

## The Moral Limits of Progress: A Posthumanist Critique of Margaret Atwood's Fiction

*Abdul Wadud*

M.A in English, M.Ed., NET., PhD Scholar, Department of English, Raiganj University

Email ID: [wadud.abdul93@gmail.com](mailto:wadud.abdul93@gmail.com)

### Abstract:

*The idea of progress has long been central to modern civilization, often equated with scientific advancement, technological innovation, and the expansion of human control over nature. However, in the contemporary era marked by rapid developments in biotechnology, artificial intelligence, and ecological transformation, the notion of progress demands critical re-evaluation. This research article examines the moral limits of progress through a posthumanist reading of the fiction of Margaret Atwood, with particular focus on the MaddAddam Trilogy. The study argues that Atwood's narratives expose the ethical contradictions inherent in the pursuit of technological and scientific perfection, revealing how such ambitions often lead to ecological degradation, social fragmentation, and moral collapse. Drawing upon posthumanist theory, bioethics, and ecocriticism, the article demonstrates that Atwood critiques the anthropocentric foundations of progress and calls for an alternative ethical framework grounded in interdependence, humility, and responsibility. Ultimately, her work underscores the urgent need to reconsider the meaning and direction of progress in an age defined by posthuman possibilities.*

**Keywords:** *Posthumanism, Progress, Ethics, Bioengineering, Margaret Atwood, Anthropocentrism, Ecocriticism, Dystopia, Technoscience, Moral Responsibility.*

### Introduction:

The concept of progress has historically functioned as a cornerstone of Enlightenment thought, signifying humanity's capacity to improve its condition through reason, science, and innovation. From industrialization to digital revolution, progress has been associated with mastery over nature and the continuous enhancement of human life. However, in the twenty-first century, this optimistic narrative is increasingly challenged by the unintended consequences of technological advancement—climate change, biodiversity loss, genetic manipulation, and social inequality.

Within this context, posthumanism emerges as a critical framework that questions the assumptions underlying traditional notions of progress. Rather than celebrating human dominance, posthumanism emphasizes the interconnectedness of human and non-human entities and critiques the hierarchical structures that privilege human interests above all else. The fiction of Margaret Atwood provides a compelling literary exploration of these issues, particularly through her speculative narratives that interrogate the ethical implications of scientific and technological innovation.

### ARTICLE INFO

*Article history:*

**Received:** 10 November 2024

**Received** in revised form

25 November 2024

**Accepted** 31 November 2024

**Citation:** Wadud, A., (2024)

“The Moral Limits of Progress: A Posthumanist Critique of Margaret Atwood's Fiction”, *Pen and Prosperity*, Vol. 1, Issue. 2, December 2024.

The *MaddAddam Trilogy*—comprising *Oryx and Crake* (2003), *The Year of the Flood* (2009), and *MaddAddam* (2013)—offers a dystopian vision of a world shaped by unchecked progress. Through its portrayal of genetic engineering, corporate dominance, and ecological collapse, the trilogy raises fundamental questions about the moral limits of progress. This article seeks to analyze how Atwood critiques the ideology of progress and exposes its ethical contradictions, arguing that her work serves as a cautionary reflection on the dangers of posthumanist ambitions when divorced from moral responsibility.

### **Theoretical Framework: Posthumanism and the Critique of Progress**

Posthumanism fundamentally challenges the anthropocentric assumptions that underpin modern conceptions of progress, questioning the privileging of the human as the central agent of knowledge, value, and development. Scholars such as Donna Haraway, Rosi Braidotti, and Cary Wolfe argue that the human subject cannot be understood as an autonomous or self-contained entity; rather, it exists within a complex network of relationships that includes technological systems, ecological processes, and non-human life forms (Haraway, 1991; Braidotti, 2013; Wolfe, 2010). This perspective disrupts the traditional hierarchical worldview that places humans at the apex of existence and instead calls for a redefinition of ethical responsibility as relational, distributed, and interdependent.

From a posthumanist standpoint, progress is no longer conceived as a linear trajectory of improvement but as a multifaceted and often contradictory process. While technological innovation undoubtedly enhances human capabilities, it simultaneously generates new forms of vulnerability, inequality, and ethical ambiguity (Braidotti, 2013). The dominant emphasis on efficiency, optimization, and control frequently marginalizes ethical considerations, resulting in what may be described as a “crisis of responsibility,” wherein the consequences of technological actions outpace the frameworks available to evaluate them (Wolfe, 2010).

