Decoding Anthropocene: Mapping the Posthuman Conditions in Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*

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Abstract: The contemporary age witnesses technological revolution in which humans and their close relationship with scientific and technological developments revolutionize the existence of life on earth. The large dependency on what Katherine Hayles calls 'Intelligent Network System' helps human beings to perform their work efficiently and complete within given deadline, which appears to be a reflection of new age, called posthumanism. Margaret Atwood's Oryx and Crake(2003) presents the development of posthuman conditions in which the human life is shown through the lenses of scientific evolutionary process. Crake, the mad scientist, engineers Crakers in Paradice dome in order to show alternative mode of life that plays vital role in humans' life. The assemblage caused by 'carbon based organic body' and 'silicon based component' contests body as 'hybridized' transgenic object which can be mobilized in posthuman conditions. Posthuman conditions highlight the vulnerability of human beings and their responsibility as a species for the world.

Keywords: *Posthumanism, Transhumanism, Cybernetics, Dystopia, Biocentrism.*

Posthuman realm interrogates the idea that humanity can be transformed, transcended or eliminated either by technological advances or the evolutionary process. The field of posthuman studies has been in full expansion since 1980s' which was triggered by the convergence of anti-humanism or posthumanism on the one hand and post anthropocentrism on the other hand. Genealogically, the root of posthumanism as an epistemological approach is debated within postmodernism as the term came in light within postmodern studies when Ihab Hassan in "The Postmodern Turn" (1987), hinted at the post human turn when he said, " I see a pattern that many others have also seen; a vast, revisionary will in the Western world, unsettling/ resettling codes, canons, procedures, beliefs – intimating a post-humanism?" ("The Postmodern Turn" XVI).

 Posthumanism as a theoretical frame has evolved and encapsulated philosophical, cultural and critical dimensions contesting the position of human being as the "measure of all things" proclaimed by Protagoras, one of the precursors of humanist thought. The dominance of humanistic thought that developed in Renaissance in the 14th century positioning human as the centre of meaning, value, knowledge, reasoning and action gradually ended in a crisis that emerged in 1960s with Michael Foucault's The Order of Things, who talked of the death of human way back on sixties when he problematised the relation between becoming thinkable and entering a state of becoming thinkable or entering a crises as he prophesized:

It is comforting, however, and a source of profound relief to think that man is only a recent invention, a figure not yet two centuries old, a new wrinkle in our knowledge, and that he will

disappear again as soon as that knowledge has discovered a new form. (The Order of Things: An Archaeology of Human Sciences XXV)

The theoretical tipping point for posthuman thought has been extended on N. Kathrine Hayles's idea on 'embodiment and materiality' which is based upon the posthumanist condition. In her theoretical work How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics, she explains how the cybernetics and, in particular, the information technology modifies our view of ourselves, as well as, our relationships with machines and other living beings. Hinting upon the erasure of "embodiment and subjectivity" (Hayles 283), she concentrates upon the idea how 'information lost its body' (Hayles 5). Particularly, in the age of cloning, xenotransplantation, and prosthetic development - where the human being shows its complete dependency on science and technology - posthuman discourse poses the serious question on the rationale subjectivity of human being. Hayles proposes a well-reasoned critique of the roots of our cybernetic future where she argues how a different future can be crafted that avoid the "desire of mastery", the "objectivist account of science", and the "imperialist project of subduing nature" (Hayles 288). She, further, argues that the conceptualization of 'body comes to an end and it acts as an empty vessel where the information can be downloaded and uploaded.

From posthumanist perspective, Hayles highlights that 'body' is an object that acts like a container. According to Hayles, "the body is the net result of thousands of years of sedimented evolutionary history, and it is naive to think that this history does not affect human behaviors at every level of thought and action" (Hayles 284). Further, Hayles echoes Warren McCulloch, an American cybernetician and neurophysiologist's viewpoint on the anthropocentric vision of human beings as he states, "Man to my mind is about the nastiest, most destructive of all the animals. I don't see any reason if he can evolve machines that can have more fun than he himself can, why they shouldn't take over, enslave us, quite happily. They might have a lot more fun. Invent better games then we did" (qtd. in How We Became Posthuman 283).

