

Food for Survival in Margaret Atwood's Dystopian Worlds

*Kiyomi SASAME**

I.

“[A]uthors could be divided into two groups: those that mention food, indeed revel in it, and those that never give it a second thought” (1). So writes Margaret Atwood in the Introduction to *The Canlit Foodbook: From Pen to Palate—a Collection of Tasty Literary Fare* (1987). Obviously Atwood herself belongs to the former group. It is only natural, therefore, that the works of Atwood, whose main thematic concern is survival, are especially saturated with food. Surprisingly enough, her interest in food and eating had been awakened long before she started a writing career. In the same Introduction she looks back on her childhood: “I think I first connected literature with eating when I was twelve and reading *Ivanhoe*: there was Rebecca, shut up romantically in a tower, but what did she have to *eat*?” (1).

What does a woman have to eat? That is the question Atwood has been exploring in much of her writing. As a Canadian woman writer, Atwood has mostly examined the survival of Canadian women in terms of their relationships to food. She explains that authors put various foods in their works because “they reveal character, slimy as well as delectable” (*Canlit* 2). In the case of Atwood's dystopian novels *The Handmaid's*

Copyright © 2010 Kiyomi Sasame. All rights reserved. This work may be used, with this notice included, for noncommercial purposes. No copies of this work may be distributed, electronically or otherwise, in whole or in part, without permission from the author.

*Professor, Tokyo Woman's Christian University

Tale (1985) and *Oryx and Crake* (2003) foods do much to reveal not only the character of the protagonist but also the society in which she or he is struggling for survival.

In *The Handmaid's Tale* Atwood presents a totalitarian society in which women are not allowed to have any kind of freedom. *Oryx and Crake* deals with the survival of all humankind in an age of genetic engineering. These two dystopian novels, unlike most of Atwood's novels, are set not in Canada but in the United States. When asked why she had not set *The Handmaid's Tale* in Canada, she replied:

The States are more extreme in everything. . . . Canadians don't swing much to the left or the right, they stay safely in the middle. . . . It's also true that everyone watches the States to see what the country is doing and might be doing ten or fifteen years from now. (Ingersoll, *Conversations* 223)

As Coral Ann Howells suggests ("Dystopian Visions" 163), this reply may also be applicable to *Oryx and Crake*.

Although these dystopian novels set in the future are sometimes called science fiction, the author herself defines them as speculative fiction that "can speak of what is past and passing, but especially of what's to come" (*Handmaid's* 515). Atwood's speculative fictions *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Oryx and Crake* describe unusual things happening in the United States, but Atwood emphasizes that both novels invent "nothing we haven't already invented or started to invent" (*Writing with Intent* 285). Therefore, they are not coinages of fancy but reflections of reality. By focusing on food in *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Oryx and Crake*, which is sometimes regarded as a sequel to *The Handmaid's Tale*, I will examine how she uses food to reveal society as well as character.

II.

Atwood started writing *The Handmaid's Tale* in 1984, the year that reminds us of George Orwell's classic dystopian novel, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. While Atwood admits that Orwell was "a direct model" for *The Handmaid's Tale*, she says she wanted to "try a dystopia from female point of view" (*Writing with Intent* 291). She states that "[a]ll fictions begin with *What if*. . . ?" (97). For instance, "[W]hat if you wanted to take over the United States and set up a totalitarian government, the lust for power being what it is? How would you go about it?" (98). The answer is *The Handmaid's Tale*.

In this futuristic novel Atwood presents the Republic of Gilead, a monolithic theocracy established in the United States. Gilead is a totalitarian regime that reflects the American neoconservatives and the New Right of the 1980s and also the New England Puritanism of the seventeenth century. The narrator of this novel describes how the United States has undergone a coup: "It was after the catastrophe, when they shot the president and machine-gunned the Congress and the army declared a state of emergency. They blamed it on the Islamic fanatics, at the time" (174).

In the process of this "revolution" by the army, women in the United States are deprived of jobs, property, family, even their names. By the time the construction of the Republic of Gilead is completed, women are denied any rights and power and are classified only according to their roles. Fertile women, the red-clad Handmaids, are sent to privileged childless couples, the Commanders and their Wives all dressed in blue, to bear a child for them. That is Gilead's solution to the falling birthrate of Caucasians, which is one of the most serious problems in the United States in the novel. The green-clad women, called the Marthas, are responsible for cooking and household chores at the Commanders' houses. Women who are sterile or insubordinate to the regime are dressed in gray. Defined as Unwomen, they are sent to the Colonies, where they are forced to clean up the toxic dumps and the radiation spills until they are soon killed. The role of the Aunts, who wear Nazi-like brown uniforms, is to train the Handmaids to become obedient surrogate mothers for the Commanders and their Wives.

Although the ideas Atwood expresses in this novel seem singular, the author says that "[t]here is . . . nothing in the book without a precedent" (*Writing with Intent* 100). Even adopting the surrogate mothers to counteract the falling birthrate draws on Genesis as Atwood indicates in one of the epigraphs. "The Ceremony" in which the Handmaid and the Commander have intercourse with the Commander's Wife behind the Handmaid on the bed may look ridiculous, but the Handmaid, the Commander, and his Wife correspond to Bilhah (the maid), Jacob, and Rachel in Genesis, in which Bilhah bears a child for the childless Jacob and Rachel.

