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ISOLATION,
SOLITUDE,
DISTANCE
AND
COMMUNICATION
IN TIMES OF
EPIDEMIC

RESEARCH AND OVERVIEW
ARTICLES

**REFLECTIONS OF MARGARET ATWOOD'S
DYSTOPIAS IN THE PANDEMIC OF 2020***Ivana Plevíková***Abstract**

The paper focuses on Margaret Atwood's novels *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood* and considers ways in which the pandemic of her dystopian world may, to various degrees, serve as a reflection of the COVID-19 global pandemic in 2020. The setting of both novels is the same dystopian world, however, they each present different ideological takes on dealing with a pandemic. The paper analyses the creation of Crakers as the new humanoid species, which are supposed to inhabit the earth in its post-pandemic state. It reflects not only political and social structures Atwood borrowed from the real-world, but also types of behavior that some political national leaders currently display. While the first novel addresses the issues of power, exploitation, and the God complex; *The Year of the Flood*, with its two female characters, investigates dealing with the pandemic via the lens of ecofeminism, ecology, nature, and sustainability. Conversely to Crake's elitist megalomaniac ideas that leave the world and its state largely out of the discussion, in the second novel, Atwood connects to the ecology of the post-pandemic world and focuses on ways of understanding it from the natural, rather than ideological standpoint. The paper considers these opposing viewpoints and shows defamiliarized versions reflected in the current state of the real world. In relation to that, correlations between fictional and real-life dichotomies of masculine and feminine perspectives on handling the pandemic both in the real world as well as in the novel are also discussed.

Keywords

Margaret Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*, *The Year of the Flood*, dystopia, pandemic, COVID-19, leadership, ecofeminism

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1. Introduction

MARGARET Atwood's dystopian novels are undoubtedly reflected in many past, as well as present moments of the real world. Because the author often borrows from real historical events when building up her dystopian worlds, Atwood's storytelling continually finds its ways of addressing the future, and suggests that time

places no restrictions upon her works. The COVID-19 pandemic has left the world exploring a territory that it has not, at least in the same way and capacity, experienced before. As a result of that, it offers an opportunity to researchers to look for insights into our current situation in literary, cultural, or historical artifacts, which could lead toward a greater understanding of what is happening around us.

Along the lines of such exploration, this paper focuses on two of Margaret Atwood's novels from the *Maddaddam* trilogy – *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood* – and considers ways in which the pandemic of her dystopian world may, to various degrees, serve as a reflection of the real-world COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. The reason behind choosing these two novels, in particular, is the presence of a pandemic at the center of the fictional world and also the fact that they are both set in the same dystopian world. However, in each of them the dystopian world is viewed from a different perspective, which broadens one's perspective when searching for reflections of them in the real world. By observing two perspectives of the same dystopian world via the lens of different characters, the narratives unravel the ideological standpoints of the novels with regard to the ongoing pandemic and the ways it is being dealt with. The paper analyzes how differently organized dystopian worlds provide different, often opposing, reflections of human behavior during pandemics, which one can also find within the space of the real world today.

In regard to *Oryx and Crake*, the paper primarily focuses on one of the protagonists – Crake, and the virus that he artificially creates and spreads via developing the so-called BlyssPluss pill. In his own way, Crake holds tremendous power, both because of his capabilities as a bioengineer and his higher-class social position. In line with that, I trace and explore Crake's behavior and find reflections of not only political and social structures Atwood borrowed from the real-world when writing the novel, but also, the types of behavior that some national leaders (i.e., those holding similar power and privilege as Crake) currently display.

Conversely to the focus in *Oryx and Crake*, exploring Atwood's second novel of the trilogy – *The Year of the Flood*, the paper investigates the process of dealing with the pandemic via the lens of human interconnection with the environment, nature, community, and sustainable lifestyle. It searches for the real-life reflections in the behavior of those who hold the power to change and do so with the emphasis on communication, empathy, and the sense of togetherness, such as, again, various national leaders, but also those that deal with the pandemic in the exclusion from the capitalist and consumerist systems, and inhabit spaces of ecovillages where the course of their behavior is dictated by nature and the community, rather than political leadership.

In light of both novels, I consider these opposing viewpoints and point out their defamiliarized versions as reflected in the current state of the real world, as well as search for correlations between fictional and real-life dichotomies of masculine and feminine perspectives on handling pandemics. Moreover, I show how Atwood's disorderly dystopian worlds are reflected in the real world.

In the first of the two Atwood's novels, *Oryx and Crake*, the storyline revolves around Crake and his biological experiment called the Paradise project, whose main focus is to exterminate humanity by engineering and distributing the BlyssPlus pill, which contains a lethal virus. The decision to create a worldwide pandemic and, as a result, killing all people, is influenced by problems Crake sees in the world, such as racism, capitalism, consumerism, corruption, and exploitation stemming from the capitalist system, as well as his concern about the "demand for resources [that] has exceeded supply for decades [and soon] the demand is going to exceed supply for everyone" (Atwood 2003, 432). The setting of *Oryx and Crake* takes place primarily in the so-called 'Compounds', which is an affluent area where the privileged elites live. In line with the setting as well as Crake's power position within the story, some of the themes notably brought to the attention by this novel are privilege, top-down hierarchy, discussion of social classes and the noticeable rigid differences between them, and subsequent power and decision-making on the part of Crake.

