

RESEARCH ARTICLE**Crake's Paradise: The Dystopian Consequences of Genetic Engineering in
Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake***

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Abstract

The theme of genetic engineering is a long running topic in literature. The concept has clearly dominated the sci-fi and dystopian fiction genres; in literature, *Brave New World* (1932), *The Giver* (1993), *Never Let Me Go* (2005), *Unwind* (2007) and "Gattaca" (1997), "Blade Runner" (1982), "Elysium" (2013) in films, are notable examples of it. As time has advanced on, science has likewise progressed by concentrating more on the human body, identity, and control. This study aims to examine Crake's "Paradise" in *Oryx and Crake* (2003) by Margaret Atwood, as a technoscientific utopian project based on genetic engineering and intentional redesign of human nature. Drawing on the concepts of posthumanism, biopower and critical dystopian theory, the study reflects how scientific advancement becomes a tool of control rather than liberation. It further portrays the dangers of pursuit of perfection through genetic engineering, thus revealing a fragile boundary between utopian dream and dystopian reality. Ultimately, the study argues that unethical advancement of science and biotechnologies are the biggest threats to humanity; weapons powerful enough to bring havoc on mankind.

Keywords: Biopower, Dystopia, Genetic Engineering, Margaret Atwood, Posthuman.

Dystopian fiction is a powerful tool to warn about the harmful future of humanity, if required serious attention is not given to the direction in which the contemporary scientific advancements are taking place. Scientific research is a powerful double-edged sword capable of affecting human lives in both positive and negative ways. The need for dystopian works driven by scientific concern, "coincided with rapid technological advancements and growing societal concerns about the implications of these technologies" (Bharatbhai and Nimavat 21). In the twenty-first century, as more technological gadgets integrated in daily life, authors "began exploring the darker side of technological progress through speculative fiction" (Bharatbhai and Nimavat 21). In this regard, there was a hike in "dystopian narratives that reflected anxieties about the potential misuse of technology and its impact on individual freedom and societal structures" (Bharatbhai and Nimavat 21).

There are many fields of scientific research that worries authors and are reflected in their works as a potential threat. One of such anxieties is the unethical use of genetic engineering. Genetic engineering is the "artificial manipulation, modification, and recombination of DNA or other nucleic acid molecules in order to modify an organism or population of organisms" (Britannica). In the light of continuous advancements in the field of genetic methodologies, science fiction correctly predicts various processes and their applications. In her novel, *Oryx and Crake* (2003), Margaret Atwood has portrayed the unethical use of scientific technologies,

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especially biotechnologies that lead to catastrophic consequences. The theme of genetic "rewinding, resetting, and reversing" dominates the novel. The novel exposes scientific rationalism and its belief in technological ability to erase major human limitations (natural traits) by creating an entirely new utopian environment for humanoids. The principal creator behind this utopian project, called "Paradise" is Glenn/Crake.

Paradise is a bubble dome with a large central space filled with vegetation and in the ceiling a blue sky. More accurately, "Not really a blue sky, only the curved ceiling of the bubble-dome, with a clever projection device that simulated dawn, sunlight, evening, night. There was a fake moon that went through its phases...There was fake rain" (Atwood 302). The author's ingenious usage of the term Paradise in place of Paradise, exposes its artificialness. After Paradise, the protagonist Jimmy for the first time is introduced to genetically modified humanoids, he calls Crakers. He describes them, "each one naked, each one perfect, each one a different skin colour – chocolate, rose, tea, butter, cream, honey – but each with green eyes. Crake's aesthetic" (Atwood 8). However, "there was no self-consciousness, none at all. At first, he couldn't believe them, they were so beautiful...Each individual was exquisite" (Atwood 302).

For Crake, major social problems—such as racism, slavery, violence, war, hierarchy, sexual abuse and religious conflicts—are traits of human behaviour, therefore instead of changing society he aims to change human nature. Crake's scientific perspective assumes that all such problems can be corrected by a single solution—genetic engineering. The problem with Crake is that he "confuses human culture with what he perceives as human nature" (Kabak 42). He tries to understand human beings as mechanical beings, and his fundamental idea is that humanity cannot be redeemed. "Hence, the only way to achieve an environmentalist utopia, for Crake, is to destroy humans, and create a genetically modified version of them by eliminating these destructive features so that these hybrid beings can replace humans" (Kabak 42). The novel reflects, Crake as a scientist who finds it conventional to create an entirely new utopian environment with entirely different, yet perfect species than to expect human behaviour to change.

