

Anthropocene Fiction as a Pedagogical Tool: The Speculative Ustopias of Margaret Atwood

Shraddha Adityavir Singh

Abstract

Anthropocene Fiction is a genre that offers affective overtures towards imagining the past, present, and future that would be felt either locally or globally, or even individually on the environment and the planet for humans, nonhumans, and posthumans in literary narratives. This paper focuses on how in the era of unprecedented environmental degradation, Anthropocene Fiction can be employed as a pedagogical tool to examine speculative literary worlds to dwell on the present and imagined future. By using Margaret Atwood's concept of ustopia and discussing her works in the ambit of Anthropocene Fiction, this paper aims to offer English literature classrooms ways to augment critical thinking about responsibility and vulnerability in the face of timely warnings offered by such writing.

Keywords: Anthropocene fiction, speculative fiction, ustopia, cli-fi

Introduction

With the climate crisis looming upon the planet, it is imperative to explore fields of study that can lend towards developing an environmental awareness amongst students. The current era is one of accelerated ecological ruin and large-scale planetary change, wherein Anthropocene Fiction is making overtures towards thinking with and thinking about earth-others, while developing a non-anthropocentric worldview.

Anthropocene¹ has been used as a term of reference in humanities and social sciences ever since it was proposed by Paul Crutzen and Eugene Stoermer, suggesting that "the biosphere and geological time

have been fundamentally transformed by human activity” (Moore, 2016, p. 3). So, although it has not been scientifically adopted, yet the term garnered enough attention and has been employed to indicate the impact of human civilization on the planet. It has become a point of conjunction for varied areas of knowledge production, in sciences, humanities, and social sciences to dwell upon human, nonhuman, and posthuman entities. Timothy Morton describes the Anthropocene as “a new phase of history in which nonhumans are no longer excluded or merely decorative features” (2013, p. 22). Timothy Clark refers to the Anthropocene as a “threshold concept” (2015, p. 15), a placeholder for the thinking involved in making sense of this damaged planet. Therefore, the Anthropocene invites fresh deliberations, new vocabularies, and speculative imaginaries to enable thought. Anthropocene Fiction augments transdisciplinary scholarship. It requires a contemplation about concerns raised in the fields of sciences, social sciences, as well as humanities through the prism of literature. In the same vein, this paper seeks to explore Anthropocene Fiction as a pedagogical tool for initiating discussions in English literature classrooms about the environment crisis. The methodology for this would be to introduce the genre classification of literature as Anthropocene Fiction and demonstrating ways of critically exploring Margaret Atwood’s speculative writing within this discourse.

Anthropocene Fiction as a Pedagogical Tool

In his lecture, “The Human Condition in the Anthropocene”, delivered at Yale University in 2015, historian Dipesh Chakrabarty emphasized on how, in a period of focus on human and geological timescales, the way we think and how we think would remain to be the most profound questions in historical and philosophical contexts. Chakrabarty’s engagement with the Anthropocene is a key starting point for revisiting the humanities in the era of anthropogenic climate change. Grasping the scope of this change that Chakrabarty points out, can effectively be done via speculative storytelling in the Anthropocene era.

Kent Linthicum, who teaches at the Georgia Institute of Technology, United States of America; has designed courses focusing on vulnerability in the Anthropocene and approaching it via fiction. In his blogpost, “Learning to Teach in the Anthropocene” on the Georgia Tech platform, he writes that by using Speculative Fiction by Octavia Butler he aims

to initiate an understanding in his students of how, “the Anthropocene has made and makes communities vulnerable, not to fetishize those vulnerabilities but to show students the asymmetrical vulnerabilities of the Anthropocene, and then help them contrast those vulnerabilities to their own as a space to build solidarity” (2019, para. 9). In her journal article, Melissa Sexton, a lecturer at the Department of English, University of North Carolina Wilmington, United States of America writes of her experience of introducing Anthropocene thinking via Speculative Fiction as, “Looking to speculative futures, the dystopian and disaster narratives we discussed imagined worlds where technological innovation cannot be neatly separated from justice issues.” (2020, p. 27) Therefore, in classrooms, Speculative Fiction has been employed in enhancing an understanding of environmental issues. However, Speculative Fiction cannot exclusively be read as, or represent the issues raised by the scholars of, the Anthropocene. This necessitated a new genre categorization that could aid pedagogical engagement specifically with the concerns of the Anthropocene.

