

# Women and Nature? Nature Writing in the Dystopian World

## Margaret Atwood's *The Testaments*

### Mulher e Natureza? Escrita sobre a natureza no mundo distópico

#### *The Testaments* de Margaret Atwood

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**Abstract:** Women and nature have an age-long association that has persisted throughout history, cultures, literatures and arts. In much of western thought, women are viewed as closer to nature in binary opposition to men, who have metaphorically and historically been associated with culture. The androcentric logic extends the binary opposition to culture/nature, placing a higher value on culture and as a result sanctioning human domination over nature. The analysis undertaken refutes this literary and philosophical heritage of an androcentric epistemology by deconstructing the symbolic and historical association between women and nature to advocate for humanity's interconnectedness with the ecosystem. This article investigates the competing discourses of nature writing in Margaret Atwood's *The Testaments* (2019) to rewrite the complex and plural relationship between women, nature, and technology. The theoretical and methodological framework of this study encompasses feminist literary criticism, dystopian studies and ecofeminist criticism. In the dystopia, the protagonists Agnes and Lydia use subversive nature writing to fight against victimization and search for empowerment. This paper expands feminist conceptions and protagonism, in addition, to providing reflections about androcentrism and anthropomorphism, with the literary and social commitment to awaken different perspectives that trigger particular processes underlying the struggle for equity among marginalized minorities.

**Keywords:** Women's writing. Dystopia. Ecofeminism. Margaret Atwood. *The Testaments*.

**Resumo:** Mulheres e natureza têm uma associação histórica de longa data que persiste em diversas culturas, literaturas e artes. Em grande parte do pensamento ocidental, as mulheres têm sido vistas como mais próximas da natureza em oposição binária aos homens, que metaforicamente e historicamente têm sido associados à cultura. A lógica androcêntrica estende a oposição binária à cultura/natureza, valorizando mais a cultura e, como resultado, sancionando a dominação humana sobre a natureza. A análise empreendida refuta essa herança literária e filosófica de uma epistemologia androcêntrica ao desconstruir a associação simbólica e histórica entre as mulheres e a natureza, para legitimar a interconexão da humanidade com o ecossistema. Este artigo investiga divergências na escrita sobre a natureza em *The Testaments* (2019) de Margaret Atwood para reescrever a relação complexa e plural entre as mulheres, a natureza e a tecnologia. O referencial teórico-metodológico desse estudo abarca a crítica literária feminista, os estudos distópicos e a crítica ecofeminista. Na distopia, as protagonistas Agnes e Lydia adotam escrita

subversiva sobre a natureza para lutar contra a vitimização e buscar empoderamento. O presente manuscrito amplia as concepções feministas e de protagonismo, além de proporcionar reflexões sobre androcentrismo e antropomorfismo, com o compromisso literário e social de despertar diferentes perspectivas as quais desencadeiam processos particulares subjacentes à luta pela equidade entre minorias marginalizadas.

**Palavras-chave:** Escrita de autoria feminina. Distopia. Ecofeminismo. Margaret Atwood. *The Testaments*.

Historically, women and nature have an age-long association that has persisted across cultures, literatures and arts. In much of western thought, women are viewed as closer to nature in binary opposition to men, who have metaphorically and historically been associated with culture. The androcentric logic extends the binary opposition to culture/nature, placing a higher value on culture and as a result sanctioning human domination over nature. The heteronormative dichotomization of gender is based on a social construction in which qualities stipulated as less valued are associated with women and nature. In canonical literature, nature writing has often reinforced such values parting from patriarchal paradigms that highlight women's and nature's pristine qualities. Are feminists' dystopias doomed to follow a similar path? This article investigates the competing discourses of nature writing in Margaret Atwood's *The Testaments* to revisit the complex and plural relationship among women, nature and technology. This research refutes the literary and philosophical heritage of an androcentric epistemology by aiming to deconstruct the symbolic and historical association between women and nature to advocate for all of humanity's interconnectedness with the ecosystem.

Although feminist critical dystopias are often seen as a subgenre of literary utopianism sheer diversity of such body of works renders inaccurate any conclusive mappings. Nevertheless, an understanding of the critical debate of the topic welcomed. Ildney Cavalcanti observes that in the beginning of the twentieth century, literary dystopias appeared with a feminist twist with the works of Charlotte Haldane's *Man's World* (1927) and Katharine Burdekin's *Swastika Night* (1937) (2003, p. 49). Feminist literary criticism no longer advocate for inherently qualities of feminist fictions. Felski observes that "[t]he variety of feminist positions makes it difficult to establish absolute

and unambiguous criteria for determining what constitutes a feminist narrative” (1989, p. 13). Yet, grouping together texts as feminist is about “the recent cultural phenomenon of women’s explicit self-identification as an oppressed group, which is in turn articulated in literary texts in the exploration of gender-specific concerns centered around the problem of female identity” (1989, p. 1). Feminist literary works are political and thus, one could argue that they are fundamentally critical.

