



# *Are we what we eat or what we worship? Food activism and fanaticism in Margaret Atwood's The Year of the Flood*

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**ABSTRACT:** Atwood's *MaddAddam* trilogy mirrors the author's commitment in the environmental debate, articulating, through the *topos* of the apocalypse, future scenarios due to modern-day generational environmental amnesia. This study focuses on the God's Gardeners, the eco-religious group of *The Year of the Flood* (2009), the second volume of the trilogy. More specifically, the core of the analysis is the vegetarian philosophy embraced by this activist faction, led by the charismatic figure of Adam One. Within the framework of literary food studies, the analysis begins by examining the implications of various dichotomies encompassing concepts such as cannibalism/anthropophagy versus vegetarianism, binge eating in contrast to fasting, as well as the interplay of waste and stockpiling. Subsequently, the essay aims to build upon prior scholarly investigations into the Gardeners' ethos, which have brought to light contradictions within their philosophy of life. By contextualizing the activism of God's Gardeners within the broader discourse on food justice and sustainability, this analysis seeks to reassess the group's core beliefs and internal inconsistencies. This endeavour involves a partial reconstruction of the viability and practicality inherent in the Gardeners' form of food activism.

**KEY WORDS:** Margaret Atwood; *The Year of the Flood*; food activism; food justice; vegetarianism; Flexitarianism



## BETWEEN FOOD UNCONSCIOUSNESS AND FOOD REPRESENTATION

The act of feeding oneself manifests as an instinctive gesture of the human species and, indeed, of all other animal species. Food is a rather complex polysemic subject, interwoven with anthropological, cognitive, and interpersonal dimensions, whose traditions not only beckon exploration through socio-anthropological lenses but also from economic ones. Indeed, it is discernible that dietary customs are not just cultural artifacts but also inextricably politically charged phenomena, underscoring the interplay between individuals and societal dynamics. The synthesis of these different aspects shapes a food-related collective memory, which conveys the complex tangle of what is nowadays considered food culture (Hostetter 26).

In the era of what Zygmunt Bauman defines as *Homo Consumens* (2021), the food system emerges as the paramount economic and societal construct, wherein industrialized societies experience easy access to copious food resources, yet paradoxically, undernourishment and malnutrition persist as preeminent contributors to mortality on a global scale (Taylor). Focusing primarily on the problem of food safety in terms of sanity of production processes, Marion Nestle (Nestle, *What to Eat*; Nestle, *Safe Food*; Nestle *Eat Drink*), underlines the imperative of civic engagement in shaping food policies, concurrently denouncing governmental and corporate entities for disseminating biased informational narratives. Therefore, the problem relies explicitly in the fact that "consumers, particularly in developed countries and industrialized societies, [...] are removed from the process of production" (Narang and Narang 127). Nestle's discourse on food awareness encompasses the totality of the production and consumption chain and suggests how a thorough comprehension of these processes would pave the way to an overarching awareness towards food justice—a goal that remains markedly elusive.

First signs of social dissatisfaction due to the unsustainability of the food market began to emerge during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It was within this historical juncture that first social organizations for food justice marked their institutional presence. This is the case with the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO, 1945), which, under the motto "Fiat Panis" (transl. "let there be bread"), emerged as an early response to the burgeoning concerns surrounding food systems, reflecting an ethos of fostering food security and sustainability. A pivotal step in the consolidation of food activism-related movements occurred in the early 1960s during the Greenwood Food Blockade.<sup>1</sup> This event marked a seminal moment where food assumed a universal emblem of the quest for societal and environmental equity, encapsulated by the rallying cry "Food for Freedom" (Smith 2). From this moment on, efforts aimed at fostering a new and alternative food system materialized, leading to the establishment of non-profit entities like the United Farm Workers (UFW, 1962) and the Community Food Security Coalition (CFSC, 1996). These organizations consider food sustainability not only as a desired outcome but also as a mean of driving change through political engagement, activism, and movement mobilization (Holt-Giménez and Wang 89). Regrettably, despite the protracted

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<sup>1</sup> The Greenwood Food Blockade was a substantial cut in welfare in the state of Mississippi that took place in 1962 and temporarily eliminated the possibility to provide food assistance with surplus products. This limitation was imposed exclusively on black people living in the state.



existence of such movements, alternatives to the mainstream food chain remain modest. In certain instances, enhancements introduced have been assimilated and subsequently adapted to consumerist imperatives (see Hallberg *et al.*, Paull, Nandwani).

