

# Trauma of the Feminine Self in Margaret Atwood's *The Year of the Flood and Maddaddam*

## OPEN ACCESS

Volume: 11

Special Issue: 4

Month: March

Year: 2024

P-ISSN: 2321-788X

E-ISSN: 2582-0397

Received: 20.01.2024

Accepted: 23.02.2024

Published: 15.03.2024

Citation:  
Aabidha Thaslim,  
M., and S. Vijayarani.  
"Trauma of the  
Feminine Self in  
Margaret Atwood's *The  
Year of the Flood and  
Maddaddam*." *Shanlax  
International Journal of  
Arts, Science and  
Humanities*, vol. 11,  
no. S4, 2024, pp. 1–4.

DOI:  
[https://doi.  
org/10.34293/sijash.  
v11iS4-Mar.7599](https://doi.org/10.34293/sijash.v11iS4-Mar.7599)

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## Abstract

*This paper aims at interpreting the recurring violence and trauma faced by women on the basis of gender even in the futuristic milieu where regressive thoughts and ideologies fade away and people appear with progressive mindsets in life and the concept is discussed through one of the principal characters of Margaret Atwood's *The Year of the Flood and Maddaddam*, proving the fact that the violence against women can never be eradicated easily.*

**Keywords:** Debt, Helplessness, Identity, Dystopia

The term 'trauma' can be seen being used widely in different fields. The recurring effects of violence in the minds of a person or an animal, inflicted by someone physically and mentally end up with the experience and change in the behaviour of the individual is considered as trauma. Ekatherina Zhukova, in one of the chapters of Humanitarianism: Keywords says "The word trauma stems from the Greek word 'trauma', meaning wound. The definition of trauma as a physical wound first appeared in the 1650s in medical practice. The 1890s saw the emergence of trauma as a psychic wound, thus paving the way for psychology and psychiatry." Negin Heidarizadeh describes about trauma in his article, "The Significant Role of Trauma in Literature and Analysis" as, "a devastating and damaging experience." A few critics say that the victims of violence who experience trauma are most probably women, children, refugees and men at war. The sexual abuse and molestation on women, who are recognized as the weaker sex in most part of the society, can be perceived everyday through media.

The struggle of women to survive in the society is the concept one can witness in every period of life irrespective of culture, nationality, race or caste. Empowerment still remains a dream in many developed and underdeveloped countries. There are hardly a very few fields where gender bias is given little importance. Science fiction and speculative fiction carry characters, settings, actions and thoughts progressing towards the future where age old norms and practices cannot be found. Such works predict the life with artificial

intelligence in which technology reigns the world. Dystopian settings are one such element in which themes such as plague, science, hybrid products, genetically modified organisms and their consequences can be learnt. Women are still portrayed as objects of exploitation in such novels as well. No matter how progressive the life style becomes, exploitation of women is a persistent occurrence.

Atwood, in her Maddaddam Trilogy describes the dark shades of the society in the futuristic world. Toby is one of the principal characters in *The Year of the Flood* and *Maddaddam*. In *The Year of the Flood*, she is portrayed as a naïve young woman who is coerced into jobs that are a threat to her gender identity. She loses her parents in the beginning of the novel. Her parents' debts leave her shattered physically and financially. Toby's mother suffered from an unidentified fatal illness and her father was responsible for the medical expenditure. So, he sold his property for the recovery of his wife. The illness of her mother was more astounding because her mother had been very careful about her health and in the wake of which she consumed dozes of Helth Wyzer supplements. After the death of her mother, Toby's father felt a void that eventually led him to kill himself in the garage. Toby had to witness two deaths of her family. Though her parents lost everything for treatment, she continued her studies by waiting tables at the college cafeteria. Since her father expired without paying the debt, the private security firm called CorpSe Corpssearch for her father. None, except Toby knew about her father's death. There were rumours that female debtors of the family are usually farmed out for sex. Toby might become a bait to the creditors in the society. The series of odd jobs in the dystopian future would give a picture of the struggle of women for existence and impending trauma in their every step of their survival.

The first job, Toby got was afurzooter. Furzooters are those who disguise themselves as animals under fake fur animal skins. They hung advertising signs and roam in the malls, boutiques and restaurants. Toby faced humiliation in her furzoots when her face and other parts of the body were rubbed, hit and touched by people. Being inside the fake fur would make anyone feel humid and suffocating yet many eke out a living by picking such odd jobs. "She suffered three attacks by fetishists who knocked her over, twisted the big head around so she was blinded, and rub their pelvises against her fur making the strange noises of which the meows were the most recognizable." (*The Year of the Flood* 38).

It is because of the lack of identity and the difficulties in changing the identity she was unable to get jobs from everywhere. She undergoes excruciating pain for sheer survival. "After the money from the hair was used up, she'd sold her eggs on the black market. Young women could get top dollar for donating their eggs to couples who hadn't been able to pay the required bribe or else were so truly unsuitable that no official would sell them a parenthood licence anyway." (*The Year of the Flood*, 38) The complications lead her to the condition that she could never have children all her life. Toby was so enervated that relationships and having children became a far fetching part of her life.

