

Depictions of Ecological Collapse in Margaret Atwood's Oryx and Crake

Areeba Batool

PhD Research Scholar (English Literature), The Women University, Multan
batoolareeba970@gmail.com

Dr. Durr-e-Nayab

Assistant Professor of English, The Women University, Multan
durrenayab@wum.edu.pk

Abstract:

The paper attempts to explore the image of ecological collapse in form of Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*, speculative fiction novel that interrogate the implications of unbridled scientific experimentation, corporate greed, and environmental degradation. Atwood creates a dystopian world in which ecological disaster is neither a potential danger in the far distance, nor in the near future. It is at hand. In the apocalyptic world through the view of protagonist, Snowman, the novel provides us a ruined post-apocalyptic world with the ravages of climate change, genetic engineering and collapse of society. Therefore the main purpose of this paper is to analyze how Atwood portrays ecological collapse as a literal and symbolic part of the plot. Based on the premises of ecocritical theory and posthumanist ideas the paper analyses the intersections between human agency, environmental ethics and speculative imagination. The outcomes implied that the novel may serve as a cautionary tale, describing why environmental irresponsibility and ambition for the cyber-garden paradise might be our final destiny and urgent doubt about our present ecological trajectory. The findings of this study also exhibited an exploration of ecological collapse, spurred by unbridled scientific experiment, corporate greed, and environmental contamination.

Keywords:

Oryx, Crake, Eco-criticism, Literature, Novel and the relationship between human and nature

Introduction

The depiction of ecological collapse in literature is a towering mirror that reflects humanity's rapid increase of the environmental anxieties and disaster tendencies due to unsustainable actions. As global warming accelerates, and ecosystems deteriorate, more and more writers have drawn on fiction to address the consequences of these catastrophes. This literary engagement called the "cli-fi" or climate fiction explores what happens when degradation of the environment causes societal turmoil, cautionary tales and hope lines (Rishma and Gill, 2024).

The phrase "cli-fi" has risen in prevalence over the past decade as a label for a genre of books on climate change and the failure of societies into cosmic ruin. Examples from early on include J.G. Ballard's *The Drowned World* (1962) [which] envisages post-apocalyptic landscape under the effects of global weather warming which drowns much of the land on the planet and Octavia E. Butler's *Parable of the Sower* (1993) which describes a world sullied by inequalities of climate and society. These works prepare the ground for a wider development of ecological topic of literature.

Ecological collapse, as a setting, is frequently used in literature to discuss human resilience, sociotechnical systems, and ethical puzzles. For example, in the case of *The Road* (2006), Cormac McCarthy describes an inhospitable world devoid of life but describes a desperate search for survival by a father and son. Similarly to this – Karen Anderson’s short story “The Ghost Birds” embraces the image of the future when humans are surrounded by nothing but the ghost ones of once living birds, and talks about the sense of loss and the human compassion to nature.

Survival, adaptation and the critique of consumerism are recurrent themes in the literature on ecological collapse. Margaret Atwood’s *Oryx and Crake* (2003) is an anti-novel that addresses the issue of genetic engineering and corporate greed. (Linda, 2012 p. 61) Corporate greed uses scientific advancements and scientific madness is the result. These narratives often question humanity’s role in environmental degradation and the moral choices that lead to ecological crises.

Literature not only reflects societal concerns but also influences public perception and policy regarding environmental issues. The lack of climate change narratives in literature contributes to a collective denial of environmental realities. By highlighting the absence of climate change in fiction, Ghosh calls for a cultural shift to address the impending ecological challenges (Gosh, 2016).

Based on the above discussion, it is to be said that the present study is based on the exploration of ecological degradation in the novel *Oryx and Crake* that already has been discussed above. Through this particular study, the researcher will examine how human beings can cause natural disaster by making their scientific experiments.

1.1 Synoptic Overview of the Novel

Oryx and Crake (2003) by Margaret Atwood is a science fiction novel that is focused to explore the themes of genetic engineering, corporate power, environmental collapse, and the dangers of playing god with science.

The story has been unfolded through the eyes of Snowman, formerly known as Jimmy, who appeared to be the last human survivor after a man-made plague wipes out most of humanity. He reflected on his past friendship with Crake, a brilliant but morally ambiguous geneticist, and his complicated relationship with Oryx, a mysterious woman connected to both men. Crake creates a new species of people, a species of Crakers to “improve” the human race – GMO humans who live in harmony with nature and are without human flaws.

