

## Harmonious Awareness of Ecological Civilization

TIAN Xiangbin WANG Caixia

638 Xintaisanlu, Guangzhou, 510540, China

Tianhe College at Guangdong Polytechnic Normal University

1253183232@qq.com ; TIAN Xiangbin

**Keyword:** Harmonious Awareness, Ecological civilization, *The Year of the Flood*

**Abstract:** Environment protection is very important for all of us. Ecological balance and environmental protection do not by all means depend on technology. The essence lies in human understanding of nature and the concept about human development. The scholars in Humanity play a more important role than scientists to call on human beings to control their personal desires and destructive nature. The idea will stop up the origin of the destruction to environment. Margaret Atwood is such a person. She published her latest ecological apocalypse book *The Year of the Flood* to show her deep concern about the ecological crisis. This book uses significant biblical images such as the Noah's ark in the flood, Ararat, and the story of Adam and Eve to warn humans to care for our environment. She criticizes developmentalism and anthropocentric tendencies. She also warns that humans should not exploit nature simply because of its regenerative capabilities, ideas which are similar to the ideas of Laozi and Zhuangzi of China. Furthermore, she points out that high-tech processes, such as gene experimentation, is also against natural laws. These behaviors would eventually lead to an uncontrollable and global disaster. Atwood expresses her ecological warning in her works: if human beings do not change their cultural and development models to give more attention to environmental ethics and pay respect to nature, humans will be the main cause of their demise.

### Introduction

Ecological balance and environmental protection do not necessarily depend on technology. The essence lies on humans' understanding of nature and concepts regarding human development. In other words, the decisive factor is controlling human desire. Humanities scholars should take the key responsibility in alerting humans to not plunder nature and destroy themselves.

The well-known Canadian writer Margaret Atwood urge people to pay attention to protecting the environment and creating harmony in the eco-sphere. In 2009, she published her *The Year of the Flood* to express her deep concern about the ecological crisis. This book uses flashback and intersection narration in an epic form. By the various memories of Toby and Ren, Atwood tries to warn humans that they will come to extinction if they continue to destroy the environment in order to pursue excessive luxury, debauchery, and high-handed power. A sudden global pandemic in the book is not accidental, but man-made tragedy. Besides, it is the inevitable outcome of human developmentalism. The biblical imagery and metaphors found in the flood and in the story of Adam and Eve are used in the book in order to tell the world that we must face the global ecological problems, and enhance ecological harmony and awareness.

The so-called concept of harmony is to allow people to establish a more broad vision and appropriate relationship between human beings and nature. This concept is reflected in China's Taoist doctrine "Unity of man and nature". Atwood advocates human scientific development in order to find greater harmony with nature.

### Punishment

Nature is composed of a huge and magnificent biological chain. Atwood holds the idea that the humans are the only one small part in this chain. Human beings, animals and plants are all God's beloved creatures. They all have their innate right to live and develop. However, with the rapacity of selfish human desires, humans began to invade the other parts of the ecological chain. Humans

have occupied resources from other species in extravagant ways and unbalanced the natural order of consumption. This has caused a great deal of damage to the ecological chain, for example introducing prey into predator-free environments and spreading invasive species. The punishment in the book is not caused by nature, but by human extremely irresponsible behavior. In *The Year of the Flood*, Atwood uses the image of “flood” to symbolize that humans will reap what they have sown, becoming inundated with their own excessiveness.

According to Genesis 6-8, God is disappointed with man. He floods the earth to wipe away the evil and sin that He saw. However, in *The Year of the Flood*, this “waterless flood” is not caused by God, but by humans. A terrible global and uncontrollable pandemic spreads because of the endless greed and pursuit of material desire regardless of the harmony among humans, humans and other species, or man and nature. This is not an ordinary pandemic: “it wouldn’t be contained after a few hundred thousand deaths, and then obliterated with biotools and bleach...it travelled through the air as if on wings; it burned through cities like fire, spread germ-ridden mobs, terror, and butchery”<sup>[1]</sup> It seems that this pandemic is a natural phenomenon. In fact, the inventors of the virus were human. In order to obtain huge economic benefits, the scientists who are working for CorpSeCorps transplanted the virus into a health pills and set the time delay factor based on different markets, which made the worldwide pandemic break out almost simultaneously. However, due to the failure of the antidote, this “waterless flood” nearly led all to the end of the human race in a very short period of time.