Nowadays, the struggle against the established food provisioning chain unfolds on two fronts. A strain of food activism is directed towards the rights of labourers within the food chain; while a second one is dedicated to advancing alternative production and consumption processes, such as fair trade, counterculture-cuisine, the local food movement, as well as expressions of dietary choice like vegetarianism and veganism (Striffler 62). Numerous scholarly investigations and scientific inquiries support these transformative methods, elucidating empirical evidence pertaining to the environmental advantages ensuing from judicious dietary selections. Noteworthy among these elucidations is the vegetarian dietary programme as contributor for the mitigation of carbon emissions—a major concern within the issue of climate change. The discernible nexus between vegetarianism, and the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions highlights the pivotal role that conscientious food choices can play in addressing the exigencies of contemporary environmental challenges (see Raphaely and Marinova, Dakin *et al.*, Frank *et al.*).

In the last decades, these theoretical and practical advancements in the realm of food production and consumption, have markedly altered individual sensibilities in addressing this subject. This is also made evident by a range of diachronic inquiries within the purview of literary food studies (see Shanani, Coghlan).<sup>2</sup> These investigations attest to a discernible shift, wherein food, historically regarded as both a tangible commodity and allegorical symbol,<sup>3</sup> assumed, particularly at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, meanings imbued with distinctly political and increasingly pronounced social connotations (see Goldstein, Boyce and Fitzpatrick, Tigner and Carruth). Instances of this literary tendency are discernible in Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* (1906) and John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939). The two novels unfold the food chain's profound social, economic, environmental, and emotional impacts on both labourers and consumers. In *The Jungle*, emphasis is predominantly directed toward the deterioration of labour conditions in a meatpacking establishment. Situating the narrative within this milieu affords Sinclair the opportunity to expound upon themes encompassing the inhumane treatment

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<sup>2</sup> This is the case with organic cultivation, which first appeared on the market after World War II but was not taken seriously at least until the 1980s. When organic came to account for about 1% of food sales, the market began to consider it more seriously as a new opportunity for profit. Thus, within a decade, organic cultivation was incorporated into the mainstream food system. To further its adaptation and create advertising campaigns in line with capitalistic rules, the organic system was progressively distanced and deprived of the radical and revolutionary impulse with which it was actually born.

<sup>3</sup> Insightful studies have been conducted examining the symbolic implications of food within renowned texts of American and European literatures. Noteworthy examples include an exploration of famine and starvation in Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale* (1611), an investigation into the parallels drawn between meat consumption and colonial exploitation in Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), an analysis of the interplay between food and lust in James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922), an examination of the intersections and dissonances between emotions and gustatory experiences in Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, and an exploration of the centrality of food as a conduit to the protagonist's epiphanies in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981).



of animals, precarious and unsanitary working environments, and the relative issue of collateral meat contamination. The society's reaction to this literary work significantly contributed to signing the Pure Food and Drug Act (1906), underscoring Sinclair's will "to educate America on consumption, dispensing advice on diet, hygiene and home economy" (Pickavance 90). Likewise, John Steinbeck elucidates the shortcomings of the agricultural production system, depicting farmers as individuals alienated from the land and distanced from the attainment of an envisaged food democracy, constantly hindered by the imperatives dictated by capitalist paradigms (Wald 200).

In reference to the food poisoning of some customers of the American fast-food franchise Taco Bell in 2007, an article published in the New York Times provocatively asserts that if we juxtapose the current situation of food production to the circumstances delineated in Sinclair and Steinbeck's novels, it becomes clear how "we have been moving in the wrong direction" (Cohen). The negative trend posed by Cohen is closed to the concept of "environmental generational amnesia" (Kahn and Weiss 7), which testifies the inclination of our society to neglect contemporary ecological drift attributable, among various factors, to suboptimal management of the food supply chain. Just as Sinclair and Steinbeck did at the dawn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, numerous contemporary authors have conscientiously aligned their literary works with the imperative of fostering environmental and food consciousness. Foremost among these esteemed voices is undeniably Margaret Atwood, whose environmental commitment is a leitmotiv of her literary output. In her first novels, *Surfacing* (1972) and *Life before Man* (1979), Atwood explores themes such as the unnaturalness and destructiveness of anthropocentric principle whereby humans relate to the surrounding environment, while convincingly showing how "eating is unequivocally political" (Parker 349). She weaponizes food needs in *The Edible Woman* (1969) and *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) by elevating food and the act of eating as "part of the gender performative acts" (Reyes 2021) and she explicitly confronts her female characters to food and eating, unravelling themes encompassing the commodification of women, sexual predation, and exploitation (Sceats 4; see also Nicholson, Stillman and Johnson, Christou, Florsheim). With the MaddAddam Trilogy (*Oryx and Crake* (2003); *The Year of the Flood* (2009); *MaddAddam* (2013)), Atwood explores food beyond gender concerns. This narrative encompasses dimensions such as individual and collective environmental responsibility, the spectre of consumerist oppression, advocacy for food activism, the political landscape of sustainable agriculture, and discourse surrounding the flexitarian dietary (see Verain *et al.*, Forestell, Curtain and Grafenauer).

