



## “Return Things to Nature’s Norms”: A Material Feminist Reading of the Surrogate Bodies in Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* and *Oryx and Crake*

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### ABSTRACT

This paper explores the ethics of surrogate bodies in Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985) and *Oryx and Crake* (2003) through the lens of material feminisms. The first section of the paper examines the exploitation of the surrogate mother, the Handmaid, by the Gilead administration and the genetic engineered nonhuman entities, the pigoons, and nature, by the authoritative scientists in the Compounds. In doing this, the author uncovers the ideologies of patriarchy, reductionism, and mechanization embedded within Gilead’s surrogate system and food distribution system and the Compound’s production of the genetically engineered pigoons ersatz food cultures. The latter part of the article highlights the parallel irony embedded within each novel, whereby the Handmaids, the pigoons, and nature resist and offer revenge through adapting and surviving throughout the stories. These reversed power relationships function as a composite material feminist counter-narrative as opposed to the patriarchal, anthropocentric, reductionist consciousnesses imposed by the Gilead administration and the Compounds. This emphasizes that the core element to “survive” in a dystopian environment is embracing material feminisms.

### KEYWORDS

non-anthropocentrism, material feminism, *The Handmaid’s Tale*, *Oryx and Crake*, resistance, adaption, survive, surrogate bodies

## 1. Introduction

Margaret Atwood's vision of the future seems to be a dystopian one. Both *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) and *Oryx and Crake* (2003) depict a similar dystopian environmental background in which an uncontrolled use of chemical substances and natural resources have caused problems such as droughts, global warming, food shortages, and new diseases. Under these circumstances, the Republic of Gilead in *The Handmaid's Tale* attempts to cope with the preservation of human life through imposing the system of surrogacy upon women who have reproductive ability. At the same time, the Compounds in *Oryx and Crake* focus on human enhancement through the production of surrogate animals and genetically modified products. This similarity between the two foregrounds the central theme of this paper: the ethics of surrogate bodies.

According to *Oxford Living Dictionaries*, "surrogate" means "substitute" or "replacement" (2019). Following this, a surrogate mother is therefore a substitute mother. More specifically, as Anton van Niekerk and Liezel van Zyl note, a surrogate mother is "a woman who, for financial and/or compassionate reasons, agrees to bear a child for another woman who is incapable or, less often, unwilling to do so herself" (345). In *The Handmaid's Tale*, all women with reproductive ability are forced to be surrogate mothers while the role of social and legal mother is taken over by women who are married to the upper-class citizens in Gilead. This brings a wealth of more complex ethical issues around gender, labor, exploitation and inequality. While in *The Handmaid's Tale* the ethical dilemmas surrounding the surrogate Handmaids become a primary concern, *Oryx and Crake* explores the unethical use of genetically modified organisms (GMOs) such as the pigoons (pig-baboon hybrid), rakunk (raccoon-skunk), wolvog (wolf-dog), snat (rat-snake) for human enhancement as well as entertainment. Here I explore the parallel structure embedded within the representations of the surrogate mothers in *The Handmaid's Tale* and the surrogate animals in *Oryx and Crake*, suggesting that on the one hand, both the Handmaids (spare womb factory) and the pigoons (spare human organs factory) serve as the victims of the patriarchal, reductionist, anthropocentric surroundings. On the other hand, the surrogate bodies destabilize the male-dominant, anthropocentric power structure through their resistance against the systems.

In both novels, the patriarchal and anthropocentric norms are imposed through (i) the surrogacy project, (ii) the food distribution system, and (iii) the operating or educational systems by the upper-class and authoritarian communities such as militarists, capitalists, and scientists. Following this, the first section of the paper uncovers the ideologies of patriarchy, reductionism, and mechanization embedded within Gilead's surrogate system and food distribution system in *The Handmaid Tale* and the Compound's production of the genetically engineered pigoons and

ersatz food cultures in *Oryx and Crake*. The later part of the article highlights the parallel irony in each novel, whereby both the Handmaids and the pigeons resist the patriarchal administration and enact revenge by adapting and surviving throughout the stories. In conclusion, I argue that these reversed power relationships can be regarded as a material feminist<sup>1</sup> counter-act against the patriarchal, anthropocentric, and reductionist perception and act.