As Snowman fought for life and sheltered the Crakers he wrestled with guilt and memory showing how Crake’s vision had caused the apocalypse.

1.2 Statement of the Problem:

Margaret Atwood’s *Oryx and Crake* is a horrifying picture of the ecologically crippling impact of uncontrolled scientific experimentation, corporate greed and environmental pollution. In the book Atwood decries humanity’s careless exploitation of nature through a dystopian future informed by climate change, species extinction and ecological instability. The goal of this research is to characterize the representation of ecological collapse in the given novel and identify the socio-political thesis Atwood encodes through these illustrations. It also tries to probe the consequences of such literary presentations on current discourse surrounding the environment.

1.3 Research Objectives:

- 1- To analyze the literary representation, of ecological collapse in *Oryx and Crake*.
- 2- For the identification and interpretation of symbols, metaphors, and narrative technique of representation of ecological themes.
- 3- To examine the contribution of the novel to contemporary eco-critical and environmental discourse.

1.4 Research Questions:

- 1- In what manner Margaret Atwood portrays ecological breakdown in *Oryx and Crake*?
- 2- How does Atwood use narrative strategies and symbols to mean environmental degradation?
- 3- How the particular novel contributes to contemporary eco-critical and environmental discourse?

1.5 Significance of the Study

This study is significant for several reasons:

It contributes to the growing body of eco-criticism by focusing on a contemporary dystopian work. It highlights the role of literature in raising awareness about environmental issues and influencing public consciousness. It offers insights into how fiction can reflect and critique real-world ecological threats, potentially guiding environmental ethics and policy discussions. It encourages interdisciplinary dialogue between literature, environmental studies, and socio-political theory.

2.Literature Review

Tatjana et al. (2024). Conducted a qualitative research that was based on the exploration of ecological degradation in the context of literary works. The paper was focused to employ the framework that was comprised of several methodological approaches including ecology, postcolonial ecocriticism and ecofeminism. However, the main objective of this study was to examine how literature portrays the relationship between human and natural entities, ecological degradation and the cultural implications of ecological crisis. The results revealed a remarkable trend in terms of literary works towards spreading awareness among the masses about environmental issues. The findings also asserted that author seem to incorporate nature related themes into their writings to reflect a growing consciousness about ecological concerns.

Asenath and Santhanalakshami (2021) conducted thier research within an aim to explore the relationship between human and natural environments. The paradigm was qualitative and the main veritable of the study was to see The results of this study provided a deep insight into the role that invironment plays in shaping literary genres.

Nahdhiyah et al. (2023). Through their research journey explored the relationship among human beings, nature and God in the context of the novel *Alchemist*. For data analysis purpose, the researchers applied the Miles and Huberman analysis technique following the certain steps like data reduction, then data presentation and the final step was to draw conclusions. The results suggest that literary works such as the novel under this investigation keep the potential to spread a strong awareness among the reading audience about the relationship between human beings, nature and then their ultimate connection with God as being their creator.

Masuga et al. (2018) through their qualitative study examined the concept of ecological degradation and climate change in the selected of Nigerian literature. The results of this study asserted that the effects of climate change can be more dangerous than HIV AIDS if the practical steps are not taken to abolish its roots and address the menace by the officials. The results further recommend that the government must pay the special attention to spread awareness among the masses regarding the need to protect the environment.

3. Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative literary analysis approach, grounded primarily in ecocriticism and supported by Garrard's (2004) theory. The primary text, *Oryx and Crake*, is analyzed thematically with a focus on representations of environmental degradation, climate change, biotechnology, and species extinction. The methodology also encloses intertextual analysis where there is an exploration of Atwood's work in connection to greater dystopian and environmental literature. This interdisciplinary and interpretive model provides a highly refined ability to interpret Atwood's critique of current ecological problems with speculative fiction.

4. Data Analysis

Margaret Atwood's dystopic fable, *Oryx and Crake* (2003), combines a world corrupted by ecological destruction, over the top scientific progress, and the destruction of society. Atwood builds a world in which ecological and ethical boundaries are trespassed, catastrophically, through the experiences of the main character Snowman (formerly Jimmy). This analysis looks at the discussion of ecological collapse in the novel and aims to follow where the texts lead as to understand how Atwood critiques both environmental and societal issues of the current time period.

