

## DYSTOPIA IN ORYX AND CRAKE VIS-A-VIS THE UTOPIA OF WALDEN: AN ECOCRITICAL APPROACH

**Sheeba V. Rajan**

Assistant Professor, Department of English, St. Xavier's College for Women,  
Aluva, Ernakulam, Kerala, India

**Abstract:** Ecocriticism is the literary branch of environmental studies. It is an attempt at finding the relevance and role of literature in examining ecological issues and suggesting ways of tackling them. This work examines certain environmental issues and their impact on human life as reflected in *Oryx and Crake* by Margaret Atwood and *Walden* by Henry David Thoreau. *Oryx and Crake* presents a dystopic vision of life consequent to man's abuse of Nature and a nightmarish vision of the consequences of globalization. *Walden* projects a utopian world created by man's close communion with Nature. Though utopian, the work is significant for its optimism and radical approach to current issue.

**Keyword:** Apocalypse, Dystopia, Ecology, Genetic Engineering, Utopia.

### INTRODUCTION:

The word ecocriticism traces back to William Rueckert's essay "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism". According to Rueckert, ecocriticism means "the application of ecology and concepts to the study of literature" (76). Ecocriticism or green criticism is one of the most recent interdisciplinary fields to have emerged in literary and cultural studies. It analyses the role the natural environment plays in the imagination of a cultural community at a specific historical moment. It investigates how Nature is used literally or metaphorically in certain literary or aesthetic genres. Ecological concerns have the subject of literature since time immemorial. One society can replace another, we have but one earth. The environmental crisis that challenges the Mother Earth and makes it fragile and endangered has acquired an existential dimension. The driving force behind the ecocritical work is the troubling awareness that we have reached at the age of environmental limits.

Literary theory examines the relations between writers, texts and the world. In most literary theories, the world is synonymous with society-the social sphere. Ecocriticism expands the notion of the world to be included in the entire ecosphere connecting everything with everything else. Environmental crises are a result of humanity's disconnection from the natural world. The crises have been brought about not only by increasing technology but also by mentality of specialization that fails to recognize the interconnectedness of all things. Ecocriticism advocates for an understanding of the world that works to heal the environmental wounds humans have inflicted upon it.

### 1 *Oryx and Crake*

Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* (2003), cautionary tale of a grim future, brings out the dystopic

vision that Man and Nature are two different entities in the present scenario. It is a compelling story of our world where genetic engineers can create animals for harvesting organs or feeding mass populations. *Oryx and Crake*, a work of apocalyptic or post apocalyptic fiction can be called a ruined Earth story or dying Earth. The end of civilization refers to human extinction and the related hazards which occur on a global scale.

The novel begins at Zero hour, a time when "nobody nowhere knows what time it is" (3). *Oryx and Crake* begins with a man, who calls himself Snowman (formerly Jimmy), sleeping in a tree, seems to be the last man alive after a killer virus has decimated the world. The name Abonimable Snowman is chosen for its mythic connotations-an unknown reality that vacillates between existence and non existence. The narrator Snowman describes a post plague society which stripped off everything except the genetically engineered children of Crake. Snowman is residing in a place which is surrounded by animals and beautiful natural scenery. But he feels alienated in communion with Nature and longs to have a human companion. He utters "Now I am alone. All alone. Alone on a wide, wide sea" (10). He also asserts: "everything is so empty. Water, sand, sky, trees, fragments of past time. Nobody to hear him" (11).

Snowman tells us the story of his past, his life as Jimmy, which appears to be the late 21st century. This was a time when mankind's environmental arrogance had led to radiation holes in the atmosphere, melting of the polar ice caps, flooding of coastal cities, drought and desertification of the continents. Nearing starvation and losing his memory of language, Snowman attempts to reveal his pre-plague world and the events leading to its inevitable devastation. The novel reveals, bit by bit, the relationships and technological genius that led ultimately to the post apocalyptic remnants.