The narrator of this novel is the Handmaid called Offred. Her name indicates that she is the property of the Commander Fred. From Offred's point of view the various ways in which Gilead controls women are presented. The Handmaids are shut up in a limited space like Rebecca in *Ivanhoe*, although Atwood never fails to mention what they eat. As

Emma Parker points out, “[o]ne of the main ways the system of oppression is enforced is through food” (118). The comparison between what and how Offred eats in Gilead and pre-Gilead clarifies the restrictions imposed on women in Gilead. To control what women eat is to control their bodies and souls. As is often pointed out, the most distinctive difference between Gilead and pre-Gilead is whether women have freedom of choice or not. At the training center Aunt Lydia gives a lecture to the Handmaids: “There is more than one kind of freedom, said Aunt Lydia. Freedom to and freedom from. In the days of anarchy, it was freedom to. Now you are being given freedom from. Don’t underrate it” (24). According to Aunt Lydia, America was dying “of too much choice” (25). People in Gilead are forced to believe that letting women choose whether or not to bear a child caused the falling birthrate in the United States. This opinion of Aunt Lydia’s is applicable to the choice of food, too. In this novel, people in the United States could choose any kind of food to eat, even ones that were bad for you. On the other hand, in Gilead food is strictly controlled.

Boiled eggs, a chicken thigh, a baked potato, green beans, salad, toast, and canned fruit. Or coffee, beer, and cigarettes. Which would one think is a more wholesome diet? Needless to say, the former, what Offred eats in Gilead, is much healthier than the latter, what she used to enjoy in pre-Gilead. Full of “vitamins and minerals,” food given to the Handmaid is “good enough . . . though bland” (65). Since a Handmaid must be “a worthy vessel” (65) to bear a child, coffee, tea, alcohol, and cigarettes are forbidden. Some critics like Sarah Sceats see an echo of Puritanism in such strict restrictions in Gilead: “It is, in keeping with the puritan ethos, a restricted diet, though restrictions have as much to do with the power of the restricters as absolute health considerations for potential mothers” (111).

The Gileadean restrictions on food often contrast in Offred’s mind with the freedom of choice she had in the United States. For example, in Gilead fish is seldom available, while there used to be a wide variety of seafood before. Offred observes:

The fisheries were defunct several years ago; the fish they have now are from fish farms, and taste muddy. The news says the coastal areas are being “rested.” Sole, I remember, and haddock, swordfish, scallops, tuna; lobsters, stuffed and baked, salmon, pink and flat, grilled in steaks. Could they all be extinct, like whale? (164)

The novel, however, contains almost no descriptions of people eating the rich variety of food they had in the United States. Having freedom of choice itself is more significant for Offred. It is because, as Sceats correctly comments, “[t]he sheer variety of the fish Offred remembers . . . stands for the diversity of ideas, beliefs and discussion, now suppressed” (111). Offred associates this freedom of choice with former happy days with her husband and daughter, whom she has never seen again since the three of them were captured by government troops. Even merely having coffee and reading the newspaper (both of which she no longer has access to) with her husband on Sunday mornings is what she now greatly misses. Walking down the street where an ice cream shop used to be, Offred remembers her daughter, who used to choose the kind of ice cream not by the name but by the color.

The healthy foods the Handmaid eats form “symbolic representation of wombs and fertility” (Stein 200). Reading *The Handmaid's Tale* and focusing on food, we notice that there are frequent references to eggs, inevitably suggestive of reproduction. Eggs also have more complex implications in this novel. On the one hand, eggs imply power in the sense of being capable of producing a new life, but, on the other hand, they are fragile, as a broken egg in this novel reminds us.

The situation of the Handmaid similarly contains conflicting elements. In Gilead a Handmaid is protected as a child-bearer. Yet, if she cannot prove herself to be a capable child breeder, she is sent to one of the Colonies as an Unwoman. Atwood has Offred ponder the parallels between eggs, the female body, and her situation:

In front of me is a tray, and on the tray are a glass of apple juice, a vitamin pill, a spoon, a plate with three slices of brown toast on it, a small dish containing honey, and another plate with an eggcup on it, the kind that looks like a woman's torso, in a skirt. Under the skirt is the second egg, being kept warm. The eggcup is white china with a blue stripe.

The first egg is white. I move the eggcup a little, so it's now in the watery sunlight that comes through the window and falls, brightening, waning, brightening again, on the tray. The shell of the egg is smooth but also grained; small pebbles of calcium are defined by sunlight, like craters on the moon. It's a barren landscape, yet perfect; it's the sort of desert the saints went into, so their minds would not be distracted by profusion. I think that this is what God must look like: an egg. The life of the moon may not be on the surface, but inside.

The egg is glowing now, as if it had an energy of its own. To look at the egg gives me intense pleasure.

The sun goes and the egg fades.

I pick the egg out of the cup and finger it for a moment. It's warm. Women used to carry such eggs between their breasts, to incubate them. That would have felt good.

The minimalist life. Pleasure is an egg. Blessings that can be counted, on the fingers of one hand. But possibly this is how I am expected to react. If I have an egg, what more can I want?