1. Environmental Degradation and Climate Crisis

Atwood pictures a world that has been subject to extreme weather patterns culminating from climate change – unpredictable rainfall, drought and oscillation of temperature, and so on. These environmental stresses lead the crop failure and the shortage of food all over. Even such small things as Snowman internalizes the unstable weather conditions:

“The weather's so weird it can no longer be forecast... the crops suffer from waterlogging, drought and terrible conditions” (Atwood, 2003, P. 13).

This representation reflects the world's fears regarding agricultural and food security effects of climate change. According to the novel, this form of environmental instability is a direct result of the persons negligence and the exploiting nature of the use of the natural resources.

2. Ethical Implications of Genetic Engineering

At the center of the story runs the preoccupation with genetic engineering; that drive to make the Crakers—genetically-engineered and genetically-enhanced creations of Crake who will be the ideal successors of humanity. The need for this bioengineering on the part of Crake is grounded in the fact that concept that humanity's essential flaws including violence and environmental destruction require radical answers. He states:

“You can't couple a minimum access to food with an increasing population for ever. Homo sapiens just appears unable to cut himself off from the supply end (Atwood, 2003, P. 31).

This view puts greater emphasis on the ethical paradox of appealing to the developed science to solve the societal issues, a question of moral relativity

to the role of God that plays as well as all the unintended consequences generated by using a scientific method of problem-solving.

3. Corporate Control and Environmental Exploitation

The novel criticizes the part that corporations play in environmental degradation. Firms take advantage of natural resources and life in the name of profits above the ecological sustainability. For instance, the production of hybrid animals, such as pigoons and rakunks, are in the interests of corporate but do not take into account ecological revenues. Atwood uses the space of the novel to describe this corporate dominance, separating elite compounds from the poor “pleeblands” outside of their boundaries in the focus on the difference between corporate dominance and environmental neglect.

4. The Collapse of Natural Ecosystems

Atwood sets out to describe the damage of the natural ecosystems by the human interference and environment neglect. In the novel, we learn that ecosystems, once flourishing, are destroyed creating a decimation of diverse species to extinction, and environmental degradation. This ecological collapse is the backdrop from which to tell this story and paints a picture of the consequences that come from disregarding nature.

5. Symbolism of Nature’s Resilience

While roiling ecological catastrophe is everywhere, Atwood is introducing symbols of nature’s resilience. After the catastrophe: Snowman notes as follows:

“Something like grapevines is in every direction, covering the windowsills, covering its way in through the split up windows and up onto the bars and grillwork... It won’t take long to erase any visible signs of habitation.” (Atwood, 2003, P. 40).

This imagery proclaims the existence of a natural ability to reclaim and to renew after destruction caused by man-made activities. Atwood is able, in this usage of symbolism, to offer a message of hope and the possibility of ecological recovery; as humanity must learn from what it’s done.

6. The Role of Maternal Love and Human Connection

Atwood makes emphatic that maternal love and human connection are core values that survive the times of the ecological and societal collapse. Just like Oryx and Snowman do, in a technological world full of environmental destruction everything comes down to love and relationships. For example, Oryx has a desire for a maternal love:

“She herself would prefer to have her mother’s love—still, she professes to believe in it, and the same love that accompanied her through the jungle in the form of a bird so she would not be too frightened or lonely” (Atwood, 2003, P. 65).

This emphasis on relationships between people highlights the novel’s criticism of a culture that has forgotten some of its basic tenets in its effort for advancement and dominance.

Findings & Discussion

Set in a dystopian future against the background of ecological breakdown, Margaret Atwood’s, one of the foremost contemporary writers, Oryx and Crake cautions of the future of human race. With the narrative vision of Snowman, the novel looks at the results of scientific experiments that went out of control, corporate greed and environmental degradation. This section explores the results and discussion related to the ecological collapse depiction

of the novel, exploring the grounds for this collapse and the consequences for the human and the planet.

Atwood criticizes the reckless cultivations of ecological balance that are driven by genetic engineering. Firms such as HelthWyzer and OrganicInc Farms, make genetically modified organisms such as pigs with human DNA and headless, legless chickens for corporate gain. Such creations interfere with natural ecosystems and the problem of interference of human intervention in nature becomes ethical in question.

Crake, a major character exponentiates the poles of scientific ambition. His creation of BlyssPluss a drug which in turn unleashes a virus that ends the human race, gives a picture of the jeopardy one creates by playing god without risking the wider ecological consequences. This act is Atwood's warning about how scientific pursuits that take innovation more seriously than ecological and ethical considerations, are dangerous.

