


## Ecological Discourses in Margaret Atwood's Novel *Oryx and Crake*

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### ABSTRACT

Cli-fi is an innovative genre of fiction that modernizes climate science into human stories. Writers of cli-fi discover, what it means to be human in a world that is influenced by warming temperature, powerful storms and rising seas. The cli-fi narratives arouse consciousness about the complex issues of climate change. The novel *Oryx and Crake* by Margaret Atwood, published in 2003, is about a post-apocalyptic world which will be a reality in the future. The novel carries two distinct genres- a pre apocalyptic world and a post-apocalyptic world. The pre apocalyptic world is an exaggerated representation of the mid of twenty first century and the post-apocalyptic world is portrayed as the end of twenty first century. *Oryx and Crake* discusses a world that is completely destructed due to unscientific acts, war, global warming, climate change and diseases. The two genres narrate through the character Snowman who is the only survivor of the destruction. *Oryx and Crake*, towards the end, narrates the ruin of entire living organisms. Snowman enters the Compound and witnesses a number of changes there. The best example is about the pigeons. Once they were meant to help human beings but now, they are cruel creatures. Bio terrorism and the over use of scientific discoveries have changed the entire bio balance of the planet. Most of characters are not affectionate towards each other. The relationship between Oryx and Jimmy is an exception. This is the reason behind Jimmy's forgiveness towards all the activities of Crake against nature. For Jimmy, Oryx is the beautiful part of nature and Snowman longs for the love and care he has once received from Oryx.

**Keywords:** *Cli-fi, global warming, speculative fiction, climate change.*

*"Man is a part of nature and his war against nature is inevitably a war against himself"*

Rachel Carson

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Margaret Atwood is a well-known Canadian writer and an environmentalist. The novel, *Oryx and Crake* discusses a completely destroyed world due to the overuse of scientific discoveries and unpredicted climate change. Through the character Snowman, the only survivor of the massive destruction, the novel portrays two distinct genres: a pre apocalyptic world and a post-apocalyptic world. Snowman's life is designed by extreme weather changes, especially global warming. *Oryx and Crake* is prominent among cli-fi for its ecocritical subject matter. Ecocriticism is a term that refers to the study of literature, art, and philosophies that are concerned with the environment. The major focus is how the environment and ecological subjects are treated in literature and art. It addresses a variety of environmental issues such as global warming, climate change, pollution, species extinction, and non-human exploitation. Ecocriticism, according to Cheryl Glotfelty is:

Simply put, eco-criticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. Just as feminist criticism examines language and literature from a gender-conscious perspective, and Marxist criticism brings an awareness of modes of production and economic class to its reading of the text, eco-criticism takes an earth-centred approach to literary studies. (18)

Usually, climate fiction focuses on one major character who is destined to be the leader to convey the real issues. *Oryx and Crake* contains an anonymous narrator who speaks with an objectivity. The speaker is however lenient towards Snowman, the protagonist. The narrator's voice is more like Snowman. The novel can be viewed as a subjective one as the narration is from Snowman's perspective. His memories are cynical and mournful, as he narrates the scientific ambition raised by Crake, that resulted in the massive destruction of the entire human world. The protagonist of the novel, Snowman, recounts the narrative with his past and present. Snowman is the only survivor of a global pandemic, created by his friend Crake. Most of the narratives move through the memories of Snowman when he was Jimmy in his past. Jimmy has an affinity towards art and nature, but the world of science and technology makes him depressed. Events that happen in a post-apocalyptic era are narrated through the interconnected past and the present of Snowman. The major conflict of the novel is between the ideologies of Jimmy and Crake. When Jimmy stands for humanistic view to solve the world's problems, Crake stands for scientific progress of the world.

*Oryx and Crake* discloses various climate change consequences in the narration. Apart from the other cli-fi novels, *Oryx and Crake* deals with this subject matter in a different way. Most of the cli-fi talks about climate change directly and give awareness to the readers without any complication. In the case of *Oryx and Crake*, Atwood reveals the matter in an exaggerated way,

by presenting a future world to the readers. *Oryx and Crake* narrates the circumstances of a world after a drastic climate change, especially global warming. The setting of the novel is both alien and recognizable. Past and present are mixed up in its setting. Past is the pre apocalyptic world and present is the post-apocalyptic world. In reality, both of these genres are exaggerated versions of the current twenty first century. The present given in the novel includes humans and animals altered by different genetic experiments. Plants are mutant versions and they remain hostile to human beings.

