

Environmental Apathy and Denial to Change: A Comparative Study of *Oryx and Crake* and *The Waste Land*

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Abstract: A great historian Arnold Toynbee in an exploration of the rise and fall of civilisations, asserted in his book *A Study of History* that "Great civilisations are not murdered. Instead, they take their own lives". The Roman, the Mayan and many other civilisations had a fall because of the abrupt climatic changes, environmental degradation and poor leadership. Apathy towards the environment may bring an end to the human race. Excessive deforestation, water pollution, soil erosion and loss of flora and fauna are the devastating effects of environmental degradation. In spite of the fact that the entire human race is responsible for the deterioration of the environment, there is a conscious denial to change so that the business can go on as usual. The proposed research paper will compare T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* with Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*. Margaret Atwood, like Eliot, warns the readers about the inevitable apocalypse that the human race will encounter if the environment is recklessly used for the need and greed of human beings. *Oryx and Crake* depict a hyperbolised future of the catastrophic world that lies ahead. The protagonist of the novel is the sole survivor of the plague that infected all human beings. The plague was a side-effect of the excessive use of science and technology, which could not be contained. The novel, like *The Waste Land*, critiques the catastrophic consequences of the mindless interventions of human activities in the domain of nature. Thus, the paper's focal point would be to unravel the similarities between the two texts and discuss them in detail.

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Civilisations are peculiar. Their origin, growth and longevity are beyond human understanding. However ancient it may be, its traces are found in all the human sapiens living

in their respective culture (Braudel xxxvi). To understand the present-day world and its problems of any kind— cultural, economic, environmental, political, social, scientific, or technical, one has to understand its recent and remote history of events. The brutal and dramatic days of the outbreak of the First World War and the epidemics that the world experienced profoundly impacted the ecology of the present world. Similar events like scientific experiments, deforestation, and technical development that were undertaken for the advanced growth of the societies, interfered with the earth's natural environment and consequently affected lives in countless ways. The present is the outcome of "the whole historical evolution of humanity till now" (Braudel xxxvi). However, all of us take the world around us only in the context of a brief span of our life and watch it as a fast-moving picture where everything happens so fast—battles, deluges, drought, economic upheavals, political crises and so on. In fact, these all are the fruits of past centuries' activities of humans that meddled with nature.

Earlier, this process of transformation was so slow that it could hardly be observed by the naked eye unless compared with the distant past. However, recent results are alarming. The changing lifestyles of people, rapid scientific and technical advancement of the civilisations, and ethical, psychological and spiritual attitude of people has played havoc with their natural surroundings. Under the garb of becoming civilised, which broadly meant the opposite of barbarism, a man got distant from mother nature. Civilisation, for the sociologists A. Tonnies (1922) and Alfred Weber (1935), was "no more than a mass of practical, technical knowledge, a series of dealing with nature" (qtd. in Braudel 5). It is the man who makes civilisation; hence he should ensure that civilisation does not destroy nature or technology human beings.

Human life cannot exist on its own. It is an integral part of the space they inhabit. These social structures confine them and provide them with social security, the ethical and

religious rules they follow, the philosophical beliefs and the civilisation to which they belong. The space, land and its contours, climate, vegetation, animal species, flora and fauna in their surroundings are equally significant and cannot be separated from human lives. Agriculture, stock-breeding, food, shelter, clothing, communication etc., are the primary conditions of human life. The endless drama of human life is played in this setting. Generations keep changing, the storyline may alter due to the activities of that particular generation, but the setting remains the same.

The man is now heading towards a catastrophe where an inevitable apocalypse awaits, and perhaps no one will be left to tell the tale. The disillusionment, frustration and disgust among humans post-world war and post-epidemics have created a sterile world of panic and barren lust for mankind waiting for some signals of redemption. This spiritual emptiness is timeless, vast and limitless in contrast to the grandeur of the past. At the same time, it reminds humans of their moral evils and makes them conscious of their future with nostalgic reminiscences to retrace the past. In such grave circumstances, literature, too, acts as a mode to sensitise its readers towards the environment and nature. It is the need of the hour for the entire human race to realise the harm caused to nature and take needful steps immediately to stop further degradation of the beautiful planet 'Earth'. Various literary texts in literature have been dedicated to studying this relationship of man with nature from an eco-critical point of view.

