

## **Bioethical Dilemmas and Societal Dystopia: Exploring Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake***

**Dr. Vinaya Bhaskaran**

Assistant Professor

PG Department of English

NSS College, Manjeri, Malappuram, Kerala

### **Abstract**

As humanity stand at the precipice of reshaping life itself, a critical examination of the moral implications of scientific progress becomes paramount. By fostering a dialogue between science, ethics, and the public, bioethics empowers us to navigate this complex landscape and ensure a future where scientific progress aligns with our moral values. Margaret Atwood's dystopian novel, *Oryx and Crake*, paints a portrait of a future ravaged by unchecked scientific ambition and corporate greed. This paper delves into the complex bioethical dilemmas exposed in the narrative. It examines issues such as genetic engineering, the ethics of human experimentation, and the role of corporations in shaping scientific progress. By drawing upon prominent bioethical theories – consequentialism, deontology, and virtue ethics – the paper analyses how Atwood's world functions as a cautionary tale.

**Keywords:** Bioethics, genetic engineering, dystopia, consequentialism, deontology, virtue ethics

As scientific advancements accelerate, particularly in fields like gene editing and artificial intelligence, contemporary literature increasingly serves as a potent platform for exploring the ethical complexities of these breakthroughs. This burgeoning trend reflects a growing societal unease with the potential ramifications of unchecked scientific progress. Bioethics, the interdisciplinary field that examines the moral implications of these advancements, finds fertile ground within contemporary literature. Authors utilize fictional narratives to challenge assumptions, raise awareness of ethical dilemmas, and foster critical conversations about the future we want to create. By exploring the human cost of scientific ambition and prompting readers to consider the potential consequences of blurring ethical boundaries, contemporary literature serves as a crucial bridge between the scientific and humanistic realms, urging us to engage in a proactive dialogue about the ethical frameworks that should guide our technological future.

Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* is a seminal work of cli-fi literature that imagines a future world on the brink of environmental collapse. Set in a not-too-distant future where

climate change has wrought havoc on the planet, the novel explores the intersection of genetic engineering, corporate power, and ecological devastation. Atwood's depiction of ecological themes resonates deeply with contemporary environmental concerns. Climate change, deforestation, and the extinction of species are pressing issues that demand immediate attention. The novel serves as a powerful reminder that our actions have consequences, and the future of the planet, and the species that inhabit it, rests on our ability to foster a more sustainable and respectful relationship with the natural world.

Through the lens of the protagonist, Snowman, Atwood paints a vivid picture of a world transformed by human hubris and technological innovation gone awry. Set in a world dominated by powerful corporations, the novel explores the ethical quagmires arising from the intersection of science, technology, and society. Through the interwoven narratives of Snowman (formerly Jimmy) and Crake, a brilliant but morally ambiguous scientist, Atwood compels readers to wrestle with the potential consequences of "playing God with nature" (242).

Snowman becomes a compelling symbol of the fragility of human identity in the face of such drastic change. Haunted by fragmented memories of his past life, he struggles to reconcile his sense of loss with the stark realities of his survival. The pre-apocalyptic world Snowman remembers is a world of rampant consumerism, environmental destruction, and ethical disregard for animal welfare. Crake's actions, though undeniably catastrophic, can be seen as a twisted response to this ecological and ethical decay.

