

DYSTOPIAN VISION OF THE FUTURE: ECOLOGICAL CRISES IN MARGARET ATWOOD'S ORYX AND CRAKE

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Abstract

The literature of the Anthropocene period has an immense contribution to dystopian or post-apocalyptic narratives of climate changes which would leave human beings in a miserable state in the future. The narratives discuss various perspectives of the ecological imbalances and climate changes which accompany the future. The 21st century is full of dread and fear of impending crises and trauma, biologically, chemically and psychologically quite evident, in this COVID-19 pandemic situation although technologically nations have progressed a lot.

Margaret Atwood's novel Oryx and Crake presents a dystopian future with climactic destruction of the globe. This paper focuses on dystopian vision and attempts to show how humanity by their own designs and evil motives bring drastic environmental consequences upon the ecosystem. This paper attempts to decode the imaginative presentation of the dystopian future by a glance into the psychic traumas of protagonists and the underlying message drawn from the result of such ecological devastation.

Key words: Ecology, dystopia, environmental crises, trauma, future

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I suppose there's no way of putting the mushroom cloud back into that nice shiny uranium sphere.

—Isaac Asimov (1972: 236).

The literature of the Anthropocene period has an immense contribution to dystopian or post-apocalyptic narratives of climate changes which would leave human beings in a miserable state in the future. The narratives discuss various perspectives of the ecological imbalances and climate changes which accompany the future. The 21st century is full of dread and fear of impending crises and trauma, biologically, chemically and psychologically quite evident, in this COVID-19 pandemic situation although technologically nations have progressed a lot. Modern dystopian fiction draws not only on real world, social and political issues but also on pollution, global warming, climate change, health, the economy and technology. Dystopian fiction also projects a society which has lost most of the modern technology and struggles for survival. *Oryx and Crake* is a novel which shows how environmental crisis is rampant and it is the need of the hour to understand it. 'As nature comes to be viewed as nothing more than the material for human domination, we develop an anthropocentric view in which we see ourselves as the measure of all things'. (Mills, 211) However, human species can never obliterate the presence of nonhuman species.

Margaret Atwood's novel *Oryx and Crake* carries this ideology and presents a dystopian future with climactic destruction of the globe. The narrative engages the discourse of the environmental crisis and the dystopian imagination of the readers and points out to a futuristic tale where survival strategies are completely different from the present condition. The central protagonist, Jimmy is engulfed by trauma and loses all hope and the writer hints

at a future where man needs to search and find hope for existence despite all odds of the environment. Jimmy is the visualizer of the future world presented from a period of his early childhood to that of the time of occurrence of the various incidents which bring the world to a strange catastrophe.

Oryx and Crake reflects speculatively much dystopia by giving us a picture of a society based on corruption; high pseudo ideals and consumerism with manipulative power resting in a few. The development and persistent desire to improve human life brings forth terrible realities. Atwood has brought us in touch with the ideals of our own society and our own desires and wants which hamper human existence. Jimmy is a middle range student and is not a genius in any scientific fields like the bio- or math- fields. He is considered a failure as he studies language at Martha Graham University: 'the system has filed him among the rejects and what he was studying was considered – at the decision making levels of real power – an archaic waste of time.' (229)

However, his father is considered great in the genetic field, working with specialization of pigeons, in order to make them produce five to six kidneys for human transplantation. He was highly valued in the society as he gets a promotion by a branch of the company he works for NooSkins, a funny name signifying either No Skins, or New Skins. The importance designated to his father socially indicates the way in which the entire system works. People were recognized by their skills in the scientific field like the genetic field. The family now moved into a compound, called the OrganInc Compound, the name of the company in which Jimmy's father worked. The house they offered was better than the earlier ones and Jimmy was shifted to a school with a better level. The social hierarchy was completely demarcated in this dystopian society. Atwood projected the dystopian tradition of spatial organization with clear separations of social stature. This novel depicts the way the world would supposedly change in future requiring an urgent propaganda for a change in direction of human thinking.

In *Oryx and Crake*, the society too had fixed such tight and rigid boundaries for people that they had no choice to deflect and overcome the boundaries. Strict social differentiation made the people to adjust to different life styles, security, wealth and educational favours.

