

ECOLOGICAL CONSCIOUSNESS IN MARGARET ATWOOD'S NOVEL *THE TESTAMENTS*: AN ECO-CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

*This study examines Margaret Atwood's *The Testaments* using an intertextual analysis, through the lens of ecocriticism, drawing upon the theoretical framework established by Lawrence Buell. The research explores the novel's engagement with ecological imagination and ecological consciousness, highlighting how Atwood critiques humanity's exploitative relationship with nature and advocates for sustainable living. The narrative emphasizes the interconnectedness of all living beings, illustrating the profound consequences of environmental degradation resulting from human actions. Atwood underscores the urgency of ecological responsibility, portraying a world where the destruction of natural resources jeopardizes human survival. By weaving ecological themes into the novel's dystopian setting, she challenges readers to rethink their environmental ethics.*

*This study employs a qualitative research methodology, utilizing textual analysis to examine Atwood's depiction of ecological awareness and its implications within the narrative. The primary data comprises textual evidence from *The Testaments*, while secondary sources include scholarly journals, academic articles, theses, and books that provide critical perspectives on Atwood's ecological themes. Through this analysis, the research aims to contribute to the discourse on ecocriticism in contemporary literature, demonstrating how Atwood's work reflects and responds to pressing environmental concerns.*

Keywords: *Ecological Consciousness, Ecological Imagination, Environmental Degradation, Natural World, Dystopian Society*

Introduction:

This research aims to examine the novel *The Testaments* by Atwood (2019) through the theoretical framework of eco-criticism. The concept of ecological imagination is an essential and central idea in ecocriticism, which is a literary theory that addresses the relationship between the environment and literature. This research also analyzes through the concept of the ecological imagination. A well-known eco-critic and literary historian named Buell (1995) first used the concept "ecological imagination" in his book *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture*. He defined the ecological imagination as the ability to understand and visualize how all living things are interconnected with one another and with their surroundings.

The word "ecocriticism" was first coined by Rueckert (1978) in his essay *Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism*. He suggested that literary works could be looked at through an eco-critical lens to depict how they deal with ecological issues and also help us to learn more about the natural world. Later on, Glotfelty and Fromm (1996) also made significant contributions to the development of ecocriticism and published their seminal work in the mid of the 1990s. Ecocriticism is a study of the relationship between nature and the literature. It was introduced by Glotfelty and Fromm in their 1996 collection, *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmark in Literary Ecology*.

Buell's eco-critical theory offers a significant lens and figure through which the researchers have analyzed the complex interactions between nature and culture in Atwood's (2019) novel *The*

Testaments. The researchers have highlighted the environmental aspects of her novel. Buell's ecocritical framework depends on the idea that literature depicts our relationship with the environment and is a form of ecological consciousness. The depiction of nature, environmental and human ethics, and the ways that literature can influence our understanding of the natural world. The basic principle of Buell's theory is the understanding of the natural world and also argues that the environment is both a component of the complex web of life and also a backdrop of the human narratives. These both factors are influenced by human actions and ecological factors.

In an interview with Hammond (1979), Atwood highlighted the values of self-reflection and self-discovery in the consciousness of oneself in her and Rich's work. She said that they both draw attention to the opposing forces of modern consciousness. The first one is the desire for change and the second one is a desire to resist it. She also highlighted that our social contract has fallen into an aimless conflict between suffering and misery. In the light of Atwood's writing, Hammond highlighted the risks of ignoring new information and experiences examined by the author. He rejected the power politics in general and political, sexual, and ecological in particular. He depicted these factors because of the destruction and suffering that result from human separation from the natural world. The danger of neglecting the natural environment and its beauty is emphasized throughout the author's poem.

Buell (2005) examined how literature and environmental issues related to each other and he examined it by using the theoretical framework of ecocriticism in his book *The Future of Environmental Criticism: Environmental Crisis and Literary Imagination*. In order to investigate the literary analysis of ecocriticism, he examined how literature responds to environmental crises and natural problems. Buell made an argument with the audience that literature influences cultural attitudes and human behavior. He also showed how authors address environmental issues such as climate change and degradation.

