

## ***Food in Margaret Atwood's Speculative Fiction***

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### **Abstract**

*Food in Margaret Atwood's Speculative Fiction* examines how food functions as a central thematic, symbolic, and structural element in Margaret Atwood's dystopian and post-apocalyptic novels. This study argues that food is not merely a biological necessity but a powerful lens through which issues of survival, power, identity, gender, and environmental crisis can be understood.

This book employs a theoretically plural framework, integrating feminist theory, psychoanalytic criticism, genre theory to examine representations of food and eating in Atwood's novels. It situates its analysis within the interdisciplinary field of food studies drawing on anthropological, sociological, historical and cultural perspectives. Echoing Parasecoli's assertion that "food is pervasive," the book emphasises how food operates across multiple cultural domains, including art, film, media, and literature. Accordingly, its reading of food in Atwood's speculative fiction is grounded in the theoretical contributions of Waren Belasco, Deborah Lupton, Elspeth Probyn, Laura Wright, and Chloe Taylor through which the study explores the ritual, gendered, and sociological dimensions embedded in Atwood's work.

Focusing on Atwood's speculative fiction—including *The Handmaid's Tale*, *The Testaments*, the *MaddAddam* trilogy, and *The Heart Goes Last*—the study highlights how food reflects and shapes social hierarchies, political control, and cultural anxieties. In dystopian settings marked by scarcity, ecological collapse, and authoritarian regimes, food becomes a tool of oppression as well as a means of resistance and survival.

The book also emphasises Atwood's hybridisation of genres (utopia, dystopia, science fiction, and post-apocalyptic fiction), showing how food imagery helps navigate these shifting narrative modes. Ultimately, it argues that rituals of eating and storytelling provide 'crumbs of hope,' offering pathways toward human resilience and the possibility of rebuilding society in the face of catastrophe.

## **Chapter Overview**

### **Chapter 1 Fasting and Feasting: Food in Speculative Fiction**

The introduction establishes the theoretical framework by situating Margaret Atwood's speculative fiction within theories of genre hybridity and intertextuality. Drawing on genre theory (Todorov; Hutcheon) and the concept of "ustopia" (Atwood), it argues that Atwood's writing destabilises rigid distinctions between dystopia, utopia, and science fiction.

The chapter integrates food studies to demonstrate that food operates as a culturally coded system that reflects social hierarchies, identity formation, and power structures. Additionally, food functions as a key interpretive tool, revealing shifts in genre as well as survival strategies. Food is thus conceptualised as both material necessity and symbolic language. By linking genre hybridity with the metaphors of consumption, the chapter argues that Atwood uses food to navigate complex intersections of ecology, politics, and embodiment. Through images of hunger, scarcity, and ritualized eating, Atwood's works expose the links between food, identity, and authority in post-apocalyptic worlds. The introductory part previews the idea that food signals shifts between genres and reflects dystopian vs. utopian conditions.

### **Chapter 2 Women as White Meat: *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Testaments***

Focusing on Atwood's Gilead novels, this chapter examines food as a mechanism of control within a theocratic regime and how strict food regulation reflects social hierarchy and oppression. Women's restricted access to food mirrors their lack of autonomy, while metaphors of consumption and cannibalism illustrate how the regime exploits female bodies. From the genre perspective, testimonial narratives use food imagery to express trauma, powerlessness, and subtle forms of resistance.

Through the lens of biopower, this section shows how the state disciplines bodies by regulating nourishment, sexuality, and reproduction simultaneously. Cannibalism is interpreted through psychoanalytic and symbolic frameworks (Kristeva's abjection), highlighting how women are both objectified and consumed by the regime. Testimonial theory further informs the reading of narrative voice. It shows how food imagery becomes a medium for expressing trauma that resists direct articulation.

