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Beyond Dualisms: An Ecofeminist Critique of Patriarchal Oppression in Margaret Atwood's *The Testaments*

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Abstract

This paper examines how patriarchal control impacts both women and nature in Margaret Atwood's *The Testaments* in light of Val Plumwood's environmentalism. Plumwood critiques dualistic thinking that privileges masculinity and culture over femininity and nature, outlining five mechanisms of domination— "backgrounding," "radical exclusion," "incorporation," "instrumentalism," and "homogenization"— that create a hierarchy of superiority and inferiority. Drawing on this framework, the study investigates how *The Testaments* portrays the intertwined oppression of women and the environment in the male-dominated society of Gilead, highlighting their shared struggle for survival. The novel not only depicts how dualisms sustain oppression but also reveals moments of resistance and survival that challenge these binaries. By bringing ecological and feminist concerns into dialogue, this paper highlights the interconnectedness of environmental degradation and gendered violence. It ultimately argues for dismantling oppressive dualisms in favor of an alternative worldview based on intrinsic value, mutual respect, and symbiosis between all genders and nature.

Keywords: Patriarchal dualism, ecofeminism, Margret Atwood, *The Testaments*, Val Plumwood

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1. Introduction

Ecofeminism has emerged as a compelling fusion of activism and theory, challenging the interconnected oppressions of women and nature since 1970s. Rooted in both feminism and ecocritical thought, it critiques patriarchal structures that marginalize women, racial minorities, and the environment while advocating for an inclusive and intersectional framework for justice. Françoise d'Eaubonne, a pioneering French author, first coined the term "ecofeminism" in her groundbreaking 1974 work *Le féminisme ou la mort*, where she called for an ecological revolution led by women to dismantle male-dominated systems that have led to environmental crises. This revolution would involve redefining gender relations and the relationship between humans and nature. Greg Garrard defines ecocriticism as "the study of the relationship of the human and non-human, throughout human cultural history and entailing a critical analysis of the term 'human' itself" (2004: 5). Ecofeminism thus seeks to integrate environmental and social concerns, helping to reveal the fact that the exploitation of nature is deeply interconnected with gendered systems of oppression. Historical examples, such as women's peace camp at Greenham Common in England, where women protested against nuclear weapons (Gaard 2011: 29), highlight how women-led environmental activism has been central to advancing ecofeminist thought. Emphasizing the intersectional nature of ecofeminism, Gaard also critiques not only the masculinist ideology but also the "atomistic" self/other distinction that legitimizes various forms of oppression (1993*:* 2). This perspective underscores the necessity of considering how gender, class, and other social categories intersect in shaping both human and environmental experiences.

At its core, ecofeminism examines the dual exploitation of women and nature while advocating for their liberation. It reveals how marginalized groups are often feminized and naturalized, exposing the ways in which traditional dualisms sustain systems of domination. Dualism tries to naturalize hierarchical domination in societal structures, with men above women and nature. In this context, Val Plumwood, the late Australian philosopher and ecofeminist known for her work on anthropocentrism, considers dualism as a process in which opposing concepts, such as masculine and feminine, are shaped by "domination and subordination and constructed as exclusive" (1993*:* 31). Plumwood has identified five distinctive features that are

critical facets of such existing oppressive paradigm: "backgrounding," or the master's denial of the Other's importance and contributions; "radical exclusion," or the distinct identity of the superior group; "incorporation," or the Other in terms of their lacks; "instrumentalism" or the Other as a tool to fulfill the superior's needs; and "homogenization" or marginalized groups as undifferentiated entities (42–56). Plumwood contends that these elements perpetuate the marginalization of women and the exploitation of nature, as they are essentially characterized by the so-called superior's domination and the so-called inferior's subordination.

Hierarchical thinking often erases alternative ways of living and experiencing the world. As Adams and Gruen note, "These hierarchical ways of thinking often get taken up by those who mean well, but they nonetheless erase other ways of living, experiencing the world, and valuing ourselves and our relationships" (2021: 6). Such attitude toward life, rooted in patriarchal ideologies, reinforces the oppression of women, nature, and non-human beings, framing them as lesser beings in need of protection but without equal moral status. Plumwood argues that these value hierarchies underlie the domination of both women and nature: "these are key ones for western thought, and reflect the major forms of oppression in western culture. Dualisms such as reason/nature may be ancient, but others such as human/nature and subject/object are especially associated with modern, post-enlightenment consciousness" (1993: 43). The contemporary consciousness, however, calls for dismantling these dualisms and advocating for a more inclusive understanding of environmental justice – one that recognizes the intrinsic value of all beings, regardless of their cognitive capacities.

Margaret Atwood's *The Testaments* (2019) skillfully weaves a narrative that critically examines the interconnectedness of gender and ecology. Through her compelling storytelling, Atwood presents us with female protagonists who navigate marginalization within their patriarchal societies. In this regard, *The Testaments* serves as a powerful critique of the subjugation of women and nature in the technologically advanced world of Gilead. Echoing Plumwood's concerns about ecological crises and women's plight in a patriarchal culture, Atwood masterfully critiques androcenterism. In this context, this paper argues that *The Testaments* critiques the intertwined suppression of women and nature by emphasizing how Gilead's patriarchal and environmental practices are rooted in a worldview of

systemic dualisms that constantly try to devalue and control both women and nature, reinforcing the novel's broader themes of power and resistance.