According to Bunkse (1997), nature is an essential part of the American material existence, as creative and intellectual as culture is to the French. This is true even though America is likely the country that has separated itself from nature. It has separated most significantly through the creation of virtual reality and technologically advanced. The significance of nature in American life is highlighted in Marx's (1964) article entitled *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America*. This article analyzed the conflicts in the American environment between the garden, wilderness, technological advancement and pastoral paradise.

Research Objectives

1. To examine the role of ecological imagination as a literary device used by Atwood in her novel *The Testaments* and the ways it enriches the storytelling
2. To investigate the influence of characters' various actions on nature and environmental issues in the novel *The Testaments*

Significance

The application of Eco-Critical theory in Atwood's novel *The Testaments* would produce very significant results. The current research has focused on the eco-critical analysis of the novel *The Testaments* by Atwood and deals with the textual analysis of the novel. The research has explored the relationship between human beings and the natural world. The study has highlighted Atwood's ecological imagination in her novel through characterization and themes. The ecological imagination in *The Testaments* is significant from an eco-critical standpoint since it encourages readers to take action to address environmental challenges by raising awareness of them.

Research Questions

1. What function does the ecological imagination play as a literary device used by Atwood in her novel *The Testaments* and how does it work within the story?
2. How do the characters' various actions on nature and environmental issues influence in the novel *The Testaments* and the overall growth of ecological consciousness?

Research Gap

This research has filled the gap in the awarded of Atwood's work by exploring the novel's engagement with environmental issues. While Atwood is known for her ecological activism and portrayal of environmental crises in her writing, there is relatively little scholarship on how *The Testaments* engages with ecological consciousness. This study has filled a gap in the literature by providing a comprehensive analysis of the novel's ecological themes and by situating Atwood's work within wider environmental discourses.

Review of Literature

Atwood's writings have critically analyzed by different critics, and they have appreciated and criticized her work. *The Testaments* is also a famous novel by Atwood. *The Testaments* has been reviewed by many researchers and critics. They pointed out different aspects of *The Testaments* through different articles, journals and thesis. It threw light on the ecological consciousness and ecological imagination, analysis of the major and minor characters by different aspects as well. Due to these qualities, the researchers have conducted this research on the topic, Ecological Consciousness in Margaret Atwood's Novel *The Testaments*: An Eco-Critical Perspective.

Csuros (2021) stated in the research paper *Margaret Atwood's The Testaments as a Dystopian Fairy Tale* by dramatizing gender dynamics and writing them again in a postmodern feminist style, Atwood's dystopian fairy tale exposes the patriarchal structure of fairy tales. Fairy tale themes and motifs are used to support patriarchal stereotypes of women in the dystopian Gileadean society, and well-known story structures and character types are misrepresented and criticized. Furthermore, by changing her writing style from *The Handmaid's Tale* to *The Testaments*, Atwood comments on the changes made to fairy tales over the centuries, highlighting how writers constantly get involved inside the text they are trying to reproduce and frequently rearrange pre-existing stories so that a happy ending results.

Lukkarinen (2021) in the research article, *Shattered Characters in Margaret Atwood's The Testaments* discussed how the characters deal with a traumatic environment without having a

chance to recover or put their shattered identities back together. Moreover, by reflecting on the genre traits listed in the theoretical framework, *The Testaments* has been interpreted as a trauma novel. Due to the breadth of the field of trauma studies, the framework was covered in several sections in this article.

Stigter (2020) in the research article, *Margaret Atwood Female Dystopian Vision* made it clear that religion plays a significant but different part in both *The Testaments* and *The Handmaid's Tale*. In this thesis, Margaret Atwood's two books are studied to compare and contrast various elements of *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Testaments*. The use of religion to explain Agnes' development from a teenager to an adult helps the YA dystopia subgenre in *The Testaments*. In each novel, generations serve a unique role. Agnes and Nicole, as well as the youthful generation added by *The Testaments*, further enhance the book's YA focus. The investigation of intergenerational dynamics in *The Testament* is also new compared to *The Handmaid's Tale*. These dynamics were there in *The Handmaid's Tale* from 1985, but they play a bigger part in the sequel.

