

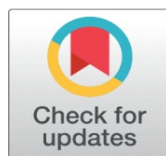
A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF MARGARET ATWOOD'S ORYX AND CRAKE AS "USTOPIA"

Sonia James ¹, Dr. Siby James ², Ms. Sophia James ³

¹ Associate Professor, St. Peter's College, Kolenchery, India

² Associate Professor, Department of English, St. Thomas College, Pala, Kottayam, India

³ Associate Professor, Department of English, Morningstar Home Science College, Angamaly South PO, Ernakulam, India



ABSTRACT

This article is an attempt to analyse human greed for perfection in the light of Margaret Atwood's novel *Oryx and Crake*. Man makes use of his scientific intellect to create creatures to suit his selfish interests through genetic engineering. The poor and powerless are ignored and are even specimens for the clinical trials of the rich. This pursuit leads ultimately to the ruin of human race and civilization.

Keywords: Genetic Engineering, Ustopia, Mind/Body Dualism, Corporate Rule, Humanoids, Mechanization of Nature

Corresponding Author

Sonia James,
soniathekkekkara7@gmail.com

DOI
[10.29121/shodhkosh.v5.i6.2024.2770](https://doi.org/10.29121/shodhkosh.v5.i6.2024.2770)

Funding: This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Copyright: © 2024 The Author(s). This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

With the license CC-BY, authors retain the copyright, allowing anyone to download, reuse, re-print, modify, distribute, and/or copy their contribution. The work must be properly attributed to its author.



1. INTRODUCTION

Margaret Atwood is a reputed Canadian writer who was born in Ottawa in 1939. She is a versatile author who has written novels, poems and essays. She is committed to issues connected to society, environment and politics. Her writings have dwelt deeply with the hierarchy of power in society demonstrating how it leads to the violation of human rights and threat to ecological balance. Gender politics also is a dominant theme in her narratives. The dystopian novel *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) is her most famous novel. *Cat's Eye* (1988), *Alias Grace* (1996), *The Blind Assassin* (2000), *Oryx and Crake* (2003) and *The Testaments* (2019) are her most noted works.

2. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Margaret Atwood coined the term "ustopia" as a combination of utopia and dystopia. She explained in an interview: "I think utopia and dystopia are essentially flip sides of the same form, and that every utopia has a dystopia concealed within it. And every dystopia has got a utopia concealed within it..." (Interview n.p.).

Oryx and Crake is a futuristic dystopian science fiction by Margaret Atwood published in 2003. It is the first of her trilogy which portrays the cataclysmic consequences of the unnatural interventions of the human brain into the natural world and the nature of human beings. The other two are *The Year of the Flood* (2009) and *MaddAddam* (2013). *Oryx and Crake* warns the human beings about the alarming future of the innovations of gene splicing and transgenic research when used unethically.

3. CHARACTERISTICS

The novel *Oryx and Crake* presents the creation of an artificial environment named "the Compound" which shuts the natural world and its ways outside. Genetic engineering is employed for the creation of a special category of creatures or humanoids called the "Crakers" which are bio-engineered post-humans. The novel is set in a future time when human beings and civilization have been destroyed completely by some unforeseen catastrophic pandemic. Jimmy who calls himself as Abominable Snowman is the narrator and the story unfolds through his memory. He is the only surviving human being. A forest near a coastal area is his present dwelling place. He sleeps on a tree on which he has made a platform and procures his supplies from the remains of the once human occupied area. He takes charge of the Crakers who had been the creation of his friend Crake (Glenn). While struggling with his attempts of survival Snowman remembers the past events which led to the present situation. The abuse of advanced genetic research had brought about the catastrophe. Snowman remembers his childhood. Human beings were categorised into two: the rich corporates and the ordinary people and they lived in two entirely separated areas. The corporates lived in the sanitized "compounds" which were surrounded by walls and high security. The ordinary people lived in the "Pleeblands" which were considered as unsanitary by the elite people in the compounds. At a later part in the novel Jimmy passes through the Pleeblands in a bullet-train and has a look at it. He feels that everything there seem extremely boundless, porous, penetrable and wide-open and hence subject to chance. The people in the Compounds believed that "there was no life of the mind" (231). However, Jimmy felt that it was mysterious and exciting. This shows how he has a different attitude to things from that of the Compound dwellers and how he finds human life with its imperfections and unpredictability to be beautiful.