2. The Objectives of the Study

This study aims to investigate Atwood's *The Testaments* in light of Plumwood's ecofeminism and her critique of the five features of dualism to address the interconnected problems faced by women and nature under patriarchy. An ecofeminist reading of the novel is thus intended to unveil Atwood's concern for the connection between women and nature, along with her critique of Western dualisms and how women and nature, subjugated to be marginalized, resist and try to establish order and balance.

3. Significance of the Study

Ecofeminism serves as a lens for reinterpreting human relationships with the natural world by raising awareness of both environmental crises and the subjugation of women. In this context, Atwood's *The Testaments* provides a helpful ground to explore certain aspects of the destruction of nature that are associated with women's exploitation from Plumwood's ecofeminism that challenges western dualisms. Atwood's Gilead, set in a dystopian future, predicts feasible threats that can endanger the environment in future just as they have marginalized women. In this light, a Plumwoodian reading of *The Testaments* helps us examine the situation of women under totalitarian, environmentally unfriendly regimes to show their detrimental effects on nature and women via similar mechanisms.

4. Review of Literature

The literature review on the ecofeminist aspects of *The Testaments* reveals a growing interest in this novel from an ecofeminist perspective. B. C. Indu (2013) explains the prequel to *The Testaments*, that is *The Handmaid's Tale*, in terms of ecofeminism, a subject of inquiry that can include *The Testaments* as well. Through this lens, women and nature are identical, and neglecting this fact leads to social sterility. Gilead oppresses nature and women in the same way, hence its corruptive status. For Görkem Neşe Şenel (2015), *The Handmaid's Tale*, before *The Testaments* was conceived, critiques

the masculine mindset which has subjugated women and exploited nature in the same manner. Patriarchal power structures, rooted in traditional dualisms, thus need to be challenged and ecofeminism is a critical tool towards that objective, Atwood's fiction being an attempt on literary grounds to criticize the catastrophe that has followed the masculine mindset. Oana Gheorghiu and Michaela Praisler (2020) consider *The Testaments* as a literary manifesto of the fourth-wave feminism, exploring how women's roles evolve against the backdrop of Gilead's oppression. Similarly, Tore F. Heggen (2020) investigates female testimony and narrative in *The Testaments*, emphasizing the use of allegory to critique power structures. Further entering the feminist horizons, however, Oda Øverland (2020) explores the female body presented in *The Testaments* through material feminism. Øverland analyzes the modes in which different configurations of the female body and lived experience are presented. She suggests that there is a need to incorporate a more holistic and complicated model of how interconnected the body is to environmental issues. Aliyah Browning (2021) argues that *The Handmaid's Tale* develops a subject that continues in *The Testaments*; the inner gender oppressions that Atwood portrays reveal the artificial power structures that seduce women themselves into taking part in their own subjugation. Examining narrative voice, memory, power and justice in *The* Testaments, Lorena Lara Ragel (2021) mainly focuses on Aunt Lydia as the main narrative voice paving the way for a better future for women. For Ragel, through her way of becoming an Aunt and getting inside Gilead's mechanisms of power, Lydia manages to do justice, not only to Offred and her daughters but also to the world by destroying a totalitarian regime such as Gilead's. On a different level, Marie Arteel (2021) explores the role of the fairy-tale, mythic and biblical intertexts in *The Testaments* through Sharon R. Wilson and Hilde Steals theories. She investigates how Atwood uses the fairy tale as well as mythical and biblical intertexts to critique the sexual politics present within Gilead. Undertaking a stronger critical analysis, Natalia De Oliveira (2021) investigates the conflicting discourses of nature writing in *The Testaments* to rewrite the complex associations between women, nature, and technology. De Oliveira uses ecofeminism to highlight Agnes and Lydia's fights against victimization toward empowerment and provides reflections on androcentrism and anthropomorphism to awaken different perspectives about equity among marginalized minorities, women and nature included.

Concurrently, Julia Kuznetski (2021) draws parallels between *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Testaments* and their television series, emphasizing how the female body symbolizes both vulnerability and resistance. More recently, Jordyn Weiss (2023) has delved into Aunt Lydia's gender performances across *The Testaments*, utilizing Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity, highlighting Aunt Lydia''s evolving roles, portraying her as both a strict Aunt and a woman secretly working to restore women's freedom. In a similar vein, Sunshine Malit (2023) investigates Atwood's characters as representations of prostitutes, employing Simone de Beauvoir's theory of the Other. This study emphasizes the role of prostitutes in challenging patriarchal structures and advocates for rethinking societal norms to recognize women's rights. Finally, Hager Driss (2023) explores how rewriting and the metaphor of textiles interconnect in *The Testaments*, utilizing theories of intertextuality and metatextuality. Driss argues that Atwood's rewriting strategies, likened to stitching and sewing, serve as tools of resistance, creating a tapestry-like novel that challenges oppression. Collectively, these reviews indicate a gap in research covering an ecofeminist reading of *The Testaments* in light of Val Plumwood's environmentalism, particularly her critique of hierarchical dualisms that sustain patriarchal oppression. While previous studies address feminism, materiality, intertextuality, and resistance, few have systematically investigated Atwood's narrative challenges against patriarchal dualisms. This study thus aims to fill that gap by applying Plumwood's framework to examine the interconnection of women and nature in Gilead, offering a more refined ecofeminist critique of the novel's power structures.