This paper will deal with two seminal texts, *The Waste Land* (1922) by T. S. Eliot and *Oryx and Crake* (2003) by Margaret Atwood. Both texts deal with the themes of spiritual barrenness and the impending doom of humanity and the human race as well. *The Waste Land*, the most famous literary work of the twentieth century by T. S. Eliot, resonates with the existential anguish and nihilism that envelops the existence of human beings in the post-world war era. The title depicts the symbolic barrenness of spiritualism, moral and ethical values,

life and its purpose, which the man used to boast of. The wars break man's ego of being the supreme power. The reality of its puny existence in the vast cosmos hits humanity hard, and eventually, it becomes difficult for him to come to terms with the extreme loss of life that is the cause of the war. Immense destruction to mankind shattered man's viewpoint of being the superpower.

The anthropocentric concept that all were created in the universe for the benefit of man and that he could exploit it according to his needs is now brought into question. In the words of Timothy Clark, "It is only with human beings that anything else has value" (Clark 2). Further to quote Murray Bookchin, "The very idea of dominating...Nature has its origins in the domination of humans by humans" (Bookchin 34). *The Waste Land* reflects a society that lacks the satisfaction of being the chosen intellectual race to conquer nature itself. While *The Waste Land* resonates with the actual setting of the society, *Oryx and Crake* is a fictional account of a post-apocalyptic era where there is a sole survivor, Snowman, whose memory narrates the tale of doom to the readers. The name Snowman comments on the feeble existence of the sole survivor representing the human race. Along with him are some genetically engineered creatures called Crakers, a fascinating output of the technological advancement of humans. The entire world seems to be neatly compartmentalised into sections which are specialised to research a particular aspect of scientific modifications to overpower the laws of nature.

One such section dealt with the genetic mutation and engineering wherein pigs were modified into 'pigoons', which could be used for organ harvesting. Now the thing that was fiction in *Oryx and Crake* has to turn into reality. Recent research has been conducted and is successful, where synthetic mice are produced in laboratories with the mission of harvesting organs to be transplanted to needy ones. The embryo of this synthetic mouse has developed a functional brain, and the heart has also started beating. This truly is a scientific miracle as they

will have multiple sets of organs to be transplanted. Man's intellect has made him an efficient species to take measures to fight for his survival.

Nevertheless, each development comes at a price; such a scientific attitude has mechanised his life and decreased human sensibilities. The advancement of science and the development of technology undoubtedly has benefitted the human race a lot. However, it has interfered with human relations too, to such an extent that their lives have become too practical and devoid of any fellow feelings or emotions. The families are disintegrating. Under the garb of modernity, people are leading immoral lives.

The protagonist in *Oryx and Crake* has troubled relations with his parents, who are too busy to spend little time with their son. The parents are constantly in a tiff with each other due to their difference in opinion about the scientific developments and the probable aftermaths yet to be explored. The mother's conversation with the child is dominant in her research on diseases in which the child hardly has any interest. Such troubled relationships played havoc with the personality of the child. The mother feels claustrophobic though living in such well-structured 'compounds' to such an extent that she abandons her family and runs away. Revengefully, she destroys her husband's computer in anticipation that the research they were heading towards was far from being a bright future for the human race.

The utilitarian lifestyle of human beings has constantly been curbing the hedonistic desires that are supposed to be the basis of human existence. Thus, the world was becoming difficult for people like Jimmy and his mother, who were woven with the fabric of human sensibilities and emotions. His friend Crake, on the other hand, is the epitome of science and its practicality. As a scientist, he is portrayed as a stoic, living a spartan life of constant endeavours to make man immortal. He worked towards the grafting and regeneration of skin so that people with enough money to endure the procedure would never age. Later, he genetically engineered the Crakers as mutated human children with beautiful eyes, having no

emotional complexity and insulated from all the diseases that were fatal to human beings. Tiresias, the protagonist of *The Waste Land*, too surveys the panorama of modern civilisation and finds it devoid of emotions and moral values.