. . . I slice the top off the egg with the spoon, and eat the contents. (110–11)

This passage is an extract from the chapter titled “Birth Day,” in which one of the Handmaids, Ofwarren, gives birth to a baby girl. Her baby is later found to be an unhealthy one and is destined to be shredded. If a Handmaid bears a healthy baby, she is considered to be a victor. On the other hand, an unhealthy baby endangers the mother's life. Women's role is not only to “lay eggs” but also to “incubate them.” Birth literally entails death, as Glenn Deer sees “[t]he connection of birth to death, the fine line between power and failure, fertility and sterility” (102) in this Gileadean birth scene. Deer also mentions that “the two eggs, one on top of the other, are like a model of the Gileadean birth scene, with the Commander's Wife seated up and behind the Handmaid” (102).

Atwood's description of Offred's observation of the egg has provoked much discussion. Deer analyzes the change in Offred's language:

Offred begins with the neutral description “the egg is white”; she then moves into a figurative language that is resonant with female symbolism: the egg is compared to the moon; the moon becomes a desert, place of spiritual trial and of revelation. An alternating emphasis between fertility and sterility, energy and entropy, is played out—the egg literally seems to throb with temperature changes. (102)

Hilda Staels comments on Offred's recurrent use of the images of an egg. Being “no more than white and granular on the outside,” Staels remarks, “[t]he egg is an image for the barren surface of Gilead and for the condition of the protagonist's outer body, which are ‘defined by sunlight’ or by the logocentrism of the rulers.” At the same time, Staels finds that in the glowing egg “a red, hot pulsing process of life is hidden” (122).

The reference to a broken egg is also noteworthy. As has been mentioned, the fragility of an egg suggests the delicate situation of the

Handmaid herself. The Commander makes a reference to eggs that reveals his insensitivity. He says to Offred, "You can't make an omelette without breaking eggs" (211). Karen Stein interprets this as "dehumanizing and cannibalizing the victims" (200), arguing: "Thus women become for him the eggs which are broken and consumed to create a better life for the patriarchal ruling class" (201). Parker is another critic who finds "symbolic cannibalism" in the relationship of the Commander to Offred: "While Atwood explores the power dynamic of eating and non-eating, she simultaneously confronts the relationship between consumer and consumed" (126). At one point the Commander confesses to Offred that he used to work in marketing research. This choice of occupation seems to underline his position as consumer. When confronted with the Commander, Offred compares herself to candy, as if she realizes that she could be consumed: "I feel like cotton candy: sugar and air. Squeeze me and I'd turn into a small sickly damp wad of weeping pinky-red" (138).

III.

So far, we have seen food as a metaphor for the power of the oppressors. Now let us consider how food also functions as the subversive power of the oppressed. There appear some kinds of food that are not eaten but that have other uses. They can be symbols of the Handmaid's weak resistance. The most striking example is butter. Every time butter is served, Offred, like some other Handmaids, does not eat it but uses it as hand lotion or face cream:

I rub the butter over my face, work it into the skin of my hands. There's no longer any hand lotion or face cream, not for us. Such things are considered vanities. We are containers, it's only the insides of our bodies that are important. The outside can become hard and wrinkled, for all they care, like the shell of a nut. This was a decree of the Wives, this absence of hand lotion. They don't want us to look attractive. For them, things are bad enough as it is. (96)

Using butter as a lotion or cream is the Handmaids' resistance, not only to the Commanders' Wives, who deny them their femininity, but also to the Gilead regime as a whole, which has reduced them to "containers." Far from being mere containers, the Handmaids are women with suppressed emotions of love. Through such use of butter Offred articulates

her hunger for love and her strong wish for the recovery of their lost freedom: “As long as we do this, butter our skin to keep it soft, we can believe that we will someday get out, that we will be touched again, in love or desire” (96–97). In this scene Offred displays some wisdom and is able to use imagery to view her own situation in a somewhat humorous way, even though she remains confined in harsh circumstances. She terms this use of butter as a lotion “buttering” and describes herself as follows: “Buttered, I lie on my single bed, flat, like a piece of toast” (97). Here Offred conveys the notion that woman, like a piece of toast, is in danger of being devoured.

Sugar is another symbol of resistance. When Offred is still at the training center for the Handmaids, the rebellious Moira, Offred’s friend from the pre-Gilead period, is punished and severely injured after an unsuccessful attempt to escape. Offred together with some other Handmaids steal packets of sugar for Moira because “it was the only thing [they] could find to steal. To give” (119). Ordinary food like sugar has become not only a symbol of resistance but also a means of communication among the Handmaids. Parker maintains that here food implies power: “The food which is intended to control becomes a means of subverting that control” (119).

The Handmaids are restrained in terms not only of food but also of space. Offred is confined in a small room at the Commander’s house that she first refuses to call her own but later begins to call hers. The room has only one small window, which only opens partly. On the wall there is a picture with no glass over it. Here the Handmaid has no freedom, even to commit suicide, though she despairs and wishes to die.

The other space the Handmaid is allowed to be at in the Commander’s house is the kitchen, where she is told by the Marthas what to buy for meals. It is the Handmaid’s job to go grocery shopping paired with another Handmaid. Those limited spaces—the Handmaid’s room, the kitchen, a route to the grocery store—are all related to food. In her small room the Handmaid eats her meals alone. In the kitchen she is given a token that she can exchange for food, and she goes out only for grocery shopping. In this way the Handmaid is completely enclosed in a women’s sphere. However, these spaces also offer the Handmaid the possibility of resistance and communication.

