



Unraveling the fabric of society: Violence, race, and social critique in Margaret

Aarif Afzal Dar

Research Scholar and Junior Research Fellow, University of Kashmir, Jammu and Kashmir, India

Abstract

When human ambition surpasses ethics, what happens? *Oryx and Crake* by Margaret Atwood forces readers to face hard realities about human nature, the moral ramifications of technological advancement, and the long-lasting effects of social injustice. This paper looks at the novel's use of speculative fiction to question social norms, race, and social stratification. Atwood highlights the devastating effects of corporate greed and technological advancement while exposing the ubiquitous nature of violence as a fundamental aspect of human behavior through a dystopian story. This analysis makes links between Margaret Atwood's narrative techniques and more general socio-political implications by concentrating on the intersection of race, social hierarchy, and systemic oppression. The findings highlight the value of speculative fiction in stimulating empathy, motivating change, and encouraging critical reflection about social injustices.

Keywords: Dystopia, speculative fiction, race, societal critique, violence, oryx and crake

Introduction

Margaret Atwood has not just captivated readers for over five decades, she has redefined the very landscape of contemporary literature. Resisting the use of the term 'science fiction' for her books, Atwood insists on calling her writings 'speculative fiction,' 'which rehearses possible futures on the basis of historical and contemporary evidence' (Howells 162). Unlike Science fiction, which according to her contains elements that can't be realistically expected, her writings is oftentimes a reflection of humanity. Atwood wanted her fiction to reflect what could realistically happen, if some extreme events were to take place. Her early works explore themes of identity and the female experience. Novels like *The Edible Woman* blur reality and fantasy, grappling with societal constructs placed upon women. Her work serves as a potent reminder of human complexities, our relationship with nature, and the urgent need for social responsibility.

Recent scholarship continues to highlight how *Oryx and Crake* serves as a powerful critique of biotechnology, inequality, and human alienation. For example, the article, 'A Hybrid World: Genetic Engineering in Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*' examines how the novel challenges traditional boundaries between humans and animals and questions the market logic behind scientific progress. Similarly, 'An Ecocritique of Postmodern Culture in *Oryx and Crake*' warns about the environmental, social, and ethical costs of corporate power and techno-culture. This paper argues that *Oryx and Crake* not only reflects these concerns, but also reveals how race/class, gender, violence and technology are deeply intertwined — each reinforcing the other. By analyzing such varied intersectionality through recent theoretical lenses (posthumanism, feminist critique, and postcolonial perspective), this study demonstrates that this novel is more than a dystopian warning: it is a mirror held up to the world we live in, asking what ethical responsibilities we must accept before crises become irreversible. The title 'Unraveling the Fabric of Society' expresses the idea of

pulling apart the ethical, social, and structural threads that hold our community together. By examining race, violence, technology, and gender in *Oryx and Crake*, this research highlights the tight interconnectedness of these elements are, and how the corruption of any one thread can destabilize the entire social fabric. In essence, this title signals that the paper exposes the hidden forces of inequality, exploitation, and unchecked scientific ambition, forces that weaken and ultimately endanger the very weave of the human society. This research is significant as it offers tools for understanding contemporary dilemmas — racial segregation, systematic violence, social injustice — and helps us imagine futures that are more just and resilient.

Oryx and Crake

A future ravaged by environmental negligence, controlled by powerful corporations, and a lone survivor on the planet Earth, such is the chillingly believable dystopia painted by Margaret Atwood in her novel *Oryx and Crake*. The story follows Snowman, a survivor navigating a pandemic-decimated world. Flashbacks reveal his past life as Jimmy, his relationships with Oryx and Crake, and the events that triggered the apocalypse. Now, amidst the ruins, Snowman becomes the custodian of a potentially new species, his so-called 'children.' The scene from *Oryx and Crake* where Snowman looks at his defunct watch, 'Out of habit he looks at his watch. zero hour. It causes a jolt of terror to run through him, this absence of official time. Nobody nowhere knows what time is' (Atwood 3), introduces the grim reality wrought by Crake's engineered plagues. As a 'liminal figure,' Snowman is in a state of suspended time; the novel opens and ends with it being 'zero hour' (Rao 110). The motif of the broken watch depicts Snowman's disorientation within a temporally fragmented, post-apocalyptic world. Snowman, a lone survivor, is haunted by memories of Oryx and Crake. Flashbacks to a lost world with them emphasize his present isolation and trauma. This crisis and temporal displacement make him the 'ultimate outcast, compelled to 'live,' albeit surreptitiously, in the past ... populated by