The concept of sex is mechanical to Crake. He is averse to the complexities of human relationships and thus manufactured Crakers in a way that they were devoid of any binding emotions, and the act of sex was a mere ceremony to reproduce. During the mating phase, the female buttocks would turn blue, indicating the mating call. The female would choose four males among the rest and consummate with them only to bear the progeny. Hormones and pheromones were considered human flaws by Crake. Thus, extreme scientific temperament inevitably made people distant from the essential elements of being human. Similar streaks of sexual degeneration can be seen in *The Waste Land*, as nothing seems to satisfy human beings. No act of pleasure seems enough, as there is a constant hunger for more. Sex being a mechanical act of lust rather than an expression of love, becomes incapable of satiating the soul. All it can achieve is physical satisfaction of the body while the soul keeps yearning for more.

The novel begins with Snowman hiding in his shaft while the Crakers play freely at the beach. The plague has killed all other human beings, and the remaining were those of dead bodies decaying, and the mechanical steel is covered by weeds and creepers. A snowman, though he survived the plague, was not unaffected by its harmful effects, the chief being that his skin became sensitive to the harshness of the sun; thus, he could not bear the scorching heat anymore. He calls it the "punishing sun", "For the children- thick-skinned, resistant to ultraviolet- he's a creature of dimness, of the dusk" (Atwood 6). A similarity with *The Waste Land* is found here as well when the poet mentions the lack of any place of shade to rest, as in the vast stretch of the wasteland, there were no trees that could cast a shadow. The dead

trees, dry stones without any sound of water, and the hot sun all symbolise spiritual desolation. Nothing good can grow in this barren land.

"A heap of broken wings where the sun beats,
And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief
And the dry stone no sound of water" (Eliot 6)

The Waste Land of spiritual barrenness is depicted in the poem where there are no morals or ethical values, and chaos prevails. In such arid conditions, one desires the shade of a tree of spirituality, which could provide him with the solace of being rooted in a rich culture and religion institutionalised by a defined social setup ordained by virtues. Hence, the malignant effects of human intervention with nature and its course are evident in both texts.

Interestingly, Snowman calls Crakers the children of Crake and addresses the animals as the children of Oryx. He tells Crakers that the children of Oryx do not cause any harm to the Crakers, but they have to fish and hunt in controlled amounts to sustain themselves. Here an ecofeminist reading of the text comes to light as Crakers being man-made, was destructive in nature and animals representing nature had no inherent desire to hurt or meddle with humans. Though in the course of the novel, it is said that Crakers were attacked by bobkittens whom the humans conditioned to be aggressive to control the increasing cat population by using them as potential hunters. The bobkittens got out of control and started killing the human pets and the Crakers. Thus, we realise that every aspect of nature that humans meddled with a backfired manifold.

The moral degradation of human beings is illustrated explicitly in the life experiences of Oryx. She was sold as a child by her family in need of money for the survival of the rest of the family. Her owner used her to blackmail people for sexual harassment. Later she was employed in child pornographic movies. Later in the novel, when Jimmy learns of her childhood, he is enraged and grief-stricken for her. He asks her if she was ever raped and if

all that is shown in pornographic movies happen. She replies that all sex is always real sex. Being an optimist, she tries to see the silver lining that her doom at least lets her family sustain. Crake has a realistic and practical approach towards her pitiable experiences, though Jimmy is deeply saddened.

As children, Jimmy and Crake saw Oryx for the first time in a child pornography movie they used to explore quite often as they were hardly supervised by their elders under the garb of privacy. Modern society gives too much independence to children who need to inculcate the acumen to differentiate the good from the bad. Without providing a moral code and spiritual moulding, immature minds of teenagers are left open to be scarred by whatever comes their way. Such children become easy victims of temptation. The moral fabric of the whole generation is doomed due to a lack of mentoring.