Like food, the kitchen at the Commander’s house serves to reveal various aspects of Gilead. The kitchen where Offred’s meals are prepared is in a sense the headquarters that controls her life. At the same

time, it is one of the few places where she can communicate with others, even though "[t]he Marthas are not supposed to fraternize with [the Handmaids]" (11).

The kitchen where two Marthas, Rita and Cora, are baking bread and preparing coffee looks normal and peaceful on the surface. Among unusual things about the society of Gilead, Atwood repeatedly emphasizes the normality of its kitchen. The following scenes expose Offred's longing for the normal life in pre-Gilead:

The kitchen smells of yeast, a nostalgic smell. It reminds me of other kitchens, kitchens that were mine. It smells of mothers; although my own mother did not make bread. It smells of me, in former times, when I was a mother.

This is a treacherous smell, and I know I must shut it out. (47)

[Rita] goes to the sink, runs her hands briefly under the tap, dries them on the dishtowel. . . . The dishtowels are the same as they always were. Sometimes these flashes of normality come at me from the side, like ambushes. The ordinary, the usual, a reminder, like a kick. I see the dishtowel, out of context, and I catch my breath. For some, in some ways, things haven't changed that much. (48)

Remembering things in "former times" with her family makes Offred hope to return to normal life. In other words, the kitchen is a place where Offred desires the recovery of her sense of humanity and believes in the possibilities of its realization. When she watches Rita making bread, she aspires to touch the bread because she wants to feel "the resistant warmth which is so much like flesh" and "hunger[s] to commit the act of touch" (11).

Through food, nonverbal communication between the Handmaid and the Marthas is established. Sceats indicates that "food provides a means of expression" (112). Cora, the younger and warmer Martha, disguises Offred's wasted food such as a broken egg because she is aware that leaving anything from of a meal will endanger Offred. It causes Offred to feel a link between them. Even the cold-hearted Rita pops an ice cube into Offred's mouth when she is overheated from wearing the stifling red clothes. Thus the kitchen has become the only place that enables Offred to feel at least the possibility of a human touch.

Near the end of the story the kitchen plays a significant role in fulfilling Offred's strong wish for a human touch. Realizing that her husband is unable to impregnate his Handmaid, the Commander's Wife suggests

that Offred have sexual intercourse with the Commander's young chauffeur, Nick, in order to get pregnant with apparently the Commander's child. Even though it is illegal and risky, Offred, out of her hunger for love, agrees to the proposal. On the night of the first attempt Offred goes out through the kitchen in order to get to Nick's room: "I open the kitchen door, step out, wait a moment for vision. It's so long since I've been outside, alone, at night" (260). After that, she visits Nick's room time and again without the Commander's Wife's knowledge. Every time Offred opens the kitchen door and sneaks out:

I became reckless, I took stupid chances. . . . I would go along the hall and down the Marthas' stairs at the back and through the kitchen. Each time I would hear the kitchen door click shut behind me and I would almost turn back, it sounded so metallic, like a mousetrap or a weapon, but I would not turn back. (268)

The kitchen has been traditionally the center of the women's sphere. However, opening a kitchen door may lead Offred to freedom. Actually, at the end of the tale Offred tells how some men, including Nick, take her out of the Commander's house. Nick whispers to Offred that he is a member of Mayday, the underground organization devoted to conducting Handmaids to Canada, like the Underground Railroad in the time of slavery in the American South. Still, Offred cannot be sure whether these men are really about to free her or arrest her, but she has no other choice but to trust Nick. Offred closes her tale as follows:

Whether this is my end or a new beginning I have no way of knowing: I have given myself over into the hands of strangers, because it can't be helped.
And so I step up, into the darkness within; or else the light. (295)

In a sense opening a kitchen door to visit Nick's room has made it possible for Offred to trust him and, in the end, to get away from the Commander's house.

The Gilead regime controls the Handmaids' shopping expeditions. Still, the grocery shopping is significant for the Handmaids. They have to go in pairs to spy on each other, but they can secretly exchange useful information. Offred learns from her shopping partner, Ofglen, that there is the underground rescue organization called Mayday. If Offred had not obtained this information about Mayday, she might have hesitated to trust Nick when he claimed to be a member.

Since Offred is well fed, she seldom feels hungry. She finds it rather difficult or even repulsive to eat up all the food she is given. As is often pointed out, “[h]er physical rejection of the food . . . symbolizes her mental and emotional rejection of the tyrannical regime she lives under” (Parker 118). Yet there are a few occasions when she expresses real hunger. It is, however, a hunger not for food but for something she is missing in this regime. On one of the grocery-shopping expeditions Offred and her partner encounter a trade delegation from Japan, which still seems to be a free nation. Seeing Japanese women’s short skirts, high-heeled shoes, and heavy makeup, Offred, whose body is completely covered by a red dress, thinks, “I used to dress like that. That was freedom” (28). Finding a Japanese woman with painted toenails, Offred remembers the smell of the nail polish she used to use. She identifies herself with the Japanese woman. “I can feel her shoes, on my own feet. The smell of nail polish has made me hungry” (29). This is the first time in the novel that Offred says she is hungry.

