

In the Name of God



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Subject:

Posthuman and Cyborg Approach in Margaret Atwood's

Novels Oryx and Crake, and The Year of the Flood

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Abstract

The present study has tried to accomplish an analysis of Margaret Atwood's novels *Oryx and Crake*, and *The Year of the Flood* in the light of posthuman and cyborg theories. Considering Posthumanism as a critical reading of some notions of humanism focus of which in this thesis has been identity, new definitions for humanity and human identity are formed. Haraway's Cyborg, as one possible new figure of human being, constructed from cybernetic and organic parts has a significant role in the definition of the new identity. This study starts from the deconstruction of the unified 'I' of humanism, moves to emergence of cyborgs and consequently cyborg identity. The presence of cyborg figure also challenges the hierarchy of the maker and the made which has also been elaborated on in the thesis. Moreover, the old definitions of humanity, family, and even love are giving their place to the new ones, matching the new era. Questioning the notions of birth, death, family, love, and procreation, and considering them as historical rather than natural, the novels present new possibilities and forms for these pre-supposed constructions. With Haraway's cyborg figure, challenging humanism's definition of human being and the unified 'I' that has existed since, the long-lived conventions of origin story has also been changed. Being constructed from the beginning, cyborg seeks a separate path from the idea of human's natural phenomena in which human being evolves through natural selection. The thesis has tried to present the formation of the cyborg identity which mixes up the separation between natural and unnatural, made and born. It has also tried to present how the creation of cyborg and cyborg identity challenges the myths of origin, birth, and death. Furthermore, who or what counts as family has been redefined in relation with the cyborgs, weakening the myth of heterosexual couples and family, and questioning the notion of love.

Key words: Barthes, Cyborg, Foucault, Haraway, Identity, Myth, Posthumanism

To

MY PARENTS

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Chapter One

Background

1.1 General Overview

Born on November 18, 1939 in Ottawa and educated at the University of Toronto and Harvard University, Margaret Atwood is one of the best-known Canadian writers. Not only is she significantly important as a poet and novelist, she is also an essayist, television scriptwriter, and political activist. Her most important work of criticism is the 1972 volume *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*, which is a description of a “national typology of patterns of plot and character through which Canadian literature expresses victimization and survival rather than heroism and triumph” (Booker 141).

Atwood’s novels are marked by diversity in subject matter and genre with a direction into the fantastic, the gothic, and the speculative. Atwood’s novel *The Handmaid’s Tale* published in 1985 is her best-known novel which won the 1987 Arthur C. Clark Award for the best annual science fiction novel. She won the Booker Prize for her novel *The Blind Assassin*; Trillium Book Award for *The Robber Bride*, and her novel *Alice Grace* was the winner of the Giller Prize in Canada and the Premio Mondello in Italy. She has won many other prizes as Governor General's Award in 1966 and 1985; Prince of Asturias Awards for Literature in 2008; Los Angeles Times Fiction Award in 1986; Canadian Booksellers Association Author of the Year in 1989; Government of France's Chevalier dans l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres in 1993, 1994 and 1995; Nelly Sachs Prize, Germany in 2010 (Godard *thecanadianencyclopedia.com*).

Resisting the restriction to a certain belief, movement or school, Atwood refuses to be labeled a representative feminist or a role model in this field, despite her numerous works belonging to this category. Camille Peri describes Atwood as “a contrary woman: a nationalist who rankles nationalists, a feminist who rankles feminists. She is a master at

exposing hypocrisy among the powerful, but can be curiously evasive when the subject is herself" (Bouson 3).

In his book *The Post-colonial Exotic*, Graham Huggan dedicates a chapter to Margaret Atwood, named "Margaret Atwood, Inc.," and he explains several reasons for Atwood's excessive success. The first and the foremost reason is her hard work and productivity. She is labeled to be a tireless and powerful performer, having enough flexibility to be known as authority in diverse literary, social, and political matters. True she is a writer and a critic; but she is a nationalist, feminist, and environmentalist as well. Furthermore, "sound bite quality of many of her public utterances" and the "epigrammatic witticisms" of her writing and her comprehensiveness for the middle class despite being an intellectual, all together make her a world celebrity (Huggan 214–15). She challenges the distinction between high and low art by mixing intellectual and popular traditions in her works, in order to subvert the recognized conventions and create a sense of playfulness (Cooke 27). Being a postmodernist writer besides a feminist and Canadian nationalist, Atwood refuses to provide only one plot and one ending to her novels, particularly for the ones which are the focus of this study.