Raffaella Baccolini and Tom Moylan read critical dystopias as texts that maintain a utopian impulse, where a traditionally bleak genre with little space for hope inside the story, maintains a utopian hope outside its pages (2003, p.7).<sup>2</sup> Other elements that categorize critical dystopias are the self-reflexive and a radical openness of endings. Baccolini suggests that critical dystopias blur the boundaries of dystopias, mixing elements of utopias, eutopias and anti-utopias to expand creative potential (1992, p. 140). Cavalcanti theorizes feminist critical dystopia with critical referring to three interrelated factors: the negative critique, brought into effect by the dystopian principle; a textual self-awareness; the sense of critical mass required to make the explosive reaction, referring to the formation of a critical-feminist public readership (2003, p. 48). Margaret Atwood herself has coined the term “ustopia” by combining the terms “utopia” and “dystopia”, because in her view, each contains a latent version of the other (2011). For Atwood, ustopia implies not only a location on a map but also a state of mind. The political roots of critical feminist dystopias resonate with Atwood’s literary fictions and theoretical reflections, maintaining the hope to raise readers’ awareness and consciousness.

Atwood’s *The Testaments* (2019) is a sequel to *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985), a dystopia about how biological warfare, climate change, and pollution have rendered most of the population sterile.<sup>3</sup> In this context, the Sons of Jacob perform a *coup d’état* in the United States to implement the autocratic patriarchal Regime of Gilead. In the dystopia, structural power lies with the Commanders and weaponry strictly given to the new male military, the Eyes. Women are stripped of their civil rights and are forcibly segregated based on their social roles in relation to men: Handmaids, reproductive entities to be exploited by the government; Aunts, older women in charge of controlling women’s education and behaviors; Marthas, cleaners and cooks of households; Wives, spouses

to men in power; and Eco-wives married to lower-cast males. Girls growing up in Gilead are taught in school how to perform their designated social positions with obedience. Reading and writing are forbidden to all women.

The dystopia alternates chapter narration among the three protagonists, Agnes, Lydia and Daisy, also known as Baby Nicole. In this article, focus is given to Agnes's and Aunt Lydia's narratives for a close reading. Agnes narrates her story in form of testimony about being a young girl growing up in Gilead with only two possible social roles to assume in the future: Wife or Aunt. Lydia writes to an unknown but desirable reader against the regime she pretends to sanction. The novel is narrated in a series of first-person monologues, which consequently are represented wholly in free direct or free indirect discourse, two of the most intimate modes of speech representation on the diegetic to mimetic scale (RIMMON-KENAN, 2008, p. 110-111). The intimacy of the narratives influence how we interpret the imagery, as metaphors carry a soothing uncensored flow of thought. Campbell explains how epistolary writing carries traits of the stream-of-consciousness style, as it

is subjective and emotional; it reaches out as it looks inward, opening up and presenting a consciousness to a specific sympathetic listener. While it appears to be stream-of-consciousness writing, the reader of the epistolary novel is aware that within its boundaries there is another reader. (1995, p. 336)

Thus, the narrative takes form of an epistolary writing, because although their writing may seem to have stream of consciousness quality, they have a clear reader in mind with the objective of sharing their story. Agnes addresses an unclear authority that collects her testimony after she has escaped Gilead. Her chapters have different titles, but each heading is the same: "Transcript of Witness Testimony 369A", which suggests that she tells her story orally. Differently, Lydia writes her own accounts while still inside Gilead. In the chapters with Lydia's narration, the titles change according to themes and she writes addressing an unknown but anticipated future reader.

As a theoretical framework, ecofeminism takes a critical stance to the andro- and anthropocentric mindset of the Western hemisphere and seeks to expose the imbalances of these value systems. A main concern is the deconstruction of the metaphor between

women and nature: “Woman’s relationship to language in ecofeminist discourse revolves around the means and usages of metaphor that reinforce the woman/nature, man/culture dualism on the lexical, semantic, and narrative levels” (DEVINE, 1992, p. 93). Through an analysis of the lexical grounds upon which it resides, ecofeminism dismantles the nature/culture dualism. Françoise d’Eaubonne first coined the term ecofeminism in her work *Le Féminisme ou la mort* in 1974. The movement was originally intended to breach the gap between activism and theoretical philosophies, working together for women’s rights and the preservation of nature in opposition to male oriented capitalism. Ecofeminists attempt to alter the structure of ideology, bringing a reform that has egalitarianism and sustainable development as its core principles. Karen Warren argues that ecofeminism as a feminist ethic is contextualist, pluralistically structured rather than unitary, giving central focus to diversity of women’s voices and favoring those claims that articulate the perspective of oppressed persons, with no attempt to provide an objective point of view (2000, p. 56). In this sense, a possible goal of ecofeminism is a diversity that welcomes a sense of respect for what is different, because any culture or movement that invalidates otherness becomes oppressive.