## 2. Bio-Perversity: Ethical Problems of the Surrogate Bodies for Human

### Enhancement and Consumption

#### 2.1 *The Handmaid’s Tale*

After being deprived of identity, family, and property, fertile women in Gilead are classified as the Handmaids based on their biological make-up, called “two-legs wombs” (135). This role is created in combination with Gilead’s patriarchal surrogate system, alongside its dehumanizing education and auto-cannibalized food distribution system as a way to control the Handmaids, making them reproductive machines or commodities for Gilead’s upper-class community to consume. Regarding the first aspect, Gilead’s surrogate system shows that neither the rights of the child nor the surrogate mother is taken into consideration, as the child is not told about his/her biological mother, and the Handmaid is forced to detach herself—both emotionally and physically—from the child once it is born. Furthermore, there is no post-pregnancy support but rather another enforced pregnancy as long as the Handmaid is still biologically capable. This aspect reveals itself in the story of Ofwarren. When Ofwarren delivers a seemingly healthy baby girl, it is taken immediately and named Angela by the Wife, leaving Ofwarren to suffer emotionally from the post-partum separation. When Angela turns out to be a “shredder” and does not live, Ofwarren is profoundly distressed, and without any psychiatric support, she eventually goes insane.

The forced surrogacy system in the novel is unethical in the sense that “it does not require the surrogate mother to feel in certain ways, but rather to act in certain ways” (qtd. in Anton and Liezl 346). As E. S. Anderson claims, “by requiring the surrogate mother to repress

<sup>1</sup> While postmodern feminists tend to see the concept of the real or material as a product of language having its reality only in languages, material feminists argue that “we need a way to talk about the materiality of the body as itself an active, sometimes recalcitrant, force” (*Material Feminisms* 4). In her article, Karan Barad also recognizes the problem of contemporary feminist theory, claiming that “[l]anguage has been granted too much power... it seems that at every turn lately every ‘thing’—even materiality—is turned into a matter of language, or some other form of cultural representation” (qtd. in *MF* 103). Similarly, Judith Butler notes, “[t]he self may be performative [...] but those performances are materially constrained” (*MF* 68). “Bodies matter,” Butler continues to note, “not because they cause our body, but because the living of them as material [...] is made possible only through regarding ourselves as subjects, as beings who have some recognizable, repeatable, and accountable identity”; “Our bodily relations—our components, affections, habits, perceptions—are subject, not just to an other who recognizes me, but to one who will recognize me as this or that social being” (*MF* 68). In this regard, material feminists focus on the agency of the living bodies and underline the problematic patriarchy and capitalism as central in understanding women’s oppression.

whatever parental love she feels for the child, these norms convert women's labor into a form of alienated labor" (qtd. in Anton and Liezl 346). Following Anderson, women in Gilead are dehumanized as alienable commodities, as there is no difference between women's reproductive labors and other forms of physical labor. In reality, Ofwarren's story reminds us of the case of the surrogate mothers in India. According to "Surrogacy: Ethical and Legal Issues," the poor, illiterate women in India have no right to take charge of "their own body and life" and hence often become victims of commercial surrogacy (Saxena et al., 2012). Once the surrogacy agreements are made, the surrogate mothers are isolated from the outside world for the duration of pregnancy. If the outcome of the pregnancy turns out unfavorably, they are unlikely to be paid. On top of this, there is "no provision of insurance or post-pregnancy medical and psychiatric support" for them (Saxena et al., 2012). Gilead's forced surrogacy service thus recalls India's commodified surrogacy system, which is constructed upon its hierarchal class divisions and patriarchal socio-cultural norms.

Ofwarren's uncontrollable insanity after losing her child further highlights the unethical aspect of Gilead's forced surrogacy system. Here, we have to understand that pregnancy is not only a biological process but also a "social" and "psychological" process. During the period of pregnancy, the mother develops an intimate bond with her child both psychologically and physically. This bond between the mother and her child is an integral part of her pregnancy. As Anton and Liezl note, "a woman's reproductive labor is more 'integral' to her identity than her other productive capacities" (347). Furthermore, what exactly distinguishes women's reproductive labor from other forms of labor is that "the product of their labors is not *something* but *someone*" (Anton and Liezl 347). However, in Gilead, the pregnant Ofwarren is not expected to recognize that she is expecting her child. The Gilead administration attempts to separate pregnancy from the conscious knowledge that one will give birth to *her* child. In this way, the surrogate mother becomes a mere "human incubator" for someone else's child, foregrounding the Gilead's dehumanized reproductive system.

