

COVID-19 Pandemic and Apocalyptic Literature: An Analysis of Margret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* at the time of Coronavirus

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Abstract

Literature has been an imitator of life for generations on this earth, this literature has voiced the voiceless. Recent contemporary and postmodern literary theories have catered to burgeoning notions of logic that go beyond human survival on the planet. Science fiction is a genre of fiction that encompasses imaginative concepts like futuristic scientific-technological settings, faster than light, past and future spatial time travel, the existence of parallel universes and extraterrestrial life etc. An outbreak of Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) caused by a novel acute respiratory syndrome of coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) occurred in Wuhan City, Hubei Province, China. The outbreak was declared as a public health emergency of international concern by the World Health Organization on 30 January 2020. During this crisis, literature also plays an important role and apocalyptic literature has shown the disastrous consequences if humans didn't stop their behaviour and attitude towards the world. This research project aims to take literature out of the realm of imagination and present the harsh realities of culture. This study revealed how literature represents the truth of the world that science is learning every day, and how certain inventions can have harmful effects if they are not halted in time. This research analysed the novel *Oryx and Crake* in the light of the COVID-19 pandemic and pointed a convincing glimpse of the future. Snowman (protagonist), known as Jimmy before humanity was overrun by science, is trying to live in a world where he might be the last human Snowman tells the tale of how Crake's scientific ambitions contributed to the abolition of human civilization. The researcher emphasizes how the reel depicts reality and how people are to blame for the degradation of their world.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic, cyberpunk, biopunk, biotechnology, science fiction, apocalyptic

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Introduction

COVID-19 has destroyed and had paused the whole world. This pandemic is one of the deadliest in history, placing the advancement of research and technology in jeopardy. Despite the development of antimicrobial antibiotics, infectious diseases and germs continue to instil fear in the human community. An epidemic has been experimented with in literature since the early days. These health problems, such as cholera, typhus, measles, plague, tuberculosis, among others, have had their effects on personal as well as socio-economic relations. Today, as the globe joins together to battle COVID 19, people can't ignore learning about the history of epidemics, as well as those portrayed in literature. Ancient writings, such as Giovanni Boccaccio's *The Decameron* (1353), Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* (1392), set in motion the literary trope of epidemics, portraying the Black Death that devastated Europe at that time. Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) and Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) can be read as allegories of epidemics as they feature hideous creatures, wreaking havoc everywhere they travel.

Oryx and Crake is a book by Margaret Atwood, a Canadian author published in 2003. The novel is speculative fiction, adventure romance and science fiction. The novel centres on Snowman, a solitary hero, who finds himself in a grim condition with only animals named Crakers to hold him company. The narrator hears about his history as a child named Jimmy and about the genetic experiments and biomedical research under Jimmy's peer Glenn Crake. McClelland and Stewart presented the novel for the very first time. It was shortlisted for both the 2003 Man Booker Fiction Prize and the 2004 Orange Fiction Prize.

Atwood's futuristic vision in her plays is just a hint at what the world could look like if current scientific, technological, and industrial advances continue. She demonstrates a world in which human exploitation is at its height. Along with human and technical devices, Crake's character represents the humanist concept that runs through an impermeable wall, created by them. Within Atwood's fiction, the notion of extinction establishes that creation and death are ultimately connected. The simultaneous adaptation and extinction cycles form life on Earth. The scientists in *Oryx and Crake* are attempting to become part of this natural phenomenon in a bid to control nature. By expressing their self-rationalized dominance by material culture and technology, humans are elevating themselves to the pinnacle of the food chain which, in effect, excuses senseless use. Intervention in natural evolution that accompanies human consumption can be seen in the human activity of selecting and breeding organisms for the desired characteristics and enacting genetic changes over multiple generations. Atwood explores whether genetically engineered plants and mutant animals are not as time-intensive as they used to be.

Review of Literature

In English-language literature, *The Last Man* (1826) by Mary Shelley was one of the first dystopian novels to speak of a possible world destroyed by a plague where a few people tend to be immune and escape contact with others to save them.