In tune with Greta Gaard’s premise that “no attempt to liberate women (or any other oppressed group) will be successful without an equal attempt to liberate nature” (1993, p. 1); Eric Otto contends that “projects of feminism and environmentalism must notice the similarities between this androcentric logic and cultural logic that constructs a culture/nature opposition” (2012, p. 74).<sup>4</sup> Both feminism and environmentalism are fundamentally critical of domination and the coming together of both philosophies can enrich the fight against the oppression of women and nonhuman nature, addressing these oppressions with theory and practice. The ecofeminist Ynestra King comments that “as women we have been an ‘other’, but we are refusing to be the ‘other’ any longer and we will not make anyone else into an ‘other’” (1983, p. 12). The sense of respect extends to the environment- nonhuman entities should not be cast as the lesser other, but instead recognized as agents of their own.

As a subgenre of ecofeminism, ecofeminist literary criticism analyzes the literary association between women and nature in works by female or male authors, as well as the

forgotten and/or overlooked aspects of what is called nature writing in the work of female authors (ABRAMS; HARPHAM, 2009, p. 89). Typically, nature writing is a form of creative fiction and nonfiction about the environment. Patrick D. Murphy defines nature writing as text that is

limited to having either nonhuman nature itself as a subject, character, or major component of the setting, or to a text that says something about human-nonhuman interaction, human philosophies about nature, or the possibility of engaging nature by means of or in spite of human culture. (2000, p.4-5).

In other words, it is marked by a plurality of possibilities concerning nature, the environment, the human, the non-human, and the ecosystem as a whole. Abrams and Harpham further expand the definition to encompass “the intimate, realistic and detailed description in prose of the natural environment, rendered as it appears to the distinctive sensibility of the author” (2009, p. 87). Nature writing can be seen as the presence of subjective depictions of nature, where nature can be a part of the story, not just a mere background in the novel. To read a text ecocritically then, is to examine the specific role of nature, environment, and ecology in the text. Margaret Atwood’s authorial voice opens space for an understanding of the plurality of nature writing in the context of dystopias. Nature writing in *The Testaments* is permeated by competing discourses. First attention is given to how nature writing is used to reinforce androcentric logic of women’s and nature’s submissive roles in patriarchal regimes. Then, consideration is given to the narratives of the two women protagonists, Agnes and Lydia, to understand how they subversively use nature writing as form of rebellion to disrupt the androcentric metaphorical relationship between women and nature.

### **Nature writing and androcentric epistemology**

The Sons of Jacob in charge of Gilead adopt androcentric logic in describing nature as a pristine wilderness that like women are available at men’s disposal. The dominant discourse follows the tradition prevalent in the Renaissance, where pastoral poetry portrays nature as a refugee from the ills of urban life through a return to the Homeric Golden Age. Along similar lines, in romanticism, nature is characterized as

female, a serene background, rural landscape or peaceful fertile land. In pastoral poetry, a subdued nature is transformed into a garden to soothe the anxieties of men distraught by the demands of the urban world. Such worldview depends on the masculine perception of nature as mother and wife whose primary function is to comfort, nurture and embellish the lives of males.

Ecofeminist Val Plumwood suggests that the idealization of the interconnectedness between women and nature “replaces the ‘angel in the house’ version of women with the ‘angel in the ecosystem’ version” (1993, p. 9).<sup>5</sup> The archetype of women as angels conceals its oppressive and discriminative stance through a discourse of care. Such discourses defend that exceptional beings deserve exceptional care. More often than not, special treatment means oppressive treatment. Such maximum seems to be one of the core paradigms of the theocratic regime in Margaret Atwood's *The Testaments*, which imposes dogmas that perpetuate women's association with nature-, where both should be “plowed” and manipulated as a resource.

In the dystopia, the regime prohibits women from reading and writing. Books are forbidden to all women. At school, teaching and learning is extremely limited to patriarchal and extreme religious dogmas. Agnes grows up in Gilead attending such schools.<sup>6</sup> In her narrative, it is possible to see how the regime adopts a master narrative of women's and nature's connectedness and submissiveness. Agnes is bombarded with teachings that endorses the metaphorical relationship between women and nature.

