

Original Paper

Cyborg Space in *Oryx and Crake*

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Abstract

*As science and technology gains steam, relationships or contradictions with human species and between humans and other groups are increasingly of vital importance. And with a seemingly chaotic new world created by modern science, Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* is an essential piece of work to analyze humans' living condition during a post-humanistic world. Therefore, based on Haraway's cyborg theory, this study intends to have a discussion on the realization of cyborg space in *Oryx and Crake* from the perspective of ambiguous boundary between males and females, humans and animals, and nature and human civilization, so as to advocate a space or society of high hybridity and ambiguity, free from superiority, prejudice or dualism.*

Keywords

*Cyborg, *Oryx and Crake*, ambiguity*

1. Introduction

Margaret Atwood, known as the “Queen of Literature” of Canadian, is a famous novelist, poet and literary critic in Canada. *Oryx and Crake*, second futuristic novel of Margaret Atwood, mainly describes the protagonist “Snowman,” formerly known as Jimmy, returned to the RejoovenEsence Compound to explore the survival goods after the destruction of the world.

The novel has attracted widespread attention from home and abroad, most of which concentrates on discussions of it from the perspective of post-humanism. Some scholars point out that numerous scientific and technological advances have taken place and the idea of man as the measure of all things has been challenged by the flourishing manifestations of posthumanism (Özmen & Vardar, 2019, p. 148). Other scholars have discussions on the predicament of humans in a post-human era as well as the reasons attributed to the apocalypse, including social system, science and technology and consumerism in the modern society (Zhu, 2020, p. 1). They, together with other scholars, make great contributions for humans to think about themselves, the relationships with other creatures, and high-tech products in the present society.

Nonetheless, considering a tough or even harsh living situation for humans, most of them neglect the optimistic side of it by achieving a complete cyborg space for animals and other creatures trapped in a weak position in the present society. Prejudice and discrimination have disappeared: all people with different skin colors—“chocolate, rose, tea, butter, cream, honey (Atwood, 2003, p. 16)” sit around together happily. And the existence and dominant position of human represented by Snowman has been weakened, “flickering at the edges of blizzards, apelike man or manlike ape, stealthy, elusive, known only through rumours and through its backward-pointing footprints (p. 16).”

The theory of cyborg is one of the most important ideas to break down all the boundaries so as to highlight equality and monism. The notion of “cyborg” is first proposed by Manfred Clynes and Nathan Kline who make an experiment to install an osmotic pump into a mice and control its biological reaction. And later in their academic paper, the picture of the mice with an osmotic pump is attached on, which is nominated as “cyborg,” defined by them as “the self-regulating man machine systems,” the combination of “cybernetic” and “organism.” And soon, it is redefined in the field of cultural criticism by the American philosopher Donna Haraway as “a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction (p. 5)” in her masterpiece: *A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the 1980's*. The meaning of cyborg expands with the gained steam in modern science and technology. By 1997, in her research *Modest-Witness @ Secon-Millennium. Femaleman-Meets-Oncomouse: Feminism and Technoscience* Haraway classifies genetically modified creatures as cyborg as well, making the notion of cyborg thought even more universal. Thus, it is not the flesh or the potential of body that matters at the present but various interfaces between one object and the other. Just as Gray once says: “even if many individuals in the industrial and post-industrial countries aren't full cyborgs, we certainly all live in a ‘cyborg society (p. 3).” And as Haraway says “we are all ... cyborgs (p. 7).”

Therefore, despite an apocalypse, the cyborg space created by *Oryx and Crake* could provide some suggestions for people in the modern world to keep balance with all creatures, be it undominated humans, animals or technological creatures. Hence, the present study would discuss the achievement of Haraway's cyborg theory through a break-down Cartesian dualism between men and women, between humans and animals, and between nature and human civilization.

2. Ambiguity between Male and Female

Men and women are in an opposite position for a long time. One of the main reasons is that the notion dualism is inherited from Plato and Aristotle and is fixed in mind accordingly. Dualism believes that the relationship between things should stand in binary opposition, such as the rational and the emotional, the private and the public, and apparently, men and women. Hence, gender dualism holds that features of men and women are of tremendous difference with men corresponding to words like public sphere, rationality, strength, and independence, while women corresponding to words like private sphere, sensibility, weakness, and dependence (Jin, 2021, p. 68). What makes things worse is the symbolic

meanings attached to the dualism which, as a result, lead to a raised social status of men and a derogated one of women.

Later with the rise of feminist movement, most traditional feminist ideas try to prove that females are as powerful or able as males. But their ideas are still centered on men and thus fail to eradicate the sex discrimination.