American poet and novelist Edgar Allan Poe published *The Masque of the Red Death: A Fantasy* (1842), the tale follows Prince Prosper's attempt to escape a deadly plague, known as the Red Death, by hiding in his castle. He, along with many other rich nobles, holds a masked ball in seven rooms of the castle, each coloured in a different hue. Amid their merriment, a shadowy

figure dressed as a Red Death victim enters and walks through each room. Prospero dies after encountering this stranger, whose attire proves to contain nothing concrete inside it; the other guests also die. The Red Death is a fictional illness. Edgar Allan Poe explains it as inducing stinging sensation and extreme tiredness, and then swelling which resulting in death within half an hour.

Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year (1722)* The bubonic plague in 17th century London is identified in literary and historical terms. Defoe is working tirelessly in the story to create the effect of verisimilitude, to remember actual neighbourhoods, roads, and even houses where accidents have happened. It also contains a table of injury facts and discusses the credibility of the writer's various stories and anecdotes.

Akhter in a paper "Gender Inequality and Literature: A Contemporary Issue" talks about the role literature plays in society as, " Literature asserted itself to be an intellectual imitator to life for generations in this earth that has voiced the voiceless. The recent modern and postmodern literary ideas have changed the whole scenario of the literature" (p. 593).

Camus' novel *The Plague (1947)* the novel tells the tale of an epidemic that is sweeping the French Algerian city of Oran from the perspective of a narrator who himself is the victim of the plague.

Menadue & Cheer (2017) points the relationship between science and culture and how the science fictions represent the culture, "Science fiction questions the role, relevance, costs, and benefits of current and future technologies, and presents ideas that can influence public opinion" (p.1)

The novel *Oryx and Crake* centres on a post-apocalyptic narrator called "Snowman," living next to a group of wild human-like beings he names Crakers. Flashbacks show Snowman was once a child called Jimmy who grew up in a world controlled by multinationals and wealthy residences for their workers' families. Close starvation, Snowman wants to return to the remains of a settlement named Rejooven Esense in pursuit of food, even after deadly genetically modified mutant animals overtake it. He provides an argument for the Crakers, who see him as a trainer, and continues his adventure forging.

Stoker's novel *Dracula (1997)*, has developed several vampire fantasy traditions by introducing the character of Count Dracula. Dracula's plan to travel from Transylvania to England to find fresh blood and spread the zombie curse, as well as the fight between Dracula and a small group of people headed by Professor Abraham Van Helsing, are told in this book.

Butler's, *Survivor (1978)* novel is a contact between the Missionaries, a party of human colonists fleeing a plague on Earth, and the Kohn, articulate inhabitants of the world where the Missionaries have landed, is chronicled in *Survivor*. The narrative centres on Alanna, the Missionaries' leader's adoptive daughter, as she tries to protect the Missionaries from being destroyed or assimilated by a powerful local society.

Menadue and Cheer (2017) wrote about the importance of science fiction as, “Science fiction questions the role, relevance, costs, and benefits of current and future technologies, and presents ideas that can influence public opinion” (p. 2). Paura and Colacel (2019) talked about science fiction as:

Two trends have long been prevalent in science fiction: the first that of totalitarian dystopia, started with classic literature. Off and on-screen, dystopian stories reveal a Panopticon society, where the pervasiveness of technology removes any hope of individual life. The second trend is that of climate fiction: narratives that imagine a world dramatically changed by the climate breakdown show that our society can always be brought back to a pre-modern state by resource scarcity and overpopulation. (p. 7)

Objectives

The main objectives of this research work are:

- To explore the relationship between science and literature.
- To analyze the concept of mind control, telepathy and telekinesis.
- To build a foundation of realism
- To analyze the vision for the future.
- To relate reel with real.

Research Methodology

The methods selected for the current study are Comparative and Analytical Approach. The paper incorporates different apocalyptic theories to understand the psychology of different characters. All these methods are appropriate for the present study.

