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Capitalist technoscience and conditioned collapse: An ethical study of *Oryx and Crake*

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ABSTRACT

The advent of innovation and renovation has long shaped the narrative of human survival. In our workaday existence, the influence of science is both a perquisite and prodigious. In *Oryx and Crake*, Margaret Atwood constructs a speculative future, a civilisation teetering on the precipice of engineered catastrophe. The novel portrays a society fractured by excessive scientific intervention and an insatiable technological fervour, wherein humanity, with unsettling complacency, embraces its own undoing. Atwood envisions the extinction of *Homo sapiens* and the unsettling emergence of bioengineered humanoid successors. Misguided ambitions and fragile consciousness intertwine, creating a tableau of misfortune. At the heart of this disquiet lies a confluence of capitalist motivated experimentation and deeply-rooted human suffering. This research interrogates the trajectory of technological advancement as presaged by Atwood. It aims to analyse how science, under capitalism, becomes a tool of ruin rather than redemption, and how advancements may herald not salvation but oblivion. Simultaneously, it delves into the flux of human psychology, revealing a world, both contemporary and imagined, riven by anomaly, adversity, and existential dread.

Keywords: *Science, technology, dystopia, adversity, psychology, capitalism.*

Introduction

The twenty-first century speaks volumes about the balance between human existence and technological sustenance. With millennials, Gen Z, and Gen Alpha, the human connection with technology and the extent to which people give in, marks the contemporary global landscape. Amidst uncountable competition, innovation, and consumption, humanity navigates an increasingly Darwinian mode of survival, adhering to the casual phrase, the survival of the fittest. Rather than engaging in the simple dialectic discussion about science as either boon or bane, a more connotative analysis measures the real depth. Literature favours such a connotative study that offers a reflection beyond the reality, the mirage, the perceptions and the assumptions. "Generations have trod, have trod, have trod", says G. M. Hopkins in his "God's Grandeur". As generations evolve with the evolutions, revolutions, hindrances and opportunities, the twenty-first century has witnessed the ever-peak phase of scientific progress. Predicting the future by living in 2025 is quite an endeavour of curiosity, while also conferring a latent anxiety.

Oryx and Crake presents a world where science becomes an antagonist and humanoids become the protagonists. The existential crisis that arises from the human dependence on the scientific techno world leads to the apocalypse in the novel. Science and technology ease human survival through comfort and access. When they go beyond comfort, they risk becoming addicted, which causes peril. This is similar to what has been described as brain rot. Humans' addiction to science and technology, the changes and comforts, even at the cost of losing the real, the natural and the self, accounts for the dystopianism in the novel. The environmental and ecological collapse depicted in the novel unfolds as a tragic catch-22, an insoluble predicament birthed by unchecked scientific ambition and horrendous technological longing. Science, being the base for human reproduction and survival, possesses the ability to swipe sides. Being a villain when dealt wrong, science and experiments have the calibre to reframe and recalibrate any rational paradigm within human society. This theme has been dealt with by Atwood in *Oryx and Crake*. Being a speculative fiction, the novel remains a prime production in dystopian literature. In the words of Katherine V. Snyder, "Dystopian speculative fiction takes what already exists and makes an imaginative leap into the future, following current cultural, political, or scientific developments to their potentially devastating conclusions. In Atwood's words, speculative fictions explore 'the consequences of new and proposed technologies in graphic ways by showing them as operational,' which is something that novels as usually defined cannot do" (Synder 470). In *Oryx and Crake*, Margaret Atwood explores how scientific advancement, particularly within the spheres of family, relationships, business and economy, becomes a double-edged instrument of progress and peril. The research explores how the novel stresses upon ethical usage of science and technology and why the ethics in usage is a bone of contention.

Technological Eden

The novel features a community divided into three - Pleeblands, Modules and Compounds. Pleeblands were where the people with a lower economy survive. Compounds were where elite people reside and Modules were where the population who fill the middle of the economic hierarchy live. The elite ones from Compounds, primarily scientists, with the help of those from Modules, used Pleeblands as their research ground for scientific experimentation. More than experimentation, basically there was a steady flow of money from Pleeblands and Modules into Compounds and so the rich became richer while the poor became poorer. Thus, the community, as a whole, remained a field of capitalist opportunism and corporate manipulation. In addition to providing technologies, entertainment, food, and other essentials, those in Compounds are equally dedicated to spreading new diseases and their necessary medicines. They targeted the population in Pleeblands, only to perpetuate a cyclical economy of sickness and cure. Science, in the projected world, is no longer just a benefactor but a catalyst for market expansion. Beyond the physical control, corporations also took psychological control of the remaining zones through media. In the commodified community, entertainment devolves into voyeurism. It was etched with sexual and violent content, all uncensored and available in excess. Corporates, being controllers of media, nourish a culture steeped in digital gaming. They can use this platform to collect personal data, at the same time manipulating the person playing the game at the best.