In Gilead, the upper-class men make the surrogate mothers relinquish their ability to interpret and control the meaning or significance of their reproductive labors. "You can't make an omelet without breaking eggs," as Offred's Commander claims (211). Here, Karen Stein notes, "women become for him [men] the eggs which are broken and consumed to create a better life for the patriarchal ruling class" (67). To achieve this so-called "better life," the Handmaids are put into the category of nonhumans. As Offred claims, "I wait, washed, brushed, fed, like a prize pig" (69). Here, Offred's description of herself as a farm pig reflects the problem of the anthropocentric/patriarchal ruling system imposed by the Gilead administration. According to Jim Mason, animals in the intensive farming factory are living in "a concentration camp,"

whereby a large number of animals are locked in an indoor facility and are fed “a steady diet of grain” before being turned into “meat, milk, and eggs” (qtd. in Sztzybel 105). This enables one to imagine Gilead itself as a kind of concentration camp or dehumanizing factory farm, in which the Handmaids’ personal identities are being stripped away, and they are treated like intensive farm animals for surrogate reproductive service and sexual consumption by the privileged community in Gilead. The dehumanization of the surrogate mothers thus highlights Gilead’s unethical ruling system that is based on male-dominant and human-centric norms.

For the authoritarian community, another way to make a “better life” in Gilead is to force the Handmaids to adapt its unethical and self-destructive philosophy. During her time at the Red Center, Offred is taught by Aunt Lydia that “America was dying of too much [reproductive] choice” and hence no choice should be given to fertile women by Gilead that declares: *give us children, or else you die* (25). Influenced by this philosophy, Offred starts to think that she will die if she does not get pregnant: “*Give me children, or else I die*” (61). Furthermore, while having an egg for breakfast, Offred cannot stop thinking whether the life of *laying eggs* and “incubating” was the only life that she could and should pursue: “The minimalist life. Pleasure is an egg...If I have an egg, what more can I want?”(111). Offred’s destruction of self-worth and identity is, therefore, an outcome of Gilead’s self-destructive philosophy that is constructed upon the anthropocentric, patriarchal ideologies (69).

The food distribution system is another model that is based on a patriarchal, anthropocentric worldview. In Gilead, the food distribution system is based on the concept of “auto-cannibalistic consumption, “whereby the Handmaids are transformed into both “edible” and “self-eating” creatures (Christou 415, 416). This aspect reveals itself in an episode concerning Offred’s breakfast, in which Offred recalls the eggcup as “a woman’s torso in a skirt” under which one of the eggs is “being kept warm”(110). This image is parallel to the tradition of the Birth Day ceremony in Gilead, whereby the Wife will sit on top of the Handmaid during labor. Referring to this similar structure, the eggs Offred eats are no doubt associated with human ovaries, which are how Handmaids are referred to in Gilead. Offred’s eating of eggs/ovaries thus symbolizes the process of self-cannibalism or self-disembodiment; by swallowing the eggs given by Gilead, Offred is transformed into *something* (two-legs wombs) from *someone*. Gilead’s food distribution system is therefore unethical based on the fact that it is a form of self-cannibalism.

## 2.2 *Oryx and Crake*

Similar to the Handmaids in Gilead, the genetically engineered pigoons in the Compounds are treated as experimental objects or the human enhancement project. As Jimmy discovers, the goal of the pigoon project is “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” (25). Used for xenotransplantation, the young pigoons are injected with a “rapid-maturity gene” in order to grow “five or six kidneys at a time” (25). Then, their extra kidneys will be ripped away and used to grow more organs (26).

Here, a profound issue that can be found in this surrogacy project is the mechanization of nonhuman living beings, especially sentient creatures, by the scientists in the Compounds.<sup>2</sup> Sentience is a key concept. Defined by Peter Singer as “the capacity for suffering and/or enjoyment or happiness,” sentience provides a simple principle that determines whether or not one should consider a being from a moral perspective (qtd. in Peterson 45). This thinking is derived initially from Jeremy Bentham, who argues that because certain nonhuman animals are more rational than specific categories of human beings (infants, mentally disabled humans), moral status cannot be determined by rationality; instead, what should be taken into account is the capacity for suffering (Peterson 45). In the novel, this notion is emphasized through Jimmy’s sympathetic view toward sentient animals. As a child, Jimmy feels guilty for not rescuing the “suffering animals” that are being placed on top of the bonfire (20). Jimmy claims that by gazing into their heads, he can literally “feel” their suffering. This understanding of animal sentience allows Jimmy to see the pigoons “as creatures much like himself,” a sentient being (27). This recognition results in Jimmy’s refusal to eat a pigoon. As he claims, “I’m their friend” (30). This cross-species friendship that Jimmy develops toward the pigoon foregrounds the problematic mechanization of sentient beings for scientific purposes.

