
An Ecofeminist Approach to Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, *Oryx and Crake*, and Octavia E. Butler's *Parable of the Sower*

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Faculté de Philosophie et Lettres
Département de Langues et Lettres Modernes

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Mémoire présenté par Mariana Costa Cardoso en vue de l'obtention du diplôme de Master en
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1. Introduction

1.1. Ecofeminism theory

Feminism as an ideology is based on the “belief and advocacy of the political, economic, and social equality of the sexes expressed especially through organized activity on behalf of women’s rights and interests” (Merriam-Webster). More specialized, academic definitions represent feminism as a movement that mobilizes “toward alleviating women’s subjugated positions, private and social alike, by exerting impact on the economic, political, and cultural fabrics of modern societies.” (Malinowska 1). This tendency presents itself in diversified forms, including “many schools of philosophical thinking, theories, and moral beliefs”, which converge in their goal for gender equality (1). The term feminism was coined by the philosopher and radical socialist Charles Fourier in 1837 to describe the manifestations in support of women’s suffrage taking place during those years (1). The feminist movement is typically divided in four waves. The first wave of feminist activism emerged in Europe and North America, and spread to Egypt, Iran and India from the beginning of the nineteenth century to the first decades of the twentieth century (3). This first wave related to the idea of the “‘New Woman’ – an ideal of femininity that challenged the limits established by male-centered society” (3). First-wave activists put into question women’s restrictions in matters of work, education, marriage, property, and their right to vote i.e., women’s suffrage.

The second wave emerged post-war during the early 1960s and was active until the late 1980s. During this phase, feminists focused on questioning “the constituents of gender roles and women’s sexuality” (Malinowska 3). Feminism’s second wave was influenced by deconstructivism; it showed interest in the distinction between womanhood as a social and cultural construction and subjective experiences of femininity (3). Moreover, in the 1980s up to the 1990s, second-wave feminists as a group became diversified, including women of colour and women from developing countries, who had been excluded during the first wave (Krolokke and Sorensen 1). From the mid-1990s onwards, the second wave gave way to the third wave of feminism, which emerged in the wake “of a new postcolonial and postsocialist world order, in the context of information society and neoliberal, global politics” (2). The third generation of feminists showed a higher level of confidence that was acquired from the experiences of women during the first and second waves, and promoted inclusivity of all individuals, as well as the deconstruction and transgression of established gender categories (16). The fourth and current wave initiated towards 2010, when feminism “revived under actions that spread

internationally across the Web” through a number of campaigns such as the Everyday Sexism Project or the #MeToo movement (Malinowska 5).

Ecofeminism is a current ramification of feminism, born in the 1970s and theorized during the 1980s and 1990s. The branch emerged during the second wave of feminism, when women took notice of the connections between “militarism, sexism, racism, classism, and environmental damage”, and began to question the dynamics behind these forms of oppression (Mack-Canty 157). The term ecofeminism was first coined by the French feminist Françoise d’Eaubonne in 1974. In the course of the 1970s, the author released two books where she defined and elaborated on this concept: *Le Féminisme ou la mort* (1974) and *Écologie Féminisme: révolution ou mutation?* (1978) (Gates 9). It is worth mentioning that although the movement’s European political roots are often underlined, ecofeminist ideas were already expanding worldwide at that time, as “women in the United States were protesting the atrocities at Love Canal¹ and analyzing the shock waves of the nuclear leak at Three Mile Island, and still others, in Northern India, were initiating the Chipko movement, hugging trees to save them from felling.” (Gates 8). Ecofeminism presents itself as “a new way of seeing old problems: the linking of the devaluation of women and the earth” (9). While the movement’s primary focus during its first years was indeed the connection between the subjugation of women and nature, its domain of interest would later broaden and include other oppressed groups in the discussion.

The term *écoféminisme* was derived from the political trend *l’écologie-féminine*, a 1970s action founded by some of the members of the Front Féministe, which was in its origins ecologically implicated, but later shifted its focus to “abortion, divorce rights, and equal [gender] opportunity” and approached fewer environment issues (Gates 9). D’Eaubonne’s first two books on ecofeminism offer her views on the disproportionate role that women play in society in contrast with men, and the lack of female voices in decisions regarding their own bodies, particularly the freedom to embrace or reject a role in human reproduction (9). The French feminist links women’s lack of agency and men’s authority over questions of reproduction to overpopulation and environmental issues:

¹ Love Canal was a canal project in the Niagara River that lasted from 1942 to 1953. During this period, the Hooker Chemical Company used the site as a chemical waste dump, leaving it contaminated with around 21 000 tons of toxic chemicals, including at least twelve carcinogen substances (Kleiman). The affair became public in the late 1970s when the population of that region began to suffer the consequences of the water’s pollution. (Kleiman).

Jusqu'alors, les femmes seules possédaient le monopole de l'agriculture et le mâle les croyait fécondées par les dieux. Dès l'instant où il découvrit à la fois ses deux possibilités d'agriculteur et de procréateur, il instaura ce que Lederer nomme « le grand renversement » à son profit. S'étant emparé du sol, donc de la *fertilité* (plus tard de l'industrie) et du ventre de la femme (donc de la fécondité), il était logique que la surexploitation de l'une et de l'autre aboutisse à ce double péril menaçant et parallèle : la surpopulation, excès de naissances, et la destruction de l'environnement, excès de produits. (D'Eaubonne 282)

Even though the author's quote dates from the 1970s, her discussion on who decides women's reproductive rights is still a valid point of discussion in the present-day. Despite the fact that some countries have legalized abortion in the course of the last century, other nations still prohibit stopping a gestation altogether or require a certain number of conditions², none of which take into account the will of the pregnant woman. Moreover, d'Eaubonne's quote points to patriarchal capitalism³ as the cause for the destruction of nature, since according to her, men have appropriated themselves of the fertility of the soil and later industrialised and overexploited it (282). The philosopher considers that in order to care for the Earth, modern society needs to get out of the production-consumption cycle, which has been established predominantly by male governments that value maximal economic profit over the planet's welfare (309). Hence, d'Eaubonne locates the solution to these conflicts in a shift of power in the handling of natural resources and the management of industries, so that decisions are not solely in the hands of men, but equally distributed between both genders (282).

The first ecofeminist theories caused some controversy, for they were based on the belief in an essential connection between women and nature. These scholars defended that women were closer to nature due to their capacity to give birth and generate life, and thus they were more prone to protect the environment (Puleo 43). However, feminists received early ecofeminist ideas with apprehension, as its principles clashed with the equality principle which the former had been advocating for decades (43). The intention behind assuming an essential connection between women and nature was an attempt on the part of ecofeminists to revalorize women's roles as caretakers and nurtures, as well as the recognition of domestic work because

²See: "The World's Abortion Laws." *Center for Reproductive Rights*.

³ For a number of ecofeminist philosophers, capitalism and patriarchy seem to be linked with one another, as both depend on the subordination of women and nature. For example, Vandana argues that in the modern world capitalism and patriarchy converge and can therefore be referred to as one single unit, the capitalist-patriarchal system (Swier 252).

most of these occupations are traditionally undervalued in comparison with those performed by men (44). Nevertheless, the danger of this conceptual thinking was a regression towards a patriarchal mindset, for it could be misinterpreted as compliance with the stereotypical vision of the “nurturing woman” who is delegated to the domestic sphere (45). Also, some scholars of this first wave of ecofeminism depicted men as innately aggressive, to which they opposed the image of the gentle woman (45). In the late 1980s, these arguments gave way to the first division in ecofeminism, which split into a radical branch and a cultural branch (Miles). Radical ecofeminism sustains that patriarchy’s linking of women to nature is used as justification to deny the former the power of making important decisions and positions of responsibility (Miles). Conversely, cultural ecofeminists maintain the existence of a special connection between women and the natural world, because of their role as mothers and caretakers (Miles). Scholars of this branch, such as Susan Griffin, argue that these traits accord women a stronger sensitivity to environmental issues and so they must be valued by society as human mediators with nature (Miles). Over time, with the expansion of ecofeminism, additional subdomains appeared, expressing different views regarding women’s connectedness to nature, religion’s role in this philosophy and humanity’s relationship with the natural world (Miles).

Presently, ongoing ecofeminist arguments include not only women and nature as equal victims of the capitalist-patriarchal system, but also every group that is viewed by the dominant sphere as Others, such as racial/ethnic minorities, the LGBTQ community, disabled individuals, as well as people of lower socioeconomic status (Plumwood i; Kings 71). What is more, recent ecofeminist texts reject an anthropocentric perspective, defend the non-human world and take into account animals and nature in the debates over equality and environmental preservation in connection to climate change (Kings 71/72). Ecofeminism is a diverse discipline as it proceeds from a wide range of feminist trends, including radicalism, socialism, spiritualism, anticolonialism, etc. (Puleo 21). Despite this heterogeneity, most ecofeminists converge in the advocacy for social transformation and in the critique of humanity’s overconsumption, which is majorly contributing to environmental destruction and to the depletion of the planet’s resources (21).

In 1993, Val Plumwood writes in the introduction of her book on ecofeminist theory *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*: “We need a common, integrated framework for the critique of both human domination and the domination of nature – integrating nature as a fourth category of analysis into the framework of an extended feminist theory which employs a race, class and gender analysis.” (Plumwood 1). The Australian philosopher’s work, along with that

of other ecofeminists in the 1990s⁴, sets the theoretical basis for what defines the branch today. Plumwood's volume dedicates a chapter to dualisms, which a number of ecofeminists hold accountable for the prevalence of social inequalities and as the ground for various kinds of oppression (2). The author argues that "western culture has treated the human/nature relation as a dualism and that this explains many of the problematic features of the West's treatment of nature" (2). Indeed, the West has positioned the human race "outside" of nature, thereby transforming environmental elements into alien Others deprived of agency and therefore subjected to humanity's will (2). Moreover, according to this dualistic view of the world, those individuals who are appointed as being closer to nature are also subjected to the control of other groups, who embody rationality and power. This type of categorization is used by dominant groups to justify "exclusion and control, not only of non-humans, but of various groups of humans and aspects of human life which are cast as nature", thus leading to sexism, classism, racism and other types of discrimination (4).

1.2. Nature and women as Others

Traditionally in the West, women have been commonly associated with nature/emotion, while men are placed closer to reason/culture, and this connection has served as justification for the oppression of females (Plumwood 11). Plumwood's theory appears in the context of feminist critiques of modernity, which point to the latter as essentially a male sphere, where women do not have a place or are sometimes scarcely tolerated (Raïd 52). These critiques relate to two attitudes that have positioned women problematically in the modern world. On the one hand, according to the definition of the modern *anthropos*, women have been seen as complementing modern men, rather than existing as individual selves (52). On the other hand, and contradicting the first tendency, the female gender has been altogether excluded from the definition of the modern human, as the definition of the modern male depends on women's relegation to the private or ancient sphere (52). Thus, this last theory implies that the modern *anthropos* does not exist but only the modern male, thereby excluding females from modernity and denying them an active role in society (52). Ecofeminists like Val Plumwood, explore the origins of oppression, deconstruct the concepts that allowed for the marginalization of both nature and women and observe the relationship between the two groups. Moreover, they work on

⁴ Such as Carolyn Merchant, Greta Gaard, Karen Warren, Maria Mies, Vandana Shiva, Ynestra King, among others.

dismantling the hierarchies created by dualisms and propose solutions for better equality and welfare of every oppressed group.

The devaluation of nature can be located in its conception as a direct opposite to the idea of rationality/reason, a concept that is deeply rooted in Western thinking: “Nature [...] includes the emotions, the body, the passions, animality, the primitive and uncivilised, the non-human world, matter, physicality and sense experience, as well as the sphere of irrationality, of faith and of madness. In other words, nature includes everything that reason excludes.” (Plumwood 19). This paradigm which values reason above nature is named by Plumwood “the master model” and serves as justification for a “white, largely male elite” to exert their control over the environment and every entity associated with it (23). Yet, the author avoids gender generalizations, as she sustains that it is “the identity of the master (rather than a masculine identity pure and simple) ... which lies at the heart of western culture”, that is responsible for the constructed hierarchies perpetuating the subjugation of groups associated with the natural world (42).

Plumwood describes the structure of dualisms — which she distinguishes from dichotomies — as implicating five processes: backgrounding (denial), radical exclusion (hyperseparation), incorporation (relational definition), instrumentalism (objectification), and homogenisation (or stereotyping) (48-55). “Backgrounding” is a concept that consists in the denial from the part of the dominant group that its own elements are, in one way or the other, dependent on the entities that they view as inferior, for example, refusing that humanity depends on a stable atmosphere to survive (21). Another instance of backgrounding may be found in the capitalist-patriarchal system’s denial of its dependence on caretaking and domestic activities traditionally performed by women (Puleo 282). Backgrounding delegates nature and individuals associated with it to the position of non-rational, non-productive Others, “their treatment as providing the background to a dominant, foreground sphere of recognised achievement or causation” (Plumwood 21). These Others are therefore deemed inferior and subjected to the control of the dominant group. The remaining characteristics of dualistic mindsets will be discussed in the main chapters regarding the presence of master models in Margaret Atwood’s and Octavia E. Butler’s stories.

According to ecofeminist Marti Kheel, the othering of nature (and accordingly of women) perpetrated in the West is sustained by two main ideas (“From” 244). First, nature is commonly associated with the image of the Beast, “as a symbol for all that is not human, for

that which is evil, irrational, and wild” (244). In order for humans to achieve a civilized society, the Beast has to be controlled, beaten or killed. This implies not only subjugation or slaughter of non-human elements, but also a denial that humans are animals, and therefore are part beastly themselves (244). The theme of the demonic Beast appears in a number of mythologies of the patriarchal world, and takes the shape of creatures that used to be adored as divinities in ancient societies such as the serpents that always accompanied Eileithyia, the Cretan Goddess of Childbirth, and were thus adored by ancient women (Sjöö and Mor 80). Later, with the biblical story of the Garden of Eden, serpents (and women) came to symbolize evil and the fall of humanity (Kheel, “From” 245). Along with snakes, mythical creatures related to nature like dragons and “horned gods” are no longer the object of worship; instead, in a number of patriarchal narratives these beings metamorphose into demons who must be slain for the safety of civilization (245). Kheel suggests that the necessity to tame nature has persisted throughout time, specifically in “masculine ventures as sport-hunting, bullfights, and rodeos” or even in practices that denigrate women like pornography and rape (245). Yet, the ecofeminist does not mention the existence of patriarchal societies that worship animal or animal-featured deities such as ancient Greece or ancient Egypt (Sjöö and Mor 104/139), which would complexify her argument.

The second image of nature mentioned by Kheel is a “mindless matter, which exists to serve the needs of superior, rational ‘Man’” (“From” 245). This gives to the idea that those beings which are seen as closer to nature, including animals and women, are nonrational creatures. This anthropocentric view already appears in ancient Greece, with Aristotle believing in the existence of a natural hierarchy, in which man, whose aim is to achieve happiness “through rational contemplation” is placed at the top (246). By contrast, women, animals and slaves are positioned at the bottom, as to the philosopher the sole purpose of these groups is to help men achieve their ultimate state of happiness (246). Moreover, some religions support the inferiority of nature, like in the Judeo-Christian tradition, where God gave men power over every living being or in the Yahwist biblical version, where animals were created to keep humans company or as their helpers (246). Finally, Descartes also contributed to the objectification of nature, by declaring that animals lack consciousness and are incapable of feeling any pain, so that from the philosopher’s perspective, a monkey would not suffer more than a clock (246).

Kheel concludes that what underlies both these images of natural elements is that they are perceived as Others, “a mental construct in opposition to which a masculine, autonomous

self is attained” (“From” 246). The subjugation of the environment is then recognized as a behaviour related to the assertion of the male identity, which is achieved through the separation from the natural world. Kheel mentions the psychoanalyst object-relations theory and suggests that this disjunctive attitude originates during childhood, when boys and girls must detach their person from the mother figure (247). While girls only have to view themselves as separate individuals from their mothers, boys are also pushed to disconnect from elements associated with femininity, which in turn leads them to view women as Others, and establish their masculine identity by excluding the female one. In object-relations theory, it is also argued that the othering of women extends to nature, and “both come to represent the world of contingency and vulnerability that men must transcend” (247). As such, this phenomenon takes shape in young men’s transition rituals into adulthood. In fact, in some tribal cultures, male rite passages are marked by violence or domination over Others, such as hunting and killing an animal, going to war or engaging in sexual relations with a woman for the first time (247).

Ecofeminists aim to dissolve the othered image of women and nature perpetuated by patriarchy. In view of this change, some ecofeminist authors suggest focusing on the deconstruction of the essentialist association between women and nature, which is perceived as problematic by those feminists who see it as a way to perpetuate women’s inferiority. However, most contemporary ecofeminist theorists underline that it is important to recognize the natural world as an equal to humanity, and stress “the idea that humanity itself is inseparable from nature as a whole” (Kings 71). Only then will nature no longer be perceived as inferior to reason, nor merely “a limitless provider without needs of its own” (Plumwood 20/21). This change of mindset is necessary to promote respect towards nature and make environmentally sustainable decisions, for the dualism reason/nature is one of the main factors contributing to the overexploitation and destruction of natural resources. To this day, the master has been largely defined as a minority of the population, namely composed of a small white male elite, and ecofeminism strives to change the dynamics that allow this particular group to be the one to hold the most power in society (Raïd 57). However, ecofeminists’ premise is not simply to change the dominating spheres by trying to include women in those groups who perpetuate minorities’ oppression. Rather, they aim to deconstruct domination as a concept in order to achieve equality and social justice for all living beings (57).

In light of this deconstruction, Plumwood’s theory includes a re-evaluation of one’s identity and a shift towards an “ecological self” (Raïd 67). Contrasting to an individualist or anthropocentric self, the ecological self

can be viewed as a type of relational self, one which includes the goal of the flourishing of earth others and the earth community among its own primary ends, and hence respects or cares for these others for their own sake. Concepts of care, solidarity and friendship present alternatives to the instrumental mode within existing liberal societies. (Plumwood 154/155)

To work on one's ecological self is to rethink dualisms, namely human/nature, male/female, reason/emotion, and cultivate empathy toward other human and non-human creatures: "Both men and women must challenge the dualized conception of human identity and develop an alternative culture which fully recognises *human* identity as continuous with, not alien from, nature." (Plumwood 36). Dismantling the idea of nature as the Other opens the way to a new culture based on sustainability rather than exploitation, which is essential especially now facing the contemporary climate crisis. The novels discussed in this thesis problematize anthropocentric views of nature that regard its constituents as Others, and propose new ways of thinking humanity and natural world collectively, rather than two strictly separated spheres. Furthermore, Atwood and Butler point to essentialist connections between nature and women that have contributed to the victimization of the latter.

1.3. Climate justice

Ecofeminist theorists take particular interest in environmental justice, a framework used to discuss humanity's different contributions to climate change and the disproportionate consequences of extreme weather phenomena on different human groups (Evans 95). In fact, environmental justice studies have concluded "that, in general, ethnic minorities, indigenous persons, people of color, and low-income communities confront a higher burden of environmental exposure from air, water, and soil pollution from industrialization, militarization, and consumer practices." (Mohai et al. 405). Also, environmental justice advocates emphasize "that climate change is a global environmental problem predominantly produced by industrialized nations, and suffered primarily by developing nations, along with the poorer classes, marginalized within the industrialized nations" (Gaard, "From" 179). Indeed, empirical evidence shows that first-world countries appear to be the main contributors to environmental damage. In a research piece published in 2020 by Oxfam and the Stockholm Environmental Institute, researchers found that from 1990 to 2015, annual carbon emissions grew sixty per cent and the quantity of carbon dioxide already present in the atmosphere doubled (Oxfam). The same study showed that of those sixty per cent, fifty-two per cent of

cumulative carbon emissions were caused by the richest people, who represent approximately ten per cent of the overall world population (Oxfam). Meanwhile, the poorest communities, who constitute fifty per cent of humankind were responsible for merely seven per cent of those cumulative emissions (Oxfam).

At the same time, the groups of society who consume and contribute less to the carbon print are also the ones who suffer more from climate change, due to a variety of factors. Ecofeminist Greta Gaard, who often engages in climate justice debates, notes that impoverished communities “are more likely to live in unplanned, temporary settlements, which are erected on unsuitable land – prone to the risks of flooding, storm surges and landslides” (“From” 180). Moreover, the lack of sanitation in the most precarious areas makes its inhabitants more vulnerable in case of a natural catastrophe, with a heightened risk of infectious diseases spreading through the communities due to the absence of clean water and proper medical assistance (180). Simultaneously, because these populations rely on the environment as a source of sustenance and financial income, namely from farming and fishing, extreme weather events and environmental pollution often worsen their fragile financial situation and exacerbate socioeconomic disparities (180).

Women represent seventy per cent of the 1.3 billion people living below their needs and are therefore among the most exposed to the consequences of the environmental crisis, specifically women based in developing countries and those living in precarious socioeconomic situations in first-world nations (Osman-Elasha, UN). Although environmental change seems to impact men’s and women’s health to a similar extent, an analysis conducted by “Carbon Brief” in 2020 — which consisted in comparing 130 climate and health studies — concluded that women are more affected than men in case of natural catastrophes (Dunne). The factors for the inequality between genders when facing extreme weather phenomena appear to be related to women’s position in society, rather than to physiological differences between genders, with the exception of reproductive and maternal health (Dunne). Gaard points to a number of factors that may affect females and males differently during a crisis, which are connected to gender roles ascribed to them (“From” 180). For example, when natural disasters occur, women tend to receive emergency information later because of their household confinement (180). Frequently, they also bear the responsibility of saving children and elders should an evacuation be necessary, which puts them at further risk (180). Moreover, depending on the country, women may wait longer to leave their homes without a male presence, fearing the heightened risk to fall victim to sexual assaulters or women traffickers (180).