In addition to posthumanist thought, ecocritical perspectives further complicate the notion of progress by foregrounding its environmental consequences. Scholars such as Greg Garrard and Timothy Morton emphasize the need to move beyond anthropocentric paradigms and adopt a more holistic understanding of human–environment relationships (Garrard, 2012; Morton, 2010). These approaches highlight the interconnectedness of ecological systems and the long-term impacts of human intervention, thereby providing a critical framework for analyzing the moral implications of progress in the fiction of Margaret Atwood.

### **Bioengineering and the Illusion of Perfectibility**

One of the most compelling representations of progress in Atwood’s fiction is the domain of bioengineering, which embodies the aspiration to achieve perfection through scientific innovation. In the *MaddAddam Trilogy*, technological advancement reaches unprecedented levels, enabling the creation of genetically modified organisms tailored to specific human purposes. Creatures such as pigeons and wolvogs exemplify this instrumentalization of life, as they are engineered for organ harvesting and security functions respectively (Atwood, 2003).

This pursuit of biological perfection reflects a broader ideological commitment to overcoming human limitations through technological means. The character Crake serves as the primary embodiment of this vision, seeking to eliminate perceived flaws in human nature—such as aggression, greed, and ecological destructiveness—by designing a new species, the Crakers (Atwood, 2003). His project represents the ultimate expression of progress as control, optimization, and rational design, grounded in the belief that human imperfection can be scientifically corrected.

However, Atwood critically interrogates this vision by exposing its ethical and existential limitations. Although the Crakers are free from disease, conflict, and environmental exploitation, they also lack

emotional depth, creativity, and symbolic consciousness. Their existence raises profound questions about the meaning of humanity and whether the eradication of imperfection necessarily constitutes genuine progress (Nayar, 2014). In this context, Atwood critiques the reductionist logic of bioengineering, which prioritizes functional efficiency over ethical complexity and cultural richness. The illusion of perfectibility, therefore, emerges as a dangerous simplification of life, one that neglects the very qualities that define human experience.

### **Corporate Power and the Commodification of Life**

Another critical dimension of progress in Atwood's fiction is the rise of corporate power and the commodification of life. The world of the *MaddAddam Trilogy* is dominated by multinational corporations that exert control over scientific research, economic systems, and social organization. Operating within a profit-driven framework, these institutions prioritize innovation and efficiency while systematically neglecting ethical responsibility (Atwood, 2003).

The corporate compounds depicted in the trilogy represent a form of controlled utopia, offering security, technological sophistication, and environmental regulation to their inhabitants. However, this apparent order is sustained through systemic inequality, exploitation, and ecological degradation (Atwood, 2009). The stark contrast between the privileged compounds and the chaotic "pleeblands" reveals the deep social divisions produced by this model of progress, exposing its inherently exclusionary nature.

By portraying a world in which life itself becomes a commodity, Atwood offers a powerful critique of the neoliberal logic that underpins contemporary technoscience. The reduction of living beings to marketable products not only undermines their intrinsic value but also erodes the moral foundations of society (Wolfe, 2010). This commodification extends beyond non-human organisms to encompass human bodies, identities, and experiences, illustrating the pervasive reach of capitalist rationality.

Ultimately, Atwood's depiction of corporate power highlights the ethical dangers of a system in which progress is measured solely in terms of economic gain and technological advancement. In such a framework, moral considerations are subordinated to profit, resulting in a dehumanized and ecologically unsustainable world. Through this critique, Atwood calls for a re-evaluation of progress that places ethical responsibility at its core.

### **Ecological Crisis and the Failure of Anthropocentrism**

The environmental degradation depicted in the fiction of Margaret Atwood serves as a compelling indictment of anthropocentric models of progress that privilege human dominance over ecological balance. In the *MaddAddam Trilogy*, the relentless exploitation of natural resources, coupled with unchecked genetic manipulation, results in widespread ecological collapse. The narrative world is marked by toxic wastelands, disappearing species, and unstable ecosystems, reflecting the consequences of a worldview that treats nature as an expendable resource (Atwood, 2003).

