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Ecocritical Reading of Margret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*

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Abstract

This study aims to define and debate the ecological crisis as presented in the fictional world of Margret Atwood. By reviewing what is meant by the term of “ecosystem” and many of its related derivatives such as ecocriticism, ecofeminism, and ecophilosophy, Atwood highlights how and why the ecology is deteriorating in her novel *Oryx and Crake*. It tackles and analyzes how science and capitalism have overwhelmed the universe and affect every single issue in human daily life. With reference to Margret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*, the study is expected to analyze the ecological reality by using a literary interdisciplinary approach to ecocriticism for example but not limited, ecofeminism, wilderness, mimetic theory, psychological, sociological, cultural, gender, and mythological approaches through literary devices help understand and interpret the world in new ways such as symbolism, personification, dichotomy. It intends to highlight discussions on many concerns, such as animal abuse, corrupt society, genetic engineering, oppression of women, social inequality, and pollution in a world dominated by technocrats and controlled by capitalistic interests.

Key words: ecology, ecocriticism, ecofeminism, scientific advancement, capitalism, genetic engineering

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The term of "ecosystem" has been developed and many related terms have been derived from it over years in many domains, most notably literature. This is very clear in the novel of *Oryx and Crake* by Margret Atwood. It goes in-depth into the ecology-related issues with regard to the relationship between humans and other creatures on Earth. *Oryx and Crake* investigates the concept of "ecological sadness" within the Anthropocene using the genre of speculative science fiction. In this way, Margret Atwood depicts so many effects of sadness that the majority of people experience when faced with the irreversible destruction that humans have caused to the environment. Through *Oryx and Crake*, Atwood portrays the impacts of today's actions on tomorrow's world and urges people to efficiently manage natural resources for the well-being of both population and the ecology.

Ecology is the study of the interactions between living organisms, such as humans, and their natural surroundings. It aims to comprehend the crucial interconnections that exist between living beings such as plants, animals, and humans. Ecology also explains the advantages of ecosystems and how the resources of the Earth can be used in a way that preserves the environment for future generations. Margret Atwood is well-known for her support of causes of ecology, beside her strong advocacy of feminism issues. In *Oryx and Crake*, Atwood highlights the human contemporary culture which is based on capitalism, instrumentalism, and scientific advancement.

Because of the inappropriate interaction between man and his environment, a great deal of phenomena and changes have been arising and appearing every day on a wide scale. The Earth's climate, geology, and biodiversity were all impacted by these

changes. Massive human interference in ecology over the past century has had catastrophic effects, creating a new ecosystem that is vulnerable to collapse due to natural disasters including earthquakes, volcanoes, hurricanes, floods, tornadoes, and windstorms.

Ecology has become one of the universal concerns that have occupied a prominent place on the discussion roundtable of international organizations in the 21st century. Many conferences and forums are held regularly to discuss ecological concerns. In 1971, ecology became an integral part of the global policy when UNESCO launched Man and Biosphere Programme to improve the overall relationships between people and their environment.

There is no clear origin for the term ecology. At the outset of the 19th century, English economist Thomas Malthus emphasized the tension between the increasing number of population and the Earth's ability to supply the human basic needs. In the mid-19th century, Ernest Haeckel, a German zoologist, philosopher, and physician, first used the term "oekologie" to describe the relationship between the animal and its organization and its inorganic environment. The term is derived from the Greek "oikos", meaning "household" "home" or "place to live" and "-λογία (-logía) "study of". Ecology, according to Haeckel, is the study of how organisms interact with their surroundings. It is the study of how organisms are distributed, and how diverse the environment is. Ecology thus focuses on the organism and its surroundings. Ecology was developed as a study to investigate the state of the natural environment and how it interacts with its surroundings.