Nevertheless, outside of an extreme weather context, women in emergent nations also tend to suffer from the everyday life consequences of climate change, especially in their role as carers and household managers. In a rural context, the scarcity of resources exacerbated by environmental changes obliges women to walk longer distances in order to fetch water, fuel or food to sustain their families, which in some contexts may represent a higher exposition to gender-based violence (Gaard, “From” 180). These hardships when facing environmental changes are not restricted to developing countries, seeing as marginalized women in first-world countries are also pointed as the class that suffers the most in disaster scenarios. For example, African-American women, the poorest people in the area affected by 2005 Hurricane Katrina in the USA, were the social group who faced more challenges during and after the event (181).

Despite women’s position as the most severely touched by climate change and natural catastrophes, they appear to still have a disproportionate minor role in political discussions concerning ecology and sustainability⁵. Gaard ascribes this anomaly to women’s position in society: “Around the world, women’s gender roles restrict women’s mobility, impose tasks associated with food production and caregiving, and simultaneously obstruct women from participating in decision-making about climate change, greenhouse gas emissions, and decisions about adaptation and mitigation” (“From” 180). Ecofeminists have defended diversified equal representation in environmental decision-making in order to assure that the laws implemented take into consideration individuals from all genders, races and classes instead of merely benefiting the privileged groups of society.

Furthermore, climate justice discussions involve the development of alternatives to unsustainable production and consumption practices of the Global North and the richest classes of the Global South, which impact the environment greatly. Gaard alerts to the fact that exploring alternatives yielding long-term effects may prove difficult, as “no one wants to be the first in reducing what the elites see as their rightful standard of living” (“From” 179). Arguably, the scholar’s comment can be extended to the middle classes, among which there are also people who are more willing to change their habits for the planet and greater social justice than others. Some practices have already been put into place to promote environmentally sustainable changes⁶, but a lot is still to be done in terms of implementing and

⁵ According to the *Global Gender Gap Report 2022* conducted by World Economic Forum, this is slowly changing. In fact, between 2006 and 2022, “the global average share of women in parliament rose from 14,9% to 22,9%.” (39).

⁶ In theory, more than 3500 climate laws and policies have been decreed. See: “Climate Change Laws of the World.” *Grantham Research Institute on Climate Change and the Environment*.

making sure that such laws and policies are respected. The premises of climate justice will be relevant in the discussion of the three novels, which contrast how characters from different backgrounds are affected by climatic conditions, and reflect on who has more impact in the degradation of nature. Also, Atwood and Butler particularly depict how climate change enlarges the gap between wealthy and impoverished classes, with *Oryx and Crake* focusing both on the Global North and the Global South.

1.4. Animal welfare

In the natural world, animals are often the most vulnerable to the effects of environmental changes, while having played no significant part in it. Climate change has already impacted Earth's biodiversity; in particular, global warming has had a number of consequences for wildlife including loss of habitat, lack of food or alterations that make an ecosystem no longer adequate for a certain species (Ifaw 2022). Since the beginning of the nineteenth century, our planet is about 1.1° C warmer and scientists estimate that it will have risen 2.7°C by the end of the twenty-first century (Ifaw 2022). Higher temperatures threaten various ecosystems and lead a number of species to migrate to unusual places that are not necessarily suitable for them, contributing to a decrease of individuals and a higher risk of extinction. Natural catastrophes are also more frequent, and affect animals' and peoples' habitats alike. For instance, it is estimated that Australia's Black Summer bushfires in 2019/2020 affected three billion koalas, kangaroos and other species (Ifaw 2022).

At the intersection of ecofeminist debates concerning the environment and the animal world is also the defence of animal welfare, the recognition of humanity's exploitation of animal bodies, and how this way of treating other species is affecting the planet. Some of the debated issues are factory farms, animal-based diets, the use of animals in scientific research as well as animal cruelty in specific industries, namely the fashion industry. One branch of ecofeminism that particularly focuses on these issues is vegetarian ecofeminism. Vegetarian ecofeminists, such as Greta Gaard or Carol J. Adams, argue that advocating for ecofeminism or even feminism and eating meat are two clashing attitudes, for they believe meat-eating to be based on speciesism, a "form of discrimination that gives preference to one's own species over all other species and that functions in a way that is similar to racism or sexism" (Gaard, "Vegetarian" 122).

Both vegetarian ecofeminism and animal liberation theory/activism seek to eradicate speciesism, albeit in different ways. The first animal liberation theories were put forward by

two philosophers: Peter Singer and Tom Regan (Gaard, “Vegetarian” 121). Singer’s utilitarian defence of nonhuman animals was introduced in his book *Animal Liberation* (1975); his argument is based on sentience and holds that if a creature is capable of feeling pain and pleasure, its interests ought to be preserved and its suffering prevented (122). Tom Regan’s proposition was exposed in *The Case for Animal Rights* (1983). His deontological defence of animal rights relies “on a being’s reason and intelligence rather than on that being’s capacity for feeling” as criteria to evaluate the morality of exploiting a particular animal body (Gaard, “Vegetarian” 122). Regan argues that if humans who cannot feel pain or are unable to reason are not treated as a means to an end, the same should be applied to other species (122). Both Singer and Regan’s approaches, which seek to eradicate speciesism, “conclude that animal experimentation, factory farming, hunting, using animal skin or fur as clothing, and eating animals for food are morally unacceptable acts” (122). Yet, even though vegetarian ecofeminists share their concern for animal welfare with Singer and Regan, the former have criticized the latter’s approaches, for they rely exclusively upon reason and exclude emotion (122). The negligence of the emotional sphere constitutes a deficiency to vegetarian ecofeminist scholars, as they defend a “combination of sympathy and a reasoned analysis of cultural and political contexts”, which might prove more efficient when it comes to making ethical decisions involving animals (123). This is in keeping with recent global survey results conducted by Vomad regarding dietary habits, which demonstrate that the most frequent reason why people adopt a vegan diet has to do with the sympathy they feel towards animal suffering, especially the recurrent unethical factory farming practices (Vomad 2019).

In “Vegetarian Ecofeminism: A Review Essay”, Greta Gaard recalls the presence of vegetarianism and activism for animal rights in the history of feminism, present since its first wave. Vegetarian feminists from the second wave already anticipated ecofeminist ideas, given that they strove to highlight “conceptual and structural similarities among sexism, speciesism, and racism” (“Vegetarian” 125). For example, Aviva Cantor has studied linguistic connections between women and animals that are used as a form of subjugation of both parts, specifically the derogatory terms used for girls and women, including “sow”, “bitch”, “old bat” and “bird-brain” (125). An association with animals has also served as a method of demeaning other marginalized groups, such as Jews, routinely called “vermin” by the Nazi propaganda (125). Furthermore, Marjorie Spiegel established linkages between the exploitation of animals and the subjugation of African Americans in the U.S. slave trade (125).

Later, vegetarian ecofeminists shifted the focus of vegetarian feminists, as they moved from the subjugated groups to studying the very structures of oppression (Gaard, “Vegetarian” 127). Vegetarian ecofeminists argue that speciesism co-exists with other forms of subjugation and serves to reinforce them. For example, Carol J. Adams gathered visual advertisements in which women appear associated with animals that are typically used for human food, thereby suggesting that both women and animals are just “pieces of meat” (Puleo 367). Additionally, vegetarian ecofeminists highlight the climatic toll of meat eating, seeing as a plant-based diet is significantly more sustainable for the planet than the consumption of animal products. For example, in 2021 the meat industry was responsible for double the pollution than the production of plant-based foods, with a quarter of the overall heating gas emissions coming from raising cows for beef (Milman). What is more, “grain that could be used to feed humans is used instead to feed animals for human consumption (Gaard, “Vegetarian” 123). For this reason, vegetarian ecofeminists claim dietary choices as a way to improve equal access to nourishment, since “eating low on the food chain leaves more food available to feed the world’s hungry.” (123). Nonetheless, the purpose of ecofeminists is not to enforce a plant-based diet as an absolute moral rule, but instead “help to dislodge the conceptual substructures that support the practice of meat eating” and put forward new ways of eating that are ethical for both humans and non-humans, while staying environmentally sustainable (Kheel, “Vegetarianism” 329). Animal welfare issues involving the exploitation of animal bodies and vegetarianism will be particularly relevant to the chapter dealing with *Oryx and Crake*.

1.5. Technology and development

Technology is a recurrent theme in ecofeminist writings, where most often than not it “seems to operate as an umbrella term for a collection of artefacts whose positive or negative characteristics are ultimately contingent upon the manner in which they are employed. The individual technologies appear as value neutral.” (Swier 248). For some ecofeminist philosophers, like Karren Warren, science and technology are not necessarily linked to the domination of one group over another, “nor imbued with the values of patriarchy” (250). Rather, they view ecological science and technology as useful resources in humanity’s reaction to the climate crisis, but also advice against worshipping it (Swier 250; Puleo 419).

On the opposite end of the spectrum, Vandana Shiva “portrays science as imbued with the ideology of capitalist economics, and technology as its point of contact with the natural and social world.” (Swier 252). In Shiva’s view, modern science serves the interests of the capitalist-patriarchal system, as it is used “both as knowledge and practice”, to perpetrate “violence both

indirectly and directly against society and nature.” (252). Shiva explains that on a practical level, scientific procedures are used to harm nature and those who depend on it, namely “women, and tribal and peasant societies”, through the pollution or depletion of natural resources (Swer 252; Shiva, *Staying* 3). Additionally, on an epistemological level, scientific knowledge denies legitimacy to other kinds of knowledge (such as indigenous or popular), and converts the majority of the population into “non-knowers’ through the creation of the expert/non-expert dichotomy, even in areas in which they regularly operate.” (Swer 252). Shiva contends that science and technology are inherently linked with capitalism because they were conceived to treat the natural world and the less powerful groups of humanity as a means to an end; “[technology] is in the control of an unaccountable elite all of whom are under the sway of a highly destructive mechanistic ideology.” (255). In other words, technology is used to reorder the world in accordance with capitalist interests, without considering possible moral, socioeconomic or ecological consequences for those who do not manage science. Shiva exemplifies the misuse of technology through the generalization of transgenic seeds in rural regions of developing countries, which disrupts local agriculture and contributes to “desertification, loss of genetic diversity, increased pest-resistance, etc.” (261). In the novels analysed in this thesis, the writers seem to assume the first stance, that is, technology used as a tool without moral value of its own rather than being inherently evil. Yet, Vandana Shiva’s ideas on science and technology are echoed in the influence of science’s misuse in the stories.

In *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Survival in India* (1988), Vandana Shiva underlines the connections between colonialism, development/progress, technology, environmental degradation and poverty in third-world nations (1). Shiva argues that development is essentially

a continuation of the process of colonisation; it became an extension of the project of wealth creation in modern Western patriarchy’s economic vision, which was based on the exploitation or exclusion of women (of the West and non-West), on the exploitation and degradation of nature, and on the exploitation and erosion of other cultures. (Shiva, *Staying* 1/2)

Put differently, development — which Shiva renames “maldevelopment” — like colonialism, is built on the appropriation of the natural resources of emergent countries by the North and by the elites of the South (2/4). Crucial resources like land, water, and forests become inaccessible to locals who depend on them for sustenance, for these are either privatized or exhausted (3).

Thus, capitalist economic growth aggravates the fragile socioeconomic state of communities located mostly in these countries' rural areas. Moreover, Shiva argues that development/progress as a capitalist-patriarchal system is based on the recognition of profit-generating activities ('production'), while "nature's work in renewing herself, and women's work in producing sustenance in the form of basic, vital needs" are marked as "unproductive work" (4). This devaluation constitutes the basis for the exploitation of nature and those who depend on it, since it privileges economic development through an endless production-consumption cycle aimed at a small elite, instead of promoting widespread sustainable practices.

1.6. Challenging the Anthropocene

In the Merriam-Webster dictionary, the Anthropocene is defined as "the period of time during which human activities have had an environmental impact on the Earth as constituting a distinct geological space". The use of the term Anthropocene is frequently controversial, as some consider it to be overly focused on the *anthropos*, thereby pointing to "abstract humanity" as responsible for climate change (Moore), or even disregarding the presence of non-humans in that period (Haraway, "Anthropocene" 159). A well-known academic figure who has developed a theory to challenge the Anthropocene as a concept is postmodern feminist Donna Haraway. Throughout Haraway's career, the scholar has elaborated on alternative connections between humans, non-humans, nature and technology. As such, her works resonate with the ecofeminist philosophy in that Haraway deconstructs the dualisms that perpetuate various forms of oppression and which have accelerated the planet's destruction. In the introduction of her book *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (2016), the philosopher suggests new ways for humanity to connect with other Earth creatures, in order "to make trouble, to stir up potent response to devastating events, as well as to settle troubled waters and rebuild quiet places." (Haraway 1). For the author, "staying with the trouble" means learning to live in the present times, taking responsibility for the state of the planet and adapting to life in a damaged world rather than just envisioning positive or negative hypothetical futures (1).

Haraway's theory originated from what she saw as the necessity for alternative terms to overcome the labels Anthropocene and Capitalocene⁷, which in her view are insufficient to

⁷ The Capitalocene is a concept used by Jason W. Moore to contradict the idea that the Anthropocene is the major cause of climate change. According to Moore "Global warming is not the accomplishment of an abstract humanity, the Anthropos. Global warming is capital's crowning achievement." (9 October 2016). Indeed, the author points to capitalism's exploitation of natural resources and industrial pollution as the main contributors to environmental change.

describe the planet's current state ("Anthropocene" 159). The philosopher argues that to represent contemporaneity exclusively in these terms is to perpetuate an anthropocentric way of thinking about our relationship with the non-human world, by giving disproportionate importance to the role and place of the human race on Earth (159). Thus, Haraway proposes the term "Chthulucene" to describe this new era, which "entangles myriad temporalities and spatialities and myriad intra-active entities-in-assemblages – including the more-than-human, other-than-human, inhuman, and human-as-humus" (160). This speculative era entails the establishment of multispecies relationships between humans and other creatures, so as to decentre human beings and give endangered species a chance to survive (160). In addition, in her efforts to decentre *anthropos*, Haraway calls herself a "compostist" rather than a posthumanist, because in her view "Critters — human and not — become with each other, compose and decompose each other, in every scale and register of time and stuff in sympoietic tangling" (*Staying* 97). Life in the Chthulucene will be based on "sympoiesis", a word that means "making-with", referring to a way of thinking about the inevitable connectedness between all creatures of the world (58). This notion is at the basis of the philosopher's proposal for interspecies genetic fusion, a theory that she sustains on scientific model systems that are currently underway at the University of California aiming at the creation of animal multicellularity "using molecular and comparative genomic approaches" (64). Haraway's slogan "make kin, not babies" aims at resituating humanity in nature, and promotes interspecies environmental justice as well as equality among human groups ("Anthropocene" 161/162). Her idea of a compost society is illustrated in *Staying with the Trouble's* final chapter "The Camille Stories: Children of Compost"⁸.

In the article "Becoming-with in a compost society – Haraway beyond posthumanism," Federica Timeto suggests that Haraway's proposal for a "compost" society aligns with the principles of ecofeminism in that both strive for alliances "formed out of response-ability and respect [that] can facilitate the implementation of a regenerative politics for living together" (316). Both parties believe in anti-speciesism and put forward innovative ways to blur ontological categories, in an effort to find an equilibrium amongst animal species as well as protect the planet from further destruction. Moreover, Haraway finds that individualist thinking is no longer conceivable in our era; rather, if humanity intends to save the planet, a community mindset is more valuable (*Staying* 5). This particular point will reappear in the following chapters, as the establishment of new sustainable communities is a feature in two of the novels

⁸ More on "The Camille Stories: Children of Compost" in the chapter dealing with *Oryx and Crake*.

under scrutiny. Aside from ecological ideals, the companion species imagined by Haraway contribute to “queer blood lineages” as well as “the institutions at the heart of the purity dream of the Modern Western subject,” namely the heterosexual nuclear family (Timeto 324). The fluidity between bodies depicted in Haraway’s theory and her alternative view of relationships contrasts with oppressive conservative patriarchal ideals. As will be elaborated later on, the philosopher’s proposals are echoed in *Parable of the Sower* through Lauren’s hyperempathy syndrome and in *Oryx and Crake* in the bioengineered fusion of different species’ genetic material.

1.7. Ecofeminism and cli-fi

Ecofeminists’ ecocritical concerns resonate with a literary genre that has become increasingly popular since the turn of the century: climate fiction or cli-fi. The term, first coined by journalist Dan Bloom in 2007, is a combination of sci-fi and climate change fiction (Pereira 1). The label became popular in the literary sphere when in 2013, *National Public Radio* published an article called “So Hot Right Now: Has Climate Change Created a New Literary Genre?”, in which Angela Evancie analyses works by authors who deal with environmental issues in different but related ways⁹ (1). Evancie’s article also mentions the genre’s role in informing and raising awareness in readers who might not be familiar with scientific discourses and analytical data about the Anthropocene (1).

The question has been raised whether cli-fi should be considered a genre of its own or mainly a sub-genre or derivation of science fiction (Pereira 1). While science fiction works have dealt with climate issues since the 1960s, the difference lies in that “sci-fi usually takes place in a dystopian future, cli-fi happens in a dystopian present” or near-future (Evancie). Dan Bloom adds a further differentiating characteristic between both genres, in that while “sci-fi is mostly for escapism and entertainment,” cli-fi is about “facing the reality of global warming” (Bloom qtd. in Evans 97). Even though Bloom’s mention of science fiction as a mere form of amusement is debatable, his emphasis on climate fiction’s thematic focus is a sound argument for the latter to stand as a genre of its own. Cli-fi narratives appear as a valuable medium to spread environmental awareness on a larger scale, and encourage readers to act on the individual and collective levels. With the number of ecological catastrophes escalating in the last decades — including phenomena ranging from high record temperatures in the Antarctic

⁹ For example, Nathaniel Rich, Ian McEwan and Barbara Kingsolver (Wright 100).

to the wildfires in Australia and in the Amazona Forrest — the popularity of cli-fi novels seems to be well founded (Pereira 2).

Despite the environment’s alarming signs, in recent years a wave of nationalists and protectionists has been arising in global politics, who often choose to ignore the matter, or even still discredit climate change discussions as conspiracy theories (Pereira 2). Cli-fi contradicts the tendency to dismiss environmental issues and the future of planet Earth, through its exposure of harmful anthropocentric activity and its critique of capitalist systems that continue to exploit natural resources despite the adverse side effects. In addition, some cli-fi novels propose solutions of their own, as will be later illustrated in the sustainable lifestyles of Octavia Butler’s *Earthseed* communities and Margaret Atwood’s *Crakers*. Although cli-fi novels are works of fiction, the genre reveals “a different kind of truth” about the possible consequences of climate change for human societies through concrete individual narratives (Wright 102). Therefore, they appeal to the readers’ “empathetic imagination,” and “can be a more effective intellectual and emotional driver than many of the scientific narratives that exist about climate change.” (102). Indeed, cli-fi narratives can work their way through readers’ emotions, which may have a greater effect than impersonal scientific texts (102). In the novels under scrutiny, a factor that may add to the emotional component is that the stories are told in the first person or the protagonist is the focalizer and the events take place in familiar settings (such as Los Angeles or New York), so that the reading experience may be felt on a more personal level.

In anglophone literature, a significant female presence in the production of cli-fi works has been noted since the beginning of the genre, specifically in North-American fiction created by women writers (Pereira 2). Narratives like Ursula Le Guin’s *The Word for World is Forest* or Octavia Butler’s *Parables* have laid the foundation for what the genre is today, and their works exemplify the convergence of cli-fi and ecofeminist ideas. In fact, cli-fi fiction books provide a prolific terrain to discuss environmental issues aligned with gender and socioeconomic problems. Despite a large production of cli-fi narratives in North America, the genre is not limited to Western borders, given that books dealing with the same topics are also present in the Global South¹⁰, where the impact of climatic change has generally been felt first (2). Still, the climatic theme outside of the West points to a centre of interest waiting to be developed, seeing as a lot of the novels written and published outside or on the periphery of the anglophone world have been more or less invisible (3). Putting writers from emergent

¹⁰ Such as Bessie Head’s novels in South Africa, or Vandana Singh’s in India (Pereira 3).

countries under the spotlight would contribute to diversifying environmental discourse and spreading awareness of the disparate effects of the climate crisis outside the Western borders, narrated by authors who are closer to the most affected locations.

As mentioned above, a large number of cli-fi authors are women, a fact that does not seem coincidental, since still today the female gender is less present in environmental politics, while at the same time, it often seems the most affected by natural catastrophes, especially in the Global South (Pereira 4). Through fictional stories, these women writers aim to criticize the lack of female power when it comes to decisions that affect all humans and yet are in the hands of a privileged minority. The feminist dystopias chosen for this work are climate fiction narratives in the sense that the authors “attempt to make sense of human collective anxiety around climate change, and to force us to react and break down some of the presumable state of solastalgia¹¹ produced by the Anthropocene.” (Muñoz-González 281). In other words, Margaret Atwood and Octavia E. Butler’s novels show instances of how human individuals or communities react to environmental crises and stress the need for large-scale lifestyle changes. These authors describe societies where flawed politics, aligned with citizens’ passivity regarding societal problems contributed to the devastation of the climate, and the implications that may come upon our planet in the near future, if alternatives to exploitative capitalist systems are not put into practice outside of the fictional worlds.

1.8.Ecofeminism literary criticism

The use of ecofeminist principles in literary analysis has been referred to as “ecofeminism literary criticism”. Gretchen T. Legler defines it as

a hybrid criticism, a combination of ecological or environmental criticism and feminist literary criticism. It is a unique combination of literary and philosophical perspectives that gives literary and cultural critics a special lens through which they can investigate the ways nature is represented in literature and the ways representations of nature are linked with representations of gender, race, class, and sexuality. (Legler 227)

Ecofeminism as a philosophical multidisciplinary trend represents a resourceful tool in the analysis of literary fiction, as it can help deconstruct the narratives under scrutiny and uncover links between a variety of different themes in relation to humanity and the natural world. Reading the novels through an ecofeminist lens is to detect the presence or absence of

¹¹ The term “solastalgia” was coined by Australian philosopher Glenn Albrecht to define the distress caused by climate change, because one can no longer recognize their familiar environment (Muñoz-González 281).

androcentric or anthropocentric viewpoints in the stories and study how these ideologies affect human and interspecies relationships, as well as their impact on the environment of the fictional worlds (Antón 45).

