

Corporate Biopower and Ecofeminist Reverberations in *Oryx and Crake*

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Ecofeminism reflects the affinity between the domination of nature and subjugation of women in history, experience, religion, literature, ethics and epistemology. The word 'ecofeminism' coined by the French feminist Francoise D Eaubonne in 1974 gained currency both with academicians and activists. Drawing attention to the current ecological crisis compounded by overpopulation, overconsumption and pollution alongside the age old patriarchal oppression of women, Eaubonne called on feminists to wed their cause to that of the environment and lead the way into a post - patriarchal, genuinely humanist and ecologically sustainable future. Ynestra King, the coordinator of the first ecofeminist conference 'Women and Life on Earth: A Conference on Ecofeminism in the Eighties' at Armherst in March 1980 states:

'Ecofeminism is about connectedness and wholeness of theory and practice ... We see the devastation of the earth and her beings by the corporate warriors and the threat of nuclear annihilation by the military warriors as feminist concerns. It is the same masculinist mentality which would deny us our right to our own bodies ... and which depends on multiple systems of dominance and state power to have its own way'.(1983: 10)

Ecofeminism is a multi-elemental cultural perspective about Nature and sub ordination of people especially women. Referred to as the third wave of feminism, ecofeminism represents a blend of ecology, feminism and women's spirituality. Patrick Murphy while commenting on the dialectical relationship between ecology and feminism stated:

'To be a feminist, one must also be an ecologist, because the domination and oppression of women and nature are inextricably intertwined. To be an ecologist, one must also be a feminist, since without addressing gender oppression and the patriarchal ideology that generates the sexual metaphors of masculine domination of nature, one cannot effectively challenge the world views that threaten the stable evolution of the biosphere in which human beings participate or perish'. (1995: 48)

Ecofeminism glorifies the harmony between Women and Nature. The ultimate aim is to subvert the ideology of patriarchal society in which men subjugate both women and nature. A multi-hued and multi-perspectival phenomenon, the leit motif is that the domination and subjugation of both women and nature is inextricably linked. As a movement, it aimed at dismantling this interconnected oppression of the patriarchal system governed by dualistic hierarchies of male/female, culture/nature, reason/emotion, white/black and human/animal. Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* (2003) is a vision of a scientific dystopia — a vision of the near future world as a bleak and terrifying place that has been destroyed in the wake of ecological and scientific disaster. The novel underscores how technological and industrial disasters first affect women (especially their reproductive system) children and nature.

Oryx and Crake vacillates between utopia and dystopia and this helps create a new scientific society which transforms the natural world into an unruly dystopic organism. As Crake, the prototypical scientist carried out different utopian experiments on the natural world, the geophysical environment gets altered into a dysfunctional and chaotic world as the following passage exemplifies:

‘These things were introduced as a control, once the big green rabbits had become such a prolific and resistant pest [...] they were supposed to eliminate feral cats, thus improving the almost non-existent songbird population [...] All of which came true, except that the bob kittens soon got out of control in their turn. Smaller dogs went missing from backyards, babies from prams, short joggers were mauled’. (O&C: 199-200)

Crake and his fellow scientists realize that their attempts of reshaping the environment according to their utopian fantasies can lead to a ‘nature’ becoming erratic and violent. Atwood through this poignant display highlights that if nature is tampered with, it can become malevolent. As Crake realizes: ‘A number of the experiments were destroyed because they were too dangerous to have around. Who needed a cane toad with a prehensile tail like a chameleon’s that might climb in through the bathroom window and blind you while you were brushing your teeth’ (O&C:59).

Crake and his group of enthusiastic scientists realize that their utopian aims have ultimately led to the corruption of the natural world. These repugnant details help create an awareness in the reader of Atwood’s ecofeminist concerns. Keeping in mind that the didactic purpose of dystopian literature is to alert the reader about the totalitarian and extremist ideologies inflicting society, Atwood through her literary dystopia warns us about the impending ecocatastrophes. *Oryx and Crake* depicts a world devastated by a biotechnological war by capitalist corporations competing for the control of dangerous organisms. Atwood warns us against the commercial exploitation of threatening bioforms. She voices her concerns regarding biopiracy through the depiction of Health Wyzer, a genetic engineering corporate house which develops bacteria and fraudulently sells drugs to contaminate people with diseases it itself creates. Atwood at her vociferous best highlights how through their dishonest schemes the scientists endanger the lives of people at large. Crake, the trickster scientist states: ‘Health Wyzer put the hostile bioforms into their vitamin pills....They have a really elegant delivery system – they imbed a virus inside a carrier bacterium, E coli splice, doesn’t get digested, bursts into the pylorus, and bingo [...] once you’ve got a hostile bioform started in the pleeb population’ (O&C: 256).

