

Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*: An Ecocritical Approach

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ABSTRACT

Ecocriticism explores how culture is related to nature in spirit of shouldering responsibilities for the environment. This paper attempts to apply an ecocritical approach to Margaret Atwood's Oryx and Crake. (2003). It analyses the environmental disaster due to man's deeds under his selfishness, explaining Atwood's concern regarding the natural world. The novel deals with the contemporary issues like worldwide warming, genetic engineering, declining resources, scarce species, sexploitation and a wearing down of kindness. It also illustrates disharmonious associations between human beings, the outcome of unhindered technology and aspiration. It appeals the mankind to reform and improve the way of being. Atwood wishes to uphold not merely the equilibrium between man and the natural world, but also the equilibrium of human associations and the equilibrium of man and himself. She hopes that man should have tough awareness of the pleasant-sounding growth of these three aspects. Just when the entire bionetwork is in an objective situation, can human beings exist securely and gladly, with complete individualism.

Keywords- Culture, Disaster, Ecocriticism, Ecology, Nature.

Introduction

Ecocriticism is a new trend in the twenty-first century English fiction. According to Cheryll Glotfelty ecocriticism is "the study of the relationship between literature and the environment." (Glotfelty xviii) Other names by which it is also known include environmental literary criticism, ecopoetics and green cultural studies. It explores how culture is related to nature in the spirit of shouldering responsibilities for the environment. The kind of questions ecocritics engage are: How is landscape represented in a literary work, and what is its function? Are the underlying values of the text environmentally sound? Should place be a category of inquiry, like other constitutive forces such as race, class, and gender? Are contemporary ecological issues exactly represented or even mentioned in accepted civilization and in current writing?

Margaret Atwood is the most noticeable female writer in Canada. She has been renowned since long for her assessment of wilderness and ecological issues. The crux of her fictional works primarily concerns woman's existence, nationalized individuality

of Canada and ecological catastrophe owing to the expansion of science and technology. In 2003 her novel *Oryx and Crake* was published. It portrays a doomsday of human beings where the entire mankind was destroyed due to the misuse of genetic engineering.

Oryx and Crake, is a dystopian fiction, echoing the theme of *The Handmaid's Tale*. (1985) It is typically an environment literature, describing how the future world loses its ecology, how disasters happen, and how human beings come to the devastation. The novel deals with the contemporary issues like worldwide warming, genetic engineering, declining resources, scarce species, sexploitation and a wearing down of kindness. This paper attempts to apply an ecocritical approach to Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*. It aims to study the ecological consciousness reflected in *Oryx and Crake* from the perspective of ecocriticism. Ecological crisis can be categorized into three layers- environmental crisis (population explosion, natural disasters, epidemic diseases, wretched animals, human extinction), social crisis (gender crisis, loss of language), and spiritual crisis (loss of culture and loss of belief). The causes of the crisis reflected in the novel are- human manipulation of nature, egoism and malfunctions of belief. Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* alerts man about the environmental disaster. By exhibiting the horrible scenes that might happen in the future, Atwood arouses the ecological consciousness in the readers, leading them to think about the way to avoid the destruction path in the fiction. Investigation on the environmental awareness in *Oryx and Crake* is of immense importance to literature and culture. It warns people to reflect on the path man has pursued. It leaves the question of how to reconstruct the green civilization.

Atwood has commented on the discomfort she experienced owing to the meeting of her imagination and the actual humankind. In

Atwood's terms, "real life was getting creepily too close to my inventions." (Atwood Writing *Oryx and Crake*, 10) Similar to her previous dystopian work of fiction, *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), *Oryx and Crake* portrays an upcoming culture that exaggerates several of the troublesome trends that are by now widespread in the contemporary world. As a matter of fact, she pays ardent consideration to the proceedings, trends, and concerns of the early twenty-first century. As she wrote this book, Atwood drew from recent affairs headlines regarding issues like ecological disaster, genetic engineering, and bioterrorism. A great component of the novel's appeal lies in its creative, although terrifying, depiction of this imaginary planet, together with the novel topography of the nation in which diverse eastern cities have been washed away – New New York supplanting New York City. The fortress-like but lavish Compounds where the affluent commercial elites and brilliant scientists reside are austere distinction to the Pleeblands where populace struggles for ever-dwindling provisions of foodstuff and additional supplies and manage as best they can with air pollutants and recurrent outbreaks of illness.