In “Ecofeminist keys for literary analysis” (“Claves ecofeministas para el análisis literario”; my trans), Eva F. Antón applies philosopher Alicia H. Puleo’s ecofeminist ideas to literary studies (45). Puleo defines “naturaleza externa” (external nature) as everything that is not man-made including any product of art, technology, science or any other human action, while “naturaleza interna” (internal nature) refers to the human body (52). In the external nature domain, a literary analysis based on critical ecofeminism looks into selected texts and questions how the author depicts humankind’s connections with the environment and the animal world, and reflects on how the future of our species is envisioned in the narratives under scrutiny (52). In view of an ecofeminist literary analysis in a corpus composed of forty French and Spanish novels, Antón takes certain fundamental concepts discussed in Puleo’s work in connection with external nature, namely androcentrism, speciesism and anthropocentrism (52). For Antón, the presence of these ideologies in literary works reveals if the respective authors question how progress is linked to humanity’s limitless exploitation of natural resources, if ethical ecological attitudes are found in the chosen narratives, or if speciesism is aligned with the nature/culture dualism and gender issues (53). In relation to internal nature, a reading based on ecofeminist literary criticism explores how narratives depict women’s and men’s bodies, and looks for a potential hidden patriarchal mindset in the illustration of those bodies (53). In fact, masculine superiority is constructed on the basis of gender norms and heteronormativity, which forces women and men to fit into traditional gender categories and experience their bodies and sexuality unequally (53). Hence, the prescription of gender norms is an essential point that serves to hierarchize the dynamics between individuals, and to restrict the freedom of those who are placed at the bottom, typically women and the LGBTQ community. The following chapters include female and male characters whose perception of their own bodies is negatively influenced by oppressive gender norms, but also individuals who dare to challenge those rules.

Ecofeminist literary critics look into reimagined relationships between humans and non-human Earth elements in literature and how nature writing has diversified from the American canon¹² (Legler 229). In the last decades, a number of authors have been developing

¹² Including authors like Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, among others (Legler 228). Despite their attempt at a new relationship between humanity and nature, these authors still depict nature as an Other against which they define their “authentic” self (229).

“‘a postmodern pastoral’ — a posthumanist construction of human relationships with nature ... a vision that is informed by ecological and feminist theories, and one that images human/nature relationships as ‘conversations’ between knowing subjects” (229). As such, by positioning the natural world at an equal status with human beings, writers such as Ursula Le Guin, or Alice Walker¹³ have contributed to the deconstruction of those dualisms that perpetrate nature’s othering, and to the recognition of natural elements as active subjects worthy of respect (229). Ecofeminist literary criticism considers a number of questions about a narrative’s depiction of humanity’s relationship with nature:

What are the relationships between modernist/humanist concepts of the self and the body and representations of nature in literature? How can you recognize human relationships with nature if nature is still regarded as “other” to humans/culture? ... How can developing an ecocritical literary theory help solve real environmental problems? (Legler 228)

These are some of the questions that will serve as a guide in the analysis of the novels throughout the main chapters of this thesis. The aim of this work is to highlight ecofeminist insights present in the novels under scrutiny by pointing to the connections between environmental degradation and the oppression of marginalized individuals, including women, but also other categories of othered human and non-human beings. In view of this, it will underline the dualisms at the basis of the devaluation of nature, and analyse how the authors deconstruct anthropocentric and androcentric mindsets, as well as their suggestions for alternative lifestyles, focused on sustainability and interspecies harmony.

¹³ For example, Walker’s short story “Am I Blue” or Le Guin’s collection of short stories *Buffalo Gals and Other Animal Presences* (Legler 231).

2. *The Handmaid's Tale*

2.1. Author and novel introduction

Margaret Atwood is a Canadian poet, novelist, literary critic, university professor, and environmental activist born in Ottawa in 1939¹⁴. A student in English literature, she received her undergraduate degree at Victoria College and her master's at Radcliffe College. Atwood grew up in the countryside in northern Canada, in circumstances which allowed her to be in close contact with nature. Her father was an entomologist whose research influenced Atwood's works greatly. Throughout her career, she has published more than 30 books of poetry, fiction, non-fiction, children's books, and short stories. Although the author does not explicitly classify her writings as feminist, tenets of this trend can be found in most of her works. Atwood holds a prestigious position internationally and has won many awards over the years. Some of her most known works include: *The Edible Woman* (1969), *Surfacing* (1972), *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), *Alias Grace* (1996), *The Blind Assassin* (2000), and the *MaddAddam* trilogy (2003, 2009, 2013), among other titles. Apart from the feminist trend present in her novels, nature and climatic issues are often in the spotlight of Atwood's plots. Indeed, the author's ecocritical views appear in her stories by means of characters' relationships with the natural world, and her texts frequently include a sense of awareness of what the aggravation of the climate crisis might bring about, should humanity continue overexploiting and polluting nature. As such, Margaret Atwood's interest in the impact of anthropocentric activity on the planet and in the consequences that the capitalist exploitation of natural resources has for marginalized human groups, place her closer to ecofeminism. For this reason, I propose a study of the author's texts through an ecofeminist lens, focusing on her novels *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Oryx and Crake*.

The Handmaid's Tale is a feminist dystopian novel located in North America. The story is told in the first person by Offred, a woman whose real name is never disclosed. At the end of the novel, in a section called "Historical Notes", it is revealed that Offred's narrative was resourced from a piece of historical evidence (Atwood, *Handmaid* 299). Indeed, the protagonist's oral testimony was transcribed by historians from long-lost tape cassettes, which were discovered in an underground vault (301). In the society presented by Offred, a large proportion of human beings have become sterile due to phenomena provoked by humans (e.g.,

¹⁴ The biographical information of the following section proceeds from: "Margaret Atwood." *Encyclopedia Britannica*.

chemical release and radiation), which affected people's bodies and led to a drastic drop in the country's birth rate. In midst of the fertility crisis and other issues causing social instability, the government suffers a coup during which the Congress is machine-gunned and the president killed (174). The Constitution is suspended and a theocratic dictatorship is set in place, the newly named Republic of Gilead. The new government implements a patriarchal system that forces fertile women who are single or whose marriage is not recognised by church to become surrogate mothers for married couples of the highest social class.

The temporal setting of the novel is divided into three moments, with Offred's voice constituting two of these moments, telling her present and past stories. As such, the narrative of the protagonist's present situation in Commander Fred's house is interlaced with fragments about the past, which emerge in the form of memories. In these, she recalls her life before the dictatorship and during the events that led to the regime's rise, when she was separated from her husband and daughter. What follows is a third temporal moment, set in the future and presented by a different narrative voice. This third point in time corresponds to the epilogue of the novel, and it is a partial transcript of a conference on Gileadean Studies held in 2195 (Atwood, *Handmaid* 299). Most of this section is voiced by Professor Pieixoto, who is the academic responsible for the transcription of Offred's recordings in the tape cassettes.

The Handmaid's Tale was written in the early 1980s and published in 1985, and the political and social context of that time is noticeable in the text. As is, the story draws on "the growing political and social conservatism¹⁵ of the United States during the Reagan era as well as Atwood's experiences travelling in Afghanistan and Iran during the late 1970s as women's freedoms were being stripped from them." (Laflen 101). The author takes inspiration from real-life cases of gender oppression to alert the public to the instability of women's recently acquired rights and urges readers to maintain a societal awareness instead of complacently ignoring red flags as most pre-Gileadean citizens did (101). Throughout her tale, Offred "questions the evolution of the fundamentalist's take over, but she also probes into her own past to examine if her attitude and indifference to violation of humans rights and insensitivity towards her environment somehow contributed to women's vulnerable position in a patriarchal society" (Khajuria 238). Although most of Margaret Atwood's novels are set in Canada, as the Canadian identity is a characteristic trait of her works, *The Handmaid's Tale* is set in the United States.

¹⁵ The New Christian Right (NCR) gained momentum during the late 1970s and 1980s and "took shape as a right-wing, fundamentalist, faith-based, loose coalition of primarily white Catholics, evangelical Christians and religious conservatives that encouraged pro-life support for the Reagan presidency and exacerbated a polarizing 'culture war'" (Sethna 3).

The reason for this is that the author considers it unlikely that such an extreme regime as the Gileadean could be established in Canada, as in her view “Canadians might do it after the States did it, in some sort of watered-down version [...] The States are more extreme in everything.” (Atwood qtd. in Laflen 101). Even though the book was written in the context of 1980s American politics, it is still relevant as a cautionary tale today, as women’s rights are still far from equality in several developing countries, albeit not exclusively. In fact, in first-world nations where reproductive rights were taken for granted, recently it was proved that each case scenario can easily change. Concretely, in 2022 a number of abortion laws in the US suffered a setback, even though the legislation had been allowing women freedom over their reproductive choices for over fifty years (United Nations).

In addition, Atwood’s concerns about women’s rights intertwine with her ecocritical perspective, as shown in her connections between environmental damage and the exploitation of female bodies. Indeed, the abuse of the natural world is connected to the misappropriation of the Handmaids’ bodies, which makes the exploitation of othered bodies a main theme in the story. Also, Atwood draws inspiration from historical religious conflicts for the dominant religion depicted in the novel, which is enforced on the population and eliminates other doctrines (Atwood, *Handmaid* xvii). Gilead’s government uses religion to rationalize the subjugation of everyone other than the founding fathers of the new nation, as the “political and moral system is actually based on those passages of the Bible that clearly define men as superior to women, who, in turn, are presented only as breeding machines.” (Kuźnicki 56). The founders of Gilead focus on a story found in the Old Testament, as explained by Atwood in the novel’s introduction: “The biblical precedent is the story of Jacob and his two wives, Rachel and Leah, and their two handmaids. One man, four women, twelve sons – but the handmaids could not claim the sons. They belonged to the respective wives.” (*Handmaid* xiv). Gilead models the handmaiding system after this biblical tale and institutionalizes adultery, since high-class men who cannot have children with their wives are to engage in ceremonial sexual relationships with assigned Handmaids. For the foundation of Gilead’s patriarchal ideology, Atwood drew inspiration from 1980s American New Right, and seventeenth-century Puritanism, whose dogma also consisted in the literal interpretation of the Bible (Kuźnicki 54).

2.2.Dualistic mindsets

The society presented in Atwood’s novel regresses to a patriarchal authoritarian government that revokes most gender equality rights. The Republic of Gilead is a theocratic dictatorship

that forces women and men into an oppressive class system that assigns societal roles according to the citizens' wealth and gender. In order to justify this regime, the Gileadean government supports a dualistic system that separates men from women, positioning the latter as inferior Others. As such, a number of features presented by Val Plumwood as typical of a dualistic mindset may apply to the gender dynamics in Gilead. In the story, the master's identity would be represented by the nation's governors as well as the Commanders, who designed and enforced rules for the subjugation of Others. In turn, the dominated side may include women and a number of minorities, even if the former are subjugated to different degrees depending on their place in the social hierarchy. Besides women, the marginalized groups of Gilead include homosexuals, Jews, people of colour as well as political opposers.

The first characteristic, "radical exclusion" or "hyperseparation", refers to the master's fixation on particular features of the group considered inferior, and the generalization or exacerbation of those particular traits (Plumwood 49). Accordingly, individuals of the dominating group "eliminate or treat as inessential shared qualities, and hence to achieve maximum separation" from those they want to subjugate (49). In doing so, the master identity hopes to establish itself as the superior class. Radical exclusion is found in *The Handmaid's Tale* in the extreme focus put on the reproductive function of women, a characteristic that the patriarchal government of Gilead uses to impose sharp distinctions between genders and to justify oppressive laws. The rapid drop of Caucasian birth rate and the female ability to bear children serve as justification to abolish women's rights and force the few fertile ones to choose whether to become Handmaids or be sent to the Colonies to spend a short life cleaning toxic waste or, if they are lucky, to work in cotton or fruit fields. In fact, the newly-established patriarchal government blames women for the birth rate crisis, even though it is known that fertility issues affect Gileadean women and men alike. The truth is secretly acknowledged during one of Offred's visits to the doctor, who is shocked by the man's deviation from the official propaganda: "I almost gasp: he's said a forbidden word. *Sterile*. There is no such thing as a sterile man anymore, not officially. There are only women who are fruitful and women who are barren, that's the law." (Atwood, *Handmaid* 61). In order to perpetuate radical exclusion, the patriarchy of Gilead ignores a shared physical condition which would weaken the patriarchy's arguments for the subjugation of women.

Another concept promoted by the master is the principle of "incorporation" or "relational definition" (Plumwood 52). Incorporation refers to a view of the Other as "a lack or absence, [...] defining the other only in relation to the self, or the self's needs and desires."

(52). This outlook implies that subjects who are deemed inferior by the master are stripped out of their individuality, as well as their emotional and moral decision power (52). In *The Handmaid's Tale*, incorporation is apparent in the social status of women after the abolition of their rights. In fact, women are forbidden by law from holding any property or jobs, and money is held back from “any account with an F on it instead of an M.” (Atwood, *Handmaids* 178). Accordingly, when a Handmaid is designated to a new household, she is stripped of her previous name and addressed by a title that reflects her status as property of the Commander to whom she is assigned. For instance, the protagonist’s name is Offred, a name consisting of the proposition ‘of’ plus the name of the Commander who she is paired with, Fred. Thus, the naming system contributes to incorporation, as it denies Handmaids any individuality by defining them as part of the closest man, who is considered to be their legal owner.

A further feature of dualisms described by Plumwood that can be identified in Atwood’s story is “instrumentalization” or “objectification”, a characteristic resulting from incorporation (53). Instrumentalization implies that the members of the oppressed side in a dominating/dominated duality are “made part of a network of purposes which are defined in terms of or harnessed to the master’s purposes and needs. The lower side is also objectified, without ends of its own which demand consideration on its own account. Its ends are defined in terms of the master’s ends.” (53). In other words, the master utilizes the individuals he deems inferior for his own benefit, without taking into account the well-being of those used as instruments. In Atwood’s novel, instrumentalization manifests in the exploitation of Handmaids’ bodies for Gilead’s project of increasing the country’s birth rate. These women are more or less forced to engage in sexual intercourse with unfamiliar men in order to get pregnant. They are indoctrinated into embracing a mothering role, only to later be obliged to give their children away to the Wives and repeat the same process all over again, albeit in a different household. For fertile women who do not belong to the higher end of the social scale — seeing as Wives are protected by their status — the alternative to this system is exploitation in the Colonies. One way or the other, Gilead perceives women’s bodies as a means to an end and overlooks their physical, emotional or ethical needs. For instance, the protagonist’s lesbian best friend Moira, is forced into the Red Centre, a re-education centre for Handmaids-to-be, even though the principles of the handmaiding system go against her sexual orientation.

In some cases, the dualistic mindset is extended to individuals of the “dominated” group. Notably, Aunts and Wives partake in other women’s oppression. While Aunts physically and psychologically abuse Handmaids during their time at the centre, Wives mistreat

Handmaids, marginalizing and referring to them in derogatory terms amongst their own circle. Yet, Aunts are also instruments of patriarchy, as Pieixoto explains in the epilogue that Gilead's superiors thought "the best and most cost-effective way to control women for reproductive and other purposes was through women themselves." (Atwood, *Handmaid* 308). Indeed, the government creates a hierarchy among women by offering small freedoms to those who volunteer for the position of Aunts, such as permission to read and write (308). These separations created by patriarchy work to discourage women from establishing group alliances and rebelling against the regime.

2.3. Women and nature

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, natural elements do not appear as often as in the other two novels presented in this thesis, yet, the environment has a significant impact on the plot. Women's relationship with nature is ambiguous, mainly due to the influence of patriarchal discourse, which tries to distort nature in its favour. This manipulation can be seen in the Commander's comment about the convenience of arranged marriages, which are mandatory amongst the upper classes. In fact, he believes that falling in love and physical attraction were "just a fluke. All we've done is return things to Nature's norm." (Atwood, *Handmaid* 220). He mislabels a cultural custom as a natural phenomenon in order to rationalize the withdrawal of women's freedom. As Howell notes, in Gilead, "even linguistically, 'Nature' can be turned on" women and serve as a justification to subjugate them (8). What is more, Commander Fred argues that women are happier in Gilead because they can "fulfil their biological destinies in peace", unlike the period before the regime, where some people could not find a partner when relying on an emotional and physical connection (Atwood, *Handmaid* 220). Hence, not only does he dismiss love as a natural human feeling, he also voices his patriarchal mentality by generalizing motherhood as the ultimate goal for all women. Love is treated as an inefficient caprice associated with irrational emotions, whereas arranged marriages are naturalised because they allow patriarchy to control young women.

Similarly, Commander Fred uses nature to rationalize the existence of Jezebel's, an underground prostitution club that serves the interests of Gilead's male elite: "Nature demands variety, for men. It stands to reason, it's part of the procreational strategy. It's Nature's plan. [...] Women know that instinctively. Why did they buy so many different clothes, in the old days? To trick men into thinking they were several different women. A new one each day." (Atwood, *Handmaid* 237). Just like arranged marriages, the club is another way by which "men have constructed 'Nature' to justify" systems that oppress women (Howell 9). Offred's master

attributes the necessity for a place like Jezebel's to natural instincts, also as an attempt to excuse the club's deviance from Gileadean's official conservative laws regarding sexual relationships.

While the men of Gilead are the sole legal possessors of items associated with culture and civilization, such as books and writing materials, women are deemed irrational and forbidden to read and write because their biological role places them closer to nature according to patriarchal views. Female irrationality is reinforced by the "Particicution", a public ritual where a man of power, usually a Commander, tricks Handmaids to take revenge on an individual of the opposite sex, by telling them that the aggressor committed crimes against women (Atwood, *Handmaid* 278). In reality, the ritual is a scheme orchestrated by Gilead's superiors, as explained by Pieixoto in the epilogue: "it was not only a particularly horrifying and effective way of ridding yourself of subversive elements but it would also act as a steam valve for the female elements in Gilead ...it must have been gratifying for these Handmaids, so rigidly controlled at other times, to be able to tear a man apart with their hands every once in a while." (307). Thus, the ritual functions not only as a way to eliminate rebels but also as a moment of temporary freedom when Handmaids are allowed to release their hatred. However, "by leading the ceremony in this particular way, the authorities [of Gilead] also point at bestiality as the reputedly innate feature of all females, at the same time validating the need for patriarchy." (Kuźnicki 64). In other words, the Particicution is another means through which women are associated with nature, and therefore deemed unsuitable to occupy positions in the country's leadership.

Moreover, there are other instances where women are more overtly linked to nature. For instance, the presence of signs connecting Handmaids and livestock points toward a parallel between women and animal oppression. On one occasion, Offred describes the mandatory tattoo that Handmaids have around their ankles as "a cattle brand", a mark which signals them as property of the government and thus easier to identify, should they try to run away (Atwood, *Handmaid* 254). Likewise, in the Red Centre, Aunts carry "electric cattle prods slung on thongs from their leather belts," in order to discipline Handmaids (4). Even the narrator, at one point, compares her body to that of a farm animal: "I wait, washed, brushed, fed, like a prize pig." (69). Offred's ironic tone is present throughout her narrative and serves as a means to subtly critique Gilead's values and restrictions.

Another recurrent image employed in the novel to situate women closer to nature is the botanical vocabulary, which is regularly employed in relation to Handmaids' bodies and their

ability to generate life. For instance, the appropriate greeting between Handmaids is “blessed be the fruit,” and fertile women are said to be “fruitful” (Atwood, *Handmaid* 18/161). Khajuria explains that “the fruit, which plays the coded symbol for fertility, implies the handmaid’s reproductive capacities. The greeting also reinforces the idea that maternity is actually sanctioned by God.” (231). Aunt Lydia, the nun who rules the Red Centre where Offred went to, frequently resorts to terms related to the reproductive system of flowers when indoctrinating the women there. Committed to the propaganda of the state, the nun advises the girls to “think of yourselves as seeds”, a metaphor alluding to Handmaids’ passive role as seeds to be planted by the elite of Gilead to assure the survival of its population (18). Hence, the parallels between elements of flowers’ reproductive system and women’s bodies illustrate an essentialist connection between women and natural elements that are easily controlled by men.

The garden and flower imageries hold an important place in the novel. In fact, gardens are among the few outdoor settings described throughout the text. In her ecofeminist reading of *The Handmaid’s Tale*, Neşe Şenel underlines the symbolism behind gardens: “according to the ecofeminist and ecocritical discourse gardens are the ordered, rehabilitated and restricted civilizational spheres of the androcentric and most importantly anthropocentric mentality for their aesthetical value.” (*An Ecofeminist* 105). She concludes that the presence of these spaces in the novel serves as a way for the government to allow Handmaids and Wives to be close to nature, even if with “limited liberation and restricted freedom” (105). As a matter of fact, Serena Joy’s gardening is recognized by Offred as the wife’s way of occupying her time as a substitution for children: “Many of the Wives have such gardens, it’s something for them to order and maintain and care for.” (Atwood, *Handmaid* 12). In the absence of offspring towards whom redirect their care, Wives employ their energy towards other activities which are not forbidden by the government. In the patriarchal mindset of the country’s rulers, women are traditionally depicted as caretakers, so that they would need another object to redirect their nurturing needs. Thus, the Wives’ gardens are an interesting example of a liminal zone which problematizes the nature-culture divide because “it constitutes a hybrid between nature and civilization or civilized nature.” (Wieczorek 105). Şenel parallels the regime’s reduction of Handmaids to their reproductive function to the silencing of nature in the narrative, because “there is almost no given description of independent nature, wilderness, or pastoral.” (*An Ecofeminist* 156). As mentioned above, nature’s appearance is restricted to gardens, and even those cannot be considered “pure” natural spaces, since they are civilized and subjected to the control of patriarchy (105).

