

# **Ecofeminism and Ecological Ethic in Society in Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake***

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This paper focuses on the two strands of postmodern ecology, that is, ecofeminism, and the concept of an ecological ethic in society through current ecological philosophies with reference to *Oryx and Crake*, a fictional work of Margaret Atwood. In this speculative novel, nature takes the pivotal role in the development of the characters as well as the theme of the story. It emphasizes a deep respect for the wild while using it to bring about significant changes in the central characters' lives. The paper also methodically charts out the ethical connections of domination of women and male monopolization of resources and power control.

## **Introduction**

Many eco-feminists advocate some form of nurturing, caring environmental ethic to confront the oppression of women and nature by men. Such an ethic recognizes and embraces the multiple voices of women differentiated by race, class, age and ethnicity. An eco-feminist ethical perspective grounded in care and nurturing is pluralist, inclusive and contextual and thus constrains traditional ethics that are based on rules and utilitarian gender roles.

-- Samantha J. Callender

Nature quite literally envelops human beings. It is almost impossible to go anywhere without crossing some form of vast wilderness that remains relatively virgin, untouched by human beings. Human beings try to catch nature even in the most urban environments. He enjoys the comforts and caress of nature. Sometimes having grown weary of the mad rush of the civilized life, human beings crave to run to the simpler, free life found in the wilderness. His greediness compels him to exploit it ruthlessly. He alone is the sole director of ecological destruction.

The major theme of Atwood's novels appears to be the relationship between man and woman, and the distinctive relationship between man and nature. In both the cases, one tries to dominate the other, may be because of the fact that she writes from a woman's point of view. She identifies women with nature and men with the technical assault on nature. Nature is very often

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the victim. Man is pictured as the manipulating oppressor. The exploitation of Nature is paralleled to the exploitation of women by the feminists and this view has been brought under the canopy of 'Feminism' in the label 'Ecofeminism.'

### **Ecological Philosophies – Ecofeminism and Ecological Ethic**

Ecofeminism is a combination of both feminism and environmental protection movements. The term 'Ecofeminism'—the nineties catchphrase for another development in critical theory is especially applicable to Canadian Literature especially to the fictional works of Atwood. Eco-feminism, in order to preserve natural resources and environment, wants to give power to women. Eco-feminism, or ecological feminism, is a term coined in 1974 by Francoise d'Eaubonne. She says that "it is a philosophy and movement born from the union of feminist and ecological thinking, and the belief that the social mentality that leads to the domination and oppression of women is directly connected to the social mentality that leads to the abuse of the natural environment" (12).

Greta Gaard has defined eco-feminism as the "drawing on the insights of ecology, feminism, and socialism, eco-feminism's basic premise is that the ideology which authorities oppressions, such as those based on race, class, gender, sexuality, and physical abilities, is the same ideology which sanctions the oppression of nature" (20). A different voice is heard from the science fiction writer Ursula LeGuin: "Where I live as a woman is to men a wilderness. But to me it is home" (35). Here the female identifies herself with wild Nature as the appropriate context for habitation.

A central precept in eco-feminism states that male ownership of land has led to a dominator culture (patriarchy), manifesting itself in the tragedy of the commons and the exploitation of people. Other eco-feminists claim that the degradation of nature contributes to the degradation of women. For followers of eco-feminism, resource depletion is due to their appropriation by men. Far from being a simple comparison of feminists and ecologists, eco-feminism wants to be a reassignment of rights of women and nature.

Eco-feminists also argue that a relationship exists between the oppression of women and the degradation of nature, and explore the intersectionality between sexism, the domination of nature, racism, speciesism, and other characteristics of social inequality. Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva are of the view that some current work emphasizes that "the capitalist and patriarchal system is based on triple domination of the "Southern people" (those people who live in the Third World, the majority of which are south of the First World), women, and nature" (41).

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### **Oryx and Crake – A Dystopian Novel**

Margaret Atwood published *Oryx and Crake* in 2003, a speculative fiction imagining a dystopian future in which a character called Snowman, possibly the last human left on Earth, roams a devastated planet populated with appalling genetic mutations devised by Snowman's childhood friend, a hubristic scientist known as Crake. The dystopian novel's success is generally considered to be dependent upon its ability to effectively criticize our present world through the extension of its consequences represented within a world dramatically devoid of morals in the future. According to this standard, Margaret Atwood's eleventh novel, *Oryx and Crake*, is a dystopian masterpiece. It takes place in a future world where scientific achievements and particularly genetic experimentation are the focus of society. Mankind's obsession with science ultimately allows the ethically blind idealist Crake to destroy human society.