The setting of *Oryx and Crake* is the twenty-first century. It deals typically ecological questions like worldwide warming, contamination, over-population, societal inequalities in relation to the surroundings, the modification and exhaustion of natural wealth, and bio-engineering in a planet ruled by technocrats and subjugated by capitalistic interests. This work of fiction comes as an admonition against the directions modern culture is taking and the choices it is making in relation to ecology. In this view, writing is employed as an instrument to caution the readers against probably deadly deviations. Nevertheless, Atwood's unease with environmental preoccupations is not precisely novel. Nearly all of her writing questions man's relation to his surroundings and

resultant endurance or extermination. By no means has this ecological worry been so fundamental, so evidently spelled out in any other of Atwood's novel. The cost of environmental recklessness and need of moral principles on the social order and humanity are explored in detail. *Oryx and Crake* situates itself in the contemporary view of Ecocriticism which has attempted to consider how literature can sway ecosystem in very real ways. As S.B. Hartman points out, Atwood has evidently evolved from a Survival theory i.e. horror of the natural world in a antagonistic atmosphere which, characterizes the Canadian thoughts, to current ecological preoccupations, pointing out that the sense of danger at present comes from man's individual productions.

In her dystopian work of fiction, *Oryx and Crake*, Atwood expresses her worry over the widening disparity, increasing starvation and dearth, deformation of the assets of the budding and weak nations and the enormous ecological dilapidation caused by commercial globalism. Especially, she voices her anxiety over the perils posed by the "gene rush" and the brunt of biotechnology as it brutally upsets the environment. The book engages in an strong case regarding the prospect of the contemporary social order and gives striking terms to the author's observation that the abuse of science and technology and man's egotistical brainpower have merely created newer traditions to enchain and ultimately end mankind.

In the beginning of the novel the only person apparently left alive is Jimmy, so readers are left to center on "the tide coming in, wave after wave sloshing over the various barricades" and the "shrieks of birds" that nest on abandoned offshore towers, with the "distant ocean grinding against the ersatz reefs of rusted car parts and jumbled bricks and assorted rubble." (Atwood 3) His lone co-survivors are a collection of Crakers- not normal humans but genetically engineered

laboratory products. The dismal sob of Snowman "Now I'm alone. . . all alone. Alone on a wide sea" (Atwood 3) mingles with horrible smell of the atmosphere, sickening the readers. To energize the terror is the existence of innumerable untamed pigeons and wolvoogs, genetically engineered animals of Atwood's mind's eye. After looking at his broken watch, Jimmy scratches bug bites then "scans the ground for wildlife: all quiet, no scales and tails. Left hand, right foot, right hand, left foot, he makes his way down from the tree." (Atwood 4) In this first passage, Jimmy's interactions include flicking a spider, urinating on grasshoppers, and rubbing ants off a mango. It is clear that Jimmy's relationship to place and environment has drastically changed. He is now a niche within an ecosystem concerned with predators, his primary concerns not social but ecological. Readings of this novel have been species-limited in their response to "a world where everything has become altered almost beyond recognition by global warming and genetic engineering." (Howells, "Oryx and Crake" 170), leaving the biological diversity of *Oryx and Crake* unnoticed. But in "Margaret Atwood, the Land, and Ecology," published three years before *Oryx and Crake*, Ronald B. Hatch recognizes that "Atwood has something in common with recent ecocentrist writers in her rejection of the anthropomorphic viewpoint and their struggles to re-position humanity as one species among many in a web of natural connections." (Hatch 181) This re-positioning can be seen in Jimmy's relationship to birds and plant life in the post-natural city he inhabits. He observes:

Several of the buildings once held roof gardens, and now they're top-heavy with overgrown shrubbery. Hundreds of birds streaming across the sky towards them, roostward bound. Ibis? Herons? The black ones are cormorants, he knows that for sure. They settle down into the darkening foliage, croaking and squabbling. If he ever needs

guano he'll know where to find it. (Atwood 109)

Buildings that once meant commerce and the towering superiority of the human species now mean fertilizer for Jimmy, indicating that his perspective has now broadened to considerations of not only bird species but also gardening. He later notices when

A long scrawl of birds unwinds from the empty towers - gulls, egrets, herons, heading off to fish along the shore ... a salt marsh is forming on a one-time landfill dotted with semi-flooded townhouses. That's where all the birds are going: minnow city... (Atwood 174).

In these passages, the novel "pursues the theme of nature's very slow but very certain power to self-renew" (Hengen 77) by returning abandoned rooftops, landfills, and townhouses to a transformed but very real "web of natural connections." In "the former park", Jimmy observes, "the botany is thrusting itself through every crack" and that it "won't be long before all visible traces of human habitation will be gone." (Atwood 259-260) This permutation, like the urban influx of bird life, indicates a resilience and increased adaptive capacity of plant and animal species. (Weisman 33) In one shattered corporate utopia, the RejoovenEsense compound, Jimmy notes:

Already the weeds are thick along the curbs. The street is circular; in the island in the middle, a clutch of shrubs, unpruned and scraggly, flares with red and purple flowers. Some exotic splice: in a few years they will be overwhelmed. Or else they will spread, make inroads, choke out the native plants. Who can tell which? The whole world is now one vast uncontrolled experiment - the way it always was, Crake would have said - and the doctrine of unintended consequences is in full spate. (Atwood 267)

Clearly, this reflection on biota and non-indigenous species is in no way speculative or

innovative; one can observe this progression in any deserted building where ubiquitous plants have been abandoned to upset biotic communities. Eventually, species struggle and adjustment will resolve to what degree indigenous and alien species thrive, and in *Oryx and Crake* such moments are formed with likelihood as well as terror. The "uncontrolled experiment" of this setting might well contain "unintended consequences" that allow life to prosper in the interstitial zones left by an almost vanished mankind. At zero hour, Jimmy holds out expectation that this space has the possibility to arrive at a stable state with high level of variety for native species. Zero, subsequently, is not a nonexistence devoid of worth, but somewhat a fundamental spot in biological time.

Snowman tells the tale of an earlier period, his existence as Jimmy in what seems to be the late twenty-first century. This was an era when mankind's ecological egotism had led to emission holes in the environment, melting of the polar ice caps, flooding of coastal cities, famine, and desertification of the continents. The enormous bulk of the populace lives in the pleeblands, where metropolitan slump, sin, and sickness make existence despicable.

Jimmy's connections with native variety also consist of a significant instant with a caterpillar "letting itself down on a thread." (Atwood 46) The caterpillar is "luscious, unreal green, like a gumdrop, and covered with tiny bright hairs..." it pauses, "...smelling him, picking up on his chemical aura" (Atwood 46). After noting that there "will be another such moment of time, another such conjunction" (Atwood 46) Jimmy says to the caterpillar, "We have hard work to do, and loads to lift." (Atwood 46) Although Jimmy second-guesses himself after his caterpillar-induced "inexplicable surge of tenderness and joy" (Atwood 46), the image however seems exact. The caterpillar not only thrives at the end of time, but it also will "work" with Jimmy to go on to promote a more sustainable

and assorted bioregion. Like Jimmy, the caterpillar is in a phase between larva and moth or butterfly. The developmental conversion of the caterpillar represents not only Jimmy's conversion, but the delicate variability of native species observed in nature.

