
A Study of Crucial Human Issues in Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*

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Margaret Eleanor Atwood was born in 1939. She is the most prominent Canadian poet, novelist, critic, essayist, and environmental activist. She has considerable number of books of poetry, seventeen major novels, books of non-fiction, short fiction, children's books, and a graphic novel to her credit. Atwood has been shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize five times, and a recipient in 2000 for *The Blind Assassin*. She is a winner of the Governor General's Award 10 times, and many other prestigious awards. As a novelist and poet, her works encompass a variety of themes like gender, identity, religion, climate change, and power politics.

Her novel *Oryx and Crake* was short listed for Man Booker Prize in 2003 and for Orange Prize for Fiction in 2004.

Oryx and Crake is a magnificent piece of speculative fiction, which reveals through flashbacks the whole story of the existential loner Jimmy, presently taking care of the primitive creatures: Crakers.

Jimmy and his friend Crake spent their childhood together in the compound and later went on to attend the higher education institutes. Crake, a brilliant student, studied bio engineering at Watson Crick. But Jimmy, an average student, studied humanities at Martha Graham. Crake rises high in his career and finally, creates humanoids. Crakers are special creatures who are herbivorous and polyandrous and they show interest in sex only during the breeding season. Probably, he is doing to cleanse the materialistic world and make life simple. Crake also makes a pill, Blyssplus which gives happiness and health but at a later stage, spreads a pandemic. Human race starts getting wiped out. Jimmy has been made immune to the fatal effects of this pill, secretly, by Crake. So, Jimmy, now Snowman, takes charge of the Crakers. There are many references to existential questions, in the discussions and debates that Jimmy and Crake have. Crake probably is so disturbed with the condition of

humanity that he takes it upon himself, to wipe out the human race and replace it with peaceful and undemanding humanoids. Jimmy's disturbance due to the offensive things happening around him, is visible, but Crake may also be touched by these, probably more intensely. Jimmy's loneliness and distress make him reflect on his past life, on the questions of life and death, on the philosophy of absurdity and despair.

Oryx and Crake has both- the apocalyptic and the post apocalyptic stories running simultaneously. Snowman of the Post Apocalyptic world is Jimmy of the lost world. The story runs back and forth in time with Jimmy narrating through flashbacks, the global cataclysm brought about by the bio weapon used by Crake. There are quite a number of themes which are conveyed through the story of the novel. Some of the important human concerns are: the ethical considerations of the bio engineering projects, the natural evolution vs the synthetic evolution, immortality and disease.

Ethical consideration of the bioengineering projects is a crucial theme and is at the core of this novel. The genetic engineering projects undertaken by the company are apparently intended to help humanity, for example, the pigoon project.

Nevertheless, at some points, the behavior of the company members is quite unethical. Once, there's an argument between Jimmy's parents about the philanthropic aims of these projects. Jimmy's mother is arguing that the work moved away from its original aim. Jimmy's father and the other workers may have had good intentions originally, but competitiveness and greed had taken precedence over compassion and a desire to help people. She expresses herself clearly, in Chapter 4, *Rakunk*:

"... Its wrong, the whole organization is wrong, it's a moral cesspool and you know it." (*Oryx and Crake* 64)

Crake's scheme also involves ethical considerations. Like the other companies, he is willing to go to great lengths to protect his project, and he comes across as an extremely driven character who will engage in behavior that many would see as unethical. It is even suggested at one point that he is responsible for his own mother's death due to experimentation with viral strains. Unleashing a deadly virus on the entire human population would certainly seem unethical. The same goes for Crake's deception of Oryx and the general public about the BlyssPluss pills. However, Crake

claims that he has a valid reason for these actions, believing that his vision will benefit the world as a whole. Likewise, his decision to entrust the Crakers to Jimmy is based on the accurate calculation that Jimmy possesses the required empathy. Crake often engages Jimmy in philosophical debates, and it is during one of these discussions that Crake concludes is that there will soon be too many people and too few resources. He implies that he will respond by modifying human beings, though his real aim is to wipe them out and create what he sees as a better arrangement. Indeed, the Crakers are programmed so that the population will never become excessive, and they are designed to use resources efficiently. Add to this the fact that Crakers are incapable of aggression, violence, and discrimination, and there is something to be said for Crake's ideals. Even Jimmy recognizes the positive aspects of the Crakers.

