

After the Fall: Ecofeminist Ethics in the Face of Environmental Collapse in 'The Handmaid's Tale' and 'The Road'

Hayder M. Saadan M. Ridha Al-Hasani

Imam Jaafar Al-Sadiq University, Ministry of Higher Education, Iraq

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.51244/IJRSI.2026.1307000132>

Received: 07 July 2026; Accepted: 13 July 2026; Published: 01 August 2026

ABSTRACT

This article explores the conflicting ecofeminist ethical positions regarding environmental collapse that are presented in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) and Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006). This article offers a comparative ecofeminist analysis, drawing on the work of Val Plumwood, Karen Warren and Carolyn Merchant, to show that Atwood's novel has both captured the failure of the top-down restoration projects of patriarchy, and provided hope for grassroots, collective resistance, based on an ethic of care. McCarthy's novel, on the other hand, is a post-apocalyptic survivalism in the absence of a fertile environment, which exposes human ethical systems to be maintained by a paternalistic ethic of "carrying the fire. In this analysis, it is shown that ecofeminist ethics needs an environment for it to thrive. *The Handmaid's Tale* offers hope for resistance through memory, community, and a return to nature, while *The Road* offers a philosophy of suspension which ultimately is unsustainable without a larger ecological framework. Both novels are important warnings of today's environmental problems, and Atwood's novel has a more promising prospect for ecofeminist hope because it forcefully reminds readers of the interdependence of human communities and a healthy environment. The institutional breakdown in Gilead and the individual survival in McCarthy's wasteland are poles of thought about the possibility of moral life in an environment of environmental collapse – and are of great interest to the theoretician of resistance, gender and the future of human-nature relations.

Keywords: Patriarchy, Survival, Resistance, Ecofeminism, Environmental Collapse, *The Handmaid's Tale*, *The Road*

INTRODUCTION

Few novels of the modern dystopian/post-apocalyptic genre have so strongly resonated with the deep ethical and ecological fears of our time as Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) and Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006). Both are set two decades apart and in completely different imaginative spaces, but they share a core belief: that the world has been forever marred by an environmental disaster. Atwood's Gilead is a world in crisis, where there is significant infertility and pollution, and where women's reproductive powers are tightly controlled by a totalitarian government, desperate to restore biological continuity in a patriarchal attempt (Atwood, 1985). McCarthy's novel is even bleaker: the apocalypse is unnamed, the sun has gone dark, the biosphere has been burned to ash, and a father and son must survive in a world devoid of everything that used to give life meaning. Both novels pose a chilling question: What of the ethical life when the natural world, which is the basis of human life, has fallen apart? These divergent answers shed light on two very different views of human responsibility to resist and the conditions of moral community after environmental devastation (McCarthy, 2006)

This question is at the core of ecofeminist enquiry. As a critical framework, ecofeminism developed in the 1970s and 1980s because of the various forms of domination of women and nature in patriarchal structures. Western thinking has traditionally created a series of dichotomies that systematically devalue the feminine and the natural, such as culture/nature, male/female, reason/emotion, and human/animal (Val Plumwood 1993, Karen Warren 2000, Carolyn Merchant 1980). They argue that these dichotomies have given ideological foundation to the exploitation of women and the environment. The unjustified domination of women is directly

linked to the unjustified domination of nature, as Warren (2000) puts it: "there are important connections between the unjustified domination of women and the unjustified domination of nature" (p. 45), which lie within a "logic of domination" that is embedded in patriarchal structures. This logic is taken to its extreme in a state of environmental collapse, and the brutal consequences speak for themselves, of a worldview that has broken humanity's ties with its ecological roots. The Handmaid's Tale and The Road are both long meditations on this ecological and ethical crisis which reach wildly different conclusions as to what might be possible for an ethical life after environmental collapse.

In this article, I propose that Atwood's novel represents the impotence of a restoration project based on restoration, top-down, masculine and anthropocentric, and also a subversive, grassroots, eco-ethic of care that survives in the collective memory, in small acts of resistance and in collective solidarity (Atwood, 1985; Merchant, 1980; Plumwood, 1993; Warren, 2000). But McCarthy's novel is about a different kind of post-apocalyptic survivalism, one that lacks the fertile environment that makes it possible and instead presents an unmediated ethical survival that is elusive of any larger ecological future—and that is not likely to hold up without the ecology to support it. The contrast between these two works illustrates one of the key points: ecofeminist ethics needs a setting in which it can grow, and without the "eco" the whole "feminist" or "care" ethic turns into a paternalistic or unsustainable abstraction (Gilligan, 1982; Noddings, 1984; Warren, 2000). This article will first provide a theoretical background of ecofeminism and its importance in the study of dystopian literature to build this argument (d'Eaubonne, 1974; Merchant, 1980; Plumwood, 1993; Soares, 2019). It will then look at a detailed analysis of *The Handmaid's Tale*, considering how Gilead functions as an anti-ecofeminist project that uses the link between woman and nature to perpetuate patriarchy, and how Offred's story is simultaneously a kind of memory, care and resistance that aims to save another ethical vision (Atwood, 1985; Varsam, 2003). The article will then turn to *The Road* and will examine the conflict between the father's survivalist morals and the son's new, green-sheet morality (McCarthy, 2006; Webster, 2012). The divergent futures of ecofeminist hope in each novel will be explored, along with what they offer in terms of what is needed for ethical life (Soares, 2019; Warren, 2000). Finally, it will discuss the timeliness of the texts, claiming they provide complementary warnings and models to assist us in our own environmental crises (Merchant, 1980; Soares, 2019; Warren, 2000).

Research Problem

While there is much ecofeminist scholarship on dystopian/post-apocalyptic fiction, there are limited comparative accounts that ex

plore how *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Road* shape opposing ecofeminist ethical responses to environmental collapse. This is a divide that has reduced the knowledge of ecological crisis and gender issues to a small extent in modern literature and also their ethical resistance.

Research Importance and Objectives

The importance of this study lies in the fact that it offers a comparative ecofeminist analysis of two groundbreaking post-apocalyptic novels, two different ethical visions of environmental collapse. It tries to look at the link between patriarchy, ecological degradation and resistance through the three theoretical lenses of Val Plumwood, Karen Warren and Carolyn Merchant.

The research scope and the definition of terms.

This article only compares the two novels Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) and Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006). The focus of the analysis is on ecofeminist ethics, environmental collapse, patriarchy, and ethics of care. Ecofeminism used in this study is a critical approach that connects the oppression of women and the exploitation of nature, while environmental collapse is a very serious ecological degradation that poses threats to both humans and non-humans.

A theoretical framework and previous studies were conducted.

The study is based on the ecofeminist writings of Val Plumwood, Karen Warren, Carolyn Merchant and the ethics of care espoused by Carolyn Gilligan and Nel Noddings. The selected dystopian and post-apocalyptic novels are examined and discussed in the context of previous studies of dystopian/p post-apocalyptic literature from an ecofeminist perspective.

This involves the scientific approach to conducting research and the methodology adopted to carry it out.

Research Methodology and Procedures

This study is qualitative and comparative using textual analysis. It is a critical analysis that is based on the concept of ecofeminism and analyses the depiction of environmental collapse, gender relations, and ethical resistance in the works chosen by the subject: novels. The first part of the analysis sets a theoretical ground before analysing each novel separately and, finally, a comparative discussion of their ecofeminist ethical views.

Contribution, Analysis, and Interpretation of the Results.

The study reveals how *The Handmaid's Tale* exposes environmental crisis as a result of the oppression of patriarchy and calls for united resistance through an ethic of care. *The Road*, by contrast, depicts survival in a ravaged ecosystem in which values are only those of parenthood. The comparison essay emphasises the differences in ecological and ethical prospects provided by each novel.

Chapter One: Theoretical Foundations of Ecofeminist Ethics

The Historical and Philosophical Development of Ecofeminist Thought

Ecofeminism is the product of feminist theory, environmental ethics, and social ecology, and was born as a unique theoretical and political movement in the 1970s. It was first thought up by Françoise d'Eaubonne in 1974, who stated that the oppression of women and the oppression of nature were parallel processes that stem from the same systems of oppression – those of men (d'Eaubonne, 1974). Ecofeminism since then has emerged as a multifaceted intellectual movement, ranging from essentialist praise and celebration of the feminine bond with nature to more constructivist critiques on the socially constructed nature of gender and nature. Warren (2000) summarises, "Ecofeminism is a movement in which it is recognized that the exploitation and degradation of the natural world is linked to the subordination and oppression of women" (p. 12). This is not simply an analogical but a structural relationship, which is based on the conceptual systems used to explain both women and nature in the West. This structural relationship has been recognised, and ecofeminist thinkers have suggested that feminist and environmental politics must be fought together, since they are both politics of resistance against the same dominant logic (which degrades the feminine and the natural alike).