However, it is very difficult for people to seek the savior in *The Year of the Flood*, because “even God may not always know what you are going to do next!”<sup>[2]</sup> Human materialistic desire has exceeded control. Toby, one of the protagonists in the book, once sells “SecretBurgers” in a company. “The secret of SecretBurgers was that no one knew what sort of animal protein was actually in them...you might find a swatch of cat fur in your burger or a fragment of mouse tail. Was there a human fingernail, once? It was possible.”<sup>[3]</sup> In order to pursue maximum profit, merchants even use corpses as the meat of burgers and sold them to unsuspecting customers. This is a vivid picture that humans totally lost their humanity and turned into fierce and cruel monsters under the developmentalism concept. If humans themselves can be used as a kind of raw material and capital in human society, nature and other species have no chance to get rid of the brutal aggression. Because of the endless void of human desire, extreme invasion and full exploitation for economic profit to sacrifice the life of others, this pandemic is doomed to happen! In real society, the same situation exists. For mineral energy and other resources, wars among different countries never stop. Who created this pandemic? It was Man himself.

## Salvation

In this pandemic, the Almighty God is no longer the savior for humans. The possibility for survival lies only on humans themselves who have to reflect after the catastrophe, considering the appropriateness of developmentalism and anthropocentrism<sup>[4]</sup>. In the book, Atwood uses “God’s Gardeners” as the propagators of ecological awareness and takes the modern ecologists and biologists as examples to explore a harmonious way of developing.

Feasts play an important role throughout the book. Almost all chapters refer to the feasts about ecological awareness and reflect The Last Supper throughout.

Saint Euell of Wild Foods advocates the spirit to go back to nature and find food. Euell Gibbons is an outdoorsman and proponent of natural diets, who recommends learning about the recognition, gathering, preparation and use of the natural health foods that grow in the wilderness. Before the pandemic, Adam One once predicted: “For the waterless Flood is coming, in which all buying and selling will cease, and we will find ourselves thrown back upon our own resources, in the midst of God’s bounteous Garden. Which was your Garden also?”<sup>[5]</sup> Many humans only return to nature for survival. This is another way to warn Man that even if the technological development can allow humans control some aspect of nature or even create new species, it cannot solve all crises and social problems. Humans cannot produce capital. Nature is the home for all creatures’ evolution. As a part of an eco-chain, humans’ explore within the nature’s boundaries, eliminating

the aggressiveness of technology and insisting on a natural living style are meaningful to keep balance among species. Euell Gibbons' method of finding food in the wilderness just reflects this ecological intelligence, which is obvious criticism to current synthetic food and transgenic plants and animals. He is an actual environmental saint of Land Ethic from this perspective.

Rachel is the first person to notice that the usage of DDT has affected and killed many of birds, worms and other wild animals. She uses beautiful words to express the serious crises on land, sea and even the whole system which have aroused the large attention all over the world. As the forerunner of the environmental movement, she makes the creative contribution to modern environment protection. Her activities at last lead to the establishment of U.S Environmental Protection Agency and World Earth Day. Rachel set a good example both on spirit and activity.

Saint Terry and All Wayfarers are about Terrance Stanley and his followers. Terry, common Canadian, was caught by cancer and forced to cut the right leg when he was 18. However, instead of giving up, he accepted the result and all kinds of treatments optimistically. He set a Marathon with a limp to donate money for cancer research. His never giving up spirit of optimism has encouraged lots of people. He is Saint Terry Fox "...who showed what the human body can do in the way of locomotion without fossil fuels"<sup>[6]</sup>. It is obvious that Atwood regards Terry and all wayfarers as Saints titled as Chapter Thirteen with the purpose to advocate their walking contribution to environment to save non-renewable resources and avoid pollution as well as praising his courage and fighting spirit in face of difficulties or even desperation.