To replace human beings with genetically modified humanoids, and to achieve his utopian dream, Crake heavily relies on scientific knowledge. For Paradise to become reality, Crake employed genetic engineering method to create an entire population with particular pre-selected characteristics. The method used by Crake is called gene slicing, a process that allows scientists to reedit genetic components of an organism so that desired traits or characteristics could be induced in the body. Crake proudly elaborates the distinct features of his humanoids while emphasising their superiority

Gone were its destructive features, the features responsible for the world's current illnesses. For instance, racism – or, as they referred to it in Paradise, pseudospeciation – had been eliminated in the model group, merely by switching the bonding mechanism: the Paradise people simply did not register skin colour. Hierarchy could not exist among them, because they lacked the neural complexes that would have created it. Since they were neither hunters nor agriculturalists hungry for land, there was no territoriality: the king-of-the-castle hard-wiring that had plagued humanity had, in them, been unwired. They ate nothing but leaves and grass and roots and a berry or two; thus their foods were plentiful and always available. Their sexuality was not a constant torment to them, not a cloud of turbulent hormones: they came into heat at regular intervals, as did most mammals other than man. (Atwood 305)

Crake removed racism by making Crakers incapable of noticing skin differences. Though it may seem ideal, it also removes the human ability to recognise and appreciate differences. He further removed hierarchy recognition capability which ensures that Crakers lose their leadership, ambition, individuality and varying social roles. Moreover, by making Crakers dependent on nothing else but leaves and berries as their food,

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eating was no longer connected to pleasure and cultural traditions, and the experience of cooking and sharing meals vanishes. Furthermore, the remodelling of Crakers' sexuality has forever changed complex relationship traits such as love, desire, jealousy, attachment and affection—the qualities that are widely regarded as defining features of human beings. Thus, Crake's Paradise, in the process of creating perfect humans in a perfect environment has sacrificed essential qualities that are core to humans.

A more disturbing aspect of Crake's project is that he didn't simply eliminate human traits he disliked, rather he incorporated animal instincts that he finds fascinating, as he would say, "*Think of an adaptation, any adaptation, and some animal somewhere will have thought of it first*" (Atwood 164). The humanoids or Crakers are not immune from wounds but so far "the injuries have been minor, and easily cured by purring" (Atwood 156).

Crake had worked for years on the purring. Once he'd discovered that the cat family purred at the same frequency as the ultrasound used on bone fractures..., he'd turned himself inside out in the attempt to install that feature (Atwood 156).

Crake equipped Crakers with purring ability for healing. The technique is inspired by cats whose purring vibrations promote tissue repair and bone healing. Another animal instinct that Crake incorporates is Scent-marking. Crakers establish their territorial boundaries by marking them with their own urine. Furthermore, Crakers "came into heat at regular intervals, as did most mammals other than man" (Atwood 305). As such, sexual relationships are reduced to reproduction, thus separating any emotional attachments, yet ensuring timely reproduction. In this regard, Crake's Paradise is a manifestation of a posthuman world. His vision is against anthropocentrism and its destructive forces. However, Amrita Bakshi argues that Crake's posthuman world is "inadvertently and inevitably reverts to the mythos of power and hierarchy which drove the very anthropocentrism in the pre-Utopian world of the novel" (31). Posthuman theories Donna Haraway (1991) in her influential essay, "A Cyborg Manifesto" declares "By the late twentieth century [...] we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism" (150). Haraway consequently challenges traditional rigid boundaries between "human and animal" and "organism and machines", stating that such boundaries are products of human imagination. According to Bakshi, "such insight helps us read Crake's Crakers as 'fabricated hybrids'—organisms designed to erase the boundaries between human culture and a purely ecological existence" (31).