Observing the perspective of this dystopian world and the pandemic created by Crake portrayed in *The Year of the Flood*, there are several straightforward yet important differences. Along with two female protagonists – Toby and Ren – there is a group of people called God's Gardeners, a religious sect that in its values connects love and appreciation for the environment and nature with the devotion to god. Through the interaction of Toby, Ren, and the Gardeners, Atwood draws attention to more social and ecological rhetoric surrounding the process of dealing with a pandemic. Furthermore, she raises the awareness of issues such as global warming, rising temperatures, and industries which contribute to the destruction of nature. As opposed to *Oryx and Crake*, the setting in this novel is quite different – the elitist corporate Compounds are replaced by a dangerous, non-corporate, peripheral district known as the 'Pleeblands'. When it comes to the themes dominating the story in *The Year of the Flood*, the focus of the narrative is primarily on environmental issues and the role nature plays in humanity dealing with the pandemic, as well as the sense of community, and the emphasis on the collective, rather than individual benefits and prosperity.

2. God Complex: Self-Oriented Approach toward the Pandemic

Before discussing how these novels are reflected in the current COVID-19 pandemic, I would like to preface by introducing some of the crucial character traits to be found in both Crake – the main protagonist of *Oryx and Crake* – and several high-profile world leaders holding power to control their countries' course of actions during the pandemic. In his own perception, Crake wants to better the world by getting rid of what is wrong with it. However, importantly, he does so via exercising a sort of God-like power, of being able to hold the decision, as if the alpha patriarch of the earth bringing a great catastrophe upon it, and yet excluding himself from being affected by it or partaking in the negative aspects of the world. Crake's role and actions within this dystopian world bring to life a centuries-old story of Noah's Ark from the Bible's Book of Genesis. What ties them together is not only the act of the rebirth of everything living and of wiping humanity's slate clean of the wrong and the bad. In a more general sense, it is the presence of chaos, its innate presence, and the narrative in which the chaos is dealt with by a similar type of ultimate action. Crake's deification is further strengthened by the manner in which Snowman portrays him in front of Crakers – the new species that Crake had created. Snowman says: "In the beginning, there was chaos. [...] In the chaos, everything was mixed together, [...] And then Oryx said to Crake, Let us get rid of the chaos. And so Crake took the chaos, and he poured it away. [...] There. Empty. And this is how Crake did the Great Rearrangement and made the Great Emptiness. He cleared away the dirt, he cleared room" (Atwood 2003, 119–21). Via Snowman's portrayal, Crake, who is, at this point of the story, already dead, thus becomes a sort of mythical being similar to God.

Throughout Atwood's novel, Crake's tendencies of abandoning the former version of the world versus perpetuating its tendencies sometimes get confused. When Crake talks about designing Crakers, he expresses his excitement by saying:

It was amazing – said Crake – what once-unimaginable things had been accomplished by the team here. [...] Gone were its destructive features, the features responsible for the world's current illnesses. For instance, racism – or, as they referred to it in Paradise, pseudospeciation – had been eliminated in the model group, merely by switching the bonding mechanism: the Paradise people simply did not register skin color. Hierarchy could not exist among them, because they lacked the neural complexes that would have created it. (Atwood 2003, 371)

Through Crake, Atwood indeed brings forth the discussion that those mentioned really are issues that are also to be found in the real world and which people often

fight. At the same time, however, based on Crake's actions, she also draws the attention to the difference between revolting against the current state of issues with individual powers and rights, which do not interfere with those of others, and the opposite – Crake's type of a revolt. While he proudly talks about the enhancements of the new species which will get rid of problems such as human tendencies to form hierarchical structures, racism, or even hereditary diseases, at the same time, he acts upon this major change in the world structure and the lives of everyone around from the position of the hierarchical top. Such actions place his rights and powers above everyone else's and thus, ironically, go against the values he claims to be standing for and go in line with those he seems to be against.

Many of Crake's characteristics and behavioral traits are reflected in the behavior of leaders as they navigate their decision-making throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. Why leaders, in particular, one might ask, considering the fact that Crake is not in a position holding executive political power in the novel. While that is true, he, nevertheless was in a position of great power, and despite not being a president, a sovereign, a prime minister, or a politician in any other way, it was him making the single most crucial decision guiding the further development of the fictional world and people's lives within it.