"May we forgive them freely, as we may hope to be forgiven by God."<sup>[7]</sup> On this wasteland, humans should be generous and gain spiritual salvation to save the whole world. This is the theme of the book: facing serious environmental and social problems, humans should have self-reflection and eliminate the racial hostility, species discrimination with equality and love, rather than removing responsibility and blaming each other. Only through self-adjustment and self-correction can humans get self-salvation.

### **Enlightenment from the work**

Margaret Atwood uses vivid images and examples to criticize the human desire to destroy the eco-chain. In her book, she directly points out that it is Man who caused this "waterless flood to destroy the Garden of God" — the earth. Atwood tries to make people understand that developmentalism, anthropocentrism and technological polarism go against the eco-sphere. Excessive human aggression towards the eco-chain will make the ecosystem lose its innate balance. The unlimited physical and material desire regardless of the cost of nature will be the end of humans. Irresponsible activities will end with humans shooting themselves in the foot. Humans need to think and change the profit-oriented development model and establish ecological holism. Humans must respect nature, return to reasonable development and find win-win situations within the ecosystem's threshold. Sustainable development and a harmonious relationship should always take precedence. It is up to humans to save the eco-sphere and themselves.

The ecological awareness of Atwood is very similar to Laozi in China. Laozi once said: "To give birth to all things but not to take possession of them, to raise them but not to vaunt this as its merit, and to be their sovereign but not to control them. These are called the profound De"<sup>[8]</sup>. He praises nature, which gives birth to every creature, but it does not control them for its own sake; it supplies everything, but it does not occupy the highest position. Nature methodically gives advantages to all creatures, which is the purest spirit. As for nature, humans are just one part. Nature supports and maintains life. This is the right relationship between humans and nature. What's more, to Atwood's opinion about desire is very similar to Laozi's as well. "There is no calamity greater than discontentment. There is no guilt greater than covetousness"<sup>[9]</sup>. During the process of development, the most horrible disaster is caused by Man's endless dissatisfaction and unlimited desire. Those pursuits result in the wars, pandemic and natural disaster.

If humans do not create an appropriate use of and relationship with nature, it is not a sustainable way to develop. Zhuang Zi holds the idea that: "To do nothing and yet command respect is the natural way of Tao, while to do things and receive the trouble is the human way of Tao. The

ruler should practice the natural way of Tao and the subjects should practice the human way of Tao.”<sup>[10]</sup> Zhuang Zi lays stress on the natural laws in the way of Tao. This idea has similarities about land use ethics: respect the natural order and minimize to only proper activities within natural boundaries. In the relationship between nature and humans, the eco-sphere should be prioritized as a whole and humans as a part which seems to match the ecological holism. The value of the development should be measured by nature and human perspectives. In this case, a harmonious relationship and sustainable development can be achieved between the eco-sphere and humans. From this perspective, Margaret Atwood and Taoists in China have the similar ideas regarding the relationship between nature and human development model, which will cause human great attention on current environmental and social problems. The book *The Year of the Flood* proposes this kind of harmonious ecological relationship. If humans can gain some enlightenment from the book and establish awareness of the ecological chain’s interaction with civilization to improve our ecological and environmental quality, Atwood has achieved her goal.

## References

- 
- [1][2][3] [4] [5] [6] [8] [9] [10] Atwood, Margaret. *The Year of the Flood*. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart Ltd, p.20, p.12, p.12, p.52, p.126, p.312, p.403, p.424, p.425, 2009.
- [7] Wang Nuo. *Ecology and State*. Nanjing: Nanjing University Press, 2007.