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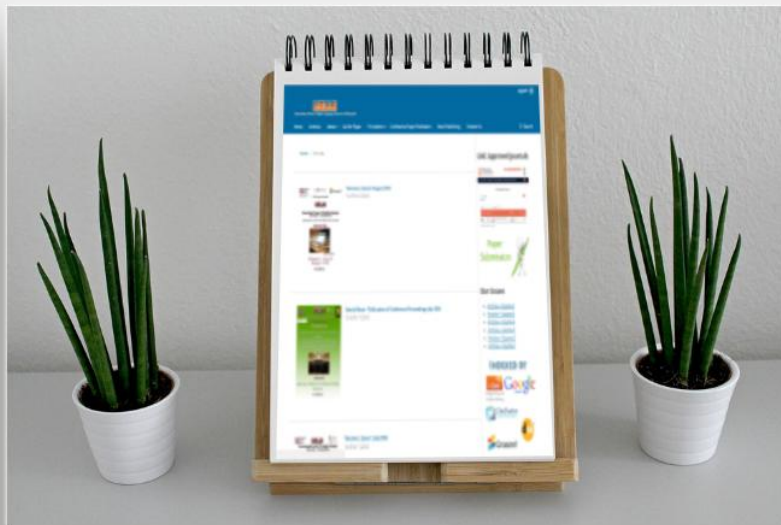
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Cartesian Perspective versus the Necessity of Non-dualism in Margaret Atwood's  
*Oryx and Crake*

Abstract

Margaret Atwood in *Oryx and Crake* which is the first in the series of *Maddaddam Trilogy* details a dystopian society represented by the Compounds comprising of genographers immersed in the tasks of manipulating the biological system of various animal species. These deeds of ruthless manipulation and exploitation are undertaken to further the selfish pursuits of the human community at the expense of non-human beings. Such ego-centric activities arise as a result of the “dualism between man and nature” (Shiva 39) which is the idea that informs the Cartesian world-view of perceiving nature. Ultimately, it rings the death-knell of the human race to purge the world of the malicious elements and pave way for ideal beings. The text thus, is speculative in nature and emphasises the need to develop and adhere to a non-dualistic philosophy that would foreground the inherent value and interconnectedness of all beings. The paper draws on the ideas put forth by Vandana Shiva in her work *Staying Alive*.

Keywords: Cartesian perspective, non-dualism, *Oryx and Crake*, Vandana Shiva

Cartesian dualism refers to the French philosopher, Rene Descartes' concept of dualism according to which “all entities that exist in the world fall under one of two categories, minds or bodies” (qtd. in Alison 1). This philosophy privileges mind over body where the former refers to intangible entities capable of reasoning and possessing sensory acumen while the latter are tangible and are largely incapable of independent existence. “Minds, according to Descartes are intangible, un-extended, and metaphysically prior to bodies... Bodies on the other hand are tangible physical objects in the external world... and in some sense are seen to be reliant on minds for their existence” (qtd. in Alison 1). In the

light of this theory, the potential of human reason surpasses that of other faculties and other non-human species including the natural world and the animal community. Here begins the roots of dissociation between the human and the non-human, vesting the former with the authority to use and exhaust the resources of the latter. From an ecological perspective, this Cartesian concept views environment as a 'resource' giving rise to a "new world view in which nature is (a) inert and passive (b) uniform and mechanistic; (c) separate and fragmented within itself; (d) separate from man; and (e) inferior, to be dominated and exploited by man"(Shiva 39). It severs the ties with nature causing a devaluation of the inherent value and interconnectedness of all beings.

Such an ideology drives most of those who populate the pre-apocalyptic society of *Oryx and Crake*, especially Jimmy's father and the staff of OrganInc Compounds and its counterparts. They are genographers who experiment on a variety of animals by altering their genes. For instance, OrganInc Farm undertakes the 'pigoon project' which is aimed at growing an "assortment of foolproof human-tissue organs in a transgenic knock-out pig host-organs that would transplant easily" and would be resistant to "opportunistic microbes and viruses" (Atwood 22). The pigoon organs (scientifically named *susmultiorganifer*, due to its function) thus reaped could be "customized using cells from individual human donors and the organs were frozen until needed" (23). Apart from this, a variety of hybrid organisms are created by the biolab hotshots at the OrganInc Compounds such as the 'rakunks' which are a modified version of raccoons, 'snats' which are a blend of snake and rat, 'wolvogs' which look just like dogs but are designed to be more ferocious and atrocious, 'bob kittens' that were supposed to eliminate the feral cats, the 'spoot/gider', "goat crossed with spider to produce high-tensile spider silk filaments in the milk" utilized to manufacture bullet proof vests and much more (199). As one of the employees in the Compunds remarks "creating an animal was so much fun...it made you feel like God"(51). This form of self-centeredness to outdo the competitors in the field, is taken to an extreme that culminates in a society which frames its life solely to make monetary gains. The natural world often becomes the victim in this process.