Following the trope of woman as the *angel of the house*, the appropriate activities taught at school to young girls include broderie, gardening and flower arrangements. Even broderie is very context specific, limited to flowers and fruits. Girls learn that each Aunt is associated with a particular flower: “We were embroidering sets of petit-point handkerchiefs for the Aunts, with flowers on them to go with their names- echinacea for Elizabeth, hyacinths for Helena, violets for Vidala. I was doing lilacs for Lydia” (ATWOOD, 2019, p. 87). The restraints imposed on broderie is an attempt to reduce the young girls' imagination, avoiding any form of self-expression through art. Gardening is also taught with strict regulations: “Aunt Lise was supposed to teach us manners and customs. . . She taught us elementary gardening, with an emphasis on roses- gardening

was a suitable hobby for Wives” (ATWOOD, 2019, p. 164). Knowledge about becoming a wife is downsized to attending the household and contained gardening. Emphasis is given to Wives’ proper behavior, because the compliance of women is fundamental to patriarchal regimes. The cultivation of roses is limited to glass houses, nothing outdoors or too ferocious is permitted in gardening, because women are confined to private spaces. The manipulation of nature in form of flowers is naturalized as the domination of women. Like broderie, gardening is a controlled activity to avoid any subversive artistic expression. Another skill taught is flower arrangement, particularly “French-style flower-arranging” (ATWOOD, 2019, p. 166), another hobby suitable for Wives. Such activity has use for the flowers cultivated and most offers a pleasant decoration for the Commanders’ houses. Women and nature reduced to roles that please men like in pastoral traditional, brightening men’s existence with beauty.

In Gilead’s dominant discourses, nature writing is used to maintain the metaphorical association between women and nature in order to tame young girls into obedience. At the school, the Aunts’ teachings emphasize the metonym of girls as delicate flowers, as Agnes recalls:

We were custodians of an invaluable treasure that existed, unseen, inside us; we were precious flowers that had to be kept safely inside glass houses, or else we would be ambushed and our petals would be torn off and our treasure would be stolen and we would be ripped apart and trampled by the ravenous men who might lurk around any corner, out there in the wide sharp-edged sin-ridden world. (ATWOOD, 2019, p. 10).

The association between girls and delicate flowers reinforces the need for constant zeal. Both require constant vigilance to bloom. Like docile flowers, girls need to be attentive to any possible mischief. Agnes’s voice illustrates how the association between women and flowers welcomes the oppression of women veiled through a discourse of care. In Gilead, teachings about women’s bodies are forbidden to women, they are only taught that they have something priceless that can easily disappear with any misconduct. Like flowers are kept inside glass houses, girls should be kept in private spaces.

To ensure male supremacy as beholders of knowledge, teachings about sexuality or women’s bodies are forbidden to girls. As if women are just a scenery at the disposal



of men's exploitation, the teachings at the school ignore women's body and sexuality. Experiencing puberty, Agnes is not sure what to expect: "More alarmingly, my breasts were swelling, and I had begun to sprout hair on areas of my body that we were not supposed to dwell on: legs, armpits, and the shameful part of many elusive names. Once that happened to a girl, she was no longer a precious flower but a much more dangerous creature" (ATWOOD, 2019, p. 82). She is taught to ignore and fear her own body. With Gilead's control of language, her only reference is "shameful part of many elusive names", illustrating how the Sons of Jacob keep young girls unaware of many subjects, especially their sexuality. Agnes is told only to be cautious of this perilous shift from "precious flower" to a "possible dangerous creature". Women becoming "dangerous creatures" echoes the animality and uncontrollable behaviors of women and the non-human.

Moreover, when Agnes's friend, Becka asks the definition of adulteress in the school, Aunt Vidala replies: "she hopes Becka would never find that out through personal experience, since those who did become adulteresses would end up being stoned or else hanged by their neck with a sack over their heads" (ATWOOD, 2019, p. 25). No answer is given, just a repression with emphasis on the terrible physical consequences of becoming an adulteress. Inhibition of questions plays a huge role in teaching young girls to be submissive and follow orders. Violence against women is regimented as acceptable and disciplinary. Aunt Estée tries to substitute the horrific scene by resorting to an explanation in nature: "she smiled and said that we were precious flowers, and who ever heard of a rebellious flower?" (ATWOOD, 2019, p. 25). Estée's explanation may be more docile, yet she reinforces androcentric logic through the metonymy "precious flowers" to refer to the young girls. The association between girls and delicate flowers reminds them that any unorthodox behavior can easily ruin them.

In *The Testaments*, extremists' religious discourse is aligned with nature writing to maintain the autocratic patriarchal regime implemented Sons of Jacob. Imagination is considered as a forbidden transgression and associated with Eve's primal sin: "Forbidden things are open to the imagination. That was why Eve ate the Apple of Knowledge, said Aunt Vidala: too much imagination. So it was better not to know some things. Otherwise, your petals would get scattered" (ATWOOD, 2019, p. 15). Agnes's words illustrate that