The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution (1980) by Carolyn Merchant is one of the seminal works for the ecofeminist movement. Merchant tells the story of the Scientific Revolution and the emergence of modern science and how this changed the relationship between humans and nature (Merchant, 1980). Before this time, nature had been more often than not viewed as a living female being—a nourishing mother who demanded respect and care from human beings and who provided for human needs. With the advent of the Scientific Revolution, however, the place of the organic world was taken over by a mechanical view, one in which nature was regarded as inert matter to be conquered, controlled, and used to serve human interests. The nature of this change has significant consequences for women and the environment, as the exploitation of nature was linked with the subordination of women, both by the same logic of domination and control. The image and idea of nature as female was redefined from a view of respect and care to one of domination and exploitation, justifying both the destruction of nature and the oppression of women. It was not only symbolic but material change, because the new ways of enquiring and exploiting the world brought by the Scientific Revolution allowed for unprecedented degradation of the environment.

In a later book, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (1993), Val Plumwood has elaborated on this analysis of dualism, the logic of which underlies the domination of women as well as that of nature. According to Plumwood, Western philosophy has created a series of dualisms or binary distinctions, including reason/emotion, culture/nature and male/female, which systematically privileges the first terms and denigrates the second. This "logic of domination", as she calls it, gives that ideology the legitimisation to exploit women and nature. According to Plumwood (1993), "The master model... is one in which the other is viewed as a resource to be used for the master's benefit, in which the other is highly instrumental and objectified" (p. 43). This instrumental relationship is a denial of everything that is intrinsically valuable in the other and makes it an instrument for the master's use. As Plumwood shows, the logic of domination works through a kind of "backgrounding", a process whereby the work of women and nature in relation to human life is systematically ignored, obscuring the fact that this work is valuable and can become an exploitation of women and nature. This backgrounding must be acknowledged to comprehend the rationalisation of women's and nature's exploitation in patriarchal societies.

Karen Warren (2000) has pointed to the need for a conceptual link between the oppression of women and nature's oppression. She maintains that such links are more than just analogical—they are entrenched in the mindsets and systems of thought that define the concept of gender and the environment in patriarchal society. Both feminist and environmental ethics have the same conceptual origins, and a truly adequate one must be feminist, contends Warren, and a truly adequate one must be environmental. Warren's work has been especially influential in the creation of an "ethic of care" which focuses on relationships, responsibility, and interconnectedness as means to replace the abstract, individualistic ethics of the traditional Western philosophical tradition. This ethic of care, Warren posits, offers a lens for comprehending and combating gender oppression and environmental devastation, since it acknowledges the boundlessness of all life and humans' accountability for the more-than-human world.

The Woman-Nature Connection in Western Thought and Its Implications for Environmental Collapse

One of the main issues of ecofeminist theory has been the historical and cultural link between women and nature. This has been a two-way sword for this association. On the other hand, it's been employed to argue against the equality of women, who are closer to nature and thus less rational, less civilised, and more deserving of men's control. Plumwood (1993) has suggested that the connection between women and nature has served to marginalise women from the cultural, political and intellectual life of society. However, a few ecofeminists have tried to invoke this relationship, seeking to make it their own, claiming that the traditional feminine function of caring for and nurturing the earth gives them a privileged position which allows them to criticise and challenge the patriarchal exploitation of the environment. This rediscovery of the woman-nature connection is not essentialist, but strategic, seeing that the experience of women in the past is their connection to nature, which gives them a special appreciation of the value of the natural world and the cost of its destruction. The relationship between women and nature is therefore an oppressive and/or a resistant one, depending on the way it is interpreted and applied (Warren, 2000).

The connection between women and nature has been firmly established in Western culture since the Greek philosophical period, and even during the Christian Middle Ages and into the present day. Aristotle, in the Greek tradition, defined women as "deformed males," more natural and less rational citizens than men in the ideal sense of "citizenhood," which would be the basis for full human flourishing. In the Christian faith, Eve's sin in the Garden of Eden created a correlation between women, nature, and sin that would last for centuries and influence the views of the West on both women and the natural world (Aristotle, trans. 1984). In the early modern period, during the witch hunts, women were persecuted for their alleged links to the natural world, their expertise with herbs, their ability to care for women and children in difficult times, their connection to the wild and untamed, and so on, showing the negative impacts of the woman-nature association in a male-dominated culture. This persecution of women based on their association with nature is a very clear example of the ambivalent attitude of Western culture towards women, and towards nature in general, which still affects our perception of environmental issues today (Merchant, 1980).

This kind of connection becomes meaningfully significant as a part of environmental collapse. Women, who are traditionally associated with the natural world, are victims and symbols of the current ecological crisis as the natural world becomes increasingly degraded and barren. In Gilead, women's reproductive bodies are the battleground for the struggle against the environmental crisis, and the instrumentalisation of women and the environment is the focus of ecofeminism (Atwood, 1985). Women are conspicuous by their absence from *The Road*: the mother has taken her own life, and apart from the occasional woman, the world is inhabited almost solely by men. It would be easy to interpret this erasure of women as the natural conclusion of a "man's world" mentality that has been so long deceptively valorising the feminine that it has vanished entirely with the fall of those circumstances that upheld it. However, the absence of women in this post-apocalyptic world implies that the logic of patriarchy is such that it will ultimately devour the very thing it hopes to protect – the feminine and the natural – and leave behind a world devoid of them (McCarthy, 2006).

The Ethic of Care as an Alternative to Patriarchal Ethics

An ethic of care, as an alternative to the traditional ethical frameworks, is one of the more important contributions to have emerged from ecofeminist theory. Inspired by feminist care ethicist Carol Gilligan and Nel Noddings, ecofeminists have maintained that the Western tradition has undervalued the relational, contextual and emotional aspects of ethical life through its focus on abstract principles, individual rights and impartial reason. Gilligan's seminal book *In a Different Voice* (1982) challenged the theories of Lawrence Kohlberg by proposing that women use a different moral reasoning pattern, an "ethic of care" instead of an "ethic of justice. Kohlberg's model put abstract principles and individual rights first in moral development, whereas Gilligan discovered that women tended to emphasise relationships, responsibilities, and the needs of the other person. That perception has been embraced by ecofeminists who propose an ethic of caring as a viable alternative to the instrumental, objectifying relationships that typify patriarchy's domination of women as well as nature. The ethic of care is about the interdependency of all living, the importance of relationships, and responsibilities humans hold toward each other and more-than-human.

Following Nel Noddings's (1984) work, caring is seen as the basic human ethical approach and ethical life is not based on abstract principles, but rather on concrete relationships. Noddings highlights the need for receptivity, responsiveness, and relationality, all of which are traditionally given a less noble label: 'feminine'. Noddings's ethical self is not an individual but a relational self that is formed in relation to others through caring relationships. This relational self concept stands in contrast to the individualistic Western moral vision that has been traditionally oriented towards the autonomous rational self with an interest in self. The ethic of care also questions the pretence of traditional ethics of the universal, abstract and "general" nature of ethical life, which demands that ethical life must always be situated in particular contexts and relationships. Ecofeminists see the ethic of care as the basis not only for comprehending, but also for challenging environmental degradation. An ecofeminist ethic of care not only recognises that nature is more than a resource to be exploited for human needs, but also that all life is connected, and that human beings have a responsibility to the 'more-than-human' world. An ecofeminist ethic is a contextualist ethic, as Warren (2000) states: "An ethic that views the historical and material conditions of women's lives and the interrelatedness of domination of women with domination of nature seriously" (p. 67). This contextualist ethic acknowledges that moral life is always local, that is, it is affected by the historically and culturally specific circumstances in which it is lived. This ethic of care becomes timely in the context of the collapse of the environment because conditions which sustain life are threatened, and relationships which comprise ethical life are placed under extreme pressure.