In the case of the Jimmy's father, his exploitative and predatory attitude is also symbolised in the knife that he presents to Jimmy on his birthday. According to Jimmy, "his father was always giving him tools, trying to make him more practical. In his father's opinion, Jimmy couldn't even screw in a light bulb" (37). But what his father doesn't realise is that Jimmy doesn't belong to the empirical, rational world which views everything else

apart from humans as irrelevant. Rather he harbours a secret personality within him who is aware of the potential and quality of all living beings, a truth, the rest of the society fails to recognise. In this respect Jimmy can be likened to the protagonist Sophie in Sarah Orne Jewett's *The White Heron* who too is presented with a pen knife by a hunter which she considers offensive since for her, his tools and his act of hunting exhibits violence that is directed towards nature. She doesn't wish to be an accomplice in his crime. Similarly, Jimmy's disregard to the above gift too echoes a similar attitude on his part.

One of the significant aspects that points to the dualistic mentality harboured by the society in the novel, is the constant calling to attention of the themes of pretension and reality. Here, the author seems to show that in a society where the human existence in one single integrated plane is further disintegrated to the realm of the virtual and the real, a thought process that would be able to perceive the value of all kinds of lives would be a rare and difficult feat to achieve. The urge to elope to a time frame that is not within the human grasp and thereby sever oneself from the existing, current reality becomes evident when Snowman remembers the schoolteacher's voice declaring "let's pretend this is a vacation... let's pretend this, let's pretend that". It is clear that Jimmy hues it with a tinge of mockery and sarcasm, for humans unable to realise the need for an integrated existence, in harmony with other beings are vying to exist in an altogether different realm (39). This is asserted as Crake tells him "we never know ...what is reality" and the latter responds it is "Bogus!" (83).

When Jimmy receives for the first time, the glimpse of the newly created humanoid creatures, his attention is drawn towards the artificial, fake reality that is designed to harbour the Crakers. He describes, "There was a large central space filled with trees and plants, above them a blue sky –not really a blue sky with a clever projection device that simulated dawn, sunlight, evening, night. There was a fake moon that went through its phases. There was also a fake rain" (302). However, at this point of time, the Crakers remain the only race of humans who are not drawn into the unreal and fake realm that the society of the novel frantically indulges in as the former "hadn't been taught evasion, euphemism, lily-gilding" (348). But, Jimmy goes on to anticipate a similar fate for this new species too when he remarks "The Crakers might ask: "who made these things?who lived in them? Who destroyed them? The TajMahal, the Louvre, the Pyramids, the Empire state building...Perhaps they'll say these things are not real. They are phantasmagoria" (222).

This constant play between the real and the unreal gets the better of Jimmy too as he acknowledges that he has fallen into the same trap. He takes a beer bottles and says “let’s pretend this is beer” (45). But he does make attempts to evade this fake reality that is engulfing him. Even as a child, Jimmy enquires while playing chess, “Why don’t we use a real set?...The old kind ...with plastic men”(77). Thereby, he is also trying to untangle Crake from the illusion that the rest of the society is after. Jimmy’s longing to be in the real world to strive to make it a better place is also symbolically presented in his act of not discarding the hard bound books which are to be replaced by digitally stored ones. As the author notes, “at the Martha Graham Library Jimmy while asked to decide what books to remain on earth in digital form he couldn’t bear to throw anything out” (241).

This form of division is what makes nature too invisible in the eyes of this anthropocentric world that Atwood vividly etches. They seem to be opposed to the “myth of mutual constructionism” that advocates the notion of nature as ‘really’ existing which is in contrast to other philosophies as the one above that sees nature as only a reflection of the mind (Buell 6). The preoccupation with a fake and artificial existence dissuade them from valuing the ‘real’ natural world around them that has a unique, intricate life of its own. They are also incapable of understanding earth as an ‘organic entity’ as Frederic Clements suggests (qtd. in Hass xviii).

The virtual games that Jimmy and Crake indulge in too provide an illusion that draws them away from the real world. Jimmy remembers playing chess but on computer and not with ‘actual chessmen’. Also, the brutality and violence associated with these games prove how the urge to ‘conquer’ and ‘plunder’ looms large in the text. For instance, the games such as ‘Three Dimensional Waco,’ ‘Barbarian Stomp,’ ‘Kwiktime Osama,’ all of them are steeped in bloodshed and violence such that it drives the players to vanquish its opponents through any means: “They all used parallel strategies:you had to see where you were headed...but also where the other guy was headed” (40).