5. Research Questions

1. How does Margaret Atwood, through *The Testaments*, critique patriarchal dualisms that position women and nature as inferior, and how does this dualistic framework contribute to both environmental degradation and the oppression of women?
2. In what ways do science and technology function as tools of patriarchal power in Atwood's *The Testaments*, enabling the colonization and instrumentalization of both women and nature?
3. To what extent does Atwood's *The Testaments* succeed in illustrating the

interconnected oppression of women and nature, and how does it engage with Val Plumwood's call for a paradigm shift toward equitable coexistence?

6. Theoretical Framework and Methodology

The present study examines Atwood's *The Testaments* in light of ecological feminism and the interconnections of women and nature via Val Plumwood's environmentalism. The methodology adopts a library-based approach, wherein the novel is examined, highlighting its thematic concerns that contribute to ecofeminism in light of Plumwood. An ecofeminist reading of *The Testaments* reveals her deep concern with the relationship between women and nature, criticizing Western dualisms in subjugating both women and nature through similar means of power and control. In this context, the five features of dualism, "backgrounding," "radical exclusion," "incorporation," "instrumentalism," and "homogenization", as investigated by Plumwood, will be discussed to pave the way for an ecofeminist analysis of *The Testaments*.

Plumwood critically examines the rationality of Western culture, revealing its significant shortcomings in acknowledging the intrinsic value of nature, women, and marginalized groups. By exposing deeply entrenched dualisms that establish hierarchical relationships, such as man/woman and human/nature, she highlights how patriarchal societies perpetuate the exploitation of both women and the natural world. This binary mindset justifies and normalizes oppressive practices, embedding them as natural or necessary. The logic of domination positions women and nature as "the Other," leading to centuries of objectification and commodification, and leaving a legacy of entrenched inequalities in its wake.

6.1. Backgrounding: The Marginalization of Women and Nature

"Backgrounding" refers to the master's denial of dependency on the Other. While the master benefits from the labor, contributions, and sacrifices of the Other, these essential roles are systematically ignored or devalued. This denial manifests in various ways, most notably through efforts to render the Other "inessential" (Plumwood 1993: 48). One of the central challenges, often overlooked—especially by proponents of rationalist frameworks—is the difficulty of expanding the sphere of

moral consideration in systems where reason and cognition are treated as the primary or sole basis for value. When rationality is positioned as the standard for inclusion in moral and political discourse, those who are deemed non-rational or less rational are inevitably relegated to the margins. This dilemma raises a critical question: how can all beings be included in the realm of justice if rationality is the primary criterion for value? Those who do not meet this standard-such as animals, individuals with cognitive disabilities, and others—are often degraded to the status of inferior members of the society. As Sunaura Taylor argues, "Within such a framework, [such members] invariably become judged and consequently categorized as less valuable" (2017: 128). Ecofeminists and disability rights advocates reject this hierarchy, challenging the notion that rationality should serve as the primary measure of moral worth. Historical and social examples illustrate how backgrounding operates, for instance, in the undervaluation of women's caretaking roles in patriarchal societies. As Marilyn Frye describes, women function as the "background against which phallocratic reality is a foreground," even though this dominant reality "depends absolutely upon the existence of the background" (1993: 167). Such denial of dependency not only sustains dominance but also rests on a fragile illusion—one that ultimately conceals the master's reliance on the very beings they seek to subordinate.

In the context of nature, Plumwood emphasizes that denying our dependence on the natural world perpetuates unsustainable practices that threaten Western societies. She argues that "backgrounding of nature is the denial of dependence on biospheric processes"; it is to consider humanity as separate from nature, viewed as a "provider without needs of its own" (1993: 22). Similarly, Karen Warren contends that nature is often overlooked as "unconsidered background to technological society, represented as inessential" (1997: 341). This perception of nature as unimportant or non-essential allows its needs to be consistently disregarded in decision-making processes, only to be acknowledged in moments of crisis when the focus shifts to restoring the status quo. Our dependence on nature is frequently framed as a problem for technology to solve, fostering an exaggerated sense of human independence from the natural world. Plumwood suggests that this mindset promotes "collaborative co-agency that feeds hyperbolized concepts of human autonomy and independence from nature" (Plumwood 2005: 109), further marginalizing nature's role in sustaining life.