Against the socio-political backdrop of a capitalist, technocratic, and anthropocentric dictatorship, Margaret Atwood situates an eco-religious community at the narrative forefront in the second volume of the MaddAddam trilogy, *The Year of the Flood*. This group, known as the God's Gardeners, purposefully disengages from mainstream societal structures with the intent of reconstituting a new Eden. Central to the God's Gardeners' philosophical tenets is the espousal of a vegetarian dietary regimen and cultivation methodologies that honour natural flowering rhythms, fostering a harmonious alignment wherein the producer and consumer converge. Positioned as activists, particularly on the frontlines of heightening awareness regarding the unsustainability of the Exfernal World system,



the Gardeners articulate an alternative narrative to the prevailing capitalist and consumerist food systems. A meticulous inquiry into this proposition yields valuable insights, rendering the eco-philosophy of the Gardeners an exemplary literary instantiation of the contemporary activist maxim 'Food for Freedom'.

## FROM TECHNO-WORSHIP TO VEGGIE-CULTURE

To explore the role exerted by the symbol of food in *The Year of the Flood*, first we need to turn to the inaugural volume of the trilogy, *Oryx and Crake*. While it may be observed that the theme of food sustainability does not figure prominently in the first book, the shift of point of view between this work and Maddaddam's second volume is illuminating. The first two books of the trilogy share a profound interdependence not rooted, as one might expect, in the chronological progression of the storyline, but rather, in the contextual richness they provide to each other: *The Year of the Flood* investigates the same events explored in *Oryx and Crake*, yet it approaches this inquiry from a distinct and innovative perspective. This grants the reader a thorough view of the pre- and post-Waterless Flood world<sup>4</sup> as experienced by those who induced it (*Oryx and Crake*) and those who suffered it (*The Year of the Flood*). For this reason, the two novels are meant to be complementary; indeed, Atwood herself described them as "two chapters of the same book" (Atwood, *Worlds* 93).

*Oryx and Crake* concludes leaving the issue of Snowman<sup>5</sup> open-ended: upon the revelation that he is not the sole surviving human post-flood, Snowman grapples with the dilemma of integrating with the fellow survivors or, cognizant of humanity's self-destructive tendencies, killing them off. *The Year of the Flood* opens withholding any elucidation on Snowman, unfolding a new narrative dimension characterized by an emerging feeling of hope for a new rebirth:

The abandoned towers in the distance are like the coral of an ancient reef-bleached and colourless, devoid of life. There still is life, however. Birds chirp; sparrows, they must be. Their small voices are clear and sharp, nails on glass: there's no longer any sound of traffic to drown them. Do they notice the quietness, the absence, of motors? If so, are they happier? [...] The flower beds, choked with sow thistle and burdock, enormous aqua kudzu moths fluttering above them. The fountains, their scallop-shell basins filled with stagnant rainwater. [...] The wide laws have grown up, tall weeds. There are low irregular mounds beneath the milkweed and fleabane and sorrel, with here and there a swatch of fabric, a glint of bone. (3-4)

Nature regains its space by restoring wilderness where imposing grey mansions had previously dominated, and at the same time it breaks through in the narrative by delineating itself from the very first pages as the driving subject. *The*

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<sup>4</sup> The Gardeners introduce the concept of the 'Waterless Flood' to define the forthcoming catastrophe. It is defined as 'waterless' because, in actual fact, extinction is induced by a human-driven epidemics, whose causes are to be addressed to the dysfunction of the Blyss Pluss, a pill thought to contrast sexual illnesses, which instead eventually kills those who take it.

<sup>5</sup> Snowman, aka Jimmy, is one of the main protagonists of *Oryx and Crake* who manages to survive the Waterless Flood. This character belongs to the Exernal World and he takes on an important role in *The Year of the Flood* too, where his story is intertwined with that of Ren.



*Year of the Flood* distances the reader from a society irrevocably estranged from the tenets of nature, promoting rediscovery of a lifestyle harmonious with the surrounding environment. This shift is made possible as Margaret Atwood strategically employs the viewpoint of the God's Gardeners—an eco-religious faction devoted to vegetarianism<sup>6</sup>—as the narrative lens of *The Year of the Flood*. Therefore, the events delineated in *Oryx and Crake* undergo a reconceptualization through the adoption of a perspective within the eco-religious group, facilitating an accentuation of thematic elements pertaining to reverence for nature and the sanctity of all life forms. Thus, the narrative pivot becomes instrumental in steering the reader towards the understanding of the ecological and ethical implications inherent in the unfolding events.