The theme of natural evolution vs. synthetic evolution is presented in *Oryx and Crake* several times. The pharmaceutical companies in the novel have gone beyond producing medicines to fight disease and bodily dysfunction. Their development into genetically customized animals raises questions about what exactly comprises

nature. Among the traits genetically given to them, their typical food habits, an inability to read, a lack of desire to worship a higher being, a lack of interest in art and an ignorance of death were the most significant ones to achieving Crake's most wanted immortality. Crake describes his modification of human beings as a part of nature as nothing lies outside of the realm of nature. The creation of the humanoids, Crakers was driven by Crake's passion to fulfill the society's desire to achieve immortality. Most of the companies were already pursuing the goal through modification of the human beings through organ transplant and drugs to rejuvenate aging bodies. But, Crake takes a giant leap and approaches this quest differently. Instead of trying to achieve immortality by modifying the existing humans, Crake aimed at recreating the human species. Crake felt that fear of death resulted in mortality. So, he made a being that had no fear of death, hence, bringing an end to the quest for immortality. The Crakers were created in such a way, so that they lead a quality life with minimum pressure on the Earth.

“ But with the Paradise method, there would be ninety- nine percent

accuracy. Whole populations could be created that would have pre-selected characteristics. Beauty, of course; that would be in high demand. And docility: several world leaders had expressed interest in that. Paradise had already developed a UV- resistant skin, a built- in insect repellent, an unprecedented ability to digest unrefined plant material. As for immunity from microbes, what had until now been done with drugs would soon be innate.” (*Oryx and Crake* 358)

The theme of nature is most expressively explored in the last chapter of the book. Upon seeing three other surviving humans, Snowman is unable to conclude which population, human or Craker, will have the chance to prosper. His decision, which is not revealed in the text, raises questions about human nature and the future evolution of the various surviving species.

In *Oryx and Crake*, disease also plays an important role. Its comprehensive presence makes it an important theme. Disease marks the class because the society is based on the segregation of urban areas. Those who have good jobs with the main

pharmaceutical companies live in highly guarded, disease-free compounds. Those who are not associated with such companies live in the disease-infested pleeblands. Disease is so omnipresent in the pleeblands that residents who do not normally live in the pleeblands either avoid going there or take special medicines to enter them and remain safe from disease.

“Compound people didn’t go to the cities unless they had to, and then never alone. They called the cities *the pleeblands*. Despite the fingerprint identity cards now carried by everyone, public security in the pleeblands was leaky: there were people cruising around in those places who could forge anything and who might be anybody... the addicts, the muggers, the paupers, the crazies. So it was best for everyone at OrganInc Farms to live all in one place, with foolproof procedures.” (*Oryx and Crake* 31)

Disease in *Oryx and Crake* is used as a weapon of mass destruction. Crake's extensive distribution of his shrouded virus results in the death of almost the entire

human population. Crake is not the only one to use disease as a weapon, rather the pharmaceutical companies are also doing it, but for a different reason. The pharmaceutical companies are inventing diseases and then curing them simultaneously in order to maintain a high demand for their products. The use of disease in this way is nothing short of swindling rather it is also a powerful capitalistic weapon. Ironically, disease is used as a cure to the problems of humanity. By inflicting a fatal disease on the world's population, Crake hoped to remove hunger, war, crime, and many other unwanted human problems.