The corporations produced high quality products for the rich customers and ineffective and low-quality ones for the poor. There were no laws to control the corporations. They competed with each other for more profit. Many of the products had serious side - effects which went unnoticed and unpunished. Snowman spent his childhood in various Compounds of this kind. His parents were scientists and moved from one Compound to another as part of their changing jobs. His name was Jimmy then. His father was a brilliant genographer. He worked for Organ Inc Farms. They had engineered "pigoon" which was a hybrid pig creature used to grow human kidneys and human skin cells. The pigoons had been perfected to grow five or six kidneys at a time. "The pigoon organs could be customized, using cells from individual human donors, and the organs were frozen until needed." (27). A variety of hybrid creatures were developed namely rakunks, wolvogs, bobkittens etc. The Organ Inc biolab scientists enjoyed creating these animals. They said that it made them feel like God. His mother Sharon was a microbiologist. She became frustrated with the unethical project and abandoned her job and family. Jimmy's mother said that "it was all artificial, it was just a theme park and you could never bring the old ways back..." (31). She called the organizations as moral cesspools and blamed her husband for "interfering with the building blocks of life" (57). She accused his job that it was immoral and sacrilegious. Later she joined "God's Gardeners" which was an activist group against researches aiming at genetic alterations.

Crake was Jimmy's high school friend. He was not interested in real people, even girls. Extinctathon, an online game, was his obsession. Jimmy too played the games along with him. Crake was very intelligent and he got admission at a reputed university. He became a highly efficient scientist at a flourishing genetics company named Rejooven Esense. There he was the head of two projects: Blyss Pluss Pills and the Paradise Project. The pills had the power to give vitality, virility and protection from sexually transmitted diseases. Crake had a utopian future in his mind. Though apparently a positive product, the Blyss Pills had the effect of permanent contraception on the consumers. However, this effect was not disclosed to anyone. The Paradise Project created a group of childlike creatures who were the prototypes of obedient and beautiful genetically altered humans. *Oryx* was appointed as their teacher. Jimmy was employed by Crake to do the

advertising part of his projects. Crake had highly devious plans which even Oryx and Jimmy could not foresee. A deadly microbe was included in the Blyss Pluss Pills which was capable of initiating a pandemic that would exterminate the human civilization other than the artificially created “superior beings”. When Oryx realized the danger of the project she protested and Crake cut her throat. Witnessing this Jimmy shot Crake to death. Crake and Jimmy had found Oryx on a child pornography website. Crake had appointed her in the Pills project. She was employed in the distribution of the pills also. It is when she came to know about the dangerous consequences that she objected to the project. The lust of unscrupulous researchers for technological progress led to the end of civilization. Crake’s father was employed at Helth Wyzer. He found out that the company distributed vitamin pills which had hostile bio forms inserted so that they were capable of creating new diseases. He could not agree with the unethical project and decided to inform the media about it. So the company executed him and made everyone believe that it was a suicide. Crake knew all of this. Still he believed in the possibility of the creation of a “better” world. He had no genuine love for anyone. Jimmy believes that Crake had a role in the death of his mother and his step father Uncle Pete.

In the opinion of Tawhida Akhter: “Crake produces the eco-friendly Crakers in Oryx and Crake, intending to replace humans with them. This is not only a Frankenstein-sequel means of manipulating nature but also an intense type of bio-centrism: it produces creatures that are readily adjusted to their climate. These new creatures are not only respectful of all life forms but also not inclined to any religion. The negative elements of Crake’s ecotopia are only the other hand of dogmatic, ecocentric radicalism and so it is unsurprising that his egalitarian dream had disastrous consequences”.(239).