Textual evidence from *Oryx and Crake* illustrates this ecological crisis vividly, as the protagonist Snowman recalls a world where "whole species were disappearing... and new ones were being created" (Atwood, 2003, p. 241). This juxtaposition of extinction and artificial creation underscores the hubris of human intervention, revealing the illusion of control that underpins anthropocentric progress. The engineered organisms—such as pigoons and rakunks—symbolize the commodification and manipulation of life, ultimately destabilizing natural systems.

Atwood's portrayal aligns closely with posthumanist critiques articulated by thinkers such as Rosi Braidotti, who argues that anthropocentrism obscures the interconnectedness of all living beings (Braidotti, 2013).

Similarly, Timothy Morton emphasizes the concept of “ecological entanglement,” wherein human and non-human entities are inextricably linked (Morton, 2010). The emergence of hybrid creatures and altered ecosystems in Atwood’s fiction reflects these theoretical concerns, demonstrating that human interference in natural processes inevitably produces unintended and often catastrophic consequences.

Through this ecological dystopia, Atwood calls for a fundamental rethinking of progress—one that incorporates ecological responsibility and recognizes the limits of human authority. Rather than viewing nature as a passive object of exploitation, her narratives advocate for a more sustainable and reciprocal relationship between humans and the environment, grounded in humility and ethical awareness (Garrard, 2012).

### **The Collapse of Moral Frameworks**

A central dimension of Atwood’s critique of progress is the erosion of moral frameworks in a world dominated by technocratic rationality and corporate power. Characters such as Crake operate within a paradigm that prioritizes efficiency, logic, and control over ethical reflection. His decision to engineer and release a global pandemic—through the BlyssPluss pill—as a means of “correcting” human flaws exemplifies the dangers of an instrumental approach to ethics (Atwood, 2003).

Crake’s ideology is encapsulated in his belief that “nature is to zoos as God is to churches,” suggesting that both are human constructs subject to manipulation (Atwood, 2003, p. 206). This perspective reduces ethical considerations to matters of utility, thereby justifying extreme actions in the name of progress. His creation of the Crakers and the deliberate extermination of humanity reveal a profound moral vacuum, where ends are detached from ethical accountability.

This collapse of morality is further exacerbated by the corporate culture that dominates the trilogy’s socio-economic landscape. As Cary Wolfe notes, contemporary technoscience often operates in a space where ethical responsibility is diffused and obscured (Wolfe, 2010). In Atwood’s fictional world, corporations function without meaningful oversight, normalizing unethical practices such as genetic experimentation, environmental exploitation, and bio-capitalism (Atwood, 2009).

The absence of accountability creates a context in which scientific innovation proceeds without regard for its long-term consequences. This is evident in the proliferation of dangerous bioengineered species and the eventual outbreak of the pandemic, both of which stem from a failure to integrate ethical reflection into technological advancement. Atwood thus underscores the urgent need for moral frameworks that can keep pace with scientific progress, warning that without such frameworks, innovation becomes a destructive force rather than a constructive one.

### **Alternative Ethics: Community, Ecology, and Responsibility**

Despite the dystopian bleakness of her narratives, Atwood also gestures toward alternative ethical models that challenge the dominant paradigm of technocratic progress. One of the most significant of these is embodied by the God’s Gardeners, an eco-religious community that promotes sustainability, interdependence, and reverence for all forms of life. Their practices—including urban agriculture, vegetarianism, and recycling—reflect a commitment to ecological harmony and ethical living (Atwood, 2009).

The sermons of Adam One, the group’s spiritual leader, frequently emphasize the sanctity of non-human life and the dangers of environmental exploitation. For instance, he warns against “the Waterless Flood,” a metaphor for the impending ecological and moral catastrophe brought about by human excess (Atwood, 2009). This vision aligns with the posthumanist emphasis on relational ethics, as articulated by Donna

Haraway, who advocates for a model of “companion species” that recognizes the mutual dependence of humans and non-humans (Haraway, 2003).

Individual characters, such as Toby, further exemplify the possibility of ethical resilience and transformation. Through her journey from victimhood to leadership, Toby demonstrates the capacity for moral growth and adaptation in a fractured world. Her efforts to preserve knowledge, foster community, and care for both human and non-human life forms illustrate an alternative vision of progress grounded in responsibility and empathy.

By presenting these alternative frameworks, Atwood offers a counter-narrative to the dominant ideology of control and optimization. She suggests that ethical renewal is possible, even in the aftermath of collapse, and that sustainable futures depend on the cultivation of community-oriented and ecologically conscious values.