Atwood is interested in issues linked to ecological ethics, and especially the problem of how unequal access to power results in the imbalances that lead to dystopian worlds. She is, however, more ironic and more uneasy about the idea of Utopia in the modern world, questioning like many ecological philosophers, and the place of 'human nature' in the current environmental, social and political crises. Her choice of setting in *Oryx and Crake* is carefully designed to emphasize certain trends in the current world, showing how it could evolve in the future, and therefore examining the current choices and activities. The novel interrogates one's understanding of the natural and the artificial.

### **Human beings and Environment**

The relationship between human beings and environment is constantly under scrutiny throughout the novel. Atwood uses *Oryx and Crake* to explore what it means to be human and, therefore, what it means to be 'civilized' or part of culture rather than nature, and how this translates into a deeper understanding of the place of an ecological ethic in our society. The idea of apocalypse is central to *Oryx and Crake*, as is perhaps to be expected in what is a millenarian novel. Dystopian science fiction, especially of the eco-SF variety, often uses the idea of apocalypse to illustrate either the impending doom of the human race or humanity's resilience in the face of catastrophe. In *Oryx and Crake*, the narrative shifts between the events leading up to the disaster and its aftermath: the cataclysmic moment when the scientist Crake releases the virus that kills almost the entire human population, the pivot between the two narratives, is only described towards the end of the novel.

As is common in speculative novels that deal with ecological issues, Atwood extrapolates from the current ecological concerns, creating a world that has succumbed to the kind of

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environmental devastation currently predicted. Eleanor Case and Maggie McDonald points out that, “Atwood herself has claimed that the novel is based on certain axioms such as global warming, pointing out, on more than one occasion, that part of the novel was written on a ship in the Arctic where she saw first-hand the melting of the glaciers” (42). Atwood is forthright about placing the novel in the context of environmental issues, which are becoming increasingly pressing.

The particularly valuable aspect of speculative fiction is that it is able to take information such as this and present it imaginatively, using plot and character to speculate on the potential effects of scientific effect. Atwood is careful to build up a dystopian picture of an environmentally devastated world slowly through the novel. This is done via almost casual references to the changes seen in the course of the narrator Jimmy's lifetime, and through his memories as his alter-ego ‘Snowman’, a name which signifies the “Abominable Snowman—existing and not existing...known only through rumours and through its backward-pointing footprints” (OC 8).

Atwood shows the young boy Jimmy and his mother questioning the excesses of the futuristic use of science and technology, paradoxically claimed to have been done in the name of saving mankind. The novel gives a view of what happens when man begins to tamper with nature and morality in search of immorality:

Jimmy's father worked for Organ Inc Farms...he'd been one of the foremost architects of the pigeon project. The goal of the pigeon project was to grow an assortment of foolproof human-tissue organs in a pig host-organ that would transplant smoothly and avoid rejection, but would also be able to fend off attacks by...microbes and viruses, of which there were more strains every year...they were perfecting a pigeon that could grow five or six kidneys at a time. It was much cheaper than getting yourself cloned for spare part or keeping a for-harvest child or two stashed away in some illegal baby orchard. (OC22)

Jimmy's mother is a brilliant microbiologist in the same organization trying to stop harmful microbes from causing damage to these perfect organs created in pigeons. But she has resigned when she comes to understand the commercial objectives, behind such scientific research, better. Jimmy's father does not. Young Jimmy, as a school-going child, learns to use scientific and technological inventions, as he believes, to good use. So, when the family moves to a new residence in the protected Compound of the father's new company, NooSkins, a subsidiary of the gigantic HelthWyzer, Jimmy has “hidden a tiny mike in the living room...so he could listen to stuff that was none of his business. He'd put the mikes together in the Neotechnology class at school; he'd used standard components out of the mini-mikes for wireless compute dictating”

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(OC55). In the postmodern world, it is the prior human attempt to extend its existence through machines that has grave repercussions. Jimmy extends his existence through the machine, but the lesson that he learns by eavesdropping on his parents is one of ethics in the regulation of relationship within bios.