Buell (1996) argued that the ecological imagination is a method of thinking that acknowledges the interdependence of all living things and the complex systems that support life on Earth. He argues that the ecological imagination promotes us to see ourselves as integrated into the natural environment rather than as something distinct from it. It also emphasizes how important it is to understand, appreciate, and take responsibility for our impact on the environment.

Sai (2019) wrote an article, *The Role of Faith in the Formation of Toby's Character in Margaret Atwood's The Year of the Flood*. In this article, the researcher investigates environmentalism and its various forms in order to understand the possible social activities that might be a reaction to the increasing problem of environmental destruction. This article portrayed how the dystopian book *The Year of the Flood*, which examines a natural calamity caused by human activity and the violent society that gave rise to it, deals with these issues. Toby, who occupies the victim role from the book's very first page, serves as its protagonist. The example of Toby demonstrates how a kind and generous approach to the environment, as well as its non-human and human components, can take its place.

Rehman and Khalid (2022) in their research article *Womanimality and Gender Polarity in Margaret Atwood's The Testaments*, focus on the Western cultural practices responsible for objectifying both women and animals. It examines how Margaret Atwood addressed these subjects in *The Testaments*, the book that comes after *The Handmaid's Tale*. The goal of this study is to examine sexual differences through animal differences using a deconstructive methodology. Since the beginning of Western civilization, animals and women have held a marginal position. Metaphors relating to animals and gender both contribute significantly to these variances. The relationship between handmaids and this androcentric categorization of women as animals is problematic in Atwood's *The Testaments*. They are being made aware of their inferiority as women through the objectification of animals.

Keck (2022) penned an article entitled *Women's Complicity, Resistance, and Moral Agency: Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale and The Testaments*, which explores how women interact with and fight against Gilead's strict patriarchy. It approaches complicity from a more comprehensive theoretical standpoint, contending that people link to a web of social interactions and structural relationships. They are helpless to stop being part of the political system they live under. Additionally, it recognizes that complicity always influences by a person's active participation in maintaining the existing sociopolitical systems. This is a type of complicity that link to one's self-perception and the social roles and scripts that are prevalent in society.

Saputri (2018) highlighted the types of ecological consciousness in an article entitled *Ecological Consciousness in J.C. George's The Talking Earth: An Eco-critical Study*. This article describes the types and manifestations of ecological consciousness as they are shown in J. C. George's novel *The Talking Earth*. The researcher identifies four types of ecological consciousness: recognizing nature's essence, expressing concern for ecology, understanding the relationship between living things and nature, and understanding how nature communicates. The character's speech, actions, and the author's remark about the character all illustrate ecological consciousness. Due to her position as the main character and her role in providing ecological consciousness, Billie's actions, words, and the author's comments about her have a significant impact on the development of her personality and ecological consciousness.

Chalise (2010) titled the article *Ecological Consciousness in Margaret Atwood's Surfacing* and argues that Atwood portrays a connection between people and the natural world in this book that enables them to absorb life energy. According to Atwood, there is an intimate and constant reciprocity between a person's existence and the lives of the earth's soil and other living things. Her main character has a profound appreciation for and grasp of the ecological relationship: "A mosquito lights on my arm and I let it bite me, waiting till its abdomen globes with blood before I pop it with my thumb like a grape. They need the blood before they can lay their eggs". He described that Atwood's novel shows the need for the presence of ecological elements that only complete the ecosystem and makes every life possible, beautiful and harmonious. Even the land in the absence of the lives in it turns out to be a barren and ugly place.

