



REVERSAL OF ANTHROPOCENTRIC WORLDVIEW IN MARGARET ATWOOD'S *ORYX AND CRAKE*

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Received date: 2 March 2023 – Accepted date: 5 June 2023

ABSTRACT

Anthropocentric worldview is the main cause of the ecological problems that the world is confronting at present. This study explores and analyse how Margaret Atwood's *Oryx* and *Crake* reveals the reversal of the anthropocentric worldview as the only solution of the ecological problems caused by human centric worldview by employing ecocritical insights envisioned by Lawrence Buell. The study scrutinize the way our rationality rejects the subjectivity of nature and regards it as subordinate to human beings in the novel. Therefore, there is a strong need to change our worldview. It follows qualitative research design and uses critical, analytical and interpretative methods for interpreting textual data. Critically analyzing different events and situations that highlight the ugliness and cruelty caused by human-centered activities, it emphasizes people's indifference towards the autonomy of the natural world. Similarly, it critiques the selfish modification of natural components as per human need. Such actions have paved the path for apocalyptic events. Human beings can avoid such events by changing their anthropocentric worldview and making it more ecocentric. This research exposes the way Atwood blames anthropocentric worldview as the main cause of the environmental crisis of present time. Self-centric corporate greed and uncontrolled bioengineering give birth to different ecological and biological problems. These problems lead the world to the possible apocalypse that results in the extinction of the existence of all the beings and things of the ecosphere. This study recommends immediate action to protect our ecosphere respecting the interdependence between human and natural world. Ecocentric worldview only guarantees the survival of all on this earth enjoying intrinsic values.

Keywords: ecosphere - apocalypse, interdependence - greed-guided mentality - ecocentrism

INTRODUCTION

In the post-apocalyptic fiction *Oryx* and *Crake*, Margaret Atwood presents the essentiality of the reversal of anthropocentric worldview through the depiction of a deteriorated planet. It criticizes the way human society approaches environmental issues. The main cause of all these disastrous consequences is the establishment of human-centeredness that promotes the concept of using all natural components for human use. This human centric concept prefers individualism guided by material greed to biospherical egalitarianism. This anthropocentrism gives birth to problems like global warming, contamination and exhaustion of natural resources, overpopulation, social inequalities and unwise bioengineering. They end in elimination of all species of the being from the earth. The solution of these problems can be traced in the act of establishing an ecocentric world. This study takes support from the theoretical perspective of ecocriticism especially following the trend of environmental apocalypse with the theoretical insights of Lawrence Buell. Critiquing anthropocentric world views, Buell points out the danger of possible environmental apocalypse. He reveals the devastating consequences of misusing natural resources and neglecting the interdependency of the human and natural world. This paper claims that through the presentation of the devastation, miseries, suffering and the final pandemic Atwood shows the need of altering anthropic worldview.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Different critics have interpreted *Oryx* and *Crake* from multiple perspectives. Berry (2004) praises *Oryx* and *Crake* as:

Extraordinary work of art, forcing us to face what we would very much rather ignore. Atwood uses the deceptive language of advertising, brand names, slogans, corporate-speak, and above all, the heartless language of scientific reductionism to explain disaster as both logical and stylish. (p. 550)

The writer's main purpose is to explain the disaster. She has successfully shown the horrific consequences of negligence to nature. According to Berry, it logically shows the way capitalist consumer culture misuses the natural resources and brings crises in the whole ecosphere. Taking it as an appeal for humankind to improve the way of being, Atwood (2004) herself calls it an adventure romance, "It is an adventure romance – that is the hero goes on a quest" (p. 517). The quest is the quest of something

that frees human society from anthropocentric sin. Bhalla *et al.* (2014) observe that the novel “illustrates disharmonious association between human beings, the outcome of unhindered technology and aspiration. It appeals to mankind to reform and improve the way of being” (p.1). Human ambition for new technologies might lead to disaster. Technological advancement is good but there should be certain limitations. Otherwise, both human civilization and the whole ecosphere fall in crisis. Therefore, there is a strong need to change our way of life.