The cumulative effect is one of imminent collapse. All this has been recalled and reinterpreted through Jimmy in a post-apocalyptic world. The narrative charts the metamorphosis of Jimmy into Snowman. "My name is Snowman", said Jimmy, to "forget the past, the distant past, the immediate past, the past in any form" (Atwood 348). He is the only human caught between ecological ruin and personal disillusionment in the post-apocalyptic world. He has been vaccinated with the appropriate dosage enough to withstand the apocalypse by the one who orchestrated the apocalypse, Crake. Crake is a best friend from Compounds to Jimmy, a lover and boss to Jimmy's affair woman named Oryx and a powerful intellectual scientist to the Compounds. The reason behind Crake vaccinating Jimmy is only to elevate Jimmy to a headman of Crake's invention, the humanoid species. Now everyone has been wiped out because of the global pandemic caused by Crake through a virus in a pill for sexual gratification. Even Crake killed Oryx and in rage, was shot by Jimmy. Being the circumstances, Jimmy ends up all alone in the post-apocalyptic world with the humanoid creatures, whom he named the Crakers. As Jimmy, he bears witness to an intoxicated uncontrollable society and as Snowman, he survives amidst its consequences, the desolation. All he realises is that despite technology's original aim to serve human welfare, its entanglement with capitalism, favouritism, and unchecked addiction transforms human life into a grim parody of itself.

While scientific discovery is seen as a beacon of enlightenment and human advancement, *Oryx and Crake* shows the antithesis. The flawed vision of everyone - across the Compounds, Modules, and Pleeblands - turned science into a bringer of damnation, not salvation (Pratha 66). In Atwood's dystopia, the extinction of the human species is not the result of fate or natural disaster. It is a meticulously planned cataclysm by Crake. The annihilation of humanity and the rise of the humanoid kingdom constitute a thoroughly man-made apocalypse. The novel portrays that the pursuit of utopia, when yoked to unchecked ambition and irrational attitude, readily descends into a dystopian abyss. Jimmy's world, steeped in materialism and self-interest, stands in stark contrast to the barren, despairing landscape inhabited by Snowman. One was driven by excess while the other bore its consequences.

In *Oryx and Crake*, Atwood unveils a veiled totalitarianism, as there is no force through tyranny, but through the omnipresence and omnipotence of science and technology. As the populace gradually realised that science could alter the fabric of daily life, they sought a utopian survival. The utopianism they desired took the shape of an adamant lust for miracles and instant solutions to complex human woes. In this mirage, the population from Pleeblands forgot that the separation is more than spatial. They are ideological products of the Compounders' progress. The inhabitants of the Pleeblands are viewed as mere links in the Compounders' life cycle, valued solely for their exploitation to maintain dominance. With amusing technology and media, the basics became a question in the lives of those surviving in Pleeblands. They did not bother about healthcare or necessities, rather they have bloated themselves with amusing technology and endless fun. They were ready to die for the media and pleasure. They were ready to get exploited to live their curiosity. They were made to survive for those in Compounds rather than for themselves. Thus, humanity itself becomes obsolete, supplanted by hierarchy, data, and design.

The catastrophe depicted is not just physical, ecological or scientific but essentially and inherently psychological. Crake, traumatised by the overwhelming dosage and effect of science in his society, seeks to cleanse the world through it. All he wanted was "the elimination of one generation", and so the planet could be restored to peace (Atwood 223). Being a corporate member, he used corporate capitalism to drive his agenda of spreading the virus, thereby eroding all ethical restraint. As planned and executed, the virus became a pandemic; humanity became annihilated; science became transfigured. Atwood suggests that science, neutral by nature, broods both beauty and destruction. The hands that use the tool decide the purpose and Crake won in that. Jimmy, transformed into Snowman, tries to restore himself from the pandemic rage, climate collapse, and the leftovers of contaminated survival. He stood as a passive witness for incidents happening from beginning to end. Also, he remained a man of isolation, isolated in death and isolated in survival after the catastrophe.