Another ethical problem that is linked to the pigoon project is the food distribution service in the Compounds. Secretly, the used pigoons are turned into food—pigoon bacon, pigoon pancakes, pigoon popcorn, pork pies—for sale in the Compound’s cafeteria when they are incapable of growing organs(27). As Jimmy/Snowman recalls, “Organ Inc Farms itself it was noticeable how often back bacon and ham sandwiches and pork pies turned up on the staff café menu. André’s Bistro was the official name of the café, but the regulars called it Grunts” (27). Jimmy’s/Snowman’s description leads Richard Ryder to question, “would it [eating those food] not be a partial cannibalism?” (qtd. in Warkentin 90). Ryder’s wonder is grounded in the statement that since human growth hormone genes are injected into the embryos of pigoons, eating them as food thus indicates the eating of “human genetic material” (qtd. in Warkentin 90). This partial self-cannibalism embedded within the food distribution system in the Compounds reminds the reader of the auto-cannibalistic mechanism that lies in Gilead’s food delivery

<sup>2</sup> Animal advocates point out that “the loss of a pig’s life is no less ethically troubling than the loss of a baboon’s life” because both are “sentient, cognitively complex mammals” (Orlans et al. 62).

system, highlighting the similar structure between the two ruling systems.<sup>3</sup>

Thirdly, as Ingrid-Charlotte Wolter points out, the notion of “humans playing God” embraced by the bio-scientists in the Compounds represents a problematic perspective (2010, 265). During Jimmy’s visit to the Organ Inc Farm, one scientist reveals that to “create-an-animal was so much fun... it made you feel like God” (57). Jimmy’s pet, who is a cross of a racoon and a skunk and thus called by the scientists a “rakunk,” is created as an “after-hour hobby on the part of one of the Organ Inc biolab hotshots” (57). This humans-playing-God notion offers grounds for the authoritarian scientists to ignore all the possible consequences caused by their immoral/unethical behavior which includes the exploitation of sentient animals’ bodies in violation of bioethical principles. Regarding bioethics, Traci Warkentin’s comment on the possible risks embedded within the pigoon project is worth quoting:

...xenotransplantation will allow new and unknown microorganisms harmless to their natural hosts, to cross the species barrier, causing infectious disease, spreading cancer-causing retroviruses, and potentially creating mutant viruses as deadly as HIV, Ebola, or BSE. (91)

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Besides the possible formation of mutant viruses, Warkentin further cites other resources to emphasize how genetically modified organisms (GMOs) can, in turn, affect future generations uncontrollably and unpredictably:

“unlike chemical substances, genetically engineered organisms have the capacity to mutate, migrate and multiply” and that “a genetically engineered organism once free in the environment is impossible to recall.” (92)

Jimmy’s mother, Sharon, appears as a feminist microbiologist who represents Warkentin’s viewpoint in the novel. When Jimmy’s father celebrates his success ingrowing human neocortex tissue in a pigoon, Sharon coldly responds, “[t]hat’s all we need...[m]ore people with the brains of pigs. Don’t we have enough of those already?” (64). Sharon continues to criticize her husband’s playing-God behavior as “immoral” and “sacrilegious” as he is “interfering with the building blocks of life” (64). She emphasizes how this humans-playing-God notion imposed by the Compounds, which is “a moral cesspool,” has turned her husband into a capitalist-driven,

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<sup>3</sup> According to Julian Baggini, “one of the most common ways of distinguishing civilized Westerners from ‘savages’ was to point to their practice of eating humans, even if they rarely or never did so. In the Western imagination, cannibalism represents the kind of amoral anarchy that civilization protects us from. To even consider it as a possibility is to slide back to barbarity.”

unethical scientist: “Don’t you remember the way we used to talk, everything we wanted to do? Making life better for people – not just people with money. You used to be so...you had ideals, then” (64).