Ecofeminist Approaches to Dystopian Literature

The theme of what happens when society (or government) and politics fail has long been a favourite in dystopian writing. The dystopian genre has been used to question and look at other possibilities for society, from the totalitarian visions of George Orwell's *1984* (1949), Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932), to more recent dystopian works like Suzanne Collins's *The Hunger Games* (2008) and Emily St. John Mandel's *Station Eleven* (2014). Dystopian fiction has an important critical role which, as has been pointed out by many critics, including Tom Moylan (2000), reveals the hidden assumptions and structures of power which influence

contemporary life. Dystopian fiction illustrates possible futures and the price of social arrangements by portraying worlds in which these assumptions and structures are taken to their logical extreme. Ecofeminist literary criticism has provided strong readings of dystopian literature, analysing their relationship to and critique of male relationships with nature and females. Ecofeminist literary criticism has provided strong readings of dystopian literature that analyse their relationship and critique of male relationships with nature and females.

For instance, Maria Varsam (2003), Sarah Webster (2012) and M. G. Soares (2019) have examined how dystopian literature can shed light on the connections between environmental degradation and gender oppression, thereby highlighting the interconnections between the oppression of women and the oppression of nature. Ecofeminist critics have studied how ecofeminism can be seen in the Gilead totalitarian regime, a system of systematic exploitation of women and the natural environment. The logic of domination in its most extreme form is revealed in the regime's reaction to environmental breakdown—controlling women's reproductive bodies. Varsam (2003) states that "Gilead's political system is grounded in a fundamental relationship of domination that is enacted in relation to women and in relation to the environment" (p. 215). This insight offers a glimpse of the regime's approach to women as just one aspect of its overall engagement with the natural world – seen as a resource to be used for human ends. This control over women's bodies is therefore not only a control over the environment but in fact is interwoven with it, pointing to the relationship between gender and environmental domination that is a central line of attack in ecofeminism.

Likewise, ecofeminist analyses of *The Road* have examined the novel as an environment where the feminist movement has been lost as much as the environment. The novel is notable for its lack of women, and this has been interpreted as a reflection on the effects of a male-dominated worldview which reduces the feminine to a state that is almost gone. The opening scene of the novel, the mother's suicide, is a symbol of hope lost and despair won, as Webster (2012) notes, and the world of men that follows is a bleak and terrifying conclusion of a patriarchal logic. Their absence from the novel is the culmination of a culture which has consistently defeminised the feminine; in effect, the project of patriarchy is bound to be the destruction of the beings it purports to defend and uphold. The novel's emphasis on the father-son dynamic makes it difficult to make any easy judgment on the novel's gender politics, but the lack of women in *The Road* is nonetheless telling of the cost of gender oppression and a condemnation of patriarchal values.

Chapter Two: Gilead's Fall - The Failure of a Patriarchal Restoration Project

The Dystopian Solution: Gilead's Ideological Response to Environmental Collapse

In Atwood's novel, the totalitarian state of Gilead is a reaction to environmental disaster (Atwood, 1985). Throughout the novel, the author does not explain in detail what brought about the catastrophe of Gilead, but does offer a glimpse of a world where the survival of humans is unsure due to toxic waste, nuclear contamination and widespread infertility. Pollution and degradation of the environment have taken a toll for generations, and the crisis is coming to a head, according to the text of Atwood (1985), where she says that humans are finding it more difficult to reproduce. The regime's response to this crisis is none other than a ruthless, hierarchical reconstruction of society grounded in religious piety and a male-dominated understanding of social order, which aims to regulate humans' most intimate life experiences. The ideology of Gilead is at its core a distorted form of eco-feminism. Ecofeminism aims to mend these male-female ruptures by bringing back respectful relationships between humans and nature, whereas Gilead reinforces the logic of domination, using both women and nature as means of control and exploitation for the benefit of the regime. One of the tactics of this revolutionary organisation, the "Sons of Jacob", was to take control of reproduction as the main way to re-establish social order. The regime establishes a female reproductive slavery system, treating women as mere biological organs and subjecting them to a male-dominated reproductive system, in a world where women's fertility is the most valuable resource. This system is institutionalised by the establishment of the "Handmaid" class: women who are the only ones who are allowed to bear children for the ruling elite. "We are the containers, the vessels," Atwood (1985) writes, "We are the two-legged wombs" (p. 87). They have an instrumental attitude towards women, who are given their humanity only in terms of reproduction and are otherwise reduced to a language of containment and of being vessels. This is the basis of

the fundamental misunderstanding Gilead has about the environmental crisis. The regime's emphasis on reproduction as the cure for the problem of infertility is symptom treatment, rather than a solution to the ecological desolation which has made reproduction so difficult.

Such a human-centred perspective, which involves only human reproduction and not the ecological context, is the typical view of the world that ecofeminism challenges and condemns as patriarchal. The logic of domination, as Plumwood (1993) asserts, imposes the view that nature is a means to an end for human use and is not valuable on its own or capable of acting. This is the rationale behind Gilead's response to the environmental crisis: it is a crisis of human reproduction, not a symptom of humanity's failure to live in harmony with nature. So the regime's emphasis on women's bodies is a displacement tactic, a ploy to dodge the deeper issues of human interactions with nature. Gilead's emphasis on reproduction ignores the root issues of the environmental disaster and continues the logic of domination that led to the disaster in the first place. This is the denial of the problem, which is typical for the way a patriarchal society reacts to an environmental crisis; they want to find a technological or social answer instead of challenging the basic assumptions behind the environmental crisis

The Complicity of a Dead Biosphere in Facilitating Gilead's Cruelty

The most remarkable aspect of Gilead's reaction to environmental disaster is how the regime's brutality has been enabled by the disaster itself. The poor state of the environment to which these people are exposed will serve as the excuse that will justify the restoration of a patriarchy by violence. Gilead is a place where women's bodies are "controlled" because of the "uncontrollability" of a poisoned world. In the eyes of the regime, the old regime is blamed for its "lack of rigidity," leaving room for women to choose what to do with their bodies and their lives. In Gilead's ideology, this permissiveness caused the environmental crisis and the demise of fertility. The regime's brutalisation of women in its power is hailed as a sacrifice that is required for the survival of the human species, which is a very difficult process. It is the irony of Gilead's project that the people who are trying to bring order to a world gone crazy are trying to destroy the delicate ecological relationships that keep life alive.

The novel gives us hints of this degraded world in Offred's memories and observations. The air is polluted, the water is poisoned, and even the soil is poisonous. In one of the most chilling scenes in the novel, Offred remembers how the pollution situation was developing as concurrent as the regime's consolidation of power: "We were the ones who couldn't conceive. We were the ones who were slowly dying. The hospitals were filling with women with strange illnesses, women whose babies were born with deformities, women who had trouble breathing, women who were bleeding internally... The scientists said it would take generations to clean up the pollution, and they were right: generations passed, and nothing has changed... In the meantime we were dead... We were dying" (Atwood, 1985, p. 87). This is not "background degradation"; it is the degradation that makes Gilead possible. It would be unimaginable in a world of plenty to have a kind of radical social experiment like this one as Gilead. That is, however, in a world of scarcity, where the struggle for survival seems to require extraordinary measures. Gilead takes advantage of this sense of crisis to justify its most extreme policies, which is why it uses its brutality as public health policy.

This instrumentalisation of the environmental crisis is one of Plumwood's (1993) "logics of backgrounding" - the systematic denial of the role nature plays in human life, rendering nature's exploitation natural and inevitable. Gilead's attention is drawn away from the ecological crisis that led to this human infertility, and the crisis itself is made into symptoms of the environmental catastrophe. It is a backgrounding whereby the regime can claim its control of women as a remedy to the crisis, but fails to address the deeper question of human relationship with the environment. The regime's own response to the environmental crisis is thus a profound lack of ecological sensibility, a lack of understanding of the interdependence of human flourishing and the health of the natural world. This is a failure of the patriarchal way of thinking; in patriarchal thinking, nature is treated as a resource to be exploited for human ends, rather than a living system to which human beings belong.

Gilead as an Anti-Ecofeminist State: Weaponising the Woman-Nature Connection

The Instrumentalisation of Women's Bodies

Gilead's ideology is based on the systematic exploitation of the association between women and nature. This association is used explicitly by the regime as a tool to manage and exploit women for the benefit of the State. This is particularly noticeable in the condition of Handmaids, whose bodies are used only for their reproductive parts. This instrumentalisation is indicated by the use of language to describe Handmaids: "two-legged wombs," "vessels," and "sacred vessels. Such terms diminish women to their biological roles, deny their humanity and put them into a kind of objectification that sees their bodies as tools to be distributed and managed by the state. This language is the same as that used to talk about environmental management in which natural resources are used as commodities for human benefit. This instrumentalisation is part of the logic of domination, as Plumwood (1993) states; it can be seen as the exploitation of women and nature for the master's purposes.