Crake had the dream of establishing a utopia. For that the human race with its imperfections had to be erased. Atwood explained Crake’s project in an interview: “Not quite everybody, he leaves Jimmy alive as the shepherd to the new-people, who have had some of what he considered to be our imperfections removed from them. Thus, they have built-in sunblock and insect repellent, which I think would be good things. They don’t need clothing and therefore will never have a cotton industry, or a fashion industry, or any cotton mills. They’re not only vegetarian, they can eat grass and leaves, so they will never have to have agriculture. They will not have to have herd animals, and therefore they will not be territorial. They will not suffer from romantic despair, they will never be rejected romantically because they breed seasonally, like most other mammals. They aren’t partially ‘on’ all the time like us. To that end, in the breeding season, parts of them turn blue, so there’s never any mistake. Because they breed in groups, they’re not worried about paternity” (Interview, Lightspeed). With his creation Crake hoped to bring about an ideal world. The technocratic capitalist world of the Compounds catered to the luxury and well - being of the elites alone. The poor people outside the walls suffered. The health and cosmetic products created through genetic technology were only for the rich. One example is that of Happicuppa which was a genetically modified coffee bean. Its production resulted in the poverty and starvation of the labourers. Crake understood that the health companies were manufacturing illnesses so that they could sell the remedy and make profit. He was troubled by the unjust practices which denied even unadulterated food to the poor people outside the Compounds. The unpredictable weather patterns too added to the imperfect condition of the earth. Crake was discontented with the hegemony of the corporate world. Crake belongs to the privileged group with access to unlimited technology. But he feels that the future is not one to hope about. He tells Jimmy, “Very soon, the demand is going to exceed supply for everyone”.(295). So, he plans to remove the human race with flaws and substitute them with a new race which is perfect. Richard Leakey, a Kenyan paleoanthropologist as well as conservationist who has done extensive research on the connection between man and nature said: “Humans evolved within a world of nature, and an appreciation of, and need for, nature are real and ineradicable components of the human psyche. We risk eroding the human soul if we allow the erosion of the richness of the world of nature around us.” (107). He warns that the culprits who will bring about the sixth mass extinction will be human beings themselves. Atwood’s portrayal shows this to be true.

Atwood brings into foray the danger of applying the dualistic philosophy of Descartes in the relation between nature and human mind. Following the ideas of Descartes human beings consider human nature/ mind as superior to Nature and they look at Nature as their possession. This anthropocentric attitude has resulted in the unscrupulous exploitation of Nature and the deliberate obliteration of any sense of responsibility to it. Instead of coexisting with nature man has dominated and altered nature for his selfish motives. In the novel man has assumed the role of the Creator and has even made separate geographical segments for the rich and the ordinary. Jimmy’s father tells him that the compounds were like the ancient day castles “for keeping you and your buddies nice and safe inside, and for keeping everybody else outside” (32). According to O’Connor “Dualism crucially frames dominant conceptions of humans, nature, and the moral implications of the relations between them” (2). She continues, “Dualism describes the relation of two distinct classes, for example reason and emotion, male and female, mind and body, humanity/civilization and nature. Unlike a simple

dichotomy or duality, the separation is imbalanced such that one class is viewed as dominant or superior (e.g. reason, male, mind, civilization) and the other as lower or inferior (e.g., emotion, female, body, nature)" (5). *Oryx and Crake* has a focus on the devaluation of art also. Crake is a representative of science and reason and Jimmy that of art. The pre-apocalyptic world of the novel shows how art got dominated by science. The corporations were biased towards technological advancement and as a result schools paid more attention to maths and science alone. Crake excelled in both but Jimmy was talented only in language. Though he was good at word play and performance his father was disappointed with him. His expertise in language and arts had no merit in an economically and technologically competing world. Crake joined a famous science institute after graduation whereas Jimmy could join an ordinary humanities academy only. Jimmy's father and Crake had an indifferent attitude towards art. "When any civilization is dust and ashes", Jimmy said, "art is all that's left over. Images, words, music. Imaginative structures. Meaning-human meaning, that is-is defined by them. You have to admit that" (197). But Crake did not accept this argument.

Crake was against natural emotions. For him falling in love was "a hormonally induced delusional state" (227). In addition, he felt it to be humiliating also. "As for sex per se, it lacked both challenge and novelty, and was on the whole a deeply imperfect solution to the problem of inter-generational genetic transfer" (227). He had created the Crakers in such a way that "There'll be the standard quintuplet, four men and the woman in heat. Her condition will be obvious to all from the bright-blue colour of her buttocks and abdomen – a trick of variable pigmentation filched from the baboons, with a contribution from the expandable chromospheres of the octopus" (194). "Since it's only the blue tissues and the pheromones released by it that stimulates the males, there's no more unrequited love these days, no more thwarted lust: no more shadow between the desire and the act." "No more prostitution, no sexual abuse of children, no haggling over the price, no pimps, no sex slaves. No more rape" (194). His mission was to remove all the flaws of the human race. What he considered as flaws are the real human nature. Christina Lake has thus opined: "When the line between virtual and real is erased, no one need to take ethical responsibility for actions performed against people" (121).