Structures and Systems of Collapse: Behind the Scene

In *Oryx and Crake*, the psychological manipulation starts from what the population saw and consumed. Brutal sex and violence in the media became the everyday casual content to consume, without any age or relevant restrictions. Class discrimination, animal abuse, child pornography, live surgeries and suicide were not only commonplace but consumed with a chilling indifference. Atwood sketched a society whose collective unconscious drifted willingly toward cruelty, finding pleasure in perversion. This degradation was not accidental and the individuals could not be blamed alone. It was institutional that the corporates designed the fabric of life for everyone, writing the motive and choosing the direction of execution. As feminism explained by Margaret

Atwood in her essay, “*The Handmaid’s Tale* and *Oryx and Crake* ‘In Context’”, women have appeared in the popular dystopian genres as “sexless automations or rebels who defied the sex rules of the regime” (p.517). Atwood inherited it into this technological dystopia. Though collective manipulation has been performed, the gendered difference in exploitation caused women to suffer more. They were objectified and commodified for the collective drive of pleasure and perversion. Sex and violence in the media featured women and girls more, hinting at the Faustian bargain of humanity for pleasure. Oryx, too, was a figure of quiet tragedy, doubly subjugated: first, as a woman commodified through pornography; second, as an unwitting agent of Crake’s biotechnological designs. She endures, not by rebellion, but by complicity. She had her survival forged in silence and surrender.

Jimmy was once a child in a dysfunctional family with his corporate-minded father and his benevolent humanitarian mother. Along with the world that affected him, his parents had a role to add up. The father was focused on corporate profits while the mother escaped due to paranoia as hinted by her in the letter to Jimmy. As a teen, he started actively consuming media and features available to his access. He had a cold war with Crake, though most of the time he remained wondering and admiring Crake for his intelligence and his navigation in the society. Crake was cared for by his mother while his father was executed for reasons of treason. As they became adults, Crake was able to secure a place in Compounds among the best corporates and he made Jimmy join under him for the job. Through Crake, Jimmy understood the dynamics of politics as orchestrated by corporations. He also got exposed to the projects undertaken by Crake and the attitude of Crake to the world. Crake never seemed to boast about his learned self or his elite lifestyle. Rather, he found a way to use it at his best with the raw emotions that he was experiencing (Lasch 150). Though Jimmy could care less for what Crake did and said, it resulted in utter annihilation as planned. Humanity became extinguished. In the place of humans, rose the Crakers. The Crakers, products of bioengineering, spliced from plant and animal DNA, were designed by Crake to replace mankind on this planet. Undertaken as a project, they were trained by Oryx. Crakers were meant to embody innocence and harmony after Crake’s cold architecture of destruction.

Atwood implies that the genesis of this collapse lay in the toxic brew of games, media, consumerism, and unchecked scientific ambition. In *Oryx and Crake*, media and entertainment functioned less as diversions and more as instruments of desensitization. News prioritized attraction and pleasure over information, while video games fostered a brutalized psychology rather than mere amusement. All digital consumption platforms normalized aggression and turned life itself into a simulated battlefield. The human desire for vitality, beauty, youth, and sexual virility, was likewise exploited. Medical corporations peddled pills promising eternal wellness. Drugs were designed to treat the desire for flesh and beauty. Medicine became a breeder for new diseases, which in turn required new cures. This cycle persisted as a Sisyphean plight till the apocalypse.

The life cycle as designed by the corporations is like a whirlwind to break as it works on economy, culture and power dynamics. If a person decided to avenge the corporate motives, the person got avenged by the political forces behind the corporations. The very example is Jimmy’s mother and Crake’s father. They chose execution rather than to submit to the system that rifts them apart inhumanely. As ruled upon bourgeois and proletarian principles, everything was commodified and the populace had no viable alternative but to submit to the logic of capitalism (Hall). Atwood’s vision unfolded in binaries where subjective actants, the individuals with agency, were eclipsed by oppressive actants, the forces of capital and technology. The latter dominated and defined reality.

Technology ceased to be a tool. It became a catalyst for the corporations and an addiction for the working class. It has been systematically used by the elite while it has been used aimlessly and randomly in excess by the others. Corporates worked with algorithms to sustain their status while others became the subjects of experiments aiding the corporates. Together, they framed a culture characterized by a planned economic output, unwavering power, unshaken capitalism, and brutal sexual pleasure and voyeurism. All products and features within this culture favored survival, which is to submit to the corporations.

The narrative intersects chillingly with contemporary technological trends. Twenty-first-century innovations such as emotionally responsive robots and digital tools are of great aid. But their application, usage and dependence mark whether the innovation is of great aid or great peril. Though humans in this setting are inseparable from science, the real question is whether science, technology, and innovation will eventually supplant human roles. This took another depiction in Ian McEwan’s *Machines Like Me* where humans are replaced by scientific bots for relationship and lovemaking. In the context of *Oryx and Crake*, science becomes not an instrument of enlightenment, but a servant to excess, a means of comfort rather than a compass of conscience.