Another critic Schmeink (2016) touches on different aspects of the novel, “Nation states have given ways to global corporate rule and especially biotechnological progress and its capitalist consumption have had a major impact on society and environment” (p. 24). He emphasizes the corruptive influence of the capitalist consumption system supported by biotechnology on human society. Katherine (2019) takes the novel as “critiquing specialization, another common critique of the world in environmental studies. Specialization is when a person is an expert in one field of study, but fails to perceive the world in general term” (p. 73). Her preference is a better understanding of the general view of the world than specialization. For the better survival of our ecosphere, there is the need of valuing all components of nature rather than showing human superiority to other components of nature.

Defining Post- apocalyptic fiction Laughlin (2020) writes, “any narrative that takes place after the collapse (universal or local) of civilization, in a world in which the population is still suffering from the short or long term effect of that collapse” (p. 94). Mostly post-apocalyptic fictions are associated with disastrous events bringing whole ecosphere in crisis. Praising the attempt of post- apocalyptic fiction to represent the true reality of female Hinchliffe (2020) mentions, “Post- apocalyptic fiction is tied to gender as the female characters are desperate to escape their limited position in patriarchal society” (p. 2). Through their post- apocalyptic writing, female writers express their desires to escape from troublesome presents.

The novel is taken as a critique of animal modification as per the need of human beings that destroys their natural qualities. Regarding this issue, Bellamy (2021) points, “Its critique of factory farming and genetically modified organisms occurs in the dystopian past and ultimately leads to the post-apocalyptic present” (p. 7). Bellamy sees problems in factory farming and genetically modified organisms. In these activities, natural qualities

are disregarded and artificiality is promoted in the way to bring crisis in the ecosphere. Atwood raises these problems in a critical way. Associating with the event of the novel *Dinis* (2021) discusses the danger of technology that might endanger humanity. He focuses, “Closely linked to social breakdown, technological advancement also reveals their vulnerabilities; although technology is created and used to protect humankind, it may often endanger humanity in unpredictable ways” (p. 232). *Dinis* highlights the presentation of the problems caused by technological advancements that are really threatening for human survival.

Analyzing the novel in the light of Covid-19, pandemic Akhter points to the consequences of scientific ambition that can be the cause of the abolition of human civilization. He states, “The novel reveals how Crake's scientific ambition contributed to the abolition of human civilization” (p. 238). Crake's ambition results in his intended plague that nearly ends the *Homo sapiens*. Chilton (2022) talks about the nature of the main character Crake who is the radical enlightenment personified believing in science for human emancipation from prejudice and illusion. Roy (2022) tries to identify various philosophical challenges posed by bio capitalism and hyper-humanist ideology associated with the *MaddAddam* trilogy. He tries to create a framework of resistance provided by a critical humanist school of thought.

To the best of my knowledge, *Oryx* and *Crake* has not been analyzed from the perspective of reversal of anthropocentric worldview showing its defects critically. Therefore, this study attempts to fill the research gap so as to make people aware of the disastrous consequences of anthropocentric worldview and the essentiality of ecocentrism as reflected in this novel.

METHODS AND MATERIALS

This research work follows the qualitative research design accessing data from both primary and secondary sources. Selected primary text *Oryx* and *Crake* by Canadian writer Margaret Atwood belongs to post-apocalyptic fiction dealing with the human induced apocalypse of a plague. Including this text, other books, academic journals and different internet sources have been used to support the claims. Critical, analytical and interpretative methods have been used for analyzing textual data using

critical insight of ecocriticism in general and environmental apocalypse in particular.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

When there was ecological balance, environmental issues were not serious. The explosion of human population and extreme pressure of it to natural resources initiated ecological problems. It is worsened by the anthropocentric worldview that regards human beings as supreme of all species and master of the whole universe. Devall and Sessions (1985) explain anthropocentrism as “Belief that humans are superior to and in charge of natural world” (p. 65). This concept disregarded the intrinsic value of all components of nature. Plumwood (2002) sees a problem in human-centeredness as it separates us from nature. She writes, “Human-centeredness promotes various damaging forms of epistemic remoteness, for by walling ourselves off from nature in order to exploit it, we also lose certain abilities to situate ourselves as part of nature” (p. 98). The idea that creates nearness between nature and human beings is positive and the opposite is negative.

