MARGARET ATWOOD’S “MADDADDAM”: AN ECO-CRITICAL AND SATIRICAL CALL TO ACTION

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Introduction

Margaret Atwood’s *MaddAddam,* the epic conclusion of the *Oryx and Crake* trilogy,is a post-apocalyptic science fiction novel and a brilliant social and eco-political commentary of the 21st century that forecasts an all-too-realistic near-future through satire that induces heavy philosophical questioning of our values. As expected from other recent dystopian science-fiction works, the trilogy focuses on life after a human-create catastrophe wipes away our current state of living, in this case a pandemic created purposefully by the genius/madman Crake. Unlike many of these works, Atwood views these events though a feminist eco-critical lens. In *MaddAddam* she uses the perspective of middle-aged, virtuous, environmental activist Toby to create these lenses.

Overview

*MaddAddam* is set after the catastrophe that has wiped only human life from the Earth, leaving behind a handful of people: God’s Gardeners, an environmental religious group that survived through their own girl guide-like knowledge, and the MaddAddamites, a group of scientists that unknowingly helped Crake create his plague. They are joined by the Children of Crake, a super-species created by Crake through DNA-splicing to live on and repopulate the Earth. The Children of Crake are the flawless illustration of Atwood’s theme around adapting to changing circumstances. They are mostly human but have traits that protect them from the sun’s now unbearable rays, natural bug repellent, and their ability to eat and digest kudzu, an invasive species of vine that is already taking over many parts of the southern United States of America.

We see the theme of adapting to changing circumstances in many parts of the book. This is Atwood’s way of warning us about how our social and environmental choices may turn out. As they flash forwards and backwards to their lives before and after the catastrophe known as “the chaos” (p.108) Toby explains what this word meant to the people of our near-future, “I remember *adapt*, it was another way of saying *tough luck*. To people you weren’t going to help out.” (p.58) In the wake of an energy crisis and other environmental changes due to climate change, humans have learned to adapt in many ways in *MaddAddam*. Most of the adaptations are technological and all of which Atwood hints as being near-sighted and self-interested. For example, as the ice-caps melt away, a corporation begins using the northern tundra to dump the world’s garbage for polar bears to eat in a thinly-veiled attempt to help them adapt.(p.57) We see this theme most prevalently in the surviving God’s Gardeners, who have learned to grow and tend to their own food, build shelters, protect themselves from the hordes of wild GMO-animals that thrive after the chaos and live without all of the luxuries of the 21st century. These adaptations are never portrayed as sad or longing of another time, they are simply necessary to the survival of each species.

If the adaptations of species are seen as necessary, the destruction of the human race is almost celebrated in MaddAddam. Atwood’s distaste for corporate and political environmental recklessness is splashed all over the book. The heroic, yet extremely chauvinistic in a satirical way, Zeb describes life before the chaos as a loveless world run by greed and individualism where the corporations, religions, and political parties are one and the same. These huge conglomerates know as the “Corps” with their gestapo “the CorpSeCorps” have a monopoly on what is left of the oil supply and are essential Big Brother with constant surveillance and the ability to shape the world according to their agenda. When she describes the “Corps” and their “real action, which was bulldozing the planet flat and grabbing anything of value”(p.69), Atwood illuminates a possible ending to our current times’ inability to wrestle power away from multi-national corporations.

The world’s reliance on multi-national corporations stems from a dependence on fossil fuels. In the time before the chaos, fossil fuels have become sparse and a luxury only the privileged can afford and even they’ve fought wars to gain access to it. It is a blunt reality that mirrors our own. This is possibly a jab by Atwood at the Canadian failure to begin shifting to renewable sources of energy soon enough. The value of economic growth over environmental responsibility in the face of climate change, could possibly lead to our demise on earth. Atwood does an excellent job of highlighting these values with her invented religion “The Church of PetrOleum” where guest speakers would “Thank the Almighty for blessing the world the fumes and toxins, cast their eyes upwards as if gasoline came from heaven.” (p.111) Although not a religion, the way that oil is ubiquitous in Canadian life and how it affects our livelihood plays much too large a role in our society.

The other side of the religious coin that Atwood portrays are the main characters of the story: “God Gardeners.” The Gardeners are a mostly peaceful group of environmental activists that were slowly preparing for the plague that they saw coming because of climate change and societal collapse due to a loss of virtues. She uses the Gardeners to show a new way of living sustainably. They worship saints like Jane Goodall and give thanks for Cyanophyta for creating an oxygen rich atmosphere. (p.136) The Gardeners work without fossil fuels and are self-reliant, growing all their own food and tending to bees, thus flying under the radar of the “Corps”. The Gardeners are very frugal and do not waste anything. They are not perfect, but they serve an important purpose for showing what kinds of values and skills will work in a post-apocalyptic and oil-less future where so much of what we take for granted now is gone forever.

Aside from oil, so many other things are lost in the aftermath of MaddAddam. Even the MaddAddamites themselves are named after extinct species: Swift Fox, Manatee, Ivory Bill and Lotis Blue. This is a yet another satirical warning from Atwood about how our values and inability to act quickly enough is resulting in the devastation of Earth’s biosphere.

Conclusion

Margaret Atwood’s witty, humourous, and eco-critical view of our not-too-distant future in MaddAddam is one that leaves you questioning your values in a gut-wrenching way. Corporate power, climate change, and our reliance on fossil fuels are some of the greatest problems to tackle in the coming decades. Through the theme of adaptation, Atwood gives hope for change, yet a warning for what will happen without it.

References

Atwood, M. (2013) *MaddAddam.* Toronto: Random House of Canada Limited.