



Decentering the Human: Posthumanism and Moral Responsibility in Margaret Atwood's Fiction

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Abstract:

*The emergence of posthumanist thought has fundamentally reshaped the ways in which scholars conceptualize identity, agency, and ethical responsibility in an era increasingly defined by technological advancement and ecological crisis. The fiction of Margaret Atwood, particularly works such as *Oryx and Crake*, *The Year of the Flood*, and *MaddAddam*, provides a compelling literary space for examining the philosophical and ethical implications of posthumanism. This article explores how Atwood's narratives decenter the human subject, challenging anthropocentric assumptions and interrogating the moral responsibilities that arise in a world shared with non-human entities, hybrid species, and artificial life forms. Through a critical engagement with posthumanist theory, the study argues that Atwood's fiction calls for an expanded ethical framework grounded in interdependence, ecological awareness, and humility.*

Keywords: *Posthumanism, Anthropocentrism, Ethics, Moral Responsibility, Margaret Atwood, Non-human Agency, Ecocriticism, Dystopia.*

Introduction:

The traditional humanist worldview, rooted in Enlightenment ideals, positions the human being as the center of knowledge, morality, and existence. This anthropocentric framework has historically privileged human rationality, autonomy, and superiority over all other forms of life. However, the rapid advancement of biotechnology, artificial intelligence, and ecological degradation has destabilized this worldview, giving rise to posthumanism—a theoretical paradigm that challenges the centrality of the human.

In contemporary literature, few authors engage with these questions as profoundly as Margaret Atwood. Her speculative fiction, particularly the *MaddAddam Trilogy*, envisions a world in which the boundaries between human, animal, and machine are blurred, and where the consequences of human hubris are laid bare. Atwood's work not only critiques anthropocentrism but also raises urgent questions about moral responsibility in a posthuman world.

Objectives: This article seeks to examine how Atwood de-centers the human subject and redefines ethical responsibility in her fiction. It argues that her narratives advocate for a relational ethics that acknowledges the interconnectedness of all life forms and challenges the hierarchical structures that underpin human dominance.

Theoretical Framework: Posthumanism and the Critique of Anthropocentrism

Posthumanism emerges as a critical response to the limitations of classical humanism, particularly its anthropocentric, exclusionary, and hierarchical tendencies that privilege the human as the central agent of knowledge and value (Braidotti, 2013; Wolfe, 2010). Thinkers such as Donna Haraway, Rosi Braidotti, and Cary Wolfe argue that the human cannot be understood as a self-contained, autonomous entity; rather, it exists within a complex network of relationships that include animals, technologies, and ecological systems (Haraway, 1991; Braidotti, 2013). This shift destabilizes the human/non-human binary and calls for a reconceptualization of subjectivity as relational, distributed, and embedded.

In the fiction of Margaret Atwood, this theoretical reorientation is vividly dramatized through speculative narratives that challenge the centrality of the human. Particularly in the *MaddAddam Trilogy*, the human is no longer positioned as the unquestioned center of existence but becomes one actor among many within an interconnected ecological and technological system (Atwood, 2003; 2009). This decentering is not merely philosophical but carries profound ethical implications. If humans are not inherently superior to other forms of life, then moral frameworks that justify domination, exploitation, and instrumentalization must be critically re-evaluated (Wolfe, 2010).

Atwood's narratives thus align closely with posthumanist critiques of anthropocentrism by emphasizing interdependence, hybridity, and ecological embeddedness. Her work urges a rethinking of fundamental concepts such as agency, identity, and responsibility, advocating for a more inclusive ethical paradigm that recognizes the value of both human and non-human existence (Braidotti, 2013).

Decentering the Human in the MaddAddam Trilogy

The *MaddAddam Trilogy* offers a compelling narrative space for exploring the decentering of the human through the creation of alternative life forms and hybrid species. One of the most striking examples is the emergence of the Crakers, a genetically engineered species designed by Crake to replace humanity. These beings challenge traditional definitions of the human by embodying traits that are simultaneously human and non-human, biological and engineered (Atwood, 2003).