We should redefine the problematic human-nature relationship. If religious ideas are obstacles, they should be changed. White (2008) asserts, “What we do about ecology depends on our idea of the man nature relationship. More science and more technology are not going to get us out of the present ecological crisis until we find a new religion, or rethink our old one”(p. 45). According to him, Christianity established the rightful mastery of man over nature. This concept leads to ecological problems, and requires rethinking.

Environmentalism is the base of ecocriticism. This interdisciplinary movement gets its independent identity with the publication of *The Ecocritical Readers* in 1996 where Cheryl Glotfelty(1996) defines it as, “the study of the relationship between literature and the environment” (p. xviii). Previously the environmental aspect was not given due space in academia for scholarly discussion and interaction. Opposite to human centric view, environmentalism focuses on the intrinsic value of all components of nature. This movement warns human beings to change their worldview.

The dissemination of ecocritical worldwide gave birth to different trends. This research work has used the ideas related to the trend of environmental apocalypse that denotes a future scenario involving the

global collapse of human civilization. Buell in his essay, “Environmental Apocalypticism” focuses on the idea of interdependency between human and natural world using ‘web’ metaphor. He argues that human induced disturbance to the web of interdependence is the main cause of different apocalyptic events. He defines ‘apocalypse’ as a master metaphor that is haunting environmentalists. “Apocalypse is the single most powerful master metaphor that the contemporary environmental imagination has at its disposal” (p.285). This metaphor has become an important part of modern fiction.

Buell identifies five modes of perceptions that can subvert environmental apocalyptic ends. They are, “Interrelatedness, biotic egalitarianism, magnification, conflation and the sense of imminent environmental peril” (p. 305). Interrelatedness refers to the interdependence between plants and animals, biotic egalitarianism focuses on the equal right and share of the universe to live and work in a hygienic environment and magnification proposes the intrinsic distinct value of every component of the biosphere. Conflation promotes unity between the biotic and abiotic world. Sense of imminent environmental peril is the major purpose of the environmental apocalypse. It is the fear that present misdeeds lead to the horrific future. This sense of peril plays a role in making human behaviors eco-friendly. Discourse of apocalypse conveys fear of unseen and manipulates mass psychology in the name of scripture, logic, totalitarian belief and imperialism (Subedi 2015, p. 150-51).

These theoretical insights of ecocriticism, especially the ideas related to the environmental apocalypse envisioned by Lawrence Buell are used as theoretical parameters for the analysis of the novel. The ideas like web of interdependence, greed guided mentality and resistance to biological modification of animals are used as analytical tools.

Evils of Anthropocentric Worldview and Essentiality of Ecocentric Outlook

Oryx and *Crake* represents the human induced ecological problems worsened by corporate greed. They have turned the world into an inappropriate place for living. It is plagued with problems like worldwide warming, contamination, overpopulation, societal inequalities, use of bioengineering for benefit motive and total crumbling of morality and ethics. In the novel, the main characters Jimmy and Crake are involved in immoral activities like smoking, porn watching and illicit sexual relationships.

Jimmy's father has an illicit sexual relationship with Ramona and marries her after his first wife's departure. Student service provides sexual service. The human world is completely corrupted and chaotic. Crake explains this problematic human race in the verge of great plague:

As a species, we're in deep trouble, worse than anyone's saying. They are afraid to release the stats because people might just give up, but take it from me. We're running out of space-time. Demand for resources has exceeded supply for decades in marginal geopolitical areas, hence famine and droughts; but very soon, demand is going to exceed supply for everyone. (Atwood 2003, p. 259)

The whole planet is in crisis but the concerned authorities are afraid to expose the reality indicated by statistics. Over exploitation of resources invites famine and drought. The cause of the predicament is nothing but self-centric activities of human beings and their negligence of the natural world. The result is before them. Inside the 'Compounds', people are living well. However, the outside world called 'Pebland' is the place of suffering. They are facing ecological problems like global warming, scarcity of food to many other human caused problems like rape, murder etc. In such a situation, Crake comes with an eccentric idea of Bliss Pluss Pills. This idea ultimately invites human extinction with the pandemic of plague. Buell indicates different bases of modern dystopia. "Loss of all escape routes" (p. 308) is one. As Crake sees no other way to correct the course, he comes with the dystopian idea of plague.