When elements like Plutonium and Uranium were first discovered, scientists would not have had an inimical idea to cause ultimate destruction. It was because of the intrusion of capitalism and its eerie handmaid, which is communism, that the whole calamity happened (European Research Council). Atwood conducts a layered psychological inquiry throughout *Oryx and Crake*, as she puts the work as “a combination antigravity ray and marshmallow toaster” in her essay “*The Handmaid’s Tale* and *Oryx and Crake*: ‘In Context’” (p.517). She maps the internal fractures wrought by external innovation. Jimmy’s father, a scientist, embodies the cold detachment of exploiting flora and fauna in pursuit of experimental glory. In stark contrast, Jimmy’s mother represents the moral conscience recoiling from this clinical cruelty. Her psychological unravelling reflects a deeper horror. She speaks the truth about her society proving how inhumanely it heralds the scientific atrocities against the innocent. Crake, the architect of the novel’s dystopia, identifies modern afflictions, overpopulation, irrational horrendous addiction and ecological collapse caused by humans from the beginning to the end. He did not see the differences between class or gender but considered every human being as responsible for polluted survival. He responded with radical, destructive remedies. His vision was not curative but eugenic. Jimmy, by contrast, is the passive chronicler. He perceives these horrors with a bemusement. Oryx, ever marginalised, endures psychological subjugation. She remains in survival mode provided the circumstances. She turned a stone with empathy and sympathy, open only to play the algorithms in the corporate-ruled world.

Atwood also interrogates contemporary bioengineering. The novel explores genetic modification, hybridisation, and cross-species experimentation as more than scientific possibilities. In *Oryx and Crake*, genetically engineered creations like Pigoons, meat grown without an animal form like ChickieNobs, and other novel species, offer solutions, yet simultaneously induce a psychological conflict. This arises from the ethical dilemmas they present such as

the exploitation of animals for human self-interest and the proliferation of inorganic, lab-engineered food. The novel's survivors, trapped within a corporate-controlled world, face similar internal struggles, unable to escape their predicament or voice their needs. Reading *Oryx and Crake* makes readers confront these very ethical questions, particularly as elements of such a future feel increasingly close to their own reality.

Conclusion: Ethical Reckonings

Dystopianism in *Oryx and Crake* is not confined to the aftermath of catastrophe, rather it pervades both the pre-apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic landscapes. The text shows the other side of the coin where high modernism marks "the destruction of the fabric of the traditional city and its older neighbourhood culture; while the prophetic elitism and authoritarianism of the modern movement are remorselessly denounced in the imperious gesture of the charismatic Master" (Jameson 54). In the pre-catastrophic world, Atwood warns of the perils embedded in present-day science, innovation, and unchecked technological progress. In the post-apocalyptic world, she renders a vision of devastation, ecological, existential, and irreversible. Though the era preceding the collapse is remarkable with the invention, its abundance poses an equally intensified conflict. The pathogens in Atwood's novel are not accidents of nature but instruments of human design which adapt, mutate, and resist eradication. Atwood's prophetic gaze anticipates a theatre of war between creator and creation. She exposes the camouflaging nature of science as the one that evolves, almost mockingly, into something stronger, more resilient, and more cunning. As rightly described by Manuel J. Smith, recalling Socrates in his 1974 book *When I Say No, I Feel Guilty*, "True wisdom comes to each of us when we realise how little we understand about life, ourselves, and the world around us" (p.65). In the end, Atwood does not merely forecast the apocalypse. She reminds the human population of the ignorance and the ruin that ignorance might yet awaken. This novel remains a warning, an eye to the future, a call for rational thinking, a call to voice out and a call to read and reflect on the contemporary world and its features. The research findings demonstrate that the cause for extinction is not solely macro-level or individualistic, to blame Crake alone. Every individual's action and reaction matter as they add up to the broad-scale reflection. Upon the psychological analysis of the key characters, every personal thought and reflection carries an underestimated potential to shape the destiny of those beyond oneself. It is the cascading effect that alters the broader world.

This study has illuminated *Oryx and Crake* not merely as a work of dystopian fiction, but as a trenchant meditation on the modern psyche's capitulation to the seductions of scientific progress. Atwood's vision is a mirror held up to the contemporary world, a world where capitalism courts science and ethics are supplanted by enterprise. The analysis reveals that science, when co-opted by capitalist ambition, becomes an instrument of ecological devastation and species extinction. Technological advancements are a visible threat when nurtured not for needs, but for market. The psychological toll in *Oryx and Crake* is a combination of trauma, addiction, and emotional desensitisation that haunts all the landscapes of the novel. Ultimately, Atwood offers not simply a narrative of destruction, but a critique of docility. The novel exposes the passive acquiescence to systems of control, casting scientific authority as a new, insidious form of totalitarianism. In doing so, *Oryx and Crake* become a work of prophetic urgency, an elegy for a world too enthralled by its own ingenuity to heed the cost of its undoing.

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