What Offred misses most in Gilead is love. When asked by the Commander what is overlooked in Gilead, Offred answers: “Love, I said. Love? said the Commander. What kind of love? Falling in love, I said” (220). Of course, it is almost impossible for Offred to materialize this longing for love. Still, as mentioned, she tries to search for a human touch. Even before the Commander’s Wife proposes she have sexual intercourse with Nick to conceive a child, the young Nick makes her hungry. She feels as if Nick were edible. “I want to reach up, taste his skin, he makes me hungry. . . . It’s so good, to be touched by someone, to be felt so greedily, to feel so greedy” (98–99). Because of this, Offred repeatedly has clandestine meetings with Nick despite the risk. Nick’s room is the only place where she can feel love, even if “[n]either of them says the word *love*, not once” (270). Offred, who wishes to believe that she is pregnant with Nick’s baby, finds herself losing interest in escape, though Ofglen offers her a chance to be rescued by Mayday: “I no longer want to leave, escape, cross the border to freedom. I want to be here, with Nick, where I can get at him” (271). Hunger for love has made Offred apathetic about getting free and deprived her of all energy to take action.

There is one time when Offred feels ravenously hungry. After she is summoned to witness the brutal executions of the rebellious Handmaids, she reveals her extreme hunger:

Death makes me hungry. Maybe it's because I've been emptied; or maybe it's the body's way of seeing to it that I remain alive, continue to repeat its bedrock prayer: *I am, I am, I am*, still. . . .

I think of the word *relish*.

I could eat a horse. (281)

Roberta Rubenstein terms Offred's hunger expressed in this passage as "both literal and symbolic" (19). Whether it is literal or symbolic, her hunger reminds us of the simple fact that we eat in order to stay alive. When she goes back to her room, for the first time in this novel she eats up a meal voraciously as if she wanted to feel she was still alive:

For lunch there was a cheese sandwich, on brown bread, a glass of milk, celery sticks, canned pears. A schoolchild's lunch. I ate everything up, not quickly, but reveling in the taste, the flavors lush on my tongue. (282)

Atwood demonstrates another hunger, hunger for words, in the Scrabble scene. In Gilead women are prohibited from reading and writing. When the Commander summons Offred to his study, however, he allows her to read the black-marketed magazines and asks her to play Scrabble with him. This illegal act gives her pleasure, which she articulates as if she were eating something delicious.

The feeling is voluptuous. This is freedom, an eyeblink of it. *Limp*, I spell. *Gorge*. What a luxury. The counters are like candies, made of peppermint, cool like that. Humbugs, those were called. I would like to put them into my mouth. They would taste also lime. The letter *C*. Crisp, slightly acid on the tongue, delicious. (139)

The Scrabble scene has drawn much critical attention. Parker argues that this scene "perhaps best exemplifies how food functions as a metaphor for power" and that "[t]he control of words and food, both forms of power denied to women, are united in the image of Offred eating the Scrabble letters" (119). Howells sees in Offred's desire to eat the letters an analogy with the subversive power H  l  ne Cixous displays in her feminist text "The Laugh of Medusa":

[Offred's] image of the Scrabble counters as candies, which she would like to put into her mouth, makes beautifully literal equivalent for Cixous's metaphor for women's seizing language "to make it hers, continent it, taking it into her mouth" (Howells, *Margaret Atwood* 104)

Lorna Sage calls Offred's desire, represented by in this word game, "erotic charge" (167). At any rate, the Scrabble scene serves as a kind of comic relief in this dystopian novel, otherwise so full of darkness. Offred herself feels like laughing when she hears that the Commander wants to play the word game. At the same time, this request indicates the Commander's isolation. The game played by the oppressor and the oppressed shows that both sides hunger for a human touch and also that there can be a sort of communication between them even though we can hardly call this companionship. Sherrill Grace asserts: "Scrabble becomes a vivid image of what is necessary to human beings and what is repressed, withheld (it cannot be absolutely destroyed) in Gilead" (197).

Offred's hunger for words is demonstrated in her reading in the Commander's study, too. She reads magazines and novels greedily, as if she were starving. Manuel Benjamin Becker argues that in this scene "Offred is . . . aware of the sexual connotations language has" (30).

On these occasions I read quickly, voraciously, almost skimming, trying to get as much into my head as possible before the next long starvation. If it were eating it would be the gluttony of the famished; if it were sex it would be a swift furtive stand-up in an alley somewhere. (184)

In *Canlit Foodbook* Atwood states that "[e]ating is our earliest metaphor" because "we eat before we talk" (*Canlit* 2). Atwood's view is embodied in the relationship between food/eating and words/reading in *The Handmaid's Tale*.

IV.

In "Writing *Oryx and Crake*" Atwood once again insists that "[e]very novel begins with a *what if*" and explains: "The *what if* of *Oryx and Crake* is simply, *What if we continue down the road we're already on? How slippery is the slope? What are our saving graces? Who's got the will to stop us?*" (*Writing with Intent* 285–86). In *Oryx and Crake* Atwood presents us with the question of where we will be at the end of the road we are now taking and whether or not we will survive in a time of global warming, overpopulation, and genetic engineering. To put it simply, the topic of this dystopian novel is the survival of humankind itself. In this novel, Atwood, who has in the past been concerned about the survival of women, chooses a male protagonist for the first time.

