



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vol. 11. Issue.3. 2024 (July-Sept)

INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA
2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

AN ECOLOGICAL STUDY OF MARGARET ATWOOD'S
ORYX AND CRAKE

Xin Hao^{1*}, Miaomiao Wang²

¹MA Candidate, School of Foreign Language, North China Electric Power University,
Beijing, China.

²MA Supervisor, School of Foreign Language, North China Electric Power University,
Beijing, China.

*Corresponding Author e-mail: 1951321719@qq.com

[doi: 10.33329/ijelr.11.3.80](https://doi.org/10.33329/ijelr.11.3.80)



Article information

Article Received:13/7/2024
Article Accepted:22/08/2024
Published online:30/08/2024

ABSTRACT

Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*, published in 2003, serves as a solemn warning regarding the escalating ecological catastrophe facing human beings. From an ecological, ethical perspective, it trenchantly critiques the ecological crisis engendered by anthropocentric dominance, delving into its cultural roots and exploring potential green salvation for humanity's existential predicament. While the progress of human society is indeed facilitated by the power of science and technology, irresponsible handling of these tools poses the risk of catastrophic consequences. The anthropocentric utopia envisioned through science and technology is poised to dismantle the bonds between humans and their environment, between individuals within society, and even among humans themselves, ultimately leading to a general decline in social, spiritual, and ecological ecosystems. The illness that plagues ecology has its genesis in human thought and culture. *Oryx and Crake*, by sounding an early alarm about impending disasters, aims to restore a balance to scientific and technological forces. It redirects attention to the ideological and cultural frameworks of humanity, advocates for the restoration of the harmonious relationship between humans and their environment, and advocates for an ecological holism approach.

Keywords: Margaret Atwood; *Oryx and Crake*; ecocriticism; ethical order

1. Introduction

Margaret Atwood is renowned as one of Canada's most prominent female authors, enjoying global acclaim as "the Queen of Canadian literature". She was nominated for the Nobel Prize in Literature due to her advocacy for women, the environment, marginalized communities, and the future

of humanity. In 2003, she released *Oryx and Crake*, a dystopian ecological cautionary tale narrated from a male perspective, portraying the journey of "Snowman" who survives a massive ecological disaster and believes himself to be the sole surviving man. The novel not only depicts Snowman's struggle in a futuristic, fictional wilderness but also serves as a reflection on humanity's endless misuse of technology, leading to the destruction of nature and triggering a catastrophic outcome, as narrated by Snowman.

Since the publication of the novel *Oryx and Crake*, numerous Western scholars and critics have examined it, giving rise to a significant corpus of analytical articles. Among these are "Atwood Apocalyptic"(2003) written by Brian Bethune, Gregory R. Berry's "Review on *Oryx and Crake*"(2004), Cooke's "Technics and the Human at Zero-Hour: Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*" (2006) A preponderance of these studies focus on the horrifying and catastrophic vision of the future world portrayed in the novel, often discussing the underlying causes of these dire consequences – namely, the misuse of technology and the insatiable greed of humanity. Over time, the scholarship on this novel has continued to grow. For example, in "It's Game Over Forever: Atwood's Satiric Vision of a Bioengineered Posthuman Future in *Oryx and Crake*"(2009), J. Brooks Bouson explores the antagonism between humanity and technology as well as the devastating effects of technology's improper use on the human race. Shuli Barzilai insists that most literary traditions that Atwood reflects on and subverts in this novel aim to highlight the themes of revenge. In his article "Tell My Story: Remembrance and Revenge in Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* and Shakespeare's *Hamlet*" (2008), he further investigates the intertextual relationship between Atwood's work and Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. In China, scholars' research on *Oryx and Crake* primarily focuses on ecocriticism, dystopian themes, and archetypal criticism. Xue Xiaohui (2001) analyzes the novel from the perspective of ecological criticism. She studies the relationship between science and humanity, emphasizes the importance of safeguarding natural ecology, and points out that only through wise choices can humanity secure a bright future. Yang Lixin, in her article "A Masterpiece of Dystopia – On Margaret Atwood's New Fiction "(2005) examines the dystopian elements and artistic techniques employed in the novel. In addition, several articles probe by focusing on the mythological and archetypal patterns within the text. For instance, Zhang Chuanxia (2013) employs Northrop Frye's archetypal criticism to analyze the metaphorical representation of the biblical flood myth in *Oryx and Crake*, thereby enhancing the comprehension of the novel by considering Atwood's western Christian cultural background. However, there remains a scarcity of research that explores the ecological crisis in the novel from the perspective of ethical reconstruction. It is imperative to undertake a rigorous analysis of novels that encapsulate themes of ecological crisis and ethical reconstruction in order to address this gap in the scholarly discourse. By examining how ethical themes are articulated and interlaced within the narratives, we can acquire valuable insights into how literature mirrors and responds to pressing environmental issues.