Telligman (2013) stated in his article named *Imagining Boundaries: (Post) Humanist Understandings and Ecological Ethics in the Fiction of Margaret Atwood*. This article looked at three of Atwood's novels that deal with topics related to how we interact with the natural world and how technology affects us. The humanist and post-humanist possibilities that exist in this hypothetical future were outlined by *Oryx and Crake*, who were the primary point of concentration. Second, *Surfacing* shows a narrator who ultimately abandons cultural norms to transform into an animal because of how he feels about the plight of Western culture. In this novel, Atwood shows how ideas like "human" and "natural" are theoretically produced, as well as how the narrator's attempts to leave civilization and go fully natural lead to dissatisfaction. It makes clear that Atwood does not believe returning to nature can solve ecological problems or society's problems. Finally, *The Year of the Flood* shows the genetically created disaster followed by another group of people. All human beings are viewed as raw resources for the manufacture of more things to maintain a dominating capitalist system.

Oliveira (2021) wrote an article entitled *Women and Nature? Nature Writing in the Dystopian World Margaret Atwood's The Testaments*. This article expands feminist ideas and protagonism, as well as provides views on androcentrism and anthropomorphism, with the literary and social commitment to promote different points of view that tell specific mechanisms supporting the struggle for equity among marginalized communities. Throughout history, civilizations, literature, and the arts, there has been a long-standing connection between women and nature. When compared to males, who have historically and symbolically been connected with civilization, women are frequently seen as being closer to nature in Western philosophy.

Joseph (2017) in his research article *Bioregionalism and Eco-consciousness in Amitav Ghosh's novel The Hungry Tide*, analyzed some of the features of bioregionalism and also observes how it helps to build up the ecological consciousness of the community. The value placed on natural systems is an important component of bioregionalism. A natural system is a group of free

organisms that link biologically on an ecosystem scale. Ghosh sees the Sunderban bioregion as a sphere of awareness as well as a region bound by physical landmarks. The novel, in which Ghosh explores the Sunderbans' geography, flora, animals, and inhabitants, serves as an example of his bio-centric worldview.

Barry (2002) explained the ways eco-critics take when analyzing any literary work in his book *Ecocriticism. Beginning theory: An introduction to literary and cultural theory*. He claims that eco-critics examine literary works through an eco-critical lens, concentrate on how the natural world depict, and expand the field of eco-criticism by incorporating themes of imbalance and balance, development and energy, mutuality and symbiosis.

Khan, Aleem, Ullah and Khan (2018) in their research paper *War on Terra and Eco-Critical Discursivity: Analyzing the Role of Cultural Productions in Creating Eco-Consciousness*, examine the characters' eco-critical awareness and draw attention to the efforts made to promote eco-awareness in the literary text's settings and narrative. The research focuses on the environmental concerns that discuss throughout the novel *Karachi Raj* in various contexts. The story depicts Basti and city life as being dangerous. The city struggles with overcrowding, traffic, and a lack of parking spaces. Basti, on the other hand, must deal with the horrors of city life, including deaths and accidents. The novel's study through an eco-critical lens shows that, although residing in a modern and cosmopolitan, individuals from third-world nations are unaware of the ecological damage they are causing to their surroundings.

Makwanya and Dick (2014) wrote an article entitled *An Analysis of Children's Poems in Environment and Climate Change Adaptation and Mitigation: A Participatory Approach, Catching Them Young*. In this article, 12 poems of children investigate, and the themes were environmental management, waste management, trees, flowers, the sun, air and water. It was discovered that children were the focus of activities, with the knowledge that kids are effective risk communicators and change agents in their communities. Children were taught how to write poetry, participate in poetry, and relate to the dangers of climate change. It has determined that children's books encourage environmental awareness, appreciation, and knowledge, among young readers. In addition, it has determined that the best approach is to catch them young to leave a long-lasting mark on environmental stewardship. Given that kids are skilled risk communicators and agents of change in their communities, children should be at the center of all activities.