Additionally, some flower species directly reflect the status of the women in Gilead. Specifically, red tulips are associated with Handmaids due to the mandatory attire of the latter, red from head to toe, except for the white wings around the women's faces to keep them from seeing and being seen. In the narrative, the parallelism between tulips and Handmaids is perceived in Offred's description of Serena Joy's handling of the flowers:

The tulips have had their moment and are done, shedding their petals one by one ... She was snipping off the seedpods with a pair of shears. I watched her sideways as I went past ... She was aiming, positioning the blades of the shears, then cutting with a convulsive jerk of the hands. Was it the arthritis, creeping up? Or some blitzkrieg, some kamizake, committed on the swelling genitalia of the flowers? The fruiting body. To cut off the seedpods is supposed to make the bulb store energy. (Atwood, *Handmaid* 153)

After the red tulips have given their fruit, Serena aggressively cuts the reproductive organs of the flowers, as they are no longer of use to her. Paula Wiczorek suggests that "the withered tulips illustrate in this context the menopause, while the bulbs and seeds symbolise fertility." (107). Indeed, this behaviour may represent both the Wife's cathartic way of releasing her anger against Handmaids, for it is known that Wives hold resentment against the former group, as well as her strategy to cope with her own sterile state. Yet, the Wives' anger is misplaced on the Handmaids, as both classes of women suffer from the implications of the roles assigned to them by the patriarchal regime, albeit on different levels.

Still, Offred refuses to give in to the idea of an ill relationship with nature. Instead of viewing flowers and gardens as instruments used by patriarchy to keep women entertained and subjugated, the narrator feels a sense of nostalgia when remembering the gardens from her past: "I once had a garden. I can remember the smell of the turned earth, the plump shapes of bulbs held in the hands, fullness, the dry rustle of seeds through the fingers." (Atwood, *Handmaid* 12). Offred's rich sensory descriptions point towards a positive relationship with the environment, rather than disguised hatred. Wiczorek suggests that "Serena's garden reminds Offred of the fact that she used to have control over her own body and sexuality," which would account for the latter's nostalgia (106). Moreover, the protagonist denies the association of red tulips with the violence perpetuated by the tyrannical regime. On finding human corpses hanging on "the Wall", a display of the government's power used as a strategy to keep their authority among the population by exhibiting condemned people's bodies, Offred notes that

“the red of the [hanged man’s] smile is the same as the red of the tulips in Serena Joy’s garden ... The red is the same but there is no connection. The tulips are not tulips of blood, the red smiles are not flowers, neither thing makes a comment on the other” (33). Offred’s comment shows how she refuses to associate nature with humanity’s faults.

In addition, the protagonist’s feelings towards nature are reflected in her view of Serena’s garden, in which she perceives an element of subversion, “a sense of buried things bursting upwards, wordlessly, into the light, as if to point, to say: Whatever is silenced will clamor to be heard, though silently.” (Atwood, *Handmaid* 153). Here, the narrator seems to point towards a rebellion of the Others, who represent those groups deemed inferior and victims of exploitation in her society. The garden allows Offred to solidarize with nature and perhaps to envision the possibility of her own rebellion. Overall, Atwood “makes use of garden imagery not only as backdrop to women’s experience; the garden represents an image of resistance to conforming to the capitalist patriarchal regime, where women are forced to be silent.” (Wieczorek 112).

Nonetheless, although Offred recognizes nature’s oppression and is aware of the consequences of environmental damage, she still displays some disbelief towards it: “The news says coastal areas are being ‘rested’. Sole, I remember, and haddock, salmon, pink and fat, grilled in steaks. Could they all be extinct, like the whales? I’ve heard that rumor, passed on to me in soundless words, lips hardly moving, as we stood in line outside” (Atwood, *Handmaid* 164). Whereas the protagonist recognizes human sterility as an effect of climate change, she is sceptic of its repercussions on other species. Muñoz-González suggests that Offred represents “the average citizen’s reaction in the face of environmental degradation, climate change and animal extinction. Her reaction consists of either incredulity or acceptance and passivity.” (283). While Offred did not seem to be environmentally conscious when she was free to do so, it is plausible that her views are now influenced by Gilead’s regime, which restricts the population’s access to manipulated global news and turns the climate crisis into a taboo subject.

2.4. Environmental degradation and climate justice

In Margaret Atwood’s novel, a parallel can be established between various forms of oppression, not exclusively gender-related. Gilead’s class system categorizes citizens according to their gender and financial means. The individuals at the top of the social hierarchy are the Sons of Jacob (the founders of Gilead) and the Commanders, followed by their Wives. The men in this category are the ones who hold the most power in Gilead and make all decisions relating to the

administration of the country. They are followed by the Eyes, who are undercover spies for the government. Anybody can be an Eye, which maintains a feeling of distrust and fear among the citizens. Next in the hierarchy are Angels and Guardians, who are Gilead's soldiers and guards, followed by Economen (working-class men). Guardians can also serve as personal security and servants for Commanders and Wives. The most influential category of women after Wives are Aunts. Aunts are nuns responsible for indoctrinating and disciplining Handmaids-to-be at re-education centres. Next in the women's hierarchy are Marthas, who are servants for the highest class and responsible for the domestic work. Handmaids stand below Marthas in social status. The next rank is ascribed to Econowives, followed by Jezebels, prostitutes who work at the underground club controlled by the government and conceived for the amusement of high-class men. It is also worth noting that this classicist system assumes that in each social category, men have control over women in the same rank.

Finally, the lowest social categories are occupied by Unwomen, Gender Traitors and Children of Ham. The label Unwoman is assigned to old Handmaids who can no longer bear children, Handmaids who have "screwed up their three chances" in Commanders' houses, and rebels against the regime's doctrine (Atwood, *Handmaid* 248). Gender Traitors refers to homosexuals, while Children of Ham is a term used to name black-skinned people, in reference to a passage in the Genesis book (Sethna 3). Whereas individuals of the first categories are sent to the Colonies or killed, the Children of Ham are resettled in segregated "National Homelands", where their life conditions remain unknown (Atwood, *Handmaid* 83). According to Offred's friend Moira, a fourth of the people in the Colonies are actually men who have been labelled as Unwomen: "All of them wear long dresses, like the ones at the Center, only gray. Women and the men too ... I guess it's supposed to demoralize the men, having to wear a dress." (249). In order to shame male dissenters, the government makes them wear garments typically associated with women and refers to them by the derogatory female title instead of creating a male equivalent, thus confirming the regime's misogynist stance.

In the matter of environmental justice, Atwood's novel points to the disproportionate way in which individuals associated with the female gender are affected by the climate crisis. In Gilead, women are blamed for the drop in the birth rate by the new theocratic regime, even if in Offred's world it is common knowledge that infertility affects both genders equally. In the epilogue, Pieixoto explains that the Caucasian birth crisis partly originated from widespread birth control, R-strain syphilis and the AIDS epidemic, but was also due to other factors closely connected to pollution:

Stillbirths, miscarriages, and genetic deformities were widespread and on the increase, and this trend has been linked to the various nuclear-plant accidents, shutdowns, and incidents of sabotage that characterized the period, as well as to leakages from chemical- and biological-warfare stockpiles and toxic waste disposal sites... and to the uncontrolled use of chemical insecticides, herbicides, and other sprays. (Atwood, *Handmaid* 304)

As Kuźnicki points out, the “core reasons” for Gilead’s existence are located in “wrong scientific proceedings” which impacted the environment and human bodies alike (21). Atwood’s worries about the abuse of science are developed in her later novels, as will be illustrated in the chapter dealing with *Oryx and Crake*.

Apart from the psychological stress caused by the health conditions derived from environmental pollution, the state further distresses women through a series of restrictions and obligations which disrespect their reproductive rights. In Gilead, abortion is strictly forbidden, so women and doctors who engage in illegal procedures are sentenced to death and hanged on the Wall. Yet, “although the state is avowedly pro-natalist, its eugenical tendencies mean that only healthy infants are tolerated” (Sethna 3). Indeed, a baby who is born with apparent birth defects is referred to as a “shredder”, and “put somewhere, quickly, away.” (Atwood, *Handmaid* 113). Paradoxically, despite the government’s anti-abortion policy, the Republic of Gilead “permits infanticide due to disability”, thereby calling to mind non-fictional authoritative regimes which also aspired to racial “purity” (Sethna 3).

Regarding women’s reproductive rights in the context of a climate crisis, the novel addresses the population’s uncertainty about the future of the planet, and how this anxiety impacts human reproduction. When speaking about women who chose not to have children, Aunt Lydia recalls that “some women believed there would be no future, they thought the world would explode. That was the excuse they used ... They said there was no sense in breeding ... such wickedness. They were lazy women ... They were sluts.” (Atwood, *Handmaid* 113). The nun’s comment refers to the partakers in feminist protests held in the pre-Gilead period, where women advocated for the right to abort in the face of environmental changes. Here, Atwood draws on second-wave feminist protests that took place in the 1980s concerning reproductive justice (Sethna 5). During the years before the novel’s publication a series of ecological disasters took place in the United States and internationally, which reinforced feminists’ claims for the right to abort, such as the 1978 radiation leak in the Three Mile Island nuclear station

in Pennsylvania, the dangerous gas leak at a pesticide factory in Bhopal, India or Chernobyl's nuclear disaster in 1986 (5). Such phenomena caused health issues for both pregnant women and foetus, leading to congenital diseases or malformations that endangered the lives of both (5).

Besides, environmental justice is relevant to Atwood's depiction of the Colonies and the people who are assigned to work there. As previously mentioned, three-quarters of the labourers are women, and the remaining one-quarter is made up of men who represent a threat to Gilead, be that because of their sexuality or political choices (Atwood, *Handmaid* 248). In fact, here the government's oppression is double-sided. The Colonies function both as a way for the regime to dispose of the people that they want to make disappear, as well as a strategy to keep the Gileadean population under control. It is worth noting that until Moira told Offred about the faith of old Handmaids, she had never reflected upon the destinies of the latter, as they simply vanished. The Colonies are more convenient than having to publicly acknowledge unjustifiable homicides because the people confined to these zones are forced to work until the end of their lives. During the punishment suffered by Moira after a failed attempted escape from the Red Center, the protagonist's best friend tells Offred how she was shown a movie about the Colonies, in order to scare her into choosing life as a sex worker:

In the Colonies, they spend their time cleaning up. They're very clean-minded these days. Sometimes it's just bodies, after a battle. The ones in city ghettos are the worst, they're left around longer, they get rottener. This bunch doesn't like dead bodies lying around, they're afraid of a plague or something. So the women in the Colonies there do the burning. The other Colonies are worse, though, the toxic dumps and the radiation spills. They figure you've got three years maximum, at those, before your nose falls off and your skin pulls away like rubber gloves. They don't bother to feed you much, or give you protective clothing or anything, it's cheaper not to. Anyway they're mostly people they want to get rid of. (Atwood, *Handmaid* 248)

Here, a link is established between the degradation of nature and the exploitation of marginalized groups of society. Outside the novel's pages, it has been proven that the impact of environmental pollution on the human population is felt disproportionately depending on the social situation of individuals (Puleo 269). Although everybody is more or less exposed to pollution, industrial workers around the world, who often belong to ethnic minorities, are highly exposed to toxic chemical products in factories, agricultural fields and greenhouses

(269). To the rulers of Gilead, Colonies workers are disposable prisoners, who they sentence to a slow death due to the effects that contaminated material produces on human bodies. Put differently, environmental pollution is used as a weapon against citizens of the lowest social class.

It can be concluded that the environmental crisis in Gilead affects women in a disproportionate way, for the most part not because of gender-specific biological characteristics, but because of their respective social status. This is in accordance with the ecofeminist claim that a considerable part of women's suffering during extreme weather conditions is derived from assigned gender roles (Gaard, "From" 180). On the one hand, Handmaids' bodies are exploited, Wives' feelings are discarded, and Marthas perform their jobs without receiving monetary income. On the other hand, women constitute the majority of the Colonies' workers, who are constantly exposed to radiation and chemical waste.

2.5. Internal nature

In the dystopian society of the novel, the mental and physical aggressions suffered by women have disturbed their "naturaleza interna" (internal nature), that is, the relationship with their own bodies (Puleo 409). Handmaids in particular suffer alienation "from their bodies, their identities, and even from their genders", as they become mere tools in the government's plan to increase the Caucasian birth rate (Şenel, "Deconstructing" 227). Indeed, Handmaids are not valued as human beings, but as "containers" according to their capacity to produce the next generation (Atwood, *Handmaid* 96). Therefore, they have no agency and all aspects of their lives revolve around their reproductive function, including their diet and personal hygiene, both chosen in order for them to keep a healthy body and be a "worthy vessel" for possible future babies (65). This type of hypercontrol around their lives infantilizes Handmaids; they are stripped from their womanhood while simultaneously their whole life is defined by a female biological characteristic, to the point where women from lower classes who cannot produce children are declared Unwomen. Offred's lack of control over her own body over time leads her to resent it: "I avoid looking down at my body, not so much because it's shameful or immodest but because I don't want to see it. I don't want to look at something that determines me so completely." (63). The protagonist's estrangement towards her body contrasts with her view of it in the past:

I used to think of my body as an instrument, of pleasure, or a means of transportation, or an implement for the accomplishments of my will. I could use it to run, push buttons

of one sort or other, make things happen. There were limits, but my body was nevertheless lithe, single, solid, one with me. Now the flesh arranges itself differently. I'm a cloud, congealed around a central object, the shape of a pear, which is hard and more real than I am and glows red within its translucent wrapping. (Atwood, *Handmaid* 73)

Whereas before her body was an instrument to be used by Offred, now it is a tool for the government to use for its own profit. For this reason, Offred feels herself becoming detached and transparent, to the point where only her uterus is visible, along with the possible being developing inside. Donald Bradfield argues that Atwood's use of anthropomorphism specifically in relation to the Handmaids' bodies "serves to further entrench the 'Other'-ness that Gilead uses to keep the Handmaids oppressed". He explains that women are indoctrinated into viewing themselves as part of nature through the association of their reproductive organs with fruit and seeds in order to accept their status as property, "much as natural things can be regarded as property, such as land or ponds." (Bradfield). The parallel between women and land seen as property echoes Françoise D'Eaubonne's theory discussed in the introduction of this thesis. The feminist links male domination of the soil's fertility and the misappropriation of women's reproductive function, and posits both as main triggers of environmental destruction (D'Eaubonne 282).

Aside from physical alienation, Handmaids, and largely speaking most of Gilead's population are estranged from emotions due to the strict individualism induced by the regime. Offred voices her need for affection and physical touch on multiple occasions: "I hunger to touch something, other than cloth or wood. I hunger to commit the act of touch." (Atwood, *Handmaid* 11). Admittedly, this severance of bonds between humans is a strategy to keep the population from forming alliances among themselves and orchestrate a rebellion against the establishment. However, it could also be argued that the oppression of human emotions springs from its association with the natural sphere, so that Gilead's restrictions would reflect the domination of reason over emotion and culture over nature. Plumwood argues that in a dualistic patriarchal mindset,

the ideals which are held up [to] us truly worthy of a human life exclude those aspects associated with the body, sexuality, reproduction, affectivity, emotionality, the senses and dependence on the natural world, for these are shared with the natural and animal;

instead they stress reason, which is thought to separate humans from the sphere of nature.
(71)

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the only emotion promoted is fear, because it works for the oppressor's benefit. In a similar manner, the spheres of sexuality and reproduction are an exception to the regime's tyranny on traits shared with the natural world. In fact, these are not altogether forbidden, but utilized by the dominating group for their goal of increasing the number of births. Nonetheless, every aspect related to sexuality and reproduction is highly controlled, asexualized and stripped of its emotional component. The Ceremony prescribed to Handmaids and Commanders is a reproductive act that has been mechanized and unnaturalized, and which serves to distance characteristics common to humankind and the natural world.

3. *Parable of the Sower*

3.1. Author and novel introduction

Octavia Estelle Butler was an American science fiction writer born in Pasadena in 1947 and deceased in Washington in 2006. Butler was a pioneer of science fiction and one of the first African American female science fiction writers.¹⁶ The author's father died when she was seven, so she was raised by her mother and grandmother. They were an African American family with few means, and Butler's mother worked hard to provide her daughter with an education which she did not have access to herself. As a child, the writer attended public schools, where her dyslexia made it harder for her to integrate. Bored with the books she was given to read in the classroom, Butler asked her mother for a library card, and so began her passion for reading. The author showed an early interest in science fiction when at nine years old, after seeing a 1954 b-movie titled *Devil Girl from Mars*, she thought she could write a better plot than the one she had just witnessed. She graduated from Pasadena City College, and continued her studies in Los Angeles. There, she took a diverse range of classes including writing, anthropology, psychology, physics, biology, geology, etc.

In the beginning of her writing career, Butler wrote short stories, but experienced difficulties to get them published, so she had to work in a series of jobs in parallel and write at night. The author's situation changed when in 1976, she wrote her first novel, which was quickly purchased and published under the title *Patternmaster*. Butler's short stories and novels have won many prestigious awards including the Nebula and Hugo Awards. In 1995, she received a MacArthur "Genius" Grant, becoming the first science fiction writer to win this award, and in 2000 she was granted a PEN Award for lifetime achievement.¹⁷ Some of her most known works are *Kindred* (1979), the *Xenogenesis* trilogy (1987/1988/1989), *Parable of the Sower* (1993), *Parable of the Talents* (1998), *Fledgling* (2005) and her short story *Bloodchild* (1995), among others.

Parable of the Sower is a speculative science fiction novel published in 1993. The book is divided into four sections which correspond to the years going from 2024 to 2027. The sections are divided into twenty-five chapters which are themselves composed of journal entries written by Lauren Oya Olamina, the protagonist of the story. Lauren is a fifteen-year-

¹⁶ The biographical information in the following section proceeds from: Rothberg, Emma. "Octavia Butler." National Women's History Museum, 2021.

¹⁷ "Octavia E. Butler." *Encyclopedia Britannica*.

old African American young woman who is afflicted by hyperempathy syndrome, a condition that makes her experience other creatures' feelings of pain and pleasure (Butler, *Sower* 11). The setting of the novel is apocalyptic southern California, in a near future where the state of the climate is severely aggravated. In Butler's dystopia, the structure of society has collapsed and the frequency of extreme weather events has led to the scarcity of basic means such as water and food. The precarity of this situation has exacerbated physical and psychological violence, which is also facilitated by corrupt institutional organisations, which fail to enforce the law and even take advantage of citizens who seek them for help. The first half of the story corresponds to Lauren's life in a closed community named Robledo, the place where she was born and where she lives with her family. Lauren is conscious that the security which her family and neighbours experience by living inside a gated neighbourhood in the midst of chaos is only temporary, so she tries to prepare herself and others around her to face life outside of Robledo. Soon, her prediction becomes real and the neighbourhood is destroyed by "paints", drug addicts from beyond the walls who are addicted to watching fires burn (Butler, *Sower* 104). The protagonist manages to escape the attack with two other survivors, Harry and Zahra, and together they depart on a journey northward, where the weather is allegedly still milder and water cheaper.

Even before the fall of Lauren's neighbourhood, the protagonist had already started creating her own belief system, different from the one preached in her family home. Lauren's religion "Earthseed" is based on the idea that "God is change", and that the goal of humanity is to take root among the stars so that it can fulfil its Destiny (Butler, *Sower* 3/73). The second half of the story depicts Lauren's travels in search of a safe place where to root and develop the first Earthseed community, and during which the protagonist recruits other people to join her and adhere to this new religion. The novel ends with the group settling north and forming a community named Acorn. The open ending leaves the reader wondering if and how Lauren and the others will survive in the harsh socioeconomic and climatic circumstances of the dystopic setting. Rachael I. Sears suggests that *Parable of the Sower* differs from other classic dystopian novels because "by the end of the novel, the seeds of a utopia have been carefully planted with the promise of a rich harvest to come." (22). Indeed, even if Butler presents the readers with a pessimist scenario throughout the narrative, the open ending leaves space for a positive outcome, where Lauren's newborn ecofeminist community might grow and initiate societal changes, like embracing diversity and cultivating respect towards all humans as well as the natural world.

Parable of the Sower was published during the 1990s when the growing concern for environmental change resulted in the creation of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change in 1988, and the first Climate Change Convention in 1992 (Messimer 68). As such, science fiction authors also began to explore the effects of climate change in their works, particularly in utopian and dystopian writing (68). Messimer notes that “early ecofeminist post-apocalyptic novels like Ursula K. Le Guin’s imagined utopia as a return to the pastoral land as it was before the Anthropocene” (68). By contrast, “1990s left science fiction authors like Butler with a deeper understanding of humanity’s continued and irrevocable deterioration of the Earth” moved towards a different kind of writing about the future of the planet and its inhabitants (68). In Butler’s fiction, the author acknowledges that Earth cannot simply go back to its pre-Anthropocene state and speculates on how humanity can survive the climate crisis and find solutions to prevent its aggravation (68). In addition, the novel is particularly relevant in present-day reality, as the fictional crowds moving to the north of America parallel current migratory movements caused by climate change. Indeed, the increasing number of adverse environmental phenomena often force whole communities to leave their land and become refugees, due to security reasons or the harder access to water, food and other resources (Tetsuji). In 2018, the Institute for Economics and Peace (IEP) released a study predicting that at least 1.2 billion people might become climate refugees by 2050, due to ongoing threats like sea-level rise, droughts, hurricanes, etc. (Tetsuji). As Butler’s story gradually resembles reality more and more, it becomes crucial to discuss the socioeconomic implications of climate change and the welfare of these refugees.

3.2. Climate crisis and social justice

Octavia Butler’s ecocritical perspective is perceptible in the desolate setting of *Parable of The Sower*. The apocalyptic scenario of the novel is a consequence of climate change caused by human activity on Earth. Butler’s California is constantly affected by extreme weather phenomena, including blizzards, earthquakes, tornados, and the rise of the seas. Likewise, the temperatures have risen and rain patterns are inconsistent, which frequently leads to droughts and wildfires. On the rare occasion when it does rain, people have to deal with violent rainstorms for weeks on end. The climate crisis is one of the main contributors to the collapse of the American economy and it affects the majority of social and political infrastructures. Although the cause of the apocalypse is not specifically explained in the novel, it is frequently suggested that the environmental conditions were induced by human activity. In the novel’s

sequel *Parable of the Talents* (1998), Lauren's husband Bankole describes the events that led to the state of the United States:

'the Pox' lasted from 2015 through 2030 – a decade and a half of chaos. This is untrue. The Pox has been much longer torment. It began well before 2015, perhaps even before the turn of the millennium. It has not ended. I have also read that the Pox was caused by accidentally coinciding climatic, economic, and sociological crises. It would be more honest to say that the Pox was caused by our own refusal to deal with obvious problems in those areas. We caused the problems: then we sat and watched as they grew into crises. (Butler, *Talents* 8)

Bankole's comment conveys the importance of civic responsibility, as it locates the root of the crisis in humanity's lack of response when faced with the outcome of its own actions. Thus, the text is a cautionary tale, as Butler speculates on the dangers of overlooking environmental issues, and a nation's passivity towards societal problems in general (Tüzün 13). In Butler's dystopia, fundamental resources, namely water, food, electricity and others are no longer accessible to everyone. The scarcity of crucial means led to their privatization and to an exponential rise in prices, so that only the wealthiest social classes can afford to satisfy their basic needs.