Though cli-fi talks about all climatic and environmental struggles, the major issue it discusses is global warming. *Oryx and Crake* opens with Snowman, the protagonist, sleeping on a tree. He wears a dirty bed sheet and mourns the loss of his beloved Oryx and his best friend Crake. The chapter directs the readers to the efforts of Snowman to combine his past and present lives. The narrative then shifts to decades back. Snowman undergoes a double journey through his past and present. In his journey, he explores the reasons behind his current state of alienated life. The dry climate of Snowman's present time is a warning to the present generation of the twenty first century. Snowman's loneliness is pathetic. "A blank face is what it shows him: zero hour. It causes a jolt of terror to run through him, this absence of official time. Nobody knows what time it is" (3). When Snowman looks at the children of Crake, he understands that they are also sensitive to U. V. rays like him. Whenever sun shines hard, Snowman goes to some shades of trees to protect himself. The aftereffects of global warming are shown through an exaggerated portrayal of post-apocalyptic era. The reasons behind the ecological issues are exposed through the journey of Snowman. *Oryx and Crake* is a futuristic novel and its foremost intention is to give awareness to the people about the upcoming climate issues.

In the pre apocalyptic world, Jimmy lives in a place which is an environmentally degraded area. He and his parents live in a place named Compound, which has high walls and lacks any contact with the neighborhood places. He recounts the memories especially about a bonfire of a huge pile of cows, sheep and pigs. The smell of flesh fills the air and it reminds him of the barbecue in his backyard. He feels high temperature on that day when he suffers global warming. Jimmy's father is a genographer, who maps genetic materials. He works for different "organInc farms" (25), as a part of Operation Immortality. His activities are mysterious. Along with his official work, he develops a multi organizer named Pigoon (25). The goal of the Pigoon project is to grow human tissue organs. The discoveries of Jimmy's father are not nature friendly. Jimmy's mother Sharon, on the other hand never supports the unscientific activities

of her husband. She slowly falls into depression due to her parting with nature. The ambience of the place they live is slowly changed to a city. The dry climate has altered the natural existence of plants and animals. The people in Compound, hate their existence there.

Compound people did not go to the cities unless they had to, and then never alone. They called the cities the pleeblands. Despite the fingerprint identify cards now carried by everyone, public security in the pleeblands was leaky: there were people cruising around in those places who could forge anything and who might be anybody, not to mention the loose change-the addicts, the muggers, the paupers, the craziers. So, it was best for everyone at OrganInc farms to live all in one place, with foolproof procedures. (27)

*Oryx and Crake* brings a detailed account of the lives of people in a suppressed world. They live in a way that is not nature friendly. Their houses known as “Modules” (30) are similar to the lives in the apartments in the present era. They fail to establish any connection with nature. They create artificial pools, parks for children, shopping malls and restaurants. They do not have any contact with the people from other villages and cities and attempts to replicate an organic life, in an unscientific way. The picture of Compound shows the radical transformation of the world. The present-day invasion of powerful corporations and the changes they bring into the environment is portrayed through Jimmy’s life. Jimmy’s father is a representative of the present-day corporate, where as his mother is rebellious towards it.

The genetically modified pigeons are actually not meant for food. When climate change alters the environment, people start to eat the meat of pigeons, by ignoring the fact that they are bioforms manufactured by cooperates. In the twenty-first century, people’s addiction towards junk foods is also satirically presented here. “Three blocks along he stops: seven pigeons have materialized from nowhere. They are staring at him, ears forward” (313).

The importance of climate fiction is that, it gives a solution to the betterment of the planet. Atwood creates Snowman as a representative of the future generation. Through various incidents, the novel showcases climate change and global warming issues. In the midst of a forest, at noon time, Snowman cannot tolerate the UV rays of sun. The efforts he takes to save himself from UV rays, is a warning to the future generation. Genetic transformation and the consequent changes are narrated through the intolerability of Snowman towards sun rays. The importance of climate fiction is that it gives a solution to the betterment of the planet.

Noon is the worst, with its glare and humidity. At about eleven o'clock Snowman retreats back into the forest, out of sight of the sea altogether, because the evil rays bounce off the water and get at him even if he is protected from the sky, and the he reddens and blisters. What he could really use is a tube of heavy-duty sunblock, supposing he could ever find one. (37)

Global warming is the most dangerous after effect of climate change. When the average temperature increases, people and other living organisms get affected by the heat. Snowman is a victim of all the cruelties done towards nature by the people around him. In his sleep, he dreams about floating in a cool swimming pool, which expresses his craving towards cool temperature. *Oryx and Crake* not only talks about climate change and its after effects on earth, but also explains how climate change reshapes human beings. When Snowman becomes the victim of all these changes, his friend Crake causes the changes. Crake's revenge against a corrupted society and corrupted social orders make him act against nature. He does not have any empathy towards the suffering of others and he believes that the earth will be a better planet when there is no presence of human beings. He stands for scientific progress through many discoveries and finds many rational solutions to the world's problems. He discovered medicines to avoid diseases. He has also made Crakers, the artificially created fellows devoid of diseases. As most of the discoveries are not nature friendly, they adversely affect the planet. The main reason behind all the climatic issues in *Oryx and Crake* is the antihuman activities of Crake. He has designed the children of Crake in an adverse way.