Theoretical Framework

Theory is the main figure in any research and the main concern of the theory was to get data and information to make sense of anything that is going to be explored and observed. Thus, the main concern of this research was to build new concepts, new ideas and new understanding to upgrade the data which already exist. Eco-criticism is a study that is based on the relationship between the environment and the literature.

The concepts of ecological consciousness and ecological imagination are significant and central ideas in Eco-criticism. A literary historian and well-known eco-critic Buell first used the concept of "ecological imagination" in his book *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* in 1995. He defined ecological imagination as the ability to understand and visualize how all living things are interconnected with one another and with their surroundings. He also emphasized an awareness of the relationship between humans and the natural world.

Ecocriticism has grown into a worldwide developing movement during the last three decades, but scholars are still busy developing its depth and nature. Rueckert (1978) originally used the term "ecocriticism" in his critical book *Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism*. The word ecocriticism was derived from the Greek words "ikos" and "logos". The word ikos means "earth" and logos means "logical discourse". Buell defined ecocriticism "as a study of the relationship between environment and the literature" (The Environmental Imagination, p.430).

According to ecology, all life on Earth is interdependent due to solar processes that control wind and water, matter exchange, and energy transfer. Since many other living things' well-being directly connects with our own, all lives are connected and dependent upon one another. In the second half of the 20th century, political and economic power led to the establishment of nuclear weapons, resulting in carbon emissions and worldwide trade.

According to Devall (1980), the natural resources are explored through the growth of the deep ecology as a conceptual framework in an article entitled *The Deep Ecology Movement*. Deep ecology has represented an overall change in environmental discourse and requires a complete reconsideration of human interaction with the natural world. It promoted the biocentric perspective that acknowledged the inherent values of all living things and ecosystems.

Research Design and Methodology

In this research study, the researcher has used qualitative and analytical methods to explore the Eco-Critical aspects of *The Testaments* by Atwood. In this study, the researchers have used analytical and qualitative methods to analyze *The Testaments*. It was based on the Eco-Critical Approach. The qualitative research has been used to analyzed with the help of a close study method. The analytical approach is also employed for the interpretation and textual analysis of *The Testaments*. It has interpreted and investigated the quality of information activities and material.

The research has used the qualitative method to constructive one because it has evaluated the most important work of Atwood *The Testaments*. For this, the researchers have used both sources primary and secondary to analyze all the data. The primary source used in this research was *The Testaments* by Atwood. The secondary sources are the print and online critical material, including books, journals and other valid publications which are available in the above-mentioned text. This whole research has revolved around the Eco-Critical aspects of the specific writing *The Testaments* by the famous novelist who was known as Atwood.

The main tool of research methodology is based on textual analysis. Textual analysis helps to researcher to see different types of interpretations of a literary text. It also shows the quality of the text or foregrounding the different ideas that were interpreted and explored by the critical readers. In this research, a text has several and multiple meanings. The analytical study of Ecological Consciousness in Margaret Atwood's Novel *The Testaments: An Eco-Critical Perspective*, has shared the aims and goals of research that was part of original ideas from selected text. The tool of textual analysis can help to achieve this goal. The researchers have used ecocriticism theory to interpret the text *The Testaments* with the help of characters, thematic concerns and settings.

Delimitations and Limitations

The delimitation of the study is the selected novel *The Testaments* by Atwood. The researchers have selected the specific text of the novel to apply Buell's (1995) concept of ecological imagination to the relationship of human beings with nature. There exists a scope to

explore the elements of feminism, post-colonial and psychoanalytical in Atwood's novel *The Testaments*.

The study is also limited to the critical analysis of the selected text. Furthermore, the research is only limited to the analysis of the eco-criticism of certain elements of climate change and environmental degradation through characterization and themes because of the time restraints.

Discussion and Analysis

The term ecological imagination in Atwood's novel *The Testaments* also challenges the readers to go against repressive regimes. She also suggested the readers raise questions and also act as a call to action. According to her novel, awareness and the actions of people are the only ways to end the cycle of natural exploitation which affects human resources and nature. The major characters in the novel struggle to maintain the natural world and also fulfil their responsibilities by destroying the oppressive structures and regimes in the society. On the other hand, the interdependence of ecological and societal well-being becomes the most important focal point for criticism.