The situation of corporate competition in the novel is the outcome of greed-guided mentality of people. They are not concerned for the welfare of humanity but just their benefit. By blackmailing people emotionally regarding issues like whiteness, sexual power, beautification, making young etc. they are just exploiting people. The biomedical companies are not curing diseases but creating them. "But don't they keep discovering new diseases?" "Not discovering", said Crake. "They're *creating them*" (Atwood 2003, p. 211). They have been doing it for years. They mix the hostile bioforms into their medicines creating another disease to earn high profit. This is the abuse of both corporate power and scientific knowledge. Medical ethics have gone and government authorities are part of the unethical activities. The animals are modified as per human need. They are transformed disregarding their natural shapes and qualities. Pigeons are used for producing human organs. The modified chickens are not chickens but lump of flesh. Buell is strongly critical of this attempt of man to control

nature. He argues, "If the environment can resist our control, then attempts to control it will produce the death or revolt of nature" (p.308). Human beings' attempt to keep nature totally under control is responsible for the disaster. Whether it is the case of the plant world or animal world, human beings are encroaching there and exploiting them as per their need. Such exploitation ultimately brings apocalypses that threaten the whole ecosphere. The post-apocalyptic fictional works give the imminent sense of environmental peril for correcting such crises.

Ethical people have no place in a greed-guided corporate world. They are either killed or compelled to leave the society. Jimmy's mother in the novel is such a representative character who speaks against corporate unethical activities and becomes its victim. She works for Organ Inc. Farm as a biologist but the unethical activities there compel her to leave the job. She warns Jimmy's father not to be involved in such unethical activities. She feels that the workers are supporting the inhuman activities of corporate people remaining silent. She claims, "No You are. You and your smart partner. Your colleagues. It is wrong, the whole organization is wrong, it's a moral corpol and you know" (Atwood 2003, p.56). She opposes the unethical activities of corporate groups but fails. Her escapism from the compound reveals the suffocation that ethical people have to face in the corporate world. Corporate houses are so powerful that individual attempts cannot do anything. This incident is very crucial to expose the evils of corporate houses and the position of moral people in human society.

Crake is the main human agent who plays a vital role for the reversal of anthropocentric worldview in *Oryx* and *Crake*. In the beginning, he is anthropocentric who supports the modification of animals as per the need of human beings. However, later on, he begins to hate the successors of Homo sapiens. He regards natural human qualities as problematic. He clarifies, "Homo sapien doesn't seem to cut himself off the supply end. He's one of the few species that doesn't limit reproduction in the face of dwindling resources" (Atwood 2003, p.120). He exposes the weaknesses of human beings in case of sex and consumption of resources that are causing problems. He concludes, making sex mysterious we are inviting so many problems. He proposes the solution of this problem by making sex cyclical. He states, "Sex is no longer a mysterious rite viewed with ambivalence or downright loathing, conducted in the dark and inspiring suicide and murder" (p. 293-94). In his act of producing Crakers, he has altered the traditional human qualities that he regards destructive. No hierarchy, no

class, no racism, no property, no marriage, no divorce, no parenthood and all equal with less pressure in the natural world. Atwood states:

What had been altered was nothing less than the ancient primate brain. Gone were its destructive features, features responsible for the world's current illness. For instance racism ". . .". Hierarchy couldn't exist among them and no territoriality. They ate nothing but leaves and grass and roots and a berry or two. Their sexuality was not constant torment to them. (p. 305)

Discerning problems in religion, art and literature, Crake plans not to permit them in the new world. The main reason behind this is the possibility of reintroducing anthropocentrism through them.