reveries, dreams, memories, and nostalgia' (Rao 108). He constantly grapples with what he's lost, existing 'in a state of double consciousness, working by associative leaps between 'now' and 'then' in an effort to escape' from a shattered world covered in the wreckage of late 20th-century civilization (Howells 172). Such harsh world strips away one's innocence. Snowman's CorpSeCorps childhood experience exposes corporate greed, thereby shaping his view of a flawed world which prioritizes profit over human well-being. Snowman feels excluded in such a world, 'as if from a party to which he will never be invited' (Atwood 80), which shows a stark contrast to his past life. The characters of the novel grapple with the loss of meaning in this world on the brink, highlighting the crisis they face, 'this is happening too much lately, this dissolution of meaning' (27). Crake's cynical view about the future of knowledge is clear in his assertion: 'Actually not. It's not liked the wheel, it's too complex now. no electricity. Then once those people died, that would be it' (172). This statement foreshadows a world where accumulated knowledge and culture are very much close to extinction.

Race, Violence and Societal critique

Margaret Atwood's novel *Oryx and Crake* transcends a typical dystopian narrative by employing Neocolonial, Marxist and Racial lenses to offer a multifaceted exploration of power structures, societal control, and the potential for change within an apparently bleak future. Through her speculative fiction, Atwood amplifies real-world issues related to race, hierarchy, and neocolonialism, creating exaggerated scenarios that reveal underlying truths about power structures and societal dynamics. This exploration of power, race, and class is essential for understanding the deeper themes of the novel.

The division between the pleeblands and the Compounds in the novel mirrors real-world racial and economic segregation, highlighting how speculative fiction can expose underlying societal truths. The power dynamics within 'CorpSeCorps' reflect neocolonial exploitation, particularly in their use of marginalized populations for experimentation and labor. Crake's creation of the Crakers can be seen as a form of Neocolonialism. Despite his claim to eliminate racial and hierarchical distinctions, he ironically imposes his own ideals and control over their existence. He envisioned a future free from racial divisions. His Crakers were 'infantile, multicolored, and consider Snowman their mentor' (Atwood 108). His experiments over them were 'intended to generate a new race not troubled by sexual needs, aggression, religious and racial impulses,' (Rao 108) but his methods reflect neocolonial attitudes. The use of the 'subjects' from poorer countries for his experiments parallels the exploitation of natural and human resources in marginalized regions, a hallmark of neocolonialism. When Jimmy asks him, 'Where do you get the subjects? For the clinical trials?' Crake grins and replies, 'From the poorer countries. Pay them a few dollars, they don't even know what they're taking. Sex clinics, of course – they're happy to help. Whorehouses. Prisons. And from the ranks of the desperate, as usual' (Atwood 227), underscoring this neocolonial exploitation on his part and the system at large. A detailed Marxist and postcolonial analysis can uncover the economic and power dynamics in the novel. The exploitation of labor and resources mirrors the global capitalist system and its impact on racialized populations.

While the absence of hierarchy in the Croakers may seem like a dismantling of power structures, it could also be a form of control. Crake says, 'Hierarchy could not exist among them, because they lacked the neural complexes that would have created it' (Atwood 234). And the Crakers' 'open friendliness, their calmness, and their limited vocabularies' (Atwood 117) raises concerns about their potential dependence on Snowman, echoing neocolonial dynamics and also highlighting the intersection of race, class, and power. Crake's genetic engineering raises ethical implications, particularly regarding race and hierarchy. As Galbreath puts it Oryx and Crake 'raises the specter of other forms of extinction, adding ethical behavior to the endangered list' (3).

Eugenics and the goal of controlling and 'improving' human populations are touched upon by the manipulation of the Crakers' characteristics. This relates to current discussions about genetic engineering, bioethics, and the possibility of new types of discrimination and inequality. Crake may have unintentionally restricted the Crakers' potential for sophisticated social organization and self-determination by attempting to engineer out their capacity for leadership. This is similar to the novel's general criticism of corporate power, in which CorpSeCorps controls and manipulates every facet of society. Atwood breaks down the idea of race using *Oryx and Crake*. The artificiality of racial categories is revealed by the division between the multiethnic working class and the light-skinned elite in the Compounds and Pleeblands. Crake's creation, the Crakers, are a hodgepodge of ethnicities, dismantling the idea of pure races. A post-racial future is envisioned in Atwood's *Crakers*, which question racial dichotomies. Her science fiction encourages critical analysis of social structures and promotes fair, responsible advancement. Towards the end of this novel, in addition to Snowman, the author includes 'two men, one brown, one white, a tea-colored woman' (Galbreath 283) as survivors in the world of eradicated humanity. It's possible that Atwood is creating the groundwork for an inclusive society, a society in which people of all races could coexist. But because Crake uses people from underprivileged backgrounds for his experiments, his control over their creation raises questions about neocolonial practices. Readers are prompted by Atwood's speculative fiction to reconsider how they view ethics, race, and power in both the real world and the made-up one.

