

The Posthuman Homo Faber in Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*: An Ironic Portrayal

Alisa Dahal*

Abstract

As a dystopia, Margaret Atwood's novel Oryx and Crake speculates the looming consequences of scientific inventions and technologies manifested in the destruction of natural equilibrium and posthuman complexities. Homo sapiens' unlimited desires and aspirations for enhancement and excellence have driven humans to enact the Creator. Crake, almost a mad scientist in the novel, creates the Crakers — genetically modified humans. To analyze this life force, the paper uses theoretical insights of humanists like Giannozzo Manetti, Rene Descartes and Friedrich Nietzsche regarding their celebration of human exceptionalism, reason, and free will. But, to counter-argue transgression in the pretext of progress, the paper also uses Donna Haraway's concept of interspeciesism and Rosi Braidotti's critical posthumanism. They promote interdependence, critical review of the past and abstinence to address the posthuman crises and existential dilemmas. The enhanced Crakers are immune to starvation and ordinary diseases, devoid of art, imagination and creativity; but ironically feed on grass and their own excrement, and lack the essence of being human. They challenge Crake's genome project by transcending the lab-limitations but adapting to natural evolution. Hence, this paper examines Atwood's speculation of how modern science and technology distorts the symbiosis and disfigures the humans resulting in unwanted negotiations for survival. A post-human homofaber, Crake tries to resolve the existential crisis by eliminating the Bastion of humanity itself but ironically dehumanizes the human. The question is how far will humanity overrule nature? Who is accountable to repair the earth? Thus, this paper enables a thought exercise to retrospect on human insensibility and undergo abstinence of desires and luxury to save the future of this planet and lives from facing the impending apocalypse, as shown in the novel.

Key Words: Homo faber, human– excellence, apocalypse, posthuman-complexities, speculate, criticality

In *Oryx and Crake*, Crake and Jimmy ironically represent the homo faber in a post-apocalyptic context. Some critics have analyzed this novel as a projection of a

* Lecturer (contract) English Department,
(M. A., B. Ed. and an Mphil Scholar in English from TU)
Mahendra Ratna Campus, Tahachal, Kathmandu, Nepal
Email: rijalalisa@gmail.com

hopeful future of the world which has new humans devoid of desires, with the problem of hunger eliminated; green lush around in nature and the new multi-traits creatures lurking everywhere. Set in the posthuman future, the novel speculates a post apocalyptic world where Jimmy is the only human survivor. It is succeeded by a new cycle of development with new hope for humanity and other life forms as well. A scientist called Crake creates new human beings and creatures with self-surviving mechanisms and a self- healing immune system. The humans are devoid of desires, concepts, ideas, imagination and art because Crake reasons they are the causes of wars, political intrigues, conflicts and suffering. The novel resets the clock of human civilization for which Crake is determined to erase humans by creating new humans. The only survivor Jimmy perceives the new world and recalls the past from zero hour as the vantage point. He is haunted by the inescapable memories of his immediate past and keeps on fabricating them.

Few ethical and ontological questions arise out of the new inventions and creations: whether the new world with the new human beings and other species populating it is a better frontier or a worse situation for humanity because it has nothing to do with the humans. Who is responsible for the suffering and destruction of mother nature and the earth? Are the new humans planned under Eugenics improved and enhanced, when they have to live on the meager diet of grass and their own excrement? What about the novel's mythical representation of the apocalypse which leaves some survivors to narrate the history and the past to the future generation as after Noah's flood? Did the god not create the human on his own image and from the concoctions of elements of other creatures meaning the symbiotic relation with them? Who is responsible to take care of and appreciate the beautiful creation of the god? Atwood implies that humans cannot defeat nature and destroy the creation for whatever they celebrate as the victory over nature. To support the argument on the issues of humanity in the speculative world, some theoretical ideas of a few Renaissance humanists like Giannozzo Manetti, Rene Descartes; Frederich Nietzsche and post-humanist Donna Haraway and Rosi Braidotti are brought into discussion. However, the textual analysis forms the major discussion along with these theoretical insights and reviews.