The interconnected backgrounding of nature and women is clearly evident, as both are traditionally perceived as providers of the environment. Plumwood highlights that this backgrounding is deeply embedded in the "rationality of the economic system and in the structures of contemporary society" (Plumwood 1993: 21), where women are marginalized as housewives, nurses, secretaries, and colleagues, just as nature is diminished to a mere resource for human expenditure.

6.2. Radical Exclusion: The Hyper-Separation of Women and Nature

"Radical exclusion," also known as "hyper-separation," highlights the so-called fundamental distinction between superiors and inferiors. Plumwood contends that the Other, perceived as "inferior, lower, and different" from the so-called master, experiences hyper-separation. This occurs when a "single characteristic which is different, possessed by the one but not the Other" establishes a distinct identity. This process enables the master to assert, "I am nothing at all like this inferior Other" (1993: 49), reinforcing perceptions of superiority.

Historically, hyper-separation has been used to justify gender discrimination, exaggerating biological differences to subordinate women. This logic extends to humanity's relationship with nature, where humans, perceiving themselves as fundamentally distinct, treat nature as a mere resource, disregarding their inherent dependence on it. Ecofeminists argue that this detachment has significantly contributed to ecological crises. Plumwood notes that "to the extent that we hyper-separate ourselves from nature … [we] reduce it conceptually in order to justify [our] domination" (1993: 9). This mindset emphasizes the differences that distinguish humans from nature, forming the foundation of human identity. As Warren observes, "human virtue is often defined in terms of the exclusion of what is assimilated to nature or animality in the human self, and in culture and society, and those inferiorized social groups associated with nature" (1997: 340). This dualistic thinking not only separates humans from nature but also marginalizes groups depicted as "primitive" or "uncivilized". For instance, colonizers compared Aborigines to "beasts of the forest," while attributing qualities such as "rational" or "civilized" to themselves (338-9). This denial of shared qualities serves to justify the subjugation of the Other. For Emile Durkheim, dualism creates a rigid divide where "two worlds between which there is nothing in common, worlds between which there is a vacuum" (1915: 39).

In this perspective, the master in a patriarchal society perceives himself as rational and contemplative, denigrating the manual labor of the slave, who is thus labeled as "a slave by nature" (Plumwood 1993: 50). Such polarized treatment of gender in Western culture exemplifies how shared characteristics between the parties of binary pairs are ignored or actively suppressed to maintain domination.

6.3. Incorporation: Defining the Other by Lack or Absence

"Incorporation," also known as "relational definition," refers to the process of defining the Other in terms of lack or absence relative to the self's needs and desires. Within this framework, the Other, whether women or nature, is not perceived as an "independent Other" (Plumwood 1993: 52), but rather through the lens of how it serves the dominant group. Simone de Beauvoir critiques this dynamic, asserting that "humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him; she is not regarded as an autonomous being" (1965: 8). Despite mutual contributions to the human world, the qualities of the dominant group are valued more highly in comparison to the suppressed group, perpetuating inequality. Luce Irigaray and Hélène V. Wenzel similarly observe that "woman is construed not as occupying a space on her own account, but as enclosing a space for another" (1982: 3). This relational definition extends to the interaction between humans and nature, where nature is often viewed as "lacking in relation to the human colonizer, as negativity, devalued as an absence of qualities appropriated for human rationality" (qtd. in Warren 1997: 341). The intricate and interconnected systems of nature are frequently misunderstood as disorderly or irrational, prompting human efforts to impose order through colonization. Consequently, nature is exploited regardless of its inherent value. Non-human beings are similarly disregarded as inferior due to their lack of human-like capacities. This perspective dismisses the diversity and unique qualities of other beings, reinforcing a dualistic view that justifies domination and exploitation.

6.4. Instrumentalism: Objectifying the Other

"Instrumentalism" refers to the process of reducing the inferior to a mere tool for fulfilling the needs of the superior. Plumwood describes instrumentalism as the process by which "those on the lower side of the dualisms are obliged to put aside their own interests for those of the master or Centre" (1993: 53), effectively objectifying them and failing to recognize their intrinsic value. Within the framework

of dualism, the Other becomes part of a network that serves the master's goals, with the master refusing to acknowledge the Other's central roles for their needs. This dynamic creates a hierarchy in which the superior is valued as independent, while the inferior is perceived as subordinate and useful only for their utility.

Warren emphasizes that women, in particular, have traditionally been portrayed as "passive and [their] agency subsumed within the agency of the male who is her protector." Consequently, a woman's value is often linked to her service to others, such as bearing children or fulfilling domestic roles, rather than being acknowledged for her inherent worth. As such, a woman's nature is understood in instrumental terms, defined as "being a good wife or mother, classically as silence and good weaving, romantically as being there to please" (338). This perspective underscores how women's contributions, especially in the domestic sphere, are reduced to their utility for others.