Arguably, the humans-playing-God behavior is derived from the notion of “mechanomorphism,” whereby nonhuman bodies and behaviors are labeled in mechanical terms. This concept is founded upon “an overzealous faith in the technology itself” and upon “an oversimplified idea of living process and bodies” (Warkentin 93). Consequently, as Warkentin suggests, the mechanization of animal bodies will lead to the mechanization of ourselves, deteriorating not only our “capacity to relate to other animals, our bodies and other human beings” but also our “sentiments,” “moral judgments” and “belief systems”(99). In the novel, the bioengineer Crake can be seen as an ultimate product of mechanomorphism. Crake directly takes on the role of God in creating a new kind of anthropomorphic creature called “Crakers” before wiping out almost all of world humanity by distributing a hostile bio form (JUVE) through the Blyss Pluss pill, a libido-and happiness-enhancing product. Crake’s bioterrorist-like actions show his inability to relate himself to other animals, human beings, sentiments, and ethical judgements. As Warkentin notes, “with the loss of embodied sensibility, of our modes of social relatedness, we run the risk of eliminating our ability to ponder metaphysics, to question our own actions and fundamental beliefs, and with it the desire or need for ethics at all” (101). Crake’s privileging of his own beliefs over all others is a result of his embracement of mechanomorphism, which enables him to eliminate the human race without a sense of guilt.

Crake’s denaturalization of fundamental relationships and beliefs is deeply bound to the pre-apocalyptic world in the novel that focuses on producing “surrogacies of every kind, notably in the area of food” (Zwart 269). This includes: Chickie Nobs Bucket O’Nubbins, Sveltana No-Meat cocktail Susages, Soy Noy burgers, So Yummie Ice Cream, Soy O Boy sardine, to name a few. Other surrogate products which are served for human consumption involve the opening of the designer baby shop by the body-oriented Compounds: “Gender, sexual orientation, height, color of skin and eyes – it’s all on order, it can all be done or redone” (340). It is through living in an environment that is full of surrogacies that Crake, as Michael Spiegel suggests, “appears to think and identify as a commodity” (128). Spiegel continues to claim, “Crake becomes ‘a part of the capitalist machinery’ by treating both Oryx (*Mine, mine*) and the ‘brain slaves’ of Madd Addam as commodities” (Spiegel 129). Hence, Crake’s preference for machinery, commodity, and surrogacy serves as a direct reflection of a neo-capitalist society that is dissociated from emotion, the integrity of living things, and the original form of things.

## Deconstructing Bio-Perversity: Material Feminist Representations of the Surrogate Bodies

### 3.1 *The Handmaid’s Tale*

While eggs represent a tool to oppress women’s fundamental rights and desires, eggs also symbolize a form of feminist resistance. “The food which is intended to control becomes a means of subverting that control,” as Emma Parker’s states (119). More specifically, eggs in *The Handmaid’s Tale* serve as a source for spiritual transformation and collective feminine resistance against the patriarchal Gilead administration. Regarding the first aspect, it is revealed in the episode of Offred’s eating breakfast. Metaphorically, the act in which she slices the top of the egg and eats the contents serves as an act of revitalization for Offred. As she claims, “the egg is glowing now, as if it had an energy of its own. To look at the egg gives me intense pleasure” (110). Furthermore, Offred links the representation of eggs to that of the moon, desert and God:

The shell of the egg is smooth but also grained; small pebbles of calcium are defined by the sunlight, like craters on the moon. It’s a barren landscape, yet perfect; it’s the sort of desert the saints went into, so their minds would not be distracted by profusion. I think that this is what God must look like: an egg. The life of the moon may not be on the surface, but inside. (110)

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This shifting of metaphors from eggs to moon, then desert, and then God, indicates Offred’s spiritual discovery of a whole different kind of universe inside the glowing egg. In other words, Offred seems to suggest that a woman’s womb is a multi-dimensional universe, in which, from period to period, it transforms from a cosmic wilderness to a tremendous warm wetland before turning into an awe-inspiring desert, whereby the spiritual purification takes place. As Glenn Deer claims, “the egg is compared to the moon; the moon becomes a desert, place of spiritual trial and of revelation” (qtd. in Sasame 94). Offred’s symbolic reconnection of her egg/womb to nature and God serves as a form of organic, spiritual resistance against Gilead’s phallogocentric oppression, which Hilde Staels confirms in the description below:

The egg is an image for the barren surface of Gilead and for the condition of the protagonist’s outer body, which is “defined by sunlight” or by the logocentrism of the rulers. Yet the egg glows red from the inside. Underground, a red, hot pulsing process of life is hidden. Red is the color of organic, free-flowing blood that reveals the existence of life energy. (462)

Staels' analysis leads to the understanding that Offred's reliance on the egg's productive (inner) life functions as a survival method as opposed to the unproductive (outer) life of Gilead. Moreover, Coral Ann Howells visualizes this contrast by referring to Offred's womb or "feminine space" as a continent of "cosmic wilderness" (137, 138). According to Howells, Offred's exploration of her feminine space functions as an "intense meditation [that] offers a kind of imaginative transcendence" (138). "It is within this territory of imagination and metaphor that Offred claims the space to write about her body, her memories, and her womanly desires, and so manages to elude the confines of Gilead" (Howells 136). In this respect, Offred's referring to her egg/womb as a wild, vital and transformative space represents an alternative way to overcome the controlling, meaningless and monotonous system of Gilead.