*The Year of the Flood's* narrator is actually a two-voice female chorus (Toby and Ren) that engenders two distinct alternating perspectives throughout the narrative. Their reports are prefaced at the inception of each chapter by the male voice of the Gardeners' leader, Adam One. This structural framework establishes three discernible narrative strata, interconnected by the three characters' affiliation with the eco-religious sect, and it enables a synchronic examination of the God's Gardeners, mitigating the inevitable bias of individual narrators and fostering as comprehensive a group's portrayal as possible. The first representations of the Gardeners are conspicuously grotesque caricatures portraying ecological fanatics who intrusively seek to persuade people to espouse their creed. At the beginning of the novel, Toby remembers her inaugural encounter with the God's Gardeners. At this time, she still lives in the Exfernal World and according to its rules:

Toby was working the morning shift when a strange procession approached along the street. From the signs they were carrying and the singing they were doing, she guessed it was a religious thing, though it wasn't a sect she'd ever seen before. [...] The leader had a beard and was wearing a caftan that looked as if it had been sewn by elves on hash. [...] They looked like raggedy angels, or else like midget bag people. [...] She'd heard of this cult: it was said to have a garden somewhere, on rooftop. A wodge of drying mud, a few draggled marigolds, a mangy row of pathetic beans, broiling in the unforgiving sun. (39)

This moment marks the first public appearance of God's Gardeners in the novel. Preceding the flood, the group lives outside the Pleeblands, isolated from the rest of the mainstream society. Their contact with the external milieu is infrequent, occurring primarily during parades, namely, pacifist manifestation characterized by prophetic and fatalistic overtones and directed to who has not yet embraced their dietary prescriptions. During the first protest against SecretBurger, a fast-food franchise, the Gardeners wield intimidating signs and shout protest songs, thereby providing the reader with an extremely realistic portrayal of activist engagement:

Behind him came an assortment of children – various heights, all colours, but all in dark clothing – holding their slates with slogans printed on them: God's Gardeners for God's Garden! Don't Eat Death! Animals R Us! [...] They'd been the ones doing the singing. No meat! No meat! No meat! they were chanting now. [...] The procession drew up in front of the SecretBurgers booth. A crowd was gathering, readying itself to jeer. "My Friends," said

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<sup>6</sup> An indispensable step in becoming Gardeners is to take the 'Vegivows': it is assumed that each future member of the group solemnly swears to vow to a strictly vegetarian diet for the rest of their days.



the leader, to the crowd at large. His preaching wouldn't go on for long, thought Toby, because the Sewage Lagooners wouldn't tolerate it. (39)

Adam One addresses the assembled crowd in almost irenic manners, wholly consistent with the rhetoric of universal brotherhood characteristic of his sermons, which, as Bergthaller observes, appear "like an odd cross-over between biology lesson and theological treatise" (739). The leader of the Gardeners reiterates to the inhabitants of the Pleeblands the heresy of adhering to materialist and capitalist dictates, concurrently admitting his sins as former carnivore and staunch hedonist:

My dear Friends. My name is Adam One. I, too, was once a materialistic, atheistic meat-eater. Like you, I thought Man was the measure of all things." [...] "In fact, dear Friends, I thought measurement was the measure of all things! Yes – I was a scientist. I studied epidemics, I counted diseased and dying animals, and people too, as if they were so many pebbles. I thought that only numbers could give a true description of Reality. But then –" [...] "But then, one day, when I was standing right where you are standing, devouring – yes! – devouring a SecretBurger, and revelling in the fat thereof, I saw a great Light. I heard a great Voice. And that voice said –"[...] "It said: Spare your fellow Creatures! Do not eat anything with a face! Do not kill your own Soul and then... (40)

The protest encounters resistance from those in attendance, who derisively label Adam One as 'ecofreak' (40). This response clarifies how the Exfernal World perceives as futile and fanaticism-driven the endeavours of an activist form convinced that transformative societal change can be reached through green dietary choices and sartorial minimalism. This sentiment is shared by Toby, who, at that precise juncture, is employed at SecretBurger. On this occasion, at some point in the discourse, Adam One directly addresses her: "'My child,' he says, 'do you have any idea what you're selling? Surely you wouldn't eat your own relatives'" (40). The Gardeners' conviction in the existence of an ancestral bond that unifies every living being is a recurrent theme in Adam One's discourses. To him, this bond transcends species, binding every creature under the power of divine will. When he alludes to "relatives", his reference extends beyond humans with whom Toby may share a consanguineous connection; rather, it encompasses all forms of animal life, and for this reason, implicit in Adam One's rhetoric is the insinuation of a charge of anthropophagy.

