

# Ethics of Materiality and Commitment in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*

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## Abstract

Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* addresses the current postmodern condition of a denatured culture, which privileges and sanctifies a fabricated and artificial culture severed from nature. Specifically, the novel questions the acceptance and reification of what Baudrillard has called "the reign of the 'simulacra,'" in which "imitations" or "fakes" are accepted as adequate substitutes for or copies of the natural or real. While Atwood is opposed to an uncritical ecological naturalism, which treats nature and culture as more or less independent and distinct entities or conditions, her novel ecocritically warns us about the indifference towards nature that marks much of current Baudrillardian-inspired literary theory. *The Handmaid's Tale* emphasizes the deleterious effects of such indifference. My paper elaborates on this claim by way of Mary Mellor's concept "deep materialism," which combines two seemingly incompatible philosophic positions, deep ecology and historical materialism, and Ariel Salleh and Erika Cudworth's concept "embodied materialism." My argument is *The Handmaid's Tale* speaks for an ethics of materiality that recognizes the corporeal grounding of consciousness, commitment to kinship and communication with nature even as it refuses to see nature and culture as independent entities.

*The Handmaid's Tale* (Hereafter *HT*) (1985) confronts the overwhelming onslaught of the fabricated and the artificial in making the argument that the artificial or fabricated body or thing does not fully duplicate what it ostensibly duplicates or simulates. Such duplication or simulation may be less satisfying or desirable than what it is designed to replace. In this novel as well as its erstwhile sequel, *Oryx and Crake* (2003), Atwood calls for the preservation of the human, and the preservation of nature, which the human belongs to, rather than the postmodern demand for putatively more durable, more robust, more efficient substitutes for the body of the human and nature. For Atwood, the desire "to be superhuman" results in "the loss of whatever small amount of humanity" we "may still

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retain" (Atwood qtd. in Hengen 74), while the acceptance of the human condition not only helps to preserve our humanity but also the nature that our humanity shares.

*HT* represents in dystopic terms the suppression, neglect, and eradication of the human and nature by a society and culture that thrives on simulated experience and simulacra. If it is obsessed with liminal territories, or with those spaces between nature and culture, science and art, and reality and virtuality, the novel also resists the postmodern age's unquestioning embrace of the second entity in each of these pairs. This embrace is particularly prevalent in critical receptions of Baudrillard and the characterization of the postmodern age as the reign of the simulacra, where imitations or fakes take precedence over and usurp the real, and where signs "do not correspond or refer to their real-life referents" but rather are endlessly "floating signifiers" (Selden 201). For many postmodernist critics, the real "has become the representation of it," "the image has become everything," and "the representation is more desirable than the real." Such statements as "Artifice lies at the heart of reality," (Baudrillard 75) or "the real has become inseparable from its own image," or "the entire cycle of production, distribution, and consumption has been converted into a semiotic system of abstract signifiers with no relation to an objective world" (Best 52) are not seen as contestable statements but as unassailable pronouncements on the postmodern condition.

*HT* resists the tacit acceptance of the Baudrillardian claim that nature has been replaced, positively negated, and inconsequentially dismissed. As part of this resistance it emphasizes the inseparability between culture and the human and nature. Coral Ann Howells, one of Atwood's most prominent critics, notes that Atwood employs parody and the genre of satire to represent the absurdity and farce of the "virtual-reality scenarios" in *HT* as well as the later novel *Oryx and Crake* (Howells 164). The dystopia's denigration of unwanted realities, devaluation of realities deemed useless, and attempt even to annihilate undesirable realities represented in the novel result in new sets of realities that are not only unwanted, undesirable, and useless but also less satisfactory than the original set of realities. In a critical scene in *HT*, the artificial-real insemination ceremony in Chapter 16, Atwood satirizes the Baudrillardian concept of the simulacrum by reversing the identities of what customarily is represented as the real and what customarily is represented as that which replaces or substitutes for the real, or the simulacrum. In the scene the Wife, Serena Joy, functions as a simulacrum for the Handmaid, Offred, whose body is used by the legitimate, sanctioned spouse of Serena, the Commander, to conceive a child for Serena and the Commander Offred, who is real, who is copy, who is pretending, who is not pretending, who is constructed, and who is natural are issues that become bizarrely and fascinatingly confused. Yet, in narrating the events of *HT* through the character of Offred, the novel implicitly sympathizes with that thing or body which has been denied its reality:

Above me, towards the head of the bed, Serena Joy is arranged, outspread. Her legs are apart, I lie between them, my head on her stomach, her pubic bone under the base of my skull, her thighs on either side of me. She too is fully clothed. (*HT* 104)

Atwood here resists the Baudrillardian acceptance of the replacement of the real by the simulacrum by emphasizing not only the inseparability of identity between the real and the replacement for it but also the concealed power of those who have a choice whether

or not to pose as the real or the simulacrum. Offred says, "My arms are raised; she [the Wife] holds my hands, each of mine in each of hers. This is supposed to signify that we are one flesh, one being. What it really means is that she is in control, of the process and thus of the product" (*HT* 104). A little later she says, she wishes that the sexual exploitation of her had not been real and "would go away" (*HT* 105). She tells us that the Wife, Serena Joy, "grips my hands as if it is she, not I, who's being fucked, as if she finds it either pleasurable or painful" (*HT* 105) but also that "What's going on in this room, under Serena Joy's silvery canopy is not exciting," and "has nothing to do with passion or love or romance or any of those other notions we used to titillate ourselves with... [or] with sexual desire, at least for me, and certainly not for Serena (*HT* 105).

In another critical scene in the novel, the childbearing scene in chapter 21, we see a similar resistance to much of postmodern theory's tacit acceptance of what Baudrillard calls the "hyperreal," or the "hallucinatory resemblance of the real to itself" (Baudrillard 72). When Janine, another one of the inseminated Handmaids, is ready to give birth, her Commander's Wife hurries in accompanied by two other Wives who scramble onto the Birth Stool. Atwood describes the handmaid's experience in the language of the penitentiary and execution of prisoners by electric shock (*HT*). The Commander's Wife sits on the seat immediately behind and above Janine, so that Janine is "framed by her" (*HT*). The Wife's "skinny legs come down on either side, like the arms of an eccentric chair" (*HT* 135). The experience of the Wives is told to us in language that represents their denial of what actually has taken place. When the baby is born, it is placed "ceremoniously" in [the Wife's] arms" (*HT* 136). The Commander's Wife "looks down at the baby as if it's a bouquet of flowers: something she's won, a tribute" (*HT* 136). The other Wives who are present jubilantly and victoriously name the baby girl. The real birth mother "[cries] helplessly, burnt-out miserable tears" (*HT* 136). Among the handmaids who sit beside her is Offred. Some time after the staged-real birth, she relates:

My breasts are painful, they're leaking a little. Fake milk, it happens this way with some of us. We sit on our benches, facing one another, as we are transported; we're without emotion now, almost without feeling, we might be bundles of red cloth. We ache. Each of us holds in her lap a phantom, a ghost baby. (*HT* 137)

Here, again the inseparability between the copy and the real, between the simulacrum and what is being simulated by the simulacrum, is stressed. Further, the inseparability is stressed in specific physical and bodily terms. When Offred says her breasts leak "fake" milk and that this sometimes happens among the handmaids, she is saying in effect that what or who she stands in for and what or who is stood in for share something that cannot be denied no matter how strenuous the denial of the relationship between them. By undercutting the notion of the hyperreal, *HT* resists postmodern arguments that in effect collapse the real and the copy into a single, undifferentiated entity.

*HT* also emphasizes the human need for a physical intimacy that is not predicated on exploitation of the human or nature. Offred is not satisfied with images of saints provided to her by her masters. She wishes for a real body to put her arms around. Without another's body, she loses the sense of her own: "Without it [a body] I too am disembodied" (*HT* 113). On the one hand, Offred and the handmaids are denied their bodies and those of partners

they desire. On the other hand, others' bodies, those of the Commanders, are forced upon them. In addition a bodily identity that they don't want or desire is forced upon them: they are "two-legged wombs, that's all: sacred vessels, ambulatory chalices" (HT 146).

The handmaids' masters, their Commanders, also reach for a physical intimacy that is not legitimate under the dystopic reign of the simulacrum. When Offred's Commander sits near her, he makes a gesture to reach out his hand to touch her face. Worried that Serena might notice, the Handmaid moves her head to the side, to warn him away. The next time they are alone, the Handmaid warns him again: "Don't do that again." "Do what?" asks the Commander. "Try to touch me like that," says the Handmaid. In response he protests that if he cannot touch her, the insemination ceremony is "impersonal" (HT 171). The absurdity of this comment is that the insemination ceremony is intended to be impersonal.