As a critique of humanist study of man as the universal representative of human, posthumanism interrogates the hierarchic ordering and subsequent exploitation and even eradication of life forms. Based upon the theoretical premise of posthuman, which according to Rosi Braiddoti challenges the idea of subjectivity and anthropocentric stance, this paper investigates Margaret Atwood's Oryx and Crake, the first part of MaddAddam Trilogy, where Atwood portrays a near-future world that approximates not only the devastating impact of human interaction with science, technology, bio-engineering, and biomedical science, but also offers a sketch of the future prophesised by Atwood in the novel:

As a species we're in deep trouble, worse than anyone's saying. They're afraid to release the stats because people might just give up, but take it from me we're running out of space –time. Demand for resources has exceeded supply for decades in marginal geo-political areas, hence the famines and droughts; but very soon, the demand is going to exceed supply for everywhere. (Oryx and Crake 295)

The Oryx and Crake, in this context, is best suited example to define the anthropocentric stance of mankind and its ugly ramifications. Oryx and Crake, the first part of MaddAddam Trilogy, sketches aftermath of pandemic caused by Crake, who   appropriates homocentrism

by bioengineering Crakers, a humanlike tribe to replace human beings. Crakers, he believes will resolve "War, which is to say misplaced sexual energy, which we consider to be a larger factor than the economic, racial, and religious causes often cited" (Oryx and Crake 292). Though, Crake's efforts tend to resolve what he believes "as a species we are in a deep trouble, worse than anyone's saying" (Oryx and Crake 295). He believes, "the contagious diseases, especially sexually transmitted ones. Overpopulation, leading – as we've seen in spades – to environmental degradation and poor nutrition" are the major determinants of human conflicts (293-295). Crake's invention of Crakers reveals how he wants to challenge human centrality as he states, "The proper study of Mankind is Man," which echoes the perennial problem which human beings have inflicted upon themselves (293).

Further, Crake's concerns for the inevitable exploitation of natural resources state his vision, "demand for resources has exceeded supply for decades in marginal geopolitical areas, hence the famines and droughts; but very soon, demand is going to exceed supply for everyone" (Oryx and Crake 295). Thinking of the best way to tackle these situations, Crake believes that Blysspluss may control birth rate, "With the BlyssPluss Pill the human race will have a better chance of swimming" (Oryx and Crake 295). Human's insatiable desires and lust to take control of universe, according to Atwood hints towards apocalypse as she writes, "The tide of human desire, the desire for more and better, would overwhelm them. It would take control and drive events, as it had in every large change throughout history" (Oryx and Crake 296).

Such uncontrollable greed for controlling and navigating the nature and other species is portrayed through Crake, who realises the 'power' possession obtained by humans and hence designs Crakers, who unlike humans, are set free from the sexual jealousy and other power structure that captivates them. Scientifically learned Crake, after his schooling at Watson-Crick institute, starts his job at RejoovenEsense on Paradice Project where besides bioengineering Crakers, he also introduces BlyssPluss Pills, prophylactic capsules which Crake believes, will control the birth rate and as a result will lower the population. Unfortunately, it turns opposite and spreads virus which swipes out the human civilization from the planet, it's Jimmy who remains alive as a sole survivor of pandemic.

Margaret Atwood's concern as a visionary has been to foresee a world more balanced and less poised by transporting the reader to such a world where conflicts between humans and humanoids, male and female, artificial and natural, technology and culture are diminished. On the proclamation of scientific thought, she speaks on unending possibilities for technological revolution in one of her lectures on "An Evening with Margaret Atwood: Literature to Explore Our Genetic Engineering Futures" Atwood states, "As you know, nothing is inevitable. There are too many variables" (Atwood). The contemporary age is enamoured by scientific advancement, as she argues, "We seem to be inclined toward a certain amount of magical thinking" (Atwood). Nevertheless, Atwood's 'dystopian art' of portraying the picture of society addresses the sensitive concerns for all life forms living on the planet. Commenting on Atwood's speculative vision, Jennifer Kuzma, states, "I don't think that dystopian speculative fiction about biotechnology is harmful at all. In fact, I think it is essential. Speculative fiction like Oryx and Crake is crucial to help us understand what we do and do not want for a future with biotechnology" (qtd. in "Margaret Atwood and the Biotechnology of Tomorrow").

The thematic resonance of the novel revolves around the genetic-engineered science and experts who control not only the life forms, but make experiments on transhuman adoptions. The gruesome hospitality puts Jimmy at ease when Crake's ensures him about the 'real' things served in Watson- Crick, the place where Crake worked. He finds himself in a nosy situation:

The food in Crake's faculty dining hall was fantastic – real shrimps instead of the CrustaeSoy they got at Martha Graham, and real chicken, Jimmy suspected, though he avoided that because he couldn't forget the ChickieNobs he'd seen; and something a lot like real cheese, though Crake said it came from a vegetable, a new species of zucchini they were trying out. The deserts were heavy on the chocolate, real chocolate. (Oryx and Crake 208)

The usage of words: 'Paradice', Blysspluss capsules, Reejoov hotel and restaurant, is a futuristic representation of the world that is assembled and moderately programmed in Crake's 'Paradice'. Crake, in the novel, is focussed upon the making of a world, the society, the real state, that can be navigated and controlled according to his will. Crake, here, predicts the urge of immortality where he says, "My unit is called Paradice over soya-banana flambé, what we're working on is immortality" (Oryx and Crake 292). Paradice, in the Watson-Crick, is a working place laboratory where, through bio-science, human being is given shape or what Pramod K Nayar in his book Posthumanism calls Assemblage happens (Posthumanism 90). Having challenged the natural course of living, the dire effects like rise in sea level and droughts associated with global warming become the life threat for the younger generation in the novel.