Adam One's discourse with Toby serves as the gateway to an enduring ideological tension threaded throughout the novel. *The Year of the Flood* revolves around a clash of diametrically opposed concepts, all converging upon the theme of food justice and sustainability. The major ideological discord concerns protein consumption, encompassing both animal meat and human flesh, therefore involving acts of cannibalism and anthropophagy (see Tartabini).<sup>7</sup> The novel is dominated by a perpetual antithesis, wherein the beastliness of meat production and consumption confronts the purported purity of vegetarianism. The latter is intentionally left indeterminate as the unequivocal ethical imperative because, even if the Gardeners engage in preserving both body and soul by abstaining from animal protein intake, this tenet is jeopardized by the sect's own fanatical behaviour.

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<sup>7</sup> Cannibalism denotes the act performed by humans or animals of consuming the flesh of an individual belonging to their own species. Anthropophagy specifically pertains to human cannibalism.



Atwood thus appears to afford the reader agency, presenting a choice between an almost obsessive vegetarianism and an unregulated diet—easily accessible yet laden with both environmental and moral hazards.

A careful examination of anthropophagic behaviours within the novel reveals intriguing dynamics. In *The Year of the Flood*, anthropophagy is often portrayed as an act performed by the consumer almost unconsciously. In Ren's first descriptions, we find reference to an impetus that drives one of her customers to bite her arm. Ren, employed as a prostitute at Scales and Tails, inadvertently depicts herself and her female colleagues as cannon fodder ready for consumption by unidentified men who want to be sexually satiated. As the narrative unfolds, it becomes increasingly evident how anthropophagy lurks within the most canonical representations of consumerism: large corporations. Before joining the Gardeners, Toby too is an adept of this system and works for the SecretBurger franchise:

The secret of SecretBurger was that no one knew what sort of animal protein was actually in them: the counter girls wore T-shirts and baseball caps with the slogan SecretBurger! Because Everyone Loves a Secret! [...] The meat grinders weren't 100 per cent efficient; you might find a swatch of cat fur in your burger or a fragment of mouse tail. Was there a human fingernail, once? It was possible. The local pleemobs paid the CorSeCorpsMen to turn a blind eye. They also run corpse disposal, harvesting organs for transplant, then running the gutted carcasses through the SecretBurger grinders. So went the rumours. During the glorious days of SecretBurgers, there were very few bodies found in vacant lots. (33)

This description portrays a society so deeply entrenched in the tenets and machinations of capitalist consumerism to the extent of willingly ingesting substances, whose questionable origin is manifestly implied by the name of the franchise itself. Toby is a double victim of this system since, working for Blanco, owner of the SecretBurger, like Ren she becomes sexual nourishment for her tyrant. This exploitation causes the woman perpetual hunger, which she quenches by swallowing SecretBurgers. In this way, the capitalist and anthropophagic system becomes self-feeding, grafting an unhealthy paradigm of production that goes far beyond any material need. The unlimited accessibility of meat impels the population toward an unregulated and unmotivated consumption, caused by an excess-driven compulsion that both is born in and reinforces the irrationality of the consumerist system. In *The Year of the Flood*, SecretBurger emerges as the emblem of this unhealthy proclivity towards gluttony, a phenomenon intimately experienced by Toby. This leads us to consider the second stratum of ideological discord, a direct child of the first, entailing two opposing dispositions: binge eating and fasting.

Once she joins the Gardeners, Toby manages to change her eating habits by going through periods of fasting, a practice that Adam One believes aids personal reflection. The Gardeners' fasting transcends mere dietary choices; instead, it is conceptualized as a renunciation of all manifestations of worldly superficiality. The Gardeners lead a lifestyle based on compromises and hardships that nevertheless empower them to promote a more sustainable alternative to the Exfernal World. Their commitment to a vegetarian diet offers the final hope for redemption and finds concrete fulfilment in the cultivation of their rooftop gardens, known as the Ararats:<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> In Atwood's novel, the Ararats are rooftop gardens cultivated by the God's Gardeners and constitute their only source of food supply. The name Ararat gives reference to Mount Ararat in Turkey





The Garden wasn't at all what Toby had expected from hearsay. It wasn't a baked mudflat strewn with rotting vegetable waste – quite the reverse. She gazed around it in wonder: it was so beautiful. With plants and flowers of many kinds she'd never seen before. There were vivid butterflies; from nearby came the vibration of bees. Each petal and leaf was fully alive, shining with awareness of her. Even the air of the Garden was different. (43)

The beauty and prosperity of the rooftop gardens stand in stark contrast to the sloppiness and minimalist lifestyle adopted by the Gardeners. Far removed from preoccupations with physical appearance—foible of a culture resistant to the rhythms of natural aging and, consequently, supportive of companies like AnooYoo<sup>9</sup>—the Gardeners channel this attention into an almost obsessive cultivation of the Ararats and bee cells. They encourage a process of growth by allowing the natural cadence required for blossoming to unfold. This characteristic is mirrored in the repetitive and cyclical actions of the Gardeners, delineated through an occasionally static narrative pace. The Ararats are depicted as sanctuary (Labudova 67), wherein prayer is accomplished through manual labour and, in performing their duties, the Gardeners adhere to well-established rituals to achieve a sort of biological sanctity.