In this section, the paper thus more closely explores those world leaders whose focus is, similarly to Crake's, oriented toward their own self and their own prosperity, rather than the collective one. These leaders also tend to focus on the preservation of people's pre-pandemic habits, such as spending habits, unrestricted gatherings, and travel, which all simultaneously lead to the preservation of the pre-pandemic economy and a working capitalist system. In this way, such a style of leadership rejects the change necessary to deal with the pandemic and might be using the pandemic for personal gains, such as election, re-election, or even passing laws. In the case of the latter, one may look, for instance, at the cabinet of Jarosław Kaczyński in Poland trying to pass an extreme anti-abortion law in times of restricted public gatherings assuming the citizens of the country would have trouble getting together and protesting against it. Regarding the described leadership style more broadly, I decided to focus on three high-profile leaders, who in many ways reflect the above-mentioned traits of Crake's behavior in *Oryx and Crake*, and have all shown reluctance toward taking the pandemic seriously and, consequently, all contracted the coronavirus themselves – Donald Trump, Jair Bolsonaro, and Boris Johnson.

The most prominent, well-known, and talked about of these leaders is, without a doubt, the president of the United States, Donald Trump. Because of him being a very active user of Twitter, the paper shares several of his tweets, which illustrate

his position towards the pandemic as well as dealing with it as a president. In one of his election-related as well as COVID-19-related tweets, he says: "The United States cannot have all Mail In Ballots. It will be the greatest Rigged Election in history. People grab them from mailboxes, print thousands of forgeries and 'force' people to sign. Also, forge names. Some absentee OK, when necessary. Trying to use Covid for this Scam!" (Trump May 2020) Trump encourages voters to vote in person instead of via mail-in-ballot system in the then-upcoming election, due to his personal and ungrounded belief in the fraudulent nature of the election. Through his actions and recommendations, he endangered the lives of those voters that, based on his advice, waited in lines and voted in person, and at the same time undermines the votes of those voting via mail while adhering to self-isolation and social distancing practices recommended by the World Health Organization. In *Oryx and Crake*, in his decision to create the pandemic and solve the problems of the world through it, Crake denies the democratic right of everyone else in the world to partake in this decision and be either for or against it. Donald Trump similarly tried to use the presence of the pandemic and the large amounts of ballots cast via mail due to it, to undermine the democratic right of these voters by claiming they were cast illegally. Like Crake, Trump is driven by a similar power of self-centeredness and the desire of achieving goals by denying democracy and leaning toward authoritarian actions.

In one of his other tweets, he says: "Coronavirus deaths are way down. Mortality rate is one of the lowest in the World. Our Economy is roaring back and will NOT be shut down" (Trump June 2020). According to the data shared by the World Health Organization, at the point of writing this tweet as well as today, the United States of America has been at the top of the list with the highest percentage of positive COVID-19 cases. Donald Trump thus fabricates false information about the COVID-19 death rate as well as about the state of the US economy. The mention of the economy roaring back, regardless of whether it is true or not, stresses the importance that the working economy holds for Donald Trump even in a situation when it is put up against the importance of public safety of imposing social distancing strategies, nation-wide testing, or lockdowns. Instead of taking such actions, he trivializes the pandemic and tells the people of his country: "Don't be afraid of Covid. Don't let it dominate your life" (Trump October 2020). After contracting the coronavirus himself and having recovered from the illness, Trump continued spreading misleading information about him being immune and not being able to infect anyone else with the virus, a presumption refuted by not only many cases of COVID-19 reinfections, but also by scientists (De Vrieze 2020). Even

though it is important to note that, in the case of Donald Trump, the decision to impose a nation-wide lockdown is not within his executive power, and, as an expert in constitutional interpretation Keith Whittington says, “is pretty far out of bounds for the president” (Watson 2020), it is equally crucial to stress that he also refused to recommend any of the social-distancing measures to either the governors holding power in individual states, or to the citizens of the United States themselves.

In the more recent US news, it has come to the attention that the inmates in prisons of El Paso, Texas are being used to move COVID-19 bodies for \$2 per hour while, as the researchers at the Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs have stated, simultaneously dying at a rate 35% higher than the rest of the prison population (Deitch et al. 2020, 11). This suggests the administration’s lack of care for the groups of people truly affected by the pandemic as well as reflects Crake’s position of a similar kind of carelessness toward other people when developing the pandemic. That applies whether it comes to Crake’s actions in a more general sense of annihilating humanity, as well as in regard to the process of the pandemic’s creation – the development of the BlyssPluss pill. Similar to prison inmates moving infected bodies for \$2 per hour, when Snowman inquires about where the people used for the clinical trials of the pill in Atwood’s dystopia come from, Crake responds: “From the poorer countries. Pay them a few dollars, they don’t even know what they’re taking. Sex clinics, of course – they’re happy to help. Whorehouses. Prisons. And from the ranks of the desperate, as usual” (Atwood 2003, 296).