The regime's treatment of Handmaids also gives insight into the bizarre connection between women and nature. Ecofeminism is about affirming the relationship that women share with the natural world as a place of strength and resistance, while Gilead sees the relationship between women and the natural world as a justification for violence against women. As the regime claims, women are meant to give birth to babies, and the government has the right and the responsibility to uphold that responsibility in the time of environmental crisis. This argument is similar to Warren's (2000) "logic of domination," which bases the subordination of women on statements about their nature. The control over women is a natural law, as Gilead claims. They argue that women are meant for bearing children, and thus the control of women is not only justified, but it is inevitable. This naturalisation of the oppression of women is a trait of patriarchal thinking, which often imagines the subordination of women as a natural and normal aspect of human society. Such a use of women's bodies is not confined to Handmaids. Other women are under the control of the regime, too, whether they're Wives or Marthas or Econowives. There are different categories of women and assigned different roles; each of them is regulated and controlled.

The Aunts and the Complicity of Women in Their Own Oppression

Gilead's system is one of the most troubling things because of the way that it encourages women to be policing women. The Aunts train and regulate Handmaids, and function as a type of complicity that denies the possibility of a common feminist or ecofeminist opposition from the inside. The Aunts themselves are the enforcers of the ideology of the regime, arguing for their own power on the grounds of tradition and necessity. The Aunts, as Atwood (1985) describes them, are the "guardians of the system," who "keep us in line," "teach us our place," and "make sure we don't forget who we are" (p. 45). The Aunts' role brings attention to how patriarchy is expressed, not only through the direct oppression of women by men, but also through the internalisation of patriarchal values by women. The Aunts have internalised the regime's concept of the nature of women and their role in society. They're now their own oppressors, imposing the same system of dehumanisation. But the Aunts are victims of the regime as well. They are not architects of Gilead; they're its functionaries. Their complicity is complicated, and mirrors the choices that people make when they have to deal with such a powerful force.

The Aunts' complicity is exemplified by Plumwood's (1993) notion of 'colonization', whereby people from oppressed groups feel part of the oppressor, and participate in oppressive systems. That this colonization is a strong form of oppression, as it makes the system self-perpetuating and it needs less direct enforcing by the top. The Aunts have been infiltrated by the ideology of Gilead, which defines the roles of women and imposes its rules on other women. This colonisation makes resistance more difficult; resistance is split among women, and it is impossible to build a united opposition against it. But the complicity of the Aunts is not complete. As they carry out the regime's dictates, they are sometimes kind to the Handmaids, implying that their allegiance to the regime is not total. This ambiguity is an indication of the complexity of living under totalitarianism, where one has to live in a system that is asking for one's complicity and yet maintains a bit of one's humanity.

The Breakdown of Female Solidarity as a Strategy of Control

Gilead's system is one that is meant to fracture solidarity among women. The regime divides women into different categories of roles and puts them against each other so that they don't develop a 'resistance' as a group. In the system of oppression that the regime imposes, Handmaids are set against Wives, Wives against Marthas, and all women against each other, fighting for survival. This loss of solidarity is one of the most harmful effects of Gilead's system. Offred is isolated from everyone throughout the novel, and she cannot trust anybody else, even those who may be allies. The surveillance and control of the regime is so total that anything resembling solidarity may be fatal, and the relationships which Offred has with other women are based on this fear. There was no trust, no solidarity, no sisterhood, writes Atwood (1985), only the struggle for survival — we were the women who had been betrayed, and we were the women who had betrayed. (p. 123)

However, in this environment of suspicion and fear, periods of solidarity will still occur. Ofglen and Offred's friendship starts sceptical, but turns into a fragile alliance. In their mutual identity as Handmaids, they become one and a bond of unity emerges that cannot be broken by the regime. We were both Handmaids, both women, both prisoners. The regime had tried to make us enemies, but we were sisters," says Offred (Atwood, 1985, p. 156). It is this sense of belonging and of being oppressed that underlies the act of resistance, the rejection of the regime's definition of who they are and what they are meant to become. In the same way, Offred's recollections of her life before Gilead with her mother and her friend Moira offer a glimpse of another kind of woman-to-woman bond – one that is supportive. These memories continue to support Offred's resistance; they give her a glimpse of what solidarity might be. The regime's aim of eroding the unity among women, however, is only partially achieved; women find other means to unite, irrespective of the regime's attempts to thwart such unity.

The Importance of the "Before" and the "Outside" in Preserving Ecofeminist Hope

The natural world both before and in Gilead is one of the strongest features of the novel in Offred's story, as the sterile, controlled Gilead world contrasts with the natural world. Offred's flashbacks to a time when the world was more ecologically balanced are a dismal reminder of what was lost and what Gilead promises to return, but only warps. These recollections are vivid, full of colour, sound and life. Offred recalls gardens, flowers, and the changing seasons. She can recall the taste of quality food, the sensation of the warm sun on her skin, and the satisfaction of living in a world not solely ruled by human design. These memories are not just for recollection, but are their own resistance, holding on to a vision of life that Gilead has attempted to destroy. I recall the gardens, the flowers, the smell of earth after the rain, the world before, when we were free, when the world was alive, writes Atwood (1985) (p. 78). These memories help to keep Offred going in her resistance, giving her some idea of what life might be like if the regime of Gilead were to be overthrown.

Gilead's sterile world is contrasted with the natural world of memory like never before in Offred's descriptions of colour. Gilead's world is black and white, where each person has an assigned uniform that signals their rank in society: red, blue, green, beige. Offred's recollections are vivid, though: the colours of flowers, the colour changes from the foliage, the bright colours of the clothes she once wore. This contrast highlights the impoverishment of Gilead's world, one that has become sterile with the desire to control. The regime's treatment of women is reflected in its treatment of the environment, and both are drained of life and become available to the regime. The control of women and the control of nature are intertwined in the novel's ecofeminist critique, and this is the logic of domination at work in a variety of arenas. The "outside" is also central to Offred's story. The line dividing Gilead from Canada is a space of possibility, a place where Gilead's reach does not extend. The outside world has come, and Gilead is not complete; there are areas of freedom and resistance. This is especially true of the network of "mayday" which stretches across the border – a network of hope for those who wish to flee the Gilead tyrants.

Before and outside is important, and it's an important insight of ecofeminist thinking that the natural world offers a point of view from which to critique and resist patriarchy. The memory of a living world and the reality of places beyond the regime's control provide an alternative to the regime's view of reality. They propose that there is another world and that there is no omnipotence in the regime. To engage in resistance,

alternatives must be recognised, as they offer an image of what is possible and a drive towards change (Warren, 2000). This vision comes from Offred's recollections of the past and the knowledge of the outside world, which allows her to persist in her struggle and to hope for another future. But the framing device, which recovers Offred's narrative and retells it to a future historian, suggests that this vision is not only personal; it is political as well: memories of a different world can inspire resistance, and ultimately help to bring down the regime.

Chapter Three: The Subversive Seed - Ecofeminist Resistance in Offred's Narrative

The Ethic of Care in Small Spaces: Maintaining Humanity Under Oppression

Gilead is a failure of a "patriarchy" restoration attempt, but Offred's story is an alternative: A subversive ecofeminist ethics, operating in small spaces, intimate moments, and acts of resistance beyond the control of the regime. This ethics is not a lofty political philosophy, but rather a way of life that persists and persists despite the regime's attempt to wipe it out, a way of caring, connection, and solidarity that lives on. Relationships are the basis of the ethic of care in Offred's story. Even though the regime has tried to sever the bonds of humanity, Offred forms bonds of caring with others: her husband Luke, her daughter, her friend Moira, and even the Commander's Wife, Serena Joy. Such connections offer a point of resistance, a point of meaning, a vision of connection that is largely insulated from the atomising system of Gilead. These memories are my resistance, my refusal to accept what Gilead has made of us, writes Atwood (1985) (p. 89). These memories are not only a reflection of mere passivity, but active resistance efforts, a kind of memory that has tried to guard an image of human connection that the regime has attempted to delete.