Jimmy's mother protests when her scientist husband begins to celebrate the success of a project for creating neuro-cortex tissue so necessary to stroke victims. Atwood takes care to note the woman/mother's ethically correct scientific concern and pits it against the man's abuse of science and technology and lack of ethical and humanitarian concern for the sustenance of life within the technologically advanced state of civilization represented here. Jimmy's mother leaves them soon after. She goes to the 'Pleeblands' or cities not protected from pollution. She turns into an ecological and environmental protester and courts police-beatings and arrest voluntarily in order to be able to tell the world about where its masters are leading it to and at what cost. It is significant that Jimmy never forgets the values and ecological ethics that she has inculcated in him. Hence he can never accept his father's values. Jimmy's mother's resistance to the excesses perpetrated in the name of a scientific regime reminds of Offred's act of resistance of another life-denying regime in Atwood's earlier novel.

Jimmy grows into a psychologically maladjusted boy who, with his friend, Glenn, begins to live in the virtual world of television shows and internet games. But even in that virtual world, games would remind him of his mother's ethical concern for life-forms. The boys had started playing:

*Extincathon, an interactive bio freak...game....Monitored by Maddaddam. Adam named the living animals, Maddaddam names the dead ones, Do you want to play?...pick one of the two chatrooms—Kingdom Animal, Kindgom Vegetable....Then it would be some bioform that had kadded out within the past fifty years...what had snuffed it. (Pollution, habitat destruction, credulous morons who thought that eating its horn would give them a boner) (OC80)*

The stage is set for the extinction of human beings too as a consequence of Glenn/Crake's (Crake being the name of the extinct bio-form chosen by Glenn for himself in the Extinct on game-site) reaction to the collective folly and crime of mankind in causing environmental degradation and ecological destruction.

Crake grows up and turns out to be a genius. He works on and creates a new race of human beings who will be innocent vegetarians and indestructible. Genetic splicing and bioengineering are combined to create the Crakers in the Paradise Project. The unrealistic-looking

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lines along which the work might have progressed, is found to have been replaced by the only reality other than death in the novel. For instance the bobcats, a species created earlier in order to keep the exploding rabbit population under control, begin to attack the Craker children. But Crake had again managed to anticipate such exigencies and empowered the Crakers to heal themselves by means of collectively organized therapies derived from an amalgamation of technological and animal existence.

Oryx, the love-interest of both Jimmy and Crake, is sold in to sex-slavery as a small child because her village is unable to support itself once the weather becomes so unpredictable and crops fail, illustrating how climate change affects not just food production but social issues too. These and other references to the environmental situations in the novel show the steady transformation from the world of today to the world of the future by referring to places and events. As a result, the scientific predictions of environmental change, which are becoming increasingly prevalent following the droughts and floods covered by recent media, become more immediate through Atwood's extrapolations.

The significant fact about the environmental degradation experienced by Jimmy in his lifetime is that it not only forms part of the background of the novel or stands as a grim warning of a possible future, but also presents his life as a descent into the kind of dystopia represented by a rejection of an ecological ethic. The dystopian world of the novel is not only illustrated through the references to the natural environment, but as a system of socio-political hierarchies. Most people live in the urban sprawl known as the "Pleeblands." Atwood clearly uses current living conditions in many parts of the world as her inspiration for these areas, although Jimmy's first view of the Pleeblands on leaving the confines of his father's company, Helth Wyzer, seems exotic to him:

Rows of dingy houses; apartment buildings with tiny balconies, laundry strung on the railings; factories with smoke coming out of the chimneys; gravel pits. A huge pile of garbage, next to what he supposed was a high-heat incinerator. A shopping mall like the ones at Helth Wyzer, only there were cars in the parking lots instead of electric golf carts. A neon strip, with bars and girlie joints and what looked like an archaeological-grade movie theatre. (OC231)

Atwood invites the readers to reassess their lives in relation to concepts of utopia and dystopia. Jimmy, for example, also sees "vacant warehouses, burnt-out tenements, empty parking lots" and ramshackle huts "inhabited no doubt by squatters" (OC217), recalling the slum-lands of cities in places like South America and Africa, their appearance in North America indicating a

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definite decrease in the general standard of living in Atwood's future. Compounding this vision of the possible future is also the realisation that the news Jimmy grows up with "more plagues, more droughts, more chickenshit boy-soldier wars in distant countries" (OC298) is a reality for increasing numbers of people in today's world, as diseases like SARS, AIDS and Ebola, and wars such as those in Rwanda and the Sudan, indicate.