The Ararats encapsulate the third ideological confrontation that reiterates the incompatibility between consumerist logics and the sustenance of human life on Earth. The rooftop gardens serve as repositories containing all essential provisions for the Waterless Flood. This emphasis on resource accumulation emerges as the linchpin for survival during the Flood, starkly contrasting the consumerist dissipation—another ramification of what Adam One characterizes as the multidimensional fall of man (188). The Gardeners' leader further traces the written language and the artificiality whereby grammar has evolved to be the corollary of the human descent into decay. Accordingly, all Gardeners are trained to the exclusive use of orality and memory. Out of this exercise begets a cognitive Ararat—a mental repository designed to aggregate all indispensable survival knowledge. Unlike words confined to books and computers, this information is immune to loss or theft. The Gardeners, self-identified as "plural Noah" (91), perceive this dual accumulation of sustenance and knowledge as their ark, ensuring their buoyancy amidst of the Waterless Flood.

The second half of the novel chronicles the decline of the technocratic social system following the apocalyptic event. Unexpectedly, the onset of the Waterless Flood brings the Gardeners to reconsider some precepts of their creed, prompting critical reflection on the reliability and coherence of their philosophy. Labudova, contending that the Gardeners indirectly depend on the Exfernal system for recycling practices, asserts that the post-apocalyptic life as envisioned by the group cannot materialize without aspects that have facilitated their survival up to that juncture (67). Grimbeek also finds it contradictory to condemn the Exfernal World market system while concurrently engaging with it, albeit to a restricted extent, through the selling of handicrafts (166). Moreover, Wright observes that the onset of

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(Ağrı Dağı in Turkish) where Noah, according to the biblical interpretations of Genesis, stood with the ark following the flood sent by God.

<sup>9</sup> The AnooYoo is a spa residence where men and women undergo beauty and anti-aging treatments.



the flood compels the Gardeners to reassess their dietary principles, potentially necessitating the consumption of animal flesh for survival (516). The stoically held convictions of the Gardeners, particularly regarding the abhorrence associated with an omnivorous and therefore also carnivore dietary, undergoes an abrupt turn. This challenges faith in the sect's precepts, a scepticism also traceable in Toby and Ren's words throughout the narrative: "The Gardeners were strict about not killing Life, but on the other hand they said death was a natural process, which was sort of a contradiction, now I think about it." (59) And again: "Burt the Knob explained how to relocate the slugs and snails in the Garden by heaving them over the railing into the traffic, where they were supposed to crawl off and find new homes, though I knew they really got squashed" (83).

This doctrinal shift clarifies during Adam One's speech on Predator Day, where God, initially a benevolent and life-giving figure, transforms into an executor and judge. The prayer following this sermon reveals a self-justification for meat consumption in times of famine: "But we are not as Animals - / We cherish other Creature's lives; / And so we do not eat their flesh / Unless dread Famine drives" (348). This departure from a previously overtly reiterated rhetoric of universal brotherhood signals a notable shift. And while Ren constantly feels revulsion toward meat as nourishment, after the flood, Toby's yearning for animal meat intake intensify progressively to the point where she feels ready to become a full-fledged carnivore again. At this juncture, vegetarianism, i.e., the foundational principle of the Gardeners' philosophy, proves to be a fallacious approach in conditions of extreme emergency. Therefore, the charges of incoherence levelled at the God's Gardeners appear to be well-grounded. Amplifying the validity of these assertions is the radical religious dimension of the Gardeners' activism. According to D'Ugo, the impracticability of the sect's fundamental tenets during the Flood transforms the survival of its members into a utopian outcome, rendered feasible solely through the transcendental influence of the God the Gardeners worship. This consideration entails a twofold risk, however. On one hand, it implies an accusation against Margaret Atwood of engaging in environmental, political, and religious rhetoric as an end in itself; on the other hand, the apocalyptic event, as it is willed by God, assumes the role of a condition that deprives humanity's responsibility and connivance in the environmental disruption.

