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AN ECOFEMINISTIC READING OF MARGARET ATWOOD'S *ORYX AND CRAKE*

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ABSTRACT

“Ecofeminism” refers to the movement and philosophy that links Feminism and Ecology. This philosophical movement, born from the union of feminist and ecological thinking, is based on the fact that the social mentality which leads to the domination and oppression of woman is also connected with the abuse of the natural environment. Both women and nature are life sustaining and life giving forces, but their roles are often neglected in the society. Degradation of land and environment by misuse of science, results in the sterility of Nature and the sterility of society comes from Man’s hostility towards Woman. Throughout history, nature is portrayed as feminine and women are often thought of closer to nature than men. In a social sense, childrearing and domestic caretaking has kept women close to the hearth and thus close to nature. The contribution of women towards preserving the environment is immense. Margaret Atwood deals with the issue of woman and nature in many of her novel. This paper tries to analyze the theme of ecofeminism in the novel titled *Oryx and Crake* (2003) by Atwood which presents an apocalyptic vision of the futuristic world. Set in the dystopian society during the second decade of the twenty-first century, the novel points out the crucial issue of human survival in a world driven by lifeless machines. She warns the readers showing the vanity of the human competitions and the quest for progress in terms of ultra-modern technologies which threaten the existence of even the last form of life on the planet drenched in relentless exploitation, ruthless corruption and ecological imbalances.

**Key words:** Feminism, ecofeminism, technology, science, body, animals, capitalism, patriarchy.

Introduction

As mentioned earlier, Ecofeminism is a branch of feminism. The term “Ecofeminism” is believed to have been coined by French writer Francoise de Eaubonn in her book *Le Feminism ou la Mort (Feminism or Death)* in 1974 (Carolyn 184). Ecofeminism strongly emphasizes on the importance of inter-relationship between humans, non-humans and the earth. It connects the exploitation and domination of woman with that of the environment and argues that there is a connection between woman and nature that comes from their shared history of oppression by patriarchal society. Francoise explains the term by stating that how human race could be saved

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by woman initiating an ecological revolution as a way to counter the oppression and destruction of nature (Carolyn 184). In Ecofeminism, the preservation of ecosystems is the prime objective. It offers ways to recognize and counter male hegemony in all matters. Ecofeminism is “ecological” because the preservation of ecosystems is a prime objective, and “feminist” on the basis that it offers up ways to recognize and counter male favoritism.

### **Patriarchal Dualism**

In western society, women are treated as inferior to ‘men’, ‘nature’ is treated as inferior to ‘culture’ and humans are understood as being separate from and often superior to the natural environment. Ecofeminism claims that patriarchal structure justifies their dominance through categorical or dualistic hierarchies: heaven/earth, mind/body, male/female, human/animal, spirit/matter, culture/nature, white/ non-white. One concept in each pair is deemed superior to the other. Ecofeminism posits that as long as any of the dualism exists as an integral component of societal structuring and justification, they will all continue to serve as starting points to justify patriarchy. Therefore all dualism and binary oppositional forms must be dismantled.

### **Ecofeminist Spirituality**

An important strand of Ecofeminism retrieves older myths and religious beliefs in which Nature is revered. They argue that pre-modern cultures have always treated Nature with respect; they learnt that all human and non-human lives are embedded in Nature; they give importance to woman’s knowledge, they legitimize female powers, female bodies and female sexuality. The spiritual strand within Ecofeminism therefore turned to Native American religions, goddess worship in Hinduism and other native cultures.

### **Women and Animals**

Another area of Ecofeminism that needs to be addressed is its connection with animal rights activism. In this sphere, Carol Adams, a renowned ecofeminist, has made explicit links between androcentric, patriarchal treatment of other-than-human animals, particularly focusing on the meat producing industries of U.S.A. and the exploitation of women. Her study, *The Sexual Politics of Meat* (1990) provides the foundation for this field of inquiry. Greta Gaard and Marti Kheel are also recognized as leading ecofeminist voice.