At Watson-Crick, Crake's campus, Jimmy saw ChickieNobs ie, chickens without heads, being grown merely as chicken parts. The pigeons of Jimmy's childhood at least did not lack heads. The chickens did not have even eyes or beak. Jimmy found it horrible. He says: "The thing was a nightmare. It was like an animal-protein tuber" (238). He felt that this creation was really going too far, that crossing of some line has happened or the transgression of some boundary has occurred. The ethical dimension of the project is being referred to here. Crake does not obey the laws either of God or nature. When Jimmy returns to the Rejooven Esense Compound he witnesses the power of nature to wipe out the inventions of the human brain and to return to its original condition. Jimmy tells time by the sun; not by the man-made watch. The bob kittens which were designed to substitute the feral cats have regained their wild nature. Also, he finds that the campsite has overgrown whether human civilization disintegrated or not. The anthropomorphic illusion of man as the centre of everything is shattered.

Dona Haraway introduced the concept of cyborg as "a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction" (5). The word is a combination of "cybernetic" and "organism". The cyborg space is a liminal space between humans and animals. The creations of genetic splicing challenge the notions of human civilization. In 1997 Haraway extended the term cyborg to mean genetically modified creatures as well. After the pandemic Jimmy names himself as "Abominable Snowman" and explains his selection of the name this way: "The Abominable Snowman -existing and not existing, flickering at the edges of blizzards, apelike man or manlike ape, stealthy, elusive, known only through rumours and through its backward-pointing footprints" (8). He feels like a cyborg himself. Bello Usman has remarked on the lethal nature of the new bioforms: "These new creatures that were created as a result of gene splicing have inevitably altered the human- nature balance. Due to corporate greed life forms that are in-between human and animal were bioengineered for the sake of man's quest for longevity and immortality" (211).

In an interview in 1972 while talking on survival Atwood said: "People see two alternatives. You can be part of the machine or you can be something that gets run over by it. And I think there has to be a third thing - a third gender space" (n.p.). Crake in the novel is similar to the masculine machine and Jimmy is more or less the feminine victim. Anyone who questions this mission is done away with. Estranged from nature, human beings and their desires become unnatural. The creation of Crakers is an onslaught on the natural instincts of human beings. They are presented to be superior beings, genetically modified, ethereal human hybrids. Genetic materials from plants, sea creatures, baboons, cats etc. are incorporated in the genes. There have been a large number of science fiction based on genetic engineering and its possibilities: both positive and negative. The various ethical dimensions have also become topics of heated debates. It is in this context that *Oryx and Crake* is put in perspective here.

The inordinate desire for controlled ultimately to the ruin of every human creation. Crake had made the Crakers with such genetic traits that they were unable to read and were deprived of any interest in art. They had no desire to worship a superior power and had no fear of death as they were ignorant of it. Though man challenged God and religion and tried to occupy the position of the creator, one finds that the Crakers demand stories about their creator. Crake believed that he had eliminated the G-spot in the brain. "God is a cluster of neurons, he'd maintained" (186). The Crakers ask: "Snowman, tell us please about the deeds of Crake" (117). Jimmy narrates to the Crakers myths about their creator Crake and Oryx and thus establishes a semi-religious cult. In due course he turns out to be the prophet of Crake and Oryx. Snowman presents Oryx as the "Goddess" of animal and plant creation. The Craker mythology slowly assumes the nature of a religion. The Crakers develop an attitude of adulation and reverence towards Crake. The power of language to rewrite the reality and invent a reality through stories is emphasised here. Snowman says: "The Crake they're praising is his fabrication, a fabrication not unmixed with spite: Crake was against the notion of God, or of gods of any kind, and would surely be disgusted by the spectacle of his own gradual deification" (120). Snowman is happy that Crake is proved wrong.

