

Navigating through Technophobia, Technological Exploitation and Post humanism in Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*

Farah Khan

Research Scholar

Department of English and Modern European Languages

Lucknow University

Abstract

This research paper analyses and discusses, Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*, with the intent to debate the uses and limits of and threats posed by technology; scientifically assisted process of evolution and post humanism. The novel commingles an apocalyptic narrative with a plot that depicts a near future where a group of humanoids is guided by a mortal human. This research paper has some specific aims; the first aim is to understand the need for genetic modification with the intent to eliminate disease and detrimental human qualities from the post humans; second, to understand the relevance of technophobia which is expressed by several characters in the novel and the third is to challenge the notion of complete extermination of humans and their subsequent replacement with post humans. Qualitative method of investigation has been employed by the researcher in order to procure information from the secondary sources. The three steps of investigation include; a close reading of the novel with the view to understand the concepts of technophobia, evolution and post humanism present in the novel. The second step is to analyze the terminologies like apocalypse, dystopian fiction and post humanism. The third step includes the findings, which are: dismissal of unwarranted excessive technological interference in the natural evolution; extermination of humans is a threatening and impractical solution; and that a complete post human society is impractical and meaningless.

Keywords: Posthumanism, Technophobia, Evolution, Apocalypse, Humanoids, Dystopia

Today's modern society has witnessed some unbelievable scientific inventions and discoveries. Technology has invaded almost every aspect of our lives. With the development of artificial intelligence and bioengineering, the boundary between human and machine is almost blurred. The novel, *Oryx and Crake* by Margaret Atwood discusses two basic issues; first, the limit to which technology should govern our lives; second, that imperfection is the beauty of humanity. *Oryx and Crake* deals with post humans created by an erudite scientist Crake, who plans to eradicate the entire population to re-inhabit the earth with his newly created species of post- humans, the Crakers. This paper considers the post human aspects of the novel *Oryx and Crake* by Margaret Atwood. This is a dystopian novel which considers the unhindered use of technology in a negative light and prophesies an apocalyptic future for the current generation if the present situations continue.

The major aspects that are under consideration in this paper are-

- a) Technophobia and ethical use of technology as projected in the novel,
- b) The feasibility of the post humans created by Crake as compared to the present human condition and
- c) Impracticality of a post human society.

Technophobia may be defined as “an irrational fear or anxiety caused by side effects of advanced technologies” (Osiceanu, 1139). In contrast to the modern day scientists’ view of a techno- utopia, dystopian literature, considers the threats posed by the extreme use of technology. In *Oryx and Crake* Atwood talks about the extensive use of modern technology in the process of enhancement of human attributes. Jimmy, whose father works as a scientist in the Organic Inc Farms bears witness to the unethical use of science and technology.

“[S]cience fiction expresses technophobic fear of losing our human identity, our freedom, our emotions, our values, and our lives to machines.” (2, Daniel Dinello)

Advent of science and technology has helped the human species to transgress the natural process of evolution. Post humanism as an idea means the uncontrolled interference of technology for the purpose of intellectual as well as physical enhancement and alterations in the natural make up of the human bodies.

Donna Haraway, in her *Cyborg Manifesto* (1985) had prophesied the creation of a cyborg which according to her would be the product of the co mingling of humans and machines. Donna Haraway, opines, “Biology and evolutionary theory over the past two centuries have simultaneously produced modern organisms as objects of knowledge and reduced the line between humans and animals to a faint trace re – etched in ideological struggle or professional disputes between life and social science.”(1925) .She further talks about a genderless society, which is a society without “genesis”. The cyborg is a creature which inhabits a post gender world. It alienates itself “from the seductions to organic wholeness”, by not having any connection with “bisexuality, pre-oedipal symbiosis, unalienated labour”, she connects all these to a higher unity (1923).

A post human as discussed earlier is a creature which is a result of man’s attempt at altering the evolutionary process by means of technology. Atwood’s *Oryx and Crake* be considered a classic example of post humanism and all the risks and exploitation that accompanies it.

Oryx and Crake is set in, perhaps not so distant future, where the world has achieved high levels of technological and medical developments. The narrator of the story, Jimmy has grown up in one of the compounds, protected from the New York of the prior times; which is now facing an array of pollution problems. His father is a scientist at the Organic Inc. Farms and works in the field of organ development in host animals for the benefit of humans. The story highlights how the corporate companies harness such projects for the exploitation of humans and animals alike.

The novel also discusses the apocalyptic events that had lead to severe environmental degradation, leaving a major part of the world highly polluted with dangerous substances. The tundra region “bubbled” with Methane gas and the Asian steppes had turned into deserts. The compounds on the other hand were like “theme parks” with facility and the green and clean environment was artificially built. Everything therein was fake and artificial (Atwood 27). There are several other examples in the novel which suggest that there was a constant exploitation of

power and technology at the hands of the big corporate houses. In fact the economically weaker section of the society was left to its fate in the polluted regions.

While Jimmy's father and Jimmy's friend, Crake remain unaffected by the unethical practices of the corporate houses; there are some characters who vehemently oppose such exploitative methods. Jimmy's mother is one such character who constantly opposes Jimmy's father and later in the novel turns out to be a rebel. Jimmy's father had been working on the "Pigoon Project" at the Organic Inc. Farms. The goal of the project was to create an "assortment" of human organs that could be transplanted without problem or rejection. The 'pigoon' was bigger and fatter than a usual pig and could easily accommodate as many as six kidneys. (Atwood 25). The company, on the other hand highlighted, exclusively, the health benefits of their projects and tried to hide its exploitative methods in its marketing policies.