Countering the first assertion are the words of Margaret Atwood herself. In an interview on *The Year of the Flood*, she affirmed, "Yes, I've themed myself" (Wright 518), thereby validating that the inspiration in formulating the Gardeners' identity is rooted in her personal vegetarian convictions. Following Atwood's statement, the irony used in portraying the Gardeners' philosophy takes on a new meaning, proving that the author consciously engenders an activist stance marked by discernible ideological tensions. Indeed, Atwood's objective transcends a representation of activism alien to any illogic. Were this not the case, D'Ugo's postulation regarding an activist utopia in *The Year of the Flood* might find substantiation. Indeed, an activist rhetoric divorced from ideological tensions tends to coincide with the proposition of an idyllic, and consequently, impractical form of activism. The internal dissonances discernible within the philosophy of God's Gardeners not only serve to humanize their eco-philosophy, thereby distancing it from any facile accusation of



divine derivation, but also, critically accentuate the potential vulnerabilities of a real-life form activism.

Conducted studies on the God's Gardeners group have also prompted an exploration of parallels between the activism of this fictional eco-religious sect and contemporary activist movements. The most widely endorsed comparative framework appear to be the one advanced by Bouson (2016, 2021). In his analysis, Bouson posits the Gardeners on a congruent plane with the principles of the eco-philosophy formulated by Norwegian thinker Arne Deike Eide Næss, known as Deep Ecology (see Næss *Ecology*, and Næss, *et al*). It is pertinent to acknowledge that both forms of activism espouse the principle of a biocentric organizational structure aligned with natural environmental rhythms. In his examination on the parallels between the Gardeners movement and Deep Ecology, Bouson properly posits the God's Gardeners' activism as fundamentally antithetical and to the concept of "cosmetic greenwashing" (Gerrard 19). However, he explicitly aligns Atwood's fictional activism with contemporary and pre-existing activist movements, formulating a constraining parallelism that diminishes the unique attributes the God's Gardeners, reducing it to a mere emulation of real as well as extensively criticized activism. A more accurate comparison emerges when considering the conceptualization of deep ecology as articulated by Garrard (2004),<sup>10</sup> namely, as a mode of ecological activism, and not a singular, clearly identified movement, that clashes with the widespread *mainstream environmentalism*. This parallelism acknowledges the existence of a theoretical and philosophical basis on which Margaret Atwood initially relied: she has steered the Gardeners' philosophy towards an activist trajectory closely aligned with the tenets of deep ecology, but then she then crafted a new and distinct identity of this group, also explicitly recognising its conflictual characteristics through the description of the counter-revolutionary attitudes towards members of the Adam One sect.

In contemporary assessments, Garrard's deep ecology has been associated to pejorative stereotype (Muñoz-González 40) as frequently exposed as being politicized toward the far left and accused of promoting privatist practices (Katsnelson), one of them being vegetarianism as proven in a cartoon featured in the *New Yorker*. This cartoon depicts two brontosaurus consuming leaves while a meteorite looms in the background, suggesting the impending destruction of the Earth. One of the brontosaurus says: "I can't believe I ate all that salad for nothing." The cartoon reveals a dangerously unconscious attitude and clearly targets vegetarian habits through a satire that is genuinely perplexing in its superficial and trivializing treatment of such an issue. This charge reminds of how the Exfernal World in *The Year of the Flood* too perceive the vegetarian diet promoted by the Gardeners as a needlessly extreme form of deprivation. From this viewpoint too, manifests the unfeasibility of Bouson's comparison, which is hardly tenable when, among the dictates of Næss's Deep Ecology, we struggle to trace a clear position regarding vegetarian dieting. This results in a confused definition of Deep Ecology itself since, without an all-encompassing consideration of vegetarianism, it is not possible to develop a systematic consideration of issues such as land use practices, food

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<sup>10</sup> Henceforth, for the purpose of conceptual differentiation, the nomenclature employed will entail capitalization when denoting Næss's movement (Deep Ecology), while adhering to the original lowercase format will be maintained in reference to Garrard's modality (deep ecology).



availability, and the quality of human life in relation to it (Waller 191). On the contrary, these are the aspects more emphatically underscored by Adam One and the Gardeners, who, through the cultivation of the Ararats, successfully actualize a proposition for a patent on food and environmental sustainability that is not only internally cohesive but, more significantly, practicable.