Regarding the political leadership, the reflections of Crake’s behavioral characteristics, however, stretch beyond Donald Trump’s take on dealing with the pandemic. President of Brazil Jair Bolsonaro, for instance, thinks that COVID-19 is a “little flu” that should be faced “like a man, not a boy” (Phillips 2020). Similar to Trump, Bolsonaro was frequently seen without a mask at press conferences, or when wearing it, doing so incorrectly and thus ineffectively. Moreover, he also stated that self-isolation was for the weak (Phillips 2020), and, after contracting the coronavirus himself, he said he would “shake off the illness thanks to his athletic background” (Londoño 2020). Akin to Donald Trump as well as Crake, Bolsonaro’s statement offers a very self-centered perspective of the pandemic viewed through the lens of himself individually, rather than the people of the country he leads.

In the early months of the pandemic in Europe, the prime minister of the United Kingdom Boris Johnson appeared on TV shaking hands with the staff in a hospital despite being advised against doing so by a group of scientists. Johnson said: “I was at a hospital where there were a few coronavirus patients and I shook hands with everybody” (as reported by Lewis 2020). This act was supposed to strengthen

his strategy during that time, whose aim was pursuing herd immunity in order to combat the virus. He is said to regard illness as a sign of personal weakness and thus was reluctant in introducing lockdown in his country during the time it had the highest number of deaths in Europe. He only later did so after contracting and recovering from the coronavirus himself. His actions, however, were motivated by his own first-hand experience with the virus, its seriousness, and ways of combating it, rather than a general nation-wide call for leadership action. Similar to the cases of the previous two leaders discussed, it signifies a more self-centered perspective of the pandemic and ways of dealing with it.

Thus, when asking how seeing the reflection of Crake, who created a pandemic and never had to deal with it, in the leadership styles of those who did not create it, however, had to face it as leaders of countries, is possible, it is essential to break down the actions into behaviors and their motivations. The denial of the pandemic, along with its trivialization by public statements such as comparing COVID-19 to a little flu, or regarding it as something not worth people's attention, not worth having it dominate people's lives, in its simplicity reflects Crake's ideas of solving the problems he sees in the world. He decides to eliminate humans because he does not like the aspects of the human society that humans have brought into it, such as capitalism, racism, exploitation, corruption, etc. Even though creating new human beings arguably cannot be simple, even in a world where such creation is possible, the simplicity stems in this decision being very obviously reminiscent of that, which he is paradoxically against – the typical consumerist behavior of buying a new shirt when the old one has a stain, focusing on it being replaceable, rather than mendable. Similar to the actions of Crake, those of Trump, Bolsonaro, and Johnson likewise do not focus on improving the current situation by introducing change and instead choose ignorance that costs lives. They exclude themselves from being affected by their decisions in a crisis, or lack thereof, and focus on the individual good guided by self-centeredness, one's powerfulness, or social position, rather than the collective good focused on equality.

3. Focus on Community, Communication, and Empathy in Times of Pandemic

Following the reflections of Crake that one can find in the real-world pandemic of 2020, we move toward the other approach of handling the pandemic that this paper looks closely at. Instead of the self-centered approach described earlier, this strategy focuses on public health, common safety, and effective communication. It is characterized by reflecting science in the person's decisive actions and via that

also reflecting nature, taking necessary steps toward the inevitable change and focus on the collective rather than individual good, which is thus distinguished by more flat hierarchies of decision-making. With that, I move the focus of the analysis to *The Year of the Flood*, and discuss some of the defining aspects of the pandemic whose reflections are to be found in the real world. The emphasis on one's realization that the surrounding nature is ever-present and is intertwined with people's daily activities and decision-making is vital for the discussion of Atwood's narrative. This is most profoundly expressed by the religious sect named God's Gardeners which the main protagonists – Toby and Ren – cohabit with. Via the interplay of all of these characters, Atwood points out the importance of the ecology, the interconnection with nature, a sense of community, self-sufficiency, and frugality as important when dealing with a crisis. As one of the crucial characteristic values, the Gardeners are notably cruelty-free and preach vegetarianism. In one of the first memories of Toby encountering the Gardeners, she says they were chanting while holding their slates with slogans saying: “*God's Gardeners for God's Garden! Don't Eat Death! Animals R Us! [...] No meat! No meat! No meat!*” (Atwood 2010, 60). Because of the animal origin of COVID-19, meat-eating, the environmental crisis, the exploitation of animals, as well as topics such as vegetarianism, and veganism are oft-discussed in regard to the current pandemic.

Being vegetarian, Gardeners grow their own food and avoid using chemicals and pesticides to do so. Atwood further emphasizes their self-sufficiency via the importance that they put on using natural and renewable sources of energy rather than fossil fuels. Gardeners' shower water, for instance, “came down a garden hose out of a rain barrel and was gravity-fed, so no energy was used” (Atwood 2010, 91). The Gardeners draw the attention toward the use of natural and sustainable resources as well as focus on recycling scraps and leftover materials. As Toby states regarding the use of natural items: “The Gardeners were skimpy on toys — *Nature is our playground* — and the only toys they approved of were sewed out of leftover fabric or knitted with saved-up string” (Atwood 2010, 92).