Such ordered societies of hierarchy can never keep communities together. People were segregated to different Modules and Compounds where each level had citizens coming from different professions/fields. The pleeblands are designated as lawless ones in the society who reside in a place where all kinds of vices are promoted and drugs are available. The people from the Modules or Compounds are sometimes allowed to visit and enjoy themselves with commodities from such places. The distinction of levels could easily be found not in just external boundaries but the system had created a definite, irremovable inequality which foreshadows the impending environmental crisis. Murray Bookchin presents the same ideology of the families residing in the Compounds ‘The very notion of the domination of nature by man stems from the very real domination of human by human’ (44) and that the domination of nature came after the domination of human by human and is entirely secondary to it. All forms of differentiation should be obliterated to create a ‘truly ecological society.’ (Bookchin 44)

Jimmy watches the world as a child and an adult, the different resources available on television and websites without ever being affected by the inequalities present in his life style, his society and his country. Dystopian literature aims at making people awaken to the flaws and vices to which many progressive societies have adapted to, and thereby involving everyone in the world to question the society in which they live and the direction in which they are travelling. Bosco points that such literature “impels the reader to act, to direct the future by transforming the there and now” (158).

The friendship and the life of Jimmy and Crake afterschool highlight the dystopian future awaiting all human lives. The society comprising of all age groups have become exposed to violent and pornographic contents on the internet or on TV without being moved: ‘When they weren’t playing games they’d surf the Net - drop in on old favourites, see what was new...because the people on it tried to pretend there was nothing unusual going on and studiously avoided at one another’s jujubes’. (94) Boys played games like: Extinctathon, Three Dimensional Waco, Kwiktime Osama etc, relating to war, destruction and planning. The developed society of Jimmy and Crake doesn’t foresee the bleak future. Nature surely calls in for a change in such a society.

Jimmy, an antihero figure has adapted and adjusted to this environment which is based on utopian model of heavy scientific progress. However, the changes which crop up ensure that such progress effects the environment and human beings in the long run. There exist in the Compounds, no people to people relationships and there is distrust among friends and lovers. Genetic innovations and progress of science is seen through the character of Crake. Crake resorts to artificial means of changing life forms unmoved to any ecological concerns. Ecological threats seem to make way as everything the genetic scientists create turns rebellious and they had to guard themselves from being attacked. Crake doesn't have faith in nature and God. He desired to wipe out the existing civilization which had flaws and failures. His logical thinking found the solution of removing the diseased parts. According to him the world was full of 'plagues, more famines, more floods, more insect or microbe or small-mammal outbreaks, more droughts, more chickenshit boysoldier wars in distant countries.' (298) Crake wished for inventing reformed creatures and pills. Crake created Blyss-Pluss pill to overturn nature by producing artificial rejuvenation in aged people.

There is too much of science involving the life of human beings. Pigoon cells are used to replace human cells and genetic research is carried out for rejuvenated wrinkle free and blemish free skin. Medicine is considered for developing 'cosmetic creams, workout equipment' even 'pills' to make a person look 'fatter, thinner, hairier, balder, whiter, browner, blacker, yellower, sexier and happier.' (291) The companies play upon people's desires and make profits and thereby control their living. Consumerism and commodification have altered the lives of the people in the society and genetic game allows man to feel like God. The progress of a country for the better can never be made without the contribution to a greater good of all sections of the society and also to the environment around us.

Human beings with their selfish, evil motives have lost concern for the environment. The government offered no relief to this savage form of capitalism of the corporate giants relying on profit motives endangering the lives of animals and species in Nature. Crake, Jimmy's friend wishes to create new species and wishes to erase mankind by genetic

research. Jimmy (renamed as Snowman) realizes the disastrous effect the companies had led to 'the weather', 'become so strange' which can 'no longer be predicted – too much rain or not enough, too much wind, too much heat and the crops ever suffering.'(143) Such weather depicts alarming eco disasters and crises which are highly threatening to both the human and the nonhuman. Technocrats and corporate giants like the pharma companies have changed the patterns of Nature which was once pure and primitive. Carolyn Merchant had also depicted the same effect of green house: 'With the green-house effect, winters would become stormier, summer hotter and drier...hurricanes would become more powerful as the oceans warm.' (1992: 19)

Jimmy is seen, after an apocalypse. caring about the Crakers, the human-like creatures created by Crake. Jimmy is seen recollecting his entire lifetime, being left alone with them. Jimmy renamed as Snowman, starts to explain abstract ideas to the Crakers by inventing myths and legends. Sometimes, he realizes that their naivety and trust allows him to make them believe him: "Now even when he's caught in a minor contradiction he can make it stick, because these people trust him (111).

The corporations have taken total hold of the needs of the people providing solutions. Scientists have transcended the human species by bringing in new species erasing all the failures and flaws present in humans and animals. So, they tend to dislocate the Natural laws. Reproduction, love and courtship are technical and have no real emotions or feelings.