Readers of Oryx and Crake are not alone in their temporally uncertain, or doubled, relation to the novel's dystopian arrangement. For Atwood's protagonist "Jimmy"- introduced to the reader as "Snowman"- the futurist dystopia sketched is already a memory. Oryx and Crake opens with Snowman awakening to a bleak, post-apocalyptic world that makes the socio-economic disparities and biotechnological threats of his past a reality. It is the past in which he is still "Jimmy" and a past that stands as the reader's, possibly, inevitable future, look clear by comparison. The novel doesn't highlight immediately what has happened to Snowman's world, but as we continue to read, we apprehend that Snowman believes himself to be the sole survivor of a global pandemic that has extinguished the rest of the humanity.

Gradually, we learn of Snowman's largely unwitting, yet also wilfully unknowing complicity in a scheme by which a bioengineered super virus (Blysspluss) was disseminated across the globe. Crake in his Paradice masterminded and bio-engineered a small tribe of genetically "improved" trans-humans community, later called "Crakes". Atwood, in the novel, seeks to provide primitive, but gentle, replacements for humanity which has been left in Snowman's care to inherit the earth after Crake's death. From the retrospective point of view of the novel's last man, as well as from the prospective point of view of the novel's reader, the difference between the past and the present and between our nearer and later future, is all the difference in the world. It is the difference between the human future and the future beyond-human.

Atwood, speaking upon the futuristic setting, states, "speculative fiction can bring us that other kind of news; it can speak of what is past and passing, but especially of what's to come" (qtd. in Publications of the Modern Language Association of America 515). In Oryx

and Crake the future is by no means "happy" as most of the people are left living in near poverty in the Pleeblands, while the select elite live in great walled 'Compounds,' where the science and technology is used to make business and Cyborgs or what Atwood refers to 'Craker's State', while they disregard the rest of society and the environment. Atwood, with acute firmness, poses question to the way in which the world is progressing: new technologies being developed and coupled with the increased dependency on technologies, the rampant disregard is given to the environment by individuals and large corporations; war, space exploration, and exploitations of people and the other species world-wide is the common norm.

Ostensibly, the scenarios Atwood has sketched in Oryx and Crake is a world of internet insecurity, pig-human hybrids, environmental devastation and complete corporate takeover of the states. In the novel, the biotech corporations command their own secret police forces such as the CorpSeCorps. These secret corporations not only command their security services, but also seek to have panoptic gaze of disciplinary society that controls human body or what Michel Foucault called "self surveillance state"(Discipline and Punish 77). .

Hence, Atwood alarms, as well as, seeks to change the outlook and the behaviour of the social scientists who, without realizing the devastating effects, have been playing with the environment and other life forms. They are, she, in one of her interviews titled "All dystopian novels are telling you to do is make sure you've got a lot of canned goods and a gun", says, "more like weathervanes than guides on averting disaster" (Atwood).

Seeking inspiration from the Biblical narrative, Atwood has beautifully crafted a scenario where Crake's 'Paradice', like God's paradise, seeks to create the human forms, but, unfortunately, ends up in a great catastrophe. Just as eating of apple results as a downfall of human being, similarly in the novel 'Blysspluss pill' marks a symbolic line of overpowering nature of technology which as a result wipes out the human civilization from the earth. The novel is a radical depiction of posthuman conditions and offers a warning of disastrous consequences for the man before he goes against the nature. In a realistic way, it offers a warning to humanity that our in/actions against the nature are leading to our eventual downfall. The style of portraying the posthumanist conditions with acute firmness shows the close resemblance to 'Swiftian Satire' in her works.

Just as in the posthuman realm, there are no essential differences or absolute demarcations between the bodily existence on one hand, and computer simulation, cybernetic mechanism and biological organism, robot teleology and human goals, on the other, *Oryx and Crake* analyses Atwood's insistence on the symbiotic relationship between human and non-human entities in the lap of nature. Having stressed upon Atwood's literary style, Carlos Gutiérrez-Jones, in his *Suicide and Contemporary Science Fiction* compares her *MaddAddam* trilogy with *Gulliver's Travel*. Keeping in mind the anthropocentric occupation of human beings, he measures Atwood's writing style with "Swiftian Satire" in its nature for portraying human conditions with certain limitations (*Suicide and Contemporary Science Fiction* 31). Atwood's fictions offer an instruction to the society to move onto the safer sides in order to avoid devastating effects in the future.

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