There are some other minor themes in this novel. One of them is the renaming. Throughout the novel, there is a distinct division between the times before the release of the virus and after that. This contrast in the plot is presented through the renaming of various characters in the novel. The renaming is symbolic as it tracks the enormous changes that have happened in the world. The protagonist of the book is Jimmy, who is renamed Snowman. He provides an excellent example of the transformation symbolized by the change of

name. The use of the names of extinct creatures as nicknames for two of the three main characters, Oryx and Crake, is also conspicuous. The names of the people working inside of the Paradise project were also drawn from the same list. Jimmy also had a nickname, Thickney, but it was not used for long. Jimmy is also the only one of the three that survives the fallout of the pandemic. The name Oryx, stands alone as she does not have a "real" name. This ambiguous naming, i.e. the using of only a nickname, reflects her character. She is a wispy, vague character. She does not reveal anything about herself. Jimmy keeps speculating about her past life. In Jimmy world, almost everything is available for a price. Similarly, another theme can be the spectacle or the visuals. Jimmy and Crake's friendship is built upon watching hours upon hours of execution, live suicide, animal killing, and pornography. Their world is one of spectacle. The CorpSeCorps don't care about this, instead concentrate their efforts on those who are against such a lifestyle. In everyday life, appearances seem to be very important. This drives the economic market for beauty enhancing products. OrganInc, AnooYoo, and RejoovenEsense all make money on this global desire for beauty and

youth. The need to look good is necessary because nearly everything is broadcast and everyone wants to look his or her best. Even when the virus is destroying the world, several people broadcast their respective demises on the internet for the surviving ones to witness.

In *Oryx and Crake*, there is a strong preference for those who are scientifically and mathematically capable to those who are capable otherwise. The world has little use for those who are verbally inclined. Jimmy, who is skilled with words, not numbers is not of much use to the capitalistic society. This fact explains the main tension in the novel. From the very beginning of their friendship, Jimmy and Crake noted their academic differences. Crake would often tutor Jimmy to help him pass his math and science classes. Crake was unable to understand why Jimmy struggled with subjects that he found so easy and essential. The death of artistic use of language is also seen at various places in the book. For example, Jimmy's college asked him to throw old, useless library books away. Jimmy couldn't do it because he could not decide which books to keep and which not to. It is interesting to note that there is a huge gap between the rank and salary given

to an individual in Jimmy's vocational grouping. Those working in a word- field, like advertising, were paid little. Jobs in this field were extremely hard to come by as well. In Jimmy's present, i.e. as Snowman, there is a slow death of words. Even for Snowman, it is becoming quite hard to remember the meanings or importance of words. Snowman realizes that just like words are slipping away, so are the last bits of humanity. For most part of the novel, Snowman believes that he is the only human alive. So, it means that once he forgets some word, it will be lost forever. This thought panics Snowman as he strives to hold on to every bit of his verbal memory. Last but not the least, the parent child bond is also a theme of this novel. Jimmy and Crake's parental relationships are reflected in their later lives through their romantic and platonic interactions. Both Jimmy and Crake had absent or dead parents, so, their concept of nurturing relationships is disfigured. Oryx, on the other hand, despite having been treated badly by her parental figures, retains a respect and hope that Jimmy and Crake lack. Probably this facet of Oryx's personality is part of what attracts both Jimmy and Crake to her. Jimmy's romantic relationships are short lived and



meaningless, a way for him to ease his rotting emotional pain. Crake seems to be unable to connect with individuals apart from Jimmy. When they meet Oryx, they both appear to experience love for the first time. Oryx's nurturing nature is featured outstandingly in her interactions with the Crakers. While, she is the Craker's symbol of love, Jimmy has to struggle with his position as the Craker caretaker.

The author has described this novel as speculative fiction, which means that it takes up the current trends and extrapolates

them to predict what future will be like. The novel, doubtlessly, extrapolates upon the rapid and unchecked advances in biological and genetic engineering and raises questions about the moral and ethical responsibilities of the scientists when they start manipulating the natural processes for material gains. Besides this, the decline of humanities and art has led to total dehumanization of human species. The future of the scientific advancements of early 21st century are very effectively portrayed in the novel.