Oryx and Crake is set somewhere along the coast of the United States, probably in the late twenty-first century. At the beginning of this novel we encounter a man who calls himself Snowman starving and scavenging for food. He seems to be the last man on this planet. Does this man embody the future of humankind? What made him a lone survivor? We later find that his civilization was destroyed by bioterrorism. Using flashbacks, Atwood demonstrates the postapocalyptic world in which Snowman is struggling to survive and the before-plague world where Snowman was called Jimmy. In *The Handmaid's Tale* the life in pre-Gilead that is narrated in the past tense is close to ours. On the other hand, Jimmy's life, which is also told in the past tense, seems to predict our future and is full of unfamiliar products. Still Atwood emphasizes that this novel is not a fantasy. In "Writing *Oryx and Crake*" she reveals that her habit of clipping small items from newspapers made her realize that "trends derided ten years ago as paranoid fantasies had become possibilities, then actualities" (*Writing with Intent* 285).

Throughout the text there are so many coinages used to name creatures and foods made by genetic engineering that the world of Jimmy/Snowman often seems incomprehensible. Yet, if we analyze this novel by focusing on food, it may help our understanding of this complicated biotech world, although the role of food seems to be less significant than in *The Handmaid's Tale*. Foods in this novel are simply classified into two kinds—artificial foods and real/natural foods, which were already beginning to become hard to get during Jimmy's adolescence. The abundance of artificial foods and the concomitant shortage of real/natural foods epitomize the world presented in this novel.

In the case of *The Handmaid's Tale* food is restricted by the autocratic regime. In *Oryx and Crake* people simply need to produce artificial foods in order to survive. Even in Jimmy's boyhood "the deterioration of the environment has led to the extinction of countless species" (Ingersoll, "Survival" 165), and new creatures immune to diseases had been created by biotechnology. Jimmy's earliest memory is of a huge bonfire in which an enormous pile of cows, sheep, and pigs were burnt in order to prevent disease from spreading. To replace them, scientists had already started to work on creating new species and growing some organs. Jimmy's father, "a genographer, one of the best in the field," works on the pigeon project, whose goal is "to grow an assortment of foolproof human-tissue organs in a transgenic knockout pig host—organs that would transplant smoothly and avoid rejection" (22). In our own lives

we have already witnessed the burning of diseased animals and the fabrication of new creatures. As Earl G. Ingersoll indicates, probably "Atwood draws here on the television images of burning carcasses of cattle with 'Mad Cows' Disease' and 'Foot and Mouth Disease' in Great Britain" ("Survival" 165). Hearing news of cloned cows, we share the fear of the young Jimmy, who is upset by the possibility of eating "pigeon pie" or "pigeon cakes."

In our everyday lives the safety of genetically modified food has been discussed. In *Oryx and Crake* genetically modified foods are much more prevalent than real foods, and wars over financial interests in "gen-mod" products have begun.

The wars were over the new Happicuppa bean. . . . Until then the individual coffee beans on each bush had ripened at different times and needed to be handpicked and processed and shipped in small quantities, but the Happicuppa coffee bush was designed so that all of its beans would ripen simultaneously, and coffee could be grown on huge plantations and harvested with machines. This threw the small growers out of business and reduced both them and their labourers to starvation-level poverty. (179)

This passage is surely a reflection of what is happening in our own time.

Unlike *The Handmaid's Tale* "there is no mention of government at all in the novel" but "[h]ierarchy is also present in a society" (Somacarrera 55). In *Oryx and Crake* it is not the case of an autocratic regime like Gilead, but elite scientists who have power. Numerous biochemical experiments are conducted in carefully guarded company compounds where top scientists like Jimmy's father and their families live. The masses live in the cities, "pleeblands," that are crowded with "addicts, the muggers, the paupers, the crazies" (27).

Originally, artificial foods must have been made for the sake of human beings. Some soy products like soy-sausage dogs and "SoyOBoyburgers" at least appear healthier than American fast food, and a chocolate-flavored energy bar may be nutritious and convenient for their busy lives. These are kinds of processed foods we are familiar with. However, some artificial foods seem to be the product of the elite's egoism and seem repulsive. "ChickieNob" is such a new creation. It is a chicken with twelve drumsticks but without a head, which makes it easier to eat. At first, Jimmy finds such chicken "horrible" and avoids eating it, but gradually he becomes used to its "bland tofulike consistency and [its]

inoffensive flavor” (292). The kanga-lamb served at a five-star restaurant is “a new Australian splice that combined the placid character and high-protein yield of the sheep with the kangaroo’s resistance to disease” (292).

What Jimmy treasures, and Snowman yearns for, are not these artificial foods, but real ones. One of his few happy childhood memories is having “a genuine cake,” which was made, or at least bought, by a Philippine housekeeper named Dolores, whom he misses a lot: “He clutches on to the reality of those cakes; he closes his eyes, conjures them up, hovering all in a row, their candles alight, giving off their sweet, comforting scent of vanilla, like Dolores herself” (50). Dolores is also the one who “cooked his egg just the way he liked it” (30). In this novel Dolores is the only person who is good at cooking.

Food that is termed real or genuine has rarity value and is considered to be a luxury. Jimmy’s friend Crake is a biochemistry genius and goes to a prestigious college, while Jimmy goes to a third-rate arts and humanities college, the Martha Graham Academy. The meals served at the two schools differ significantly: “The food in Crake’s faculty dining hall was fantastic—real shrimps instead of the CrustaeSoy they got at Martha Graham” (208). Even Crake, who is indifferent to food, seems to be impressed by real oysters and “real Japanese beef, rare as diamonds” (289) at a restaurant.

