



# A Study of Female Alienation in The Year of the Flood From the Perspective of Fromm's Alienation Theory

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**Abstract:** The Year of the Flood is the second book in Margaret Atwood's *MaddAddam Trilogy*. As a Canadian literary queen, Margaret mainly explores the issue of women's situation and prospects in the society. She depicts the current situation of women with delicate strokes, and *The Year of the Flood* is a typical example of this. This novel depicts the post-apocalyptic scenario faced by mankind after a waterless flood. The work delves into the postmodern society's over-reliance on technology and material development. People blindly pursue development rather than to fulfil real needs. In this background, the novel reveals the alienating effects of the egoistic tendencies of the society on women's existential condition. This paper analyses the survival of women in capitalist society as revealed in the novel *The Year of the Flood* Epidemic and applies Fromm's theory of alienation to illustrate the alienated survival that women face in capitalist society in the novel, revealing that society tends to take economic growth and technological advancement as the criteria for measuring social progress, thus ignoring the ecological environment's capacity to withstand the impact of development and the spiritual needs of human beings. This single criterion of pursuing development not only causes damage to nature, but also alienates women's state of existence. The purpose of this paper is to arouse readers' thoughts and reflections, to call on people to pay attention to the relationship between human beings and nature and human beings and society, to build a sound society with respect, equality and responsibility, and to realize the liberation of women, so that human beings can realize true freedom and liberation.

**Keywords:** Margaret Atwood, *The Year of the Flood*, Fromm, Alienation, Liberation

## Introduction

Margaret Atwood is an acclaimed Canadian author whose work usually explores real-world settings, incorporating elements of capitalism and presenting visions of how the future might unfold, and whose work tends to explore themes of power, gender, the environment, and society, with the novels often depicting the impact of technological advances, and order under a capitalist society on the lives of human beings, and especially on women. *The Year of the Flood*, a novel by Margaret Atwood published in 2009, is a feminist account of the unbridled development of technology under postmodern capitalism, which has led to a waterless flood sweeping through human society, showing the existential plight of the humans in it, especially women.

Fromm's alienation theory reveals the alienation of human beings in the situation of capitalist society. Instead of achieving freedom, people are plunged into deeper spiritual dilemmas under the great material abundance and rapid economic and technological growth, and his theory of alienation covers all aspects in capitalist society, including the production process, consumption, political life and social relations. Society progresses only when there is simultaneous change in the economic, socio-political, and cultural spheres. Any progress confined to one sphere injures the progress of the whole<sup>[1, p. 13]</sup>. The problem of human survival under capitalist society requires the establishment of a sound society through comprehensive social change, which has a positive significance in solving the real dilemma.

This paper attempts to combine Fromm's alienation theory to try to analyse the manifestation of female alienation in the novel, to explore how women under capitalist society are caught in spiritual dilemmas and existential alienation, and how women should resist the alienation brought by society.

## 1. The Alienation of Female Existence in Capitalist Society

According to Fromm, there are four main manifestations of capitalist alienation in a capitalist society. Here, the current status of women's alienation in the novel *The Year of the Flood* will be analyzed by applying Fromm's theory of alienation and combining it with the content of the novel *The Year of the Flood*.

### 1.1 Alienation from Ways of Existence

In the era of rapid scientific and technological development in post-capitalist societies, there is a growing willingness to pursue material and spiritual pursuits. However, the corresponding ways of survival have also undergone fundamental changes, and the system built on profit and power has revealed a number of problems. In the novel, Toby's mother dies after contracting an artificial virus, while his father, crushed by great despair, ends his life with a gun. In order to avoid official surveillance, Toby flees to an abandoned city where everything is centred on material things. Under these circumstances, women can only find a way to survive by trading their value.