Discussion and Analysis

The settings of science fiction are all largely formed within the alternate subsistence of utopian and apocalyptic future societies, the environments of science fiction are often contradictory to those of concurrent fact are often contrary to those of concurrent reality, as they are mostly developed within the alternative subsistence of utopian and dystopian future worlds. Science fiction that highly uses magical and other supernatural prospects as its principal ingredient of plot, theme or setting is categorized under ‘Fantasy,’ an independent subgenre of science fiction. The diversified subgenres that come under the broad field of science fiction are Bio-punk, Cyberpunk, Time travel, Military Science Fiction, Superhuman depictions, Apocalyptic and Post-apocalyptic, Space opera, Paranormal Science Fiction, Social science fiction, etc. Science fiction first appeared in the 1980s as a kind of near-future fiction portraying a bleak patriarchal civilization in the throes of socio-cultural revolution as a result of invasive technology's transformations. Bio-punk is concerned with the future and the anticipated implications of the biotechnology boom and recombinant DNA breakthroughs. Built upon how technology has already altered our lives.

Oryx and Crake's pre-apocalyptic universe was teeming with science and technology firms specializing in transgenic studies. Constantly testing the limits of imagination, these corporations finally pushed humanity off the brink. The expression is Genetic experimentation in which genetic material from one animal is artificially inserted into the DNA of another is known as transgenic science. Jimmy's father was interested in transgenic science. For example, he was the brains behind the pigeon, a hybrid pig creature intended to produce human kidneys and skin cells. Other hybrid creatures included in the book include rakunks, wolvogs, bobkittens, and

luminescent rabbits genetically engineered with jellyfish DNA. However, from Snowman's post-apocalyptic viewpoint, it is apparent that the desire for technological progress directly contributed to the abolition of humanity by granting control and wealth to unscrupulous scholars.

Oryx and Crake are engaged in a symbolic struggle between science and the arts, with Crake representing the science side and Snowman representing the art side. In the pre-apocalyptic setting of the novel, science strongly overshadowed the arts. Snowman makes many references to Crake's position as God in the book. Despite his adamant atheism, Crake created the Paradise facility and inhabited it with a new breed of humans, casting himself as a symbolic God. While Crake's reaction to the word 'Paradise' was probably sarcastic, Snowman realizes that Crake had a God complex. He not only created a new breed of humans, but he also went out of his way to wipe out the entire human species. Snowman, in the present, transforms Crake's irony on himself by making him a god worshipped by the Children of Crake. Snowman refers to himself as the 'God of Bullshit', and he creates bizarre origin stories that the Crakers enthusiastically believe.

The Book ends as "Oryx and Crake" is an exciting love tale at once, and a convincing glimpse of the future. Snowman, born as Jimmy before an epidemic ravaged humanity, is fighting to live in a society where he might be the last human being, and grieving the death of his best friend, Crake, and the lovely and mysterious Oryx whom they both loved. Snowman embarks on a quest in pursuit of answers with the aid of the green-eyed Children of Crake – through the rugged forest that was so recently a great community before large companies put mankind for an unregulated genetic manipulation adventure.

Margaret Atwood is leading us into a distant future all too ordinary and beyond our imagination. "Strange to think of the endless labour, the digging, the hammering, the carving, the lifting, the drilling, day by day, year by year, century by century; and now the endless crumbling that must be going on everywhere. Sandcastles in the wind" (Chapter 3). Snowman is contemplating the remains of his collapsed civilization and how even the most stable objects turn out to be frail. After the everyday afternoon rain, Snowman makes his way to a broken bridge where he can wash in the rainfall and fill his empty bottles of beer with drinking water.

Crake produces the eco-friendly Crakers in *Oryx and Crake*, intending to replace humans with them. This is not only a Frankenstein-sequel means of manipulating nature but also an intense type of biocentrism: it produces creatures that are readily adjusted to their climate. These new creatures are not only respectful of all life forms but also not inclined to any religion. The negative elements of Crake's ecotopia are only the other hand of dogmatic, ecocentric radicalism and so it is unsurprising that his egalitarian dream had disastrous consequences.

Oryx and Crake track the human path from manipulating nature (by producing new organisms and leading the current ones to face extinction) to winding up as another survivor of the evolutionary history narrative. Just like the creatures, they replace; the better-adapted crackers supplant them too. It will act as a harbinger for all mankind because far from being deemed excluded or exalted from natural powers (which offer a false sense of supremacy to humans), our technological advancement can transform into our greatest fear because lead the whole race to perish.