In addition, the state of the climate has unleashed a wave of violence, as the lack of resources pushes the impoverished population to rob in order to survive. However, the crisis also serves as an excuse for some individuals to commit other crimes, e.g., rape, torture, arson and murder. In parallel, discriminatory attitudes such as sexism, racism, and classism have been exacerbated by the state of the planet, which generates further conflict among human groups. In her ecofeminist reading of the novel, Hatice Ö. Tüzün underlines the interconnectedness between civilization and the natural world, as Butler portrays "how the major problems (of our time) ... environmental degradation, climate change, economic disparities, racial and gender discrimination – cannot be understood in isolation. Being systemic problems that are interconnected, they can be considered as various aspects of a single crisis (the Pox)." (15). The novels illustrate how the mistreatment of the planet reflects in the degradation of human relationships, thereby blurring the barrier between civilization and nature.

Parable of the Sower belongs to the "apocalyptic ecologism" tradition, a trend that was born in the United States with the publication of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* in 1962, which is also "considered the beginning of modern environmentalism." (Mayer 175; Muñoz-

González 279). While Carson's apocalyptic ecologism focuses on the outcome of Anthropocene-related damage inflicted upon nature and on its consequences on the human body, Butler's novel particularly highlights climate justice issues (Mayer 175). In fact, the author aligns the comment on ecology with social justice through her depiction of the disproportionate way in which the more vulnerable groups are affected by environmental catastrophes. Further on the abovementioned passage about the Pox, Bankole describes how the climate crisis impacts the lives of human beings to different extents: "I have watched education become more of a privilege of the rich than the basic necessity that it must be if the civilized society is to survive. I have watched as convenience, profit, and inertia excused greater and more dangerous environmental degradation. I have watched poverty, hunger, and disease become inevitable for more and more people" (Butler, *Talents* 8). In addition, Butler's dystopia shows how the climate crisis exacerbates economic disparities, as the middle class progressively disappears, thereby widening the gap between the rich and the poor. Whereas the few wealthy individuals left are able to afford sustenance, education and to hide in the security of their mansions, the majority of the population is poor and struggles to survive in hostile environmental conditions.

Through the climate justice lens, the disproportionate victimization of vulnerable or marginalized groups is illustrated in the hardships that poor women, children, racial minorities and homosexuals endure in a scenario of environmental catastrophe. The fact that women are especially targeted as victims of sexual assault is acknowledged by Lauren, who chooses to travel up north dressed like a man (Butler, *Sower* 130). Her decision stems from what she experienced in the expeditions to the outside of Robledo's walls, where she frequently testified the brutality inflicted on female bodies, but also from the arsonists' attack on the neighbourhood. During the invasion, the intruders did not hesitate to sexually assault every female they encountered, including the younger girls of Robledo. This scenario echoes climate justice concerns about the specific hardships that women endure during natural catastrophes and as climate refugees. As mentioned in the introduction of this thesis, one of the causes why women might be unequally impacted in case of an extreme weather phenomenon is that they tend to wait longer to leave their homes, because of the heightened danger of assault when going outside without a male presence or due to their inferior social status in certain patriarchal societies (Dunne).

Another aspect linking gender issues and the climate crisis portrayed in the novel is the rise of various types of gender-based violence such as domestic physical and emotional abuse,

forced prostitution and child marriage. Zahra, one of Lauren's travel companions and former neighbour, is a victim of such abuse. Zahra was bought by a Robledo man from her homeless mother, and forced into a polygamous marriage when she was merely fifteen years old (Butler, *Sower* 159). Outside of the novel's pages, gender-based violence has been observed in a number of societies like Bangladesh, Ethiopia and Kenya, as a way for families to cope with climate disasters by selling female relatives to recover what was lost and/or get hold of basic necessities (UN Climate Change). Similarly, Allison and Jillian Gilchrist, another pair of young women who join Lauren along her journey north, ran away from a father who forced both daughters into a life of prostitution and killed his own newborn grandson. Other times, women undergo sexual exploitation as an alternative to poverty and life in the streets of apocalyptic California. More generally, Butler aligns ecocritical issues with social and gender inequalities, by portraying how women with fewer means are used as tokens of power and discarded by upper- and middle-class men: "Some middle-class men prove they're men by having a lot of wives in temporary or permanent relationships. Some upper-class men prove they're men by having one wife and a lot of beautiful, disposable young servant girls. Nasty. When the girls get pregnant, if their rich employers won't protect them, the employers' wives throw them out to starve." (Butler, *Sower* 34). Whereas upper-class men do not take responsibility for their acts, lower-class women are put in further vulnerable conditions, since if they survive pregnancy, they will have to bear the burden of raising the babies alone.

Lauren's character is Butler's challenge to the cultural gender norms. The author "insists on unmaking the gender of her protagonist ... throughout the narrative. This not only becomes crucial to Lauren's survival but also vital to her development of a critical ecological ethics and to her envisioning of a truly 'new' ordering of the world." (Frazier 50). Lauren cuts her hair short and travels dressed as a man, and even though she finds it strange to be treated like an individual of the opposite sex, the androgynous look does not bother her. Zahra, by contrast, refuses to cut her own hair or to travel disguised as a man, despite the added security that this would bring, especially to her, whom Lauren describes as having a physical appearance that attracts the male gaze (Butler, *Sower* 193). While both women were educated in households that emphasized traditional gender roles, Lauren's open mind, along with her interest in cultivating herself through reading, allow her to look beyond the conservative education she was given and to begin to unloose "maleness and femaleness from their symbolic principles." (Frazier 57). Lauren's fuzzy gender is part of Butler's deconstruction of those dualisms that are the basis of various kinds of discrimination.

Besides the connection between environmental issues and gender discrimination, the existence of racial tension is also highlighted throughout the novel. The protagonist is highly conscious of the weight of people's different skin colours on her reality: "Dad likes to work with him, although sometimes there are problems. The Garfields and the Baiters are white, and the rest of us are black. That can be dangerous these days. On the street, people are expected to fear and hate everyone but their own kind" (Butler, *Sower* 33). However, the situation is different inside their walled community because Lauren's "neighbourhood is too small for [them] to play those kinds of games" (33). While in California's streets, individuals have turned against each other, the residents of Robledo have to learn to respect one another in order to protect their community against the outside world. Importantly, this does not mean that they discard racial differences altogether, as interracial relationships inside Robledo are not lightly accepted and have generated physical conflicts in the past. Still, these fights were soon set aside for survival purposes.

According to Sylvia Mayer, the articulation between ecocriticism and social justice is further evident in Butler's choice of narrator: "By using a narrator from a socially marginalized group, the young, female, black Lauren Oya Olamina, and by focusing on the experiences of low-income, multiethnic, largely, though not exclusively, non-white communities, she puts emphasis on the nexus of social and environmental degradation." (175). The choice of an African American protagonist is in keeping with Butler's wish to diversify science fiction and dystopia as genres, considering that beforehand these largely featured white main characters, and relayed other ethnicities to minor roles in the story (Butler "In 1980"). Besides, Lauren's didactic tone is in line with Butler's intention to raise awareness about social and environmental issues. In fact, the parable is an old Judeo-Christian genre "defined by its openly moral and didactic purposes ... The title and the text of the biblical 'Parable of the Sower,' St. Luke, 5-8, with which Butler ends her novel, function as a framing narrative device to highlight the text's moral, didactic thrust." (Mayer 178). More than a simple moralizing figure, Lauren is an activist and an educator, who intends to reverse the capitalist ethos which has destroyed the environment and contributed to the marginalization of the less powerful groups of society.

3.3. Slavery

Slavery is a recurrent theme in Octavia Butler's prose and it is often underlined in connection with her novel *Kindred* (1979). In *Parable of the Sower*, Butler draws important parallels

between slavery and the role of multinational corporations in the crisis, as the latter are responsible for the depletion of natural resources as well as the manipulation and exploitation of communities in fragile socioeconomic situations. In the story, the Japanese-German-Canadian company KSF buys a small coast town named Olivar and governs it according to its self-made policies. Olivar is described as “an upper middle class, white, literate community of people who once had a lot of weight to throw around” that has been devastated by the rise of the sea level, the warming climate, earthquakes, and the waves of refugees arriving at their shores (Butler, *Sower* 111). KSF’s intention is to exploit the town’s remaining resources by developing large-scale agricultural industries and selling water, solar and wind energies. To that effect, the company seduces Olivar’s habitants into accepting “smaller salaries than their socioeconomic group is used to in exchange for security, a guaranteed supply, jobs, and help in their battle with the Pacific.” (112). However, this system is a scam orchestrated by big companies like KSF, since the workers’ modest salaries are not sufficient to cover their living expenses, which leads Olivar residents to fall into debt and be obliged to continue working there so as to pay their employers back. Even though at first some of the people in Olivar were sceptic about taking the deal, the menace of poverty and the need for physical security makes them fall into the company’s trap. Butler visibly draws inspiration from contemporary capitalism to design certain aspects of the novel’s society (Sears 25). In fact, “it is no secret that ‘in order to have access to a cheap labor force, thereby increasing profits, many American businesses build factories in third world countries to take advantage of locals who are willing to work for what would be criminally low-wages in the United States’” (Allen qtd. in Sears 25). This capitalization upon the bodies of less powerful groups for the benefit of big cooperations is also explored in the book, with Olivar’s residents suffering a similar type of abuse so that the companies can generate higher incomes.

Butler’s dystopia also puts forward that the exploitation of poverty-stricken groups is not limited to the outside of Western borders, nor to the past. In the author’s interview with *Crisis* magazine, she argues that slavery never disappeared, as in present-time America “people have been held against their will and forced to work after having been seduced by lies about good salaries and that sort of thing.” (Butler qtd. in Kouhestani 900). The writer adds that in the United States, most of the people targeted by these schemes belong to ethnic minorities, particularly Hispanics in the North and Black people in the South (900). In *Parable of the Sower*, Butler articulates neo-slavery with climate justice, as she demonstrates that dominant groups may use the degradation of the environment to take advantage of low-class communities

and also eventually of more comfortable citizens, as is the case for the white middle-class residents of Olivar. In the novel's setting, "the reason for slavery is no longer racial superiority but the power of the employer, regardless of race and class, over employees through 'debt slavery' as well as 'company slavery,'" and the workers do not resist the capitalist oppression, because the alternative would be the precarious life outside the town's walls (Kouhestani 902).

Moreover, the allusions to slavery in the story are the author's contribution to sustaining collective memory on the subject. For this purpose, Butler inserts informational fragments about slaves' lives of the past. During a conversation between Lauren and Travis, an African American man whose mother worked as a servant for a wealthy family, the young woman is surprised that he knows how to read and write while having had no access to formal education (Butler, *Sower*: 205). Travis explains that he owes these skills to his mother, who used to sneak with him to her boss's library in order to teach him what he should have learned at school (205). Travis's testimony leads Lauren to reflect on the similarities between her travel companion's background and slaves of the past: "Of course. Slaves did that two hundred years ago. They sneaked around and educated themselves as best as they could, sometimes suffering whipping, sale, or mutilation for their efforts." (205). Butler establishes a connection between past and future forms of oppression in a didactic manner, a narrative feature which is abundant throughout the novel.

In addition to the more overt fragments about slavery, certain formal aspects of *Parable of the Sower* point towards the novel's intertextuality with the African American slave narrative. Scholars like Sylvia Mayer have written on the parallels between Lauren's texts and the African American slave narrative, namely the use of the first-person and the presence of polyphony in the book (179). In fact, Butler's dystopia is a compilation of different texts and genres rather than just diary entries. For instance, the book includes "aphorisms" at the beginning of each chapter written by Lauren for "Earthseed: The Books of the Living", a kind of holy book where she develops her new religion (Mayer 179). Additionally, biblical texts and allusions are spread throughout the novel. The most evident are the "Parable of the Sower", which appears on the story's final page and gives the novel its title; and the "Parable of the Importunate Widow", another Bible chapter that Lauren quotes during a eulogy to her father (Butler, *Sower* 311/126). Mayer describes the novel's polyphony as a postmodern "ecological mode of representation ... that foregrounds process, relationality, and interconnectedness" (179). Indeed, Butler's use of different types of texts makes for a "self-reflexive narrative", where Lauren's subjectivity is put into question through a critical dialogue between diverse

voices including the traditional Judeo-Christian theology, and also more factual insights from natural history and ecology books, which the protagonist borrows from her father's shelves (179/180). Hence, the text's "resistance to monologic concepts of 'truth' can be read as a critique of those concepts which have dominated the West in the modern era and have thus contributed to environmental degradation" (Mayer 180). The dialogue generated by polyphony presents different perspectives of reality by offering, for example, "different concepts of God, of the human self and of nonhuman nature" (180). As a result, Butler's text conveys "an awareness of relationality and constant flux", thus opening the way for the deconstruction of those dualisms that have served as an excuse for environmental degradation and to discriminate against human groups who are associated with the natural world (180).

3.4. Ecofeminist spirituality: Earthseed

Lauren begins creating a new religion at the young age of twelve, when she realizes that "my father's God stopped being my God ... My God has another name." (Butler, *Sower* 7). At that point, she starts scribbling down verses and later gathers them in "Earthseed: The Books of the Living". Lauren's belief system diverges from her father's, who is the Baptist minister of their walled community Robledo. Still, the protagonist pretends to adhere to his religion and even lets herself be baptized, so as to avoid confrontation with her family. She keeps her religion a secret until Robledo's fall, after which she attempts to preach her word and gather followers during the journey northward.

The basis of Earthseed is a combination of different religions and philosophies and it can be associated with what ecofeminist theologian Carol P. Christ calls "an impersonal process of life, death, and transformation" (qtd. in Mayer 184). As a matter of fact, the protagonist's faith is based on the belief that "God is change" (Butler, *Sower* 3), a non-anthropocentric entity that exists regardless of humanity's wants and needs, but which can be shaped by each person:

We do not worship God.
We perceive and attend God.
We learn from God.
With forethought and work,
We shape God.
In the end, we yield to God.
We adapt and endure,
For we are Earthseed
And God is Change. (Butler, *Sower* 17)

The nature of Lauren's doctrine liberates its adherents from the idea of a transcendental male or female God who is in charge of deciding their future, depending on the worship practices or the moral behaviour of its followers. At the same time, the religion fabricated by Butler places a sense of personal responsibility on every individual to overcome inertia, learn to live in community and adapt to the continuous changes of the universe. The protagonist's inclination to act reflects in her rejection of Christianity because for her its values promote the kind of passivity that contributed to the Pox. From Lauren's perspective, people's belief that there is a God to protect them is the kind of mindset that allowed communities like Robledo to hide behind their walls instead of taking action to improve their lives (Kouhestani 899). This mentality is encapsulated in the different opinions held by Lauren and her father concerning the causes of the climate crisis. While Lauren defends that "People have changed the climate of the world. Now they're waiting for the old days to come back," her father dismisses any anthropocentric responsibility by claiming that "only God could change the world in such an important way." (Butler, *Sower* 52). Put differently, the protagonist's father ascribes climate change to the will of God, thereby implying that people do not need to change their way of treating the planet and seek a collaborative solution that includes tackling the environmental crisis.

Furthermore, when one of Lauren's travel companions asks her what or who is the object of Earthseed's worship, she gives a practical explanation as to why there is none. In the protagonist's words: "Earthseed deals with ongoing reality, not with supernatural authority figures. Worship is no good without action. Without action, it's only useful if it steadies you, focuses your efforts, eases your mind." (Butler, *Sower* 206). The protagonist recognizes that religion is a powerful medium to appeal to people on a large scale and to inspire them to change their attitude, so she uses Earthseed as a means to "initiate and then support a systemic transformation", but eliminates the aspects she esteems will hinder humankind (Tüzün 15). Lauren's verses intend to redirect individuals into finding a way to survive in an apocalyptic setting, but also aim to help the human race achieve their full potential as a species, while simultaneously respecting other human and non-human beings. Ultimately, Lauren rejects her neighbours' tendency to look backwards, as she "recognizes the need for dramatic social change, and is therefore the only person in the novel who can think toward utopia." (Messimer 74).

Lauren's religion echoes ecofeminist philosophy in her denial of dualistic thinking. She rejects an anthropocentric form of God, and thus "avoids running the risk of revivifying

received theologies that have been used to legitimize systems of domination” between humankind and the natural world (Mayer 185). In fact, the protagonist’s dogma points towards a continuity between Earth elements, rather than a strict separation between civilization and nature, as may be perceived in some of Earthseed’s verses: “We are all Godseed, but no more or less so than any other aspect of the universe, Godseed is all there is – all that Changes.” (Butler, *Sower* 73). Butler imagines a new religion devoid of human supremacy, thereby leaving room for alternative relationships between humanity and the natural world. Lauren focuses “her teachings on the mutuality and not the hierarchicality of the human-nature relation that highlights nature’s life-giving state ... [and] introduces a philosophy of life based on equality.” (Elham M. 9). Another piece of evidence that nature plays an important role for the protagonist is her choice of the name Earthseed:

Well, today, I found the name, found it while I was weeding the back garden and thinking about the way plants seed themselves, windborne, animalborne, waterborne, far from their parents. They have no ability at all to travel great distances, under their own power, and yet, they do travel. Even they don’t have to just sit in one place and wait to be wiped out. (Butler, *Sower* 73)

Lauren praises the adaptability of plants and uses it as a metaphor to compare this ability to the religion she wishes to develop; in doing so she establishes a parallel between the human and the natural world. According to Elham M. Achachelooei, the metaphor of the seed stands “for the knowledge and message that Lauren is preaching. The provider, bearer and transformer of the seed is nature or soil. Lauren, metaphorically, is illustrated to be the feminine representation of this fertility.” (8). This characterization of Lauren is based on the “mythological conception of woman as the grain gatherer and natural healer” in which “woman is considered as a knowledgeable person whose knowledge comes from association with nature” (9). Arguably, this vision could contribute to an essentialist connection between women and nature. Nonetheless, Lauren’s role in healing people’s relationship with the natural world as well as her hyperempathy syndrome point towards a special bond uniting the protagonist and the planet.

Sears discusses further connections between *Parable of the Sower* and ecofeminism, specifically a branch named Spiritual Ecofeminism (29). Rosemarie Tong explains that Spiritual Ecofeminism assumes there is

a close connection between environmental degradation and the Judeo-Christian conviction that God gave humans 'dominion' over the earth ... Implicit in the thought of most spiritual Ecofeminists, therefore, is the view that unless 'patriarchal' religions such as Judaism and Christianity can purge themselves of the idea of an omnipotent, disembodied male spirit, women should abandon the oppressive confines of their synagogues and churches and run to the open spaces of nature. (qtd. in Sears 29)

Spiritual Ecofeminism in the novel may be found in Lauren's conviction to distance herself from her father's religion and in her own new belief system. When reflecting upon spirituality, the young woman observes that "a lot of people seem to believe in a big-daddy-God or a big-cop-God or a big-king-God. They believe in a kind of super-person. A few believe God is another word for nature. And nature turns out to mean just about anything they happen not to understand or feel in control of." (Butler, *Sower* 14). In this passage, Lauren reflects on the reasons why she cannot relate to any of the already existing religions of the world. For her, neither anthropocentric religions nor entities related to a vague notion of untamed nature make sense, so she decides to fabricate a new one. Although the protagonist does not willingly abandon the confines of her neighbourhood and run to nature but is obliged to do so by an arsonist attack, her leaving the Christian abode and entering wilder spaces symbolically allows her to fully embrace and preach her own faith. However, she does not replace a patriarchal religion with a matriarchal one, which is in keeping with radical ecofeminist theories which sustain "that the concept of a male, omnipotent, rational God enforces patriarchal domination over both women and nonhuman nature" whereas "the concept of a female, earth-like or earth-centered Goddess can enforce essentialist notions and biological determinism." (Mayer 185). Thus, by adhering to the abstract notion that God is change, Lauren liberates her belief system from any socially constructed categories that might have a negative influence on its believers, and instead creates a religion based on gender neutrality and inclusivity.

Apart from the opposition to Christianity, Earthseed is contrasted with another androcentric belief system, a religion fabricated by Richard Moss, one of Robledo's inhabitants presented in the first chapters of the story. Moss is the husband of three wives, on whom he imposes a religion that is "a combination of the Old Testament and historical West African practices. He claims that God wants men to be patriarchs, rulers and protectors of women, and fathers of as many children as possible." (Butler, *Sower* 34). The head of the family works at a big commercial water company and this financial power allows him to pick up homeless young women from the streets and to take advantage of their desperation to manipulate them into a

polygamous relationship. Once more, an individual associated with the capitalist system — as private companies sell water at unreasonable prices — is associated with the exploitation of socioeconomically vulnerable people. Besides, as opposed to Lauren, who frequently worries about the future of the babies who are born in the midst of the crisis, Moss wants to produce as many descendants as possible without worrying about the dangers lurking outside Robledo’s wall or even the general socioeconomic instability. What is more, Richard Moss almost never allows his female relatives to go on group expeditions beyond the walls of the neighbourhood to get acquainted with life outside. Instead, “they were educated at home by their mothers according to the religion their father had assembled, and they were warned away from the sin and contamination of the rest of the world.” (Butler, *Sower* 39). Therefore, the Moss girls have no preparation for possible attacks and no information about how to survive in the wild.