lack of knowledge is presented in a positive light at school, intended for the girls to keep their docile and pure nature. The metonymy of flowers represents the girls' fragile nature and the dangers of transgressive or even unconventional behavior. Young girls and flowers are to be tamed and confined to specific roles. Eve's transgression of eating the forbidden fruit is associated with an uncontrollable nature- the wilderness. In order to avoid Eve's disgrace, young girls are taught to be submissive, avoiding questions and respecting rules. The Theocratic regime established by the Sons of Jacob, adopts teachings of the Old Testaments, which emphasizes a dry wilderness contrasted sharply with the bountiful, fruitful Garden of Eden. Girls as precious flowers belonging to the gardens in Gilead are held in opposition to an untamable nature, represented by Eve. The desert represents a land that needs to be made arable and suitable for planting, justifying the domination of nature and women. Common to the Judeo-Christian thought present in Gilead's religious discourse, the images of nature and women are two-sided- the pure virgin offers fertility, while the witch brings chaos. Thus, the constant need for vigilance preached by the Aunts- so girls can avoid the fate of becoming 'ruined.' The rhetoric of fear that pervades the teachings at Gilead's school through the use of androcentric nature writing purposely limits the girls' knowledge, imagination, and sense of self.

### **Women Characters and Subversive Nature Writing**

In Hélène Cixous word's, writing is a space that can serve as a springboard for subversive thought, the precursory movement of a transformation of social and cultural structures (CIXOUS, 1976, p. 879). Language is used as a site of resistance against the forced silenced imposed on women. Words are how the characters resist domination not only through their act of speaking, but also through *how* they speak.<sup>7</sup> In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Frantz Fanon comments about the power of language, presenting the assertion that "a man who has a language consequently possesses the world expressed and implied by that language" (2008, p. 9). The ability to speak a language is a possibility to take on a world and a culture. Agnes and Lydia shape Gilead's dominant discourse of pastoral and romantic nature into a subversive nature writing to fight against victimization and search for empowerment.

Despite the attempts at school to bend young girls into particular social roles, Agnes defies such teachings. Inside her house, she notices how Commander Kyle and his new wife Paula cast her aside: “They had taken to doing something they called ‘humouring me’, which in practice meant ignoring any displays of mood so I would learn that I could not influence them by stubborn silences. . . *I see Agnes is in one of her moods. Yes, it is like the weather; it will soon pass. Young girls are like that*” (ATWOOD, 2019, p. 76).<sup>8</sup> Agnes is critical of their actions and narrates with an ironic tone their attempt to shape her into obedience. By those closer to her, Agnes is not seen as a docile flower, but rather as the unpredictable weather, a foreshadowing of her defiance. Here the association is with a rebellious nature, foreshadows Agnes’s acts of resistance against Gilead.

Language becomes a site of empowerment for Agnes’s rebellion against the preached ideal of becoming a Wife. The Commander Kyle and Paula are eager to marry her off and have summoned three possible husbands. Alone in her bedroom, Agnes refuses to accept dominant discourses paradigms, seeing arranged marriage through a negative light: “I pictured each one of them on top of me- for that is where they would be- trying to shove his loathsome appendage into my stone-cold body. Why was I thinking of my body as stone cold? I wondered. Then I saw: it would be stone cold because I would be dead. . . there was a certain power in it, silence and stillness” (ATWOOD, 2019, p. 223). Agnes challenges the pastoral view of nature adopted by the Sons of Jacob by using the metaphor of stone to describe herself. By calling herself as a stone, she cannot be tamed or metttled with by others, an empowering idea in a society where all of her behavior is conditioned according to patriarchal and religious doctrines. Her nature writing is subversive because she challenges a androcentric epistemology that defends women are happiest when married, as they can fulfill their role in multiplying offspring, much like flowers in nature. She rather sees herself dead than to be married to one of the suitors. Language offers Agnes a possibility to reimagine her life, searching for a sense of self.

As the narrative continues, the protagonist adopts a bleaker view of her surroundings. She is indignant with becoming a Wife and heads to Ardua Hall to ask Aunt Lydia to become an Aunt herself, the only option for a girl in Gilead to avoid marriage. When heading by car towards Ardua Hall, she observes through the car window: “the

sun was setting. The springtime air was filled with the golden haze that can often appear at that time of year: dust, or pollen” (ATWOOD, 2019, p. 237). In this passage, what seems to be a classical description of a spring sunset is ruptured by Agnes suggestion that the air could be filled with *dust*. In other words, the air could be filled with life, honey, a metaphor for fertility with the pollen as the plant’s reproductive spores or with plain lifeless, gray sand. She questions the status quo of the association between women and nature as available fertile entities. She continues to observe nature with a heightened critical perspective:

The leaves of the trees had that glossy sheen, so fresh and newly unfolded; as if they were gifts, each one, unwrapping itself, shaken out for the first time. As if God had just made them, Aunt Estée used to tell us during Nature Appreciation, conjuring up a picture of God waiving his hand over the dead-looking winter trees, causing them to sprout and unfurl. Every leaf unique, Aunt Estée would add, just like you! It was a beautiful thought. (ATWOOD, 2019, p. 237).

