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Genetic Engineering And Ecological Catastrophe: An Ecocritical Reading Of *Oryx And Crake*

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Abstract:

This study explores the ecological concerns advocated by Canadian Author Margaret Atwood in one of her compelling dystopian novels *Oryx and Crake*. Instead of improving the existing conditions of human beings and nature, Genetic Engineering, corporate greed, social inequality, oppression of women and genetic splicing bring catastrophe to the ecosystem and they lead the human beings to extinction. On glancing through the ecocritical lens, the themes such as anthropocentrism, environmental apocalypse, genetic engineering, capitalist exploitation of nature, ecofeminism are brilliantly incorporated in this dystopian narrative. The anthropocentric world envisioned by science and technology has created a great rift between the bond of human beings and environment. Human avarice is the root cause for the great damage we encounter in the present world that may suffer endlessly in the dystopian world. This paper evaluates how Atwood's futuristic novel voices for the environmental protection and planet's safety through her speculative writing.

Keywords: dystopian, genetic engineering, anthropocentrism, environment, apocalypse, ecofeminism, exploitation, ecocritical

Introduction:

Margaret Atwood is one of the distinguished contemporary authors who deeply concern about ecological environmental issues in both fictions and non-fictions. On analysing her writing in ecocritical perspective, Atwood's works can be regarded as a powerful exploration of the relationship between humans, nature, and technology, often warning against environmental degradation, unchecked scientific advancement, and the consequences of ignoring ecological balance. She is the author of fifty works of novels, fictions, poetry and graphic novels. Her latest novel *The Testaments* is a co-winner of Booker Prize 2019. *Oryx and Crake* (2006) is the first book of MaddAddam trilogy which includes *The Year of the Flood* (2009)

and *MaddAddam* (2013). Margaret Atwood's exemplary dystopian trilogy weaves a near future devastated by genetic engineering and plague, where those remaining humans must fight to survive.

Ecocriticism and its functions:

The avarice and selfish attitude of human beings have made the earth vulnerable. Nature's resources have been exploited and there has been no considerations in the destruction of the eco system. There is a dire need to address these issues and many movements have been started to raise awareness. One such movement is ecocriticism. In the words of the renowned founder of ecocriticism, Cheryll Glotfelty, "Ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (Glotfelty xviii). It is a critical approach which began in the USA in the late 1980s and the UK in 1990s. Glotfelty adds that "Ecocriticism takes its subject the interconnections between nature and culture, specifically the cultural artifacts of language and literature. As a critical stance, it has one foot in literature and the other on land; as a theoretical discourse, it negotiates between human and the nonhuman" (xix). According to Peter Barry, American's ecological approach of ecocriticism is 'celebratory' in tone whereas British green studies is 'minatory' in tone warning us of environmental threats emanating from governmental, industrial, commercial, and neo-colonial forces.

Dystopian world:

Oryx and Crake portrays highly imagined dystopian world that serves as a powerful ecocritical warning about the dangers of environmental destruction, uncontrolled science, and exploiting corporate power. This dystopia is grounded in real scientific trends and environmental concerns, making it particularly appropriate from an ecocritical perspective. The environment shown in the futuristic world is dirty, infertile, ecologically collapsed, polluted and completely altered. Scientist Crake is responsible for creating crakers who are the majority in the dystopian world by eliminating the human beings with the virus and inventing dysfunctional pill, BlyssPluss. This act is the clear example for the formation of dystopian world. Without worrying about the consequences, the earth is depleted, exploited and made barren.

Genetic Engineering and Ecological Catastrophe:

Margaret Atwood sets the initial setting of *Oryx and Crake* as the disastrous one by projecting ecosystem in a collapsed and devastated condition altered by the genetically engineered projects of the human beings and technologically manipulated inventions. At the beginning of the novel, Snowman is the only survivor of the human-made contagious plague and he has to stay alone in the debris. When he is seen searching for the things which were lost in his old home, the genetically engineered children in the apocalyptic world comes with a few items stored in the sack,

"Oh Snowman, what have we found? They lift out the objects, hold them up as if offering them for sale: a hubcap, a piano key, a chunk of pale-green pop bottle smoothed by the ocean. A plastic BlyssPluss container, empty; a ChickieNobs Bucket O'Nubbins, ditto. A computer mouse, or the busted remains of one, with long wiry tail" (Atwood 7).

Atwood visualizes the dark world with the description of genetically engineered Crakers who are human like hybrid creatures, the pigoons, who are raised for human organ transplantation at OrganInc farms, the wolvogs which are blended of dogs and wolves. Atwood dramatically differentiates the condition of the past world and present world through Snowman who was named Jimmy in the past world.