In *A Text Book of Environmental Science* (2009), Eugene Odum defines "Ecology" as:

The study of the relations of organisms or groups of organisms to their environment" or "The study of structure and functions of living organisms and their relations with nature. It deals with the web of life that entangles: (a) every species with the lives of other; and (b) each species with its

non-living environment as a whole and each element or factor of that environment. Ecology then is the study of the inter-relationships within ecosystems. (P.9)

Since literature is well-known for reflecting actual real-life issues, it could not have strayed away from the topic of ecology, which pushes writers to represent man as an ecosystem element who exploited nature to serve his own interests. Fiction has been giving proper attention to ecology for many years through what is called ecofiction which is interested in the relationship between nature and literature. In Jim Dwyer's book *Where the Wild Books Are: A Field Guide to Ecofiction* (2010), Mike Vasey defines ecofiction as:

Stories set in fictional landscapes that capture the essence of natural ecosystems (They) can build around human relationships to these ecosystems or leave out humans together. The story itself, however, takes the reader into the natural world and brings it alive. ... Ideally, the landscape and ecosystems-whether fantasy or real- should be as realistic as possible and plot constraints should accord with ecological principles. (3)

Oryx and Crake sheds light on the relationship between humanity and its natural environment and portrays the role of human beings and science in devastating the universe and how they have turned human life into a materialistic one. She portrayed the anxiety that we have reached due to the excessive consumption of ecology. In *Oryx and Crake*, a scientist called Crake believes that the human race should be wiped out, and the current world should be eradicated to restart the universe over. He created a new species of human beings, the children of Crake. His experiments with gene splicing and bioengineering are part of the natural course, "If you could tell they were fake," said Crake, "it was a bad job. These butterflies, they mate, they lay eggs, caterpillars come out."

Since the environmental humanities study is an interdisciplinary field that offers a sound understanding of human-based causes for social, economic, scientific, and environmental changes, the literary works try, through a critical eye, to study how this relationship affects the ecology. Hence, a new literary approach has stemmed up, namely Ecocriticism. O. J. Joycee and Evangeline Manickam in an article, *From Ego-centered to Eco-centered Humanism: A Wilburian Perspective in The Atlantic Literary Review* opines as follows:

Ecocriticism anticipates a response to the need for humanistic understanding with the natural world in an age of environmental destruction. The war-ravaged Twentieth Century catapulted attention to the environment and since then there has been no dearth of theories and movements. Our understanding of nature is at odds with another, and there is no definitive way to judge which one is better... Nature is, therefore, an idea that takes on different meanings in different cultural contexts. (75)

It draws on the impact of capitalism, genetic engineering, commodification, overconsumption, instrumentalism, technological advancement, and what might happen in our future if their bad effects left uncurbed and not eliminated from people's life. Capitalists and corporate compounds excessively consume all the available natural resources for their own interests and instead of developing the renewable resources, they invent technology and industry that destroy the entire ecology. *Oryx and Crake* portrays the myths that corporations create for the population to persuade them to buy and consume their products of all human needs such as myths of sex, beauty, and motherhood and myths about how people should eat, make love, breed, live, and dream. These myths serve the capitalists' interests by maximizing the wealth of corporations. Myths work well in this context because they "make sense of the

inchoate flux of life and provide a sense of purpose and conviction” (Cornwall, Harrison, & Whitehead, 2007, p. 5).

The novel revolves around two main protagonists, namely Crake, the mad scientist who is working on two projects. The first is a pill called BlyssPluss, which is being sold as a "one-time-does-it-all birth control pill for male and female alike, while the second project is a manipulation of human embryos, believing that the human species needs to be prevented from reproduction, thus a better alternative should be offered according to his thought. The second protagonist is Jimmy later known as Snowman after occurring the apocalypse who is looking after the Crakers which Crake invented as an alternative to humanity.

One day, Crake takes Jimmy to a place called Hypothetical Scenario, where new diseases are created. Jimmy discovers that Crake encourages the invention of new viruses for generating more revenue and profits. Crake reveals the motivations of "Health Wyzer"'s operations, saying: "There is a whole secret unit working on nothing else... They put the hostile bioforms into their vitamin pills... Naturally, they develop the antidotes at the same time as they're customizing the bugs, but they hold those in reserve, they practice the economics of scarcity, so they're guaranteed high profits" (Atwood 211). He tells Jimmy that HelthWyzer and similar companies create viruses and spread them into the population to promote the cures because "illness isn't productive. In itself, it generates no commodities and therefore no money. Although it's an excuse for a lot of activity, all it really does moneywise is cause wealth to flow from the sick to the well. From patients to doctors, from clients to cure-peddlers. Money osmosis, you might call it." (Atwood 210).