Again, the motif of pillage, plunder and mutiny which forms the basis to the Cartesian mode of perceiving nature, is made explicit through the combat between civilizations that existed at various points of time – the Rome versus the Visigoths, ancient Egypt versus the Hykos, Aztecs versus the Spaniards, Petchenegs versus Byzantium and so on. It is concretised in the game of Blood and Roses where “the Blood side played with human atrocities –a large no. of people had to be wiped out. It contained massacres, genocides and other such things”

(78). Invariably the Blood Player won in this game inheriting a wasteland, thus showing that in the world portrayed in *Oryx and Crake*, only those who takes recourse to the domination of one over the other, or endures the test of ‘the survival of the fittest’ through any means, would be successful. As he recapitulates all this, voices ring in Snowman’s ears “the sack of Troy...the destruction of Carthage.The Vikings, The Crusaders...The massacre of the Vathars.The witch burnings. The destruction of the Aztec...Hitler, Hiroshima...Saddam Hussein”(78). All these point to how modernity can emerge as what Yi-Fu Tuan would call, a ‘paleolithic hunter’ (qtd. in Bryson 17). These games that focus on life-threatening and life-reducing activities to attain individual gains when considered on an extended level are representative of the various experiments and innovations that the employees of various companies indulge in, solely for monetary benefits. Jimmy, however cannot fit himself into this framework of murder and violence, though initially he had been a player of the aforementioned games. He is incapable of unleashing violence upon the real world by tampering with its delicate balance and unique ecosystems that possess various biologically diverse flora and fauna. Due to such concerns and care that he shows, he is viewed as ‘different’ and is thus looked upon as a misfit by the rest of the society represented by his father.

As opposed to the above attitude that aims to distinguish between two entities which are essentially interconnected, namely man and nature, the solution that Atwood seems to offer is the non-dualistic philosophy often discussed with respect to the Indian context. It would help humans realise that “everything is connected to everything else” as observed by Barry Commoner in his “Four Laws of Ecology” (qtd. in Strauss 1). Though this is not explicitly stated in the text, Jimmy’s statements with respect to the Indian concept of the ‘mantras’, the transformation of Oryx to a mantra for him, after her death, and the notion of ‘duality in unity’ that is a significant aspect in the Indian philosophy of ‘advaita’, points to this fact.

Vandana Shiva, by drawing on the Indian philosophy of duality in unity, enumerates the characteristics that ‘Prakriti’ or Nature would be seen as possessing according to this view. She says that the idea of duality in unity would enable an individual to understand that the natural world and human life are intricately connected, man cannot exist outside nature, nature holds value within itself and cannot be disregarded as merely inanimate. As KalikaPurana explains, “rivers and mountains have a dual consciousness”, one at the superficial level and other within them as animate beings, a truth which is hidden most often

from human eye and knowledge (qtd. in Shiva 38). One would be able to make connections from these ideas to the notions of 'advaita'. K.C. Varadachari in *Vishishtadvaita and its Development* explains:

One of the most important aims of philosophizing in the earliest period of Ancient India was the attainment of a comprehensive synoptic insight into the nature of the multiplicity that confronts the individual in all directions. The sense of unity...was found to be the occult secret of reality which defined the senses and the mind. The word synthesis or samavaya expresses this intention.

(3)

As seen in the novel, Jimmy seems to have inculcated this non-dualistic philosophy that supports the indivisibility of God and man, Nature and man and Shiva and Shakti. The inseparability of the latter two becomes evident when Jimmy utters "Toast is me. I am toast" as he speaks to the Crakers (98) and remarks about Oryx "she was in him, or part of her was in him." He also observes that in old books, lovers only said "I'll make you mine", never did they say "I'll make you me" (315). The fact that he is also able to imbibe 'Oryx' as a mantra as he utters, "Oryx, it's not even her real name...It's only a word. It's a mantra" and believes "if he can say her name over and over, then maybe she'll glide into his body and be present with him in his flesh," shows that he is capable of perceiving the interconnectedness of the different spheres of reality and on an extended level, the world in general too (110). One of the reasons why Jimmy survives the apocalypse that ravages the world, is this ability of his to perceive the world as an organic entity, where all the component parts make up an integrated whole.

The notion of Correspondence too gains relevance here as it portrays the divine as dwelling in the natural world or nature as a manifestation of the divine presence, thus once again asserting the significance of non-dualism. As Joel Porte observes about Emerson, one of the pioneers of American Transcendentalist movement, "perhaps the most important idea that Emerson got from the eighteenth century is the notion of Correspondence; that nature is symbolic of spiritual truth and that to be so is its highest and truest function...It was simply a way of accounting for nature "by other principles than those of carpentry and chemistry"(13). It shows that the identification of the divine in the natural world might help alleviate the environmental crises the world is currently facing. It also comes as a resolution for the survivors in the text who have been left behind after the massive destruction, on whom the

tasks of creating the world anew and restoring the once devastated ecological systems, are vested.

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