The treatment of nature has gone through the same ideology. Nature, under male-dominated policies, has shifted from being perceived as a nurturing entity to a mere resource for human exploitation. In an anthropocentric culture, nature's value is recognized only when it serves human needs, leading to continuous degradation and an ongoing ecological crisis. Modernity often separates ethical considerations for humans from those for nature, asserting that "nature can only have purpose and value when it is made to serve the human colonizer as a means to his ends. Since there are no moral limits, expediency is the appropriate morality" (Warren 341). In Plumwood's ideology, this reductionist approach diminishes our sensitivity and understanding of nature, viewing it purely as a resource without moral constraints. Consequently, nature is reduced to raw material rather than being acknowledged as a complex, interconnected system deserving respect and ethical consideration.

6.5. Homogenization: The Diminution of Individuality and Diversity

"Homogenization," or stereotyping reduces marginalized groups to a uniform, undifferentiated entity, thereby erasing individuality and diversity. Plumwood associates homogenization with colonialism, where the colonized are "all alike and not as individuals" in the colonizer's mind (Plumwood 1997: 55). Reflecting on her own experiences against dualisms, Plumwood discusses how foreign immigrants were treated, with their differences often disregarded and frequently labeled as

"'aliens,' 'wogs,' or 'reffos'" (53). This loss of identity extends to feminist discourse, where women are often treated as a homogeneous group rather than as individuals. Similarly, Plumwood observes that nature and animals have been stereotyped as "lacking consciousness," a trait often presumed to be uniquely human, thus ignoring their "diversity of mind-like qualities" (qtd. in Warren 340). Anthropocentric culture further reinforces the reduction of nature and animals to mere resources, overlooking their individuality and complex needs. This perspective portrays nature and animals as inferior, lacking "reason, mind, and consciousness" (Plumwood 1997: 108), and views them as mechanistic entities, leading to a disregard for the uniqueness of natural resources.

From the vantage point of homogenization, distinctions among individuals in subordinate positions at the periphery are deemed inconsequential and may threaten entrenched stereotypes of supremacy. Homogenization further disregards the differences within marginalized groups, which are often perceived as "interchangeable, replaceable . . . homogeneous" (Warren 337). Plumwood (1997; 2005) believes that to those at the center, such differences are insignificant unless they directly impact their own well-being. In this context, the Other is not regarded as an individual but rather as part of a category of replaceable entities. These entities are managed as resources to satisfy the needs of the dominator. Consequently, the notion of an unchanging and uniform essential female nature is perpetuated, with phrases like 'women are all alike' contributing to this homogenization. Furthermore, this tendency to homogenize extends to nature, where consciousness is presumed to merely belong to humans at the cost of anything that is not human. Accordingly, differences in nature are acknowledged if they are beneficial to human welfare, ultimately leading to a perception of inferiority rather than celebrating diversity.

7. Women as Nature or Nature as Women: Dismantling Dualism in *The Testament*

Atwood's *The Testaments* sharply critiques the dualistic thinking prevalent in Western tradition, questioning the binary oppositions above. These binaries establish hierarchical relationships that marginalize the subordinate. Through the narratives of Aunt Lydia, Agnes, and Daisy, Atwood masterfully unravels the intricate web of hierarchical dualisms and their far-reaching effects by not only highlighting these

inequalities but also prompting readers to critically analyze the broader consequences of binary thinking. Atwood's portrayal of Gilead vividly intertwines the struggles of women with environmental crises under an oppressive regime, reflecting Plumwood's analysis of hierarchical dualisms that sustain such subjugation. By dissecting the five above-mentioned features of dualism, this study will reveal how *The Testaments* critiques the abovementioned crises.

7.1. Backgrounding or the Marginalization of Women and Nature in *The Testaments*

In *The Testaments*, "backgrounding" is vividly illustrated through the dismissal of the significance and contributions of the oppressed as well as enforced rigid gender roles and social hierarchies to marginalize women and confine them to domestic spaces. Gilead's educational system exemplifies this by restricting girls to domestic skills, as epitomized by Agnes Jemmia's training to be a wife: "she [Aunt Lise] taught us elementary gardening, with an emphasis on roses,—gardening was a suitable hobby for Wives—and how to judge the quality of the food" (Atwood 2019: 164). This focus confines women's relationship with nature to ornamental and household tasks, reducing their engagement with the natural world to something decorative rather than substantive. Women are further limited by the curriculum, which teaches them basic sewing and paper flower making, excluding more artistic or intellectual pursuits, as Agnes recalls: "they [girls] did not even learn petit-point embroidery or crochet work, just plain sewing and the making of paper flowers and other such chores" (11). The denial of these more creative roles, combined with the emphasis on simple tasks, supports the backgrounding of women by devaluing their capacities and relegating them to subservient, domestic roles. Plumwood describes this process as making women "not worth noticing" (1993: 104). This is compounded by the control of literacy in Gilead, where only Aunts are allowed to read and write, and even they have limited access: "writing materials were the prerogative of the Commanders and the Aunts" (Atwood 298). This suppression of intellectual engagement reinforces the stereotype that women are not fit for education or the complexities of knowledge, as highlighted by the belief that "reading was not for girls: only men were strong enough to deal with the force of it; and the Aunts, of course, because they weren't like us [other women in Gilead]" (156). Women's education, as Agnes remembers, was

designed to prepare them for domestic roles, emphasizing their future as "mistresses of high-ranking households" (161), thus ensuring their subordination to powerful men and perpetuating the patriarchal order.