Reflecting on the downfall of humanity from the garden of Eden, human desire proves a driving force to determine our fate and destiny. John Milton's biblical story of the fall of man refers to the same story of desire for the unknown that caused the decline of the divine human. The frontier myth has produced many frontier heroes like "the American Hero", heroes as in the sci-fi movies and the comics starring transhumans like Superman, Batman and Spiderman in a multiverse. So, the homo faber is also undergoing evolution and needs to be recontextualized from its conceptual status. Detlev L. Tonsing traces coinage of the term "homo faber" in one of his articles: "The phrase homo faber was coined by Applus Claudius, who formulated its meaning in the sentence . . . (every human is the maker of his or her destiny) . . . the makers of their own instruments and the makers of their own lives" (Tonsing). A human is "an animal laboran . . . labor[ing] to meet the basic

needs of survival like all animals, so slave to the needs of the body and still unfree. To be free, we need to move beyond slave labor to creative work” (Tonsing). Crake’s obsession to eliminate the whole human civilization by his new creation overtones the same human desire for survival free of human sufferings and atrocities caused by the human himself. Pointing at the need to revisit and reconfigure the homo faber, Ihde and Malafouris argue:

Humans are no mere creatures of ‘nature’ or ‘biology’. They are not solely the products of ‘culture’ either. Rather, the human mode of being can be better described as ‘a continuum of human-prostheses inter-relations’ (Ihde 2012, 374).” That is a mode of being in between the imposed notional frontiers of ‘nature’ and ‘culture’ or ‘mind’ and ‘matter’. (Ihde and Malafouris 196)

Homo faber’s aspirations, quest and creation should not erase humanity itself because only the integration and symbiosis or the continuum of interrelations can resolve the posthuman crisis, not human arrogance defying nature and god. They reclaim:

Humans, more than any other species, have been altering their paths of development by creating new material forms and by opening up to new possibilities of material engagement. That is, we become constituted through making and using technologies that shape our minds and extend our bodies. (Ihde and Malafouris, Abstract)

Donna Haraway’s cyborg represents the similar mediated posthuman as an answer to the complexities brought by the mechanical world. Humanity’s failure to overcome its own unlimited desires and reckless ventures at the cost of nature has brought miseries in human life itself. Our victory lies in accepting interrelational continuum of nature-culture that Haraway proposes while discussing on interspeciesism. Like the ecocritics’ regard to the inanimate matter as an active organism, technology grows with humanity so can not be resisted but needs to be integrated. Haraway asserts: “So my cyborg myth is about transgressed boundaries, potent fusions, and dangerous possibilities which progressive people might explore as one part of needed political work.” (Haraway 13) As such, technology should not be used to destroy us but our resistance to it “needs an imagined organic body to integrate [it]” (13) meaning reconfiguration of our relations and adaptation.

But, against this appropriated posthuman, Giannozzo Manetti in *Renaissance Humanism* celebrates the human as the “unique creation of god” (46) and the uniqueness lies in its “. . . rational soul that permits the human beings to experience the highest forms of pleasure” (46). The dignity of the human body and soul is enormous. To keep the dignity, we should “reject vice, and pursue virtue, . . . since by continual and determined acts of virtue we are not only made blessed and happy but we are remade . . . in the image of the immortal God . . . in perpetual and eternal blessedness and pure delight . . .” (46). Man has the potential to experience the “highest good.” Crake, the image of the God, creates a new world to reach “the greatest fulfillment” of a better human but is doomed to the perpetual recycling of excrement as food and fodder for his creatures.