The medication companies that run the largest compounds are responsible for developing "New and different" diseases designed to allow money flowing "From patients to doctors, from clients to cure-peddlers. Money osmosis, you might call it." (Atwood, 210). The new economy depends on disease, as a disease-free population would not be profitable. As Crake states, "The best

diseases, from a business point of view . . . would be those that cause lingering illnesses. Ideally—that is, for maximum profit—the patient should either get well or die just before all his or her money runs out. It's a fine calculation" (Atwood, 211).

The excessive consumption and manipulation of natural resources in *Oryx and Crake* have created large-scale structures of capitalism, racism, and class categories. In her depictions of globalized societies, Atwood highlights the domination of multinational corporations, whose relentless need for profit motivates them to hire a large number of scientists to develop cutting-edge technologies. These scientists obliterate reality by creating lab-made creatures that are produced by bioengineering. The mass media constantly arouse different desires in people by advertising the products of these scientists, so that more profits for those companies can be obtained and their power bolstered. Everything seems to be available through the means of technology in this illusory and consuming world that is manipulated by scientists and the media. *Oryx and Crake* illustrates how the "simulation" of reality by scientists and media in the service of a world ruled by capitalists might lead to the extinction of humanity.

Instrumentalism is very clear in Atwood's novel through the treatment of the environment, animals, and women. The capitalists use animals, plants, and organisms to better suit their purposes of food, medicine, or scientific research.

Such a host animal could be reaped of its extra kidneys; then rather than being destroyed, it could keep on living and grow more organs, much as a lobster could grow another claw to replace a missing one. That would be less wasteful, as it took a lot of food and care a pigoon. A great deal of investment money had gone into Organic Farms. All of this was explained to Jimmy when he was old enough." (*Oryx and Crake*, 22-23)

Scientific experiments and corporate power often go indistinguishably linked. Atwood, in a way, tries to remind the

readers that the threat of genetic engineering is certainly a possibility, if not now then the near future may witness the catastrophic result of the unethical and unregulated genetic experimentation. The practices of genetic engineering are funded by corporate houses motivated by capitalism. In the pre-pandemic world, experiments in genetics were made with obvious anthropocentric goals combined with the push for profit by the corporate houses.

Atwood focuses on bioengineering as the main feature of the foreseeable evolution in economic, environmental, and scientific terms, offering a wide range of technology applications ranging from pharmaceutical, medical, cosmetic, or agricultural to just commodities for post-human life. Crake's bioengineering experiment, which resulted in the creation of Crakers and the eradication of the "faulty human beings" places him in the literary tradition of other mad scientists such as Victor Frankenstein or Dr. Moreau. However, Atwood's comment is ironic, turning the beasts of this creation into docile herd animals and turning the world from the self-centered hybrid to the supposed green activism to save the world, while casting doubt on the scientist's insanity and rather transferring it on the capitalist society that Crake lives in.

Through *Oryx and Crake*, Atwood lays a great emphasis on the genetic experiments in creating hybrid animals for the service of profit-driven corporations. Atwood's novel reflects the contemporary life through Jimmy's recollections that take us back to his childhood when genetic experiments are conducted to create new types of hybrids. Genetic materials are being sold as data banks of potentially profitable commodities. In a similar way that ChickieNobs take over the market and produce new variations of the genuine chicken using only pieces of the chicken, pigeons construct mankind from the components of humanity that are bred in them. Global companies create new concepts about people and animals and alter the originality of humans and animals. Corporations at the OrganInc and HealthWyzer compounds deal in genetics and biology for profit, exploiting

women, animals, plants, genes, and cells. Everything within the ecosystem is tailored to be commercially consumed and exploited.

For Crake, experimentation with gene splicing and bioengineering is just a regular part of his life. He defies the natural laws and combines the features of several living species. Humans are modifying animals, plants, and creatures to make them more useful for their intended usage such as food, medicine, or research. Genetically modified organisms are becoming commonplace, particularly transgenic plants, which might be used for biopharmaceuticals and are commonly used for food.

Bioengineering and cloning, where gene splicing and ambiguous hybrid creatures are the novel's central focus which prevails in every single aspect of life. All of them are created by elite scientists to meet human needs. The main driver of the economy in *Oryx and Crake* is the development of new species, such as the pigoons (designed to harvest organs), wolvogs (a cross between wolves and dogs, designed for security), or rakunks (a cross between skunk and raccoon, designed as a pet, without the faults of both species), as well as commodities like ChickieNobs (an artificially grown chicken without a brain that continuously produces chicken wings.).