By depicting a landscape that is transformed into hazardous biospheres, Atwood cautions us against the lethal aspects of our technocratic societies as well as the ecocatastrophe that these might cause. In *Oryx and Crake*, Atwood imagines a series of alarming eco disasters. This correlates with what Carolyn Merchant, a prominent ecofeminist states about the green house effects: ‘With the green -house effect, winters would become stormier, summer hotter and drier. Seas could rise one to three feet over the next half century; hurricanes would become more powerful as the oceans warm’. (1992: 19)

A strikingly similar parallel is to be found in *Oryx and Crake* when ‘climatic changes bring forth ‘more plague, more famines and more floods’ (O&C: 143). Snowman realizes that even the sources of food became scarcer as: ‘The weather had become so strange and would no longer be predicted – too much rain or not enough, too much wind, too much heat and the crops ever suffering’. (O&C: 143)

Atwood succinctly refers to the ecological threats looming large as everything turns topsy turvy. She makes Snowman the votary of expressing her ecofeminist concerns. At the very outset, Snowman wakes up to a landscape contaminated by industrial waste:

‘On the eastern horizon there’s a grayish haze lit now with a rosy, deadly glow [...] the distant ocean grinding against the ersatz reefs of rusted car parts and jumbled bricks and assorted rubble sounds almost like holiday traffic’. (O&C: 5)

Atwood reminds us of the horrifying ecological disasters of the Bhopal Gas Tragedy and the Chernobyl explosion. She insists that ecological disasters are a result of man’s treatment of nature. She cautions us against environmental pollution through the portrayal of Crakers. While delineating their characters, she states: ‘Crake had nose cones for them too, the latest model, not just to filter microbes but also to skim out particulate. The air was worse in the pleeblands, he said. More junk blowing in the wind, fewer whirlpool purifying towers around.’ (O&C: 346) Through these portent images of decay, pollution and destruction, Atwood brings home the truth about impending ecological disasters and comes across as a formidable environmentalist. She advocates immediate action for saving the earth as well as human life. What is apparent in *Oryx and Crake* is that the interconnectedness/interdependence between man and nature is

incorporated in a negative manner. In fact the relationship between humans and nature is epitomized by images of ecological chaos and human abuse of the natural environment. These negative images are found aplenty in the novel. Atwood imagines a corporation specialized in coffee bean production called Happicuppa when she writes 'they are nuking the cloud forests to plant this stuff'. (O&C: 218) This incident highlights the logical destructive outcome of human domination and exploitation of nature. Profit and domination are what matter the most to Crake and his ilk. They are least bothered of connecting spiritually with nature or venerating the natural world. Needless to say, the substitution of an inert and mechanical nature for an ecological, spiritual one can foster a static connection between humans and nature. Atwood's analysis of the natural world in *Oryx and Crake* depicts nature as a victim of Crake's utopian pursuit which only smacks of exploitation, transformation and destruction. This is similar to what Vandana Shiva calls 'biological reduction' as Crake and his scientists define nature solely in biological terms.

Patrick Murphy argues in *Farther Afield in the Study of Nature Oriented Literature* that many ecofeminist novels engage in a discussion of these issues and 'pose problems and solutions regarding contemporary (humanity's) relation with the rest of nature'. (2003: 14) He further adds that Atwood's dystopia does not 'stop at describing the natural history of an area, but instead, or in addition, discuss the way in which pollution, urbanization and other forms of human intervention have altered land and the environment'. (2003: 14)

Atwood emphatically satirizes the glamorization of violence and disregard for natural environment. Crake's childhood is marked by death and destruction. He has a fetish for extinct species and renames himself as Crake, an extinct Australian bird. He likes to play virtual games as Extinctathon and Blood and Roses which end in acts of war and destruction wiping out plants, animals and civilization and as Jason Brooks Bouson in her article on *Oryx and Crake* remarks 'turn mass destruction into an enjoyable spectacle'. (Bouson, 2004: 143)