Hence, instead of putting in an opposed position of male and female, the theory of cyborg breaks through the analytical framework of gender dualism, working for women's liberation and gender equality by the ambiguity of gender. That is also the significance of Haraway's cyborg feminist idea, considering "cyborg" as emblem of females which could reestablish women's body, identity, social status and political power because everyone shares the same position as "cyborg."

In *A Cyborg Manifesto*, the notion of female is related to "integrated circuits," the parts of which could be departed and reconstructed. Integrated circuits use a specific process to connect various components together and place them on a small crystal or substrate. They have been widely used in electronic products because of their miniaturization, intelligence, and convenience. Hence, like those integrated circuits, body parts or functions of women in a high-tech modern society have already gotten rid of traditional features as weak, fragile and so on, in that they can also be changed or reconstructed to be better used or achieve an equal position with men anytime.

Females in the world created by Crake are women of integrated circuits, with modified body parts and changed or promoted social status. Female bodies often suffer from physical weakness and injury due during the process of sex and childbirth while features of cyborg body including self-replication and self-repair free women from the restraint of physical body as well as a weak social position. Therefore, women created in *Oryx and Crake* are equipped with the ability of self-healing gained from the genes of bobkitten and "ultra-strong vulvas-extra skin layers, extra muscles (p. 185)" so that they could be prevented from injure and a lower position during sex. And when it comes to males, the meanings of their bodies have also been changed, no higher or aggressive than that of women's: their reproductive organs and their special way of urinate are designed by Crake to merely offer them "something important to do, something that didn't involve childbearing, so they wouldn't feel left out (p. 174)" rather than a symbol of power or dominance.

Hence, accordingly, sex between males and females also becomes a collaboration or according to Crake, "an athletic demonstration, a free-spirited romp (p. 185)," for pure happiness rather than pressures for women to prepare a baby, or suffer and endure sex passively. In a previous world described by Atwood, sufferings for women, including rapes, sex tapes, and prostitutions are everywhere, with males stand as dominant figures. For instance, in a porn video involving *Oryx*, several girls participate in a sex to serve one man, scaring and crying, far from enjoying sex but apparent evidence of a weak position during that. Nonetheless, the cyborg space changes all of these fundamentally. All being the successful products of science and technology, women share the same status of men, and are allowed to have sex with several

men at the same time. It becomes a common phenomenon. And due to stronger body parts designed by Crake, they can enjoy sex easier than before.

Therefore, in a cyborg space created by Crake, physical weakness of women has been complemented by technology and strength of males represented by their reproductive parts in the previous society have been debilitated so as to maintain an equal position between the two parties. Also, unlike being in a subordinate position during sex, women can also enjoy sex, free from the main task of being pregnant. All these contribute to the breakdown of dualism between males and females.

3. Hybridity between Human and Animals

For hundreds of years, the organic, including humans and animals, takes up a high place in researches of biology and evolution. And scholars put great efforts on the inseparability between the two: biologist try to explain human behaviors from the perspective of animals, and animal rights activists insist that animal should be equal with humans, being respected and enjoying some human rights. Nonetheless, most previous studies still involve a touch of humane idea and center on human beings.

Hence, based on previous studies, Haraway's idea goes further in the breakdown of boundaries between the two. She gives an example of rats with carcinogenesis, which becomes a strong proof of the ambiguity between humans and animals. Those rats are modified to be involved in experiments on cancer, embodying both genes from humans and rats, blending with each other in every cell. It is impossible to distinguish one from the other. Hence, rats with carcinogenesis go beyond the specific definition or boundaries between the two elements in them.

In *Oryx and Crake*, the ambiguity between animals and humans can be revealed in the Children of Crake, and some genetically modified animals, such as Pigoon. Despite the fact that the former can be known as "humans" and the latter, "animals," to some degree, all of them are not delivered through natural birth but products of science and technology by Crake and Oryx. Hence, they are all the same in essence. Besides, those "humans" created by Oryx and Crake are all embodiment of genes from both animals and humans, including genes from cats, the purring of which could contribute to "their own self-healing mechanism," and genes from baboons and octopus which bring about variable pigmentation and expandable chromosomes, and so on. All these turns human into a new species, neither humans, nor animals, unveiling an equality between the two. It is also true of Pigoon, a combination of pig and human organs, created to provide endless organs for humans. And even for those animals free of human genes, like snat, a combination of snake and rat, and rakunk, a combination of racoon and skunk, they are still involved in artificial operation. And for the seemly only creature who owns solely genes from human species, Snowman turns to an "apelike man or manlike ape (p. 16)" as well in the world of Crake. Hence, what Atwood and Crake intend to advocate through their new world or, in some sense, cyborg space, is a unique living system composed of pluralistic form and approach (Wang, 2020, p. 90).