Central to the novel's bioethical exploration is Crake's creation of the Crakers, genetically modified humans devoid of the violence and destructive tendencies that plagued their predecessors. The novel's protagonist, Snowman, reflects on his past as Jimmy, a young man who becomes entangled in the world of corporate biotechnology. Through his friendship with the brilliant but morally ambiguous Crake, Jimmy is drawn into a world of genetic experimentation and bioengineering. Crake's vision of a genetically perfected humanity leads to the creation of the Crakers, a new species designed to be free from the flaws of their human creators. Crake expresses his disgust with humanity's flaws throughout the novel. He complains to Jimmy about "the stupidity, the waste, the pointless suffering" (243). This disdain fuels his desire to create a "better" species. Crake manipulates the Crakers' genetic makeup to eliminate negative traits. Snowman reflects on how Crake "edited out" the capacity for violence and "weeded out" negative emotions (366). Crake views the Crakers as a solution, a way to "start over" and create a future free from the destructive impulses that plague humanity. He tells Oryx, "Maybe this time we'll get it right" (290). The Crakers' altered biology reflects Crake's vision. They have a simpler digestive system, suggesting a reduced reliance on resource consumption (123). Additionally, their lack of romantic love eliminates a source of conflict and possessiveness (364). However, as the novel unfolds, it becomes clear that Crake's experiments have unleashed unforeseen consequences, leading to the collapse of civilization and the near extinction of the human race. Oryx, a character exploited by Crake for his experiments, reflects on the powerlessness of those trapped within the system: "They're always doing things to you, you never know what" (182). This lack of

autonomy underscores the ethical bankruptcy of Crake's methods, regardless of his purported noble intentions.

The novel can be read through a biopolitical lens, which examines the ways in which power operates through the regulation and control of life itself. The novel depicts bioengineering as a tool for exerting biopolitical control. Crake's ultimate act – the creation of the Crakers – becomes the pinnacle of biopolitical control. He engineers a new species not out of altruism, but as a means to assert his dominion over the very essence of life. These engineered humans are depicted as emotionless beings with "vacant black eyes" (321), suggesting a deliberate manipulation of human characteristics. The Crakers symbolize the ultimate realization of Crake's ambition – controlling and manipulating life itself to serve his vision for the future. through its biopolitical lens, throws critical questions about the ethics of scientific intervention at our feet. The fate of humanity in the novel serves as a stark warning against unchecked biopolitical power. Atwood compels us to consider the potential consequences of blurring the lines between scientific advancement and manipulation. Bioethics, the consideration of ethical principles in the context of biological research, becomes paramount in the face of such power dynamics.

Through the lens of consequentialism, one can argue that Crake's actions, specifically the creation of the Crakers, could be justified by the potential benefits. However, the novel also exposes the shortcomings of this utilitarian approach. Crake envisions the Crakers as a solution to humanity's destructive tendencies. He believes his actions will lead to a future free from violence and disease. He explains his motivations to Oryx, stating, "This way it'll be different. This time we'll get it right. No more murder, no more pointless wars" (290). This highlights Crake's belief that the potential benefits of his creation outweigh the ethical concerns. The Crakers are engineered to be healthier and less destructive than their human predecessors. Snowman observes their "superior" biological features, noting their "immunity to most of the usual human diseases" (366). Additionally, their lack of violence could lead to a more peaceful future, as Snowman reflects: "No more wars, no more body counts, no more apocalyptic visions on the evening news" (124). However, the novel also exposes the flaws in a purely consequentialist approach. The disregard for human life and autonomy inherent in Crake's methods are undeniable. This shows the violation of human rights involved in Crake's creation of the Crakers. Furthermore, the novel emphasizes the inherent dangers of manipulating the genetic code. The engineered paradise built on the ashes of a ravaged world underscores the potential for unforeseen consequences. Crake's inability to fully control his creations and the unknown risks associated with genetic engineering cast doubt on the wisdom of his approach. While Crake may envision a utopia built on the backs of the Crakers, *Oryx and Crake* ultimately question the ethics of achieving a "better" future at the cost of human autonomy and potential unintended consequences. The novel invites readers to move beyond a purely utilitarian perspective and consider the wider ethical implications of scientific progress.

Deontological ethics, a cornerstone of moral philosophy, stands in stark contrast to consequentialist theories. Unlike its outcome-oriented counterpart, deontology prioritizes the inherent rightness or wrongness of actions based on adherence to moral principles and duty. This framework offers a distinct approach to navigating complex ethical dilemmas, emphasizing the importance of acting in accordance with universal moral laws, regardless of

the consequences. Prominent philosophers like Immanuel Kant and John Rawls have shaped the understanding of deontological ethics. Kant's Categorical Imperative provides a practical guide for applying deontological principles. For example, the principle of universalization encourages us to consider whether an action could be universally followed without creating chaos or contradiction. Building on Kant's ideas, Rawls' "veil of ignorance" thought experiment challenges us to choose moral principles from a position of not knowing our social status. This promotes fairness and impartiality in decision-making, ensuring principles wouldn't be biased towards benefiting oneself.