God's Gardeners' approach to life, nature, and sustainability is reflected in the real-world communities of people living similarly in so-called ‘ecovillages’. For instance, Dan Durica, an American living in an ecovillage named Dancing Rabbit located in Missouri, says: “I can provide basic needs for myself, not only in a sustainable way but in a way that I don't have to be dependent on the broader economy anymore” (“How Sustainable Living Prepared Me for a Pandemic” 2020). Durica shares his way of life in the ecovillage via his YouTube channel called “Hardcore Sustainable” and offers insights into the challenges he experiences on a daily basis.

When it comes to the COVID-19 pandemic, he stresses “the ways that [he has] implemented sustainability in [his] life have also been really useful for this crisis, because [he has] systems set up to be much more self-sufficient” (“How Sustainable Living Prepared Me for a Pandemic” 2020). He further stresses that “it’s important for people to realize during this crisis that preparing in this way, trying to live sustainably, can also be adaptable to other crises that society and our economy might be going through” (“How Sustainable Living Prepared Me for a Pandemic” 2020). In one of his YouTube videos, Durica also points out that because of his sustainable lifestyle, he was able to notice changes in the lives of people in general, including those who do not live in ecovillages like himself. Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, he has seen an increased interest in his own channel where, according to his words, the views of the videos have gone up. Furthermore, he has also noticed a broader, more general interest in sustainability and self-sufficiency. Signifying the greater interest, in one of his videos, he also mentions noticing seeds and other farming supplies being sold out in 2020, saying that such a thing has never occurred during his time of living in an ecovillage (“How Sustainable Living Prepared Me for a Pandemic” 2020).

Returning to *The Year of the Flood*, the parallel of Durica’s lifestyle and values in the ecovillage is to be found in the Gardeners’ general relationship to nature and, as Wiczorek points out, also in Toby’s time spent in the God’s Garden developing “the skills and knowledge she acquired during her unfinished studies at the Martha Graham Academy. That is, she becomes an expert in horticulture. [...] Toby’s spiritual connection to bees and nature indicates that women have a less dominating relationship with nature, which reflects the beliefs of spiritual ecofeminists” (2018, 118). Toby’s life as a woman in *The Year of the Flood* is intertwined with the injustice of power, her being dominated, exploited and sexually abused by men, and even having her mother, also finding herself in a position lacking power, and falling ill “as a result of taking supplements engineered by the corporation she was working for” (Wiczorek 2018, 116). As Wiczorek points out, “in Atwood’s narrative, certain parallels can be seen between the treatment of animals and women. Namely, they are both exploited by capitalist forces; their role in a post-industrial society is to serve” (2018, 117). Because Toby cannot find support and solace in the functioning government, she finds it in her relationship with nature via the community of people equal to her, nature, and each other, as well as equally disadvantaged people, when perceived in a more general sense of social classes, support from the state, etcetera. Toby, however, is not only a representative example of the exploitation of nature, women, and the underprivileged in Atwood’s dystopian

world. Toby's being in the world of *The Year of the Flood* additionally parallels the lives of various groups of equally underprivileged people lacking governmental support or health care while trying to survive the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020.

Reading further, one can also notice major differences when it comes to the description of the hierarchical structure among the characters that Atwood describes as follows:

Figuring out the Gardener hierarchy took [Toby] some time. Adam One insisted that all Gardeners were equal on the spiritual level, but the same did not hold true for the material one: the Adams and the Eves ranked higher, though their numbers indicated their areas of expertise rather than their order of importance. (Atwood 2010, 78–9)

Contrary to the position of Crake, the hierarchies within the community of God's Gardeners reflect a person's expertise, and so the hierarchical top in terms of having the ultimate executive power does not exist. In the flat hierarchies of God's Gardeners, Atwood reflects on the communal devotion of Jesus's Apostles that is described in the Acts of the Bible's New Testament saying that "all who believed were together and had all things common" (Acts 2:44 New Revised Standard Version) and "[n]ow the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common (Acts 4:32 New Revised Standard Version). The togetherness and equality is reflected not only in God's Gardeners' lack of top-down hierarchies, which are more characteristic of capitalistic structures, but also their sense of taking care not only of each other but also of their surroundings and nature and treating those equal to themselves and humans around them. It is also notable by their ways of dealing with the pandemic created by Crake, where they collectively, rather than individually, store the food and other necessary things together. In regard to the biblical parallels, Wiczorek says:

The Gardeners reinterpret the teachings of the Bible so as to encourage all the members of their cult to take a biocentric approach to nature. It is noteworthy that spiritualist ecofeminists, such as Susan Griffin and Charlene Spretnak, Consider the Judeo-Christian beliefs that God gave human beings dominion over earth, to have led to the destruction of ecosystems. [...] In this way, the Gardeners reject the Jewish-Christian tradition, which has contributed to the instrumental and hierarchical treatment of nature and women. (2018, 115–16)