Jimmy’s preference for real foods over artificial foods shows that he is suspicious of artificial things. Jimmy’s mother shares his suspicion. While his father highly values the safety of the compound, his mother is critical of its artificiality and disdainfully calls it “just a theme park” (27). Jimmy’s mother, who used to work as a microbiologist, denounces her husband’s project as “immoral” and “sacrilegious” and says, “Why can’t you get a job doing something honest?” (57). Fiona Tolán argues that “his mother . . . in an increasingly genetically modified environment, struggles to maintain a division between the artificial and the real” (277). Indeed, she might have tried to do so at first. However, her sulky attitude at home shows her present hatred of the world they are living in. She is, in fact, the only person who takes action to overthrow the existing conditions. After smashing her own and her husband’s computers, she finally disappears, leaving a letter to her son in which she says, “*I have taken Killer [Jimmy’s pet] with me to liberate her, as I know she will be happier living a wild, free life in the forest*” (61). Just such “a wild, free life” is what she herself aspires to. She can be a person “who’s

got the will to stop” scientists who keep on going to extremes. Jimmy, however, later learns that his mother has joined the Resistance and been executed.

Crake is at the opposite extreme from Jimmy's mother. He avows that he believes neither in God nor in Nature. He himself manipulates the ecosystem as if he were a god. As one of the elite scientists says, “it made you feel like God” (51). Crake's lifework, termed “Paradice [*sic*],” is to create humanlike creatures, Crakers, to replace human beings. The Crakers are “programmed to drop dead at age thirty” (303) in order to avoid overpopulation. Among the Crakers there is to be no feeling for “territoriality” (305), since they are made to be vegetarians. Similarly, racism will not exist because the Crakers' skin colors are too versatile—“chocolate, rose, tea, butter, cream, honey” (8). In order to realize this plan, Crake plans to exterminate all humans by means of a deadly virus. Another thing he must do in order to complete this project is to make Jimmy immune to the virus by vaccinating him without his knowledge and entrusting him to take care of the Crakers after all other human beings have died out.

Why does Atwood make Crake choose Jimmy to be the last man on this planet? Elaine Showalter concludes that “[p]erhaps Atwood intends us to believe that language, imagination and a religious sense will ultimately overcome scientific engineering, that word people will inherit the earth” (35). Whereas most of the characters living in the compounds are brilliant scientists and called “number people,” Jimmy, who is “high on his word scores but a poor average in the numbers columns” (173), is a “word person.” In the age of bioengineering, which underrates the power of words, Jimmy hangs on to words:

He compiled lists of old words too—words of a precision and suggestiveness that no longer had a meaningful application in today's world. . . . He'd developed a strangely tender feeling towards such words, as if they were children abandoned in the woods and it was his duty to rescue them. (195)

Jimmy's love for old words and his love for genuine foods seem to have something in common. It may be the feeling of nostalgia for the world that is in danger of becoming extinct.

Even while being on the verge of starvation, Snowman/Jimmy realizes the value of words, saying, “It's comforting to remember that *Homo sapiens sapiens* was once so ingenious with language” (99). Like Offred,

Snowman feels a hunger for words when in an extreme situation. When scavenging for food at a desolate house, Snowman comes across some books—"a dictionary, a thesaurus, a Bartlett's, the *Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry*" (233)—and thinks approvingly that the dead resident must have been "a word person." At another house he unexpectedly hears a human voice coming from the radio he finds in the cupboard, even though the language the voice is speaking is not English. While scavenging for food, which is essential for survival, Snowman thus finds words that are also indispensable. Eleonora Rao concludes that for him words are "also salvation, a way to remind him that he is still human and alive" (111).

As artificial foods and real foods are contrasted in the novel, there is also an opposition between the values of science and reason and the values of language and art. Critics discuss this opposition in terms of gender: "Jimmy and his defense of 'the arts' are positioned as 'feminine' and self-indulgent, while Crake and science are gendered 'masculine,' in a blatantly masculinist performance of power" (Ingersoll, "Survival" 166). Sharing this view, Howells underscores Atwood's attempt to "erode binary opposition" by making "both her protagonists male" ("Dystopian Vision" 170). It should also be noticed that Atwood arranges to have Oryx, a female character, as Crake's partner. In literary texts, normally women represent the life of emotion and imagination, but here Oryx sides with Crake in believing that "[h]e wants to make the world a better place" (322) with the power of science and plays the role of the Crakers' teacher.

Oryx is the most enigmatic character in this novel. Jimmy and Crake first find her on a child-pornography site and later come to love her. Showalter sees Oryx as "the vehicle . . . for Atwood's indignation at child slavery, prostitution, sex tourism and other extreme forms of female victimization" (35). Oryx, having been born in a poor Asian family and obliged to become "a sex worker" even in her early childhood, is clearly a victim. However, she is more than a symbol. She is a realist who sees through the fact that a man who "wanted to make a profit from you would make sure you were fed enough and not damaged too much" (126). At the same time, this mysterious woman awakens Crake's humanity and his sense of romanticism at the last moment. When the pandemic is about to wipe out all human beings, Crake slits Oryx's throat and lets Jimmy shoot him dead.