Carolyn Merchant argues that these traditional narratives of restoration posit an ethic of domination in which humans assume control of nature and asks for an alternative narrative that of partnership among people and with nature. Crake's Paradise project is an oft-killer version of one of the central stories of Western civilization and evokes images of egocentric domination and mastery. This is further corroborated by Bouson who states that Crake 'used science not to conquer the natural world but to control nature'. (2004: 141)

Atwood makes Oryx rewrite her past but not as a story of lost innocence and colonial victimization. Oryx's account of her childhood reveals her debased conditions even though she has learned to use the commodified and prevalent value system to her advantage. She remarks: 'Of course (said Oryx) having a money value was no substitute for love – but love was undependable, it came and then it went, so it was good to have a money value, because then at least those how wanted to make a profit from you would make sure you were fed enough.' (O&C:156) She pricks Jimmy's conscience through her casual acceptance of the immoral even though she offers an indictment of his affluent and sexually debased world of virtual games which essentially dehumanizes women like Oryx by portraying them as eroticized commodities. Oryx's inaccessibility and the capriciousness of nature can be brought under the gamut of ecofeminism. As Snowman recalls his father's remarks while fighting with his mother when he states: 'women always get hot under the collar'. (O&C:17) He reiterates this comparison when he compares women to the weather and remarks: 'hotness and coldness, coming and going on in the strange musky flowering variable weather inside their clothes-mysterious, important, uncontrollable'. (O&C:17) This notion of connecting women to capricious nature echoes in Catherine Keller's statement in Carol Adams *Ecofeminism and the Sacred* wherein she points out: 'The weather like nature has readily been woman-identified alternately enchanting and frightening, nurturing and withholding, rhythmic and capricious, moody and unstable, subject to the modern and manly sciences of meteorology, climate control and other modes of social management'. (1993:31)

Neither Snowman nor his father seem to manage this capriciousness in women and nature. Atwood delineates Oryx's character as one beyond the grasp of scientific male control. Crake's 'generalist' approach to life indirectly makes a strong connection between feminism and art. In fact this distinction between female art and male science seems to underlie the presence of exploitation in the text. As Howells in her critique, *Margaret Atwood* remarks:

‘Atwood is exploring fictions of masculinity, with Crake the personification of the urge towards male mastery through reason and science and Jimmy representing an alternative ‘female’ allegiance to the life of emotion and imagination’.(1996:177)

Atwood satirizes the brave new world of gene splicing of plants and animals and makes Jimmy her mouthpiece. Jimmy questions Crake’s nonchalant acceptance of all generically spliced being-rakunks, pigeons, skoats, wolvogs. When Crake enthusiastically shows off the animals created at the Watson and Crick Institute, Jimmy wonders ‘if some line has been crossed, some boundary transgressed? How much is too much, how far is too far? Crake retorts back with a sharp riposte – ‘Nature is to zoo as God is to churches’ and asserts that he doesn’t believe in God or in ‘Nature, with a capital N’.(O&C: 250)

This view accords well with Donna Haraway’s assertion in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women*(1991) that ‘Women know very well that knowledge from the natural sciences has been used in the interests of our domination, and not our liberation...’ (1991:8)

Hence it is obvious that the biotechnology which permeates *Oryx and Crake* neither augurs well for women nor for nature. As Haraway perceived the imaginative possibilities opened up by the implosion of nature and culture as well as the explosion of global scientific enterprises in its unrivalled capacity to break down artificial boundary between the Subject and Object which resulted in promiscuously fused and transgenic beings. She warns us that the recent discoveries of biotechnology afford the possibilities of an exciting cyborg vision in which ‘miscegenation between and among humans and non humans (Will increasingly be) the norm’. (1997: 121)

Oryx and Crake offers a grotesque simultaneously ridiculous and terrifying perspective on Haraway’s promissory cyborg universe in which virtually everything has been crossed with virtually everything and is for sale. Atwood’s main targets are genetic engineering, virtual reality, pornography and all the new technologies linked to the exploitative aspects of twenty-first century corporate biopower. Crake as the scientist creates new organisms and species while his aptly named Paradise project, a transgenic cross of organic and mechanical utopias deploys the latest scientific technologies to reassert human domination over nature. It examines the way in which age old practices of physical domination and oppression are now being revisited. In her own words, ‘her fictional stories are not political treatise’ but nevertheless they do raise pertinent questions about the role of all humans towards a safe environment and implicate the reader in the subordination of women and nature. By raising awareness of this subordination she enters into a dialogue about the plight of women and the environment.

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