Atwood tries to inform the readers that the unethical and unregulated genetic engineering would impose a real threat to humanity in the foreseeable future unless the capitalists and scientists curb their desire in generating more profits for their own interests. Jimmy's mother records her moral reservation and concerns against the pigoon development project. She criticizes her husband and the corporate where he works, saying:

What you're doing—this pig brain thing. You're interfering with the building blocks of life. It's immoral. It's . . . sacrilegious. (Atwood 57)

Margaret Atwood is an author whose main concern has always been with the female issues. However, in her recent novels, she has set her stories against wider cultural, social, and ecological

levels. She discovers a relationship between women and nature, linking human exploitation of the environment to male aggression toward women. ecofeminism accuses the androcentric dualism of man versus woman.

Ecofeminism philosophy is a term coined by a French writer, Francoise d' Eaubonne in 1974. It seeks critical interconnections between the unjustified domination of women, people of color, children, and the poor and the unjustified domination of nature (Warren, 2000, p.1). Ecofeminism proposes that women must play a key role in the "transition from an unsustainable to a sustainable world" (Mellor, 45). For ecofeminists, the main link between women's oppression and the ecological degradation of our nature by societies all over the globe where they adopt a capitalist lifestyle, using natural resources in unsustainable ways. Similarly, most societies have a historically patriarchal culture that continuously enforces gender and racial hierarchies. Ecofeminists see both of these structures as forms of domination that overlap and build on each other.

Atwood finds a connection between the mistreatment of nature and the oppression of women. The fundamental subject of Atwood's female characters in her books is suffering. As a result, in her most recent novels, she has been embracing the ecofeminism concept. Mary Mellor defines ecofeminism in *Feminism & Ecology* (1997) as:

A movement that sees a connection between the exploitation and degradation of the natural world and the subordination and oppression of women. It emerged in the mid-1970s alongside second-wave feminism and the green movement. Ecofeminism brings together elements of the feminist and green movements, while at the same time offering a challenge to both. It takes from the green movement a concern about the impact of human activities on the non-human world and from feminism the view of humanity as gendered in ways that subordinate, exploit and oppress women." (1)

Sharon, Jimmy's mother is the only one who is furious about the loss of ethical principles such as justice, social as well as class equality, reality, and other moral human values. In a refusal against the corporate actions, Jimmy's mother, the former scientist like her husband rejects the experiments that Organinc Organization in general and her husband in specific conduct, so she quits her job, abandons the corrupt HelthWyzer Compound, and escapes from her spouse as well as her son. Jimmy's mother is frequently depicted as struggling to maintain her mental health because of her husband's lack of support and her increasing depression.

On another level, Oryx, who is Crake's partner and who is the unintentional manipulator in the implementation of Plague realizes that she is manipulated by her boss Crake as she puts the virus in the pills without her knowledge about Crake's plot. Oryx is a South Asian whose parents sold her as a slave in a distant country and she is broadcasted online to Jimmy who becomes obsessed with her. She was forced into sexual affairs by her handler without understanding what she was doing. Jimmy falls in love with her, especially after he had watched her on HottTotts child porn website Jimmy and Crake first see her performing sex, and she in turn avails herself for him. In the meantime, Crake explains that he hired her as a prostitute for him and as a teacher for the Crakers. She tells Jimmy about leaving South Asia, where she had been engaged in blackmail plots, and traveling to the US, where she later found work as a sex slave and prostitute. At the end of the novel, Crake slits her throat. Atwood indirectly creates certain cultural feminist ideologies linkages with the neo-conservative ideas of "motherhood environmentalism", drawing the character of Jimmy's mother, Sharon, to enact the cultural damage that these ideas can inflict on women.

Atwood shows the illness of capitalism penetration in our morals and ethical values and highlights the widespread of drugs and how traders spoil our society and cause lots of ailments. The two friends spend together partthe of their time in unethical

activities. "They'd roll a few joints a few joints and smoke them while watching the executions and the porn" and usually it ended with Crake "who'd decide what to watch and when to stop watching it" (Atwood 86).