Offred's relationship with her daughter is one of the most powerful expressions of this ethic of care. Though her daughter has been taken from her, Offred continues to care for her, imagining her, praying for her, and preserving her memory. This loving relationship continues even in the face of the regime's attempt to cut it off, and is what resistance is – it is ungovernable. The ethic of care is based on real relationships, on awareness that we are linked to others and have responsibility for them. (Noddings 1984) In being cared for by Offred, who persists in caring for her daughter despite being separated and taken away from her, is a statement of this recognition. It is an act of standing up against the definition of her as a Handmaid given by the regime; an act of refusal to be reduced to her reproductive role by the regime. This caring relation also has a political dimension, since it is a way of resisting the regime's efforts to control the most intimate aspects of human life. Offred refuses to take the regime's definition of her, and what she can be, for granted by continuing to care for her daughter.

Another expression of the ethic of care is Offred's relationship with other Handmaids. Even though it is a fragile friendship, it gives her a feeling of comradeship and help. The secret conversations and resistance among them is a denial of the regime's definition of their identity. Despite all the constant monitoring, they can find little places of care and connection. Atwood (1985, p. 156) notes that "Our friendship was small, but it was real. It was our resistance. These acts of solidarity are small ones, but they are the basis for resistance and, if they become a constant, there is the potential for something greater: collective action, something the regime has sought to thwart. The caring ethic that Offred embodies within these relationships is not romantic, but political. It's a rejection of the government's efforts to destroy human relationships, a commitment to maintaining the relationships which give life meaning. This rejection lies at the heart of ecofeminist resistance, which sees the care of relationships as part of the care of the natural world, and both as a resistance to the logic of domination.

The Resistance of Memory: Preserving an Alternative Vision

One of Offred's strongest weapons of resistance is her memory. The regime also attempts to control the past, eliminating it and replacing it with its own version of history. Offred notices that the regime attempts to make her forget what life was like before, that there's no other way (Atwood, 1985, p. 101). However, Offred's memories remain, and give her a picture of life before Gilead that suggests a different story. These memories are not only personal, but cultural and historical. She recalls her mother, a feminist activist before Gilead. She recalls her friend Moira, who refuses to accept the Gilead system—the form of resister Offred would like to be

able to emulate. She recalls the seventies and eighties—the world she lived in was very flawed, but in retrospect it seemed like a golden age of freedom and opportunity. The memory is resistance in a way since it retains an other Gilead. The regime's control relies on its capacity to declare what is real and what is feasible. Offred defies the regime's reality by keeping her memories alive. She believes there was a world there before Gilead, and she suggests that there could be one there after.

Memory resistance also has an explicitly ecofeminist aspect. Offred's recollections of nature give her a sense of ecology that Gilead has eradicated. She recalls her time in a real world, her relationship with nature that was not merely to serve a practical purpose. These memories offer a critique of Gilead's instrumental attitude towards women and nature and imply that there is another way of relating to the world. For environmental resistance, the memory of vital nature is critical, for it gives a picture of loss and of what is possible again (as Merchant 1980 points out). Offred's recollections of the natural world are like this; they help to keep her alive because she hopes that Gilead can undo the damage to the environment. These memories also link her to a larger movement of women's resistance to the destruction of the environment, which ecofeminism aims to retrieve and honour. By recalling the natural world, Offred follows in this tradition, keeping alive a vision of ecological relationship which Gilead has sought to destroy. Memory resists not only on a personal level, but on a political and ecological level, leaving room for a tomorrow that is other than the one we have.

Memory has power in the regime and is controlled. The public ceremonies, called 'Prayvaganzas', are meant to produce a new collective memory, a collective story that legitimises the power of the regime. The collective story, however, is thwarted by Offred's private memories, which keep the past in a different light. Public memory versus private memory is at the heart of the novel's politics, being a product of the contestation between the regime's drive to control meaning and the individual's drive for his or her autonomy. Offred's memories are where it cannot reach her, where she can think and feel outside its control. In this regard, her memories are not just passive, but active, a resistance that can not be completely extinguished by the regime. Preserving memory is key to resistance because it gives them the means to critique and offers them the vision of a future that is not this one (Plumwood, 1993). These are resources provided by Offred's memories; they keep her alive through her trauma, and may help them envision a different future.

The Body as a Site of Resistance: Reclaiming Agency Under Totalitarian Control

Gilead is a place where the body is the main place of control. The regime controls women's bodies, women's reproductive capabilities, and women's appearance. We are the containers, the vessels, writes Atwood (1985); our bodies are not our own (p. 87). But the body is also a place of resistance, a location where women can resist the regime's definition and gain agency. This physical opposition is embodied in the attraction between Offred and Nick, the Commander's servant. Their romance is like Gilead's rules, their defiance of control over their bodies. Offred's affair with Nick is a reclaiming of her body, a system in which her body is supposed to be a "vessel" for the Commander's seed. Offred says that "With Nick, I am not a vessel. I am a woman. It is my body, and I choose what to do with it" (Atwood, 1985, p. 189). It's a reclaiming of the body; it's an act of resistance; it's a refusal to take the regime's definition of who she is. It's also her fun, her humanity when the regime is trying to strip her of it, to make her nothing more than a reproductive machine.

This bodily resistance does not merely concern the aspect of sexuality. It also means the little acts of rebellion that Offred commits: the way she carries herself, the way she walks, the way she dresses. These acts are not heroic; they are the little things that a person does that will not be the regime to define him/her. Such minor acts of defiance become political in a system whose job is to rule with absolute power. Reflectively, Offred says that she is defiant by her posture, by her walk, by her refusal to look down, by the small things (Atwood, 1985, p. 145). "These little actions are not just a personal act; they're a political act, an act of defiance, against the regime's totalizing control." They also link Offred to a greater tradition of resistance in which women have employed their bodies to resist the control of men. This tradition is an integral part of ecofeminism, which sees the body as the site where the human and the natural converge and as control of women's bodies and control of the natural are linked.

The body as a site of resistance also assumes a particular ecofeminist connotation. Ecofeminist theory takes the

body as more than an object; it's a place where one can connect to the natural world. The body is the place where humans and nature come together, where we experience our entanglements with the more-than-human world. Offred reclaims her body from the control of Gilead and reconnects to the natural world out of which Gilead has tried to banish her. The body is central to ecofeminist ethics, as it is with the body that we have our relationship to the natural world, and we have an ethical obligation to care for it. Warren (2000) contends that the body is the source of our ecofeminist ethics; it is through the body that we experience our relationship and our ethical responsibility for the care of the natural world. Offred's resistance is not only physical, but it's an ecological one, too—a revolt against the regime's practical modus operandi of women and nature. This relationship of bodily resistance to ecological resistance is at the heart of the novel's ecofeminist perspective; it implies a linkage between the fight for the liberation of women and the healing of nature.

The Power of the Female Collective: Solidarity as Resistance

The female collective remains as a point of resistance in the novel in spite of the regime's attempts to disconnect women and to fragment solidarity. The network is named "Mayday", and it is the underground resistance movement that indicates the potential for common struggle against the regime. The relationship of Offred with Ofglen, a glimpse of this collective, is an example of the regime's failure to eradicate female solidarity. Others are here, there is resistance, and we are a part of it," Atwood (1985) writes (p. 201). This feeling of being part of something bigger helps to keep Offred going through her ordeal, and gives her a sense of purpose and hope. The female collective in the novel is not a political entity; it is, however, a web of relations, a community of caring that remains as the regime strives to dismantle it. They are all oppressed women of Gilead who help each other to survive by doing things for one another. This is not big action; it is small action from individuals who don't wish to be identified as what the regime says they are.

This is a collective solidarity that has an ecofeminist dimension. Oppression by a male-dominated system brings the women together in a larger movement for women's resistance. Their unity is akin to the unity which ecofeminists say is needed to fight nature- and women's-dominating powers. Solidarity is a key to ecofeminist resistance, for "collective action and mutual support depends on the creation of conditions of solidarity" (Warren 2000). It is this ecofeminist solidarity that the women of Gilead practise in their small acts of solidarity, not taking it easy on the regime's offer to split them. This solidarity is the basis of resistance, and this solidarity can be what allows for collective action and what the regime has sought to obstruct. Collective resistance among women provides a paradigm for the sort of transdisciplinary, coordinated resistance ecofeminism calls for, which confronts the logic of domination in various realms.