In contrast to the dystopian-seeming pleeblands, Jimmy grows up in the highly protected and secured compounds attached to the major scientific corporations. The compounds not only resemble a 1950s advertisement for suburban bliss; they also appear to be exemplars of the ecological ethics of care, mutuality and diversity. Life inside the compounds might be strongly reminiscent of ecotopia.

Jimmy's mother's rejection of everything for which Jimmy's father and his employers stand eventually sparks her desire to leave the compound life, but the reaction of the HelthWyzer officials makes it clear that this is not simply a decision to leave her marriage; it is a treasonable offence. Her note for Jimmy indicates that she is aware that a search will be conducted, and her destruction of the home computers indicates her fear of discovery after her escape, as much as it does her disapproval of the work being done on them. Her careful planning, which outwits the CorpSeCorps security guards, enrages them and causes them to question Jimmy and to track his contacts for years after her disappearance. Atwood's insistence on undercutting the apparent utopia of compound life through the events surrounding the escape of Jimmy's mother, ensures that "the supposed security of Jimmy's family is achieved at a high cost by means of implementing a policy of authoritarian monitoring the control" (OC108) writes Eleonora Rao.

Atwood illustrates the ultimate apocalyptic disaster when the novel's antagonist, Crake, uses both his scientific genius combined with his apparent moral depravity to attempt extinguishing, and then recreating, the entire human race. In contrast, the narrative voice of Jimmy/Snowman, the story's protagonist, gradually reveals a world of isolation for those who possess either artistic appreciation or compassion. The descriptions of life prior to the act of bioterrorism and the outline of its effect on Jimmy call into question the notion of 'human nature' and how it can be both the agency of human destruction and the saviour of humanity. The rationale behind Crake's Paradise Project initially seems valid: his plan in designing the Crakers is to isolate what he believes are the main causes of our damaged and broken world, and thereafter to devise a human race that is incapable of replicating humanity's so-called progress, which he sees as being responsible for damaging the planet. He modifies the Crakers' brains to remove what he calls "destructive features, the features responsible for the world's current illness"



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(OC358) such as racism, hierarchy, love, sexuality, or “harmful symbolisms such as kingdoms, icons, gods, or money” (OC359). His hypothesis is that, once destroyed, current civilisation cannot be rebuilt because the surface of the earth has already been mined out. Without minerals and metals, Crake argues, there would be “no iron age, no bronze age, no age of steel, and all rest of it. There are metals farther down, but the advanced technology we need for extracting those would have been obliterated” (OC261). Crake's logic seems valid: if humans are responsible for destroying the world, then it makes sense to alter humans radically in order to ensure this destruction can no longer continue.

The Paradise Project is thus set up to create a type of human that conforms with Crake's idea of a perfect world and his “aesthetic” (OC8). These genetically engineered ‘humans,’ called Crakers after their creator, initially do seem to be a practical path to a utopian world based on an ecological ethic. In fashioning the Crakers, Crake removes racial stereotyping, making each person a different colour, “chocolate, rose, tea, butter, cream, honey” (8), but all with Crake's own bright green eyes. The Crakers are programmed not to kill, as Crake wanted “no more human predation” (OC116), and are able to protect themselves from predators by marking their territory: the men's urine is chemically enhanced to resemble that of the larger predators so that dangerous animals are frightened away (OC182). They are also able to heal themselves by purring over wounds at “the same frequency as the ultrasound used on bone fractures and skin lesions” (OC184). The Crakers eat only vegetable matter and, like rabbits, produce caecotrophs which they then re-eat in order to ensure the maximum digestion of nutrients. They grow so rapidly and reach adolescence after a mere four years, thus eliminating the long period necessary for child-rearing.

Population itself is strictly controlled, as women come into heat only infrequently. When a woman is in oestrus, her buttocks and abdomen turn blue, and after a courtship ritual, she chooses four mates with matching blue penises. Crake thus takes a variety of features from the animal kingdom and designs a human that appears closer to nature, yet is ironically the product of a laboratory experiment.