Jimmy is the one who undergoes the trauma of the apocalypse and is found recollecting all the things he had done as a human being. The purgation of Jimmy is grounded in reality as he makes references to Cuba, Mexico and Middle East countries, to San Francisco etc. There is no significant time period indicated as to when the apocalypse occurred but there is a clear assumption that the future is quite close as Jimmy indicates. The volcano in the Canary islands and the shrinking of Lake Okeechabee, the coastal cities wiped off by huge tidal waves etc are reminiscent of our contemporary concerns of Nature being affected by the works of mankind. The report which Jimmy comes across states: 'as time went on and the coastal aquifers turned salty and the northern permafrost melted ... and the Asian steppes turned to sand dunes, and meat became harder to come by, some

people had their doubts.’ (27) This report clearly states the uncertain future of the planet earth. The animals have become extinct and Jimmy survives the dystopian future. The novel depicts a world devastated completely by greedy, profit oriented organizations which brought forth for the humanity a biotechnological war. This can be compared with the modern COVID-19 situation where corporations in the novel competed for the control of dangerous, newly created organisms.

Nature when exploited by artificially created bioforms through commercial ideologies by huge corporations would naturally threaten the very survival and extinction of mankind. The genetic engineering corporate houses in the novel show the destruction of everything that is pure and natural in the environment. Health Wyzer, a genetic engineering company develops bacteria and sells drugs to cure it by double dealing. Medicines are created by the company by biopiracy; contaminating the people first and then offering cures to the bacteria created artificially.

The future as represented by Atwood showcases the fraudulent planning of scientists who endanger the lives of people on a large scale. Crake is such a fraudulent scientist who tells Jimmy about the work of Health Wyzer which creates hostile bioforms into their vitamin pills: ‘They have a really elegant delivery system – they imbed a virus inside a carrier bacterium, E coli splice, doesn’t get digested, bursts into the pylorus, and bingo ... once you’ve got a hostile bioform started in plebe population.’ (256) Such steps for profit would alter the existence of natural species resulting in disturbing ecocatastrophes.

Jimmy as Snowman voices out the concerns of the impending environmental apocalypse waking up to a landscape polluted by industrial wastes: “On the eastern horizon there’s a grayish haze lit now with a rosy, deadly glow... the distant ocean grinding against the ersatz reefs of rusted car parts and jumbled bricks and assorted rubble sounds almost like holiday traffic” (5). Jimmy watches and reflects upon the images of ruin, decay and pollution in the area. Snowman understands the interconnectedness of earth and human life. He could forge through the reality after the apocalypse that man and nature are always interdependent. The exploitation and disfiguring of natural forms with artificial life forms led to the ecological chaos and crisis. Profit and business firms have domination and money

to do anything; to substitute anything in nature. However, this brings drastic negative impact on human beings towards the end.

The draining of natural resources is revealed in the production of coffee beans called Happicuppa: 'they are nuking the cloud forests to plant this stuff.' (218) portraying human abuse of nature. According to Catherine Roach, 'we are all closely tied to the environment, our very existence derives from and depends on a healthy environment, as our existence once depended on a mother – Mother Nature.' (53) Man lost veneration of the natural world. Life has become largely mechanical with scientific discoveries and inventions. The new world is substituted by an artificial order to the age-old ecological, spiritual natural order. Nature has been victimized by biological reduction in the utopian pursuit of progress and development. The direction man has carved for the future seems to be dystopian as it encompasses exploitation of Nature and natural forms along with scientific transformation leading to ecological crisis. Crake, in the words of Bouson 'used science not to conquer the natural world but to control nature.' (2004: 141). Crake's Paradise project is funny in its name itself as he played dice with the future of human beings suggesting alternative species of restoration. It hence, turns out to be a disaster not like the Paradise of nature which fills and feeds all with its bounty.

Conclusion

Jimmy's remembers the gene splicing of plants and animals had turned nature topsy turvy in the aftermath, alone. Jimmy acts a votary of truth and cautions the future generations not to be attracted to acceptance of anything created by science. Jimmy couldn't accept the animals newly created such as the rakunks, pigeons, wolvogs etc. wondering 'if some line has been crossed, some boundary transgressed?' (250) Oryx and Crate provides an exploration of the practices of physical domination and oppression meted out to the poor and creating a void between relationships among people. Jimmy as Snowman reinstates the responsibility of human beings towards maintaining a safe environment along with progress. He serves as a mouthpiece, to the entire humanity, forsaking the ecological crisis in the 21st century with his questions: 'How much is too much, how far is too far?' (250) Human beings should reengineer themselves not only towards mechanical progress but

spiritual progress too, to ensure the survival of man and other species in the natural ecosystem. Man and nature are inseparable parts of the ecosystem and hence should be aware of the consumerist, evil motives which result in drastic environmental consequences on the ecosystem. Jimmy's dilemma is in fact, the dilemma of everyman connoting, the underlying message of a great ecological crisis in the future which can be avoided only by redesigning our consumerist behavior, minimizing reliance on artificial products and supporting a sustainable bio-ecosystem.

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