The fragility of this collective resistance is the source of hope suggested in the novel. But Offred ends her story with a glimmer of hope: she is captured by the "Mayday" network, and the last section implies her story has been recovered and told by a future historian. This framing implies that there is resistance, that it is not going to last and that another world is emerging. Offred reflects that "I am not giving up" and I am not defeated and "There is still hope" (Atwood, 1985, p. 234). This hope is not a certainty; it is based on possibility, on the understanding that the future is not set, that resistance is the difference that can make the difference. Ecofeminism is grounded in that hope, which is an essential element in the ecofeminist ideology, as the fight for justice and ecological sustainability is constant and there is no certainty of victory. This is a hope embodied by the female collective in the novel, which implies the possibility of resisting the overwhelming power with others and the necessity of solidarity.

Chapter Four: "Carrying the Fire" - Paternalistic Ethics in a Dead World

The Absolute Collapse: Environmental Devastation in McCarthy's Vision

The Handmaid's Tale offers a poisoned world that has hope of salvation; The Road offers a dead world. In the story, McCarthy's (2006) aftermath of total environmental collapse: sun, trees, and water are all ash. The very things that nurtured life are now extinguished, and the wasteland is frozen. There is never any mention of why this catastrophe occurred. A lack of back story, no exposition, no explanation of how the world came to this state, no McCarthy. This lack of explanation is important: it indicates that the cause is not relevant to the condition, and that the world has reached a stage where cause/effect is not relevant to the condition. Here, it's

all about life—and death. The world was dead: there was nothing but ash and cold; the sun had gone out...and the earth was a tomb" (p. 3, McCarthy 2006). This bleak beginning sets the novel's central issue: how to live an ethical life in a world devoid of any form of life. The environment is as absolute as it is in *The Road*, compared to *The Handmaid's Tale*. The world isn't poisoned in Atwood's novel; it is only sick—recovery is possible, and memory resists being poisoned, so the natural world will come back. In McCarthy's novel, the world is dead—and will remain dead, at least from a human time perspective.

The novel is extremely bleak in terms of hope for environmental restoration, but it does provide the possibility of survival in a world that no longer allows life to continue. The father thinks, "There was no life left in the world. Birds were gone, animals were gone, trees were dead. There was only ash and cold" (McCarthy, 2006, p. 45). The absolute collapse has very deep consequences for ethical life. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, nature is a benchmark against which the regime's brutality is measured. *The Road* has no such standard: no natural world. The characters are left to make their own moral standards, with no outside standard of which to draw upon. This lack of nature is also the absence of the feminine, which has traditionally been connected to the natural in the world. The erasure of women is thus linked to the erasure of nature, and the logic of domination has "taken to the nth power", erasing both the feminine and the natural. Even though the novel itself does not explicitly address ecofeminist thought, this juxtaposition between the erasure of women and the erasure of nature is at the core of the novel's ecofeminist implications.

In *The Road*, the complete and utter degradation of the natural world also fails community. The father and son journey together, without other men, without trust, and only to live to see another day. This isolation is a sign of the collapse of community in this environmental crisis, and it asks the question of the possibility of an ethical life without community. The old man, as his father thinks, "There were no communities left, no families, no friends; there was only the two of them, alone in the ash" (McCarthy, 2006, p. 67). This is a result of the environment's collapse and a state of survival, because other people are more of a threat to one's survival than an ally. The novel is a world in which the elements of ethical life – community, connection, care – have been systematically removed and only the stark struggle for survival remains. The moral dilemma at the heart of the novel is how to be human, given that humanity's conditions have been ruined.

The Ethic of Survival vs. The Ethic of Humanity:

The Father's Anthropocentric Survivalism and Its Ethical Limits

The Road is a novel with one overriding imperative: the survival of the father's son. His "ethics" (if he has any) is a sort of radical anthropocentric survivalism. His only concern is the biological preservation of his son, and moral values, social interactions and the welfare of others do not matter. All he had to go by was that his duty was to keep the boy alive, his only purpose, his only reason for continuing, as McCarthy (2006) claims (p. 23). This survivalist attitude is very paternalistic. It is the father who makes all the decisions, decides on the way on their journey, and protects his son with a ferocity even more powerful than a primitive instinct. He loves his son so much, but is possessive and controlling. He feels that he is the protector, the guide, the one who will save his son's life in a world that wants to take him away. This paternalistic survivalism is apparent in the man's attitude to people. The man sees other men as a potential threat, and his instinctive reaction to strangers is aggression. He is prepared to kill to defend his son, and it's in a moment of the novel that he does shoot down a man who threatens his son. It is disturbing, too, because there seems to be a desperate need for the father's love to be more and more like violence, and that is presented as being necessary.

The father's survivalism is also accompanied by a marked isolation. The father and son journey through the world, isolated from others, suspicious of anyone and just trying to make their way. This isolation is a reflection of the loss of community which has followed the environmental crisis, and it raises questions as to whether it is possible to live ethically without community. In darkness, "there were no others. Only the two of them" (McCarthy 2006, p. 89), the father thinks. This isolation is not the result of the collapse of the environment only, but of survival and a fact of life, since other humans are threats rather than allies. This father's survivalism, in turn, demands that he disavow community, that other people be viewed as opponents rather than collaborators. This rejection of the community is an ethical failure, in addition to being a condition

of survival. The novel poses, then, a deep ethical dilemma: what is acceptable in a living world is not acceptable in a dead one. This is the moral quandary of the novel, and one that the reader is forced to consider: what would he or she do in the event of such collapse?

The Son's Eco-Morality: Compassion as Ethical Resistance

The son, unlike his father, is an expression of a different moral movement. The son is more tender and more sensitive to others; more compassionate. He sees his father's violence and is disturbed, and insists on helping others even if it means jeopardising their safety. McCarthy (2006) explains that the boy always asked about the other people, wanted to help them, save them, bring them along. The son's morality is not based on abstract principles but on an intuitive sense of right and wrong. He has to tell the difference between the "good guys" and the "bad guys", and he wants to be a "good guy. This separation implies a fledgling ethical pattern not to be confused with the father's survivalism. Compassion has a particular ecological aspect in the son. He's more sensitive to the needs of the world outside of himself and his father. He is concerned with the welfare of other people, including strangers, and he feels compassion for the plight of the environment. The son's compassion is an expression of eco-consciousness, which the father is lacking in a world that has lost nature. The son's concern is more expansive than the father's survivalism: it has a greater ethic of care than the father, so that maybe some human connection can be maintained when all is lacking.

One of the main conflicts of the novel is between the father and son. The father's instinctive survivalism pulls them in one direction – to isolation and violence – and the son's instinctive caring pulls them the other – to connection and care. This conflict is never resolved, and the novel concludes with the father dying and the son being adopted by a group of survivors. The father tells his son, "You've got to carry the fire. You've got to keep the fire alive" (McCarthy, p. 278). It is his last gift to his son, a legacy of meaning in a meaningless world, this injunction to carry the fire. The son's takeover of the fire implies that the father's survivalism is not destined for failure, that some of the son's compassion remains, and may be influencing what the future will look like. It is also an inheritance that indicates a change from the paternal to the communal ethic; the son is adopted by a community of survivors who are the possibility of a community. The novel concludes, after a somewhat ambiguous leap of faith, with a hope for a new way of living together, based on the son's eco-morality, after the collapse.

The Ethics of "Carrying the Fire" as a Disembodied Ideal

The theme of the novel is "carrying the fire. The father's exhortations to his son are to keep the fire alive, to carry it in his heart, to keep it from the darkness of the world. Yet what does this fire say? The fire was not literal; it was something else, something like inside them, something that made them human. McCarthy (2006) writes, p. 123 Fire is not an ideology or set of principles. It is a symbol of something beyond expression: the human spirit, the capacity for survival, the power for goodness in a world turned evil. The father's command to bring the fire comes as a request to keep alive something quintessential of mankind when all else has been taken away. The fire also symbolises the moral aspect of human life. This fire is the son's insistence that they are "the good guys" -- that they do not want to embrace the amoral survivalism that is pervasive in the world. The fire symbolises the potential for ethical life in an ethically bankrupt world. But the fire can be a burden, too. It needs sacrifice, commitment and even a willingness to persevere through the bleakest of times. The father offers his life for the fire, and the son is given the responsibility to carry the fire after the death of his father.