Although Atwood's novel focuses largely on the human, its larger argument is an ecocritical response to the current denatured culture that denies the human *as* nature or *as* natural being. Sabine Wilke in her article "The Sound of a Robin after a Rain Shower: The Role of Aesthetic Experience in Dialectical Conceptions of Nature" summarizes the debate in ecocriticism over what actually constitutes the real or nature. Ecocritics such as Karl Kroeber, Michael E. Soule, Gary Lease, Glen Love, and Lawrence Buell who associate with the "nature camp" explore the connection between nature and culture in ways that suggest that "both realms need to be acknowledged in their own right" (Wilke 91). Ecocritics such as William Cronon, Greg Garrard, and Dana Phillips who associate with the "constructivist camp" insist on the historical and cultural construction of nature belong to the latter (Wilke 91). Atwood generally is regarded to be a constructivist. She radically reverses or confuses who or what is being constructed or simulated and what or who is constructing or copying the real in ways that suggest the Baudrillardian position. Yet, she presents this real-fake world in dystopic terms as a warning not to treat whatever might be the real as something that can be adequately replaced by a simulacrum. Her warning parallels the theory of a very different postmodern thinker to Baudrillard, that of ecofeminist Donna Haraway.

In her book *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women* (1991), Haraway insists on grounding constructionist projects on factual claims and in terms of situated knowledges. Situated knowledges do not abandon claims of fact. Rather, this position recognizes views from local, situated and marginalized perspectives. Haraway states:

All truths become warp speed effects in a hyper-real space of simulations. But we cannot afford these particular plays on words—the projects of crafting reliable knowledge about the 'natural' world cannot be given over to the genre of paranoid or cynical science fiction. For political people, social constructionism cannot be allowed to decay into the radiant emanations of cynicism. (184)

Similar to Atwood, Haraway confronts the postmodern age's passive acceptance of the reign of the simulacrum. She argues that one must "have *simultaneously* an account of radical historical contingency for all knowledge claims ... *and* a no-nonsense commitment to faithful accounts of a 'real' world . . ." (187). For her, this is particularly important for a feminist critical objectivity, which is a feminism that insists on "particular and specific embodiment" as opposed to the "the false vision promising transcendence of all limits and

responsibility" (190). She advocates "a doctrine of embodied objectivity," which avoids the danger of disembodiment and radical constructivism (189). Embodied objectivity emphasizes "finite embodiment," or "living within limits and contradictions, i.e., of views from somewhere" (196).

As Erika Cudworth, in *Developing Ecofeminist Theory*, points out, Haraway always gives credence to some level of "ontological realism" in her understanding of nature. For both her and Haraway, nature is both an expressed thing and expressive, or a "material-semiotic actor" (152). In her own critical writings, Cudworth uses the term "embodied materialism," a term first proposed by Ariel Salleh in 1997 (Cudworth 3), to endorse a postmodern perspective which asks for the "embedding of socio-economic practice" in "corporeality" (3). She argues further that ecological impacts are often experienced most directly as effects on human bodies. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, we see this in the marginalized human identities of the handmaids, which are treated as nature, thereby denigrated. For both Atwood and Cudworth, our (humans') "embodied position as human animals" (3) is not grounds for the dismissal of the human but grounds for what is irreplaceable by their cultural counterparts. Both writers celebrate humans as "things" in the first place" (Cudworth 3). As Cudworth also expresses this belief: "Leaving 'the meat behind' is impossible, for to be human is to be embodied" (154).

Another ecofeminist, Mary Mellor, also deserves mention for her concept of "deep materialism," which has close affinities with Salleh's and Cudworth's "embodied materialism." This concept and thinking strives to make compatible deep ecology and Marxist materialism (Mellor 209). Deep ecology includes the beliefs that the being of the human cannot be separated from the being of nature and the being of nature, like the being of the human, has intrinsic value beyond its use or commodity value. The tension in Mellor's term represents the effort to accept deep ecological philosophic thinking while also being informed about historical-material wrought change. Deep ecology can contribute to our re-evaluation of the relationship between humanity and nature including, in the words of Steven Vogel, a reevaluation that recognizes nature as the "intractable Other of the modernist attempt to understand and control everything there is" (302).

How to consider nature as more than a trove of human resources is a question that Atwood urges us to attend to. Insisting on the importance of embodiment and physical touch in this novel, Atwood expresses her skepticism of the pursuit of disembodiment and transcendence in her parody of counterfeit copies and simulacra. For Atwood, to be human is to recognize and accept our identity as material and physical things as well as immaterial constructed identities. More critically, for Atwood, humans, as material and physical things, share with nature an agency that cannot be fully replaced or duplicated by the Baudrillardian simulacrum.

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