“The goal of the pigoon project was to grow an assortment of fool proof human-tissue organs in a transgenic knockout pig host- organs that would transplant smoothly and avoid rejection...”(Atwood 25)

Crake, who studied at EduCompounds and was snatched by the Watson-Crick institute for a high price, involves in the highly secret project ‘Paradise’ that involves cloning embryonic organs for the purpose of immortal youth and accumulating money through this unethical invention.

The results of genetic engineering have made the evolution process a mockery and the natural life cycle into a complex maze not to be deciphered by the ordinary. Humans tend to think themselves as Creators and they are in the intention that are vested with immeasurable power to create any forms. This impulsive act of humans are underlined with cautions and consequences by the novelist. Existence of human beings, extinction of non-human forms, the functionality of natural formula and the safety of environment are doubly twisted by the genetic engineering. In order to earn more money, new bio engineered materials have been circulated.

“The students in Botanical Transgencies (Ornamental Division) had created a whole array of drought-and-flood resistant tropical blends, with flowers or leaves in lurid shades of chrome yellow and brilliant flame red and phos-phorescent blue and neon purple.” (Atwood 234). Thus, the natural species have been replaced with human-made species for the commercialisation. Nature and regulated ecosystem don’t have value in the dystopian world as depicted in the novel.

Ecofeminism:

The most important approach within ecocriticism and ecological activism is ecofeminism. Promod K. Nayar says that patriarchal society’s values have resulted in the oppression of both women and nature. It ignores women’s work, knowledge and situatedness. It sets forth the idea that the environmental decay is not only created by anthropocentric attitude of men but also the exploitation of human resources by other human beings. Men dominate both women and nature and assume that both have to be exploited. Margaret Atwood clearly explains the plight of a young girl named Oryx who has been abducted from Asia to America and she is serving as an assistant to Crake. Due to her poverty and bitterness in the childhood, Oryx made a life by starring in pornographic movies which were enjoyed by Crake and Jimmy.

“Oryx was sold to a man who made movies. She was the only one of them that went with the movie man. He told her she was a pretty little girl and asked how old she was, but she didn’t know the answer to it”(Atwood 159).

Vandana Shiva, an eminent ecofeminist from India expresses, “the creation of inequality through ecologically disruptive economic activity arises in two ways: first, inequalities in the distribution of privileges and power make for unequal access to natural resources — these include privileges of both a political and economic nature” (Vandana 70). As Vandana states, girls are forced to have more babies and more children are sold due to poverty in the novel.

Genetic Splicing:

Genetic Splicing is main technology employed by the corporations like HelthWyzer and RejoovenEsense which alter the society and use bio-science to create consumer-driven bio-products. There are many instances shown by Atwood in the novel for this devastating practice which changes the living condition of human beings and the e

“Compared with Martha Graham, Watson-Crick was a palace. At the entrance was a bronzed statue of the Institute’s mascot, the spoot/gider- one of the first successful splices done in Montreal at the turn of the century, goat crossed with spider to produce high-tensile spider milk filaments in the milk.” (Atwood 234)

Huge fake rocks, which looked like real rocks but weighted less made of recycled plastic bottles and tree cacti, Moses Model water, ChickieNobs, genetically modified meat, genetically spliced butterflies, chickens are a few other examples of genetic splicing.

“...Décor Botanicals, where a team of five seniors was developing Smart Wallpaper that would change colour on the walls of your room to complement your mood...”(Atwood 237)

Ecosocialism and Environment

Another sub field of ecocriticism, ecosocialism, is anthropocentric and humanist. David Pepper says, “The basic socialist principles are egalitarianism, eliminating capitalism and poverty, resource distribution according to need and democratic control of our lives and communities” (Pepper 233). Ecosocialism suggests that the difference in distribution of wealth is at the base of experience of environment. Social exclusion leads to environmental exclusion. The persistence of class division is evidently shown by the two divisions, Compounds and Pleeblands in the futuristic society. In Compounds, the highly sophisticated scientists, technicians and their family reside whereas in Pleeblands, which is despised by the aristocratic group, the workers of the factory and farmlands stay. It is clearly explained by Atwood that the capitalistic attitude will get even worsened in the future even after the so called scientifically developed world.

Conclusion:

This study analyses *Oryx and Crake* ecocritically reflecting on the future environmental disasters as envisioned by Margaret Atwood. This novel is written as a cautionary tale, a speculative eco-dystopia that reflects real-world anxieties about genetic splicing and modification, climate change, and ecological collapse. Atwood doesn’t portray the futuristic world in a negative way but she warns the readers how the succeeding generation will have to face the world if the current trend goes unchecked. She invites the readers to rethink their relationship with nature, usage of technology, and suggests the readers to use natural resources effectively for the better use of future generation.

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