Contemporary advancement in the fields of science and biotechnologies have a serious effect on human life and have significantly transformed our understanding of humans. Contemporary philosopher Rosi Braidotti (2013) further defines that the posthuman knowledge is not about eliminating human beings, rather it questions its boundaries and future. She states, it raises "deep anxieties both about the moral status of the human and...the political desire to resist commercially owned and profit-minded abuses of the new genetic knowhow" (40). In *Oryx and Crake*, Atwood dramatises such technological interventions that blur rigid human-animal boundaries and turn living organisms into commodities in the hands of corporations.

Biopower /Biopolitics refers to the "new forms of knowledge/power concerned with fostering and administering life" (Andrée 167). For Foucault, it is "power over death, into a new power over life focussed on the shaping of the individual and the care of populations" (Andrée 167). Modern power operates by controlling the body, health, disease, sexuality, survival, birth and death. Thus, biopower constitutes sovereign power. Crake exercises biopower because he does not merely govern individuals but redesigns life itself. The novel represents Crake as a genetic engineer, creating life by selecting desirable qualities from various species, especially animals and incorporating them all to make an entirely new human breed. "Under the guise of his

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scientism, he assumes the role of Yahweh who, after seeing the evil in human beings, is displeased with his creation" (Kabak 44). Therefore, he took the chaos, and he poured it away "... this is how Crake ... cleared away the dirt" (Atwood 103). However, Atwood exposes that Paradise—the ideal place and Crakers—perfect humanoids are achieved by eliminating essential human qualities, thus, making readers interrogate whether or not such techno-utopian dreams are worth the human sacrifice.

Murat Kabak in his article "Margaret Atwood's 'Oryx and Crake' as a Critique of Technological Utopianism" further outlines two major problems in relation to Crake's method of genetic elimination of undesired human traits. First, his approach assumes "a core that defines what is human...Second, this method reveals the totalitarian aspect of Crake's nostalgia for a paradisiacal existence, as the hybrid beings are renditions of Adam and Eve's state before the Fall" (Kabak 43-44). In the novel, Crake with his totalitarian vision is portrayed as a mad scientist "whose intentions are egotistic, otherwise egomaniacal, expecting a solution of worldwide problems by destroying, not the source, but the being who can perceive it and find millions of paths that can conduct to a win-win resolution" (Maglioni 59). Consequently, "the reason why the existence of the Crakers is not entirely good is because of his creator's means of achieving his goals" (Maglioni 59).

Atwood's central argument is the "use of scientific knowledge without any ethical or moral oversight in attaining an ideal society by showing that it is not only totalitarian but also inherently human-centered" (Kabak 43). With regard to concerns surrounding genetic manipulation, D. S. Nicholl coined the term 'genethics' "to describe the ethical problems that exist in modern genetics, which are likely to increase in both number and complexity as genetic engineering technology becomes more sophisticated" (Maglioni 50). Yet, scholars emphasise that people should not condemn science as evil. But, "they should take into account its purposes and the means it is using to reach them" (Maglioni 50). Rather than questioning technology alone, attention should be directed towards humanity as the governing force. Regarding moral conduct in terms of genetic engineering, the use of animals for research and playing the role of creator, technophiles are of the opinion that scientific technology in itself is neutral. Nicholl's answer concerning neutrality is that "scientists are humans; therefore, they are not ethically and morally neutral", but he also warns that is not solely scientists' responsibility, he states that "in the developed world, we live in societies shaped by technology, which is derived from the application of scientific discoveries. [Hence]] We must all share the responsibility of policing the new genetic technology" (Maglioni 51).

Dystopian fiction is the realisation of the truth that there are serious issues with the utopian dream of paradise. As such, critical dystopias provide "the narrative space that, not only thematically but even structurally, foregrounds the most urgent issues of our times (Fortunati 35). Atwood's dystopian novel has clearly illustrated the negative social result of using technological advancements. Atwood's satirical tone in *Oryx and Crake* is a warning against unethical and morally deficient conduct of scientific knowledge. Atwood cautions her readers that even though biotechnology and genetic engineering may seem as potential tools to achieve utopian dreams but when such technologies begin pointing human limitations, they become biggest threats to humanity. In conclusion, the novel suggests that not only scientists but laymen in general have a huge responsibility, as G. A. Maglioni states, "We must take into account our needs, the limits of our hunger for knowledge and to respect life above all" (52). Only, by replacing greed with need, and aligning scientific progress with moral responsibility can society achieve favourable conditions for humans to prosper.

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