“After the money from the hair was used up, she’d sold her eggs on the black market<sup>[2, p. 34]</sup>.” This sentence suggests that Toby, new to the abandoned city, can only survive by cheapening her body into a commodity. Later, while working at the Secret Burger, she meets a terrifying man named Blanco, who made her change color at the mention of his name. Blanco is Toby’s manager, a violent man who sees his female employees as tools for venting. “But he figured the girls were his perks<sup>[2, p. 39]</sup>,” who sees women as his property. In order to survive, the female employees working here have to submit to his exploitation. However, as soon as Frank loses interest in her, he ruthlessly gets rid of them. Even after Toby escapes the “secret burger” and joins the gardeners’ organization, she can’t quite escape the psychological shadow that Frank casts over her. The fear that Frank has created for Toby still hangs over her. Obviously, in a capitalist totalitarian society, women are in a vulnerable position of oppression and alienation. They are subjected to an oppressive system that commodifies them and they exist only as tools to satisfy male desires. This systemic status quo drives a cycle of exploitation that perpetuates women’s vulnerability and fear.

The chaotic conditions in the derelict are the result of capitalism’s uncontrolled rule and a symbol of the alienation that drives the female condition of existence. The abandoned city is filled with echoes of despair and hopelessness. In the novel, the nightclub “Scales” is a prominent manifestation of the phenomenon of women’s alienation, “One day we’d seen a scaly girl running down the street in daytime, with a black-suited man chasing her. She sparkled a lot because of her shiny greenscales; she’d kicked off her high heels and she was running in her bare feet, dodging in and out among the people, but then she hit a patch of broken glass and fell. The man caught up with her and scooped her up, and carried her back to Scales with her green snakeskin arms dangling down. Her feet were bleeding<sup>[2, p. 73]</sup>.” It can be seen that the inaction of the government and the chaotic social conditions cast a shadow of domination and exploitation on the vulnerable women. In this ominous reality, survival is no longer a matter of choice, but becomes a cruel game where the rules are decided by those who hold the power. It reflects the power imbalance and systemic oppression ingrained in capitalist totalitarian societies. It highlights the struggles faced by marginalized communities, especially women, who struggle to survive in an unjust environment where they are seen as objects rather than equal human beings. Through the harrowing experiences of Toby and others, we are forced to think about the shortcomings of the capitalist system and human relationships, to find solutions to objectified human relationships in an egoistic society, and to find a way out of women’s existence as human beings with authentic intrinsic value rather than commercialized value.

## 1.2 Alienation from Freedom

The process of human individualization is inevitable and irreversible. In Fromm’s words, Freedom is characteristic of human existence<sup>[3, p. 16]</sup>. Economic development is often accompanied by individual progress, but this freedom also gradually alienates human relationships, leading to feelings of loneliness and helplessness. In order to escape loneliness, people usually adopt two ways: one is “Escape Mechanism” and the other is “Convergence”, but still perceiving themselves as free.

In the novel, Lucerne becomes the perfect example of escaping freedom. She used to be a member of the Holswither compound, however, her husband’s long-term focus on scientific research lacks love and companionship for her. This, coupled with the closed administration of the HelthWyzer compound, makes Lucerne feel lonely and lost, longing to find her freedom. Later, she meets Zeb, who can satisfy her desires, at the AnooYoo Corp. Lucerne’s release of her desire for self is actually a manifestation of external repression. Her husband stays in the research lab for long hours and lacks care and love for Lucerne; and the closed administration of the HelthWyzer House makes Lucerne become obsessed when she meets Zeb, which is a way for her to vent out her repression. This is what drives Lucerne to seek “freedom” and leave the HelthWyzer. Although she succeeds in getting out of her bondage, later on, when she is with Zeb, they fight a lot and there is a lack of trust between them. Lucerne says, “You’ve got someone else!”, “I can smell bitch all over you<sup>[2, p. 128]</sup>!” This clearly shows her loss of belonging and security, and no matter how much reassurance Zeb gives, it does not help. The only solution is to solve the problem by finding an outside authority. Thus, in the end, Lucerne returns to the compound and regains her “freedom”, i.e. eliminates the quest for “self”. On the face of it, Lucerne is seeking freedom, but in fact, she is dissatisfied with the real world and has alienated her consciousness, thus choosing to escape from the act of freedom.

According to Fromm’s theory of “Escape From Freedom”, personal freedom in modern society brings people great responsibility and uncertainty, resulting in a sense of powerlessness and nothing to rely on. In order to escape the anxiety and stress of this freedom, people often seek authority and guidance from outside in order to free themselves from responsibility. Lucerne’s experience is the real-life embodiment of this theory, and in her quest for freedom she is actually escaping from the dissatisfaction and repression of the real world.