According to John Rieder, contemporary cultural thought leans towards genre organisation and structuring based on time and place and mass publication. He talks about Science Fiction in *Science Fiction and the Mass Cultural Genre System*, and terms this new form of classification of genres as “the mass cultural genre system” (2017, p. 1). Thus, for taking a historical or socio-cultural point of view for communicating the contemporary crisis on our planet, Anthropocene Fiction is a useful term. Many scholars and writers have mediated on the relevance of Anthropocene Fiction². Adam Trexler deliberates on how anthropogenic climate change, that has impacted the earth, has also affected literature and for teaching literature within the discourse of the Anthropocene, he found that there was a lacuna in literary criticism in addressing the form of the novel as affecting a response to this crisis. By using climate science, sociology, reflecting on the oceans, ecosystems, and changes to these, Trexler argues that the novel brings forth tangible experiences of living in such times. Amitav Ghosh finds the modern novel to be inadequate in describing the experiences of the Anthropocene³, even though “it was in exactly the period in which human activity was changing the earth’s atmosphere that the literary imagination became radically centred on the human” (2016, p. 88). Therefore, he finds it crucial for the stories of climate change as well as ecological disasters, along with non-human

presence, to find representation in fiction that is taken seriously, and not relegated to the margins. In the wake of such deliberations, emerged Cli-fi, a neologism popularised by journalist Dan Bloom's usage in his blogpost in 2015, "Can 'Cli-Fi' Help Keep Our Planet Livable?". It attracted the attention of Margaret Atwood, who linked it with her article in the same year in the online journal *Medium*, "It's Not Climate Change, It's Everything Change". Interestingly, the opinion shared by Bloom and Atwood was the same. It was about the pedagogical relevance of introducing climate change fiction in the classrooms, and specifically for Atwood—Speculative Fiction as a way of doing so. However, despite the popularity of the term Cli-fi, Trexler prefers using the term Anthropocene Fiction over Cli-fi or ecocriticism as he understands the preoccupations of the ecocritics to view climate change as a human incursion into nature, as a scientific theory, not as a process that links the human and the non-human. He suggests possible directions to investigate "a moment whose literary, political, cultural, geological, and biological coordinates have not yet fully emerged" (2015, p. 19).

Anthropocene Fiction is an execution of imagination that allows the reader to bridge the gap between understanding the theoretical impact of climate change and experiencing it as a large-scale or localised event within the narrative of the novel being examined with the characters, human, non-human, and posthuman, going through the impacts of climate crisis. Based on this identification, or even distancing, Anthropocene Fiction allows us to understand how identical, yet irregular, experiencing the Anthropocene may be. Trexler, and by extension the genre of Anthropocene Fiction, equips its readers with the ability to reconfigure human economies and ecologies around the representations of non-human and posthuman, and understand and question human agency in the face of environmental issues wherein non-human and posthuman players may be active agents. Anthropocene works at a scale that is global, that impacts local or individual responses in varied ways. Trexler states that, "To date, nearly all Anthropocene Fiction addresses the historical tension between the existence of catastrophic global warming and the failed obligation to act." (2015, p. 9) Thus, Anthropocene Fiction can be a tool to examine or understand, prophesize upon, and even mourn the conditions experienced due to climate change and environmental degradation with respect to agency and action.

Examining Atwood's *MaddAddam Trilogy* as Anthropocene Fiction

Margaret Atwood has been a resounding voice in presenting ecological concerns in her oeuvre, and through her various charities, and the green organisations and endeavours, that she supports⁴, she has represented environmental issues⁵ for more than half a century. Atwood's *MaddAddam Trilogy*, her speculative ustopia, is in the ambit of the Anthropocene, rife with instances of climate change and the depletion of the ozone layer. The three books of the trilogy *Oryx and Crake* (2003), *The Year of the Flood* (2009), and *MaddAddam* (2013) depict afternoon thunderstorms, rising of the sea levels submerging coastal areas, melting of the northern permafrost, extinction of several species, and unbearable heat as common planetary occurrences. And all of these are caused by the biotechnology evolution and greed of the capitalist companies that govern the world of the *MaddAddam Trilogy*. These corporate firms control and manage their own gated compounds under the protection of the privately-owned and armed CorpSeCorps, and have installed solar air purifiers for their inhabitants as kitschy modern art. These segregated compounds are an Anthropocene fantasy—they aim to provide a self-contained escape from the harsh realities of the planet. However, in the trilogy, they represent an absence of systems of social welfare and governance; and further highlight the precarity of life.