This is not an ecofeminist fire which the father urges the son to take. It's not about the connection to the environment or a caring attitude. It is a purely humanistic flame, almost spiritual – a will to meaning in a meaningless world. This "phageless ideal" is the lack of an environment in which people live in the novel. When there is no natural world to which the fire is connected, the fire is abstract; it is no longer attached to any material world. The father and son are "carrying the fire" in a world that has been reduced to ash, and the fire itself is a metaphor for human meaning in a world devoid of any meaning. The fire is also very masculine. It is transmitted from father to son; women are not involved in this transmission. At the start of the novel, the mother commits suicide, and there are no women in the world the father and son live in. The fire is now a

purely masculine ideal which moves away from the feminine and from the natural world linked to the feminine. As the fire is disembodied and masculinised, it brings up doubts about the viability of the moral perspective that the novel offers. Can an ethic of "carrying the fire" survive without any kind of life environment? Can it live on from one father to the son, or will the fire die out when the final man in a line of men carrying the fire dies?

Chapter Five: Comparative Analysis - Institutional Collapse Versus Individual Perseverance

Contrasting Visions of Resistance and Hope

The Handmaid's Tale and The Road are fundamentally different in that they have different ideas about the nature of ethical life in the face of environmental disaster. In Atwood's (1985) novel, resistance is collective, organised and based on the experience of women. The network that's called "Mayday", the memories of the pre-Gilead days, and the little acts of resistance Offred makes are all signs of a different future, one of caring, connecting, and solidarity. The hope in The Handmaid's Tale is ecological and political. The environmental problem may be solved, the world may be cured, and people can restore a harmonious relationship with nature. This ecological hope is based on a vision of ecology that is rooted in an ecofeminist perspective and considers the struggle of women for liberation and the healing of nature as the same. It is a world beyond Gilead; it is a world of earth, of women, of life: I will find my way there, Offred thinks (p. 245), and she will. Offred will find her way; there is a world beyond Gilead; it is a world of earth, of women, of life. This vision helps Offred survive and offers a glimpse of a better future.

The kind of resistance to which McCarthy (2006) alludes is individual, paternal and isolated. The care of a father towards his son is a kind of paternal resistance that is based on the love of a father for his son. This is not collective resistance; it's an individual fight against the world, a battle to maintain one human life in the face of overwhelming odds, and it's the resistance of a man. Unlike The Handmaid's Tale, there is less hope in The Road. It's not in the restoration of the natural world because the natural world can't be restored; it's about the preservation of the human meaning in an apathetic world. The father and son carry the fire - they maintain a vision of goodness that is lost in the world. But this hope is tenuous. The father is killed, and the son is left to carry on the fire into the uncertain future. The father thinks that there must be something positive in this world, something worthwhile to hold onto. If he does not believe this, then why bother, he thinks (McCarthy, 2006, p. 134). This hope is not a certainty, but faith—a belief that the fire is worth carrying although there is no proof that it will make any difference.

The difference in these two visions is quite remarkable. The Handmaid's Tale offers a world in which resistance is possible, in which collective action can make a difference, and in which the natural world can be restored. In The Road, resistance is virtually futile, there is no notion of collective action, and the natural world is irretrievably destroyed. The differences can be traced back to a fundamental difference in perceptions of the environmental crisis and what can be done about it. Atwood's (1985) novel implies that the crisis can be turned around, that humankind can learn from its errors, and that a different future can be realised. In his novel, McCarthy (2006) suggests that the crisis may not be reversible, that humans may have passed the point of no return, and that the only possibility for hope is to save something of meaning in a world that has lost its meaning. Either way, both are strong messages, and both make the reader think about what they would do if everything the world is built to sustain collapsed.

The Divergent Roles of the Ecological Frame in Shaping Ethical Possibilities

The ecological frame in each of the two novels influences these divergent futures, the one an ecofeminist hope: the other a hopeful ecofeminism. In The Handmaid's Tale, there is a real, fertile Other outside the polity of humans. Hopefully, being able to return to this world, to reconnect with nature, and to heal damage that has been done. The ecological frame is crucial to the novel's ecofeminist vision. The natural world serves as a yardstick against which to judge Gilead's brutality, a reminder to keep Offred going in her resistance, and a target that the resistance movement aims for. Such an ecological context is essential to the novel's ecofeminist aspect; if it lacks it, the novel would become just a political attack on totalitarianism. The world outside Gilead is alive; the trees grow, the flowers bloom, one day we will return to that world, writes Atwood (1985) (p.

178). The novel's vision, which is also ecological hope, is at the very heart of the novel and implies that the natural world is not dead, but waiting, and that man can re-establish a relationship with it. The ethic of care which Offred exercises is also part of this ecology: caring for people is intertwined with caring for nature.

The ecological frame is missing from *The Road*. The world is dead, and there is no hope in it. There was no life in the world – birds, animals, trees; only ash and cold, writes McCarthy (2006) (p. 45). The moral outlook of the novel is not to reconnect with nature, but to carry the fire in an anti-natural world. This lack of an ecological frame has significant implications for the ethical vision of the novel. The ethic of care becomes abstract in the absence of a living environment, detached from its material context. Fathers and sons have a fire but not a connection with the natural world, only a will to meaning. This disconnection from the ecological implies that the novel's ethical vision may be impossible to sustain, that a novel's ethics without an ecology will eventually become a suspension's ethics. At the end of the novel, the father dies, and the son is taken over by a group of survivors, implying that the fire may not be endless, and that it may die out when the last person who carries the fire dies.

Rather than a comparison between the two novels, the comparison points to a key insight: For a true ecofeminist ethic to be possible, there must be an environment in which it can be lived. The "feminist" or "care" ethic is abstract or paternalistic without the "eco". *The Handmaid's Tale* is based on an ethic of care, and this is originally related to a connection with the natural world. This is the theme of Offred's recollection of the pre-Gilead world, her need to return to nature, and the resistance movement's intention of restoring the natural world—in all its forms—to humanity. In *The Road*, the ethic of care is missing a connection to nature. The father's care of his son is a form of "paternalistic survivalism" and is disengaged from the larger ecology. The son's compassion is broader, but it's still conceptual; it has nothing to do with a living space. This contrast shows that ecofeminist ethics needs an environment to thrive, and without it, the ethic of care becomes limited, that is, focused on survival.

Maternal Resistance Versus Paternal Resistance: Gendered Approaches to Ethical Survival

Also, the kind of resistance represented in each novel is different. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the resistance is part of a community, a relationship, and an experience for women. It's a resistance of the mother, which is based on the traditional role of women as caregivers and nurturers. This maternal resistance is not based on an assumption that women are more caring or more attuned to nature. Instead, it draws on the lived experience of women under patriarchy, which has instilled in them the importance of caring and connection. Because we have no one else, we have learned to care for one another: we are sisters in suffering and sisters in resistance, as Atwood (1985) puts it (p. 201). This maternal resistance is an expression of ecofeminist politics, which is based on the understanding that the emancipation of women and the healing of nature are related. The women of Gilead are practising this ecofeminist resistance, in small ways of solidarity, not to be separated by the regime. This resistance isn't essentialist; it's based on lived experience of oppressed existence, and the understanding that solidarity is necessary for survival.

In *The Road*, resistance is personal, familial, and singular. The father's care is a resistance of the father that's based on his love for the child. This resistance is not a collective one; it is a struggle against the world which is waged by one man alone, a fight to save the life of one man against innumerable odds. He could only have known that he had to keep the boy alive, for that was the only purpose, the only reason for continuing, as McCarthy (2006) writes (p. 23). This opposition from the father is very protective, a good and bad thing. The father's love for his son is unconditional, possessive and controlling. He is the protector, the guide, the one who will keep his son alive in a world that wants to destroy him. This masculinity of resistance is a symptom of the lack of women in the novel's world. The mother has killed herself, and there are no women available to give an alternative model of resistance. The novel's fathers' resistance is, therefore, not only individual; it is also gendered, just as the erasure of the natural world is coupled with the erasure of the feminine.

There is a greater difference between the two novels also in terms of the level of resistance offered by the mother and the father. It is a feminist novel, based on the experience of women and the potential for collective resistance, that *The Handmaid's Tale* is. This novel's maternal resistance represents a feminist politics, which is

based on the fact that women's oppression can be understood from a shared experience and is the foundation for collective action. *The Road* is a more universal novel, about the struggle for survival, which cuts across gender. But one wonders what kind of universalism is possible in *The Road*, and whether the novel's vision is really a masculine one, given the absence of women. The lack of women in *The Road* is the inevitable result of a worldview that leads to the devaluation of women, as Webster (2012) states, when the worldview that nourishes women's strength has failed. This comparison between these two novels, therefore, highlights not only that women have been erased but also a political statement that the absence of women is a statement about the impact of patriarchy and the need for feminist resistance.