Crake's violation of human dignity and autonomy through genetic manipulation and experimentation would be unequivocally condemned under this framework. This framework emphasizes abiding by fundamental moral principles, regardless of the potential benefits. Viewed through this lens, Crake's disregard for human dignity and autonomy in his genetic engineering becomes a central ethical violation. Crake treats human life to an end, not as something intrinsically valuable. He views humans as flawed and manipulable, disregarding their individual dignity. This is evident in his conversations with Jimmy, where he refers to humans as "morons" and "meat" (42). This objectification of human life forms the ethical foundation for his experiments. Oryx, one of Crake's subjects, embodies the violation of human autonomy. She is subjected to numerous experiments without her full knowledge or consent. This highlights the lack of respect Crake shows for individual rights and bodily autonomy, a central tenet of deontological ethics. The creation of the Crakers further exemplifies Crake's deontological transgression. They are brought into existence without any say in their genetic makeup or their purpose. This manipulation undermines the inherent right of individuals to determine their own existence. Snowman contemplates this ethical quandary, reflecting, "They were never given a choice" (367). Deontological ethics prioritizes upholding moral principles regardless of the potential benefits. Even if Crake's engineered humans create a more peaceful future, the violation of human dignity and autonomy during the creation process remains a central ethical concern. Through Oryx and Crake's experiences, Atwood exposes the ethical shortcomings of Crake's scientific pursuits. From a deontological perspective, his disregard for human dignity and the violation of fundamental rights outweighs any potential benefits. The novel compels readers to consider the limitations of scientific progress and the importance of upholding ethical principles in the face of transformative technologies.

Finally, a virtue ethics lens would focus on the character and motivations of the scientist. In the realm of ethical theories, virtue ethics stands apart by focusing on character development rather than actions or outcomes. Unlike consequentialism, which judges actions based on their results, and deontology, which emphasizes adherence to moral rules, virtue ethics asks: "What kind of person should I be?" This framework, with its emphasis on cultivating moral virtues like courage, honesty, and compassion, offers a distinct approach to navigating complex ethical dilemmas. Considered the father of virtue ethics, Aristotle believed that happiness or eudaimonia is the goal of human life and that this can be achieved by cultivating good character traits (virtues) through practice and habituation. He identified virtues like courage, temperance, and wisdom as essential for living a good life. A contemporary proponent of virtue ethics, Alasdair MacIntyre emphasized the importance of social narratives and traditions in shaping moral development. He argued that virtues are not universal but are embedded within specific historical and cultural contexts.

This framework shifts the focus from actions and consequences to the character and motivations of the individual, specifically Crake, the brilliant but morally ambiguous scientist. By examining Crake's personality traits and motivations, a virtue ethics perspective reveals his disregard for ethical responsibility within the scientific community. Crake exhibits a deep-seated desire for control throughout the novel. He views humanity as flawed and manipulable, seeking to engineer a "better" species through the Crakers. Snowman reflects on this controlling nature, stating, "He always had to be in charge" (132). This obsession with control transcends the scientific realm, extending to his relationships with Oryx and Jimmy. Crake's actions are driven by his own twisted vision, with little regard for established ethical principles. His experiments on Oryx and others highlight this disregard. Virtue ethics emphasizes the importance of cultivating moral virtues like honesty, compassion, and justice within individuals. A virtuous scientist would prioritize ethical considerations alongside scientific progress. Crake, however, embodies a lack of these virtues. By portraying Crake's moral failings, Atwood emphasizes the importance of fostering ethical responsibility within scientific communities. Scientists have a duty to consider the broader consequences of their research and ensure it aligns with ethical principles. Oryx and Crake, through the lens of virtue ethics, exposes the dangers of unchecked scientific ambition devoid of ethical considerations. Crake's character serves as a cautionary tale, urging us to emphasize the development of moral virtues alongside scientific advancements. The future of science hinges on fostering a scientific community that prioritizes not just progress, but also ethical responsibility.