With the publication of *Oryx and Crake*, a postmodernist and "post-apocalyptic novel that takes place in the wake of a catastrophic genetic engineering accident that has wiped out most of humanity" (Booker 142), Atwood returned to science fiction in 2003. *Oryx and Crake*, her first novel in the *MaddAddam Trilogy* which was published in 2003, was picked out for the Man Booker Prize for Fiction in the same year. Being a dystopian example of speculative fiction, *Oryx and Crake* is an exploration of developments in science and technology in the fields of xenotransplantation and genetic engineering. It is particularly about the creation of transgenic and hybrid animals such as 'wolvogs' which have the appearance of domestic dogs but the feral nature of wolves, and 'rakunks'

hydrides of raccoons and skunks, and ‘pigoons’ that are pigs with bodies like balloons which are created to grow extra organs for human transplantation. There’s also an increasing gap between rich and poor in the society where different classes of people are extremely isolated from each other by the walls and security guards. *Oryx and Crake* examines the economic, social, ethical, and scientific consequences of such advanced technology. In *Oryx and Crake*, which is “a deadly serious and darkly satiric novel” (Bouson 16) and namely speculative fiction, Atwood:

intervenes parodically in the contemporary public debate about genetic engineering and provides a scathing indictment of our current “gene rush” in describing the catastrophic end of humanity in the near future—one generation or so from the present. Setting her novel on the east coast of the United States, Atwood describes the future world through the experiences of her central character, Jimmy-Snowman, who, according to Atwood, is born around 1999 and is twenty-eight when he finds himself inhabiting the post-catastrophe and posthuman world engineered by his genius-scientist friend, Crake. (Bloom 94)

Oryx and Crake is a deep love story as well as a persuasive prediction of the future. The story circles around Snowman, known as Jimmy, prior to the destructive epidemic which killed almost all mankind on earth. It shows his struggle for survival in a world where he might be the last human. All the time he is in grief for the death of his beloved Oryx who was killed by Crake –his best friend. Recalling the memories of her, their first visit, the first time he saw her photo, and the times they spent together, step by step the story of her life is revealed to the reader. The vision of the world before the plague is exposed to the reader by Snowman’s memories of the past which gradually lead to the time of the crisis and revelation of the truth behind the plague.

In one of his wanderings at the end of the story, Snowman notices three people from behind the bushes. He hides himself thinking. He doesn't know them and is in doubt whether to kill them or go forward for greeting. After all, he cannot risk his life if they are criminals. The story ends at this point and leaves the reader in suspense. But with Atwood's next novel, *The Year of the Flood*, the mystery is solved, and the people who appeared at the end of the first novel become known to the reader.

The Year of the Flood, the latest novel by Margaret Atwood is the second book in the *MaddAddam Trilogy*. It was published on September 2009, both in the United States and the United Kingdom. Based on several newspaper reviews written on it, *The Year of the Flood* is believed to be one of the notable fictions of 2009. Like *Oryx and Crake*, the events in this novel also are not in chronological order. Contrary to *Oryx and Crake* which focuses on the life of one main character of the story, *The Year of the Flood* focuses on a group called God's Gardeners that were briefly mentioned in her earlier novel *Oryx and Crake*. In this novel we get to know the identity of the three human beings who appeared at the end of the novel *Oryx and Crake*. In some parts it works as a completion to *Oryx and Crake*, by giving broader information about the things stated in the earlier novel.

It depicts a world in which the corrupt corporations in power have huge investments on gene-spliced life forms. As a result of the researches on this field, Crake, as one of the most important scientists working for these corporations, makes a deadly virus with the aim of destroying human species. The plague which is distributed all over the world through BlyssPluss Pill, another product of the company, acts as an epidemic, taking the lives of the people. A few human beings surprisingly survive though, among which are Ren, a dancer at a sex-club named Scales and Tails, and Toby, a member of the God's Gardeners sect who is hiding in a spa. The story is told through the events that happen to

these characters and they are a part of. It also shows the life of the Crakers and their adaptation to the world where there is almost no human left, and the few remaining humans are extremely weak and in struggle for survival. It's as if the new world in process of shape is going to follow a different path from the previous time. It is not clear if the humans or the clones – Crakers- will occupy the earth. Being stronger, and having simpler adaptation to the world, Crakers have much more chance than the remaining humans. It seems the world is going to be a place for the posthumans, and the earth is going to experience a change and life and evolution will follow a different path.