Unethical practices are commonplace in the narrative, as companies like HelthWyzer have implanted disease-causing virus in medicines and supplements and offered cures for the same. AnooYoo, the beauty-and-mood enhancing spa offers physical transformations to those who can afford it but exploits the labour of the disadvantaged. Happicuppa and SecretBurgers, the coffee and burger chains, use raw material from dubious sources for their products. Genetically modified babies are in demand, and BioCorps are profiting out of gene-splicing human babies. Thus, in the trilogy, all these companies compromised on ethics for the sake of profit and drove the world towards an ongoing crisis-like situation with disparaging socio-economic, political, and environmental instability with no regard for any life forms, human as well as non-human. Amidst the same setup are a cult called the God's Gardeners with Adam One as their leader—who promote sustainable living and foraging, provide refuge to the ones they can save, and spearhead underground attacks on the exploitative corporations.

It is interesting to note how individual characters like Crake, the scientist, enact agency differently in such a scenario. Having grown up in the privileged compounds of these large bio-corporations, Crake fights the system from within and develops a posthuman genetically modified species—the Crakers. The Crakers are devoid of any materialistic needs, have many genetic features borrowed from the nonhuman world, and have a limited lifespan of a few decades. Some of the members of the cult, the God’s Gardeners, are highly gifted scientists, who are employed by Crake to help him with the designing of the Crakers. All of them work undercover to dismantle the system from within. Crake plans the elimination of the human species by planting a deadly virus in HelthWyzer’s Blyss Pluss Pill—a pill meant to enhance sexual pleasure and offer longevity; and designs the Crakers to be the custodians of the planet. This is his one-stop solution for saving the earth from further damage by the humans. In her contribution to Greta Thunberg’s *The Climate Book* (2022), Atwood writes, “It’s a high probability that if nothing is done to stop the climate crisis and the parallel species extinctions now well underway, a Crake will appear among us with a mission to put us out of our misery.” (2022, p. 360) This is the kind of thinking that Anthropocene Fiction evokes. The possible and probable scenarios offered by fiction, may or may not be practical, but they offer ways of testing and trying out various entanglements with ecological concerns.

In the final book of the trilogy, *MaddAddam*, the surviving few humans find Jimmy the Snowman and the Crakers; and have to find ways of surviving along with the genetically modified nonhuman pigeons, wolvogs, liobalms, and rakunks. Together they have to make decisions that would impact human, nonhuman and posthuman life and find ways of communicating with each other. In spite of what may seem like a universal struggle to persist in the face of this calamity, Atwood’s trilogy does not bring the multispecies players on a level playing field—however, the nonhuman and posthuman players are shown to depict agency, plans and actions of their own. It is very clear, that for survival, everyone will have to come together; and Atwood’s narrative offers such possibilities and engenders hope. Thus, despite the catastrophe, the relationality between humans and their environment and amongst the various nonhuman and posthuman characters in the *MaddAddam Trilogy*, there is a future of regeneration where practical solutions are

being thought of not just in terms of basic needs for survival, but also in terms of governance, social interactions, skill-development, language acquisition—which are essential in understanding this multispecies cohabitation as an aspect of Anthropocene Fiction. This deliberation can generate multidisciplinary conversation in classrooms where Atwood's *MaddAddam Trilogy* is discussed, where apart from the ethical ramifications of Crake's actions, conversation about the inherited fractured planet and the way forward become engaging points of learning in the light of the diverse group of characters present in the narrative. Thinking must account for not just the humans, but also the earth others in such a set-up. Atwood's utopias are, "the imagined perfect society and its opposite." (2012, p. 66) She coined this word by bringing together utopia and dystopia to show how both could coexist simultaneously. In her speculative utopia, the *MaddAddam Trilogy*, Atwood depicts a world struggling to cope with an environment calamity looming large, amidst a crumbling social order with rampant exploitation and greed; and finding ways of negotiating with the challenges in a responsible way. Therefore, it amplifies thinking, through the aid of literature, about discussing solutions and ways of bringing scientific and creative thought together through the hybrid agency of the multispecies players in the narrative.

Conclusion

As deliberated upon in the paper, Anthropocene Fiction provides an opportunity to scholars of literature to conduct transdisciplinary research. However, it does not privilege any knowledge system over another. Rather, it operates on an understanding of shared vulnerabilities in a multispecies world. Possible future settings, as well as projected pasts, are studied in the classroom via Anthropocene Fiction where scenarios are examined with an understanding of agency with respect to causes, choices, effects, and results; and the paper specifically depicts this in Atwood's utopias where there is hope of survival at the end with a sense of shared responsibility towards the survival of planetary life. Thus, this paper has demonstrated, for educators and learners in a literature classroom, how the emergency of the Anthropocene implores that the content and discussion of it should be mediated in ways that intersect with the affective turn towards creating environmentally and socially just pedagogies; and the ethical, ontological, and epistemological

practice of such pedagogical thinking can be facilitated through an engagement with Anthropocene Fiction.