### **Ecofeminist Movements in Literature**

The early ecofeminist literature canonized movements such as the *Chipko Movement* (1970s) in Himalayan, India, *The Green Belt* (1977) in Kenya, *Love Canal* (1978) in New York state have drawn attention to the role of women in dramatizing the links between environmental damage, the human impacts of this, women’s relative lack of power and the strategies this lack of power has necessitated. Early publications that analyze the woman-nature connection in light of the environmental crisis include Ruether’s *New Women/New Earth* (1975), Mary Daly’s *Gyn/Ecology* (1978), Griffin’s *Woman and Nature* (1978) and Carolyn Merchant’s *The Death of Nature* (1980).

From the work of Griffin, Daly, Ruether, Merchant and others in the 1970s, grew a dramatic expansion of Ecofeminism in academic circles during the 1980s and 1990s. Activist movements also increased in the 1980s. Several conferences focusing on Ecofeminism were organized: “Women and life on Earth: Eco-feminism in the Eighties” (1980), U.N. conference on women in Nairobi in 1985, “Ecofeminist perspectives: Culture, Nature, Theory” (1987), a group at the National Women’s Studies Association (1989).

Margaret Atwood, one of the most prolific writers of the present time, was born on November 18, 1939 in Ottawa, Ontario, Canada. Her father, Carl Edmund Atwood, was a Zoologist. Her mother, Margaret Dorothy Killiam, was a former dietician and nutritionist. Atwood was the second of the three children. In 1968, Atwood married Jim Polk; they divorced in 1973. She formed a relationship with her fellow novelists Graeme Gibson soon after.

Atwood has three decades of literary career to her credit. She is known for both the quality and quantity of her writing. She is a B.A. with honors in English language and literature from Victoria College, University of

Toronto (1961), and has studied with Northrop Frye, Jay Macpherson, Kathleen Coburn and many other Canadian literary scholars of repute. As a poet, novelist, short-story writer and essayist, Margaret Atwood holds a unique position in contemporary Canadian literature. Her books have received critical acclaim in the United States, Europe, Asia and her Native Canada. She has taught English and has been writer in Residence at several Canadian and other Universities. With her work published in more than fifteen countries, she has achieved an international repute. Her prominent place in Canadian literature rests as much on her published works as on her efforts to define and give value to her nation's literature.

In writing *Oryx and Crake* (2003), Atwood captures the tone of the twenty-first century ecofeminism. The novel focuses on the early ecofeminist concern of technological annihilation. Jimmy/Snowman is one of Atwood's very few male protagonists who live near a group of primitive human-like creatures whom he calls "Crakers." The novel opens up on a note of environmental issues where the main character of the story wakes in the morning and sees the environment's miserable plight, "On the eastern horizon there's a greyish haze, lit now with a rosy, deadly glow...the distant ocean grinding against the ersatz reefs of rusted car parts and jumbled bricks and assorted rubble sounds almost like holiday traffic" (Atwood 3). Atwood insists that the ecological disasters are the result of man's treatment of nature. She warns us against environmental pollution. Flashbacks reveal that Snowman was once a boy named Jimmy who grew up in a world dominated by multinational corporations and privileged compounds for the families of their employees. Crake/Glenn is his friend and they grow up playing computer games full of bloodshed, watching online surgeries, animals being tortured, executions, suicides, child pornography etc. Oryx is one of the unfortunate little girls who is abused, enslaved and dehumanized by the sex industry against her will:

Uncle En would see if you didn't work hard or tried to run away, or if you kept yourself any of the money you got from the tourists. Then you would be punished. Uncle En's men would beat you and then you would have bruises. They might burn you as well...If you tried these forbidden things often enough-laziness, theft, running away-you would be sold, to someone much worse- it was said- than uncle En. Or else you would be killed and tossed on a rubbish heap, and nobody would care because nobody would know who you are. (Atwood 149)