In his book *Cyberculture Theorists*, Bell defines Posthumanism as “[t]he idea that either (i) the human species is at an evolutionary dead-end, and must incorporate technologies in order to evolve to the ‘next level’; or (ii) that we have long ceased to be human, because of our increasingly intimate relationships with nonhumans, such as technological artefacts” (24). Posthumanism first appeared in the 1980s as “a literary movement significant for its rejection of the technological utopianism of much traditional sf....” (Booker 110). It deals with the “often uncomfortably close relationship between humans and technology. It poses the question of what it means to be human while suggesting that “the posthuman is an inevitable consequence of dissolution of boundaries between human and machine” (Booker 110).

Cyborg theory a main branch of posthumanism was first presented by Donna Haraway in her essay “A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century” in which she described cyborg as the inevitable offspring of technological progress. A cyborg consisting both biological and technological parts hints a new world whose inhabitants are hybrids of human and machine. As Elaine Graham quotes from Haraway in her article *Post/Human Conditions*, “Cyborgs thus inhabit a world simultaneously ‘biological’ and ‘technological’. A living

fusion of the human and non-human animal, the human and the mechanical, and the organic and the fabricated, the cyborg exposes the collapse of taken-for-granted boundaries between species and categories” (13).

In her “Cyborg Manifesto” article, Donna Haraway defines a cyborg as follows:

A cyborg is a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction. Social reality is lived social relations, our most important political construction, a world-changing fiction. The international women's movements have constructed 'women's experience', as well as uncovered or discovered this crucial collective object. This experience is a fiction and fact of the most crucial, political kind. Liberation rests on the construction of the consciousness, the imaginative apprehension, of oppression, and so of possibility. The cyborg is a matter of fiction and lived experience that changes what counts as women's experience in the late twentieth century. This is a struggle over life and death, but the boundary between science fiction and social reality is an optical illusion. (150)

In her “Cyborg Manifesto”, Donna Haraway tries to emphasize certain characteristics of a cyborg such as inapplicability of myths by stating that “The cyborg would not recognize the Garden of Eden; it is not made of mud and cannot dream of returning to dust” (Haraway 152).

With her cyborg metaphor Haraway attempts to represent:

The potential for a renewed relationship between humanity and what has been characterized as nature and technology, a greater intimacy and complicity with environment and artefact, a true interdependence in which human nature is no longer characterized through mastery and exclusion of its designated others. (Graham 13)

She introduces the cyborg as an inevitable outcome of technological advances which bears diverse changes to the humans' lives, attempting to uncover "the historical construction of the pedigrees for existing social relations - the naturalization of race, sex, and class". (Haraway Introduction)

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Identity is one of the most important notions that concerns Posthumanism. In a Posthuman world with all the technological advances human identity is under change and modification. With the penetration of technology into lives and bodies of the people, new hybrids of human and machine are created whose existence challenges the idea of human unity. Gradually a new kind of humanism and definition of human being in relation with the nonhumans which were so far considered as the other emerges as the whole world becomes occupied with Posthuman or cyborg creatures either real or metaphoric. As a result, cyborg figure puts an end to the humanist ideas of Man as the center of the universe.

With the creation of hybrids which soon occupy the world, gradually the human being as seen today perishes; giving place to new creatures whose physical and mental capabilities are so advanced which become incomparable with those of conventional human being. It is a time where human being starts his new evolutionary path with the assistance of technology and progressively reaches a point in a new world where there is no more a place for human being as has been defined so far. With the elimination of the human being and the replacement of the new technologically made posthumans who could be born in the labs as a result of gene splicing, the conventional human being no longer exists, and the process of reproduction continues in its new way. The unified human being as the creator-god of these cyborgs doesn't exist anymore. With his death,

his identity becomes fractured and so does the identity of the cyborgs. They have no origin. They become rootless and as Donna Haraway refers to it, the identity of maker and the made is fractured (151).

Breaking from the myths is another emphasized factor concerning the existence of cyborgs in posthumanism. Their very existence is a revolt against any myths including the myths of origin, love, family, reproduction, and death.

The cyborg does not expect its father to save it through a restoration of the garden; that is, through the fabrication of a heterosexual mate, through its completion in a finished whole, a city and cosmos. The cyborg does not dream of community on the model of the organic family, this time without the oedipal project. The cyborg would not recognize the Garden of Eden; it is not made of mud and cannot dream of returning to dust. Perhaps that is why I want to see if cyborgs can subvert the apocalypse of returning to nuclear dust in the manic compulsion to name the Enemy. (Haraway 152)

For the cyborgs with extended life-span and even the possibility of an eternal life with the aid of technology which prevents the death of the cells, death is no longer an issue of fear and resistance. Cyborgs also question the notion of family. There is no meaning for the notion of fatherhood or motherhood for cyborgs, creatures who are constructed and modified, and not born.