Scientific breakthroughs can be amazing, but they also raise questions about what's right and wrong. *Oryx and Crake* and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, while separated by centuries, offer a compelling exploration of similar bioethical concerns. Both novels highlight the potential pitfalls of scientific advancement when conducted without ethical considerations. By exploring the monstrous consequences of scientific hubris, these works encourage us to engage in critical reflection on the ethical boundaries of scientific progress and the responsibility of scientists in shaping our future.

Both *Oryx and Crake* and *Frankenstein* delve into this complex narrative, exploring the transgressive nature of scientific ambition and its potential to birth monstrous consequences. Through the warped creations of Victor Frankenstein's Creature and Crake's engineered humans, the novels expose the ethical quagmires of bioengineering and the moral responsibility scientists bear in the face of such advancements. By dissecting the motivations and actions of these protagonists, *Oryx and Crake* and *Frankenstein* offer a relevant comparison, prompting us to question the ethical boundaries of scientific exploration and the potential ramifications of playing God.

Both protagonists, Victor Frankenstein, and Crake, engage in acts of "playing God" by creating life in the laboratory. Frankenstein assembles his creature from body parts, defying the natural order of birth and procreation. He narrates his ambition, stating, "Lifeless matter I shall animate; unspeakable perfection of humanity will bless my labours" (*Frankenstein*, 34). Similarly, Crake genetically engineers the Crakers, a new human species designed to be free from violence and self-destruction. Snowman reflects on Crake's god complex, stating, "He thought he could fix the world" (*Oryx and Crake*, 121). The creations in both novels become monstrous figures, highlighting the potential dangers of scientific



overreach. Frankenstein's creature, ostracized for its grotesque appearance, turns to violence. The creature laments its existence, stating, "I am an abortion, and nature has horror at me" (*Frankenstein*, 133). Similarly, the Crakers, though lacking violence, are depicted as emotionless and detached from the natural world. Snowman observes, "They didn't seem to have any connection to the place" (*Oryx and Crake*, 372). These monstrous outcomes raise bioethical questions about the responsibility of creators towards their creations. *Oryx and Crake* delve deeper into bioethical concerns than *Frankenstein*. Crake disregards the concept of informed consent by manipulating human embryos and experimenting on individuals like Oryx without their full knowledge. Oryx expresses her discomfort, stating, "They're always doing things to you, you never know what" (182). *Frankenstein*, however, focuses on the creator's burden and the psychological toll of creation. Furthermore, *Oryx and Crake* introduce the ethical complexities of manipulating an entire species. The creation of the Crakers raises questions about the ethics of altering the fundamental characteristics of humanity. Both novels leave readers pondering the ethical implications of scientific progress. *Frankenstein* serves as a cautionary tale about the dangers of unchecked ambition and the importance of considering the consequences of scientific endeavours. *Oryx and Crake* expand on this theme, urging readers to consider the ethical implications of genetic engineering and the importance of respecting human dignity in scientific pursuits.

Another approach to analysing *Oryx and Crake* is through an ecofeminist lens, which exposes the disturbing parallels between the exploitation of women and the degradation of the environment. Considering Crake's manipulative treatment of Oryx, stating, "She belonged to him now" (147) echoes the objectification of the natural world by corporations like "CorpSeCorps," which prioritize profit over sustainability. Oryx, much like the ravaged environment, becomes a victim of a system that prioritizes control and extraction. The novel further underscores this connection by portraying a world where environmental devastation coincides with the decline of traditional femininity. Characters like Oryx, forced into a life of "plastic surgery and hourly sex changes" (181), embody the commodification of both women and nature.