The backgrounding and marginalization of nature in *The Testaments* parallel the subjugation of women, reflecting a broader critique of how both are treated as mere backdrops to human endeavors. As Warren observes, "nature is massively denied as the unconsidered background to technological society" (341). This sentiment is echoed in Plumwood's critique that nature is often dismissed as "inessential" and that humanity's dependence on nature is largely ignored (1993: 108). This dismissal is embodied by the controlled and artificial gardens in Gilead, where nature is meticulously curated, stripped of its wildness and vitality. This is illustrated by the narrator's observation that "there were the French-style flower-arranging secateurs, like the ones Becka had used . . . but they were in the garden shed, which was locked" (Atwood 225). The locked garden tools symbolize the suppression and manipulation of nature, which is reduced to a mere resource for human utility, devoid of its intrinsic vitality and diversity. Atwood critiques this reduction of nature through her portrayal of Gilead's controlled landscapes, which reflect the restricted roles women are forced into, both being subject to the same system of domination. This dualistic worldview, which denies the complexity and independence of nature, is further emphasized in a passage reflecting the environmental degradation in Gilead:

> In that vanished country of mine, things had been on a downward spiral for years. The floods, the fires, the tornadoes, the hurricanes, the droughts, the water shortages, the earthquakes. Too much of this, too little of that. The decaying infrastructure—why hadn't someone decommissioned those atomic reactors before it was too late? The tanking economy, the joblessness, the falling birth rate (Atwood 66).

This litany of environmental and societal crises reveals the consequences of neglecting nature, where the deterioration of the natural world is acknowledged only when it becomes an urgent, irreparable problem. The repeated environmental disasters serve as a metaphor for how both nature and women are marginalized until their exploitation leads to collapse, underscoring the severe consequences of prioritizing human or patriarchal dominance over them.

7.2. Radical Exclusion or the Hyper-Separation of Women and Nature in *The Testaments*

The concept of hyper-separation in *The Testaments* emerges as a prominent theme, shaping rigid gender roles and the dehumanizing treatment of women in Gilead. For Plumwood, hyper-separation designates the Other as "inferior and radically separate" (1993: 101), a notion illustrated by Gilead's strict segregation of genders and the suppression of women's agency. Simple childhood pleasures, such as swinging in the park, are denied to girls due to concerns about propriety, as their skirts "might be blown up by the wind and then looked into" by boys (Atwood 16). Such trivialization reinforces gender segregation, granting boys freedom while hyper-sexualizing and restricting girls. Even in death, women are devalued, as exemplified by the unceremonious treatment of Agnes's mother's funeral: "they didn't make a big fuss over the funerals of women in Gilead, even high-ranking ones" (74). Such kind of disrespect underscores society's lack of regard for women's lives and deaths, reinforcing their marginalization and dehumanization. The absence of female statues in Gilead further reflects this hyper-separation, as the narrator observes, "you didn't usually see statues of women in Gilead, only of men" (239), thereby excluding women from public recognition and empowerment. This inequality extends to the juridical system, where women's testimonies are devalued: "four female witnesses are the equivalent of one male, here in Gilead" (252). Such hyper-separation between humans and nature aligns with Plumwood's critique of dualisms. She asserts that any sort of dualism fosters an extreme division, positioning nature as entirely separate from and inferior to humanity, thereby reinforcing domination. This separation is poignantly symbolized in the narrator's reflection on her mother's room, which once exuded a "light, sweet smell like the lily-flowered hostas" but now carried the scent of a "stale and dirtied stranger" (26). The transition from a natural, fresh aroma to one associated with decay reflects the growing estrangement between humans and the natural world. Nature, once integral to human life, becomes distant, degraded, and undervalued, much like the women of Gilead.

7.3. Incorporation or Defining the Other by Deprivation in *The Testaments*

In *The Testaments*, individuals are assimilated into rigid, predetermined roles that strip them of their individuality. In Gilead, a person's value and identity are defined

not by their own traits or desires but by their relationship with others. This concept is exemplified in the assertion that "one person alone is not a full person: we exist in relation to others" (Atwood 148). The Handmaids serve as a clear example of this incorporation; their identities are erased, and they are referred to solely by their reproductive functions. The narrator observes that "[Commander Judd] had already had several Wives—dead, unhappily—and had been assigned five Handmaids but had not yet been gifted with children" (222). This events, in particular, illustrates how Handmaids are absorbed into households solely to fulfill reproductive duties. Their worth is measured not by autonomy or personhood, but by their ability to serve governmental birth policies.