The new breed of enhanced humans with no unique personality traits were created to eliminate sexual competition and violence and to establish a non-hierarchical society where there would be no leaders. Crake believed that leaders would turn to tyrants and will bring about massacres. However, one among the Crakers named Abraham Lincoln shows leadership qualities against Crake's plan. Thus, Crake's endeavour to produce a perfect state of being does not seem to be a fool proof one. Once while talking to each other Crake put forward a speculation about a time when civilization as human beings know it gets destroyed. Jimmy was shocked and defended saying that human beings would somehow or the other rebuild. Crake was convinced that if one generation is eliminated, the end would be perfect. Contrary to his belief evidences to the existence of survivors other than Jimmy are given in the novel. Jimmy sees a column of smoke at a distance. Also, he hears human voices in the abandoned radio. Towards the end of the novel Jimmy finds three people at an encampment. "They are thin, battered-looking. Two men, one brown, one white, a tea-coloured woman.... All three of them look wasted" (431). He is doubtful about whether to kill them or not. The novel ends this way: "Zero hour, Snowman thinks. Time to go" (433). Future is left open. One does not know whether Jimmy allows the human beings to remain on earth or whether he wipes out the human race thus fulfilling Crake's dream of letting only the Crakers remain. The novel, however, makes it clear that Crake's superficial utopian dream has in reality turned to a dystopian one. "The world is reduced to an artificial 'Paradise' amid a vast wasteland and humanity is a group of robot-like humanoids perfect in a plastic way but devoid of human complexity, of human specificity itself" (Banarjee ix).

4. OBSERVATIONS

"If we don't do maintenance work and minor improvements on whatever we actually have, things will go downhill very fast. So of course we should try to make things better, insofar as it lies within our power. But we should probably not try to make things perfect, especially not ourselves, for that path leads to mass graves." (Atwood, *In Other Worlds* 95). In his pursuit of establishing a utopia Crake ended up creating a dystopia. One feels like agreeing with Atwood's concept of "ustopia" that every man-made utopia has dystopian elements and vice-versa.

SCOPE FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Only one text has been selected as a sample for the analysis of the representation of ustopian worlds in fiction. Further studies can be conducted in the field of other genres as well.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We are indebted to the libraries of our institutions St. Thomas College, St. Peter's College and Morning Star Home Science College for the reference books

REFERENCES

- Anderson, Lindsay McCoy. "The Machine,the Victim,and the Third Thing: Navigating the Gender Spectrum in Margaret Atwood's Oryx and Crake and The Year of the Flood". 2012, Print.
- Akhter, Tawhida . Arab World English Journal (AWEJ) Special Issue on Covid 19 Challenges. "COVID-19 Pandemic and Apocalyptic Literature : An Analysis of Margaret Atwood's Oryx and Crake at the time of Coronavirus". ISSN:2229-9327. www.awej.org. April 2021. Arab World English Journal (2021). n.pag. 5 February 2023. Web. DOI:10.24093/AWEJ/COVID.18
- Atwood, Margaret. Oryx and Crake. Great Britain.Virago, 2004. Print.
- Banarjee, Suparna. "Science, gender and History : The Fantastic in Mary Shelley and Margaret Atwood." Cambridge Scholars Publishing. .ProQuest ebrary (2014).p.126. 6 Feb. 2023. Web.
- Gray, C.H.. The Cyborg Handbook .London: Penguin, 1995. Print.
- Haraway,Dona . "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science,Technology,and Socialist-Feminism in the 1980's." DOI: 10.1007/978-1-4020-3803-7_4. The International Handbook of Virtual Learning Environments,Springer.(2006). p. 117-158.20 Jan.2023. Web.
- "Interview: Margaret Atwood by The Geek's Guide to the Galaxy". Dec.2013 (Issue 43).https://www.lightspeedmagazine.com/nonfiction/interview-margaret-atwood/. 24 Jan. 2023. Web.
- Lake,Christina B."What Makes a Crake? The Reign of Technique and the Degradation of Language in Margaret Atwood's Oryx and Crake".Prophets of the Posthuman: American Fiction, Biotechnology, and the Ethics of Personhood.University of Notre Dame Press. p. 109-130, 2014. Print.
- Leahey, Richard. "Does it Matter?". Issues that Matter. Ed. R.Anitha and Jimmy James. Macmillan, 2017. Print.
- O'Connor, SORCHA. (2022). "Environmental Ethics Beyond Dualism: An Argument for Mutuality". Scholars Bank. University of Oregon. (2022). n.pag. 25 Feb.2023. Web. https://scholarsbank.uoregon.edu/xmlui/handle/1794/27393.
- Usman, Bello. "Pigoons and Objectification of Nature in Margaret Atwood's Oryx and Crake". Journal of African Sustainable Development. IJSAD.Vol.20.No.2.June,2020, Print.
- Zhu,Chen Chen. "Cyborg Space in Oryx and Crake". Education Language and Sociology Research.4(1) March 2023. p14. 1 April 2023. Web. DOI:10.22158/elsr.v4n1p14.