Her description of the beauty of tree leaves is of a classical image of pastoral’s docile nature, yet she is merely repeating the words she is taught in class by Estée. In such teachings, the dogma that God handles nature as he pleases, can be associated with men manipulating women and nature according to his desire- an underlying assumption of Gilead’s regime. Agnes critique appears in her last words- “it was a beautiful thought” ironically suggesting that although such imagery may appear to be lovely, it hides the oppressive reality imposed on nature and women.

In the alternating chapters of *The Testaments*, Aunt Lydia’s narration resonates with Agnes’s subversive nature writing as she secretly rebels against the regime from within Ardua Hall through writing.<sup>9</sup> Language is once again a site of resistance. Defying the Sons of Jacob, Lydia writes of the horrors of the regime in a series on monologues. Some letter are sent to movements of resistance in neighboring countries and other writings with more detailed accounts of the peculiarities of the regime, stay in Gilead, where she secretly hides them in her office inside the book *Apologia Pro Vita Sua* by Cardinal John Newman. Newman’s text is a defense of his religious opinions, which can be seen as a spiritual autobiographical defense to the attacks made by Charles Kingsley of the Church of England. A parallel can be made with Lydia, who writes not only to expose the Sons

of Jacob, but also to share her subject position, experiences, and thoughts. Although she may suggest at times that her choices may be indefensible, she nevertheless hopes to contextualize her story and rebel from within the system<sup>10</sup>.

Although Lydia is secretly against the Gilead Regime, she continues to play her role as the Head Aunt. It is in her writing that she challenges the dominant patriarchal autocratic discourse. As previously mentioned in Agnes's accounts, each Aunt is associated with one flower to predetermine the acceptable broderie for the young girls in Gilead. At first, Lydia appears to corroborate with metaphors that confine women/nature, but she wittedly subverts such tradition: "The crocuses have melted, the daffodils have shrivelled to paper, the tulips have performed their enticing dance, flipping their petal skirts inside out before dropping them completely . . . What's next in the waltz of the flowers? Lilacs. So dependable. So frilly. So romantic. Soon my old enemy, Aunt Vidala, will be sneezing" (ATWOOD, 2019, p. 111). Lydia attributes agency to various flowers. The flowers are not described as helpless and fragile, instead they are actively changing forms according to the weather. They are free and their movements are associated with a traditional dance, the Waltz. Such romantic imagery resembles William Wordsworth's daffodils, of the poem *I wandered lonely as a cloud*: "A host, of golden daffodils; // Beside the lake, beneath the trees, // Fluttering and dancing in the breeze" and "Ten thousand saw I at a glance, // Tossing their heads in sprightly dance".<sup>11</sup> Even though Lydia's nature writing at first recalls a romantic imagery of dancing flowers common to romantic poets, she subverts such tradition by turning the flowers into powerful war agents. The daffodils are not naively dancing but have withered into paper. She accepts the association of herself with Lilacs, only to dismantle androcentric principles by making the flowers a potent source of revenge. Lydia appropriates a war-like discourse by calling Vidala her enemy and employing whatever weapon she has to attack, in this case, lilacs, to incite Vidala's allergies. Challenging tainted paradigms of docile feminine discourse, Lydia's subversive nature writing equips herself with nature to prepare for battle and face her enemies.

Lydia subversively uses nature writing to pretend an affiliation with the Sons of Jacob, only to ensure acts of resistance within the regime. One of the dentists in Gilead,

Dr. Grove, rapes several young girls, including his adoptive daughter, Becka. To punish Grove for his atrocities, Lydia makes use of the metaphorical association between women and nature to convince the Commanders of the necessity of such penalization. Explaining the assassination of Grove to the Commander Judd, Lydia says: “[H]e was ruining too many young girls for marriage. Rather than accepting wedlock, the precious flowers were deserting to the Aunts” (ATWOOD, 2019, p. 280). Lydia ironically adopts the dominant discourse that preaches young girls as delicate flowers to seek punishment for the male abuser. Young girls, seen as flowers, are portrayed as victims, but only matter because their decisions are directly affecting the lives of the Commanders.