In this way, children are also abused by man for his personal gains. They are brought far away from their families and homes, devoid of love and care; they are treated with anger and threat all the time. They are told to sell flowers for uncle En. Oryx is particularly successful in this because of her innocence and prettiness. Her status is being emphasized as a commodity. Her value is determined by the amount she earns by selling flowers. However her brother proves a failure in it and later on he runs away from uncle En's custody because he is told to make money by performing sexual favors and doing dangerous messenger work. This incident shows that when man stops taking care of his family; woman finds other ways to survive the family and face the reality. The village women have to sell their children for the sake of money and thus to run the family. As Vandana Shiva has stated in the *Ecofeminism*, "As survival is more and more threatened by negative development trends, environmental degradation, and poverty, women and children develop new ways to cope with the threat"(84). Later on, Oryx is also instructed to perform sexual task for other men. Consequently a man approaches her and takes her with him to a hotel. She is told to take off her clothes and get intimated with the man. Being an obedient child, Oryx does the same and is abused sexually many times in her whole life.

In college, Crake says that Nature and God are the "barriers" that keep human beings in order. According to him, there is no need for a relationship with nature and instead promotes the idea that nature is flawed. Using a technology metaphor, Crake rationalizes murder, war, violence, and overpopulation as the results of flawed human nature. He means that our natural impulses are misguided and destructive. He vilifies nature for humanity's imperfections. Although Crake is Jimmy's best friend, he is the enemy of Ecology and Females around him. Animal abuse is also shown when Jimmy's father kills them and perceives them as combination of proteins

and he feels no regret about locking them up for life, and torturing them for the sake of humanity. Jimmy's mother, Sharon, is against this act of violence. Jimmy's father also tries to construct him in a stereotype way where masculinity is superior than femininity. He helps him in inculcating these traits that are thought to be essential for a boy in patriarchy. As Greer has also mentioned in *The Female Eunuch*, "Boys learnt their male role from father and girls their female roles from their mother" (246-47). As patriarchy considers and encourages men being rational, not emotional, as emotions and tears are unmanly. Jimmy enacts a puppet show in his school making his mother as 'Righteous Mom' and father as 'Evil Dad', "Righteous Mom weeping in kitchen because her ovaries had burst "because of the "sex" with his, "Evil Dad falling upon it and tearing it apart from lust because Righteous Mom was sulking inside and empty Twinkies package and wouldn't come out" (Atwood 68). This sexually brutal behavior of Jimmy's father with his mother apparently reflects men as sexually dominant and women as passive sexual object. Man always exercises this sexual dominance which is given to him by constructed hegemonic masculinity. He always oppresses woman, objectify her sexually, does not treat her as human being and mutilate her very existence. Jimmy's representation of dad with his right hand and mom with his left hand confirms gender hierarchy. Kate Millet explicates the sexual dominance of men and subordination and passivity of women i.e. "sexual behaviour" as "almost entirely the product of learning" as the "product of a long series of learned responses – response to the patterns and attitudes, even as to the subject of sexual choice, which are set up for us by our social environment" (*Sexual Politics*, 32). The humans in Jimmy's life live on corporate compounds and the only animals they interact with, are bio-engineered hybrids. Crake uses his prominent position in order to create the Crakers which are herbivorous humans. His stated goal is to create "floor models" of all the possible options a family could choose in the genetic manipulation of their future children. Crake explains that science created things are as real as nature created ones. He makes no difference in science and nature. He takes Jimmy on a visit to the campus and introduces him as "Jimmy, the neurotypical" (Atwood 239), which means a person having low intelligence level. Then he shows Jimmy a laboratory where a new kind of chickens is in the way to grow- with no head, feathers and feet. It is only a lump of muscle, having a feeding tube:

Those are chickens...chicken parts. Just the breasts. On this one... "But they aren't any head", said Jimmy...he grasped the concept...At least the pigeons of his childhood hadn't lacked heads... "that's the head in the middle" said the woman. "There is a mouth opening at the top; they dump the nutrients in there. No eyes or beak or anything, they don't need those".