### **Chapter 3 Canned Food and Canned Death: *Oryx and Crake***

This chapter examines the role of artificial and technologically engineered food and pseudo-food in a pre- and post-apocalyptic context. It shows how synthetic food reflects ecological collapse, moral decay, and the dehumanising effects of scientific progress. This pseudo-food replaces authentic nourishment with substitutes and additives that fail to provide satisfaction. The concept of the pharmakon (Derrida) is central to the analysis, as food simultaneously functions as sustenance and poison, blurring boundaries between life and destruction. Food becomes intertwined with death, toxicity, and manipulation, while cannibalistic undertones expose the disturbing consequences of corporate and scientific control. "Canned Food and Canned Death: *Oryx and Crake*" engages with posthumanist theory (Haraway) and ecocriticism (Morton; Buell) to analyse the relationship between food, technology, and ecological collapse in *Oryx and Crake*. Cannibalistic undertones highlight the collapse of distinctions between human and non-human. The chapter explores the connection between food, death, and pandemic catastrophe and shows how abundance becomes deceptive, masking deeper hunger and leading to destruction.

### **Chapter 4 Corporate Cannibalism: *The Year of the Flood***

Here, food is analysed as both survival mechanism and ideological tool within a corporatised dystopia. The chapter contrasts exploitative consumer culture with the eco-religious practices of God's Gardeners, who use food as a form of resistance and ethical living. It highlights how dietary choices, emotions, and communal rituals challenge systems of power and environmental destruction. By juxtaposing the opposing food systems, the analysis reveals how Atwood critiques unsustainable consumption while imagining ethical alternatives rooted in community and ecological awareness. Food thus becomes both a site of conflict and potential pathway toward sustainable living. In *The Year of the Flood*, (vegetarian) food becomes a symbol of hope through reconnection with nature.

### **Chapter 5 Eating and Storytelling: *MaddAddam***

This section explores how food and storytelling function together as foundations for rebuilding society after catastrophe. The chapter argues that rituals of eating and narrative exchange preserve memory, identity, and community in a fragmented world. Food symbolizes both scarcity and renewal, suggesting that survival depends on cooperation, cultural

continuity, and shared meaning. This analysis emphasises the regenerative power of narrative and shared rituals. Through the lens of trauma, storytelling and sharing stories is understood as a mechanism for processing loss, while shared meals function as rituals that reinforce community bonds. By linking oral consumption with oral communication, the chapter argues that Atwood presents survival as both a biological and cultural process. Food and storytelling together enable the reconstruction of identity and the negotiation of a shared future, highlighting the importance of multispecies cooperation and adaptability in post-catastrophic worlds.

### **Chapter 6 Junk Food and Prison Food: *The Heart Goes Last***

The chapter investigates the paradoxical relationship between food, freedom, and control in a dystopian social experiment. While prison offers abundant and appealing food, it comes at the cost of personal liberty. In *The Heart Goes Last*, food imagery and food metaphors are used to illustrate the genre switches: dystopian reality is shown through hunger, scarcity of satisfying food, dry and stale leftovers of junk food, while the (grotesque) prison serves elaborate cuisine. The chapter examines how food becomes a tool of propaganda and manipulation: comfort, including food, can mask deeper systems of coercion and control. The analysis argues that the novel presents a slow apocalypse where security comes at the cost of freedom.

### **Chapter 7 Hybrid Genres: Festive Intertextuality and Hungry Reality**

The conclusion synthesises the book's arguments by emphasising Atwood's genre hybridity and intertextual play. It argues that food imagery ties together diverse narrative forms and thematic concerns, bridging literary experimentation with real-world anxieties about consumption, survival, and power. The chapter sums up Atwood's use of food in speculative novels. Atwood's writing strategies resemble cooking: her postmodern intertextual writing combines ingredients from post-apocalyptic fiction, dystopia, utopia, fairy tale, myth, thriller, and other traditions to challenge her readers' expectations.

Across all parts, the book demonstrates that food is a multifunctional metaphor linked to power, identity, and survival. Eating practices reveal social and political structures, while dystopian worlds use food to expose inequality, control, and ecological crisis. Despite bleak settings, food rituals and storytelling offer hope and continuity.