3.5. Ecofeminist communities

The protagonist’s main goal in regard to Earthseed is to make its values widespread and to establish communities where respect and acceptance are mandatory, regardless of one’s gender, sexual orientation, and racial or social background. In “Earthseed: the Books of the Living”, Lauren writes the following verses:

Embrace diversity.
Unite –
Or be divided
Robbed,
Killed,
By those who see you as prey.
Embrace diversity
Or be destroyed. (Butler, *Sower* 185)

Lauren’s religion contradicts the general hostility of her world and contends that diversity is a valuable characteristic instead of a vulnerability, for she “sees the strength in unity between people with different talents and perspectives” (Messimer 83). Hence, her group welcomes individuals of various ages, genders and ethnicities.

Heidi Hutner suggests that Butler’s Earthseed is based on a “partnership ethic”, a concept developed by Caroline Merchant in *Reinventing Eden* (68). Partnership ethic is “based on the idea that people are helpers, partners and colleagues and that people and nature are equally important to each other.” (Merchant qtd. in Hutner 68). In the novel, this mindset is put into practice in the group that Lauren gradually forms during the journey northward and later in her community. Despite the racial tension felt in Butler’s chaotic world, Lauren’s

companions recognize the value in each individual who joins the group, and so they learn to thrive in diversity. In Merchant's words: "Partnership ethics encompasses both similarities and differences. In any partnership based on a relationship, there's a dialogue, there's a give-and-take, there's a mutual responsibility, a mutual sharing, a holding back for the benefit of the other partner." (qtd. in Bryson 128). This conscious way of thinking is precisely what Lauren envisions as the basis of her philosophy. Even though the young woman is established as the leader of the group, she discusses matters with the rest of her community before making important decisions, and acts for the benefit of everyone. In addition, the protagonist does not impose her religion on newcomers and is happy to engage in philosophical debates related to the fundamentals of Earthseed. All of this makes for a harmonious community, where the elements of the group respect each other and work towards the same goal: survive and search for better life conditions.

Moreover, partnership ethic in Lauren's group entails "mothering", a form of care and nurturing towards children, which contrasts with how offspring are viewed by other characters in the book (Hutner 72). Instead of perceiving babies and toddlers as burdens that slow their journey north, Lauren, Bankole and the other adults share a mutual responsibility to care for the children they find along the way. They do this out of compassion for those who cannot yet defend themselves, but also because they recognize that "a community's first responsibility is to protect its children – the ones we have now and the ones we will have." (Butler, *Sower* 305). Earthseed's ethic relies on finding value in everyone, even if that person might not have anything tangible to give in return. Nonetheless, "although mothering is 'fundamental' part of the Earthseed community, 'Butler's concept of mothering rejects the white stereotypical ideal of the nurturing self-sacrificing mother within the patriarchal society. Instead, it embodies involvement and commitment to the community at large that in principle is independent of gender.'" (Melzer qtd. in Hutner 72). Mothering in Lauren's community is practised by men and women alike, so that the responsibility of looking after the younger generation does not fall exclusively on women, which was customary in Christian Robledo. Besides, mothering in the group is directed towards all children rather than being reserved for those who share biological links with their caretakers, which again challenges the hostile environment of the novel, where the crisis has exacerbated people's individualism and indifference to others.

Elham M. argues that in *Parable of the Sower* there are two mentalities regarding natural elements present in the novel, "a masculine Christian one, which credits the misuse of creation for the benefit (in this case survival) of humanity, and a female environmentalist

mentality which does not feel at ease with the justification of survival at any cost.” (7). The first mindset can be located in Robledo, where its inhabitants seem to live in rivalry with non-human beings. For instance, in her neighbourhood, Lauren feels a sense of obligation to shoot squirrels, rats and birds because they either eat or destroy the community’s crops. However, as the story unfolds, “Lauren increases and deepens her understanding of interdependency and respect for the rest of creation” (Elham M. 7). In *Parable of the Talents*, this change of attitude is fully attained and allows the newly-established Acorn to keep a harmonious relationship with their environment. The new mindset towards the natural world also works to diminish and eventually stop the violent atmosphere of the first and the beginning of the second novels (7). Indeed, Lauren’s world slowly starts to heal when people start practicing partnership ethics towards non-humans. This stability “is achieved by focusing on the sustainability of this peaceful life through productive activity of cultivating, and caring for land. It envisions a reciprocal relationship of respect between human and nature which reduces the need for violent competition for survival, especially in hard times” (7).

Another crucial aspect that Lauren finds necessary in her future communities is to make basic literacy available for everyone. Since all systems of public education have disappeared, low- and middle-class children are illiterate because only the higher classes have access to private education. In reaction to the absence of schools, Lauren and her parents organize their own education system in Robledo, which the protagonist intends to adopt in her future community. She understands that reading and writing are important skills to have a better chance to get a paid job, but she is also “aware of the fact that illiteracy means a loss of the status and the rights of citizen: it precludes access to information and to participation in the political processes” (Mayer 192). Thus, literacy is part of Lauren’s project to build an ecofeminist community, where every individual has the capacity to partake in group discussions and make informed decisions. Additionally, the novel emphasizes the value of possessing environmental knowledge, which is illustrated in Lauren’s avid “attempts to gain as much agricultural, biological, and ecological information about the region of the American Northwest” that she gathers from her father’s and grandmother’s books (193). Her understanding of the natural environment plays a part in the group’s survival in the wild and later in the successful establishment of Earthseed’s first sustainable agrarian community, where people learn to sustain themselves without harming nature.

3.6. Empathy

Lauren's hyperempathy can be seen as another aspect of the novel that encourages a way of thinking about humanity and the natural world collectively, as opposed to the strict ontological hierarchies that have rationalized the mistreatment of nature and contributed to the climate crisis. Hyperempathy syndrome in Butler's dystopia is described as a congenital condition where a person physically experiences the pain and the pleasure of other beings, and children afflicted by it might even bleed along with this other being (Butler, *Sower* 11). In Lauren's case, it originated from her late mother's drug abuse. Evidently, in the hostile environment of apocalyptic America, Lauren mostly experiences the negative side of her affliction, which is even used as a weapon against her. As a result, she makes an effort to hide the condition from people whom she does not completely trust. In fact, as a child, she experienced her hyperempathy being wielded against her as perverse pranks by her brother Keith, who once "used to pretend to be hurt just to trick [her] into sharing his supposed pain. Once he used red ink as fake blood to make [her] bleed." (11). Moreover, the protagonist's father also encourages his daughter to hide her hyperempathy and to view it as a weakness, rather than an essential link with other living beings. Lauren implies that his need to keep her affliction a secret is due to the Baptist minister's shame of his late wife's drug problem (12). However, he also does it to protect Lauren, as the syndrome makes her an easy target for aggressors and slavers, who specifically seek young empaths (289).

Despite Lauren's perception of her congenital syndrome as "a weakness, a shameful secret," she also recognizes the positive implications that sharing other beings' pain and pleasure, especially if it were widespread among the population (Butler, *Sower* 167). After her brother Keith's murdered body is found on the other side of town, Lauren reflects on how her affliction could have an impact on acts of violence:

If hyperempathy syndrome were a more common complaint, people couldn't do such things. They could kill if they had to, and bear the pain of it or be destroyed by it. But if everyone could feel everyone else's pain, who would torture? Who would cause anyone unnecessary pain? I've never thought of my problem as something that might do some good before, but the way things are, I think it would help. (Butler, *Sower* 108)

In other words, if hyperempathy syndrome were widespread, the connections it would create between individuals might discourage violent behaviours against others, as the pain inflicted would be reflected on the perpetrator's body.

In addition to the improvement of human relationships, the novel's hyperempathy syndrome opens the path for deeper connections between humankind and animals. As previously mentioned, Lauren's hyperempathy extends to non-human creatures, such as dogs, squirrels and rats, although the link seems to be the strongest with the first species. Dogs are a current theme in the book and serve to illustrate how climate change affects other animals, even those which were considered domesticated by humankind. In *Parable of the Sower*, the friendly species that used to live alongside humans has gone feral and will attack the most vulnerable people; therefore, dogs have become an object of fear rather than a companionship symbol. Lauren's sharing pain with a wild dog is illustrated in the early chapters of the story, during a group expedition beyond Robledo's walls. Upon stumbling on a dying dog, Lauren shoots the animal to end its suffering:

I thought I would throw up. My belly hurt more and more until I felt skewered through the middle. I leaned on my bike with my left arm. With my right hand, I drew the Smith & Wesson, aimed, and shot the beautiful dog through its head. I felt the impact of the bullet as a hard, solid blow – something beyond pain. Then I felt the dog die... I saw it die. I felt it die. It went out like a match in a sudden vanishing of pain. Its life flared up, then went out. I went a little numb. Without the bike, I would have collapsed. (Butler, *Sower* 41)

Even though the protagonist knows that the act of killing will be projected onto her body, she still shoots the animal out of compassion. The shooting goes beyond a mere killing as “in this intimate moment, Lauren ... becomes animal – opening her to a different set of experiences that radically deepens her connection to another form of life.” (Frazier 54). Thus, Butler's hyperempathy becomes a medium that shatters ontological barriers and creates a sense of fluidity between human and non-human creatures.

As explained by Weitzenfeld and Joy, human empathic response to another individual's suffering has been ascribed to the existence of mirror neurons, brain cells “that are activated when a subject witnesses the experience of another, and the subject actually feels with the other.” (21). Although experiences involving mirror neurons have been conducted exclusively on humans, “there is no reason to assume that mirror neurons are not activated when humans witness the experience of nonhuman beings as well.” (Weitzenfeld and Joy 22). Further, they argue that Western societies work on the distortion of that biological empathy towards nonhuman beings by naturalizing certain speciesist behaviours, such as “the exploitation,

objectification, and consumption of animals as food.” (20/21). In her fictional world, Butler promotes the opposite tendency, seeing as the biological empathic response is exacerbated even towards non-human animals, so that physical abuse of others is no longer without consequence. Ultimately, the protagonist’s condition forces her to be “hyperaware of the existence of the Other and cannot discount them as less important than herself.” (Messimer 78). In Puleo’s terms, hyperempathy directly connects Lauren’s internal nature to elements of external nature (409). From an ecocritical stance, hyperempathy syndrome could benefit animal welfare and sustainability, since it positions all creatures as worthy of consideration rather than promoting human exceptionalism and attitudes that might hurt other creatures and indeed even the planet. As Messimer suggests, Lauren’s “extension of feeling is precisely what allows her to see beyond the binaries, boundaries, and limitations that support the violent oppression that characterizes her society and climate change.” (79). Hyperempathy symbolises the antidote to the generalized “hyperaggression” perpetuated upon people, animals and the planet, and a way of encouraging egalitarian relationships (Shahnavaz 43).

Focusing on hyperempathy’s disruption of ontological categories, Stacey Balkan establishes a connection between *Parable of the Sower* and Donna Haraway’s posthuman theory, and relates the novel to insights from *Staying with the Trouble* (845). In fact, she compares Lauren’s community (Acorn) to Haraway’s Chthulucene, given that both foreground “collectivity, offering a guide for ‘world-making’ in capitalist ruins through the literal spreading of seed” (Balkan 851). Although Balkan’s claim that Lauren’s target is to create “earth-bound” communities can be argued with — since the protagonist frequently states her desire to expand Earthseed to other planets — she makes an interesting association between hyperempathy and “tentacular intimacy” (852). Haraway uses this last term to describe multispecies intimacy¹⁸, however, in the dystopia, Butler “cultivates ‘tentacular intimacy’ ... to forge intimacies amongst previously segregated human communities” (Balkan 852). According to Balkan, hyperempathy syndrome shares similarities with Haraway’s “mode of sympoiesis”, because it is “suggested as a viable means of cultivating solidarity” between different human groups, which could extend to the natural world and the planet itself (852). Indeed, a major problem of promoting sustainability rests in humankind’s impossibility to

¹⁸ The connections between humans and animals in the novel’s syndrome echo Haraway’s theories on a new kind of post-anthropocentric relationship, based on interspecies sympoiesis, instead of traditional human genealogical relationships (*Staying* 58). Lauren’s sharing of other creatures’ feelings could be seen as the first step in the process of “making kin” advocated by Haraway in *Staying with the Trouble* and illustrated in her *Camille Stories* (Haraway, “Anthropocene” 161).

perceive the long-term consequences of their actions, as “changes to Earth’s systems occur over long expanses of time; and it is often the case that effect is temporally disconnected from cause to the extent that cause is no longer legible” (853). In view of a mindset switch towards a greener future, hyperempathy could be beneficial because it reconnects cause and effect, which could prompt faster political responses to the climate crisis (853).

4. *Oryx and Crake*

4.1. Novel introduction

Oryx and Crake is a speculative fiction novel written by Margaret Atwood and published in 2003. This dystopia is the first book in the *MaddAddam* trilogy, followed by *The Year of the Flood* (2009), and *MaddAddam* (2013). The story is set in the near future and is located in a post-apocalyptic North America, where a lab-made virus has eradicated most of the human population. Unlike the previous two novels, this story is narrated in the third person from the perspective of a male character, Jimmy/Snowman, who believes he is the sole human survivor up until the last chapter of the novel. His story is structured in two timeframes, divided into alternating chapters, which refer to the protagonist by two different names. First, there is a series of chapters depicting the post-apocalypse, in which Snowman describes his daily struggle for survival in a hostile environment, where the basic infrastructures of society have collapsed, and climate change has made it barely tolerable for humans to survive on Earth.

The other set of chapters corresponds to Snowman's memories from his life before the apocalypse when he was still just Jimmy and had not adopted his alter ego name. In this timeframe, Snowman recalls his childhood in the Compounds and how he met his long-time friend Crake. Crake is described as a young genius who grows to be a skilful scientist. Jimmy's best friend plays a fundamental part in the novel's plot because he is the mastermind behind the conception and propagation of the virus intended to annihilate humankind. In parallel, the young scientist creates a new genetically engineered humanoid species to replace "normal" humans. Another influential character is Oryx, a sexual worker who is hired by Crake to be the educator of the new human species, and later she also becomes Jimmy's lover. Before Crake unleashes the lethal virus, he manipulates Jimmy into taking a vaccine that immunizes the latter to the virus, because he has chosen his friend to be the only survivor so that he can serve as caretaker and protector to the new human species. When the plague is at its peak, Crake performs "assisted suicide" (Atwood, *Oryx* 400); he kills Oryx in front of Jimmy, rightly predicting that his friend would kill him after. The new humans, whom Snowman later names "Crakers" after their creator's name, are an innocent and peaceful species, conceived to live in harmony with the natural world. These post-humans are the only company Snowman has throughout most of his tale, until the very end of the novel, when he discovers signs of other humans alive.

Echoing the themes explored in *The Handmaid's Tale*, *Oryx and Crake* displays Margaret Atwood's will to raise awareness about mankind's mistreatment of the environment, and how this defective relationship has consequences for nature and humanity alike. However, in this novel, the author develops the abuse of technology and comments on the ethics of tampering with the natural world for the benefit of humans. Indeed, Jimmy's pre-apocalyptic society is dominated by private biotechnological corporations, which hold a great deal of wealth and power by manipulating nature and capitalizing upon it to generate profit. The novel's ecocritical perspective is aligned with the values of ecofeminism, since it explores a variety of topics often discussed by ecofeminist scholars, namely the connections between the mistreatment of nature and women's subjugation and how these can be linked to human supremacy and speciesism. Likewise, Atwood illustrates climate justice issues, concretely the consequences of extreme environmental phenomena on impoverished social classes and the growing disparities between the rich and the poor in the face of climate change. This first novel also opens the door for new types of relationships between humans and non-human beings, which are further explored in the subsequent books of the *MaddAddam* trilogy.

4.2. Technology

Even though Margaret Atwood herself is not a scientist, several relatives of hers have jobs in science, so the author acquired passive and active knowledge in those disciplines through family gatherings and suggested readings (Atwood, "Writing" 285). In the essay "Writing *Oryx and Crake*", Atwood reveals the genesis of the novel, which came about from the influence of her family's interests and her own travels, during which she witnessed the effects of environmental change (285). The author catalogues both *Oryx and Crake* and *The Handmaid's Tale* as speculative fiction, rather than simply science fiction as her novels contain "no intergalactic space travel, no teleportation, no Martians." (285). As a matter of fact, rather than relying on fantasy, her stories are always reality-based and develop contemporary societal problems. In Atwood's words, *Oryx and Crake* "invents nothing we haven't already invented or started to invent. Every novel begins with a *what if* and then sets forth its axioms. The *what if* of *Oryx and Crake* is simply, *What if we continue down the road we're already on? How slippery is the slope?*" ("Writing" 285). The author's reflection on technological progress present in this dystopia stems from well-known instances of technology's misuse that had occurred prior to and during the years of its writing, including the terrorist attacks of September 2001, but also from seeing the consequences of anthropocentric activity upon the environment in person, like the melting of glaciers (285). In the same essay, Atwood clarifies that her worry

is not so much about technological progress itself, but rather the handling of these innovations by humanity (285). Hence, her outlook on technology echoes many ecofeminist scholars' opinions on the subject, such as Karren Warren, who sees technology as a tool without inherent moral value, and whose effects depend on the ethics of who controls it and the context of its use (Swier 251).

In this novel, Margaret Atwood's comment on scientific and technological development is clearly established through the depiction of a corrupt technocratic society. Anna Bedford notes that cooperative power is a tendency in contemporary dystopias, where "Big Brother has often been replaced by 'Big Business'" (75). This is the case of *Oryx and Crake*, where Jimmy's recollections of the pre-apocalyptic world show a society that privatizes science and imposes no limits when it comes to generating profit using technological progress. Even though the protagonist is not a scientist himself, his perspective is crucial to understand the weight of science in the dystopia, as both Jimmy's parents were scientists, and as a child he often visited his father at work. Likewise, his best friend Crake is a bioengineer who later hires Jimmy to work in the marketing of his products, which allows the protagonist to be among the first to learn about the newest scientific developments. In Jimmy's society, "nation states have given way to global corporate rule, and especially biotechnological progress and its capitalist consumption have had a major impact on society and environment" (Schmeink 73). Indeed, in the novel's setting big corporations hold more power than the government, which they maintain by manipulating consumers and aiming to maximize "their profit margins, replacing any ethical decision-making." (77). Atwood's depiction of a technocratic society is in tune with Alicia H. Puleo's reflection about who holds the most power in today's globalised world:

those who decide matters of utmost importance are no longer the governors elected by the citizens, but the lobbies of multinational oil, agrochemical and pharmaceutical companies, as well as the international financial market. ("los que deciden sobre asuntos de la mayor importancia ya no son los gobernantes elegidos por la ciudadanía, sino los *lobbies* de las empresas multinacionales petrolíferas, agroquímicas y farmacéuticas y el mercado financiero internacional."); my trans; 179/180)

In the dystopia, corporative research centres have no problem with trespassing moral boundaries, committing fraud, and exploiting human and animal bodies to satisfy the needs of their human customers. The multiple technological corporations tamper with "genetics and biology for profit, exploiting women, animals, plants, genes, and cells. Everything within the

ecosystem is tailored to be commercially consumed and exploited.” (Soliman M. 109). The misuse of technology in the plot is explored on different fronts, and ultimately, it is also what almost leads to the complete annihilation of humanity.

The biotechnological industry works through the creation of myths in order to encourage never-ending consumption. As Soliman explains: “There are myths of sex, beauty and motherhood and myths about how people should eat, make love, breed, live, and dream. The purpose of these myths is to increase the wealth of corporations. Myths do this by providing, through media, images of the ideal life that are able to be realized through the consumption of products.” (112). Instead of responding to the real necessities of their customers or investing their resources in the resolution of societal problems, like poverty or climate-related issues, cooperations manipulate people’s insecurities into generating new needs. The corruptive dimension of this market is also addressed through the biopiracy existing between biotechnological cooperations that dispute access to dangerous microorganisms, such as bacteria, viruses, and fungi (Farooq 80). Once they have the bioforms in their possession, scientists use them as biological weapons to overthrow the competition, without caring for potential collateral damage. For instance, Jimmy’s first memory as a child is of a bonfire he attended with his father, where cows, sheep, and pigs were burned because they were infected with a virus brought about by a rival company (Atwood, *Oryx* 22).

Apart from biological warfare, bioengineering research facilities like HelthWyzer, secretly sell vitamins and drugs that are infected with diseases created by the laboratories themselves, who later promote cures to those same diseases, as described by Crake:

They’ve been doing it for years. There’s a whole secret unit working on nothing else ... They put the hostile bioforms into their vitamin pills – their HelthWyzer over-the-counter premium brand, you know? ... Naturally, they develop the antidotes at the same time as they’re customizing the bugs, but they hold in reserve, they practice the economics of scarcity, so they’re guaranteed high profits. (Atwood, *Oryx* 247/248)

Evidently, such a scheme that disregards work ethic and the customers’ health is not accepted by all scientists and that is why it is kept a secret. Crake’s late father, who used to work for HelthWyzer, discovered this fraud and was planning to expose it on the internet, but the company pushed him from a bridge and made it look like suicide (Atwood, *Oryx* 248). Ironically, later in his life, Crake mimics HelthWyzer’s pill scheme as part of his plan to end the human race. He develops a revolutionary pill named BlyssPluss, which gains popularity

very fast, and is imbedded with a quick spreading lethal virus — the Jetspeed Ultra Virus Extraordinary (JUVE) — that kills its host within a few hours (398). Be that as it may, Atwood's illustration of the fraudulent companies warns against the dangers of mishandling science and questions the overall idea of progress. The deceitful nature of these brands is even conveyed through their ironic names. For instance, OrganInc Farms is not a real organic farm but a research facility that develops genetically modified animals, AnooYoo ('a new you') is a company that sells self-help products, RejoovenEsence develops temporary products to slow the aging process, etc.