The viability of the Gardeners' proposed system is substantiated toward the end of the novel, wherein a scene unfolds, portraying Toby and Ren as they engage in the search for food as early humans in the wilderness. Drawing on the knowledge gained from their time with the Gardeners, stored within their mental Ararat, they easily discern the edible nourishment nature offers them. Following the Waterless Flood, the surviving Gardeners undergo a reversion to ancestral practices, symbolizing a restoration of equilibrium between humanity and the plant and animal realms. At this juncture, Toby, and Ren, are explicitly depicted while consuming animal flesh. Notwithstanding previous criticisms, characterizing the Gardeners' eco-philosophy as devoid of substantiation is an oversimplification that fails to acknowledge the nuanced nature of their actions. Upon the analysis of the context surrounding Toby and Ren's resumption of meat consumption, it is imperative to emphasize that their conduct does not encompass anthropophagy. Secondly, the meat partaken by the two women does not originate from an industrialized slaughtering process, akin to the practices associated with SecretBurger, but rather represents an acquisition of animal protein aligned with the natural cyclical dynamics of life and divorced from the excess-driven dynamics of the capitalist milieu. Margaret Atwood's decision to reintroduce the prospect of healthy meat consumption carries a dual-layered significance. Primarily, it endows the Gardeners' activist movement with the capacity to adapt to evolving circumstances. This facet underlines Atwood's characterization of the God's Gardeners as a proactive force, opposed to instances of ecological greenwashing and conventional environmentalism. Concurrently, it diverges from the deep ecology activist mode by eschewing an absolutist vegetarian imperative, thus emphasizing the pragmatic realism of the Gardeners' movement. This leads to the second implication linked to the author's discerning awareness of the challenges associated with advocating vegetarianism. While Atwood undeniably advocates for the viability of a vegetarian diet through her narrative, it tacitly conveys an acknowledgment of the formidable ecological commitment that not all individuals may be prepared to embrace.

The culminating concession to a carnivorous diet introduces an alternative and more readily implementable avenue that can potentially be put into practice by a wider range of people: the flexitarian diet. This approach represents a judicious, low-impact methodology involving intermittent animal protein consumption. In an almost prescient fashion, Atwood anticipates and introduces this alternative diet years ahead of the flexitarianism's emergence as a widespread trend in various countries. Toby and Ren's flexitarian dieting does not advocate for absolute and categorical deprivation; rather, it reveals the necessity for a progressively transformative shift within the production and consumption system.

By deciding to consume meat again, Toby proves to be able to discern the specific elements within Adam One's eco-philosophy that enable her to overcome the flood, deliberately eschewing the abstract and spiritual precepts in which she has never placed trust. Toby's attitude undermines D'Ugo's assertions regarding a



utopian salvation, simultaneously highlighting a tendency to disproportionately focus on religious fanaticism rather than thoroughly engaging with the issues surrounding vegetarianism and food sustainability. This limit is also traceable in the criticisms put forth by Labudova and Grimbeek, who allege hypocrisy on the part of the Gardeners due to their engagement in the disposal of Exfernal World's waste. However, this critique overlooks the potential positive environmental consequences of such activities, which align consistently with the principles underpinning a circular economy<sup>11</sup>.

Atwood deliberately exacerbates the theological beliefs of the Gardeners by making their religious faith a sardonic element that contributes to the idea of the group as fanatics whose extremism, however, must be confined to the religious sphere. The Gardeners' conceptualization of the Waterless Flood itself is religious only in its labelling, while they are aware that the catastrophe is the inevitable outcome of the inefficacy, volatility, and unsustainable nature of the capitalist Exfernal World. The apocalypse delineated in *The Year of the Flood* thus emerges as an ecological derangement directly engendered by human agency, imbuing the event with a historical veracity. This aligns with Atwood's broader thematic considerations on dystopia as a narrative device elucidating events that clashes conventional moral and social justice frameworks, whose roots are nevertheless readily discernible in our present reality.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, within *The Year of the Flood*, Atwood imparts a palpable sense of plausible inevitability to the depicted events, eliciting ecological disquietude in the reader with the aim of fostering a potentially "therapeutic corrective" (Harland 584).

The corrective element relies in the survival of the God's Gardeners as result of a food system based on moral and ecological integrity. Their salvation is linked to their awareness of the impending catastrophe, and "[...] their beliefs do in the end emerge as a credible response to the crisis, not because of their efficacy, but because they are based on the understanding that the problem of sustainability must remain insoluble in the absence of an 'anthropodicy'"<sup>13</sup> (Bergthaller 738).

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<sup>11</sup> For an updated introduction to the concept of circular economy applied to the sustainable food system, please refer to Jurgilevich *et al.*, Vilariño and Lehtokunnas *et al.*

<sup>12</sup> Please refer to the interview published by the Penguin Random House. Link available in Works Cited.

<sup>13</sup> The term 'anthropodicy' denotes a discipline aspiring to foster a participatory role for human beings in addressing not only the environmental crisis but, more broadly, the deteriorating life conditions on Earth. See Untea.



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