### **Reconfiguring Progress: Toward a Posthuman Ethics**

Ultimately, Atwood’s fiction calls for a profound reconfiguration of the concept of progress, aligning it with the principles of posthumanist ethics. This involves moving beyond anthropocentric and utilitarian frameworks toward a more relational understanding of existence, in which humans are viewed as part of a broader ecological and technological network.

As Rosi Braidotti argues, posthuman ethics emphasizes “becoming” rather than “being,” highlighting the fluid and interconnected nature of identity (Braidotti, 2013). In this context, progress is no longer defined by domination, mastery, or perfection, but by the capacity to coexist with diverse forms of life in a sustainable and ethical manner. Atwood’s narratives reflect this shift by illustrating both the dangers of unchecked progress and the possibilities of ethical transformation.

This redefinition requires a fundamental shift in values—from control to care, from exploitation to sustainability, and from individualism to interdependence. It also necessitates the development of ethical frameworks capable of addressing the complexities of a posthuman world, where the boundaries between human and non-human are increasingly blurred (Wolfe, 2010).

Through her speculative vision, Atwood demonstrates that the moral limits of progress are not abstract concerns but urgent realities with tangible consequences. Her work serves as a cautionary tale and a call to action, reminding readers that the future of humanity—and the planet—depends on our ability to navigate these ethical challenges with responsibility, humility, and foresight.

### **Conclusion**

The fiction of Margaret Atwood offers a profound critique of the ideology of progress, exposing its ethical contradictions and unintended consequences. Through her exploration of bioengineering, corporate power, ecological crisis, and moral collapse, Atwood reveals the dangers of pursuing technological advancement without ethical consideration. Her work underscores the need to rethink progress in the context of posthumanism, emphasizing the importance of interdependence, responsibility, and ethical awareness. By challenging anthropocentric assumptions and advocating for a more inclusive and sustainable vision of the future, Atwood provides valuable insights into the moral limits of progress. Ultimately, her fiction serves as both a warning and a call to action. It invites readers to critically examine the values that shape our understanding of progress and to consider alternative pathways that prioritize ethical responsibility and ecological balance. In an age defined by rapid technological change, such reflections are not only relevant but essential.

## Reference

- Agamben, G. (2004). *The open: Man and animal*. Stanford University Press.
- Atwood, M. (2003). *Oryx and Crake*. McClelland & Stewart.
- Atwood, M. (2009). *The Year of the Flood*. McClelland & Stewart.
- Atwood, M. (2013). *MaddAddam*. McClelland & Stewart.
- Bouson, J. B. (2010). "It's game over forever": Atwood's satiric vision of a bioengineered posthuman future in *Oryx and Crake*. *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 45(2), 139–156.
- Braidotti, R. (2013). *The posthuman*. Polity Press.
- Clark, T. (2011). *The Cambridge introduction to literature and the environment*. Cambridge University Press.
- Fukuyama, F. (2002). *Our posthuman future: Consequences of the biotechnology revolution*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Garrard, G. (2012). *Ecocriticism* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
- Habermas, J. (2003). *The future of human nature*. Polity Press.
- Haraway, D. J. (1991). *Simians, cyborgs, and women: The reinvention of nature*. Routledge.
- Haraway, D. J. (2003). *The companion species manifesto: Dogs, people, and significant otherness*. Prickly Paradigm Press.
- Heise, U. K. (2016). *Imagining extinction: The cultural meanings of endangered species*. University of Chicago Press.
- Howells, C. A. (2006). *The Cambridge companion to Margaret Atwood*. Cambridge University Press.
- Ingersoll, E. G. (Ed.). (2006). *Margaret Atwood: Conversations*. Princeton University Press.
- Latour, B. (2005). *Reassembling the social: An introduction to actor-network-theory*. Oxford University Press.
- Morton, T. (2010). *The ecological thought*. Harvard University Press.
- Morton, T. (2013). *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and ecology after the end of the world*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Nayar, P. K. (2014). *Posthumanism*. Polity Press.
- Vint, S. (2007). *Bodies of tomorrow: Technology, subjectivity, science fiction*. University of Toronto Press.
- Wolfe, C. (2010). *What is posthumanism?* University of Minnesota Press.