Aside from taking advantage of human customers and damaging their health, the novel's laboratories also exploit non-human bodies to generate profit. Genetic engineering is abundant in the novel, with bioengineers creating new hybrid species to satisfy the necessities of the most privileged social classes. Some of the gene spliced species were created with a practical purpose such as the wolvogs, a cross between a wolf and a dog conceived to work "better than an alarm system" (Atwood, *Oryx* 241). Others, like the pigoon, were designed with medical intentions: "The goal of the pigoon project was to grow an assortment of foolproof human-tissue organs in a transgenic knockout pig host – organs that would transplant smoothly and avoid rejection, but would also be able to fend off attacks by opportunistic microbes and viruses, of which there were more strains every year" (25). The rakunk, on the contrary, "had begun as an after-hours hobby" and it is a cross between a raccoon and a skunk, designed to be the perfect pet, as it does not have the smell of the latter species, neither the disposition of the first (57). Gene splicing becomes so common that it goes beyond the need to make a profit and turns into a mere form of entertainment for the researchers. Hence, the novel describes a society where human supremacy is the rule, as scientists feel entitled to use othered bodies without caring for the ethical implications of tampering with nature and causing pain to the animals they handle.

One of the experiments that makes Jimmy reflect on scientific ethics is a new kind of "chicken", developed in the elite science university where Crake studies at. The whole operation is "an extreme extension of contemporary factory farming" and puts into question how animals are treated in the food industry (Bedford 78). These artificially grown animals are deprived of a head, as well as of "all the brain functions that [have] nothing to do with digestion, assimilation and growth", and they end up looking like "large bulblike object[s] ... covered with stippled whitish-yellow skin." (Atwood, *Oryx* 237/238). Each chicken is designed to grow a specific type of chicken part, which is ready to harvest in three weeks, trademarked under the

name ChickieNobs and sold below the price range of normal chicken meat. After Crake introduces Jimmy to the ChickieNobs and to the wolvogs, the protagonist expresses his concern with this use of science: “Why is it he feels some line has been crossed, some boundary transgressed? How much is too much, how far is too far?” (242). In fact, although this type of experiment might appear far from the present reality, there are already similar projects underway. The concept of “cultured meat” was “popularized by Jason Matheny in the early 2000s” to give a name to meat produced from the cellular regeneration of animal protein (Lance 68). Since the turn of the century, the lab-grown meat industry has been expanding, with powerful investors funding the activity of those laboratories focused on it (68). However, the current price of the product prevents it from reaching the expansion it does in the novel.

What’s more, technology is used by international corporations to practice disloyal competition with small businesses. Apart from the meat industry, the ethical problems of transgenic farming are illustrated in the “Happicuppa” brand coffee developed by a HelthWyzer subsidiary (Atwood, *Oryx* 210). The new type of coffee bush is designed so that all its beans are ready to harvest at the same time. As opposed to traditional farming that produces in small quantities and is based on manual labour, Happicuppa coffee occupies endless plantations, and machines are employed for the harvesting of the coffee beans (210). Evidently, this mode of production allows the company to sell its coffee at a cheaper price than traditional farmers, but there are subsequent socioeconomic implications to the brand’s expansion: “[Happicuppa] threw the small growers out of business and reduced them and their labourers to starvation-level poverty. The resistance movement was global.” (Atwood, *Oryx* 210). The indignation towards the brand is not only manifested by farmer trade unions but also by environmental activists, on account of the fact that the company is cutting down cloud forests to plant their new transgenic coffee bushes. The novel depicts how Happicuppa contributes to a rise in social tension, as protests escalate to riots, violence, and terrorist episodes involving innocent victims.

Ecofeminists Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva have discussed the consequences of transgenic seeds for nature and independent farmers alike. In their book *Ecofeminism* (1993), Shiva alerts to the socioeconomic consequences of privatizing seeds and to its effects on the soil’s biodiversity: “Potential diversity is nullified by transforming [seeds] into mere raw material for industrial production based on uniformity and this also necessarily displaces the diversity of local agricultural practise.” (Shiva, *Ecofeminism* 30). Ultimately, this system leads to the genetic erosion of seeds, as natural varieties are considered “primitive” and therefore

replaced with a new generic one, which frequently cannot “produce by itself, to do so it needs the help of artificial, manufactured inputs.” (30). Put differently, large-scale companies simultaneously contribute to reducing the biodiversity of the soil responsible for maintaining the equilibrium of multiple ecosystems, as well as to environmental pollution, since their products necessarily require the use of agrochemicals.

Besides Jimmy’s remark on the ethics of technology, another character who represents a great consciousness towards the misuse of science is Sharon, the protagonist’s mother. Sharon used to work as a microbiologist at OrganInc, the first firm where Jimmy’s father also worked at. However, the text suggests that she leaves the job due to her opposition to the kind of work done in the laboratories and the toll it takes on her mental health. For instance, her ethical reservations about the pigoon project are disclosed during a discussion with her husband, after he arrives home wanting to celebrate the successful implantation of neocortex tissue inside a pig’s brain. When the father accuses the mother of never being supportive, she answers: “There’s research and there’s research. What you’re doing — this pig brain thing. You’re interfering with the building blocks of life. It’s immoral. It’s sacrilegious.” (Atwood, *Oryx* 64). Also, Sharon strongly disagrees with the Compound’s lifestyle and the CorpSeCorps¹⁹ constant vigilance. For these reasons, a few years after leaving her job, she decides to abandon the corporate town (and her husband and son), to reside in the pleeblands and engage in radical ecological activism. She also tries to defy the authority of the corporations by denouncing what goes on inside their research facilities. As a result, she is arrested and executed by the CorpSeCorps. Sharon’s unease with the pigoon project and her ecological activism make her the most apparent ecofeminist voice in the novel. A religious, environmentally sustainable and non-speciesist community named “God’s Gardeners”, whose members also engage in ecological protests, is briefly mentioned in this novel, but it is in *The Year of the Flood* that it becomes one of the plot’s focal points.

The presence of dualisms in the dystopia could account for the human race’s entitlement to manipulate nature using technology, as in the pre-apocalyptic society there is a clear binary that separates culture (and thus humanity) from the natural world and hierarchizes that duality. Lucy Rowland suggests that in *Oryx and Crake* “the pre-plague society was consumed by a desire to exert control and power over non-human nature, at a time when the environment was

¹⁹ Initially, the CorpSeCorps were only a private company responsible of the Compound’s security and the protection of corporative interests. However, they took over law enforcement “when the local police forces collapsed for lack of funding.” (Atwood, *Year* 30).

becoming more and more of a threat to the continued survival of humanity”, with a high incidence of natural catastrophes originating from climate change (52). In other words, the manipulation of certain natural elements in the novel may reveal humanity’s fear of being unable to manage other uncontrollable elements of nature that force humans to face the possibility of their own extinction. Moreover, the anthropocentric need to control nature seems to handicap humanity’s ability to recognize itself as the instigator of hostile environmental conditions or to perceive nature as an entity with needs of its own. In an ironic turn of events, science becomes the cause of humankind’s demise and impels the few individuals that survive the pandemic to shift their mindset and re-evaluate their position in the natural world. Additionally, the same bioengineering that had served to establish human supremacy is also what enables Crake to create a new hybrid human species, thereby disturbing human exceptionalism by blurring the line between ontological categories. Crake’s posthumans will be discussed in a later sub-chapter dealing with posthumanism and ecofeminist communities.

After the plague, ecological devastation gives way to a natural scenery where plants and animals thrive, including those species genetically spliced by humans. Indeed, in the post-technological era, “the new transgenic species challenge any remaining delusions of mastery over nature by adapting to life beyond their preconceived functions” (Schmeink 88). The novel shows how these animals transgress the anthropological purpose for which they were conceived, as they adapt to the wild just the same as non-genetically modified species.

4.3. Capitalism and instrumentalism

In *Oryx and Crake*, the commodification of animal and human bodies is practised and encouraged by capitalist institutions. Margaret Atwood’s critique of capitalism shares similarities with the opinions of ecofeminist scholars on the subject. Anna Bedford suggests that there are “two central philosophical ways [in which] ecofeminism finds itself at odds with capitalism” (75). First, at the material level, capitalism clashes with the premises of ecofeminism in its exploitation of women and nature “both as resources and as labour (particularly the poor and non-white who traditionally have been tied most closely to nature).” (Bedford 75). Second, while ecofeminist thinkers encourage egalitarian relationships between humans and nature, and among human communities, capitalism operates based on individualism and instrumentalism (75). As discussed in the chapter dealing with *The Handmaid’s Tale*, Val Plumwood establishes instrumentalism as one of the five features of dualisms and contends that it is “a way of relating to the world which corresponds to a certain

model of selfhood, the selfhood conceived as that of the individual who stands apart from an alien other and denies his own relationship to and dependency on this other” (Plumwood 142). Instrumentalism is then used as a means of asserting one’s identity as superior to an Other, while at the same time making use of that othered body without recognizing their intrinsic value.

In Atwood’s dystopia, instrumentalism appears in the way that women and animal bodies are treated as means to an end. The novel problematizes the separation between civilization and nature that enables the abuse of othered bodies, and points to it as a culturally generated phenomenon, rather than the innate stance of humanity towards the natural world. In relation to animals, the use of othered bodies is found in the perpetuation of a meat-eating culture. Due to climate change, real meat has become a luxury only accessible to the wealthier social classes, i.e., the Compounders. However, rather than switching entirely to plant-based alternatives, technocrats found other ways to explore animal bodies for their flesh. This is exemplified in the ChickieNobs, a project which “calls into question capitalist value systems that uphold human exceptionalism” because of the extreme way that scientists manipulate the chicken genome to achieve ultimate financial profit (Lance 67). The speciesist perspective behind this operation is voiced by a scientist working in the ChickieNobs department, who comments with Crake and Jimmy that “animal welfare freaks won’t be able to say a word, because the thing feels no pain” (Atwood, *Oryx* 238). The woman rationalizes the experiment by arguing that the chickens do not suffer, yet she discards other ethical issues such as humankind’s entitlement to manipulate othered bodies to the extreme. As Labudova suggests, “the removal of eyes, beak, and brain functions reduces the living chicken to a protein tuber which can be seen as a hyperbolization of contemporary market strategies: all the features of the living animal are minimized to protect the separation of humans and their (once-alive) food sources” (55). Thus, science is used by capitalist cooperations to avoid any interspecies empathy and to encourage the general population to consume lab-cultured meat without thinking about the origin of the food. Besides, the fact that the process is painless and more sustainable for the planet than traditional factory farming enables the company to disguise the product under an ethical label, despite the industry’s exploitation of animals.

Furthermore, the evolution of the protagonist’s attitudes and mindset towards the animals that surround him throughout his life also demonstrates the influence of a speciesist culture. Jimmy’s memory of the bonfire marks him out of sympathy for other creatures:

At the bonfire Jimmy was anxious about the animals, because they were being burned and surely that would hurt them ... he thought he could see the animals looking at him reproachfully out of their burning eyes. In some way all of this – the bonfire, the charred smell, but most of all the lit-up, suffering animals – was his fault, because he'd done nothing to rescue them. (Atwood, *Oryx* 20)

When Jimmy tells his father he feels bad about the animals burning, the latter explains that the animals are not suffering because they are dead, “they were like steaks and sausages, only they still had their skins on.” (20). While the child perceives the animals to be his equals, conscious creatures capable of feeling pain, his rationalist father encourages Jimmy to look at them merely as food. As such, the scientist represents the instrumentalist mindset in that he “recognises no residue or autonomy in the instrumentalized other, and strives to deny or negate that other as a limit on the self and as a centre of resistance.” (Plumwood 142). The same occurs when Jimmy visits his father at work in HelthWyzer, specifically the unit where the pigoon experiments take place. During a lunch break in the laboratory cafeteria, his father's colleagues pick on Jimmy by telling him that he is eating pigoon meat: “This would upset Jimmy; he was confused about who should eat what. He didn't want to eat a pigoon, because he thought of the pigoons as creatures much like himself. Neither he nor they had a lot of say in what was going on.” (Atwood, *Oryx* 27). At this stage, the young protagonist still identifies with animals and recognizes them as equal living beings, so he is disturbed by the possibility of viewing them as food. Greta Gaard explains that children's “sympathies ally them with the animals, and severing this alliance is a process of acculturation” intended on perpetuating meat-eating (“Vegetarian” 120). Thus, the father's comment at the bonfire can be understood as an acculturation strategy, a way to prepare his son to partake in capitalism's exploitation of othered bodies without being hindered by natural emotions like empathy or remorse.

Jimmy's attitude towards the instrumentalization of animal bodies slowly changes after his activist mother abandons him, so that progressively he becomes more complicit with the capitalist system that commodifies Others. Whereas as a child he empathized with the pigoons, during his adolescence, along with Crake, the boys surf the dark web and watch “animal snuff sites” for entertainment: “though these quickly grew repetitious: one stomped frog, one cat being torn hand apart by hand, was much like another.” (Atwood, *Oryx* 93/94). Moreover, while Jimmy is initially sceptical about the ChickieNobs, after a while he begins to consume them regularly, “he becomes acclimatised and desensitised” from the feeling of unease he felt with the manipulation of animals (Bedford 79). This detachment from Others' feelings and

well-being is not limited to animals; rather, it extends to the female gender and marginalized human classes. As a teen Jimmy “was interpolated into his father’s sexist jokes and views of women”, so he adheres to this view, and as an adult he sexualizes women and discards girlfriends mindlessly (86). Later, when he hears Oryx’s story about her childhood involving pornographic movies and prostitution, he places his anger on the men who directly exploited her without ever thinking about his own implication in the system, since he supported it by watching pornography online. The same happens with Jimmy’s role in the pandemic as advertiser of the BlyssPluss pill. Even though the protagonist does not know that the drug is designed to exterminate humans, Crake informs him that the product secretly sterilizes its users, and the protagonist accepts to market the pill nevertheless (86). Hence, despite not being evidently evil, Jimmy participates in oppressive systems. Bedford notes that Jimmy is “a product of his terrible society... he is a relatable and very average character [who] serves as an indictment of our own society where most are not malevolent but can nonetheless be wilfully ignorant of the human and environmental exploitation that go into the capitalist production of goods they create demand for.” (86). Indeed, his character might serve as a mirror for readers to question their own passive or active role in the exploitation of other human and non-human beings.

After the apocalypse, Jimmy/Snowman still views animals as Others, however, he starts displaying attitudes and expressing thoughts that echo his childhood perspective. Alone, the protagonist starts paying attention to the surrounding nature and even finding beauty in it: “A caterpillar is letting itself down on a thread, twirling like a rope artist, spiralling towards his chest... Watching it, he feels a sudden, inexplicable surge of tenderness and joy. Unique, he thinks. There will never be another caterpillar just like this one. There will never be another such moment of time, another such conjunction.” (Atwood, *Oryx* 46). Unlike the period during which he was surrounded by a society that viewed animals as mere resources or forms of entertainment, after the pandemic Snowman acknowledges the wildlife around him, and learns to connect with other creatures as individuals on a similar journey for survival. In the same passage, the protagonist reflects on his position in the post-apocalypse, and his inclusion in the natural world is reflected in the use of the first-person plural pronoun to refer to himself and the caterpillar: “We are not here to play, to dream, to drift... We have hard work to do, and loads to lift.” (46). Likewise, Snowman shows altruist attitudes by protecting the Crakers and patiently answering their never-ending questions, without expecting anything in return. Despite his “carnivorous desires”, he even abstains from slaughtering animals for their meat because

he is afraid that might upset the Crakers (110). Thus, it is the crumbling of anthropocentric and individualistic human institutions which allows the protagonist to “cast off his self-absorption and the toxic influences of the capitalist society and to instead embrace caring relationships and community” (Bedford 86/87).

4.4. Environmental justice

Aside from the novel’s depiction of technocratic capitalism’s abuse of animals and marginalized human bodies, Atwood also touches on other themes that resonate with ecofeminism, such as climate justice issues and how these relate to other types of discrimination. For instance, classism is apparent in the novel through America’s segregation into two different classes. Scientists and their families make up the upper class and live in secure communities named “Compounds” (Atwood, *Oryx* 30). Inside these gated neighbourhoods, which belong to big technological corporations, residents live comfortably and have the possibility to satisfy all their basic and accessory needs. The Compounds have strict security regulations, reinforced by a special private company called CorpSeCorps, which is responsible for protecting the corporative towns and the interests of technocrats. By contrast, most of the population makes up the lower classes, who live in the poverty-stricken “pleeblands” (31). As opposed to the Compounds, the pleeblands abound in disease and crime, and there is a generalized feeling of hostility.

In the pleeblands pollution levels are felt to a bigger extent, as shown in Crake’s insistence to wear a nose cone with an air filter when he takes Jimmy outside of the Compounds: “The air was worse in the pleeblands, he said. More junk blowing in the wind, fewer whirlpool purifying towers dotted around.” (Atwood, *Oryx* 338). While the wealthier population is protected from most environmental hazards, the residents of poverty-stricken areas must deal with scarcity and the repercussions of human activity on the planet. These social disparities are also a cause of discrimination among the characters of the book, as Compounds’ residents prejudice the pleeblands and disdain its residents as uncivilized “mental deficient” (339). In addition, because of their vulnerable socioeconomic status, marginalized social groups are targeted as test subjects for biopharmaceutical companies, inside and beyond America’s borders. For instance, in the tests for the BlyssPluss pill, Crake admits he initially finds candidates who are in difficult socioeconomic situations: “From the poorer countries. Pay them a few dollars, they don’t even know what they’re taking... Whorehouses. Prisons. And from the ranks of the desperate, as usual.” (Atwood, *Oryx* 349). In other words, people with

fewer means get instrumentalized by scientists who take advantage of their fragility and often, their lack of formal education.

Additionally, the disparities between the North and the South are highlighted in the juxtaposition of Jimmy and Crake's privileged childhoods with Oryx's background. In fact, the text implies that Oryx was born in a third-world Asian country, in "some distant, foreign place... A village with trees all around and fields nearby, or possibly rice paddies" (Atwood, *Oryx* 133). Aside from the comparison between Oryx's impoverished village and the rich Compounds, the book portrays the institutionalization of instrumentalism, especially of marginalized social groups. As a matter of fact, the capitalist society depicted in the novel commodifies "women's and children's bodies in the sex industry and child trafficking", as it is illustrated in Oryx's story (Bedford 80). Although Oryx does not remember her mother tongue nor the name of the country where she was born, she remembers her "village was a place where everyone was poor and there were many children." (Atwood, *Oryx* 134). In that poverty-stricken environment, families sold their children because there was not enough food to sustain everyone. Oryx recalls that families sold girls with more frequency because while boys could work in the fields, girls had no prospects besides motherhood, and were therefore unable to provide for the family (135).

Furthermore, climate change is posited as an aggravating factor for the villagers' survival, as according to Oryx "the weather had become so strange and could no longer be predicted —too much rain or not enough, too much wind, too much heat — and the crops were suffering." (Atwood, *Oryx* 136). Like many of the village children, Oryx was sold to a man called Uncle En, who ran an illegal business in a large city, which consisted in making children sell flowers to tourists. When this man is found dead, Oryx is sold again, this time to a child pornographer named Jack, a white man who, apart from directing the movies also tries to take advantage of the young girl. It is during this period that Jimmy and Crake see Oryx on the internet for the first time: "She was only about eight, or she looked eight... Her name wasn't Oryx, she didn't have a name. She was just another girl on a porno site." (103). A few years later, Oryx travels from Asia to America and continues to work in pornography and as a sex worker.

The association between capitalism and the commodification of marginalized women's bodies becomes clear in the institutionalisation of prostitution. In fact, Crake finds Oryx "through 'student services' at the university he attends," a system created so that high-top

students can satisfy their sexual needs without getting distracted from their careers (Beford 80). Still, although Oryx is objectified throughout her entire life, her attitude and words reveal no resentment of her position in society, and she seems to have become rather resigned to it. While Jimmy is horrified by the exploitation she underwent as a child, she highlights what she took out of those experiences. For example, during her time with Jack, the child pornographer, Oryx “was able to find a way to use these very same abuses as tools to escape her role as a subaltern, by trading sex for education,” which allowed her to learn to speak and read English (Martín 179). By opposing Jimmy’s victimisation of herself, Oryx “aims at contesting Jimmy’s version of her subaltern existence and voices her story as opposed to the predominant his-story.” (Sharma and Ringo 10). Despite Oryx’s relative life improvement after meeting Crake, she continues to be instrumentalized by others who feel entitled to do so. When Crake starts working on his secret project, he hires Oryx to be the Crakers’ teacher and to promote/sell the BlyssPluss pill which contains the lethal microorganism. Yet, Crake puts the virus inside the pill without Oryx’s knowledge, which makes her the “unintentional manipulator in the implementation of [the] Plague,” when her intention had been to help people become happier (Soliman M. 111). In the same manner that the scientist perceives genes, animals, and natural elements in general as biological factors to be manipulated, he sees Oryx as another instrument to help him achieve his goals.

Oryx’s association with the natural world is hinted at on various levels. At times Jimmy animalizes Oryx, as he describes her as having catlike features or behaving in a feline kind of way (Atwood, *Oryx* 133/299). Also, the woman’s essential link to nature is established through her role in the Crakers’ education. As Sharma and Ringo suggest: “Crake becomes their technological father biogenetically splicing them in his laboratory, while Oryx qualifies as their ethereal mother welcoming them to the new world.” (12). She is the one responsible for the Crakers’ ecological education, and the one who teaches them to respect animals and nature. This role distribution positions Crake closer to the empirical sciences, civilization and culture, while Oryx is associated with caretaking and life in the wilderness, since the Crakers are enclosed in a dome that mimics a natural landscape and secluded from the modern world. However, after Crake kills Oryx, the Crakers are brought to the outside world and the responsibility of protecting and educating them is passed onto Jimmy. In reassigning a mothering role to a male character, Atwood denies male archetypes often associated with the notions of virility and domination (Antón 54).