Crake made the bones of the children of Crake out of the coral on the beach, and then he made their flesh out of a mango. But the Children of Oryx hatched out of an egg, a giant egg laid by Oryx herself. Actually, she laid two eggs: one full of animals and birds and fish, and the Children of Crake had already been created by then, and they had eaten up all the words because they were hungry, and so there were no words left over when the second egg hatched out. And that is why the animals can't talk. (96)

Atwood narrates a fictional background to make the readers aware of the climate change caused by the activities of human beings. *Oryx and Crake* portrays a world, where over-consumption and environmental negligence lead to the total destruction of the ecosystem. Atwood presents a number of imaginary characters and their unbelievable life experiences. The post-apocalyptic life of Snowman witnesses the environmental destruction in his past and present. In the current world, people try to become Crakers, who have no diseases and life issues. Life will be pathetic and people will have to live a suffocating life amidst the global warming issues. In *Oryx and Crake*, Snowman and the Crakers, the children of Crake, fear sunlight more than anything. The

beach, where they live, witnesses the rise of sea level. All these are presented as the after effects of the activities of people in the pre apocalyptic world.

Atwood presents the climate change clues in *Oryx and Crake* both explicitly and implicitly. The incident that happened during the graduation day of Jimmy and Crake in the HelthWyzer High is a perfect example of climatic disorder. It is a warm day of February. Usually, the graduation ceremony is set in the month of June. As it was hotter than they expected, it was decided to postpone to February. They expect that, February will be a cool month, though the situation again changes. February also becomes a hot and sunny month, and June becomes wet and cool. The climate change due to global warming is focused here. Days turn out to be unfortunate for Jimmy. Crake achieves a great placement than Jimmy, as Jimmy is average in studies. Jimmy feels uncomfortable there and he slowly confronts depression, which is his first traumatic experience. The ecological changes destroy people's peace of mind and slowly push them towards depression. This is authenticated through the life of Jimmy, who even loses his family's support during this time. Ecopsychologists believe that each person has an innate love for the environment and they need to get pampered by it. Theodore Rozak is the first person to use the term ecopsychology in his text, *The Voice of Earth*. Rozak defines:

Ecotherapy or green therapy or nature therapy boosts the mental health of an individual and aids them to recover from the bitter past. It is important as any other treatments. Therapies like, dark nature, adventure therapy, green exercise, theopathic farming falls under the category, eco therapy. (13)

One of the title characters, Oryx is mainly traumatic because of the ill-treatment towards nature by people. She is alive only in the memory of Snowman. Snowman waits for her presence even in his post-apocalyptic life. Snowman craves for a happy life with Oryx without global warming. When Oryx describes her childhood, she remembers the beautiful village where she is brought up. In her memory, Oryx values the greenery she has enjoyed once and laments over the loss of such happiness. *Oryx and Crake* also describes the need of a world of beauty and freshness through the memory of these characters. In the mid of twenty first century there is no greenery around them. The faded memory of Oryx is expressed as she says, "It was a village, said Oryx. A village with trees all around and fields nearby, or possibly rice paddies. The huts had thatch of some kind on the roofs-palm fronds? - although the best huts had roof tin. A village in Indonesia, or else Myanmar?" (115).

*Oryx and Crake* provides more information about genetic alteration, which is unscientific and against the natural existence. Crake is the major character in the novel who creates genetic alteration. Crake has designed the Crakers (his genetic alteration) to mate only once in three years to avoid the growth of population. The population of the pre apocalyptic world is out of control. The sustainable energy is affected by climate change and global warming. People do not have enough food to sustain their lives. Crake creates some capsules to control appetite. Through his activities, Crake moves towards a complete destruction of the natural world. Snowman in the post-apocalyptic world is forced to live on a tree to save himself from high temperatures. The anti-environmental activities of Crake is revealed when Snowman makes a trip back to the Compound and remembers the discoveries of Crake. In Compound, Snowman finds big butterflies that have undergone genetic changes. In Crake's Bio Defense lab, there are large human friendly dogs in cages, with artificial genetic modification.

Many people believe that, nature is the art of God and all the creation exemplifies the power and presence of God. Crake does not believe in God and nature, while Jimmy is attached to God and his creations. Crake rejects the idea of respecting nature by giving a capital N. According to Jimmy, "Nature is to zoos as God is to churches" (242). In a conversation Jimmy and Crake discuss about God and nature: "I thought you didn't believe in God, said Jimmy. I don't believe in Nature either, said Crake. Or with a capital N" (242).