Summing up the statements above, the main questions of the thesis would be as follows:

1. How does the human identity defined by humanism fracture in the stories?
2. What kind of new identity is shaped for the characters as a result of technological advances?

3. How do the dualisms of self/other, and maker/made break?
4. How is family, in contrast to its myth redefined and reconstructed?
5. How do the notions of love and procreation change in the new world rule presented in the novels?
6. How has the notion of birth and death changed for the new world inhabitants who become cyborgs?

1.3 Significance of the Issue

In his *Cyberculture Theorists*, Bell quotes from Turkle that “Today’s children are growing up in the computer culture; all the rest of us are at best its naturalized citizens. ... [W]e can look to children to see what we are starting to think ourselves” (Bell, *Cyberculture Theorists* 31).

Today one cannot imagine living without thousands of electrical devices around. Life seems as if impossible without modern and digital technology. Human being is connected to all these things, and many more in some way or another. It seems the entire human identity is changing as human being is becoming cyborg and his identity cannot be defined without these devices. Nowadays a new kind of humanism is shaping with the association of the electronic devices around us. But it is not only happening in our lived reality, with the creation of virtual realities, “cyberspace also exists in the imagination, in fiction, in the stories we tell ourselves about this world” (Bell, *CybercultureTheorists* 1). In his essay “Transhuman Value” Nick Bostrom states that our current physical mode is so limited that it is no more than “a minute subspace of what is possible or permitted by the physical constraints of the universe (see Figure 1). It is not farfetched to suppose that there are parts of this larger space that represent extremely valuable ways of living,

relating, feeling, and thinking” (2). A posthuman body is a space of huge possibilities and potentials.

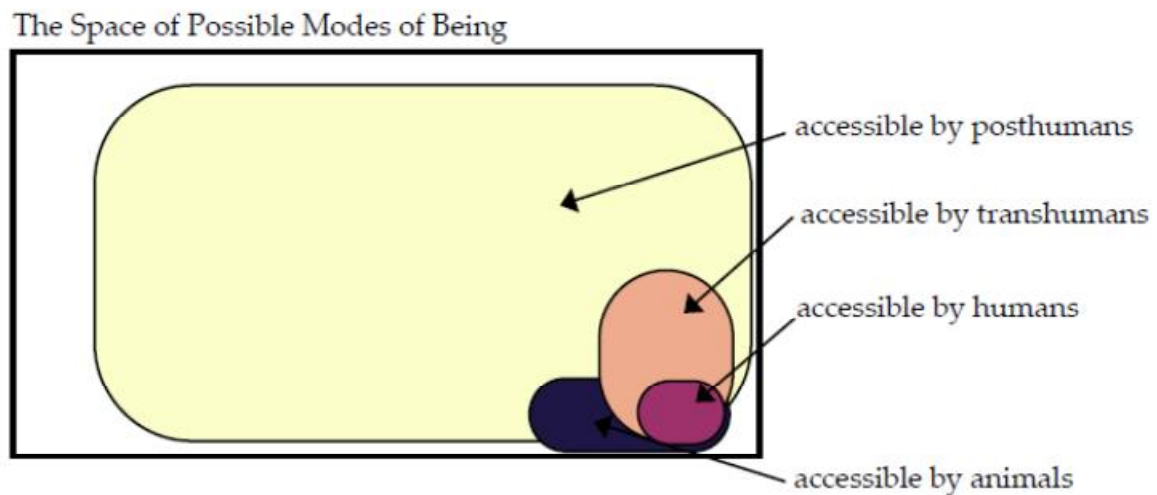


Figure 1 (Bostrom, “Transhuman Values” 2)

New digital and biogenetic technologies in the form of media, virtual reality, artificial intelligence, genetic and other technological changes hint a ‘posthuman’ future in which the boundaries between humanity, technology and nature are more and more manipulable. Now we can see that what we assumed as a fixed nature is manipulated by varieties of technology and biotechnology. Today the dream of merging human and machine in science fiction has left its fictional realm and entered a lived reality, changing the meaning of being human, as a result.