Despite their different background, Oryx seems to be connected with Jimmy's mother. The two women are nature's advocates, although Sharon is in a more active manner, seeing as she expresses her ecological views and later engages in radical activism in the pleeblands. Still, both women influence Jimmy/Snowman in his own relationship with the natural world. The association between Sharon and Oryx is evident in the way they encourage Jimmy to be a better person and care for others. Shortly before the pandemic's outbreak, Oryx makes Jimmy promise her that he will take care of the Crakers in case she is gone and tells him: "don't let me down" (Atwood, *Oryx* 378). These were the same exact words he last heard from his mother, who urged him to act against the establishment. Unlike Crake and Jimmy, who view the Crakers as experiments, Oryx sees them as innocent living beings and intends to protect them, even after she is gone. On her part, Sharon defends ethical science and environmental protection. Hence, the women's attitudes place them both in the position of "dynamic representatives of ecological feminism", who are eliminated by the capitalist society set on exploiting the natural world and vulnerable individuals (Sharma and Ringo 15).

More than just being oppressed due to an essential link between women and nature in the eyes of patriarchy, Oryx and Sharon are subjugated because they represent values which threaten the capitalist system and its necessity to perpetuate the dualisms that allow violence upon othered bodies. Ecofeminist values are also found in the importance given to Oryx's background story, as it acknowledges how differently women experience climate change outside of the West. Like ecofeminist texts, Atwood's novel "not only recognizes the multiple voices of women, located differently by race, class, age, [and] ethnic considerations, it centralizes those voices." (Merchant qtd. in Sharma and Ringo 10). While *Oryx and Crake* does not expose the experiences of Western low-class women, *The Year of the Flood* develops the lives of two female characters in the pleeblands.

4.5. Ecotopia and posthumanism

Margaret Atwood has labelled *The Handmaid's Tale* and the *MaddAddam* trilogy "ustopias", a term coined by herself to describe a world combining utopian and dystopian characteristics, "— the imagined perfect society and its opposite — because in [her] view, each contains a latent version of the other." (Atwood, "Margaret"). In *Oryx and Crake*, the destruction of human civilization and the last-man-on-Earth narrative belong to the dystopian tradition, while the Crakers' lifestyle could be seen as the concretization of Crake's ecological utopia. Lucy Rowland notes that this "hybrid blending" of opposite genres allows the author to introduce an

“ecofeminist praxis in a posthumanist setting — a location that allows, even promotes, the effective decentring of ‘the human’.” (55). Put differently, the insertion of utopian traits into a dystopic setting enables a positive ecological shift towards a new space where the human race is not presented as the centre of the planet and thus has no sense of entitlement over its resources. Rather, humanity is conceived as a species among others, and “normal” humans are turned into an endangered species on the brink of extinction.

Crake’s desire for an ecotopia arises from his lack of hope in humans because of their unwillingness to make decisions that are not destructive to each other and to the planet. Crake is described as a young genius, whose intelligence makes him aware of the Compound’s corruption and the implications of human activity on the environment from early on in his life. This awareness, aligned with the knowledge of his father’s assassination, urge the scientist to design a plan to reinvent humanity so as to give the planet a chance to regenerate itself, or at least to avoid further environmental degradation. Crake’s plan is divided into two parts, the BlyssPlus pill, already discussed previously, and the “Paradice Project”²⁰ (Atwood, *Oryx* 358). Paradise corresponds to the unit where Crake creates the new race of genetically modified humans, from whose genome he eliminates what he saw as human beings’ “destructive features, the features responsible for the world’s illnesses.” (358). As noted by Laflen, Crake sees himself as a god figure who wants to recreate paradise, and this “requires the eradication of flawed human beings and the creation of a new type of human designed without the knowledge of good and evil.” (102). Therefore, the Crakers are made to be ignorant of notions such as religion, politics, abstract thinking and any type of discrimination or violence.

As a species, the Crakers are designed to have shorter reproduction periods, so they mate seasonally and every three years, for Crake believed overpopulation to be a major cause of the planet’s degradation. During a discussion with Jimmy about Oryx’s impoverished childhood, Crake seems to blame the large families of marginalized countries: “You can’t couple a minimum of access to food with an expanding population indefinitely. *Homo sapiens* doesn’t seem able to cut itself off at the supply end. He’s one of the few species that doesn’t limit reproduction in the face of dwindling resources.” (Atwood, *Oryx* 138). Arguably, Crake fails to recognize his own surroundings’ responsibility in the overexploitation of nature and

²⁰ The “Paradice Project” contains clear biblical allusions, such as Crake’s parallel to God, the creator who shapes the new humanity according to his will and keeps them inside a dome protected from the outside world, the equivalent to the Garden of Eden (Laflen 102). Besides, Paradise is also an allusion to John Milton’s epic poem “Paradise Lost”, which is also hinted at by Oryx’s voice inside Snowman’s head: “Paradice is lost, but you have a Paradise within you, happier far.” (Atwood, *Oryx* 362).

forgets that he too is contributing to the scarcity of resources in the East by partaking in the corporations' capitalist system. A specific example of this is Crake's meat-based diet, which as mentioned in the introduction has a greater toll on the environment and contributes to a defective distribution of basic means (Milman; Gaard, "Vegetarian" 123). While his elite high school for future scientists still serves real meat, now considered a luxury since the drop in meat production, Oryx's village cannot even sustain its plant-based diet because the family crops are destroyed by the extreme state of the climate.

An important trait of the Crakers is the modifications in their genetic code, which are largely derived from features of nature and the animal kingdom. Such features were integrated into the human DNA because their creator thought they would be useful for the survival of the new human race in nature as environmentally sustainable creatures. For example, the Crakers "smell like a crateful of citrus fruit," an added feature conceived to ward off mosquitoes (Atwood, *Oryx* 119). They also have the ability to heal themselves by purring, a characteristic added by Crake after he found out that "the cat family purred at the same frequency as the ultrasound used on bone fractures and skin lesions" (184). Besides, they are vegetarian, and their digestive system is similar to that of the rabbit; they eat caecotrophs, their own excrements consisting of "semi-digested herbage" (187). Snowman explains that this digestive feature has several ecological and functional benefits, since caecotrophs are enriched with vitamins and minerals "at four or five times the level of ordinary waste material", so it is "a way of making maximum use of the nutrients at hand" (188). Another animal trait appears during mating season, when females' buttocks and abdomens, as well as male's penises turn a bright-blue colour, a biological characteristic taken from the genomes of baboons and octopuses (194). In terms of appearance, the Crakers have green eyes, luminescent in the dark because of a jellyfish gene integrated into the human DNA, which is noted by Jimmy as "Crake's aesthetic", his trademark in gene-splicing inspired by his own eye colour (8). Moreover, the Crakers exist in every skin colour possible and do not register different skin tones, so racism is unknown to them (358).

As mentioned above, the Crakers were created to replace humanity after the annihilation of the latter, which makes them conceptually and literally posthumans. The Crakers represent the posthuman race that "is staged as an alternative category better equipped to prosper" in the post-pandemic world (Schmeink 75). Atwood's posthumans defy speciesism and human exceptionalism, because of their characteristic amalgamation of human and animal genetic codes. As suggested by Lars Schmeink, novels like *Oryx and Crake*, where "the idea

of the 'human' is under attack... undermine concepts of human exceptionalism, question the ontological stability of biological categories, and reveal a belief in the interconnectedness of all life on the planet." (75). Paradoxically, while Crake plays God by tampering with genetics, the changes in the human genome contribute to decentre the *anthropos*, seeing how it becomes clear that humans are not superior to other creatures and neither exempt from biotechnological manipulation (89).

Atwood's *Crakers* might be reminiscent of Donna Haraway's idea of a compost society, illustrated in *Staying with the Trouble's* final chapter, "The Camille Stories: Children of Compost". Haraway's text is a near-future "speculative fabulation" following five generations of human-animal hybrids, the Camilles (*Staying* 134). Less radical than Crake's utopia, in this story Haraway proposes a solution for overpopulation that consists in the progressive replacement of traditional human reproduction with the advent of human-animal symbionts. In this world, the Children of Compost are activists for the movement "Make Kin Not Babies" (137), and aid human parents to choose an animal symbiont amongst the many endangered species. The first Camille is born out of an alliance between a human being and two types of monarch butterflies (142). Unlike Atwood's story, Haraway's ecological solution does not start after a revolutionary event, as "the children of Compost knew they could not deceive themselves that they could start from scratch. Precisely the opposite insight moved them; they asked and responded to the question of how to live in the ruins that were still inhabited, with ghosts and with the living too." (138). Despite the different approaches, both stories recognize that human lifestyles must be adapted to an already damaged planet and promote interspecies relationships.

Although in Atwood's novel the *Crakers* are spliced in view of a more sustainable human race rather than to directly assure the survival of endangered species, both tales show a disruption of ontological categories, which gives way to the generalization of care and respect beyond species. For this reason, Bedford suggests that the *Crakers* represent what Plumwood has described as a shift from an anthropocentric self to an ecological self (84). Indeed, their whole identity is based around a sustainable way of living where they are able to fulfil their own needs, but also "expand moral concern and care beyond themselves or their own species." (84). Speciesism is virtually unknown to the new race of humans, so not only do they refrain from harming other creatures, but they also empathise with animals and view them as equals.

Aside from the Crakers, the pigoons are another biological experiment that destabilizes the barrier between the human and the natural sphere. In fact, initially the pigoon project consists in the infusion of a person's genetic code in a pig, so that it grows spare organs that are genetically compatible with that individual and ready to be harvested if needed. Later, Jimmy's father reveals that his team has successfully implanted neocortex tissue in pigs' brains. Schmeink argues that pigoons disturb "exceptionalist views by becoming in part human. When human organs can be replaced by parts grown in other animal species, this process reduces the human itself to be a part of a technoscientific, mechanized view of nature." (89). In other words, humanity is placed on the same level as other animals rather than appearing as a superior species, because the human genome is yet another manipulable factor in the capitalist system's quest for profit.

In addition, the pigoons' status changes, as they convert from subjugated lab experiments "into aggressive predators, at some point starting to hunt Snowman for food — reversing the food chain and making the human edible meat." (Schmeink 91). This moment constitutes an ironic turn of Jimmy's childhood memories, when his father's co-workers made jokes about pigoon meat being served in the cafeteria. The inclusion of human genetic material in pigoons is also the reason why some of the scientists oppose that pigoon meat should be offered in the laboratory's cafeteria. Indeed, "geneticists and staff acknowledge the ethical dilemma ... If pigs are engineered with human DNA, eating a pigoon would be much like eating a human." (Lance 65). Although consuming meat is perceived as a privilege in Jimmy's society, this changes when it comes seemingly close to cannibalism.

What is more, Margaret Atwood anthropomorphises genetically modified pigs. Pigoons are perceived by Snowman as intelligent and cunning creatures, capable of recognizing weapons and displaying behaviours associated with humans, namely complex capture strategies and conspiracy against the protagonist (Schmeink 91). In *MaddAddam*, the last book of the trilogy, pigoons are further anthropomorphised to the point where they are represented as a community capable of communication, democratic discussions and mourning rituals. Also in this book, there is much interaction between human survivors and pigoons, as they cooperate to take down former human convicts who threaten the security of the first two groups. Moreover, a special connection is established between pigoons and Crakers — both posthuman representatives — because they can communicate among themselves, while humans "don't understand their languages." (Atwood, *MaddAddam* 328). Therefore, a young Craker boy must act as a mediator in the dialogues between pigoons and humans. At the end

of the trilogy, humans, Crakers and pigoons learn to share natural spaces and make concessions to show respect towards one another.

Schmeink problematizes the narrative's deconstruction of ontological categories, since the ironic distance in the descriptions of the Crakers' features — such as their digestion or their mating rituals — at times conveys a sense of ridicule more than respect toward alternative sustainable lifestyles (101). Still, the scholar also recognizes that the *MaddAddam* trilogy, “with its hybrid, complex, and shifting conceptions of subjectivity, is poised to become a new form of society that incorporates a *zoe*-centric view of life, and fosters interconnected relations between different species, earth, and technology” (Schmeink 116). Throughout the novels, the human is progressively resituated as a species amongst others, which contributes to a heterarchical relationship between humans and the natural world, and to dislodge the anthropocentric mindset that has played a crucial part in environmental damage.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, this work has shown how *The Handmaid's Tale*, *Parable of the Sower* and *Oryx and Crake* can be approached through an ecofeminist lens. The main challenge of this process largely rested in the heterogeneity of ecofeminist ideas and the many focuses of the movement that have emerged throughout its five decades of existence. As Kings explains, ecofeminism has been compared to the act of quilting:

While the borders of said quilt act as the boundaries of our discussion, the patches which provide the quilt with its 'quilt-ness' are created by the diversity of perspectives and multitude of opinions from a grassroots level upwards. Ecofeminism is a continually evolving academic/activist tradition and one which it is impossible to completely define in a set of necessary and sufficient conditions. (82)

Whereas in its early years, ecofeminism mainly focused on the underlying factors connecting the oppression of women to nature's exploitation, progressively it grew to take "into account the interconnected nature of social categories such as gender, race, class, sexuality, caste, species, religion, nationality, dis/ability, and issues such as colonialism" (Kings 71). Additionally, it began to challenge anthropocentric mindsets and to include animals and other elements of the natural world in its discussions (71/72). By way of concluding this thesis, I argue that the three novels reflect ecofeminism's interdisciplinary approach and how the movement has evolved to show greater intersectionality in currently debated issues.

Published at the end of the second wave of feminism, *The Handmaid's Tale* appears to be closer to the premises of d'Eaubonne's ecofeminism, as Margaret Atwood connects women's oppression to nature's degradation, but develops few of the topics discussed by later ecofeminists. In fact, environmental damage is reflected in decreased human fertility, and this serves as an excuse for an authoritative government to strip women of their rights and appropriate their bodies. While the novel acknowledges how classism is related to climatic issues, since the lowest social classes are made to handle toxic and radioactive waste, the connection between environmental problems and other types of oppression is not so clear. For example, the novel briefly mentions the existence of racism in Gilead, as the government allegedly resettles African American communities in "National Homelands", but this point is not explored any further (Atwood, *Handmaid* 83). Moreover, even if the climate factor plays an important role in the plot, animals and other elements from the natural world are almost

absent, apart from gardens and flowers, which occupy a peculiar position, as previously discussed.

By contrast, in *Parable of the Sower*, ecofeminism's intersectionality is much more evident. More than approaching the connection between women's and nature's subjugation, Octavia Butler illustrates the links between different social problems and how they are exacerbated by adverse environmental circumstances. At the time of the novel's publication, the author's depiction of a black female protagonist born in a multiracial neighbourhood contributed to a diversification of cli-fi narratives, and it allowed for a new perception of how gender and race impact individual experiences of the climate crisis. In addition, unlike *The Handmaid's Tale*, the natural world has a bigger presence in the novel, and the protagonist recognizes the value of plants and animals. What's more, with Lauren's hyperempathy syndrome, Butler introduces a posthuman trait that leads the main character to establish a special connection with other human and non-human beings, and which influences the creation of a belief system based on diversity, equality, and respect. Also, the novel's multinational companies are a critique of the capitalist system and how it is linked to the exploitation of vulnerable people and to the climatic component of the novel's crisis.

In a similar way to the previous novel, *Oryx and Crake* deals with a variety of issues that concern more recent trends of ecofeminism and expands on some of the matters already present in *Parable*. As such, Atwood comments on capitalism's misuse of technology and the danger it represents to marginalized human beings and to other creatures when used unethically for the profit of the elites. Furthermore, *Oryx*'s story stretches the narrative to the Global South and juxtaposes experiences of environmental change in an already impoverished rural context with those of Western citizens, thereby highlighting climate justice issues at a global scale. Besides, posthumanism here is further developed with the presence of human/animal hybridity. While the pigoons contribute to dislodging human exceptionalism, the Crakers completely shatter ontological barriers and resituate humanity in nature. In the post-apocalyptic setting, civilized and wild spaces merge into one another, nature is no longer exploited, and Crake's ecotopia supposes that other forms of oppression such as sexism, racism, and speciesism, have also disappeared.

In her discussion about Margaret Atwood's work, Muñoz-González labels *The Handmaid's Tale* "proto-cli-fiction", as the novel "explores possible public, natural, behavioral, emotional, physiological, and political responses to a new environment transformed by human

actions ... The novel can also be seen as a precursor of Atwood's subsequent dystopias more openly centered on the climate change issue" (282). The same idea could be applied to feminist ecocriticism in the book. As previously mentioned, the theme of this dystopia is in keeping with the fundamental concern of ecofeminism during its early years, while Butler's novel and Atwood's other story, written later in her career, develop a wider range of issues explored by ecofeminists from late 1980s onwards. Therefore, *The Handmaid's Tale* could be classified as a proto-ecofeminist novel, as it displays an emergent intersectional consciousness, a crucial feature present in the work of later ecofeminists.

Nonetheless, the three novels present common points that are at the centre of contemporary ecofeminist debates. First, the novels illustrate the interconnectedness of the human and the natural world, as they parallel the mistreatment of the planet and the degradation of human relationships. In fact, the climate's instability is directly reflected in human civilizations through violence, poverty, war, and various types of discrimination. Margaret Atwood and Octavia E Butler write cautionary tales that alert their readers to what the future holds if privileged human groups continue to overconsume and deplete natural resources. The authors depict the disparate impact of climate change on marginalized human groups, either directly, through a higher exposition to polluted areas and extreme weather events, or indirectly, through harder access to natural resources and the scarcity of basic means. Moreover, they show how the capitalist-patriarchal system simultaneously appropriates natural resources and marginalized bodies in search for maximal economic profit, and how the unlimited search for progress has contributed to the contemporary climate crisis. In this context, Vandana Shiva's critique of "maldevelopment" is often echoed in the plots (*Staying 4*), as economic growth and/or scientific advancement are often predicated upon vulnerable human and non-human beings. At the heart of this subjugation is the othering of nature and its relegation to an inferior position to reason by capitalist-patriarchal entities. This devaluation thus justifies the instrumentalization or altogether exclusion of othered individuals who are associated with the natural sphere, as is illustrated in the novels through Oryx and the women of Gilead.

As speculative fiction novels, these texts imagine humankind's future in different but connected ways. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Offred's testimony ends with the possibility that she may have escaped the regime and fled to a more liberal Canada. In addition, the epilogue is set in a post-Gilead era where much of the social tension seems to have disappeared. While the novel's ending does not suggest alternative sustainable lifestyles, Offred's flight might foreshadow Gilead's fall, thereby leaving room for imagination on how an individual act might

contribute to systemic change. In comparison, Lauren's *Earthseed* is Butler's explicit vision for a better future. Her protagonist's non-anthropocentric religion is based on mutual respect and strives to eliminate interconnected forms of oppression, including sexism, racism, classism, and speciesism. Also, the novel underlines the importance of collaborative action, grounded on inclusive debates and democratic informed decisions, which aim at improving humanity's future through sustainable lifestyles and without neglecting previously othered groups.

In *Oryx and Crake*, the ecological shift is represented in Crake's radical ecotopia. The scientist's plan forces Jimmy/Snowman to adapt to a world where progress and overconsumption are replaced by survival and sustenance, and where he unavoidably coexists with other species. In addition, the Crakers provide an example of an ecological community. Unlike previous generations of "normal" humans, who were educated and acculturated per anthropocentric values, Crakers are "starting more or less from scratch", and their instruction is based on interspecies equality and respect towards the natural world (Atwood, *Oryx* 363). Hence, both Crakers and Lauren's *Earthseed* could be seen as concretizations of Val Plumwood's ecological self, as each ecofeminist community includes the interest of "earth others and the earth community among its own primary ends, and hence respects or cares for these others for their own sake" (Plumwood 154/155).

Furthermore, both authors stress the importance of an individual's ecological and political awareness, especially during periods of social (or environmental) instability. As suggested in the stories, it is during these times that oppressive regimes/movements are more likely to take the upper hand. The protagonists realize that their own or others' active ignorance of societal problems contributed to the exacerbation of the novels' crises. In this sense, the authors hold a mirror for readers to examine their own reactions to the climate crisis and urge them to overcome passivity. As mentioned in the introduction, in comparison with scientific discourses on environmental change, climate fiction stories may be more efficient in captivating the attention of a wider public because they simultaneously entertain, inform and appeal to the reader's emotions in an approachable manner (Wright 102). In Haraway's words: "It matters what matters we use to think other matters with; it matters what stories we tell to tell other stories with" (*Staying* 12). As such, cli-fi stories are a valuable medium to spread environmental awareness because they articulate accounts of climate change with individual narratives, thereby linking the personal with the global and calling for a collective response.

While the three novels have been described as cautionary tales, Patrick Murphy notes that for feminist speculative fiction: “Perhaps ‘cautionary’ is not quite the right word for these stories; perhaps ‘opportunity’ or ‘possibility’ tales would be better. Doom and gloom does not always spur people to action; sometimes hope and potential does more to break inertia.” (6). His remark is appropriate for Atwood and Butler’s stories, considering that rather than simply depicting pessimist apocalyptic scenarios, they also provide optimistic details that suggest there is still a chance for characters to have a brighter future. In this regard, it could be argued that it is the novels’ “ustopian” character which grants them the hopeful tone through a blend of utopian and dystopian elements (Atwood, “Margaret”). Even if *The Handmaid’s Tale* proposes a more subtle possibility of change, both *Parable of the Sower* and *Oryx and Crake* provide the reader with systemic alternatives to consider the future of planet Earth and our place in it.

The growing tendency towards posthumanism materializes the idea that human civilization is irredeemably entangled with nature, and the stories portray how denying this fact was a fundamental trigger to their socioeconomic and environmental crises. Accordingly, the authors recognize that it is impossible for planet Earth to return to its pre-Anthropocene state and suggest ways to “stay with the trouble of living and dying in response-ability on a damaged earth.” (Haraway, *Staying* 2). In Butler’s case, while the protagonist adapts to the hostile environment conditions, her goal is to explore other inhabitable planets, since she believes hers will eventually no longer be suitable for human life²¹. Finally, as stories with ecofeminist insights, they highlight the fundamental values that have allowed both the degradation of the environment and the instrumentalization of othered individuals, no longer focusing exclusively on women or human beings. Atwood and Butler point to those dualisms that have given way to interconnected forms of oppression and put forward ways to dismantle them with the hope of contributing to the improvement of human and interspecies relationships and avoiding further damage to the planet.

²¹ Lauren’s wish for humanity to take root among the stars is fulfilled at the end of *Parable of the Talents*, although at that point she is already too old to join the first shuttles (Butler, *Talents* 387).

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