Similarly, Rene Descartes' thought of body-mind dualism also privileges mind over any materiality and false beliefs that refer to the deceiving values of Christianity. This claim of the human mind over body and God, for determining truth is foundational of the western thought. Discussing a hypothetical argument in his book *Meditations*, Descartes envisages: "If I wanted to establish anything in the sciences that was stable and likely to last, I needed—just once in my life—to demolish everything completely and start again from the foundations" (1). This is the voice of a Renaissance man—a homo faber, aspiring to new knowledge and meaning for something better than the lies of the old belief system. Dr. Faustus in Christopher Marlow's book of the same title, sells his soul for the thirst of knowledge (59). A desire-ridden man inquisitive to know the world, Dr. Faustus uses his soul as an instrument to achieve his end which identifies him with a mad homo faber.

Nietzsche also contends the herd mentality to overcome the meekness and rise above to a Superpower. What is virtue for a man is his passion. Nietzsche's Zarathustra defies God's law and claims: "An earthly virtue is what I love: it has little prudence, and least of all the reason and wisdom of everyone" (Prologue 33). We find the similar madness and obsession in Crake as his will to power to become the Creator but ironically he creates humans devoid of this will and imagination. Immanuel Kant advocates for freedom that enables ". . . to have courage to use your own reason" (Kant). But Crake, craving for freedom is imprisoned in a world with no new possibilities but back to the vegetation, grass, plant shoots – or mother nature.

Hence, all these theorists and philosophers conform to the power of reason and passion that drives human beings to search for new things and betterment. Arguing on Nietzsche's concept of the overhuman and transhuman, Stefan Lorenz Sorgner reasons: ". . . the species "human being", like every species, is not eternally fixed and immutable, It came into existence, it can fade out of existence, and it can evolve into a different species" (Sorgner 31). His concept conforms to Darwin's theory of evolution, but not of the biological rather of technological change. Darwin's "struggle for existence" parallels Nietzsche's concept of will-to-power and persistent striving for power as "the fundamental human drive" (33). In *Oryx and Crake*, the genetically created creatures are subject to natural evolution once they are left free in the wild. Atwood's stance at this conflict between genetics and evolution is quite ironic in the sense that the new lab-humans are prone to adaptation for natural growth that shows Crake's genome project going awry.

Reflecting over the issues Atwood implies, modernity's commitment to achieve human ends at the cost of nature and other life forms is unethical and questionable. The firms working on creating and making different hybrid creatures invest for profit under the euphemistic ideals of helping humanity to provide with necessary organ implantation. Jimmy recalls how the rakunks decorated the dish at the hotels and hostels and how he points at the cannibalistic cultivation in humans who eat the animal made from human genes. The only human representative of homo narrans, Jimmy stands as the mouthpiece

of the author disenchanted with the cruelty and brutality of modernity. He is employed to teach humanity to the readers, Crakers and Crake himself through his grand narratives, stories and memories of the past. His inventiveness and imagination counters the new humans devoid of these human attributes. Jimmy and Crake serve the projection of ongoing conflict between humanity and technology for Atwood's humanistic endeavor for holistic worldview in the novel.

Likewise, beginning and end of the novel with human footprints, the enhanced Crakers' feeding on their excrement, the mad scientist Crake — representative of homo faber stuck with the recycling of excrement and perpetual regrowth of vegetation to eliminate overpopulation-induced hunger are ironic portrayal against the inventiveness and creative potential of the homo faber. The conflict between evolution and genetics also draws upon Atwood's ironic paradigm of the novel. The Crakers' greed for power prevails in that they urinate around to mark their areas and prevent intrusion with the strong smell of their urine. Crake forbidding Jimmy—imaginative and inventive— to create symbols, narratives fearing that the Crakers will have an impact, contradicts with his faith in genetics and eugenics to improve humans. Snowman claims to have seen three other humans like him including a woman at the end of the novel. Desperate to find human company in the deserted state, he sees the human footprint on the sand: “Here is a human footprint, in the sand. Then another one. . . . there is no mistaking them. . . . a signature of a kind [human].” (Atwood 372-373) Inquisitive about them, “he smells the smoke, he can hear the voices now he peers out through the screen of leaves: there are only three of them, sitting around their fire” (373). The smoke, fire and voices symbolize the inevitable continuity of human civilization that Atwood advocates for in the novel. Snowman's uncertainty and unknown fear of killing or being killed if encountered with the three people demands corrections of human behaviors and regaining faith in themselves to let the civilization flourish. The presence of the woman implies a possibility of reproduction and continuation of the human population despite Crake's missionary undertaking of beginning a new civilization.