On his trip to Compound, Snowman sees only a few plants and creepers. When noon approaches, he tries to find a shelter to save him from the solar radiation. In the twenty-first century, human beings are suffer due to extreme temperature and other climatic disorders. It is pathetic that, people frightfully look at the primary source of energy, the sun. *Oryx and Crake* talks about a condition in the mid of the twenty first century and how it affects the future generation terribly. "The sun is climbing higher, intensifying its rays. He feels light headed. A thick tendril slithers away, flickering its tongue, as his foot comes down beside it. He needs to pay more attention" (224).

The impact of the destruction of ecosystem is portrayed through Snowman's visit to his native place. In *Oryx and Crake*, the ill-treatment towards nature causes a complete destruction of human generation and leaves only one man alive. The plants and trees invade the buildings of the former civilization. Crake has attempted to save the human generation from diseases and death, though the result is just the opposite. Margaret Atwood connects nature with humans. She explains the ongoing corporate greed, genetic cloning and other manipulations of nature.

Atwood displays other issues connected with climate change, like physical and psychological illness along with global warming. The major characters undergo traumatic experiences due to the unexpected changes in nature. Atwood opines that the increase in population may result in the destruction of environmental sustainability. *Oryx and Crake* is about the end of an imaginary civilization which is actually an exaggerated version of the twenty first century itself. “The sky is the pearly grey-pink of early morning, hardly a cloud in it. The landscape has been rearranged since yesterday” (313). It is a warning that, people have to face the seeds of their actions. Environmental degradation, global warming and natural hazards are inevitable consequences of the ill-treatment towards nature by human beings.

In the post-apocalyptic world, the climate of Compound and the childhood place of Jimmy, has undergone changes. Sometimes the temperature rises too high and sometimes it rains heavily. The artificially created pigoons fail to tolerate storm and rain. The sky has changed to greenish yellow. *Oryx and Crake* shows a complete rearrangement due to the overuse of science. The change in the behaviour of the genetic clones, pigoons, is also changed according to the climatic disorders. Jimmy, in the past, is in a confused state when he loses his job. He wants to do something for nature and the environment though others believe that humankind is doomed by the invention of agriculture. Jimmy, who rejects their opinion, loses the companionship. Several people like Crake never respect nature and their consideration is only towards the monetary benefits out of it. Jimmy, who feels trapped in an island where no one supports him, gradually falls into depression. The fall of nature leads to the destruction of human peace. The place is affected by plague, famines, floods and droughts. Many issues towards women and girls are also reported at that time as in the twenty first century.

People around Jimmy wrongly believe that agriculture is the root cause of all the issues in the world and they fail to understand the climate changes created by themselves. They believe that, life sustains through agriculture. It increases the human population and creates all the issues that adversely affect the human beings. Jimmy argues against this absurd philosophy. The upcoming news reports about climate and environmental issues make him realize that the attitude of friends has destroyed the planet’s smooth run. In effect, humans are doomed by themselves. At the same time Crake is busy with his invention of new viruses to spread diseases, in order to reduce human population. Crake’s Uncle Pete is the first victim of his invention and Jimmy is totally depressed to know all these cruelties. Jimmy’s mental state is



equal to that of many environmental activists, who are unable to do anything against the big corporate businessmen.

*Oryx and Crake*, towards the end, narrates the ruin of entire living organisms. Snowman enters the Compound and witnesses a number of changes there. The best example is about the pigeons. Once they were meant to help human beings but now, they are cruel creatures. Bio terrorism and the over use of scientific discoveries have changed the entire bio balance of the planet. Most of characters are not affectionate towards each other. The relationship between Oryx and Jimmy is an exception. This is the reason behind Jimmy's forgiveness towards all the activities of Crake against nature. For Jimmy, Oryx is the beautiful part of nature and Snowman longs for the love and care he has once received from Oryx. The dilapidated state of earth is narrated in Snowman's visit to the Compound. The fall of everything including, men, women, animals, trees and nature is evident in the novel.

In cli-fi, the major element is suppositional in nature. Even though, Snowman survives the pre apocalyptic world, the wound on his foot results in his death. He uses over dosage of antidots to get relief from pain on his foot. Crackers help Snowman on his last days which signifies a hope towards the future world. The last moment of Snowman ends in a positive note when, he hears the voices of *Oryx and Crake*, as consoling musings. "Crake is watching over you, he'll say. Oryx loves you. Then his eyes close and he feels himself being lifted gently" (426). The novel ends ambiguously by emphasizing the uncertainty of nature.

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