Crake's method of making the world a better place may seem unusual, but it has particular relevance to ecological philosophy, as many theorists have outlined desires for an eco-friendly future for Earth based on similar ideas to that of Crake. The Crakers, with their restricted reproductive capacities, certainly appear to pose an ideal solution to the problems associated with overpopulation, and the lack of pair bonding amongst them ensures that it “no longer matters who the father of the inevitable child may be, since there's no more property to inherit, no father-son loyalty required for war” (OC195). The infrequent oestrus means there is “no more prostitution,



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no sexual abuse of children, no haggling over the price, no pimps, no sex slaves. No more rape” (OC194).

Atwood herself has argued that there is nothing intrinsically bad about such genetic engineering, but however constructive such creations seem, when science is sold to the highest bidder the questionable morals behind genetic engineering become more obvious. It chills us with presentiments of what genetic research may bring. “The novel plays,” avers Supriya Chaudhuri “with the major themes of modern culture: GM foods, cloning, cryogenics, AIDS, Viagra, species death, organ (not organic) farming” (5).

The opening section of *Oryx and Crake* is extremely important in foregrounding the question of what it means to be civilized, as one is plunged, *in medias res*, into a confusing assortment of scenes experienced by Jimmy as he becomes ‘Snowman’ in the days after the JUVE virus has eradicated humanity. In the first few pages of *Oryx and Crake*, every description is designed to estrange the reader, as is typical of the science-fictional mode. The association of Snowman with pre-civilised man, living amongst scenes of apocalyptic devastation, suggests that he has been reduced to a travesty of civilisation. Atwood returns to the question throughout the novel on what it means to be civilised. But one particular way in which she concentrates the reader’s attention on what it means to be civilised, is through the computer games that Jimmy and Crake play as boys.

In order to create his ecologically ideal Crakers, Crake tries to make sure that he eliminated everything he blamed for the world’s ills: the Crakers are specifically designed without features like emotion, love, imagination or creativity. He believes that imagination is the main downfall of humanity, as it is our ability to imagine our own deaths that is responsible for overpopulation. In the face of environmental crisis, Crake tells Jimmy that animals “put their energy into staying alive themselves until times get better, but human beings hope they can stick their souls into someone else, some new version of themselves, and live on forever” (OC139). Crake is not alone in dismissing ‘culture.’ In the world in which Jimmy and Crake grow up, science and reason are lauded above all else—‘numbers people’ rule the world and ‘word people’ are relegated to the outskirts of society. Jimmy’s own life illustrates this as it becomes apparent to him that his lack of numeracy makes him invisible to his parents because he does not measure up to their ideals. Jimmy rebels against Crake’s attempts to create a human race without acknowledging that to be fully human is to have both reason and imagination. Ironically, therefore, by leaving Jimmy as the Craker’s caretaker, Crake actually leaves a door open into the past and into a world of symbolic thinking: the Abominable Snowman’s backward facing

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footprints join the pre-apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic worlds inexorably, not through the medium of biology, but through that of culture. Even more importantly, the close of the novel also indicates that there are other human survivors of JUVIE. The readers have no idea why Crake's supposedly infallible way to remove humans from earth fails, but the presence of first the voice on the radio, which Snowman hears on his trip to Paradise, and then the two men and one woman who walk past the Crakers down the beach, make it clear that it did. Atwood possibly suggests that human civilisation is more resilient than Crake could have foreseen. As Howells has suggested, that "the zero hour displayed on Snowman's watch could not only symbolise an end, but a beginning with the narrative poised on the edge of a future where history may be about to repeat itself" (OC171). The novel has shown that human culture and civilisation are not as easily destroyed as Crake imagines.

*Oryx and Crake* engages with one of the most important aspects of ecological philosophy: the debate over the divide between nature and culture and its effect on our relationship, as humans with our environment. Much scholarship in ecological philosophy has centred on why it is that humans have mistreated their environment in such a manner that has led to our current environmental crisis. In short, humans have come to use the separation from nature to justify a dualistic or hierarchical relationship of difference to nature. Novels like *Oryx and Crake*, through their speculative character, are able to alert those who dream of an ecological utopia to become more self-reflexive about the realities of living according to an ecological ethic. The novelist instils an urgent desire for the implementation of an ecological ethic in the behaviour of the human beings. She warns that if one does not learn to engage in respectful, mutual relationships with other human beings, then one may indeed face the kind of future into which Jimmy is born.

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