This reduction of women to functional roles is further explored by Malit through Simone de Beauvoir's theory of the Other. Malit argues that "all of the Handmaids in the novels fit the classification [of the Prostitute], with their roles as two-legged wombs engaged in ceremonial monthly intercourse with high-ranking men" (25). Characters such as Moira, Paula, and Shunammite embody this role, with Moira serving as the most explicit example—a woman who is both "a prisoner and a sex slave of Gilead's supposedly pure men and a prostitute for foreign tourists" (25). Malit's interpretation underscores how patriarchal systems, as reflected in Atwood's dystopia, rationalize the subjugation of women through cultural, religious, and political frameworks, while simultaneously reinforcing their objectification. Moreover, this logic of incorporation extends beyond reproductive roles. In Gilead's hierarchical society, even humor is a privilege reserved for those in power: "the only ones allowed to make jokes are those at the top" (Atwood 251). This control over expression highlights how individuality is suppressed across all lower ranks, leaving the marginalized dehumanized and voiceless.

Framing the Other as inferior is reflected in the maltreatment of women, who are defined primarily by their relationship to men, in Gilead. Aunt Lydia's remark – that Commander Judd prefers "young girls who can be viewed as not fully human, with a naughty core to them" (Atwood 315-316) – reveals how women are objectified and their humanity disregarded. The societal structure of Gilead defines women in terms of their subservience to men, reinforcing gender hierarchies. This is evident when Judd dismisses women's roles by stating that "men have better things to do

than to concern themselves with the petty details of the female sphere" (176), thus epitomizing the gender-based incorporation that limits women's roles and denies their individuality.

Incorporation in *The Testaments* extends beyond human relationships to encompass the treatment of nature, which is similarly reduced to a mere resource for exploitation, as well. This is starkly illustrated in the violent explosion of a car with Melanie and Neil inside, an event showcasing the destructive potential of technology when used irresponsibly: "the car blew up" shortly after they were forced inside (Atwood 187-188). This incident highlights how both humans and nature are subsumed into systems of technological domination, where the value of life is disregarded in favor of mastery and control. Atwood further critiques this instrumental approach in her depiction of school lunches, where real cheese is replaced with an "artificial cheese mixture" (134), so that the genuine product can be reserved for soldiers. This act of diverting natural resources to benefit the elite reinforces Plumwood's argument that both people and nature are integrated into systems of exploitation, stripped of their intrinsic value.

7.4. Instrumentalism: Objectifying the Other in *The Testaments*

"Instrumentalism" in *The Testaments* is intricately embedded in the dynamics of power and exploitation within Gilead's oppressive regime. The dehumanizing logic instrumentalism as the reduction of individuals to their utility dimension is vividly reflected in Gilead, where women are commodified and objectified as reproductive machines. As one narrator bitterly observes, "the Commanders must have their little perks . . . Women are only one of the commodities" (Atwood 210). Within this patriarchal structure, women exist primarily to serve the desires of those in power, whether as domestic workers or as objects of sexual gratification. Malit argues that in Gilead's male-dominated society, "the Handmaids are exploited, enslaved, and regarded as an object rather than a person"; they are required to "submit completely to the desires of Commander or master and the regulations of the regime," which include both "domestic servitude [and] sexual subjection," thereby reducing them to "the status of a domestic and legal Prostitute" (30). The fate of Handmaids, like Ofkyle, who are passed from one owner to another and renamed based on their Commanders, starkly illustrates this reality. Shunammite's dismissive remark about

them reveals how Handmaids have been reduced to their reproductive function: "our household received a Handmaid. Her name was Ofkyle, since my father's name was Commander Kyle. Her name would have been something else earlier. Some other man's. They get passed around until they have a baby. They're all sluts anyway" (Atwood 81). Their names are not real, and their worth is tied solely to their ability to give birth to children for the ruling elite, disrespected altogether: "Handmaids were forced to get pregnant like cows, except that cows had a better deal" (46). This treatment reinforces Plumwood's argument that a woman's nature and virtue are defined instrumentally as "being a good wife or mother, classically as silence and good weaving, and romantically as being there to please" men (Plumwood 1993: 105). Even the narrator's reflection on her past sexual encounters—"no lasting harm was done to me, some pleasure was both given and received" (Atwood 170)—highlights how women's bodies are reduced to instruments of male desire.

The feature of instrumentalism is further illustrated by the dehumanizing treatment of individuals in Gilead, where people are reduced to mere tools serving the regime's objectives. In one harrowing scene, women are "reduced to animals—to penned-up animals—to our animal nature," emphasizing how their humanity is stripped away, rendering them instruments of control and subjugation. The metaphor of their daily existence – "unfurl[ing] like a toxic flower" (Atwood 143) – highlights how their suffering is orchestrated to reinforce the regime's dominance, with their experiences manipulated to serve its power structure. Women, handcuffed and paraded under harsh conditions, are "marched out in a line and slotted into the bleachers" (143), demonstrating how their bodies are exploited to maintain order and obedience. Their dehumanization reflects Plumwood's critique of instrumentalism, wherein individuals, like nature, are treated as interchangeable components of a larger system, devoid of inherent value. By reducing individuals to mere instruments, Gilead enforces a power structure that erases personal identity and autonomy. Through this portrayal, Atwood critiques the broader implications of instrumentalist thinking, exposing how the reduction of individuals to tools for others' purposes perpetuates exploitation and domination, echoing Plumwood's concerns about the destructive nature of dualistic societies.