Drawing on current trends in scientific research,

Atwood leads our attention to a familiar but strange world filled with genetically scrambled creatures such as pigeons, bob kittens, rakunks and wolvogs. Her fanciful and fictitious words reflect the carelessly executed powers of the mad scientist Crake, once Glenn, Jimmy's brilliant high school friend. He is also the mastermind of the strange new "Paradise". This world is created by a man who believes in neither God nor Nature. It was Crake's mastery of genetic manipulation that led to his creation of the newly designed creatures called Crakers from human embryos. The crakers were a new multicoloured placid race of human beings, smelling vaguely of citron. It was Crake's plan that led to the end of humanity and leaving Jimmy as Snowman to protect his creatures.

Dystopian novels are often depressing symphonies. They start with an interesting premise and the same point is hammered again and again in an attempt to convince the reader how rotten humanity has become. In *Oryx and Crake*, Atwood depicts a near future world which turns from the horrible to the horrific and from a fool's paradise to a biowaste land. Through this novel, Snowman tries to explore the answers for the devastation of the planet, in the double journey he takes-into his own past, and to Crake's high-tech bubble-dome. The novel oscillates between Snowman's attempt to survive in his future that has no future and his past where his only enjoyment was his friendship with Crake and his love for Oryx. Snowman's pointless existence is a reflection of his society's pointless existence.

In Margaret Atwood's dystopia, the biotech companies control the world because they have to gratify the society's desires for what they do not have. The author feels that man destructs his environment in order to provide for too much population and man's arrogance that he can mould the world in his own vision will result in a rotten world. She asks us as she asks herself: Are we conscious of what we are doing and where we are going in a society? Margaret Atwood describes a world that we are alarmed to think of but one we are familiar with. She suggests that humanity may be doomed by our own vanity, lust, greed and arrogance. This novel is not one of hope but the ideas might be charged through the body and the mind of the reader. The novel ends as it begins at Zero hour and "Snowman thinks, Time to go" (374).

## 2Walden

Walden or Life in the Woods (1854) is an autobiographical narrative by Henry David Thoreau. The whole of Walden is an experience of the microcosmic and cosmic travels of the self. It is not only a critique of the civilized world but also examines issues afflicting man in society ranging from economy and reading to solitude and higher laws. He also speaks about his experiences at Walden Pond and makes comment on the animals and the way people treat him for being there. To his Nature descriptions, he brings clarity of expression as well as a naturalist's care in observation. At Walden Pond, Thoreau lived in closest proximity with Nature and established a Wordsworthian intimacy with Nature's aspects and moods. He expresses the view that people speak of the dignity of man and yet waste their lives in materialistic pursuits. He considers the luxuries

and comforts of lives as hindrances to mankind. He advocates a life of utter simplicity totally devoid of any sophistication and away from the main stream of life.

The essay contains a vivid description of Thoreau's empathy for the animals and his participation in their lives. His use of Nature metaphors in his descriptions of society and his use of social metaphors in his descriptions of Nature blur the line between society and Nature. He destroys the notion that Nature cannot provide companionship for a person. The chapters "Visitors", "Baker Farm", "Former Inhabitants" and "Winter Visitors" contain an account of his encounters with human beings. Even if man prefers solitude, there are bound to be visitors because he is a social animal. "The Bean Field" is concerned with the cultivation of beans. The ritual of sowing gives a new contract with the earth. It brings about a new awareness of life and strength. In "Solitude", Thoreau is filled with a sense of delight and feels himself to be a part of Nature. Though loneliness is unpleasant to some, to Thoreau, who enjoys the friendship of seasons and Nature, life never becomes a burden. He finds not only companionship but divine companionship with Nature. At Walden, because he is with Nature, he is not alone but is with God. Thoreau's personification of Nature marks his significant contribution to the transcendental philosophy. In "The Ponds", Thoreau uses minute descriptions of Nature to reveal his understanding of human spirituality and its connection to Nature. He goes to Walden to become an unaccommodated man and to find his naked and sufficient self. Of this, the Pond is the symbol. He emphasizes the divine Nature of Walden and he has perceived the Pond as a mirror for himself. Through "The Ponds in Winter", Thoreau takes Nature as an example asking and answering no questions but living serenely. The home is not his cabin, but it is the Woods.