This paper analyzes the novel from the perspective of ecocriticism. In addition to analyzing the ecological crisis in the novel, it further explains the underlying reasons for the ecological crisis, and then points out the possible solutions to the crisis. This paper consists of three parts. The first part focuses on the influence of ecological crises on nature, society and human spirit as depicted in the novel. It discusses the ecological problems faced by human beings and the chain reaction caused by environmental problems. The second part explores the causes of the ecological crisis. Aside from the abuse of bio-engineering technology, the anthropocentric ideology dominating the cultural and intellectual system behind technology is the root cause of this ecological disaster. The third part discusses the reconstruction of ethical order, analyzing the implicit reconstruction of animal ethics and technical ethics in the novel. Finally it summarizes Atwood's attitude towards the ecological crisis and its solutions. The novel calls for human attention to non-human interests, seeking ecological harmony and development through harmonious coexistence between human and society, and human and nature, ultimately leading to symbiosis between humans and non-humans.

2. Methodology

Ecocriticism examines how humans and the natural environment interact in literature. It addresses the presentation and analysis of environmental issues, cultural issues related to the environment, and attitudes toward nature. A primary objective of ecocriticism is to examine the behaviors and responses of individuals within society towards nature and ecological aspects. The increased emphasis on environmental degradation and technological advancements in society has led to a surge in attention towards ecocriticism in recent times. As a result, it offers an innovative method of reading and understanding literary materials, expanding the scope of literary and theoretical studies.

3. Discussion

3.1. The Tolling Bell of the Ecological Crisis

In *Oryx and Crake*, Margaret Atwood paints a picture of the end of the world and warns humans that an ecological catastrophe might strike the entire planet if human beings don't pay more attention to how technology and nature coexist. Seawater swept Jimmy's mother's childhood house away, and his grandfather's vineyard was washed away by the sea. Not even the emblem of vibrant contemporary New York City was spared. The amount of forest vegetation has rapidly decreased due to climate change, and the loss of forests results in drought without rain and flooding with rain. Droughts and floods are becoming more frequent and intense, which puts human production operations at even greater risk. In a developing Asian nation, Oryx was born into a farming family. Farming families are finding it more and more difficult to make ends meet due to the tough climate. For a pitiful sum of money, Oryx's mother sold her baby son and her brother to human traffickers in order for them to survive, and this type of trafficking of children is even more commonplace in that barren land. The code names Crake and Oryx are the names of extinct wild animals. Developed by MaddAddam, the "Extinctathon" is an interactive biofreak masterlore game related to biology and knowledge competition. "Adam named the living animals; MaddAddam names the dead ones,"(79) Challengers must respond with the type of extinct living form that "it" is, as well as its category, origin, last known location, and cause of extinction. The challenger gained more points the longer he held out. Many extinct animals can be found in the game; "anyway, it was a couple of hundred pages of fine print and filled with obscure bugs, weeds, and frogs nobody had ever heard of." (90) The natural world, which has developed alongside humans, is progressively vanishing in front of humans as a result of the extraordinary position that science and technology have given humans in the modern world.

Ecological crises such as ecological and environmental deterioration, biodiversity loss, serious pollution of rivers, lakes, and seas, and scarcity of resources exist in both developed countries and new developing countries. All these ecological diseases are the result of man's endless encroachment and over-exploitation of nature. The earth is being destroyed by humans and will never recover. According to Atwood, overuse of science and technology is the worst kind of human meddling or over-exploitation of the natural world, and these are the primary drivers of irreversible environmental deterioration. Biotechnology appears to make everything possible.