*The Testaments* begins with Lydia’s words: “Only dead people are allowed to have statues, but I have been given one while still alive. Already I am petrified” (ATWOOD, 2019, p. 3). By saying she is “petrified” she suggests an approximation with stones, lifeless form in nature, contrary to the docile lively nature. She avoids a pastoral view of nature adopted by the Gilead Regime that emphasize nature and women’s function as fertile entities made for exploitation. A couple of paragraphs later, Lydia describes how wild nature has appropriated her stone statue: “Since then my statue has weathered: pigeons have decorated me, moss has sprouted in my damper crevices. Votaries have taken to leaving offerings at my feed” (ATWOOD, 2019, p. 4). Moss has taken control and pigeons have left their mark in her statue, or man’s creation. Nature is portrayed as insubordinate to men’s creations. In Lydia’s nature writing, power is granted to nature, an entity of its own, who takes control of statue. Nature is beyond a backdrop in the novel, it is present in the narrative as a part of the story. Lydia’s association of her condition as being petrified can be compared Agnes’ metaphor of herself as a stone- they consider themselves petrified and dead, or rock solid. Both women use subversive nature writing by defying romantic ideals and choosing to associate themselves with stones. In a place where women are moved without any rights, becoming firm like a rock seems to offer more life and liberty. Toni Morrison suggests that the power of language is so great that: “if the cognitive ecology of a language is altered, so is the community” (1998). The dystopia world may not change at first, but by altering language and its meaning Agnes and Lydia alter their sense of self and that’s the first step for changing a community.

As the analysis undertaken in this article suggests that language can be a subversive site of resistance. Often times, it is cultural tools, such as technological apparatus, that offer women characters the means to express themselves and fight against victimization. In *The Testaments*, the women characters subversive nature writing extends to the appropriation of technology. The protagonists use technology for necessity and not tech gadgetry for its own sake, which speaks to the various possibilities of alternative use of technology. Lydia writes using microfilms of old cameras and incorporates her words secretly into flyers distributed in neighboring countries with the help of a few Pearl Girls, Gilead's missionaries. She corresponds with Mayday, an international organization that works against the regime, sharing information from within that can help women escape and eventually cause the downfall of the regime. Lydia appropriates the act of writing to resist, destabilizing the binary of men and culture. She establishes a resistance from within the system by successfully incorporating technology into the scheme.

Inside Gilead, technological apparatus plays a significant role in Lydia's subversive acts: "I installed two battery-run surveillance cameras in the base of my statue. I have always been good with tools. I replaced the moss carefully, reflecting that I should really get my replica cleaned. Moss adds respectability only up to a appoint. I was beginning to look furry" (ATWOOD, 2019, p. 209). Lydia installs the cameras herself, acknowledging she masters such skills, thus, disrupting the paradigm of women's amateurish abilities with machinery. The moss alludes to nature in its free form, taking control of the statute, which can symbolize women's retaliation against the culture of Gilead. To ensure her success, Lydia replaces the moss to hide her camera and by appropriating her surroundings according to her own predicaments, she challenges the phallogocentric dominion. Even so, she is not ruthless, by changing the moss "carefully", she shows respect for nature.

Lydia dismantles the association between women and nature as passive and continues to explore technology to her best interest. She secretly sets up cameras in Ardua Hall to exert her dominion by having access to privileged information: "Over the years I increased the sensitivity of my microphones, I attuned them to whispers, I held my breath to see which of our newly recruited girls would provide me with the sort of shameful information I both craved and collected. Gradually my dossiers filled up,

like a hot-air balloon getting ready for liftoff” (ATWOOD, 2019, p. 251). The constant surveillance offers Lydia the various advantages of acquiring the information girls share in secrecy. The reference to the human invention a “hot-air balloon” that is “getting ready for liftoff” can suggest that Lydia’s words against the Sons of Jacob will be heard in different places through the support of technological tools. Yet nature is not discarded as wind is fundamental aspect for the success of a hot-air balloon travel. Lydia’s subversive nature writing includes an appropriation of technology to fight against Gilead and search for empowerment.

A critical perspective is needed in order to avoid a romanticizing of technology, especially considering how technology has been aligned with unquestionable progress and domination of nature. Devall cautions that ideologies of dominance are supported by “myths of economic growth, progress, belief that technology will save us from environmental problems, and humanism” (1992, p. 52). Nevertheless, recognizing the impossibility of completely ignoring technological advances, an environmentally sensitive technology is welcomed in this article. Carol Stabile cautions that ecofeminism movement often has an aversion to technology that perpetuates women’s exclusion from positions of symbolic power (1994, p. 49). It can be counter-productive to women’s liberation if dichotomies continue to govern women’s experience and place in society. Lydia’s appropriation of technology can be polemic, because she adopts a tool commonly used by patriarchy to oppress women and nature. She uses technology available to fight against Gilead’s Regime. In the dystopia, the act of shaping language to serve as a means of expression of the subjective self is a means of rebellion. The protagonist appropriates print culture to best claim a textual space of her own with help from technology. The ability to appropriate language for one’s own needs is a powerful form that subalterns have to fight against domination that can also be extended to conscious use of technology. In this sense, narrative acquires a complex aspect as she incorporates the use technology and subverts nature writing to fight against the Sons of Jacob.

