



The Commodification of Life: An Ecocritical Approach to *Oryx and Crake*

Jaya Nalini Ekka

Department of English, J.N College Dhurwa, Ranchi, Jharkhand, India

E-mail: jayaoffice17@gmail.com

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Abstract: *In the present times, the so-called human development and progress have become inversely proportional to the degradation of nature. Where humans have mindlessly exploited nature that has resulted ecological imbalance. An urgent call to awaken the masses toward their responsibility and ethical duty to preserve and protect nature is vital. Ecocriticism looks at the relationship between man and nature as presented in literature. This paper attempts to apply an ecocritical lens to Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* (2003). In her work she illustrates the repercussions of selfish human behaviour and insatiable greed, which have led to a chain of environmental disaster. Through her work she makes an endeavour to present how humans' mindless exploitation has spoilt the natural balance. She presents how the anthropocentric attitude has encouraged abuse of technology and scientific developments to improve the human lifestyle without taking into consideration the aftermath of these selfish decisions. Her work *Oryx and Crake* can be seen as a warning to the humans of an impending disaster and an urging to retrace their steps back and have an ecocentric approach. She advocates respect toward all beings of the earth, as well as the understanding of the fact that between nature and human beings there is no superiority.*

Keywords: *Ecocriticism, Climate Change, Genetic engineering, Dystopian fiction*

Introduction

With the dawn of Industrialisation, began a race of scientific advancement, where the humans negated themselves from taking any responsibility towards the exploitation of nature that they have caused and continue to do the same as long as it could fill their coffers. The twentieth century has witnessed how the so-called human development and progress have become inversely proportional to the degradation of nature. Where the mindless exploitation of natural resources by humans and their innate nature to dominate nature have led to ecological crises and rendered our ecosystem into a proverbial wasteland. A call to awaken the masses toward their responsibility and ethical duty to protect and preserve our home brooks no delay. With this sense of collective responsibility the writer and critics in their work present real or imagined scenarios with the aim of urging people to take concrete steps to save and protect the

environment and to combat the ecological crisis and also to make them aware of how an anthropocentric attitude has rendered the earth into a wasteland that is at the mercy of humans. Ecocriticism looks at the relationship between man and nature as presented in literature. In her work *Oryx and Crake* (2003) she presents how the mindless exploitation of earth's natural resources has severely damaged the ecological balance and how human insatiable greed and selfish behaviour have led to a chain of ecological disaster. She presents how, in order to better human life we humans have indiscriminately encouraged abuse of technology and unregulated scientific developments without taking into consideration their aftermath. In this paper an attempt has been made to study Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* (2003) from an ecocritical perspective and try to see how the present deteriorating ecological balance serves as a warning to humans of an impending disaster and urges the masses to mend their ways and have an ecocentric approach towards nature.

Ecocriticism is a recent addition in the field of critical studies, which urges the readers to look at the interconnections between physical nature and man as presented in literature. It urges the masses to think from an ecocentric approach, which places nature at the centre of things. It essentially condemns any form of exploitation of nature by man. Willam Ruckert was first to coin the term "ecocriticism," which was a way "to find the grounds upon which the two communities-the humans, the natural can co-exist, cooperate and flourish in biosphere" (The Ecocriticism Reader, 107). Nature and literature have always been closely associated, as we find in the literary works of different poets and authors throughout history. However, the recent anthropogenic activities, which have invariably resulted in ecological imbalance, have raised concern for its protection and preservation, and its reflection in literature has given birth to the concept of "Ecocriticism". It was through the efforts of Cheryll Glotfelty that ecocriticism expanded and became widely discussed as a literary and cultural theory by the early 1990s which led to the formation of the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE) followed by the publication of its journal, *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*.

Purpose

The objective of this research paper is to analyse ecocritically Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* where she imagines a dystopian world which could be a reality if human beings do not mend their ways. It can be seen as a warning of an impending apocalypse if man fails to realize its wrong doing and retrace its step back and have an ecocentric approach. The lesson derived from the study will help addressing the ecological crisis qualitatively.

Methodology

The paper is research based and qualitative in methodology, sourcing the materials from reference books and the internet. The cited materials have been examined in terms of their relevance and usefulness to the issue in question and have formed part of the findings.

Discussions and Findings

Margaret Atwood is Canada's most eminent novelist and poet; she also writes short stories, critical studies, screenplays, and books for children. She has been renowned for her assessment

pertaining to ecological issues and wilderness. The essence of her fictional works essentially concerns woman's existence, nationalised individuality of Canada, and ecological catastrophe owing to the unsupervised expansion of science and technology by ethics and morals. In her *Oryx and Crake* (2003) she portrays a dystopian world as an aftermath of misuse of technology of genetic engineering.

The backdrop novel *Oryx and Crake* is a futuristic dystopia that has emerged after the collapse of the global ecosystem. It mainly voices the ecological issues such as global warming, climate change overpopulation.

...as time went on and the coastal aquifers turned salty and the northern permafrost melted and the vast tundra bubbled with methane, and the drought in the midcontinent plains region went on and on, and the Asian steppes turned to sand dunes, and meat became harder to come by, some people had their doubts. (p.31)

We find a lone survivor of the manmade global catastrophe in the futuristic wasteland, Snowman who is the protagonist and narrator, must reside all alone in the world's ruin.