There is a perfect harmony between Man and Nature in Walden. The book triumphs in establishing the close inter-relationship. Thoreau takes the readers with him in his panoramic view of Nature in its splendour-sights, sounds, creatures, birds, animals, vitality, renewal and rejuvenation. According to Thoreau, urbanization and commercialization are seemed to be building blocks in man's relation to nature. Through his life in the Woods, he demonstrates that man can live successfully in the midst of Nature. Today, Nature is being tamed and controlled by man in the form of rail roads, factories and other technical innovations. Throughout the essay, the weather reflects his emotional state. His period of melancholy and doubt occurs during the winter and his joy and delight is reflected in the spring. For him, the divine is most sublimely expressed in Nature. To Thoreau, God is the creator of Nature and through this understanding he expresses the transcendental belief of divinity in all men.

## 3CONCLUSION

The work on Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* and Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* based on the theory of ecocriticism is an attempt at a comparative approach. *Oryx and Crake* is a haunting experience of the present generation whereas *Walden* remains only a dream in the minds of the people as far the present era is concerned. According to

Thoreau, Nature is the natural environment for the physical, spiritual, mental and moral growth and development of a man. To Atwood, Nature is not, but technology and genetic engineering are the foundation stones for the growth and development of a man. Thoreau's experiment in simple living, free from the frills of mechanized existence or the complexities of industrialized urbanization questions the very foundation of the so-called civilized life. Atwood, on the other hand, unfolds the ills of mechanized existence due to man's tinkering with Nature. Thoreau's Wordsworthian intimacy with Nature proves man's true role and destiny realized in consonance with Nature. His Nature based Utopia undermines biblical concepts of man as the master of universe. In chapter 1 of Genesis, Jesus Christ says, "Let us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness, let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth" (4). It is rather an emphatic statement of man as part of Nature rather than lord and master of Nature. Nature is a gift of God to man. The primitive man had the power and authority over everything Nature. But they did not ill-treat Nature for their worldly pleasures.

Walden presents the cycle of four seasons representing the cycle of life. It begins in delight and ends in delight. But *Oryx and Crake* begin in despair and ends in despair. When man becomes isolated from Nature, it questions the very foundation of human existence. Walden is not informed sympathy or condescending consideration for animals and other forms of life rather it is an empathy with non human forms of life. While there is undoubted increase in the comforts and luxuries in the privacies of well maintained homes, one has to go farther and farther from human habitation to breath in unspoiled atmosphere. We have inherited the environment from our ancestors and we have a duty to preserve it and hand it over to the next generation. But, today we are exploiting the environment and making the earth unfit for human habitation. Thoreau depicts the positive aspects of man's communion with Nature whereas Atwood reflects the negative aspects of man's alienation from Nature. In Thoreau's *Walden*, he strongly encourages man to be a part and parcel of Nature, but in Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*, she points out the dangers of Nature being in the wrongful clutches of man.

#### 4ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The author is grateful to The State Central Library & University Library, Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala, India for providing books and journals to carry out this research work.

#### REFERENCES

- i. Atwood, Margaret. *Oryx and Crake*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2003. Print.
- ii. Dean, Thomas K. "What is Ecocriticism". The Association for the Study of Literature and Environment. n.p.: n.d. Web. 6th May 2013.
- iii. ---. Holy Bible, King James Version. Newyork: Thomas

Nelson Publishers, 1982. Print.

iv. Rajan, P.K, George, K.M. *Common Wealth Literature-Themes and Techniques*. Delhi: Ajanta Publications, 1993. Print.

v. Rueckert, William. "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism". *Iowa Review*. 9.1 (1978): 71-86. Print.

vi. Thoreau, Henry David. *Walden or Life in the Woods and Civil Disobedience*. New York: New Amer Library Classics. 2012. Print.

vii. Woods, Tim. *Who's Who of Twentieth Century Novelist's*. London: Routledge Taylor & Francis group, 2001. Print.