*Oryx and Crake* also invite posthumanist readings, prompting us to question the boundaries between human and non-human. The Crakers, genetically engineered beings with "vacant black eyes" (321), challenge traditional notions of humanity. Their existence blurs the line between human creation and a distinct species, raising questions about Crake's right to manipulate the very essence of what it means to be human. Snowman reflects on this uncertainty, stating, "They weren't like us, not exactly" (373). Atwood's exploration of posthuman themes in *Oryx and Crake* compels readers to re-evaluate their understanding of agency, consciousness, and embodiment in a world increasingly shaped by biotechnologies.

*Oryx and Crake* transcend bioethics by exploring the role of corporations in shaping the ethical landscape. The novel paints a bleak picture of unchecked corporate greed, where profit reigns supreme over environmental protection and social well-being. The narrative establishes the pervasive influence of powerful corporations like "CorpSeCorps" and "MaddAddam" (10). These entities control various aspects of society, dictating everything from healthcare to entertainment. Snowman reflects on this dominance, stating, "The corporations had gotten too big, the governments too small" (102). This highlights the power imbalance that allows corporations to operate with minimal oversight. Atwood emphasizes

the corporations' relentless pursuit of profit at the expense of the environment. Rampant pollution and depletion of resources become hallmarks of this dystopian future. Snowman observes the lasting effects of corporate greed, describing the environment as a "waste dump" (99). This underscores the disregard for long-term sustainability in the face of short-term gains. The novel suggests that unchecked corporate influence hinders ethical scientific progress. Crake, forced to work within the constraints of corporate interests, feels stifled. He reflects on the limitations imposed by corporations, stating, "They wouldn't let me do the research I wanted to do" (112). This challenges the potential conflict between corporate profit motives and scientific advancements that prioritize ethical considerations. The ravaged environment and Crake's desperate actions stand as testaments to the dangers of prioritizing profit over environmental protection and ethical considerations. By exposing the detrimental influence of corporations in *Oryx and Crake*, Atwood compels readers to engage in critical discussions about corporate responsibility and the need for regulations that prioritize the well-being of the planet and its inhabitants.

Through *Oryx and Crake*, Atwood promotes an environmental ethics perspective, urging readers to consider the moral responsibility of humans towards the planet and its resources. The novel underscores the interconnectedness of all living things, emphasizing the need for humans to act as stewards of the Earth for future generations. Crake's engineered paradise, built on the ashes of a ravaged world, exposes the fallacy of seeking solutions in isolation from the natural world. Atwood's vivid portrayal of a world in ruin serves as a stark reminder of the consequences of prioritizing economic gain over environmental sustainability. Atwood emphasizes the disconnect between humans and nature in this dystopian future. People live in artificial, controlled environments, isolated from the natural world. Snowman reflects on this by stating, "They didn't seem to have any connection to the place" (372). This highlights the disregard for the intrinsic value of nature fostered by a society focused on corporate profit and technological advancement. Snowman, haunted by memories of the past, acts as a conduit for the reader to understand the value of a healthy environment. He recalls the beauty of untouched nature, stating, "There were forests then. Real forests, with trees that were hundreds of years old" (101). This nostalgic perspective emphasizes the loss incurred due to environmental negligence. Even Crake's actions, though seemingly focused on human evolution, can be interpreted through an environmental lens. His engineered humans, the Crakers, are designed with simpler digestive systems, suggesting a potentially reduced ecological footprint (123). However, this doesn't excuse his overall disregard for the environment during his rise to power.

*Oryx and Crake* is not merely a cautionary tale; it's a call to action. By depicting a dystopian future shaped by unchecked scientific advancement, corporate greed, and ecological collapse, Atwood compels readers to critically examine the ethical implications of technological progress and societal structures. The novel encourages us to engage with contemporary bioethical debates, challenge corporate control, and foster a more responsible relationship with the environment. The novel serves as a potent reminder that true progress must be grounded in ethical principles and a deep respect for the fragility of our shared world.

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