Notes

1. The Anthropocene, as a term of reference was proposed by Paul Crutzen and Eugene Stoermer to indicate and dwell upon the impact of human civilization on the planet. Though not an officially used nomenclature to identify the current epoch, the term has been widely used ever since to evoke discussions on climate change, species extinction, pollution, etc. in academic and popular discourse.
2. For some deliberations on Anthropocene literature, see *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet: The Environmental Imagination of the Global* (2008) by Ursula K. Heise, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (2016) by Amitav Ghosh, *Anthropocene Fictions: The Novel in a Time of Climate Change* by Adam Trexler (2015), and *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and the Anthropocene* by John Parham (2021).
3. For Amitav Ghosh's views on the modern novel, as well as literature in the Anthropocene refer to *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (2016)
4. Margaret Atwood is passionate about the environment. She is an avid birder and has been an honorary President of the Rare Bird Society. She has a dedicated page on her website about the green initiatives she promotes as practices in her everyday life and the charities she supports. More details about this can be found at <http://margaretatwood.ca>
5. In her latest project, Practical Utopias, Atwood is conducting live learning experiences on the DISCO platform for a period of eight weeks. This will involve discussions and imagining homes, foods, systems of governance, education, etc. for utopic scenarios of the future with the climate crisis as the most important concern to be dealt with. For a detailed list of Atwood's published works on environment and climate issues, visit <http://margaretatwood.ca/full-bibliography-2/>

References

- Atwood, M. (2003). *Oryx and Crake*. McClelland & Stewart.
- Atwood, M. (2009). *The year of the flood*. McClelland & Stewart.
- Atwood, M. (2012). *In other worlds: SF and the human imagination*. Virago.
- Atwood, M. (2013). *MaddAddam*. McClelland & Stewart.
- Atwood, M. (2015). *It's not climate change: It's everything change*. Medium. <https://medium.com/matter/it-s-not-climate-change-it-s-everything-change-8fd9aa671804>
- Atwood, M. (2022). Practical utopias. In G. Thunberg (Ed.), *The climate book* (pp. 360-363). Penguin.

- Bloom, D. (2015). *Can 'Cli-Fi' help keep our planet livable?* Medium. <https://medium.com/@clificentral/can-cli-fi-help-keep-our-planet-livable-8b053bd4aa35>
- Clark, T. (2015). *Ecocriticism at the edge: The anthropocene as a threshold concept*. Bloomsbury.
- Crutzen, P.J., & Stoermer, E.F. (2000). The "Anthropocene". *IGBP Newsletter*, 41, 17-18. <http://www.igbp.net/download/18.316f18321323470177580001401/1376383088452/NL41.pdf>
- Chakrabarty, D. (2015). The human condition in the Anthropocene. *The Tanner lectures in human values*. Yale University. <https://tannerlectures.utah.edu/Chakrabarty%20manuscript.pdf>
- Ghosh, A. (2016). *The great derangement: Climate change and the unthinkable*. Penguin.
- Linthicum, K. (August 26, 2019). Learning to teach in the anthropocene. *TECHStyle*. <https://techstyle.lmc.gatech.edu/learning-to-teach-in-the-anthropocene/>
- Moore, J.W. (2016). *Anthropocene or capitalocene?: Nature, history, and the crisis of capitalism*. PM Press.
- Morton T. (2013). *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and ecology after the end of the world*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Rieder J. (2017). *Science fiction and the mass cultural genre system*. Wesleyan University Press.
- Sexton, M. (2020). Teaching the anthropocene: Technology and environmental justice. *Resilience: A Journal of the Environmental Humanities*, 8(1), 26-31. doi:10.1353/res.2020.0034.
- Thunberg, G. (2022). *The climate book*. Penguin Random House.
- Trexler, A. (2015). *Anthropocene fictions: The novel in a time of climate change*. University of Virginia Press.

Shraddha Adityavir Singh is Associate Professor at the Department of English, Zakir Husain Delhi College, University of Delhi. Her areas of interest are genre fiction and literary theory.

shraddha@zh.du.ac.in