Unlike humans, the Crakers live in apparent harmony with their environment, free from destructive impulses such as greed, violence, and hierarchy. However, their engineered perfection raises critical questions about what is sacrificed in the process. The absence of symbolic thought, artistic creativity, and complex emotional depth suggests that humanity cannot be reduced to mere biological efficiency without losing essential dimensions of cultural and existential meaning (Nayar, 2014).

Furthermore, the presence of hybrid creatures such as pigeons and rakunks destabilizes rigid species boundaries and challenges the notion of human exceptionalism. These genetically modified beings exhibit intelligence, memory, and adaptive behavior, thereby complicating traditional distinctions between human and animal (Wolfe, 2010). By granting these non-human entities agency and narrative significance, Atwood effectively de-centers the human and foregrounds a more pluralistic and interconnected understanding of life.

Non-Human Agency and Ethical Recognition

A central tenet of posthumanist thought is the recognition of non-human agency, which challenges the anthropocentric assumption that only humans possess subjectivity and moral worth (Haraway, 1991; Wolfe, 2010). In Atwood's fiction, animals and genetically engineered organisms are not passive objects of human control but active participants in the narrative world. The pigeons, for example, demonstrate intelligence, social organization, and even forms of strategic behavior, suggesting that they possess a degree of consciousness and intentionality (Atwood, 2003).

This acknowledgment of non-human agency carries significant ethical implications. If non-human entities are capable of thought, interaction, and possibly suffering, then they must be incorporated into ethical frameworks traditionally reserved for humans. Atwood's portrayal of such beings compels readers to reconsider the moral boundaries that have historically excluded non-human life from ethical consideration (Braidotti, 2013).

Moreover, the interactions between humans and non-humans in the trilogy highlight the fundamental interconnectedness of all life forms. Human survival in the post-apocalyptic world often depends on cooperation, negotiation, and coexistence with non-human entities. This interdependence underscores the necessity of moving beyond hierarchical models of existence toward more cooperative and relational modes of being (Haraway, 1991).

Through these narrative strategies, Atwood not only critiques anthropocentrism but also advances a posthumanist ethic grounded in recognition, responsibility, and respect for the multiplicity of life.

Moral Responsibility in a Posthuman World

As the human subject is increasingly decentered within posthumanist discourse, the question of moral responsibility becomes more complex and expansive. In a world where agency is distributed across humans, non-human organisms, and technological systems, ethical responsibility can no longer be confined solely to human intentions but must account for a broader network of interactions (Braidotti, 2013; Wolfe, 2010). In the fiction of Margaret Atwood, particularly the MaddAddam Trilogy, this shift is dramatized through narratives that foreground the consequences of human actions on multiple forms of life.

Atwood suggests that moral responsibility is not diminished by the decentering of the human; rather, it is significantly expanded. Humans are called upon to recognize their entanglement with ecological systems and to act in ways that sustain rather than exploit these relationships. In *Oryx and Crake*, the catastrophic pandemic unleashed by Crake exemplifies the failure to acknowledge such responsibility. Crake's project to "improve" humanity through genetic engineering and selective eradication reflects a technocratic logic that prioritizes efficiency, control, and perceived perfection over ethical accountability (Atwood, 2003). His justification—that human flaws necessitate radical elimination—reveals a dangerous moral absolutism detached from empathy and relational ethics.

In contrast, characters such as Toby, as depicted in *The Year of the Flood*, and the eco-spiritual collective known as the God's Gardeners embody an alternative ethical framework grounded in care, humility, and coexistence (Atwood, 2009). The Gardeners' teachings emphasize responsibility toward all living beings, advocating vegetarianism, biodiversity preservation, and non-violence. Toby's gradual moral development, particularly her empathy toward both humans and non-human creatures, reflects a shift toward relational ethics that acknowledges interdependence.

This contrast underscores the importance of ethical awareness in navigating the complexities of a posthuman world. Atwood's narratives ultimately suggest that moral responsibility must be rooted in an understanding of interconnectedness and a commitment to preserving the diversity and integrity of life forms. Ethical action, therefore, is not about domination or control but about sustaining relationships within a shared ecological system (Haraway, 1991).