Crake, conversely, has discarded in total the separation between twofold constructions for instance native/exotic, indigenous/nonindigenous, and actual/false. Crake's "scientifically advanced world no longer relies upon such oppositional logic. Within his environment, the lines that separate the natural from the artificial are no longer necessary or visible." (Davis 89) Bouson proclaims, "Filled with scientific hubris, Crake, who does not believe in God or Nature, also does not believe in the value of human life." (Bouson 146) For good or ill, the novel's modified humanity is clearly generated by Crake's intricate perception of the natural milieu and its dangers. He explains the absurdity of human carrying capability to Jimmy, asking him to

look at it realistically. You can't couple a minimum access to food with an expanding population indefinitely. *Homo sapiens* doesn't seem able to cut himself off at the supply end. He's one of the few species that doesn't limit reproduction in the face of dwindling resources. (Atwood 138-139)

Crake describes the obvious effects of the BlyssPluss Pill in reproductive expressions, illuminating that it will "eliminate the external causes of death" such as "Overpopulation, leading - as we've seen in spades - to environmental degradation and poor nutrition." (Atwood 345) In both passages, Crake's sobering evaluation of the overpopulation ambiguity explains with terrifying lucidity what will ensue to accessible resources, dirt free air, and water if human statistics go on rising at the present pace. "Demand for resources," Crake reminds us, "has exceeded

supply for decades in marginal geopolitical areas, hence the famines and droughts; but very soon, demand is going to exceed supply for *everyone*." (Atwood 347) Crake prompts readers to consider questions that not only have a bang on the future but also worry numerous inhabitants these days.

Planned in Crake's high-security arena compound Paradise, these "environmentally friendly hominids" (Bouson 141) are depicted not as hideous but as possessing suprahuman prettiness: "At first [Jimmy] couldn't believe them, they were so beautiful. Black, yellow, white, brown, all available skin colors. Each individual was exquisite." (Atwood 355) Crake employs genetic engineering technologies to devise posthuman creatures with not merely artistic appeal but also resistance to climate change, insects, warfare, and hunger. The Crakers represent genetically what Atwood's millennial "green" readers might wish to behaviorally, and therefore fraction of Atwood's novel's environmental hopefulness might be established in the ability of civilization to hold an culture of ecological stewardship. They have been planned to check overpopulation and revere all species of life. Jimmy thinks subsequent to stepping on a banana slug that "If he were a Craker he'd have to apologize to it - *I'm sorry I stepped on you, Child of Oryx, please forgive my clumsiness*." (Atwood 390-391)

The Crakers can primarily be noticed as representing a figure of original purity. They are absolutely ecologically friendly. They are vegan grass eaters who, similar to a number of animal species, can even re-ingest their own feces so as not to bang greatly on the atmosphere. Snowman, nevertheless, is merely a man, and cannot stay alive on grass. Therefore, the foremost thing he does is inform the Crakers to bring him a fish each week, a ritualized action that will guarantee his own continued existence. A critical reading of Snowman would be that he has subverted the Crakers' ecologically friendliness and

provided them with stories and explanations and behavior (killing fish) which will ultimately lead them to become less Crake-like and more like pre-apocalypse man. His association with the Crakers is a type of symbiosis in which each side profits. He is reliant on the Crakers for his own continued existence as they supply the fish, which keeps him living. The Crakers rely on him for answers to their questions and for their safety. Logically, Snowman is bartering narratives for fish, language for provisions. However, it occurs at the cost of intimidating the atmosphere; the Crakers have taken their initial unsure footstep away from chaste vegetarianism, and consequently concord with their atmosphere. As this work of fiction obviously suggests, man's contemporary civilization, left unrestricted, might bring absolute catastrophe for the atmosphere.