In that way, the Gardeners' way of life puts the emphasis on their perception of themselves as being equal with nature, and, in a more general sense, being equal

with everything living, especially the less powerful and more vulnerable beings. Furthermore, via the depiction of the way the members of their cult live, Atwood simultaneously criticizes the Christian church of today, which oftentimes preaches about the values of humility and equality, rather than acts upon them as an institution, and whose hierarchical structures along with the church's notable wealth rather resemble a capitalist or a corporate structure. Via such disparity, she also draws attention to the ambiguity of the Bible in terms of meaning, and the fact that its interpretation does not depend as much on the book itself but rather the one holding it. It is, after all, Donald Trump's favorite book, as he himself claims, and was also used by his cabinet to interpret the COVID-19 pandemic as being the wrath of God brought to the Earth because of "several groups [of people], including those who have 'a proclivity toward lesbianism and homosexuality'" (Sopelsa 2020). Unlike the biblical interpretation of Gardeners, the one used by Trump's cabinet goes against the values of equality and inclusivity, and just as Crake himself prior to creating the pandemic, shifts blame for the undesirable state of the world – whatever the particulars of that state might be – from oneself to the 'other.'

The ways of living and the approach to nature, science, common safety, and the importance of the community as opposed to the importance of self, are all characteristics of the Gardeners' lifestyles which find their reflections in real-world leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic. Differently from the leaders discussed earlier, such as Trump, Bolsonaro, and Johnson, who, more than anything, in their approach resembled the character of Crake, these leaders regard as highly important to instead focus on public health, common safety, consideration of science, and empathetic communication.

Throughout 2020, there have been multiple occasions of media coverage focusing on the exceptional capacity of predominantly female country leaders to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic. This section of the paper aims to explore the reflections of their actions one can see in Atwood's *The Year of the Flood*, and whether their gender potentially has an impact on the differences between their decisive actions and those of the male leaders discussed earlier. In regard to the process of dealing with the coronavirus from the perspective of a country leader, Jacinda Ardern, the prime minister of New Zealand, said that "one can actually lead with both resolve and kindness" (Hassan 2020) when fighting against the pandemic. With support and solidarity for her fellow New Zealanders, and because of the financial crisis existing alongside the pandemic, she and her cabinet took 20% pay cuts for six months after first introducing lockdown (Hassan 2020). Besides that, Ardern hosts live videos from her self-isolation at home where she appears in her

casual leisure clothes, sharing all sorts of activities including cooking, tidying, or being bored while socially distancing, in order to show compassion with other people's isolation as well as emphasizing the equity between her and the citizens. Similar to the way in which the characters in *The Year of the Flood* deal with the pandemic, Ardern, too, deems the focus on community and equal treatment of all as one of the crucial points guiding her decisions.

In contradiction to one of Trump's previously quoted tweets, in which he tells people to not be afraid of the coronavirus, the prime minister of Norway Erna Solberg stresses that "it's okay to be scared" (Hassan 2020). Uniquely among other world leaders, Solberg has held a press conference dedicated specifically to children, in which she explained the pandemic to them, showed compassion and understanding for them not being able to be at school or meet friends during an early-imposed lockdown (Hassan 2020). She also introduced extensive monitoring in Norway and overall, her executive actions during the COVID-19 pandemic have shown her leadership's interest in all social and age groups as well as the inclusiveness of vulnerability as a real phenomenon existing alongside such a crisis. Solberg and her decision-making processes during the COVID-19 pandemic is a prominent example of feminist leadership. As Billing points out: "Feminist leadership understands that we're only as safe — or empowered — as the most vulnerable among us. An intersectional analysis helps us to understand how the virus disproportionately impacts specific groups of people, who, because of their intersecting identities, face unique forms of burden" (Billing 2020). In line with the focus on public health and safety seen in Solberg's decision-making in Norway, the Icelandic prime minister Katrín Jakobsdóttir and her cabinet offered free tests for everyone as well as launched an intensive contact-tracing initiative early on during the pandemic (Hassan 2020).

When the COVID-19 pandemic arrived at Sint Maarten, the prime minister Silveria Jacobs said: "Simply. Stop. Moving. If you do not have the type of bread you like in your house, eat crackers. If you do not have bread, eat cereal, eat oats, sardines" (Hassan 2020). In her statement, she reflects the importance of living with what one already has and utilizing it, which is reflected in *The Year of the Flood* with Toby saying that "the food was pleasant enough — Rebecca did her best with the limited materials available — but it was repetitious" (Atwood 2010, 69). Both Jacobs and Toby point at the importance of resourcefulness as well as prioritizing one's safety over the maintenance of the pre-crisis life standards and habits.