The hierarchical dominance of nature and women renders an unsustainable lifestyle on Earth, where a very specific group of humans benefit from such oppressions in the present. Atwood’s dystopia portrays the not-so-futuristic consequences of climate



change, biological warfare, and pollution that opens space for dictatorships with heightened religious sense of blaming the apocalyptic scenario in women's and nature's rebellion against their natural duties. Although *The Testaments* is shaped according to first-person narrative, bound by the anthropomorphic perspective of the protagonists, its role in engaging with central issues of ecofeminism should not be undermined; the narrative subverts oppressive dualisms between women and men, and nature and culture.

Margaret Atwood's dystopia moves toward a critical mode of ecofeminist understanding, one motivated to explore the plural contingent features of androcentric logic. In the novel, the diverse discourses of nature writing enrich the aesthetics of the dystopian future, characterized by conflicting ideals of nature as a pristine wilderness and nature as independent entities. This article illustrates how the competing discourses of nature writing in *The Testaments* rewrites the complex and plural relationship between women, nature and technology. The protagonists Agnes and Lydia subversively employ nature writing as a form of rebellion to disrupt the metaphorical relationship between women and nature. In the words of Carolyn Merchant "a new partnership between humans and the earth is urgently needed" (1980, p. xv). Although Merchant wrote more than 30 years ago, such philosophical stance is still very much needed in the present. The analysis undertaken in this article, expands feminist conceptions and protagonism, in addition to providing reflections about androcentrism and anthropomorphism, with the literary and social commitment to awaken different perspectives that trigger particular processes underlying the struggle for equity among marginalized minorities.

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## Notas

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- <sup>2</sup> Lyman Sargent has added "critical dystopia" to his list of definition: "a non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as worse than contemporary society but that normally includes at least one eutopian enclave or holds out hope that the dystopia can be overcome and replaced with a utopia" ("US Etopias, p. 222).
- <sup>3</sup> For an ecofeminist reading of *The Handmaid's Tale*, see Inger Hagane's "Visions of nightmare, dreams of freedom: Ecofeminism in two feminist dystopias" (2010).
- <sup>4</sup> Relevant to the debate are the definitions androcentrism and anthropocentrism, because despite their interconnectedness both refer to different ideas. Androcentric can be understood as a dominated by or emphasizing masculine interests and/or point of views; while anthropocentric can be defined as interpreting or regarding the world in terms of human values and experiences, with human beings being the most significant entity in the universe.
- <sup>5</sup> "Angel in the House" became a popular expression to express the perfect Victorian woman of the nineteenth century. The ideal Victorian woman was a wife and mother selflessly devoted to her children and submissive to her husband. Notions of femininity, domesticity, submission, and sacrifice permeate the construction of this ideal Victorian woman. The origin of the expression is from Coventry Patmore's poem to his wife, which he entitled: *The Angel in the House*. In the poem, he exalts his wife as the perfect woman because she sacrifices herself for her home, her children, and husband.
- <sup>6</sup> Agnes is the daughter of June, the protagonist of *The Handmaid's Tale*, however, while growing up in the household of Commander Kyle and Tabata she is unaware of her biological mother. At the time of her narration, she's speaking from outside Gilead and she has learned the truth about her past. Her testimony is rather a memory of growing up in Gilead.

<sup>7</sup> Women's speech is limited and reinforces women's submission to men. For example, the appropriate response for women's greetings, both for hello and good-by is "Under his eye". Another common phrase is "Blessed be the fruit" with the traditional response "May the Lord open". Language is severely controlled and marked by biblical references.

<sup>8</sup> Paula is Commander Kyle's new Wife after Tabata, Agnes's adoptive mother, passes away.

<sup>9</sup> To avoid a reinforcement women's confinement based on their social roles, as stipulated by the Gilead Regime, this article avoids the term "Aunt".

<sup>10</sup> As a character, Lydia is often judged negatively as a villain, because she helped the Sons of Jacob maintain control through a ruthless and violent training of Handmaids and young girls. Nonetheless, her narrative sheds light into how she was kidnapped and tortured into compliance with the new regime if she wanted to live. To judge Lydia as bad or good character is to reinforce binaries only further contribute to women's oppression. Instead, such judgements are refrained as focus is given to Lydia's written narrative.

<sup>11</sup> Wordsworth's complete poem:

I wandered lonely as a cloud// That floats on high o'er vales and hills,// When all at once I saw a crowd,//  
A host, of golden daffodils;// Beside the lake, beneath the trees,// Fluttering and dancing in the breeze.  
Continuous as the stars that shine// And twinkle on the milky way,// They stretched in never-ending line//  
Along the margin of a bay:// Ten thousand saw I at a glance,// Tossing their heads in sprightly dance.  
The waves beside them danced; but they// Out-did the sparkling waves in glee:// A poet could not but be  
gay,// In such a jocund company:// I gazed—and gazed—but little thought// What wealth the show to me  
had brought:

For oft, when on my couch I lie// In vacant or in pensive mood, // They flash upon that inward eye// Which  
is the bliss of solitude;// And then my heart with pleasure fills, // And dances with the daffodils.