Crakers have been tamed and are extremely better adapted to the new world than Snowman. They comprise "a UV-resistant skin, a built-in insect repellent, an unprecedented ability to digest unrefined plant material." (Atwood 358) Moreover, Crake has cautiously wiped-out those genetic qualities of older humankind that have led it down the pathway to ecocide:

What had been altered was nothing less than the ancient primate brain. Gone were its destructive features, the features responsible for the world's current illnesses. . . . Since they were neither hunters nor agriculturalists hungry for land, there was no territoriality. . . . Their sexuality was not a constant torment to them . . . : they came into heat at regular intervals, as did most mammals other than man. . . . They were perfectly adjusted to their habitat, so they would never have to create houses or tools or weapons, or, for that matter, clothing. They would have no need to invent any harmful symbolisms, such as kingdoms, icons, gods, or money. (Atwood 358)

Thus, Crake has used the tools of genetic engineering to breed the craziness out of man, creating a species of human beings that will be incapable to dirt the earth. The Crakers have been thoroughly and permanently reformed. They also help the readers to bear in mind that as a species, human beings are not exempt from adaptations and mutations that happen through processes of development, regardless of the diverse advances. The stylistic liveliness of expressions such as "ChickieNobs Bucket O' Nubbins" (Atwood 7) and "Organ-Oink Farms" (Atwood 25) intimidate to make depictions of commercial slaughterhouses and laboratories nearly shine. Turner explains that

when a man ceases to be the master and becomes the equal or fellow of man, he also ceases to be master and becomes the equal or fellow of nonhuman beings. It is culture that fabricates structural distinctions; it is culture too that eradicates these distinctions in liminality ... (Dramas 252-253)

Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* discloses not only "The End," but in addition, a fictional and artistic longing for a novel start – an environmental society rising out of a planet where intellectual distinctions and boundaries have generated

more plagues, more famines, more floods, more insect or microbe or small-mammal outbreaks, more droughts, more chickenshit boy-soldier wars in distant countries. (Atwood 298)

An ecocritical approach to the bionetwork in *Oryx and Crake* powerfully indicates that Jimmy's environmental worry will consistently conclude in a novel constancy of bioregional society. Jimmy's dilemma at the conclusion of the book reminds man of his own predicament at this junction in ecological history, at a time "when everything, as it were, trembles in the balance." (Turner, Ritual 44).

Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* has incited an absolute deluge of reviews and articles filled

with apocalyptic terror. From an ecocritical viewpoint, in spite of the evident catastrophe, this work of fiction offers new-fangled optimism for humankind and other life forms. Ecocriticism stirs the readers to perceive abandoned lands, for instance, Snowman's "Great Emptiness" (Atwood 119) not just as lifeless and desecrated places, however, as those zones that go on to become accustomed and develop - even in "zero hour." (Atwood 3) To observe these zones encourages the re-evaluation of human interactions to post-natural areas, for instance, deserted lots, obsolete business enclaves, and even graveyards. Like the land itself, Jimmy embodies the toughness and promise of places considered doomed. The basis for hope in this novel is in place, but not because as one critic suggests, the "elimination of the human race also solves the environmental crisis in one stroke." (Dunning 95) As an alternative, a reading of existing bionetwork in the story indicates several chances for the ecological reincorporation and compromise. In its depiction of living from a biocentric viewpoint, *Oryx and Crake* reminds that place is forever being born. It is the gene splice, which enables Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* to be studied as a dystopian fiction that evidently represents the ecological concerns.