On top of this, Offred's narrative "doubles and multiplies to become the voices of 'women' rather than the voice of a single narrator" (Howells 133). This aspect can be seen in the episode concerning Ofwarren's Birth Day ceremony, whereby all the Handmaids in Ofwarren's room feel as though they were "transported" into the body of Ofwarren, experiencing her pain as one collective entity (127). As Offred claims, "[i]t's coming, it's coming, like a bugle, a call to arms, like a wall falling, we can feel it like a heavy stone moving down, pulled down inside us, we think we will burst. We grip each other's hands, we are no longer single" (125). This collective experience, according to Offred, is strengthened through sharing the smell of "matrix" among the Handmaids (123). Drawing on the association between the words "matrix" and "mother," "womb," "original place" in late Latin medical literature, the sharing of the smell of matrix thus reflects the sharing of motherhood, transformative femininity and diverse individuality among the Handmaids (qtd. in Aristakhova 12). This consequently leads to the suggestion that the Handmaids' sharing of the "matrix" consciousness represents a collective adaptation to Gilead's patriarchal, dehumanizing and reductionist norms in order to survive.

### 3.2 *Oryx and Crake*

After Crake eliminates almost all the human race through the use of the poisoned bio form JUVE, Snowman (excluding three other people who show up at the end of the story) becomes the only human being who struggles to adapt himself to the post-apocalyptic environment. It is not only full of natural disasters such as unusual afternoon storms, heavy acid rain and skin-burning sunlight but also dangerous genetically engineered animals like wolvogs, pigeons, and bobkittens, along with pre-apocalyptic insects in the forest and polluted fish in the sea. Among those genetically-engineered creatures, Snowman sees the wolvogs as one of the most life-threatening of animals. Even though they cannot climb trees, Snowman notices that the wolvogs are "smart" and predict "very soon they'll sense his vulnerability" and "start hunting

him” by learning how to climb trees: “[w]olvogs can’t climb trees...but how long can that last?” (126). Snowman’s question indicates that genetically engineered creatures are highly unpredictable because they are capable of adapting to their surroundings according to their needs.

Furthermore, the pigoons are depicted as brilliant creatures and adapt themselves to the post-apocalyptic world. The pigoons’ “rapid-maturity genes” enable them to grow tusks and human-like abilities, which include: rapping their enemies based on teamwork and communication; retreating from perceived threats and weapons; enacting revenge on human beings (43). During his food-searching journey in the Compounds, Snowman is mortally threatened by the human-like traits exhibited by the pigoons. After recognizing their enemy, Snowman, the pigoons plan their attack by cutting off his escape route and trapping him on the top floor of a gatehouse. Through observation, the pigoons understand that Snowman needs something in the garbage bag for his escape. Hence, they use the garbage bag as bait to entice him down to the ground floor. As Snowman observes,

They were waiting for him, using the garbage bag as bait. They must have been able to tell there was something in it he’d want, that he’d come down to get. Cunning, so cunning. His legs are shaking by the time he reaches the top level again. (319)

Drawing on Snowman’s description, the pigoons are a kind of posthuman monstrosity. This might be the result of a mutation from the human-pigoon hybrid genes. As Snowman claims, some pigoons “may even have human neocortex tissue growing in their crafty, wicked heads” (276). These posthuman monstrosities scare Snowman, but at the same time, their subjectivity and agency are being recognized: “[t]hey were always escape artists, the pigoons: if they’d had fingers they’d have ruled the world” (314). Snowman’s description makes visible the pigoons’ posthuman agency and ability to disrupt the superior position of human kind through transcending the boundaries between animals and humans. This recognition recalls Warkentin’s argument that “even if a being is modified, is understood as unnatural...the organism itself still possess integrity of its own, and is neither natural nor unnatural on definition terms” (87). This perspective leads to the assumption that every living organism in this world possesses an intrinsic value, agency, and subjectivity, regardless of its species or biological construction.