Diminishing human animal hierarchy is the way that the writer uses to reverse anthropocentric worldview in the novel. Animals and humans both are used for experiment. Talking about Crake's Bliss Plus Pills project Jimmy asks, "Where do you get the subject?" Crake responds, "From the poorer countries. Pay them a few dollars; they don't even know what they're taking" (p. 296). Oryx herself is such a character who is experimented in different jobs. Crake uses humans as a test subject, in the way our society today uses animals in experiments. The act of commodification and experimentation on both humans and animals merges the distinction. In this case, Dunlop (2013) writes, "Humans and non-human animal lives are bundled into a single category- all lives are objects whose purpose is to entertain" (p.5). This act dismantles the traditional concept of human supremacy.

Atwood's post-apocalyptic world is the real ecocentric world, which is the reversal of anthropocentric worldview. All components of nature have their own place in this system. Still there we see minor influences from the previous world but this will be eliminated soon. Jimmy as representative of homo sapiens has changed his name to Snowman, an abominable creature and near extinct species. He is no more in the position of interfering in the new world. The beginning of the novel beautifully presents the ecofriendly post-apocalyptic world. "He lies unmoving, listening to the tide coming in wave after wave sloshing over the various barricades, wish wash, wish wash the rhythm of heart beat" (Atwood 2003, p. 3). It does not have any touch of the ugliness of human beings and the pandemic of the recent past. When human beings stop to think of themselves as the master, they become a part of this great mechanism. This breaking of hierarchy solves so many

ecological problems and creates an eco-friendly world. In the words of Buell, only in such a society biotic egalitarianism can be practiced.

Previously all controlling human becomes just a part of a great mechanism in the ecocentric world of Atwood. Repeatedly Jimmy feels fear of being killed by other clever animals in a trap, “They are smart, very soon they’ll sense his vulnerability, start hunting him. Once they begin, he’ll never be able to go anywhere or anywhere without trees” (2003, p.109). It shows the situation of reversal. In anthropocentric world, human beings identify the weaknesses of animals, trap them and kill them. But the situation has changed, a human being has fear of being hunted as prey. The human-centered world completely vanishes but the natural world survives in a new form. The end of the human centric world is not the end of everything but a new beginning with new possibilities. Braidotti (2013), a post humanist, claims, “The end of classical humanism is not a crisis but entails new positive consequences” (p. 51). Her focus on new possibilities refers to the possibility of the world untouched by traditional humanism. Nature has never ceased to provide its charm even after all that happened to the human world. Atwood writes, “After everything that’s happened, how can the world still be so beautiful? Because it is. From the off shore towers come the avain shrieks and cries that sound like nothing human” (2003, p.371). Nature’s intrinsic beauty is reflected in these lines. Now it is spontaneous without human interference. Nature in its autonomy is more charming than native with human domination.

CONCLUSIONS

This discussion of Atwood’s *Oryx* and *Crake* justifies that the anthropocentric worldview is the root cause of modern ecological problems. Most of the characters like Oryx, Crake, Jimmy, Jimmy’s father are influenced by capitalist consumer culture that totally disregards the value of nature and natural state. The corporate houses perform such unethical activities; the ethical people like Jimmy’s mother are chased away. Corrupted mentality dominates the human world that ultimately produces the character like Crake who plans to erase the traditional human civilization with the intended plague. The meanness of people and modification of nature as per the greed of human beings further complicate the problems. The solution is in an ecocentric worldview forwarded by ecocriticism. Whether it is through apocalypse or drastic change in human behavior, reversal of human centric view is the necessity. By presenting

a horrible anthropocentric world, apocalypse and new ecofriendly world, Atwood warns to change human behavior and make it ecofriendly. Before too late, human beings should implement it in practice. She further appeals to the readers to be ready for the reversal of anthropocentric worldview and guarantee the egalitarian existence of the natural world with its intrinsic qualities.

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