The characters, Jimmy, his mother, and Oryx, stand out in the novel as representatives of ethical values and those who stand against the practice of commercialization of biotechnological processes. On the other hand, Crake and Jimmy's father strongly believe in technological advancements at the cost of ethics and ideals; wherein, commercial profit was of prime importance.

Jimmy was not a "number person" he constantly fails to comply with the societal demands (Atwood 29). He loved literature and books and pursues his academic qualification in the same direction. He stands as a symbol of humanity in its original form when the entire population gets wiped out after the apocalyptic outbreak of the deadly epidemic. The Crakers, symbolize genetic engineering and a man made creation. They lack common sense or a sense of humour, in fact they are innocent, gullible species who thrive on plants and their own excrement. This clearly shows a form of regression on the part of human species (Atwood 355). It is interesting to note that Crake attempts to eliminate all possible weaknesses; physical and psychological; from his species of Crakers, yet they become attracted to Snowman owing to his fantastical stories of their creation and their connection with their creator Crake. Snowman/Jimmy barter his fabulous stories for fish and other items necessary for his survival, with the Crakers.

Although the novel is understandably coy about the status of Snowman's sacred stories, it clearly suggests that we cannot do without such tales, not at least, if we wish to remain even marginally human. Thus, whatever solutions we may hope for must come at least partially by way of recovery, recovery of some form of great narrative that reestablishes culture firmly in the cultus from which science has torn it (Dunning 186).

Atwood reassures the readers through Snowman's narratives that being human in any way is not possible without stories, words and expressions.

Crake is Jimmy's alter ego in the novel. Crake was everything that Jimmy was not. Crake was a science person, and a number genius. Jimmy on the other hand had an aversion to technology and could not make a career as a scientist. He loves words. As the sole survivor of the apocalypse, he is the physical example of art saving science.

The "Paradise Project" of Crake was an outcome of his life's hard work. He had procured an array of high level scientists from around the world to create the Crakers, a species of advanced post humans. The Crakers were trained for their future lives in a "simulation chamber" which replicated the time cycle of a day. Fake celestial bodies were projected on the domed

screen above them. The Crakers remained naked like animals and were not self-conscious; moreover, they comprised of different colours and regions and were too beautiful to be true. The Crakers remained immune to the fear of death or illness and were programmed to drop dead at the age of thirty, “suddenly without getting sick”. Crake’s idea was that by depriving them of old age he saved them from anxiety. They also had “advanced immune system functions” and were therefore not prone to contagious diseases. Moreover, they were not tormented by their sexual desires and mated at specific intervals like other mammals. The Crakers also had no societal pressure of marriage or divorce and were adjusted to their habitat and did they require a house (Atwood 355-356).

The novel also talks about various companies which were involved in the commercialization of science and biotechnology. The commoditization of science had made humans into a target market without consideration for ethical issues and dangers or risks involved. The company where Jimmy’s father worked also indulged in exploitation of technology for economical benefits of a few. In the Organic Inc. his father worked as a scientist and developed “pigoons” which could be used as organ donors for transplantation among humans. They also experimented with creating new animals. Jimmy’s pet “rakunk” itself was a result of a lab experiment. “Snat”, on the other hand was a blend of a snake and a rat (Atwood 57). There was also a toad type creature with a “prehensile tail” like a chameleon. These animals went on a rampage when the human society collapses. Jimmy had to face several dangerous animals when he tries to venture into the compound post the apocalypse. Health Wyzer company where Jimmy’s father worked was a better and bigger business house. Technology and science were associated with affluence. Here “pigoons” were being used to develop skin related biotechnology (Atwood 61). One of the company’s endeavors was to revive youth. Its target market was the older generation of people. However, the volunteers who acted as subjects ended up looking like or aliens from outer space (Atwood 63).

Jimmy’s mother is seen criticizing his father for his unethical approach, and the neuro regeneration project with “pigoons” to replace human brain with pig brain and reprimands him that he wanted to make “life better for people –not just people with money” (Atwood 64).

At RejoovenEsense, the company where Crake worked as a scientist, all experiments and products were intended for economical gain. It had entered the market with a host of offers. They were able to offer to create totally “chosen babies” who could be made to possess any feature, physical, mental or spiritual. Hereditary diseases could be eliminated and the “customer would get what he’d paid for (Atwood, 357). The whole set up of such businesses centered around commodification of youth, reproduction and organ transplant. The Bliss Plus pill made by Crake, was marketed as a birth control pill which promised protection against sexually transmitted diseases, increase sexual powers and prolong youth. The benefits of the pill were a trap to lure the customers, but the pills were actually meant for spreading the epidemic which would subsequently wipe out the human population (Atwood 346).

The novel thus shows a constant tussle between science and arts. While Crake symbolizes the former, Jimmy/ Snowman stands as a symbol of latter. Snowman, who becomes the guide and guardian of the Crakers, exemplifies the idea that science can survive only in the presence and guidance of arts. The imperfections of the humans beautify and diversify them.

The Crakers despite their genetic superiority are a gullible lot, and many a times appear as ludicrous creatures eating their own excrement. Besides, they lack the nuances of the human

species. Thus, they turn out to be more like a new variety of animal rather than an improvement upon the human species.

Jimmy, his mother, and Oryx, all oppose the exploitative use of technology, and are a symbol of technophobic approach to science. Post humans are projected in the novel as a form of regression rather than progression. The Crakers in no way prove as a superior species as they can be easily taken in by Snowman's implausible stories. Post humanism is thus presented in a cynical manner in the novel and technophobia to a certain extent is rendered wise and practical.

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