One of the most prominent protagonists of her novel *The Testaments*, Agnes has provided the reader with a critical theory through which to see how ecological exploitation and gender discrimination interact. Atwood has also illustrated the close relationship between women's slavery and environmental deterioration. According to her, this kind of interaction between gender and ecological issues highlighted how the system has utilized both natural and human resources are naturally unsustainable. It also illuminated the larger effects of unchecked authority.

According to Rowland (2015), the emergence of ecofeminism as a critical theory and its roots are highlighted in his article. He emphasized how it differs from previous problematic branches of second-wave feminism and also highlighted to show how Atwood developed ecofeminist views. Next, he highlighted how the novel's characters apply ecofeminist theory. He used ecofeminist principles and new theories about humanity's relationship to nature as remedies to the social and environmental problems in the text. On the other hand, he analyzed how Atwood invites the reader to participate in a dialogue that is presented as a developing strand of ecofeminism.

In *The Testaments* the ecological imagination is introduced against the harsh background of the Gilead society. Gilead society is the dystopian nation that replaced the United States. In her novel, there are a lot of factors presented as powerful visuals of environmental degradation such as degraded rivers, barren landscapes and the poisonous air of Gilead that become a vivid representation of the effects of repressive regimes

Another main protagonist of the novel, Agnes, also acts as an example through which the readers may see the degradation of the natural world. The Handmaid's approach to their bodies is nothing more than biological tools. Natural resources are exploited on earth due to the misuse of the narrative power towards the environment and its surroundings. Overall, the novel's statement depends on the inherently unsustainable nature of the oppressive system. This system was strengthened by the use of Atwood's concept of ecological imagination to show how the exploitation of natural and human resources are interconnected with each other.

Atwood implies that ecological consciousness and ecological imagination both extend beyond the physical world to include the entire element of social conventions and power systems. These factors are connected with the character of Aunt Lydia's manipulations with the degradation and destruction of the ecosystem. The activities of Aunt Lydia also degrade the ecosystem

emphasizing the close connection between ecological health and also the morality of the society portrayed in *The Testaments*.

The Testaments employs ecological consciousness and ecological imagination as a metaphor to illustrate the delicate state of Gilead's power systems. The poisoned environment becomes a metaphor for the decaying and destructive fundamentals upon which the Gilead society is based. The dependence of the regime on exploiting both the women and the environment and its surroundings.

The characters in the novel *The Testaments* are active participants in the natural world where they live. It explored the issues and difficulties as it is transformed by the ecological effects of human behavior. Agnes and Daisy addressed the realities of their surroundings and also decided to create struggle and change towards the means of empowerment by using the concept of ecological consciousness and imagination.

Conclusion

Atwood novel's *The Testaments* has analyzed through an ecocritical perspective by using Buell's concept of ecocriticism to explore the relationship between the human and natural world. This research have portrayed Atwood's ecological themes and their significance for modern society by investigating the depiction of nature, human-environment interactions and ethical aspects of environmental issues. *The Testaments* also encourages readers to reflect on the connections between social and ecological issues for environmental awareness and action through vivid imagery and complex characters. Buell's theory places a strong emphasis on analyzing literature from an ecological point of view. Buell's theory can be used to explore *The Testaments* through the lens of ecocriticism.

On the other hand, human beings used the resources of the Earth and they controlled women through power and repress their rights. Atwood used symbolism to illustrate the human and the natural world such as Red Robes related to the themes of killing that are innate to the human connection with nature. They also symbolized fertility and destruction. The natural world itself takes on symbolizing perseverance in the devastation carried out by humans. Buell's theory of ecocriticism highlighted the moral aspects of environmental conversation such as sustainability, and environmental justice. Atwood presented the ethical challenges and environmental degradation in *The Testaments* that are related to authority, accountability and exploitation.

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