Oryx and Crake by Margaret Atwood depicts a frightening cycle of violence driven by social injustice, corporate greed, and individual experiences. This widespread cruelty highlights the price of putting financial gain ahead of interpersonal relationships. Snowman wishes he could help [the Crakers] comprehend that relationship and thus acknowledge kinship with himself because he feels but off from other living things but tangentially connected to them. Atwood refers to Crake's world as 'a moral cesspool,' emphasizing the pervasive corruption and societal deterioration. Tragically, this cycle highlights the negative effects of disconnection. Crake's behaviour reflects his perverse reaction to population growth and environmental deterioration. The risks of unrestrained human intervention motivated by violent tendencies are highlighted by his immoral solution of mass extinction through engineered plagues. The character Snowman's adaptation to a world filled with violence is depicted when he observes, 'during the period of chaos the guards probably fired on the crowd

from up here while they still could, and while there was still a crowd' (Atwood 206). This suggests a normalization of brutality, where violence tends to lose its shock value over time. His involvement with MaddAddam highlights the blurred lines between scientific innovation and weaponization.

According to Atwood's story, social structures exacerbate the cycle of violence and disconnection. Atwood examines how violence is ingrained in human nature. This shows up as societal desensitization to common brutality and catastrophic biological warfare. 'Why blame Crake alone? Vexation takes in more than Crake.' (Atwood 124). This claim highlights a more widespread social illness. Through the story, Atwood shows that the 'madness of Crake's actions lies in the fact that they are not those of a rebellious individual, but instead the logical product of a society with an affective structure very like our own' (Kroon 2). Crake's motivations can be understood by looking at 'CorpSeCorps' practices. As Crake says, 'When your main game's over, you can always move your chessboard elsewhere' (Atwood 230). This illustrates how corporate greed amplifies inherent human violence. This violence also occurs on a global scale, where women are trafficked for sexual exploitation and marginalized areas are vandalized for resources, including human labour. The novel's racial intersections with other axes of oppression and identity can be examined through the lens of intersectionality. In Marta Dvorak's words, Atwood 'directs her derisive laughter at what she seems to be the abuses of power in the multiple fields of human experience.' (124). Multiple, overlapping systems of marginalization and power shape the experiences of the characters, hence providing a nuanced understanding of the novel's themes. The history of Oryx, for example, is one of 'sexual enslavement grounded in a system of instrumental, late capitalist exchange' (DiMarco 16). Atwood writes, 'it wasn't a pastoral scene: these were girls in danger, in need of rescue' (202). This commodification and sexual exploitation of women, particularly Oryx, who belongs to some unidentified East Asian country, reflect the historical objectification of women and the persistence of patriarchal structures that reduce women to their sexual and economic value.

The novel's depreciation of the environment criticizes the overuse of natural resources by industrial and post-industrial societies. This is similar to the harm done to the environment during the Industrial Revolution, when rapid technological advancement came at the expense of serious ecological damage. Atwood highlights the negative effects of putting industrial expansion ahead of environmental conservation. By highlighting the perils of unbridled scientific experimentation and technological hubris, Atwood challenges the Enlightenment era's emphasis on reason and scientific advancement. Grayson Cooke writes:

Despite her stated desire to question not biotechnology but human hubris, which translates into an unstated desire to keep human actions and intentions separate from techno-scientific practice, Atwood dramatizes the ease with which distinctions between these formations can be done away with (13).

The Idealistic notions of a perfect society are contrasted with Atwood's speculative world, which shows how such endeavours can result in totalitarianism and the loss of individual liberties.