4. The Question of Gender

After analyzing the leadership behavior of these politicians during the COVID-19 pandemic as well as studying their reflections in Atwood's novels, the readers and observers of the pandemic situation might still wonder whether gender really matters when it comes to leading the fight against the pandemic. In 2020, Uma Kambhampati and Supriya Garikipati were pondering on the same question, and in order to find out, conducted a study in which they observed how gender affects national leadership. The researchers admit that “[g]iven the consistent result on women’s relative aversion to risk and anecdotal reports of risky behaviour by male leaders, it is tempting to draw simplistic conclusions” (2020, 3) They, however, stress that “[a] reliable conclusion on the issue [...] requires more systematic investigation” (2020, 3). In their research, they consistently compared countries with roughly the same size, demographic, countries that are either neighboring or within the same geographic area, in order to eliminate differences in their outcome based on aspects other than the leadership itself, and the pandemic rules and restrictions implemented throughout (2020, 4–6). In their findings, they suggest that in terms of risk management, women leaders are more risk-averse in the domain of human life, but more risk-taking in the domain of the economy, while it is the opposite for male leaders, such as the ones discussed earlier (2020, 12).

Being risk-averse when it comes to health and survival is also reflected in the attitude of God’s Gardeners, who start preparing for the pandemic even before it happens. As explained, one of the predictions of the pandemic catastrophe states that: “A massive die-off of the human race was impending [...] but the Gardeners [...] intended to float above the Waterless Flood, with the aid of the food they were stashing away in the hidden storeplaces” (Atwood 2010, 81). The Gardeners’ behavior reflects their preparations for future self-sufficiency and the focus on nature as one of their resources for growing produce that they can, along with other food, store for times of crisis. In such a way, they try to grasp the upcoming situation well in advance and thus avoid as much risk when it comes to one’s health and safety as possible.

In regard to task management, the researchers found out that “women are more ‘interpersonally-oriented.’ [...] Consistent with this finding, women tended to adopt a more democratic and participative style and a less autocratic or directive style than men.” (Garikipati and Kambhampati 2020, 14) As opposed to the male leadership studied, Garikipati and Kambhampati also emphasize the presence of empathy in the communication styles of the female leaders as well as the focus on community rather than on the self and thus an individual (2020, 15). Jennifer Curtin,

a researcher from the University of Auckland studying female leadership in general, introduces a nuance in the discussion on gender when she states:

Women political leaders doing so well [...] during this time is because there are several high-profile male leaders that are taking quite a contrasting approach to managing this crisis. Some have reported this as a more aggressive rhetorical approach, [...] portrayed as hypermasculine. And so, the contrast between empathetic, resolute women leaders and, perhaps, hypermasculine male leaders is quite extreme, contrasting, and more noticeable. (Corona Crisis: Is Female Leadership Superior? 2020)

She thus admits that these female leaders could likely be considered doing normally or appropriately, rather than exceptionally well, if there was not a notable presence of influential male world leaders taking a contrasting and more aggressive approach. Curtin also suggests that it may be feminist, rather than necessarily female leadership, that leads toward more favorable outcomes in times of pandemic. She stresses the importance of empathy and understanding of female leaders toward women in their countries, knowing that despite the fatality rates of men being higher than those of women, women are, nevertheless, more negatively affected by the pandemic due to taking up the majority of caregiving when it comes to children, as well as, importantly, comprising the majority of all health care workers worldwide (Corona Crisis: Is Female Leadership Superior? 2020). The evidence contained within the study conducted by Erika Fraser exploring the impact that COVID-19 pandemic might have on violence against women and girls further suggests that women and girls are also negatively affected by experiencing a higher risk of domestic violence as well as “violence against healthcare workers, due to the serious stress that the pandemic places on patients, their relatives and other healthcare workers” (Fraser 2020, 2).

Returning to the discussion on leadership, Margaret Heffernan, an entrepreneur who has written about management during a pandemic, says:

If you don't have institutional power, the best way to protect yourself is by knowing what's going on [and] have trusted relationships with people who can tell you and give you early warning. Powerlessness has developed in women a capacity which in a crisis you really need, which is the ability to reach out to people, develop relationships of trust [and] communicate with high levels of empathy. [...] If you walk into a culture where everything is set up for you, as most white men in the Western world do, you don't have to develop those skills, because everything is kind of designed for you. (The right stuff: Are female leaders better at managing Covid-19? 2020)

She stresses that not gender necessarily, but rather one's position within society's institutional power structure is what has a significant impact on one's behavior during a crisis. Furthermore, such direction of behavior analysis also reflects male characters in Atwood's novels such as the members of God's Gardeners, but in many ways also Snowman, who are in their respective ways disadvantaged in the world they live in and find themselves on the periphery of power, rather than at the center of it.