The novel demonstrates how corporate bodies give preference to earning than environmental sustainability. Sequestration of the rich by corporation creates wealth and poverty with the rich in sanitized disease free zones and the poor who live in polluted hazardous areas. This separation inflates the social inequalities and plays a role in the environmental degradation .

Crake's deeds enhance the malignant effects of corporate driven agenda. And with BlyssPluss, orchestrating a pandemic, he removes the human population and all that remains is a planet where corporate interests have killed off the species it had once abused. This act is an indictment to exploitative capitalist systems which do not care for the long term ecological health of the planet.

The world in which Atwood describes a climate change ravaged world proves to be a warning. The novel outlines changed climate patterns; unpredictable seasons, incredibly strong sun streams etc. which destabilizes the environment. Such changes disturb agricultural practices and compromise food security, so that real-world issues about the consequences of global warming are raised.

The novel's environmental devastation corresponds to the modern scientific scenario regarding the consequences of climate change. Increased sea heights, natural calamities and loss of biodiversity are effects of human caused environmental changes. Atwood's narrative puts urgency in the need to address climate change before dystopian presents themselves.

The novel canonizes dramatic ethical questions of man's position in environmental management. Those types of characters (Jimmy and Crake) are having to deal with the moral issue regarding the consequences of their actions as well, which involve vindicating destructive behaviors as a prerequisite for development or survival. This moral ambivalence is intending to ask the readers what they are responsible to do about the environmental crises.

Atwood implies that ethical considerations should be used to chasten the activities of science and corporate initiatives. No presence of ethical oriented Councils or Legislature in the novel's society summarily leads to uncapped exploitation of warm earth by the novel's denizens and that too with catastrophic consequences. This is a reminder that the ethical way of dealing with the environmental problem is needed.

The Crakers, the genetically modified organisms made by Crake, are a sign of a return to an ecological balance. Blessed to live in harmony with nature, they are a utopian idealization of human possibility to co-universe with nature. Snowman's service as their caretaker underlines the possibility for reclamation and ecologic renewal despite the large scale failure.

The Crakers also point to the limits of human disturbance, though. Their existence poses a moral question whether one can engineer new life forms, and issues exogenous damaging effects of such exercises. Atwood employs the Crakers in order to investigate such ideas as creation, responsibility and complexities of ecological balance.

Conclusion

Margaret Atwood's novel, *Oryx and Crake* opens an extremely deep study of ecological collapse according to the aspects of uncontrolled scientific experimenting, corporate greed and environment deterioration. All through the novel's narrative and characters one can read a warning of what may happen if we ignore ecological and ethical concerns. It prompts readers – to think about their role in the maintenance of the environment, their actions impact the whole planet on the long term.

Future Implications

1. Ecological degradation can also be studied in some other novels written by Margaret Atwood by future researcher.
2. They can do the comparative study of Eastern and Western literature having an aim to examine the relationship between human and natural world.

References

- Atwood, M. (2003). *Oryx and Crakes*. New York, Doubleday.
- Asenath, T. J. ,& Santhanalakshami,A. (2021). A Study of Ecocriticism on the Relationship between Nature and Human Environment. *Journal of Language and Linguistics Study*, 17(2). 1285- 1289.
- Atwood, M. (2003). *Oryx and Crake*. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart.
- Estok, S. C. (2009). "Environmental Ruin and the Consequences of Climate Inaction." *Ecocritical Studies Quarterly*, 15(3), 85-97.
- Lawn, J. (2007). "Unethical Bioengineering and the Distortion of Ecosystems." *Environmental Ethic Journal*, 29(2), 148-160.
- Mohamad, M. A. S. (2022). "Ecocritical Reading of Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*." *Egyptian Journal of English Language Studies*, 11(1), 101-116.
- Masuga et al. (2018). Perception of Ecological Degradation and Climate Change in the Selected Nigerian Literature. *International Journal of Humanities and Social Studies*, 6(1). 2321-9203.
- Nahdhiyah et al. (2023). Ecological Study on the Relationship between Human, Nature and God in The Novel *Alchemist*. *Cogent Arts and Humanities*, 3(2). 3-9.
- Saund, G. S., & Samy, K. (2023). "Eco-critical Dystopia and Anthropocentrism in Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*." *The Scientific Temper*, 14(3), 741-746.
- Tatjana et al.(2024). Ecocriticism in literature: Examining Nature and the Environment in Literary Works. *Educational Administration: Theory and Practice*, 30(6). 2162-2168.