Atwood presents two surprising things at the end. First, the Crakers, who are not designed to have enough intelligence or feeling to have a religious sense, begin to worship Snowman. Second, Snowman, who considers himself to be the last man on the planet, finds that there are, after all, three more survivors. It seems, therefore, that Crake's project has met with failure. In other words, this biochemistry genius has failed to recreate the world as he wanted to. In an interview Atwood has said that she likes to "leave the ending open enough so the reader can make some choice" (Ingersoll, *Waltzing Again* 262). With Snowman, the readers cannot tell whether the other survivors will accept him or attack him. At least, however, we can assume that this is not the end of humankind. Making one of the survivors a woman, Atwood provides a fair chance that the life of human beings will continue. No matter how powerless Snowman is, Atwood entrusts the future of humankind to this word person, not the number person.

V.

Quoting novelist Alistair MacLeod, "writers write about what worries them," Atwood has asserted in "Writing *Oryx and Crake*" (2003) that "the world of *Oryx and Crake* is what worries me right now" (*Writing with Intent* 286). After witnessing how, in Australia, the Aborigines "had lived in harmony with their environments," after seeing on a boat in the Arctic "how quickly the glaciers were receding" (*Writing with Intent* 284–85), and after being stranded at the Toronto airport on September 11, 2001, Atwood completed this dystopian novel about the survival of humankind. In her foreword to *Victory Gardens: A Breath of Fresh Air* by Elise Houghton (also published in 2003), Atwood declares that "[f]or *Homo sapiens*, the major question of the twenty-first century will be, *How will we eat?*" (*Writing with Intent* 311). Atwood's interest in food or eating was aroused by the question, what did the heroine have to eat? About a half-century later, in this question—how will we eat?—we can see her interest has been greatly broadened.

Still, Atwood's concern about "survival" has been consistent, whether her protagonist is female or male. Through the protagonists' hungers, as depicted in two dystopian novels, *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Oryx and Crake*, Atwood demonstrates what is essential for us to survive. By leaving the ending open in both novels, she requires her readers to think about

what is necessary to be a human. Her message seems to be simple and clear: “Man cannot live by bread alone” (Matthew 4:4).

Atwood concludes the essay “Writing *Oryx and Crake*” as follows: “[N]o matter how high the tech, *Homo sapiens sapiens* remains at heart what he’s been for tens of thousands of years—the same emotions, the same preoccupations” (*Wiring with Intent* 286).

WORKS CITED

- Atwood, Margaret. *The Canlit Foodbook: From Pen to Palate—A Collection of Tasty Literary Fare*. Toronto: Totem, 1987.
- . *The Handmaid’s Tale*. New York: Anchor, 1998.
- . “*The Handmaid’s Tale* and *Oryx and Crake* in Context.” *PMLA* 119.3 (May 2004): 513–17.
- . *Oryx and Crake*. New York: Anchor, 2004.
- . *Writing with Intent: Essays, Reviews, Personal Prose, 1983–2005*. New York: Carroll, 2005.
- Becker, Manuel Benjamin. *Forms and Functions of Dystopia in Margaret Atwood’s Novels*. Saarbrücken, Germany: VDM Verlag, 2008.
- Bloom, Harold, ed. *Margaret Atwood*. Philadelphia: Chelsea, 2000.
- , ed. *Margaret Atwood’s The Handmaid’s Tale*. Philadelphia: Chelsea House, 2004.
- Deer, Glenn. “*The Handmaid’s Tale*: Dystopia and the Paradoxes of Power.” Bloom. 2004. 93–112.
- Grace, Sherrill. “Gender as Genre: Atwood’s Autobiographical ‘I.’” Ed. Colin Nicholson. *Margaret Atwood: Writing and Subjectivity*. New York: St. Martin, 1994, 189–203.
- Howells, Coral Ann Howells. *Margaret Atwood*. 2nd ed. New York: Palgrave, 2005.
- , ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Margaret Atwood*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2006.
- . “Margaret Atwood’s Dystopian Visions: *The Handmaid’s Tale* and *Oryx and Crake*.” Howells. 2006. 161–75.
- Ingersoll, Earl G., ed. *Margaret Atwood Conversations*. London: Virago, 1992.
- . “Survival in Margaret Atwood’s Novel *Oryx and Crake*.” *Extrapolation* 45.2 (2004): 162–75.

- , ed. *Waltzing Again: New and Selected Conversations with Margaret Atwood*. Princeton, NJ: Ontario Review, 2006.
- Parker, Emma. "You Are What You Eat: The Politics of Eating in the Novels of Margaret Atwood." Bloom. 2000. 113–30.
- Rao, Eleonora. "Home and Nation in Margaret Atwood's Later Fiction." Howells. 2006. 100–13.
- Rubenstein, Roberta. "Nature and Nurture in Dystopia: *The Handmaid's Tale*." Bloom. 2004. 11–20.
- Sage, Lorna. *Women in the House of Fiction: Post-War Women Novelists*. London: Macmillan, 1992.
- Sceats, Sarah. *Food, Consumption and the Body in Contemporary Women's Fiction*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000.
- Showalter, Elaine. "The Snowman Cometh." *London Review of Books*. 24 July 2003. 35.
- Somacarrera, Pilar. "Power Politics: Power and Identity." Howells. 2006. 43–57.
- Staels, Hilda. "Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*: Resistance through Narrating." Bloom. 2004. 113–26.
- Stein, Karen. "Margaret Atwood's Modest Proposal: *The Handmaid's Tale*." Bloom. 2000. 191–204.
- Tolan, Fiona. *Margaret Atwood: Feminism and Fiction*. New York: Rodopi, 2007.