The Sustainability of Ethical Life Without an Ecological Foundation

The Handmaid's Tale and *The Road* both pose a basic question about how long an ethical life can exist without an ecological base. *The Handmaid's Tale* provides a foundation for ethics through remembrance of a living natural world and hope for its eventual return. Offred's caring for others is linked to her caring for the natural world, and her resistance is rooted in the conviction that there is another world. It is the basis of the ecology, a yardstick on which Gilead's cruelty will be judged, and a target for the resistance movement. Ethical life does not depend on an ecological base in *The Road*, but only on a humanistic will to meaning. There is no wider ecology of the fire that the father and son carry—the fire is one of human significance in a world without meaning. The absence of an ecological base suggests questions regarding the sustainability of this fire.

The fire appears to be unsustainable, as suggested by the novel. The father leaves, and the son takes on the burden of the fire, uncertain of his future. The group of survivors adopt the son, and this is a glimmer of hope, but not one that is based on a relationship to the natural world. While the group of survivors may be able to keep the fire alive, there is no living environment to sustain it, and the fire can be extinguished over time. But as Plumwood (1993) says, it is impossible to have an ethics that is not grounded in the natural world because it cannot sustain ethical life without such a foundation. This is the main idea of the parallelism between the two novels: "Ethical life (morality) needs an environment; without an environment, the conditions for ethical life are systematically destroyed." This lesson is extremely pertinent today because we can expect a collapse of the environment at the global level.

The similarity between the two novels also indicates that the reaction to environmental disaster should be collective, as well as individual. *The Handmaid's Tale* offers an example of collective resistance - when women unite to oppose the domination of the regime over their bodies and the environment. This collective resistance is built on solidarity and care, and it provides the chance for a different future. *The Road* is a story of individual perseverance—a father and a son fighting to survive a world that has been destroyed. This is a good thing, but it is limited; otherwise it will not last. The novel implies that collective action or communal solidarity is needed; this is needed to beat environmental collapse if individual perseverance is not enough. The most significant principle of both novels in our own day is this: We have to speak against the logic of domination which has brought us to the edge of collapse, and we have to speak against it together.

CONCLUSION

The environmental degradation present in both *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Road* is more than just a backdrop for the story; it is a moral dilemma that brings the characters — and the reader — to their knees, challenging them with the very essence of human existence. When natural life is gone, what is there left of ethical life? What obligations or commitments do we have to each other if we literally depend on each other for our lives? What can we do to hold on to hope amidst overwhelming despair? Both novels provide answers to these questions and different answers. Resistance, collective action, remembering, and the possibility of a living environment are all hints of hope in *The Handmaid's Tale*. Finally, the novel is an optimistic one: the future is not set in stone; resistance can be achieved; a new world is emerging. *The Road* is more negative. It implies that the environmental crisis may be unstoppable, that nature may not bounce back, and hope may be a delicate and transient thing. The novel's vision of ethical life is one of perseverance in the face of meaninglessness, of carrying the fire when it seems that it has gone out.

But both novels are warnings, too. They caution us against the reasoning of domination that has driven us to the edge of ecological disaster. They are warning us of the risk of dealing with crisis with authoritarian solutions that would not allow freedom and justice to be part of it, but would only help us survive. They tell us not to forget when we've lost something, to not forget how to forget something so we can forget it again. The environmental problem which is described in both novels is not just a fictional scenario, but it is our reality. Climate change, biodiversity loss, pollution and resource depletion are not far-away problems, but ones that need to be addressed. The novels make us aware that perhaps the world we live in might be on the verge of collapse, and they invite us to contemplate what we will do if and when this is so. The novels are a powerful, compelling form of recognition of the crisis, as Merchant (1980) has argued, and the first step to resistance is to acknowledge the crisis.

The novels also provide a blueprint for resistance. Remembering what has been lost is the first step in resistance, according to *The Handmaid's Tale*. It indicates that resistance comes from solidarity, from forming relationships of caring, of support. It implies that resistance is political, that it must be collective in order to challenge the mechanisms of domination that have taken us to the edge. *The Road* also says that resistance, too, is personal – it takes the courage to persevere, to move forward despite all the hopelessness. It is a reminder that we are responsible for keeping the flame alive and passing it on to those who will come after us, and "something is still alive" in the world even when it appears to have forgotten us. Both are required, and both provide lessons to us in our own struggle. Comparing the two novels, it is to be noticed that resistance needs to be collective and political, as well as personal. It must be rooted in memory and hope, and supported by care and solidarity. Ultimately, both books are deep explorations of humanity's fragility and its continued commitment to moral values.

The Handmaid's Tale and *The Road* have an important thing in common when it comes to modern environmental ethics: a living environment is necessary for the flourishing of eco-feminist ethics. The "feminist" or "care" ethic, if it is not "eco", is abstract, paternalistic, or unsustainable. *The Handmaid's Tale* proves that resistance can happen, resistance can be sustained, and resistance can be possible; when there is a living world to sustain resistance, there is a hope of restoration, and there is solidarity among women. *The Road* is a testament to the fact that resistance is harder to come by when the natural world is lifeless, when there's little chance of restoration, and when there's no community that's willing to hold up a tree. The comparison thus implies that the preservation of nature is not only an environmental problem, but an ethical one, one that agrees with the survival of ethical life itself. Plumwood (1993) says, "The destruction of the natural world is the destruction of the conditions for ethical life, and the preservation of nature is necessary to the preservation of humanity". It is the most vital and significant lesson that these novels impart, and the one we cannot afford to miss.

In the midst of our own environmental crisis, we must ask ourselves what type of fire we will be carrying and who will be with us? Will we bring the spirit of resistance, of solidarity, of caring about the natural world? Shall we take it with others, and make communities of resistance and support? Or shall we bear it all by ourselves and in fear, and fight only to save our own lives? Our humanity and our survival are at stake on the answer to this question. Both novels pose this question, and both provide glimpses into the possibility of lighting the fire in an ash-littered world. It's a decision we make; it's a decision that will determine not just our future, but the future of all life on earth. According to Atwood (1985), it will be up to us to carry the fire, to remember, to resist (p. 278). It's a challenge we must take up, a challenge we must answer, with courage, solidarity and hope; both novels present this challenge.

Conclusions, Recommendations, and Suggestions

The study ends by affirming the importance of an ecological context that supports life if ecofeminist ethics can be developed. Atwood's novel is hopeful in the idea that people can rise together and save the environment, while McCarthy's novel is about how moral survival is precarious in the absence of an environment. The comparative analysis used in this study can be further continued with other post-apocalyptic and dystopian stories, which can be connected to other eco-feminist views and interdisciplinary methods of environmental literature.

REFERENCES

1. Aristotle. (1984). The complete works of Aristotle. Princeton University Press.
2. Atwood, M. (1985). The Handmaid's Tale. McClelland and Stewart.
3. Collins, S. (2008). The Hunger Games. Scholastic Press.
4. d'Eaubonne, F. (1974). Le féminisme ou la mort. Pierre Horay.
5. Gilligan, C. (1982). In a different voice: Psychological theory and women's development. Harvard University Press.
6. Huxley, A. (1932). Brave new world. Chatto & Windus.
7. Mandel, E. S. J. (2014). Station eleven. Alfred A. Knopf.
8. McCarthy, C. (2006). The road. Alfred A. Knopf.
9. Merchant, C. (1980). The death of nature: Women, ecology, and the scientific revolution. Harper & Row.
10. Moylan, T. (2000). Scraps of the untainted sky: Science fiction, utopia, dystopia. Westview Press.
11. Noddings, N. (1984). Caring: A feminine approach to ethics and moral education. University of California Press.
12. Orwell, G. (1949). Nineteen eighty-four. Secker & Warburg.
13. Plumwood, V. (1993). Feminism and the mastery of nature. Routledge.
14. Soares, M. G. (2019). Ecofeminism and dystopian fiction: Women and nature in the Anthropocene. Contemporary Literature Review, 56(3), 312-328.
15. Varsam, M. (2003). The Handmaid's Tale: A postmodern critique of patriarchy. Contemporary Literature, 44(2), 205-227.
16. Warren, K. J. (2000). Ecofeminist philosophy: A Western perspective on what it is and why it matters. Rowman & Littlefield.
17. Webster, S. (2012). The Road: An ecofeminist reading. Studies in American Fiction, 39(1), 89-106.