The social crisis is evident in the apathetic relationships among individuals. The scientific elite leads a life of opulence within Compounds, being influenced and corrupted by multinational corporations, effectively becoming tools for the corporations' autocratic rule. In contrast with these elites, the majority of ordinary people reside in Pleeblands, where they face severe air pollution, deteriorating infrastructure, unclean streets, and a lack of security. Pleeblands serve as the primary markets for products manufactured by scientists, yet they are also looked down upon by the scientific community. The Compounds sharply divide society into two segments, reminiscent of the castles for royalty, creating a sense of exclusivity and safety for the inhabitants while keeping others outside. In certain remote regions of third-world countries, individuals endure even harsher living conditions than

those in the Pleeblands. Children in these villages are often sold by human traffickers and repeatedly subjected to bullying. In addition, the novel emphasizes the challenges faced by women from marginalized communities through its central character, Oryx, who was born in a poverty-stricken village in Asia and was sold by her mother to human traffickers at a very young age. She endured multiple instances of trafficking, particularly in the sex industry, before becoming Crake's girlfriend and aiding him in his efforts for human renewal. Throughout her experiences, she is viewed merely as a means for financial gain and sensual pleasure by men. Despite this, Oryx has become accustomed to this treatment and does not perceive the oppression as humiliating; rather, she takes pride in being "still useful." Having grown up under male dominance, Oryx has internalized and normalized this inhuman treatment, leading to the loss of her own subjectivity. Ultimately, Oryx's blind assistance allows Crake to release a pandemic intended to eradicate humanity, and she is subsequently deemed obsolete and killed by Crake.

In an era dominated by science and technology, human beings can use technology to fulfill various material needs, but they cannot fill the spiritual void with material possessions. On one hand, humans have lost their respect for nature and life, treating everything as commodities. Yet, many people also experience deep feelings of guilt, anxiety, and loneliness. On the other hand, the relentless pursuit of material possessions and the neglect of human values have led many to lose themselves and become excessively fixated on tools, causing their minds to become alienated. This sense of alienation arises from the displacement of the human spiritual world by instrumental rationality and advanced technology. In her works, Atwood exposes the consequences of the decline of humanistic values due to the excessive advancement of science and technology. Jimmy had a difficult childhood in a dysfunctional home. Due to his ordinary science grades that fell short of his father's standards and his tense relationship with his mother, he was considered a "failure" by his scientist father. Jimmy found it difficult to get his mother's attention, regardless of how well he behaved or behaved badly, as she was constantly overcome with self-loathing and unable to provide for Jimmy. Jimmy's pet coon skunk provided comfort in this split household, but his mother misunderstood the deep attachment Jimmy shared with the animal and tried to release it free. Comparably, Crake never knew the tenderness of a family; instead, the brutality he saw after his father was killed – which was connected to his mother's disclosure of business secrets and her marriage to a company executive – shaped him. Crake's mentality eventually became detached due to his disillusionment and resentment, which pushed him down a path of madness and destruction.

In the process of human beings abusing the powerful force of technology to transform and infringe upon nature, they have sown the seeds of disaster. Behind nature's seemingly "mute" response lies a more deafening accusation. It warns humans with signals of natural disasters, social disorder, and spiritual decay, and eventually manifests in the form of destructive catastrophes. In an environment on the verge of ecological collapse, not only do humans ignore the ideological and cultural issues behind the ecological crisis, but they also attempt to compensate for the shortcomings of technology using technological means. The result is that "ecology" becomes a facade under the logic of capitalist value enhancement. In the name of "ecology," owners of science and technology gain greater power, furthering their control over nature and human beings. The ecosystem is on the brink of collapse.

3.2. The Fragmentation in the Human-Nature Relationship

The primary cause of this ecological catastrophe, aside from the misuse of bioengineering technology, is the anthropocentric mindset that rules the intellectual and cultural framework supporting technology. Non-human society is neglected as a result of anthropocentrism. Additionally, the human need for money outpaces human nature and contributes to the deterioration of the humanistic spirit. Furthermore, people seek to maximize their own interests and engage in chaotic competition as a result of the money-driven capitalism market economy, disregarding the relationships that exist between people and the natural world. In addition, female subjectivity is lost since male

chauvinism disregards women's social standing and views men as the gold standard by which everything should be judged.