Instead of controlling by humans and being symbols of weak or fragile existence in the face of humans, animals in the world of Crake stand as an equal position as humans and can challenge the power of

humans accordingly. For instance, the children of Crake can be bitten by a bobkitten, and after that they feel sorry and intend to present apology because they try to throw stones toward it which could injure them. Besides, Snowman is always alarmed to Pigoon and other creatures which with part of human genes are actually human with strategy as well, during his journey back to the experimental farms.

Therefore, there is no absolute animals or absolute men in the cyborg space created by Crake. Humans obtain certain characteristics from animals while genes of animals can go into human bodies and even play an essential part of them, as well. Both of them sharing genes or some features from each other, humans and animals can never be separated and the categorization between is impossible (Liu, 2021, p. 118). Hence, Animals are humans, vice visas and there is no superiority between the two.

4. Combination of Nature and Human Civilization

In *A Cyborg Manifesto*, through the analysis of atom and ether Haraway points out that the boundary between natural and unnatural, or between nature and human civilization, has already been mixed up (Zhang, 2006, p. 22). In the era of information, a large number of Microelectronics emerges, including Mobil phones, laptop, and Bluetooth earphones and so on, among which the silicon wafers play an essential role. They are made from atoms and serve for different uses through the movement of silicon atoms. According to Haraway, Microelectronics the modern machines are everywhere, with their cores being the silicon atoms. So, in a large sense, all the human world is made from atoms, which is the same as natural world, among which atom still takes up a large percentage in natural things, like medals and rocks. Hence, through the analysis on the relations between Microelectronics, silicon wafers and silicon atoms Haraway points out that the distinguishments between natural things and artificial things do not exist.

Therefore, the nature and human civilization are actually of the same origin and essence, and not be departed accordingly.

In *Oryx and Crake*, the world before the apocalypse is an example of division between nature and human civilizations. Humans consider themselves as master to nature and makes use of it without even thinking about the serious consequences. Soon, the global climate has deteriorated irreversibly with Harvard University been flooded and the beach house of Jimmy's mother together with the rest of the beaches, and quite a few of the eastern coastal cities "washed away because of quickly-risen sea-level and huge tidal wave caused by the Canary Islands volcano (p. 71)." Also, "Lake Okeechobee had shrunk to a reeking mud puddle and the Everglades had burned for three weeks straight (p. 71)," and "The village where Oryx lives rains either too less or too much. the crops are damaged, and people are starved to sell kids to make a living (p. 131)." It is also worth noticing that the deterioration of the climate is one of the most important reasons attributed to the prostitution of Oryx and her brother. The pornography and sexual slavery during her childhood are not only caused by the dominance-and-underdominance relationship between the males and females, but also the integration of sexual violence and political violence under the background of exhaustion of ecological resources and the survival crisis of the poor.

As a consequence, the life condition of Snowman is actually very harsh after the catastrophe. He can only live on a hot tropical beach. Animals from the previous world disappears with human species. And in order to avoid the burning hot of seaside desert and the attack of genetically modified animals, Snowman spends most of his time on trees. There is not much description about the ecological environment after the catastrophe, in that the entire natural ecological system that Snowman lived in in the past has already been severely damaged. That's the reason why Snowman has completely fallen into pain and is unwilling to recall himself from the beautiful natural environment that humans once owned long ago.

However, the world created by Crakes has demonstrated the notion of symbiosis between nature and human civilization, which could be revealed by the components and life style of children of Crake. Genes of animals are added to the children of Crakes, making them genetically feel closer to the nature. They are set as vegetarians who can maintain environmental sustainability. Gentle and kind, care about each other, They do not dress, do not cook, and are ignorant of material wealth, selfish interests, and conspiracy. More importantly, unlike humans in the previous world, they adopt the minimum use of resources. Therefore, in a cyborg space with the harmonious or hybrid relationship between nature and human, there is still hope for a damaged environment when the nature could stand as an equal position with humans.

5. Conclusion

Among the voice and discussion about the desperate living condition for humans in the world created by Crake due to rationalism and dualism, it should be seen that his world illustrate what cyborg space could be like, to some degree. In this world, physical bodies of both males and females are free of symbolized meanings and the weak or fragile body of women is strengthened so as to advocate equality or mixed idea between men and women. Moreover, by creature of Pigoon and children of Crake, together with Snowman's ordinary life which constantly involves fights with other living creatures, the notion of humans or animals becomes ambiguous as well. Besides, in a world of cyborg, the combination between nature and human civilization becomes common and important than ever. Nothings can exist without crossing with others.

Hence, like cyborg space, the world created by Crake have challenged the time-honored dualism inherited from Descartes. All creatures, be it natural or unnatural, organic or nonorganic, are chimeric organisms, creatures in the post-gender world, driving people in the present society to reconsider their relationships with themselves, animals and technology.

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