He is probably mankind's only survivor in the post-pandemic world, and he is portrayed as the representative of humanity. He thinks

Maybe that's the real him, the last Homo sapiens- a white illusion of a man, here today, gone tomorrow, so easily shoved over, left in melt in the sun, getting thinner and thinner until he liquefies and tickles away altogether. As Snowman is doing now. (p,224)

Whatever living beings he meets are the products, as Jay Sanders put it, of "genetically engineered animals" and "hybrid creatures" (2013, p, 219). These are especially designed to serve humans; pigoons for instance, were created and raised for organ plantation; the Crakers, who are immune to diseases, tame, innocent, humanlike, and beautiful. The novel critiques Crake's Paradise Model; a bioengineering project that aims to create a superior race that would supposedly replace humans. Crake is in charge of this top-secret project, where we find him blinded by his optimism in science and technology as he downplays the natural Darwinian conception of evolution. Through this project he expects to realize the human's dream of permanent youth and beauty. Atwood voices her concern as to how humans see themselves as creators and justify their acts of interference in the natural order of things. We find that genetic engineering has opened Pandora's Box in Atwood's commercialized environment, where human beings have overstepped the boundary and something impermissible has taken place. We also find that unsupervised technological advances fuelled by human lust to interfere in the natural processes have created a man-made nature, which will ultimately be metamorphosed into a proverbial wasteland. Atwood has a deep understanding of human behaviours as she perceives the potential of unethical human use of technology and portrays the hazardous consequences of bioengineering. Through her work *Oryx and Crake*, Atwood imagines a futuristic wasteland that is not in a distant future but rather much nearer future reality, according to the existing phenomena in today's society. Crake has the capability to change the world, though aware of the negative effects of "BlyssPluss", he seeks to save the planet from humans' destructive and environmentally hostile traits. But we find that his environmentalism relies on

the principle of human exception for solving environmental problems. He consciously contributes to the apocalypse. Atwood, thus, invokes a sense of ethical responsibility in the scientists who are engaged in the development and advancement of science and technology. Science when bereft of serious regulation and guided by the insatiable greed of the people will wreak havoc, which could lead to irreversible damage to our environment. Jimmy's mother reveals the consumerist ideology of the society in an argument with Jimmy's father where she exposes the dark side of the corporate institutions with the sole objective to exploit people and natural resources for profit-making:

...You and your smart partners. Your Colleagues. It's wrong, the whole organization is wrong, it's moral cesspool and you know it."

At NooSkins' prices it is. You hype your wares and take all their money and then they run out of cash, and it's no more treatments for them. They can rot as far as you and your pals are concerned. Don't you remember the way we used to talk, everything we wanted to do? Making life better for people- not just people with money You used to be so... you had ideals, then." (OC 64)

Atwood presents a horrifying yet real picture of the disastrous consequence of overpopulation. She directs our attention and compels us to rethink our social policy, which, if solely guided by humans' unrestricted materialism, would inevitably lead to a dystopian world. As Greg Garrad states, "population will always increase to the point where 'misery and vice' halt it, Malthus claimed" (2004, p. 94). Here "misery and vice" are manifested as famine, plague and war from overpopulation. In *Oryx and Crake* the environment is facing deterioration due to overpopulation. As population puts a strain on the limited resources, the ecosystem invariably collapses, leading to famine and plague. Population has become a malignant tumour, and the only real cure is radical surgery. Since humans were neither willing to curb their population nor restrict their insatiable materialistic demand, Crake for the environment and for humankind performs a radical surgery with the view of slashing the population by spreading a fatal pestilence. Crake comprehends humans as

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" (OC,2003,p-119)

Humanity has reached to a place of no return and has always failed to mend their ways, making "the same cretinous mistakes over and over, trading short-term gain for long-term pain" (p. 243).

Crake's grand plan of bioterrorism and the genetic experimentation to replace the flawed humanity with genetically engineered humanoids called as Crakers, implies the lack of human values and ethics. The contemporary bioengineered test-tube babies, is perhaps the perfect example that humans have already started to walk towards the dystopian world that Atwood has imagined. Atwood underscores the folly in the social order of things, which needs to be addressed without any detail. She further 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 world has given prominence to science and its advancement, where human emotions have taken a backseat. People are guided by materialistic aspirations which have robbed them of moral and human values.

The dystopian world in *Oryx and Crake*, Atwood warns, is potential disastrous end of human race in the near future if humans are not ready to retrace their steps and have ecocentric approach towards the environment. One also finds in her narrative a ray of hope that appeals to the masses; that all is not lost. She gives a picture of the possible future, which can only change with a combined effort of all humanity and ecocentric approach towards the environment.

Conclusion

This paper analyses through an ecocritical approach the anthropocentric attitudes of the people that have led to the collapse of the ecosystem. It also illustrates how humans’ mindless exploitation of natural resources has ruined the natural balance. It also depicts how the anthropocentric activities have encouraged abuse of science and technology. She cautions the humans of an impending disaster, which is not too far if humans fail to mend their ways. She advocates respect toward all beings of the earth, as well as the understanding of the fact that between nature and human beings there is no superiority.

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