There were two different types of dwellers mentioned in *The Year of the Flood*; the people who live in the compounds are under constant surveillance. They lead a far better life than those who live outside the compounds. The others were called 'Pleeblers' and people who dwell in outside the compounds hardly work with their identities. Neither the scrutinizing of the CorpSeCorpsenor any kind of safety could be seen among them. Toby got a new job in Secret Burgers. Though she was paid rock-bottom wages she was able to get two burgers per day to satiate her hunger. The manager of Secret Burgers was so wicked that he would never hesitate attacking women who work for the shop. The name of the manager was Blanco and he got his nickname "Bloat" by the women working at the Secret Burgers. The appearance of Blanco was as intimidating as his character.

He had two men as his body guards and he had connections with CorpSeCorpse as well to sweep all his blunders under the carpet. Besides that, he considered women as perks for his lust and would sell them or at times would do things that whatever the vilest of the creature on earth can do. It includes tossing the mortal remains of the workers and selling the body parts well. Rebecca, who worked at the place where Toby worked had warned about Blanco and his encounters on women. Toby tried her level best to get away from the glimpse of Blanco. Toby felt insecure and scared and she was so helpless that she could not leave the job. Her trauma began from the day She was born and by the time Toby got wind of the fact that Dora, who worked in the other shift of that place was lying dead and her neck was broken. The next bait could be Toby at any time.

The next morning, Rebecca signaled Toby over. Dora's dead," she said. "Tried to run. I just heard it. Found her in a vacant lot, neck broke, cut to bits. Saying it was some crazy."

**But it was him? said Toby.**

**"Course it was him," Rebecca sniffed. "He's bragging".**

(The Year of the Flood 44)

When Toby was called by Blanco through his bodyguards, she felt traumatized. She headed towards the grim cabin and he asked her to take his shirts off. As mentioned by Rebecca, Blanco had a huge tattoo of a naked woman wound in chains and her head, invisible but her hair in flames. This clearly states that women were just sexual baits for him and he would not mind exploiting them to the core. At times he would sell the women to the sex club called 'Scales and Tails' where women were sold for lust. Blanco is archetypal of those people who least consider women as humans and keep women traumatized all their life. Toby was sexually exploited by Blanco every day. At times she had to leave for him during lunch hours and apparently, she starved like hell at Secret Burgers. She craved for the escape and she could leave only when there was possibility for her survival. "She had been Banco's one- and-only for lesser than two weeks, but it felt like years", (The Year of the Flood, 46).

Meanwhile Rebecca escaped Secret Burgers and it did not make any change to Blanco either. With the help of the 'God's Gardeners', the cult group of people who proclaim the significance of nature and cautioning public every time about the invisible flood, the impending danger of nature. The gardeners met Toby at work many times and some children of the group were also attacked by the bodyguards of Secret Burgers and people called 'Pleebrats'. Toby experienced great relief after escaping from the Secret Burgers with the help of the inmates of God's Gardeners. "She found herself crying with relief and gratitude. It was as if a large, benevolent hand had reached down and picked her up, and was holding her safe." (52) Though Toby felt a little odd being in weird religious group with different principles and rules she tried getting accustomed to them slowly.

Survival needs more of a struggle for men whereas it requires more persistence to undergo severe and several types of traumas for women. Even in such speculative fiction like The Year of the Flood, the struggle of women appears prodigious and risky. Atwood's portrayal of Toby compared with other women characters is unique and the author has tried to prove the perseverance of the character in all her struggles. In the sequel of The Year of the Flood.

Maddaddam, Atwood has painted Toby as one of the strongest of those who survived the perilous invisible floods and as the one who leads the Crakers and the humans after the flood. Crakers are genetically engineered creatures produced by Glenn whose other name is Crake. Toby's clarity in thoughts, decisive mindset and strong attitude are the results of the trauma she had faced at places like Secret Burgers. In the article, "It is the End of the World and We Know it", a review on Atwood's The Year of the Flood", Katherine V. Snyder says, Toby and Ren are thus survivors both literally and metaphorically, before and after the flood. Their positions as service makers and women make them vulnerable to exploitation and violence, yet they are equipped with emotional fortitude, practical knowhow and a quantum of good luck, which help them to make it through to the other side.

Apart from Toby whose life had a traumatic sojourn for survival are Ren, Amanda and Pilar. Toby had emotional and mental upheaval and she lost ways to escape from the fatal and gruesome consequence of the manager, Blanco. Besides that, she lost her parents at her early age and she was made confounded and was emotionally strengthened through such dark experiences and circumstances yet she groomed herself in such difficult situation to accept the reality to cope with all odds happening in the society. Toby became the wise and perfect instructor and guide to Crakers, the genetically engineered creatures in *Maddaddam*. It is learnt that her trauma in her initial stage of her life carved her into a better form of an individual who can manage both the innocent and the evil through her keen observation of life she got from her early days. It is inferred through Atwood's portrayal of Toby that trauma is inevitable for women even in the futuristic world irrespective of the progress in science, technology and other external and progressive walks of life.

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