Another essential aspect brought to light in the novel is man's need to communicate effectively. The importance of language is depicted beautifully as Snowman slowly forgets the words he once was well versed with. He forgets the spellings and the word structures which makes him frustrated. A label on the beer bottle seems like an oasis in the intellectual desert. He does converse with the Crakers, but the ideas and thoughts that he has are entirely unrelatable for the Crakers. Subsequently, each conversation leads to further disgust. Crakers ask him many questions, but his inability to answer them effectively leaves him both helpless and hopeless.

Crake created the Crakers, so they did not believe in God and his existence. However, post-apocalypse, Snowman realised that Crake ended up simply replacing God with himself as the Crakers started considering him as the superpower they followed. Nietzsche claimed that "God is dead", but humans always want to create a supernatural being that is looking after them and will always help them grow. It is the spiritual tendency of man to pray to a higher power for their well-being as it brings a sense of security to him. Thus, the atheist quality that

Crake tried to incorporate in the Crakers was a complete failure like many others that he tried to achieve to make the world more straightforward and practical.

This is similar to the satire in *The Waste Land* on Madame Sosostris, a famous fortune teller considered the wisest of all, yet she suffers from a common cold like any other man or woman. The crowds of people that Madame Sosostris sees walking aimlessly in her cards represent the society that has become astray as man has been enveloped with purposelessness, aimlessness, impotence and nihilism. The poem, in some instances, seems to be a blabber, much like the meaningless dialogues of *Waiting for Godot*, where the protagonists are suffering from existential anguish. The second section of the poem, titled *A Game of Chess*, draws a set of isolation and loneliness in people's lives. In order to play a game of chess, two players are required, but the modern man is so lonely that he has no one to play the games with. The female voice in the poem coaxes the listener to stay with her as she is lonely. In continuation, the poem talks about a prolonged conversation in a bar. The conversation goes on without any meaningful outcome with the sole purpose of having company even though the pub owner is eager to call it a day as it is time to close the pub. A similar state of affairs is seen with Snowman in the novel, where he is giving in to depression because of his loneliness. The voice of another man on the radio seeking help acts as a silver lining for Snowman. The predicament of Snowman is similar to the statue of *The Thinker* by Rodin, who, despite having a muscular build and intellect, seems unable to achieve anything and is in anguish over his inability to do so.

Water is a common motif in both texts. Potable water is scarce for the Snowman even though he resides next to the shore. Sea water is abundant, but his inability to consume it makes him feel helpless. Water is symbolic of thoughts and memories. Lack of water is indicative of mental and imaginative stagnation. The dormancy of thoughts and imagination

makes man devoid of the spirit of liveliness and happiness—"Here is no water but only rock/Rock and no water and the sandy road" (Eliot 12).

Water is also symbolic of purification and regeneration, but in the modern man of desolation, it has lost its function and has become a source of destruction. The stock routine employed in both texts is similar to the *Myth of Sisyphus* by Albert Camus, where Sisyphus, despite possessing the powers of a demi-god, was given the task of rolling a boulder up Mount Olympus only to roll it back till the end of time, consequently wasting his capabilities to nothingness.

In *The Waste Land*, the inhabitants of the contemporary wasteland are spiritually dead and dread the very thought of rebirth or spiritual regeneration. *Oryx and Crake* envelop a dreadful threat against the future of technological hyperbolization fuelled by stoic and arid capitalism and the greed of the corporate world scarred by a lack of morals and ethics. The researcher does not deny the immense positive outcome of technological advancements and how they have aided human beings' lives as they play a significant part in the development of civilisation. But as the gyre spirals back after reaching its full girth, the ill effects of technology have also started emerging rapidly. As the great historian Arnold Toynbee says, "Great civilisations are not murdered. Instead, they take their own lives" (Toynbee 4). Thus, the reckless exploitation of nature to feed the dependence on science and technology will eventually lead man to his doom. Texts like *The Waste Land* and *Oryx and Crake* serve as a mirror to their readers of the follies that man has adhered to and the possible outcome that humanity will endure.

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