## 1.3 Alienation from Consumption

Driven by scientific and technological progress, science and technology have become more and more powerful in controlling human beings, and people have gradually lost their sense of independence and become slaves to machines. In the capitalist consumer society, the phenomenon of alienation of consumption has appeared, and people’s consumption is no longer a means to satisfy their needs, but has become the ultimate goal. The advertisements have such enticing slogans as “UGLY DUCKLINGS TO LOVELY SWANS AT” and “Goose Your Self-Esteem<sup>[2, p. 246]</sup>.” As well as the themes of leisure and holiday or regaining youth, are nothing more than a cover for the rhetoric of capitalism. Women, under the temptation of these sweet-talking advertising slogans, are willing to spend at all costs in

the pursuit of eternal youth. Virtually every woman who patronizes these places comes for some purpose, “The ladies who were going in, frightened by the first signs of droop and pucker, then going out again, buffed and tightened and resurfaced, irradiated and despoiled<sup>[2, p. 250]</sup>.” What's more, adverts proclaim: “We're not selling only beauty, the AnooYoo Corp said in their staff instructionals. We're selling hope<sup>[2, p. 251]</sup>.” This marketing orientation leads to the alienation of people's consumption. The over-reliance on technology and the pursuit of the dream of eternal youth is clearly a tactic employed by the capitalist economy for profit, revealing the emptiness of the female spirit and the lack of rationality in such a society. The alienation of consumption is clearly influenced by social marketing techniques. Fromm argues that contemporary consumption is often instigated, “Consumption is essentially an artificially stimulated arousal of gratification, an illusory activity alienated from our real selves<sup>[5]</sup>.” The skilful use of advertising and propaganda devices in the novel makes people pour out their money and energy in pursuit of superficial beauty and rapid change. In such a social atmosphere, women are moulded into objects of consumption and misled by the media and advertisements to pursue perfect appearance and eternal youth. The disconnection between this pursuit and reality has led to the alienation of their consumption behaviour. Their consumption is no longer a means to satisfy their needs, but rather an ultimate and unrealistic end; whereas the market used to satisfy needs, in current capitalism, needs are slaves to the market, and consumption behaviour is manipulated and influenced by marketing.

#### **1.4 Alienation from Interpersonal Relationship**

Under the influence of egoism, human relationships are gradually based on mutual needs and mutual exploitation. Let's take Amanda in the novel as an example, she is a refugee from Tex-Mexican who lost her father and mother, and her mother even died due to the poor water quality in the refugee camp. In the harsh environment of survival, Amanda grows up understanding that the only way to get what she needs is through trade. For a girl with no support and nothing to lose, the market value she had in her was herself, becoming the tool used to make the exchange. “I knew she used to do that kind of trade, for food, when she was so hungry after the Texas hurricane, but she'd told me she'd never liked it and it was strictly business<sup>[2, p. 151]</sup>.” In the novel, the relationship between Ren and Bernice gradually deteriorates, which causes Ren to be emotionally drained. Amanda sees this and in an attempt to cheer Ren up, she makes a deal with Croze and Shackie in exchange for marijuana, but of course, such a deal is predictably costly. In this example, we can see that the relationship between women and men is alienated into a relationship between objects. Amanda offers her body in exchange for marijuana, and women are objectified into concrete commodities, losing their dignity and selves.

Fromm's theory of alienation of social relations says that relationships in modern society have become increasingly cold and egoistic, and the bonds between people have begun to drift apart. In this situation, people are more inclined to see others as tools and transform relationships into exchanges between objects<sup>[6]</sup>. Amanda's predicament and the fact that she is forced to exchange her body for material things is the result of this alienation of social relationship.

In a nutshell, the influence of egoism has gradually evolved the relationship between human beings into one of mutual exploitation and mutual need. Amanda, as an example, is in a difficult situation and has to use her body as an exchange, losing her dignity and self. It presents the indifference of interpersonal relationship and the transformation of interests between people in modern society.