7.5. Homogenization of Women and Nature in *The Testaments*

In *The Testaments*, homogenization is intricately woven into both the physical environment and the treatment of individuals, aligning with Plumwood's critique of reducing complexity to a singular, monolithic group. In Gilead, individuality is deliberately erased—particularly among women—who are stereotyped as inherently deficient and submerged in what Plumwood calls "an anonymous collectivity" (1993: 102). This erasure is most evident in Handmaids' appearances, where "you couldn't even see their faces because of those white hats they wore. They all looked the same" (Atwood 16). These white hats, which obscure their faces, symbolize their collective identity, stripping them of personal distinction and individuality. The narrator further observes, "They all went for a walk every day two by two; you could see them on the sidewalks" (17), reinforcing their rigid conformity and lack of autonomy.

Homogenization extends to the broader population of women in Gilead. Agnes recalls that even girls from elite backgrounds were subjected to prescriptive uniformity: "The pink, the white, and the plum dresses were the rule for special girls like us. Ordinary girls from Econofamilies wore the same thing all the time" (Atwood 21). The enforced color-coded dress not only obliterates personal identity but also serves as a visual marker of Gilead's strict social stratification. The distinction between the colored garments of the privileged and the monochrome attire of the lower classes reinforces both gender and class hierarchies. Similarly, the Marthas are also subjected to this symbolic erasure. Agnes remarks, "All the Marthas were known as Martha because that's what they were, and they all wore the same kind of clothing" (23), underscoring how even names are stripped away and replaced with functional labels. Even the persistent presence of color as a tool of identity control remains vital to the narrative, as when Atwood's use of green—worn by young girls of marriageable age—adds complexity to the system: "green is the color of the outfits worn by young girls of marriageable age" (Heggen 53). While green in this context can symbolize "jealousy and envy, negative attributes that are prevalent in the repressive Republic of Gilead," it also represents more positive associations such as "renewal, youth, fertility," and, as Atwood herself describes, "spring hope" (53). This suggests a subtle resistance and potential for regeneration amidst the regime's rigid structure. As Heggen argues, Atwood employs such color symbolism to balance the oppressive tone of Gilead with a "more optimistic disposition" (48).

Ultimately, Gilead's systematic effort to mold individuals into uniform roles and appearances reflects Plumwood's critique of homogenization. By erasing individual and cultural diversity, the regime maintains control, reinforcing the dualistic logic that upholds patriarchal domination. In illustrating the consequences of these dynamics, *The Testaments* urges us to recognize the inherent value of every individual and the necessity of preserving the rich tapestry of human and natural diversity. It serves as a powerful reminder that true liberation lies in embracing our differences and fostering a society that celebrates the uniqueness of both people and the environment.

8. Conclusion

Plumwood's environmentalism challenges Western dualism by exposing what lies at the core of "backgrounding," "hyper-separation," 'incorporation," "instrumentalism," and "homogenization." This critique, in conjunction with her ecofeminism, argues that dualistic thinking perpetuates the subjugation of both women and nature. To counter this, ecofeminism supports a holistic approach that rejects hierarchies and promotes interconnectedness. Addressing these issues requires fostering a mindset that values equality and interdependence between genders and the environment. In this context, Atwood's *The Testaments* portrays the struggles of women in a dystopian regime, reflecting their exploitation alongside the degradation of nature. Atwood's narrative of three women entangled in a resistance movement against Gilead's oppressive rule, in light of Plumwood, critiques the treatment of women and nature under patriarchy. The subordinated position of women parallels the unchecked crises in nature, with women confined to predetermined gender roles, similar to the imposed order by men on nature. The novel illustrates incorporation through the forced assimilation of women into prescribed roles, stripping them of autonomy.

Instrumentalism is vividly depicted as women's bodies become commodities for reproduction, mirroring the objectification of nature within Gilead. Furthermore, the homogenization of women, similar to the stereotypical categorization of nature, erases their individual identities. These multifaceted connections, highlighting the ecological and gendered dimensions within the novel, converge into a compelling plea for understanding and action. By presenting these elements through the lens of homogenization, Atwood critiques the broader implications of dualistic thinking,

where individuality, diversity, and complexity—both among people and in nature—are devalued and erased. The narrative serves as a poignant call to save both women and nature from the detrimental effects of patriarchal policies, urging a collective effort to dismantle systemic oppression. *The Testaments*, through an ecofeminist lens, thus reveals the profound connections between women and nature, highlighting their shared problems. This analysis enhances our understanding of societal structures, power dynamics, and the ways in which dualistic frameworks perpetuate the critical conditions of both women and the environment. By dismantling dualistic thinking, we can reshape societal norms and move toward a more balanced and ecologically sustainable future.

Statements and Declarations

Thesis Declaration

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AI Use Declaration

AI tools were used solely for minor language editing. All arguments, interpretations, and conclusions are entirely the authors' own.

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