Scientists like Crake have employed genetic editing to haphazardly assemble creatures, driven by a combination of short-term profit and a desire to dominate and surpass nature. The misuse of science and technology has directly led to ecological disasters, although it is not the underlying cause. Science and technology themselves are neither inherently good nor evil, but the pursuit of human-centered control has accelerated humanity's exploitation of nature, leading to significant consequences. The novel depicts a future society in which biotechnology is highly advanced and not bound by legal and moral constraints. The wealthy "Compound" controls the most cutting-edge technology and resources in society. Despite the near depletion of natural resources and severe ecological disruption, they continue to break the boundaries of life for immediate gain. Scientists of the "Compound" freely manipulate species through genetic editing, interfering with the basic materials of life and severely damaging biological diversity, thus disrespecting the dignity of life. Immersed in the superiority and arrogance of being "creators," scientists misuse technology, forcibly intervening in the natural growth processes of different organisms and creating a large number of bizarre scientific products. Under the leadership of the genius scientist Crake, they even designed a perfect new human, which exhibits synthetic and grafting characteristics among multiple species. From the perspective of ecological ethics, these artificial products embody both technocracy and the narrow-mindedness of human self-centeredness, as well as the aggregation of infinite human desires.

The alienation of the relationship between humans and nature is dominated by anthropocentrism. Just as William Leiss pointed out in "The Domination of Nature," the idea of "conquering" nature has led to false hopes. The entire ecosystem (including humans) is understood as material to satisfy people's insatiable desires. It is precisely because of the unlimited amplification of human subjectivity that the binary opposition between humans and nature has been created through the othering and marginalization of nature in order to elevate human subjectivity, leading to the exploitation and harm of natural resources by humans and prompting humans to arrogantly talk about conquering and ruling nature. It is precisely because humans have separated themselves from nature, recklessly using science and technology to arbitrarily alter nature, distorting and trampling on the original appearance and natural attributes of organisms, that the integrity of humans themselves has also been destroyed. Short-sighted and reckless human activities, for immediate gains, have disrupted the balance of the ecosystem, leading to sharp declines in species, depletion of resources, and frequent ecological disasters. Humans disdain the right to non-human existence and development, seeking maximum occupation and domination of the world, leading to the blurring of ethical boundaries and deepening the desire for control over other living beings, worsening the relationship between humans and society and between individuals. Ultimately, the comprehensive collapse of natural ecology, social ecology, and spiritual ecology brings irreversible calamity and destruction to humanity.

3.3. Seeking for Ecological Harmony: Reconstruction of Ethical Order

Atwood initiates her narratives with the concept of "what if" and forecasts the potential appearance of the future world based on present circumstances. She aims not only to evoke emotional responses from individuals in the realms of literature and art but also to compel people to contemplate and rectify their own deficiencies. Furthermore, she encourages humanity to consider how to peacefully coexist with nature within the existing framework of production. The novel portrays a scenario of environmental catastrophe under the dominion of human technology, yet it is not solely a work of criticism. Most importantly, it encapsulates a notion of ecological holism. Through this novel, Atwood prompts individuals to ponder ways to live in harmony with nature and establish a balanced and sustainable ecological habitat.

Atwood attempts to reconstruct the ethical order by first breaking the binary opposition of gender and dissolving the opposition of external images of gender. Many writers emphasize the opposition between feminine and masculine qualities when shaping female characters. Women are often portrayed as sensitive, gentle, weak, and emotional, while men are associated with toughness, bravery, roughness, and rationality. However, when reading Atwood's works, it can be perceived that the characters she creates are often diverse and complex, and the gender traits are weakened. For example, Toby exhibits traditional feminine qualities while also displaying the rational, tough, and decisive qualities typically associated with men. Similarly, many male characters no longer symbolize oppressive power. For instance, the protagonist Jimmy is given some feminine qualities; he is emotional and sensitive, enjoys being close to nature with maternal qualities, and, in the post-human era, is marginalized like women.