## **2. Means of Eliminating Alienation**

In her works, Margaret Atwood reveals the alienation of women's existence under the conditions of capitalism, and tries to arouse people's attention to the reality of life, as well as to the realization of human values and the construction of morality. Fromm argues that in the modern age of industrialization, the objectification of society caused by the alienation of labour has affected every aspect of human life, and that the human self is caught up in a circle of alienation phenomena, lacking in rationality and negativity. The gradual unidirectionalization between man and society has led to the emergence of a quantifiable phenomenon of man and morality. As a result, problems such as moral degradation, loosening of ethical order, and confusion of social order and morality have emerged, resulting in a lack of human morality and spiritual civilization and stagnation of social development<sup>[7]</sup>. In the face of all these problems, the following is a combination of the subjective and objective aspects of Fromm's theory and the way to abandon alienation, thereby calling on people to think and act deeply to reshape a sound society and rebuild a harmonious relationship between human beings and between human beings and society.

### **2.1 Existential Revolution**

Fromm's book, through the analysis of people's daily life behaviors, pointed out that people's value orientation can be divided into two kinds: “possession” and “survival”, and the lifestyles they show are “possession” and “survival” lifestyles respectively.” and “survival” lifestyles. According to Erich Fromm, consumption is a kind of “possession”, and alienated consumption is a kind of “possession-based” way of life. He made a profound criticism of alienated consumption, and put forward a conception of abandoning alienated consumption and returning to the original meaning of consumption<sup>[8]</sup>.

In order to break through the alienation of women's existence in capitalist society, it is necessary to build a “survival based existence” society. This approach stresses the self-realization, creativity and development of the individual. In such a way of life, the female subject becomes an active practitioner, actively participates in creative activities and realizes her personal values.

In the novel *The Year of the Flood*, Amanda is a character who practices survival focused existence well. “Amanda? Got out. higher education. art<sup>[2, p. 255]</sup>.” Through Zeb's portrayal of her we can see that Amanda has always remained courageous and motivated. She pursues higher education and shows her intelligence by using her talents to create art. With her intelligence and courage, Amanda bravely searches for and realizes her own worth against the backdrop of the influence of a sickly capitalist society. The way of life she pursues is exactly what Fromm advocates, that human beings, as subjects of activity, should realize the value of their lives through personal growth and self-improvement. Amanda's actions and endeavors to become an individual who actively participates in creative activities demonstrates the spirit that people should pursue in their social existence.

Fromm's emphasis on replacing a possession-based existence with a survival based existence aims to pursue inner fulfillment, build social care and harmony, and achieve individual liberation and social transformation. This transformation contributes to the well-being and sustainability of the individual and society. For women to eliminate the alienation of their way of being in a pathologically egoistic capitalist society can be achieved by redefining success and happiness, building support systems, personal development and promoting social change. This requires individual effort and social support to create a more egalitarian, caring and meaningful social environment.

## 2.2 “Love” revolution

By advocating and practising love, people can overcome feelings of loneliness and alienation and experience identification with self and others, thus maintaining individuality and integrity<sup>[1]</sup>. In the novel, Lucerne can avoid feeling lonely due to her husband's indifference and remove the emotion of feeling helpless due to Zeb's departure by paying more attention to her child, Ren. By distributing her love to Ren, she will realize the value of her life and the meaning of her existence. On the other hand, it is mentioned in the novel that Toby's care for Ren makes her experience a sense of mission and responsibility and find herself in loving devotion.

Fromm's “Love” revolution provides us with a framework for thinking about and understanding this emotional shift. According to Fromm, the indifference of modern human relationships is due to the lack of true love. Love is the answer to the most basic questions of human existence; it is a life activity, not a simple emotion. In short: love is primarily about giving, not receiving. Fromm states that love is primarily giving, not receiving<sup>[9]</sup>. The theory emphasizes love as a positive behaviour and attitude aimed at attending to the needs and well-being of others. In this novel, Lucerne can practise this positive love and overcome her feelings of loneliness and helplessness by turning her attention to her child and caring for her sincerely. In addition to this, love is an emotion that embraces and identifies with others. In the novel, if Lucerne, through establishing a deep emotional connection with her child, Ren, then she can better understand Ren's inner world and develop a close relationship with her. This mutual identification and understanding can help them to maintain their individuality and self-integrity so that they can better cope with external pressures and challenges. At the same time, Fromm also points out that love requires effort and responsibility. In the novel, Toby's care for Ryan makes her experience responsibility and mission. “Adam One would say that Ren is a precious gift that has been given to Toby so that Toby may demonstrate unselfishness and sharing and those higher qualities the Gardeners had been so eager to bring out in her<sup>[2, p. 334]</sup>.” In her attention and care for Ren, she not only took responsibility for her growth and well-being, but also found meaning in her own existence. This sense of devotion and responsibility allows her to truly overcome her alienation from self and find her true identity and worth.