One of the fantastic human and non-human images is cyborg, presented by Haraway that is a metaphor of the various ways in which the hybridization of human being is currently being experienced on. Veronica Hollinger quotes from Best and Kellner in *The Routledge Companion to Science Fiction*:

Recent scientific and technological breakthroughs demonstrate that the gap is being bridged between science fiction and science fact, between literary imagination and

mind-boggling technoscientific realities ... Moon and Mars landings, genetic and tissue engineering, cloning, xenotransplantation, artificial birth technologies, animal head transplants, bionics, robotics, and eugenics now exist. (268)

As David Bell proposes, the idea of a fixed, stable identity of human being is fractured as a result of the creation of cyborgs, saying:

The idea that we are born the way we are, that there is a 'real me', that our identities are fixed and stable, and so on, are all manifestations of Cartesianism, and can all be described as forms of essentialism. In the academy, insights from a whole host of different scholars have led to a progressive eroding of this stable, unified, essential view of the self—it has, to use another of Hall's terms, become 'decentred'. (*An Introduction to Cybercultures* 114)

In a world when the boundaries between human and non-human can no longer be distinguished a new kind of humanism is needed to define humanity in accordance to new world structure.

1.4 Delimitation

The researcher has chosen Margaret Atwood among all science fiction and speculative fiction writers. The books *Oryx and Crake* published in 2003 and *The Year of the Flood* published in 2009 are chosen among her works. Both of the novels are part of a trilogy named *The MaddAddam Trilogy*. The third volume of the trilogy has not been published yet. Being parts of a trilogy, both of the novels share the same span of time, and some same characters. Being postmodernist fictions, the novels examine the possibility of different plots and endings for the same catastrophe.

The approach that is going to be followed in these novels is Cyborg which is a branch of Posthumanism. There are several notions and topics discussed in Cyborg theory presented by Donna Haraway in her “Cyborg Manifesto” essay such as “ironic dream of a common language for women in the integrated circuit” (149), “fractured identities” (155), “the informatics of domination” (172), “myth of political identity” (173), and etc., among which the issues of fractured identity of the humanist subject, the relation between the creator and creatures, and the deconstruction of myth of origin, love, family, and death are focuses of this thesis. The researcher also noted some ideas of Foucault and Barthes regarding the deconstruction of the humanist subject and the myths. In the end, it is a library based research and the novels are approached thematically.

1.5 Methodology and Approach

This study follows the process of the shaping of a new identity in the posthuman world illustrated in the stories. It tries to show how the characters of the story are in the process of becoming posthumans as a result of the excessive penetration of technology into their lives. Cyborg as one possible posthuman figure is one of the representatives of this new identity. While the theory of cyborg has been borrowed from Donna Haraway, the study is by no means limited only to her critical ideas, and the theories of other thinkers such as Foucault, and Barthes are of great importance for the current study as well.

At the intersection of “science fiction, critical studies of science and technology, and cultural theory, there is a complex and fascinating ongoing debate about the nature of human nature in an increasingly pervasive technoculture” (Bould 267) . A new human identity is in the process of shape which is defined by its relation with technology.

Neglecting the old ideas and definitions of human's unified identity, the new identity conquers the fear of confusion with the other and inharmonious identity.

Exploring deeper in the stories and focusing on the process of change in human identity, one can recognize three categories. By identity it is meant how the characters' identities become partial in association with technology. Moreover, their identities as the maker of the hybrid creatures existing in the stories, known as 'children of Crake' or Crakers become fractured after the apocalypse in which almost the entire humanity dies. Also, the research is concerned with the identity of the new creatures, living along with the few remaining humans. So the focus will be on both human being's and new creature's identities.

Main character's extreme use of computer games and their entrance into virtual reality world, constituting organizations and connecting to each other with identifications other than their real ones makes all of them metaphoric cyborgs. On the other hand, their identity as the creator-god of the new genetically changed human clones named Crakers becomes lost when nearly all the human beings along with the main creator of the Crakers, Crake, die in the catastrophic apocalypse. The world is inhabited by creatures whose creator is dead, and the new inhabitants of the earth have no recollection of their god. At this point, they try to create a god for themselves, by asking questions about Crake and his place from Snowman.

De-mythologizing is one of the most important issues related to the shaping of the new identity and figure represented in a cyborg in a posthuman world. There exists no myth in relation with the existence of a cyborg. It is an organism made of assembled parts for which the myths of origin, death and other existing myths are inapplicable. This deconstruction chronologically will be followed from the myth of origin and death, then