He knew he was faltering, trying to keep his footing. Everything in his life was temporary, ungrounded. Language itself had lost its solidity; it had become thin, contingent, slippery, a viscous film on which he was sliding around like an eyeball on a plate. (Atwood, Chapter 10).

This quotation appears at the end of Chapter 10, soon after Jimmy learns of his mother's execution. Jimmy fell into a deep depression as a result of this horrific reporting. He continued to withdraw from his already small social life, drinking late at night to drown his sorrows. Jimmy's sense of intent had faded, and he was losing his grip on reality.

"Immortality," said Crake, "is a concept. If you take 'mortality' as being, not death, but the foreknowledge of it and the fear of it, then 'immortality' is the absence of such fear. Babies are immortal. Edit out the fear and you'll be" (Atwood, Chapter 12).

This is a conversation between Crake and Jimmy which takes place in chapter 12, where Crake first revealed to Jimmy the research he had carried out on the human genome. Crake expressed his expectation that his new species of humans would be immune to death because they had no sense of mortality. This will give them the illusion of longevity without ever allowing them to live indefinitely.

Akhter in a paper "Problems and Challenges Faced by EFL Students of Saudi Arabia during COVID-19 Pandemic", has shown the face of coronavirus as, "The COVID-19 pandemic had a major effect on human survival around the globe. Indeed, the Covid-19 pandemic could trigger the global economy to compress to one quarter by 2020" (p. 2).

The natural sense states that humans are beings special because they exhibit qualities such as voice and sensitivity that all other animals' experience. Another such separator is the capacity to interact but it has often been questioned. Human beings are engaged in language distinguished by tone, movement and facial expression and are determined by it. But many creatures also have their system to communicate including infrared vision, smell and body language, chemical signals, or hearing that reaches beyond human sight through registers of their organisms.

On the other, Sharon and Oryx have a slice of the novel's feminine department. They underscore the dubious use of science and technology. Both the characters are symbols that enjoin technology on nature. In an Asian village of parched fields, trees and wild animals that make up the world, Oryx lives from one extreme to the other – the affluent inner paradise of the Rejooven Esense Compound that symbolizes technological/scientific elitism in the business culture. Sharon is taking the opposite direction by serving as a microbiologist with the Organic Compound, only to enter the same research she helped build in the revolutionary environmentalist demonstrations against the corporate perversions.

Scientists continued creating both strange species and utilitarian ones. Genetic engineering enabled humans to overcome the barriers that normally limit the arbitrary cross-breeding of different species of organisms. It has almost made them feel godlike. Whereas some inventions like the dancing rat were friendly and playful, others were dangerous, like the snake (a rat hybrid and the rattlesnake). These hybrids once freed from human control, tended to

overwhelm the animal kingdom. Of all varieties, the most popular were the Crakers that represented an anti-humanist philosophy. Survival was their primary characteristic and not religion.

According to Glover, humans playing god prefer to objectivize reality regardless of their desire to hybridise. The humans and the humanoid Crakers, as Chung-Hao Ku argued, depict the fine line between humanity and monstrosity. In the artificial selection of Oryx and Crake, Atwood explores the natural social order and human exceptionalism and investigates the relationship between humans and animals, their roles, and non-human sentience. Atwood discusses the ethical treatment of animals and informs her readers about what they are eating and how it is produced. Although not consumed, the pigoons (transgenic pigs bred to grow human replacement organs) are nevertheless killed for harvesting the organs from them.

Nutrition has been an overwhelmingly commoditised societal force, given its roots in nature. There are other forms of meals a single group eats. The established ties between food and human consumption have been broken here. This is further exemplified with the agricultural commodity dubbed Chickie Nobs, an all-breast-meat chicken production line that reduces the animal to only the muscle tissue to combat the protein scarcity created by current factory farming related to climate change and overpopulation. Initially averse to consuming them, Jimmy eventually gives in by remarking how the food is not as bad as it appears especially if one can “forget everything the provenance”. This is an illustration of what Atwood considers mindless consumption which is first characterised by abhorrence on the part of the consumer and finally participating due to exhaustion in the face of natural dissolution.