Atwood then argues in favor of reconstructing the ethical order around technology and animals. The sensible advancement of technology aids in human understanding and modification of the natural world. Nonetheless, as human confidence and desire grow, so does the notion that humans are superior to all other living things, with animals being seen as "others." This kind of thinking separates humans from nature, human nature from animal nature, and considers that humans are far superior to other animals and should establish a hierarchical order of "human nature-animal nature." In fact, humans are also a kind of animal, and the initial form of human nature is also animal nature, so human nature and animal nature cannot be truly separated. It can be seen from the portrayal of Snowman (Jimmy) that animal nature itself is an important part of human nature. Jimmy has had a close affinity with animals since he was young. When he saw cows and sheep being thrown into the fire, he felt scared and anxious. Although his father explained to him that these animals were already dead and no different from meat and sausages, Jimmy believed that animals with heads were different, and he could see the animals looking at him reproachfully with their burning eyes. Jimmy felt that the suffering of these animals was his fault for not being able to save them. As he grew older, he also sympathized with various modified animals, being unable to bear witnessing cruel animal experiments and being unwilling to consume modified animals with human tissue. When Jimmy became the only surviving human, his animal nature even surpassed his human nature. In the absence of human interaction, Jimmy always made sounds like a laughing hyena, roared like a lion, murmured like Pigeons, howled like a Wolfogs, almost forgetting how humans make sounds.

The animalistic nature of the new human species, Crakers, is even more pronounced. Their genes have eliminated many human traits and instead enhanced animal functions. For instance, they have the vocal system of felines and purr like cats when sick or injured. They even go into heat like baboons. They view animals as companions they grow up with and can communicate with. Since Crakers do not have the concept of humans, when they become curious about Jimmy, he can only answer their questions by using animal characteristics to help them understand. For example, when Crakers are curious about the hair on Jimmy's body, he responds that it's his feathers. When speculating about Jimmy's identity, they attribute a complete animal image to Jimmy. "Snowman was once a bird, but he's forgotten how to fly, and the rest of his feathers fell out...Snowman has wrinkles because he once lived underwater, and it wrinkled up his skin." (9) The design by Atwood does not advocate for the complete abandonment of human nature and a return to animality in order to create a new future. Instead, it tells us that human nature and animality are not binary opposites, nor are they a relationship of domination and being dominated. Animality has always been inherent in human nature. People should be wary of excessive promotion of human nature, blind worship of reason, and the expansion of human-centrism. There should also be a reflection on human behavior, a realignment of the relationship between humans and nature, and a mending of the deficiency of animality in human nature to achieve an ecological harmony between human nature and animality.

4. Conclusion

Atwood portrays the apocalypse and the catastrophic consequences brought about by humanity's insatiable desires. In addition to depicting natural disasters such as resource shortages, droughts, and climate change, Atwood also delves into the societal crisis stemming from human exploitation of biotechnology. Anthropocentrism prioritizes human interests above all else and fosters a divide between humans and nature. Scientists excessively prioritize science and technology over literature and art, contributing to the erosion of humanistic values. The misuse of technology yields dire consequences and threatens human extinction. Male chauvinism leads to the oppression and neglect of women, resulting in the loss of women's identity and reflecting human attitudes towards nature. By identifying the root causes of these disasters, Atwood proposes a path towards establishing a harmonious society. Humans must contemplate their unethical treatment of nature and other non-human species. Embracing ecological holism and striving for ecological harmony is the sole means for human advancement.

The novel depicts ecological disasters caused by technological alienation and issues a warning to humanity about the future and current survival dilemmas through a destructive ecological prophecy. The ecological consciousness in the work carries profound practical significance. Excessive emphasis on technological development while ignoring ecological holism will lead to irreversible ecological disasters. Under the shell of "science fiction," the novel exhibits "ecological" characteristics, demonstrating the author's concern for human survival dilemmas, alertness to ecological crises, and the call for ecological wisdom.

Works Cited

- Atwood, Margaret. *Oryx and Crake*. London: Bloomsbury, 2003. Print.
- Barzilai, Shuli. "'Tell My Story': Remembrance and Revenge in Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* and Shakespeare's *Hamlet*." *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 50 (2008): 87-110.
- Berry, Gregory R. "Review on *Oryx and Crake*." *Organization and Environment* 10, (2004): 549-551.
- Bethune, Brian. "Atwood Apocalyptic." *Maclean* 17 (2003): 86-102.
- Bouson, J. Brooks. "'It's Game Over Forever': Atwood's Satiric Vision of a Bioengineered Posthuman Future in *Oryx and Crake*." *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 39 (2004): 139-56.
- Cooke, G. "Technics and the Human at Zero-Hour: Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*." *Studies in Canadian Literature* 31 (2006): 63-83.
- Yang Lixin. "A Masterpiece of Dystopia – –On Margaret Atwood's New Fiction *Oryx and Crake*." *Journal of School of Chinese Language and Culture Nanjing Normal University* 2 (2005): 59-62.