In the novel, besides genetically modified animals, nonhuman Nature<sup>4</sup> also shows its high level of adaptability in a post-apocalyptic environment. For instance, while passing by the

<sup>4</sup>The use of Nature here is to emphasize Crake’s dematerialization of nature by claiming, “I don’t believe in Nature...Or not with a capital N” (OC 242).

abandoned block of buildings, Snowman notices that

The botany is thrusting itself through every crack. Given the time it will fissure the asphalt, topple the walls, push aside the roofs. Some kind of vine is growing everywhere, draping the windowsills, climbing in through the broken windows and up the bars and grillwork. Soon this district will be a thick tangle of vegetation...It won't be long before all visible traces of human habitation will be gone. (260)

The description above shows how strong nature can be when it comes to adaptation and survival. No matter how chaotic the situation is, Nature can always find ways to adapt to artificial objects like buildings, walls, windows, and roofs. Beyond that, Nature has the capability to alter a chaotic environment to create its own territory: "a thick tangle of vegetation" (260). Snowman's description of Nature thus foregrounds the subjectivity and agency of over-arching nature as opposed to the anthropocentric notion of "nature as human's object."

In the novel, the nature-as-object notion is enforced by the anthropocentric bio-scientists through their creation of a surrogate nature. This is reflected in Jimmy's observation of the Paradise module founded by Crake:

There was a large central space filled with trees and plants, above them a blue sky. (Not really a blue sky, only the curved ceiling of the bubble-dome, with a clever projection device that simulated dawn, sunlight, evening, night. There was a fake moon that went through its phases, he discovered later. There was fake rain.) (355)

The fake sky, rain, moon and other nonhuman entities in the Compounds are a final product of anthropocentrism, which is constructed using the notion of "nature as object." It is in this respect that nature is deprived of its capital "N" and specific agency by humans and is turned into "a 'storehouse of resources, a bare bones nature with no subjectivity and no personal variables at all: just stuff'" (qtd. in Lindgren and Öhman<sup>5</sup>). Snowman objects to this human-centric and false definition of nature in the post-apocalyptic world. "After everything that's happened, how can the [natural] world still be so beautiful? Because it is," he claims (429). This line foregrounds the materiality, subjectivity, and agency of Nature.

### Conclusion

The ethical dimensions of using surrogate bodies for human consumption, preservation enhancement, and entertainment services are a crucial theme to be explored in Margaret

Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* and *Oryx and Crake*. This paper has examined both the dehumanization of the surrogate mothers (the Handmaids) and the mechanization of the surrogate animals (the genetically engineered pigoons and artificial nature). Both novels expose the patriarchal, reductionist, and anthropocentric norms imposed by the Gilead and Compound administration as unethical, biased, and oppressive. In *The Handmaid’s Tale*, Gilead’s surrogacy system is constructed upon the dehumanization and mechanization of the surrogate mothers in the regime. This includes the forced deprivation of the newborn children from their biological mothers, the lack of post-pregnancy support for the surrogate mothers, and the imposition of forced sex and pregnancy upon them as long as they can still reproduce. Here, the repression of maternal love and human nature convert women’s labor into a form of alienated labor, transforming women into alienable commodities. Ofwaren’s insanity in the story indicates that pregnancy accompanied by reproductive labor is beyond what we think is a mere biological process. Instead, it is also a social and psychological process, as the mother creates an intimate bond with her fetus during the pregnancy. From this respect, Gilead’s dismissal of women’s pregnancy’s social and psychological aspects is unethical, inhuman, and patriarchal.

— 15 — In Gilead, this inhuman surrogacy system is constructed upon the patriarchal norm called “you can’t make an omelet without breaking eggs.” This means that the sacrifice of women is inevitable in order to make Gilead a *better* world (for the authoritarian community). Gilead’s ultimate goal isto transform the handmaids into breeding machines or *two-legged wombs* through its patriarchal rules and systems. This includes Gilead’s self-destructive education, whereby the handmaids in the Red Center are forced to go through a brainwashing process designed to devalue their self-esteem and confidence. Moreover, Gilead’s food distribution system is built upon auto-cannibalism, leading the handmaids to view and think of themselves as “eggs” while eating their breakfasts every day. Furthermore, Gilead’s Birth Day ceremony is a practice of dehumanization. It converts the handmaid into a breeding machine by covering her upper body with the skirts of the Commander’s Wife. All these regulations and practices expose Gilead’s unethical administration.