Ironically, Atwood fills the readers with hope despite the devastation and climatic disasters Snowman is surviving with when he assures us: “And everything that's happened, how can the world still be so beautiful?” (371) Some critics point out that the novel has “hope but not for us” as entitled in Gerry Canavan's article “Hope, but Not for us: Ecological science fiction and the End of the World in Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood*”. But Atwood implies a new beginning with the frequently used motif of zero hour—a moment of crucial decision that evokes in Snowman a sense of hope to revive the lost civilization, reviewed and corrected.

Hence, the posthuman homo faber needs reevaluation of the overambitious dreams of human excellence and creation. The arrogance of tremendous human potential to create a new reality demands critical inquiry because of its counter-attack in different guises on the planet and its inhabitants themselves. Snowman's vantage point at the “zero hour”

between the past and the present calls for reflection about the past and future when he says: “He doesn’t know which is worse, a past he can’t regain or a present that will destroy him if he looks at it too clearly. Then there’s the future. Sheer vertigo” (147). The realization of the symbiosis of humans, nature and the culture can help save the posthuman future to some extent. Crake’s destruction of the old sorrow-ridden humans by constructing techno-enhanced new humans ironically envisions a materialistic form of life dried of human instincts, imagination, art and creativity—the Bastion of humanity. The destructive scientific tools are mere tools if not wisely handled by a humane agent tinged with empathy and criticality—the essence of humanity.

But, in the pretext of eliminating human desires and improving human life, Crake, a nerd, wise kid and a “number guy” exploits genetics, transgenics and eugenics, and creates new programmed humans called Crakers. As a modern reincarnate of Frankenstein—a mad scientist, he reasons every work he does to found a new civilization with new humans, bizarre creatures like pigoons, rakunks, wolvogs and snats. Interestingly, a man of logic, unlike a “word guy” Jimmy, Crake lacks the vision of the future when he creates the new humans who have no potential of creativity and invention that he possesses. With this reimagining of the better and trouble-free human life, ironically, he has also ended the possibilities of new findings and discoveries with the humans devoid of instinct for quest, newness, imagination and art- the natural traits of a human.

However, for whatever he does, Crake does not produce disgust but elicits our positive outlook and sympathy on him at an apparent level. The irony comes out of the pity he draws—from what he is doing for humanity and how he fails to realize the hellish life his new humans are living against the dignity and specificity of humans that distinguishes them from other animals. Crake’s use of programmed urine and excrement also is suggestive of the lack of resources because of overuse or some climatic catastrophe or some disasters that he could work upon otherwise. Crake regrets the exploitation of resources: “Because all the available metals have already been mined . . . Without which, no iron age, no bronze age, no age of steel, and all the rest of it. There’s metal farther down, but the advanced technology we need for extracting those would have been obliterated” (223). Drawing upon the human-induced resource crisis putting an end to all possibilities of significant development and progress, the writer enables a critical review of our past to transform the crisis into opportunity and learnings for future. Humans designed with an ultrasonic cat’s purring for remedy of small injuries remind us of Nietzsche’s mockery of humans who are teased by the transhuman and the apes teased by the human. Crake’s posthuman is mocking humans if contemplated implicitly. Balaje Palanimuthu echoes the similar idea about the novel’s motive: “The focus is on the foremost dismal trends of today: science abuse and genetic modification. The self of the humans is mocked at by the genetic tinkering that’s taking place: the creations of humanoids, who or that are better alternative to humans, representing the results of the rampant biological research mania within the core of today’s

science.”(Palanimuthu 641). Behind the grim tale of the dismal future, Atwood reclaims certain hope of the human future through Jimmy’s character.