Because Snowman is the only remnant of the original human species in the world, he has the power of knowledge as well as the ability to use it to his own advantage and in his own ways. However, as opposed to Crake, Snowman holds a different kind of power – the power to create the narrative of the new world, to curate the information of the past, and the power to form a bond with the new species through it. In her work titled *Margaret Atwood*, Carol Howells remarks that through the characters in *Oryx and Crake*, “Atwood is exploring fictions of masculinity, with Crake the personification of the urge towards male mastery through reason and science and [Snowman] representing an alternative ‘female’ allegiance to the life of emotions and imagination” (Howells 1996, 177). In light of the dichotomy of Crake and Snowman, as well as due to Snowman's bond with the new species, one may view Snowman through a feminist or even ecofeminist lens. Regardless of the gender identification, one could also think similarly, or perhaps even more so, about the God's Gardeners, not only because of lacking institutional power to change the course of actions beyond their own narrow community, but also, importantly, because of their capability to prepare for the crisis in a sustainable and resourceful way as well as due to the valued common good that is intertwined in the process of doing so. In that regard, Atwood further emphasizes the nuance of the relationship between one's gender and one's behavior in the ecofeminist sense.

Looking at Atwood's stance toward the interconnection of feminist and ecological aspects and its representation throughout her work, as early as in her second novel *Surfacing*, the author has continually explored the relationship women have with nature, social and environmental awareness, and the inclination men have toward materialism, rational and technocratic domination of nature, and women. *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood* are not exceptions to that narrative. While Crake criticizes the former world, its oppression, exploitation, and corruption, he does not try to solve the problems he sees in ways opposing the system he criticizes. Instead, he again chooses the hierarchical top and uses his power to decide and dominate. Even though the leaders discussed in this paper that reflect some of the main characteristics of Crake's behavior are not responsible for the emergence of COVID-19, a similar lack of care, as well as a lack of effective decision-making, contributes to them being the perpetrators of the current state in their countries as well as affecting other countries around the world. In Snowman's character,

conversely, one can see the opposition to that and observe the lack of impulses to hold the ultimate power and control the natural via the technological, as well as his inclination toward social justice and a behavior displaying compassion with not only Crakers but also nature of the remaining post-pandemic world.

5. Conclusion

Over the years, Atwood's dystopian fiction has been able to pertinently capture and defamiliarize important moments of history as well as more minute moments of living in the world which, when compared with real world events, have been capable of producing new reflections and meanings for her readership. The fact that even a year ago, Atwood's novels *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood* did not resonate with the situation in the world nearly as much as they currently do shows that readers are able to re-experience the significance of these dystopian novels again over time, just as they do via Atwood's most well-known novel *The Handmaid's Tale* ever since having been written in 1985.

In line with that, this paper explored the ways in which the main characters in the two novels and their behaviors during the fictional pandemic are reflected in the real-world behavior and decision-making processes of national leaders. As argued, the leadership styles of Donald Trump, Jair Bolsonaro, and Boris Johnson not only share many similarities in between themselves but also notably reflect Crake in his self-centeredness as well as the inclination toward male mastery connected with the lack of care for those finding themselves on the periphery of power. Conversely, female leaders, such as Jacinda Ardern (New Zealand), Erna Solberg (Norway), Katrín Jakobsdóttir (Iceland), and Silveria Jacobs (Sint Maarten), shared various behavioral characteristics with the characters from *The Year of the Flood*, mainly the God's Gardeners. In that way, it puts both the discussed world leaders as well as these two novels into opposition. While presenting the same dystopian world featuring the same pandemic, the characters, their positions within the power structure of their world, as well as their understanding of nature and the regard for the environment, play an integral role in setting them apart.

Focusing on the overall analyses of both of Atwood's novels would undoubtedly offer many valuable insights into her fictional worlds as well as the real world we live in. In that way, the paper naturally leaves space for further analyses of topics related to Atwood's dystopian worlds. I opted to focus on the narrower selection of main character's behavioral traits, their position of power, actions, and relationships in regard to themselves, people around them, their natural environment and observed what role those aspects play when it comes to living in the pandemic times

as well as whether there are parallels between them and the real world to be found. In spite of the narrower focus, the aspects discussed offer an in-depth look into how Atwood approaches and comments on social, political, and gender-related topics via the interplay between the characters and their surroundings, as well as how significant parts of their characters poignantly transcend the boundaries of the fictional text and find reflections in the real-world pandemic situation.

As Rita Felski notes in *Uses of Literature*, “[t]o propose that the meaning of literature lies in its use is to open up for investigation a vast terrain of practices, expectations, emotions, hopes, dreams, and interpretations – a terrain that is, in William James’s words, ‘multitudinous beyond imagination, tangled, muddy, painful and perplexed’” (Felski 2008, 8). Atwood’s novels revolving around the world pandemic help extrapolate what the world around us might look like if the words of their author are made real. It also reminds its readers that the origin of the thoughts creating dystopian worlds lies in the real world and makes it possible for them to return to it in their defamiliarized forms. The paper calls attention to the fact that the vast terrain is already open and that dystopian literature and its ideas transgress the boundaries of the literary and fold themselves back into the real while being crucial for increasingly becoming a more distinct tool to address various kinds of concerns within the public space, whether it is the leadership of a country during a crisis, the discussion of social classes and privilege, or the relationship toward nature and environment.

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