In *Oryx and Crake*, the surrogate system is built upon the mechanization of animals and plants in the regime. In the Compound’s laboratory, there is no ethical restriction in terms of the use of animals for scientific experimental purposes. Hence, the God-like scientists can invent any form of hybrid animal according to their personal interests and hobbies. The fact that most of the scientists are funded by capitalists who only care about their profits further leads to the inhuman exploitation of sentient animals. For instance, the genetically modified pigoons are made to produce six kidneys so that they can generate more money for the investors. Another unethical aspect that can be explored in the novel lies in the food distribution system presented. Similar to

*The Handmaid's Tale*, the Compound administration runs its food distribution through an auto-cannibalistic model. As Jefferey reveals, the meat sold in the cafeteria is actually coming from the laboratory itself, with human genetic material in them. The eating of the bacon sandwiches and pork pies in the cafeteria is thus a self-cannibalistic practice.

Both the human-playing-God behavior and the auto-cannibalistic practice are derived from the notion of “mechanomorphism,” an ideology based on an unrealistic utopian faith in the technology itself and an over-simplified attitude toward the living body, whereby the agency of the body is not recognized. In *Oryx and Crake*, the bioengineer Crake embodies the representation of mechanomorphism. Crake’s killing of all humanity in the world shows that he has lost this embodied sensibility as a human, his capacity to relate himself to other living beings, and his ability to question his unethical actions. However, it is only by living in an environment full of surrogacies that one appears to think of a commodity. From this respect, Crake is only another product of a neo-capitalist society that tends to dismiss feelings, the integrity, and the authenticity of living things.

While the surrogate mothers in *The Handmaid's Tale* serve as victims of Gilead’s patriarchal ruling system, they also play a crucial role in deconstructing these oppressive systems. For instance, in the novel, Offred uses eggs as the source of her spiritual transformation. By associating the egg with the moon, desert, and God, Offred suggests that a woman’s womb is a multi-dimensional universe that constantly changes. Offred’s dependence on the productive life of the egg/womb thus serves as a feminine/feminist resistance as opposed to the unproductive life of Gilead. Furthermore, the handmaids’ holding of their hands together during the laboring process of Ofwarren accompanied by their sharing of the smell of matrix represents both collective femininity and diverse individuality among the surrogate mothers. This act indicates another feminine/feminist resistance against the Gilead administration's patriarchal, reductionist, and dehumanizing norms and ruling systems.

In *Oryx and Crake*, several characters uphold a non-anthropocentric consciousness instead of the Compound’s anthropocentric, mechanomorphic ruling systems. Jimmy’s promotion of animal sentience is one of the examples. Unlike the scientists and capitalists in the novel, Jimmy’s sympathetic view toward the suffering animals and his cross-species friendship with the pigeons foreground the problematic mechanisation of sentient beings for scientific and self-entertaining purposes. Besides that, Sharon’s criticism of her husband’s human-playing-God behavior—the implantation of human tissues into the pigeons—calls attention to the ethical boundaries in bioengineering practices. Another character that plays an essential role in destabilizing the Compound’s ruling systems is the genetically modified pigeons. After most of mankind are killed by Crake’s invented poison, JUVE, Snowman (or Jimmy) discovers that those

pigeons can adapt perfectly to the post-apocalyptic environment. Ironically, it is Snowman who has now become their food source. This reversed power position leads Snowman to realize the subjectivity and agency of the pigeons. This posthuman monstrosity of the pigeons plays a crucial role in destabilizing the ideal situation of humanity through transcending the boundaries between humans and animals.

On top of that, the natural world in the post-apocalyptic world represents an essential element in deconstructing the anthropocentric notion of “nature as object” that is upheld by the Compounds in the pre-apocalyptic world. Regardless of its biological construction, Snowman’s descriptions of the over-arching nature in the post-apocalyptic environment shows us that nature too holds subjectivity and agency in this more-than-human world. In fact, nature has always been the strongest fighter when it comes to adaptability and survival.

From a material feminist perspective, Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* and *Oryx and Crake* play an important role in challenging the persistent anthropocentric and patriarchal bias of dominant norms, proposing that our natural world is neither feminized and mechanized. Instead, nature grows, adapts, and survives. Hence, in order to build a sustainable society within this more-than-human world, we should reconceive the relationship between scientific disciplines and environmental humanities.

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**BIO**

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