Ecological Ethics and the Critique of Human Dominance

Atwood's decentering of the human is deeply intertwined with her critique of environmental exploitation and ecological degradation. The dystopian landscapes depicted in the MaddAddam Trilogy are the direct consequences of human arrogance, unchecked capitalism, and the instrumentalization of nature (Garrard,

2012). Through vivid narrative detail, Atwood portrays a world in which ecosystems have been destabilized by genetic manipulation, pollution, and corporate greed.

In *Oryx and Crake*, the proliferation of genetically modified organisms—such as wolvogs, rakunks, and pigeons—illustrates how human attempts to control nature often result in ecological imbalance (Atwood, 2003). These creations, initially designed for profit or utility, escape their intended purposes and disrupt natural systems, highlighting the unintended consequences of human intervention. The environmental collapse that follows serves as a critique of anthropocentric ideologies that prioritize human gain over ecological sustainability.

Atwood underscores the necessity of a paradigm shift in ethical values. Rather than viewing nature as a resource to be exploited, her narratives advocate for a posthumanist ethic that recognizes the intrinsic value of all life forms. This perspective aligns with ecocritical thought, which emphasizes the interconnectedness of human and non-human existence (Garrard, 2012).

The God's Gardeners provide a compelling alternative model of ecological ethics. Their practices—such as rooftop gardening, recycling, and reverence for extinct species—reflect a commitment to sustainability and environmental stewardship. Their sermons, particularly those that commemorate endangered animals, highlight an ethical framework that extends moral consideration beyond the human (Atwood, 2009).

Through this contrast between destructive human practices and the Gardeners' sustainable ethos, Atwood suggests that ecological survival depends not only on technological solutions but also on a profound transformation of human values. Respect for nature, recognition of limits, and ethical coexistence emerge as essential principles for a viable future.

The Crisis of Humanity and the Possibility of Renewal

While Atwood's fiction presents a stark and often unsettling vision of the consequences of human hubris, it simultaneously offers a nuanced exploration of renewal and ethical transformation. The near-extinction of humanity in the MaddAddam Trilogy represents not only a crisis but also an opportunity to reimagine the foundations of human existence (Atwood, 2013).

The survivors—such as Toby, Ren, and Jimmy (Snowman)—navigate a radically altered world in which traditional hierarchies and systems of power have collapsed. Their survival depends on cooperation, adaptability, and the ability to form relationships with both humans and non-human entities. In *MaddAddam*, these characters gradually build a fragile community that includes the Crakers and even former adversaries, suggesting the possibility of coexistence across difference (Atwood, 2013).

Importantly, the decentering of the human in Atwood's fiction does not imply the erasure of humanity but rather its transformation. By relinquishing the illusion of dominance and embracing a more humble and relational understanding of existence, humans can become participants in, rather than masters of, the ecological web. This transformation is reflected in moments where storytelling, memory, and cooperation re-emerge as essential human practices, even in a post-apocalyptic context.

Atwood's work ultimately invites readers to reflect critically on the kind of future they wish to create. It challenges the assumption that technological progress must come at the expense of ethical responsibility and ecological balance. Instead, it advocates for a vision of progress that is inclusive, sustainable, and ethically grounded.

Thus, the trilogy concludes not with absolute despair but with a cautious optimism—suggesting that while humanity's past actions have led to catastrophe, the possibility of renewal remains contingent upon the willingness to embrace responsibility, interdependence, and ethical transformation (Braidotti, 2013).

Conclusion

The fiction of Margaret Atwood offers a powerful critique of anthropocentrism and a compelling vision of posthuman ethics. By decentering the human, Atwood challenges readers to reconsider their assumptions about identity, agency, and moral responsibility. Her narratives highlight the interconnectedness of all life forms and emphasize the need for an ethical framework that extends beyond the human. In doing so, they provide valuable insights into the challenges and possibilities of living in a posthuman world. Ultimately, Atwood's work serves as both a warning and a guide, urging us to confront the ethical implications of our actions and to strive for a more just and sustainable future.

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Citation: Wadud, A., (2025) "Decentering the Human: Posthumanism and Moral Responsibility in Margaret Atwood's Fiction", *Bharati International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research & Development (BIJMRD)*, Vol-3, Issue-11, November-2025.