"This is horrible: said Jimmy...It was like an animal –protein tuber. (Atwood 238)

Crake has crossed all the limits to satisfy his greed for scientific experiment and fame. Marti kheel rightly describes the state of nature, animal and woman saying that "The image of nature (and women) as mindless objects is typically employed for more practical goals-profit, convenience, and knowledge. Division and control, not conquest, are the guiding motives; the rationality of the detached observer replaces the pleasure of conquest as the psychological mode. The use of animals in laboratories, factory farms, and fur ranches exemplifies this frame of mind, as does the image and use of women as "housewives" and "breeding machines." In the earlier (Beastly) image, nature is seen as a harlot; in this conception, nature is more like a slave or wife" (*Ecofeminism*, 247). But Crake has nothing to do with this and he tells Jimmy about another project of his, a pill that sterilizes people without knowing them. He also hires Jimmy to help in marketing it. At the Rejoov compound, Jimmy sees a human in the Crakers habitat and immediately recognizes her as the girl from the pornographic video. Crake explains that her name is Oryx and that he has hired her as a sexual toy for himself and a teacher for the Crakers to make them learn how to behave and act. Oryx and Jimmy form a relationship, and fearful of Crake knowing about it, Jimmy promises Oryx to look after the Crakers if anything happens to her. After Crake's wonder drug is widely distributed, a global pandemic breaks out and begins wiping out the human race. The hidden factor Crake admits to Jimmy is that these pills will also, "act as a sure fire one-time-does-it-all birth control pill, for male and female alike, thus automatically lowering the population level" (Atwood 347).

Crake's use of this pill thus becomes illustrative of his extreme instrumentalism: other humans not just nature, becomes mere objects to Crake, as only the objectification of humans could allow him to rationalize removing their ability to conceive without their knowledge. Even more distressing the future hidden aspect of BlyssPlus Pill: the pills are also seeded with "a rouge hemorrhagic leading to high fever, bleeding from the eyes and skin, convulsions, then break down of the inner organs, followed by death" (Atwood 380). Realizing that this was planned all along, Jimmy kills Crake, but before dying, Crake kills Oryx. After this destruction of the world, Jimmy is the only person who is left to look after the Crakers. Thus as a result of man's selfishness and patriarchal traits, both woman and nature get harmed in the novel and teaches the lesson that both woman and nature have to be valued to sustain life on the earth. Dido Dunlop has rightly defined ecofeminism in this context saying, "Ecofeminism adds that patriarchy devalues women, and therefore devalues nature, because nature is seen as mother. Women and nature get trashed together. Anything patriarchy associates with women is also trashed: caring, compassion, mothering, emotions, looking after nature, valuing life over money. To survive the climate emergency, we need to know we're part of Mother Nature. To value nature, we must honour women too, and vice versa" (web).

Atwood wants to focus on the fact that excessive use of technology is bringing doom to the human race; therefore the humans should take care of Nature. The novel also focuses on the inferior position and exploitation of women by men. Atwood's writings expose that men are powerful and have most typically possessed typical qualities that shape and cloister the female sex/nature in its particularities. Atwood through her fiction brings out a world where both ecology and human existence face grave danger. Through her writings Atwood has depicted the crucial issue of environmental degradation brought in by the technocratic society and how it has affected the lives of women on this planet. Preservation of biodiversity is a must for the continuation of the human life on the earth.

In sum up, one can say that Atwood was highly influenced by her environment, and therefore environmental issues are of great significance in her novels. Her concern for the environment informs her fears about the future and provides the ground for the speculative fiction. In Atwood's understanding ecological ruins stems from human estrangement from the natural environment, an estrangement fortified by capitalism and consumerism in contemporary societies. Instead she strives to situate the creative, imaginative human species within a larger natural order that inspires ethical treatment of more than human world.

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