Despite the fact that *Oryx and Crake* reads like a fantasy tale, it leaves the readers with the belief that the worth of human existence is quickly failing. The rationale of Crake's Paradise Project is to make completely selected babies that would include any corporeal, intellectual, or religious facet; the customer might hope to choose. Crake's grandmaster arrangement of bioterrorism and the genetic experimentation to substitute the "flawed humanity" with his genetically customized humanoids called the Crakers, suggests the deprivation of human existence and human value. The contemporary test-tube babies, for instance, reveal that man needs not wait too long for the mass-production of

babies. With profound individual apprehension, Atwood depicts the predicament of men betrayed into servitude and devastation by their own voracity. She plainly shows what the superhuman power scientists draw from contemporary technology is heading for merely additional anarchy. The admonition sent throughout this work of fiction is that the utopian hopes and aspirations would collapse shortly. Atwood highlights the ethical imperfection at the centre of a social order, which has mistaken ease for culture. She furthermore expresses her conviction that "everything is connected to everything else and that Literature does not float above the material world in some aesthetic ether but rather, plays a part in an immensely complex global system in which energy, matter and ideas interact" (Heise, par. 7-9).

The modern culture of science has not just robbed the globe of its resources but in addition humans of their emotions. People have no moral or cultural values. They have been besieged by the attraction of supremacy, sex, and cruelty. "Pair-bonding" is the word the brilliant Crake gives to association between a young man and a young woman. Atwood's sarcastic tenor can be observed in the subsequent discussion between Crake and Jimmy: "Pair-bonding at this stage is not encouraged," said Crake, sounding like a guidebook. "We're supposed to be focusing on our work." (Atwood 243) It is the workaholic-Crake who created the destroyer Blysspluss Pill, shed guiltless blood, murdered Oryx and brought disaster over the entire humankind. When his Paradise plan finished in complete disorder, Snowman was left by himself to face the planet of sweltering temperature, inadequate provisions, and odd animals like pigeons and wolvoogs. Together with Snowman the readers begin travelling to the horrific hell Atwood creates with her sarcastic depiction. Here is the example of the unpleasant depiction of Snowman's world:

Noon is the worst, with its glare and humidity. At about eleven o'clock Snowman retreats back into the forest, out of sight of the sea altogether, because the evil rays bounce off the water and get at him even if he's protected from the sky, and then he reddens and blisters. (Atwood 41)

The consequences of global warming are shortly going to bring upon man such parallel horrors of heat, which several parts of the globe are by now experiencing. The frightening tale of *Oryx and Crake* and the distressing science fiction world it creates are not unfamiliar to the current age group.

Technology has also produced a gap between the rich and the poor as can be clearly noticed in this book. The privileged reside in the profoundly protected clean compounds that look like the ancient nineteenth century company towns, whereas the underprivileged reside in messy and polluted pleeblands.

The depressing image Atwood competently portrays in *Oryx and Crake* cautions man about the probable disastrous end of human race in the near future if it is not ready to put right its conduct. She makes an ardent appeal to the humanity to get vigor from the visionary forewarning the book projects, i.e. to have a rigid code of conduct and discard fake joy and unethical pleasures science would propose and to prevent technology from robbing the natural world and civilization.

Atwood in telling the stories of her protagonists combines societal remarks with her technical observations and sets them against the bigger worldwide changes she describes:

She also uses her narrative as a platform to voice her concerns about a trend in contemporary culture that she finds troubling: the mainstreaming of violence pornography into the mass culture. (Bouson 143)

The belief that "everything is connected to everything else" underlies Atwood's work of fiction. Through the vibrant descriptions of the humankind in her inscription, there shines a farsighted sparkle, a definite indication of her vigorous hopefulness. Her powerful expectation and authoritative words expressing her fervor for this globe speak well of her work of fiction for ingenious ecocritical researches.

Conclusion

In sum, through an ecocritical approach, this paper analyses the environmental disaster due to man's deeds under his selfishness, explaining Atwood's concern regarding the natural world. It also illustrates disharmonious associations between human beings, the outcome of unhindered technology and aspiration. It appeals the mankind to reform and improve the way of being. Atwood wishes to uphold not merely the equilibrium between man and the natural world, but also the equilibrium of human associations and the equilibrium of man and himself. She hopes that man should have tough awareness of the pleasant-sounding growth of these three aspects. Just when the entire bionetwork is in an objective situation, can human beings exist securely and gladly, with complete individualism.

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