In conclusion, through Fromm's theory of love revolution, readers can understand that the characters of the novel will experience emotional transformation and realize their own values in their loving devotion. Toby finds her true identity by experiencing a sense of purpose and responsibility through caring for Ren. This emotional transformation reminds readers that by advocating and practising love, people can overcome alienation and realize themselves, as well as build strong and meaningful relationships.

## 2.3 Cultural revolution

Fromm argued that socialist ideas must give people a new spiritual soul in order to achieve equity and justice in society. In order to eliminate alienation, revolutions are needed in the field of culture, of which educational reform and the importance of the role of religion are important aspects. In the novel *The Year of the Flood*, the Rooftop Garden, an environmentally friendly religious organization, demonstrates the role of religion in the cultural revolution advocated by Fromm.

In this novel, Rooftop Garden, as an environmentally friendly religious organization, is committed to humanitarian ideas, focusing on human existence mode and the importance of environmental protection and sustainable development. “Our teachers were Nuala for the little kids and the Buds and Blooms Choir and Fabric Recycling, and Rebecca for Culinary Arts, which meant cooking, and Surya for Sewing, and Mugi for Mental Arithmetic, and Pilar for Bees and Mycology, and Toby for Holistic Healing with Plant Remedies, and Burt for Wild and Garden Botanicals, and Philo for Meditation, and Zeb for Predator-Prey Relationships and Animal Camouflage<sup>[2, p. 62]</sup>.” Each gardener plays his or her own role and co-operates with each other to achieve a common goal. This organizational structure rejects all anthropocentrism and emphasizes the humanist concept of caring. According to Fromm, religion plays an important role in cultural revolution. Religion can provide people with spiritual support and moral guidance and motivate them to be responsible for themselves, others and society. Rooftop Gardens, as an environmentally friendly religious organization, practices this concept on a religious level by respecting and protecting nature. Religious beliefs inspire the gardeners to focus not only on their own interests but also on the collective common good. It is from the basic survival knowledge and concepts learned from the roof garden that the main characters of the novel, Toby and Ryan, as

well as Amanda, benefit, as they protect themselves during the ravages of the epidemic. Fromm also emphasizes the importance of educational reform. The roof gardeners were systematically trained and educated to learn and practice a basic set of survival knowledge and values. This education equipped them with the ability and wisdom to respond to the flood and epidemic and to protect their own lives and the lives of others and their own dignity. The Rooftop Garden embodies the theory of cultural revolution and the role of religion in socialist thought. The organization is concerned with the overall well-being of mankind, emphasizing co-operation, environmental protection and social responsibility, while enabling gardeners to uplift themselves through education and religious beliefs to establish a more equitable, just and harmonious order.

### 3. Concluding

Atwood's feminist perspective focuses on the state of existence and problems of women in capitalist society, emphasizing the impact of gender inequality and social oppression on women's emancipation. Fromm's theory of alienation, on the other hand, critically examines the state of human existence under capitalist society, reveals the alienation and deprivation of people in the economic system, and emphasizes the close connection between human beings and themselves, and between human beings and society.

This paper integrates these two theories and analyses in depth the alienation of women's state of existence in the novel *The Year of the Flood* and the close connection between the liberation of women and the liberation of mankind. Meanwhile, countermeasures and ways to achieve female liberation and sustainable social development are proposed. The alienation of women's state of being under capitalist society is further explored, and the connection between gender emancipation and sustainable social development is emphasized, and a call is made for the construction of an organic and unified society. This study's in-depth exploration of the existing state of women's existence under capitalist society provides new perspectives and ways of thinking about gender equality, social progress and sustainable development.

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