Margaret Atwood uses historical atrocities like genocides and wars to criticize society's desensitization to violence. The novel's normalized brutality illustrates how societies can grow numb to violence as a result of ongoing exposure and historical forgetfulness. By comparing her dystopian world to actual historical occurrences, societal trends, and philosophical concepts, the author uses her unique understanding of history to critique societal values and norms in *Oryx and Crake*. She emphasizes how humanity's tendency to repeat mistakes and the cyclicity of history are reflected in her speculative story, highlighting persistent social injustices, environmental degradation, and moral failings in spite of technological advancements. The dark history of eugenics and the idea that selective breeding can improve humanity are both criticized by Crake's genetic engineering and the creation of the Crakers. This echoes Atwood's cautions against unbridled scientific and technological advancement without ethical considerations and reflects historical instances where science was abused to justify racial superiority and discrimination. Atwood's portrayal of a future in which genetic engineering and bioengineering are widespread illustrates a significant change in moral principles. A utilitarian approach to ethics, in which the ends justify the means, is exemplified by Crake's development of the Crakers and the BlyssPlus pill, which were designed to control population growth and eradicate diseases. The ethical ramifications of playing god are called into question by this. Atwood's depiction examines the commodification of life, the breakdown of conventional social values, and the moral conundrums raised by unbridled scientific advancement. According to Atwood, humanity is prone to repeating its mistakes and history is cyclical. This concept is demonstrated in *Oryx and Crake* by the persistence of social injustices, environmental deterioration, and moral failings in spite of scientific and technological breakthroughs. Feudal systems and historical class stratification are reflected in the division between the Pleeblands and the Compounds. The Compounds' affluent lifestyles stand in sharp contrast to the filth of the pleeblands, underscoring enduring economic and social divides. What they produce is 'done under the guise of an altruistic desire to better human life' (Cooke 7). Atwood highlights these disparities, reflecting past trends in which privilege and wealth were concentrated among a small number of people at the expense of the majority.

Jimmy's passivity and readiness to take advantage of the system for his own benefit draw attention to the moral ambiguity and ethical disregard that permeate the society portrayed in the book. As Grayson Cooke puts it, this book is a 'treatise on the ambiguous potential of powerful tools, and the role of humanity in determining the fit use for such tools' (107). His complicity highlights the need for personal accountability and moral integrity in opposing structural injustices, criticizing the acquiescence of unethical standards. The book suggests that society is destined to repeat past patterns of exploitation and devastation in the absence of critical thought and change.

Conclusion

In the end, Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* shows how gender, race, violence, and technology all work together to tear apart society as a whole. The world of the Compounds and Pleeblands serves as an example of how corporate dominance corrodes ethics and redefines social values

instead of defending humanity. The ‘loss of independence of scientists suppression of negative data by corporate sponsors’ (Louët 163) highlights the peril of letting profit dictate truth, as Atwood herself noted. Crake's terrifying statement, ‘When your main game’s over, you can always move your chessboard elsewhere’ (Atwood 230), encapsulates this callous reasoning in which human lives are treated like disposable parts in a bigger corporate game. The book criticizes both the corporations that normalize exploitation and the cultural indifference that permits systematic violence to continue. Atwood emphasizes the ongoing significance of feminist, postcolonial, and ecocritical viewpoints by demonstrating how *Oryx* is commodified, how the environment has been manipulated and drained and how science without ethics leads to catastrophe. By doing this, she breaks down cycles of colonial rule, inequality, and environmental devastation, arguing that when human ambition surpasses responsibility, history repeats itself.

However, there is some hope in Atwood's dystopia. The human need for connection endures despite the dystopian world's isolation and crisis. The Crakers' brittle innocence and Snowman's storytelling highlight the resiliency of memory, empathy, and the potential for connection. This enduring human spirit and potential for change are reinforced by his recollections and concern for the Crakers, as well as his fleeting interactions with strangers. Atwood poses this question, ‘Can a single ant be said to be alive, in any meaningful sense of the word, or does it only have relevance in terms of its anthill?’ (23). The question is left to us, we must decide whether to live as a group dedicated to justice, compassion, and survival or as solitary individuals supporting profit-driven systems.

To conclude *Oryx and Crake* is not just a speculative fiction but an urgent cultural warning. Through the engineered Crakers, the novel reimagines humanity and demonstrates how science can change identity and emotion. It depicts a world in crisis, characterized by deep inequality, corporate violence, and ecological collapse, all of which are the result of human choice rather than fate. However, it also suggests that ethical renewal and resilience are still possible even in post-human, dystopian futures. Its importance stems from the fact that it forces us to envision futures that are influenced by both current ethical decisions and crises. While dystopias reveal our darkest inclinations, Atwood reminds us that they also inspire us to be resilient, accountable, and human in new ways.

‘Human society, they claimed, was a sort of monster, its main by-products being corpses and rubble.’

—Margaret Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*. Introduction

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