Moreover, Jimmy worries on the removal of sexual pursuit and longing from the Crakers to end rape, prostitution, or sexual jealousy among them. Oryx embodies the victim of misogyny and patriarchy of the contemporary civilization that Crake is critical about to the extent to erase the sex instincts. The mating every three years among four men and a woman with the external light for heat to stimulate men is equally ironic and humorous. The coupling takes place as demanded and needed by nature but which nature that Crake has control over to determine the need of mating is a vague imperative. With the natural instincts erased, Jimmy resents the loss of great art born from the sexual longing. Bobkittens going wild instead of pursuing the task of removing the feral house cats, justifies Crake’s failure in his project. Atwood’s position regarding the conflict between evolution and genetics is how nature does not care about human history and achievements but undoes human accomplishments, and takes its own course even after the apocalypse. The creation of new humans, ironically, is suggestive of self-destruction of humans; positioned somewhere between humans and animals eliminating its own dignity and specificity. Crake has dehumanized the humans because he has lost faith in humanity but it is just an enraged response to humans themselves, not a solution to the ongoing crisis of the world.

Hence, the perpetual quest for more sophisticated and better life at the cost of other lives ironically may lead to a situation when the inventions and dreams of betterment counter-attack humans themselves. This leads to humanity in a state of impasse unable to exit out of and get stuck with a more miserable state as a result of their unquenchable thirst of fulfilling their desires overlooking “the others”. Atwood creates strong repulsion in the readers against the possible dystopian future through the projection of the Crakers, the new humans doomed to live on the grass and their own abominable discharge- the excrement. The revelation of this crucial truth brews out of the portrayal of new humans “paying the rent” for what the humans think as the victory over nature and humanity.

Works Cited

Atwood, Margaret. *Oryx and Crake*. Nan A. Talese, 2003.

Canavan, Gerry. “Hope, But Not for Us: Ecological Science Fiction and the End of the World in Margaret Atwood’s *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood*”. *Lit: Literature Interpretation Theory*. Vol. 23, Routledge, 2012.

Descartes, Rene. *Meditations on First Philosophy*. Jonathan Bennet, 2017.

“Giannozzo Manetti”. *Renaissance Humanism*. Edited and translated by Margaret L. King, Hackett publishing Company, inc., 2014.

- Haraway, Donna. "A manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s". *The Haraway Reader*. Routledge, 2004. PP 7-45.
- Ihde, Don and Lambrous Mlafouris. "Homo Faber Revisited: Postphenomenology and Material Engagement Theory". 30 July, 2018. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13347-018-0321-7>.
- Kant, Immanuel. "What is Enlightenment?, 1874". *Internet Modern History Sourcebook*. Paul Halsall, Aug 1997, halsall@murray.fordham.edu, Accessed 24 August 2022.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for All and None*. Cambridge University Press, 2006.
- Marlow, Christopher. *Doctor Faustus*. (Edited by John D. Jump). Routledge, 1965.
- Palanimuthu, Balaje. "A Critical Study on Margaret Atwood's Oryx and Crake as Dystopian". *Ijellh*. Vol. 6, Issue. 12, December 2018.
- Sorgner, Stefan Lorenz. "Nietzsche, the Overman, and Transhumanism". *Journal of Evolution and Technology*, Vol. 20, Issue 1- March, Institute for Ethics and Emerging Technologies, 2009. Pp 29-42. <http://jetpress.org/v20/sorgner.htm>
- Tonsing, Detlev L.. "Homo faber or homo credente? What defines humans, and what could Homo naledi contribute to this debate?". *HTS Theological Studies*. Vol.73, n.3, Pretoria, 2017. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/hts.v73i3.449>