Oryx and Crake revolves around the global world that is run by the control of corporate power and the innovations of biotechnology that destructs the whole universe "Juve, Jetspeed Ultra Virus Extraordinary" (Atwood, 341). It sheds light on the consequences of a biotech pandemic made by a mad scientist and eradicates humanity as a race. It takes place in a post-apocalyptic world where the ecology is on the verge of collapse and humans have all vanished and are replaced by a new, biotechnological enhanced race. *Oryx and Crake* is set against humankind's scientific approaches and corporate power and control over the surrounding.

The corporate leadership enforces its power through myths created for the population of *Oryx and Crake* to consume; there are myths of sex, beauty, and motherhood and myths about how people should eat, make love, breed, live, and dream. The purpose of these myths is to increase the wealth of corporations. Myths do this by providing, through media, images of the ideal life that are able to be realized through the consumption of products.

In Atwood's world, everything is available for a price. Globalization has resulted in social inequality. This is clear in the living standards gap between the communities in the corporate compounds where human welfare is established and the communities in the pleeblands whose inhabitants lack every human right such as education, health, wealth, and science. etc. The extreme inequality between the rich and poor in *Oryx and Crake* reflect what we live in the present globalized world. Atwood highlighted the segregation that communities live in. While the upper-class lives in fenced compounds established especially for elite employees of the controlling corporations, the middle-class workers, like dentists, work and live in less secure walled neighborhoods called Modules, while the poor live in the

pleeblands, now slums overwhelmed by gangs, “the addicts, the muggers, the paupers, the crazies” (Oryx, 27).

In *Oryx and Crake*, Atwood leads us through a bioengineered world where a new species called the Crakers, had been invented by Crake. Crake devastated the ecosystem by manipulating genes of organisms. He creates pigoons (a combination of pig and human genes), wolvogs (wolf and dog), snats (snake and rat). The protagonist named Snowman is a survivor from the apocalyptic world and he looks after Crakers. Characteristics of humans, animals, and plants altered by many biotechnical experiments, resulting in creating the hybrid animals. *Oryx and Crake* situates itself in the more recent line of ecocriticism which has attempted to look at how literature can influence ecology in very concrete ways. It warns about ecological devastation that can affect man’s lifestyle and threaten his existence. People live in chaos; they do not understand what they are doing to the sea, the earth, the sky, and the animals. They are killing everything without understanding that they will kill themselves in the end.

The world has warmed, the coastal aquifers turned salty and the northern permafrost melted]...] the drought in the midcontinental plains region went on and on, and the Asian steppes turned to sand dunes, and meat became harder to come by. (Oryx and Crake, 24)

Atwood believes that corporations and capitalists owe a lot of debts to the ecosystem due to their materialistic, economic, and capitalistic purposes that have been overwhelming it. And here, debts are not financial; rather, they are moral, ethical, and religious debts. The maturity date has passed, yet due to human wrongdoing, debts have not been repaid. Every debt has a due date by which the debtor should pay the creditor. This failure has caused a terrible outcry and anger throughout the ecosystem as a result. Due to this debt, there have been unfavorable climatic changes, earthquakes,

lethal viruses, man-made diseases, ecosystem imbalances, and other several hazards.

Atwood emphasizes that because people are a crucial component of the ecosystem, they must be conscious of their actions and make remedies for whatever faults they may have made. She warns the reader that the planet will soon be destroyed if people continue to act recklessly toward nature.

people all over the world are suffering from the spread of a novel virus called the Covid-19 pandemic that originated in China. The Covid-19 outbreak was first reported near the end of 2019. On 30 January 2020, the International Health Regulations Emergency Committee of the WHO declared the virus outbreak worldwide. On 11 March 2020, the WHO declared the Covid -19 outbreak to be a pandemic. The measures to slow the spread of Covid -19 have had a significant impact on the global economy. Governments worldwide imposed travel bans and strict quarantine measures. Businesses are dealing with lost revenue and disrupted supply chains. This is a good example to prove the voice of Atwood in her novel which confirmed that the different risks can only be contained through global collective efforts. She recommends the whole world wake up and leave the ecosystem valid for the future generations.

At the conclusion of *Oryx and Crake*, Jimmy faces not only the real pain in his foot and the possibility of his near-death but also the question of choice, moral responsibility, and the chance of entering again into human relationships. He asks himself many questions without reaching an affirmative answer such as: Will he be able to protect the Crakers? Will he be able to negotiate or kill? And whom? Which story will he choose?

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