As Atwood shows in her novel, pandemics can bring forth deeply rooted fears and modify human behaviour greatly. The novelist used the apocalyptic genre to criticize contemporary social structure. Even though it was published some twenty years ago, the novel presents the same concerns we face today. The post-apocalyptic setting reflects the current time of the novel, and every chapter of the book shifts back and forth between Snowman's present encounters and his recollections of his pre-apocalypse childhood when he was named Jimmy. As the novel progresses, these disparate yet intertwined plot strands weave together. This brings to mind the current uncontrolled COVID 19 and the fear and hysteria that it engenders. The novel also symbolises the infection since it feeds only on human blood. Literature goes beyond statistics on global mortality and spread to show how the epidemic has affected the lives of those who have been infected, as well as their relatives, families, and neighbours. As many cultural critics have noted in recent weeks, fictional works concerned with plagues, epidemics, and other manifestations of biological crisis have seen a dramatic increase in popularity.

Several of the literature on plague and contagious diseases portrays those in charge as the sole instigator of the masses' wrath, which can be contrasted to the actual mismanagement of regimes in several nations. The lack of access to personal narratives is a profound cultural and ethical feature of all global epidemics. The community takes the role of the citizen as the protagonist, and the public's welfare takes priority over the individual's. In this way, recounting past sufferings as told in numerous literary and historical texts can result in dense recollection with subjective specificity. Pandemic apocalyptic practices, such as COVID-19, are profoundly embedded in theological and cultural myths that point to the end of the world. In conclusion, we

should hope to become more expressive in our creative creations under COVID 19 regarding our human survival, loneliness, insecurity, confusion, and, most importantly, the importance of mutual introspection of inequality linked to pandemic deaths.

Conclusion

Oryx and Crake can be used as a monstrous personification of the epidemics. *Oryx and Crake* open up in a tree with a guy called Snowman. There has been some sort of tragic incident, but the reader does not yet know what the event was or what triggered the event. It seems that Snowman may be the only survivor of the case, apart from several childlike people he relates to it as the "Children of Crake," who wander about nude and have a special genetic makeup. Comparing the now-extinct animals with their bio-engineered equivalents, Atwood points out that unless a single species becomes beneficial or valuable to human society, it may undergo practical exploitation as opposed to extinction only. These genetically modified organisms are merely slaves to the coming generations as they are voiceless and mere property. We are valued as much as they can support their owners and no matter how much they add to the broader community. We might also be exterminated and put back according to human whimsicalities. Beneath the façade that is creation and growth, a substantial amount of naturally born species that are of little benefit to humans go extinct. *Oryx and Crake* debate whether extinction is a more troubling problem because it affects the human race, as opposed to the non-human population, and whether the principle of fairness still extends to the latter (which has been called the 'other' for too long). Humans have always attempted to segregate themselves from non-humans. Via practices such as factory farming and the manufacture of processed foods, humans have effectively made animals the "other" who are only supposed to support humans and maintain their health. This also rendered us unaccountable to anyone who is not human. Humans in *Oryx and Crake* retain isolation from natural processes that enable them to prevent any ramification.

What should be remembered is that choices made from this vantage point, such as collecting organs from pigeons and subsequent sacrifice, decide the ethicality of acts from the human viewpoint. However, what should be borne in mind is that judgments made by this point of view, as exemplified by collecting pigeon organs and their consequent destruction, decide the ethicality of acts from the limited human viewpoint. The majority of the story includes Snowman recalling the circumstances that led to the post-apocalyptic setting under which he now finds himself. Each occurrence takes the reader closer to a complete comprehension of the catastrophic event that wiped out the majority of the global population, as well as Snowman's role in it. The humanities, especially literature, offer insightful insights into how people in the past dealt with the tragedy of pandemics, as well as how to make sense of a world that is now, in many ways, beyond our reach.

About the Author

Tawhida Akhter is working as Assistant Professor of English Literature in the English Department, Faculty of Sciences and Arts Sajjir, Shaqra University, KSA since 2019. She obtained her Ph.D from India. She has published a book with Emerlad Publishers and her another book is submitted for publication with Cambridge Scholars UK. She has published more 20 research papers in International journals and has attended more than 30 conferences and workshops. She is actively involved in research on Women Empowerment, Gender Studies,

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