

# The Corollary of Man's Endless Effort to Play God in Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood*

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## Abstract

Canadian writer Margaret Atwood is well known for her visionary writings and her works have a prophetic touch in them. She adorns her writings with futuristic elements. The two novels *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood* are futuristic and Atwood's brilliant portrayal of the man's increasing quest for power. The paper focuses on the outbreak of the great virus that wipes away almost the entire human race from the face of the earth and the fatal events that follow it. The consequences of the unchecked growth of science and technology are evident through the gruesome incidents that take place.

## Key Words

Distorted world - Science and technology-virus outbreak – JUVE– pandemic – death

## Limitless growth of science

The world has seen enormous changes and has adapted itself to the varying waxing and waning of human culture, growth and existence. The earth which has once been a place of unmatched beauty and cheerfulness has slowly but steadily started losing its charm. Nature which is its pride and strength has sadly yielded to the supremacy of the inhabitants. The course of nature has been greatly hampered and its boundaries have been shrunk. The world has undergone drastic variations and now the artificial has started to replace the real. The creation has started to compete with the Creator and has come up with its own list of creations which they claim to be a modified version of the real. Along with it comes the gory fact of consequences which create nothing but chaos and destruction. The tremendous growth in the field of science and technology is often considered as a boon for the ever developing human world. Little do people realize that the darker side of it is more horrifying and weighs more than the benefit it yields. Sarah A. Appleton in *Marketing Death in Margaret Atwood's Oryx and Crake and The Year of the Flood* says, "The holocaust of humanity is blamed on scientific developments to enhance life that are then turned into money making endeavors instead of benefitting humanity".(68)

Many writers of the past and the present have constantly dwelt on the issues of environmental hazards and the outcome of limitless growth of science. Margaret Atwood is one such visionary writer who in most of her works emphasize on the importance of setting boundaries to all fields of human development. She probes into the aftermath of unchecked human interference in the territory of nature and man's unimpeded advancement where the human beings play God. In her trilogy, she clearly portrays the distorted world which has lost its all naturalness and the consequences of it in a very artistic and descriptive manner.

The paper will focus on the onset of the great pandemic and the events that follow in the novel. And also the rapid changes that take place as a result of the disaster and the panacea for the limitless growth of science – the desertion of the human race.

## Dire corollary when man plays God

In *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood* Atwood, highlights the fact that the world seems to be in the total grip of the corporate power. Everything is controlled and keenly watched. New species have come into existence by splicing and merging of genes. This new venture is very exciting and as days go by it has become a part of normalcy. The pandemic that suddenly crops up in the novels is purely manmade and it is started to eradicate the human race from the face of the earth. The virus is created by Crake who wants to replace the human inhabitants with his own human like creations called the Crakers. He introduces the virus through a pill called as Blyssplusspills which is introduced in markets worldwide. The pills are consumed with the belief that it would enhance the sexual life of a person. It is a big hit and people all over the globe start consuming it little knowing that it would slowly take a toll on their lives. Crake takes his subjects from the poor countries, sex clinics, prisons and the desperate lot who are very eager to try this pill.

The effect of the drugs is so sudden and instantaneous that people are left perplexed and confused. They are totally clueless as to what is happening around them. Atwood mentions in her novels that the people have been used to a variety of viruses by now and new types of diseases have surfaced now and then. And the scientists very soon found drugs which worked against it and it caused deaths in few hundred thousand. The appearing and disappearing of various viruses have become a part of the mundane living for the people. Nose cones and bio suits have become common usage things. But this time it seemed to be entirely different. Toby, a character in the novel *The Year of the Flood* notices that the outbreak of the virus is not like the usual one which can be controlled after a few loses. “This was not an ordinary pandemic: it wouldn’t be contained after a few hundred thousand deaths, then obliterated with biotools and bleach.” (Atwood, “The Year of the Flood” 20)

## The certainty of the uncertain death

And even before people could figure out what it is, death has started to hog limitlessly. “The thing didn’t appear to be spreading from city to city: it was breaking out in a number of them simultaneously.” (Atwood, *Oryx and Crake* 325) Atwood further emphasizes that people flee to their own homes thinking that at least staying together could save them. It spreads as fast as fire and it is everywhere in the air. “...it travelled through the air as

if on wings, it burned through cities like fire, spreading germ-ridden mobs, terror, and butchery. The lights were going out everywhere, the news was sporadic: systems were failing as their keepers died.”(Atwood, “The Year of the Flood”20)

Jimmy the protagonist in the novel *Oryx and Crake* locks himself up in Paradise Dome along with the Crackers. He witnesses the gory incidents in the news channels where he observes how the outbreak of the pandemic creates great havoc and people run hither and thither hoping frantically to be saved from this lethal virus. Initially they are positive that it could be controlled. News channels flash messages of hope saying that the science heads are working frantically for the vaccine. Politicians were as usual spreading messages of vain hope and saying that things were under control. The news channels were constantly giving updates about the virus,

It was a rogue hemorrhagic, said the commentators. The symptoms were high fever, bleeding from the eyes and skin, convulsions, then breakdown of the inner organs, followed by death. The time from visible onset to final moment was amazingly short. The bug appeared to be airborne, but there might be a water factor as well. (Atwood, “Oryx and Crake”325)

Atwood goes on to describe that religious preaching go on in full fledge, talking of the apocalypse, cults try hard to prove their beliefs and their doctrines of the doomsday are coming true, prayers are heard everywhere. In the initial days of the pandemic people are given instructions to boil water and drink, to avoid handshakes and to stop moving or travelling. Latex gloves and nose – cone filters disappear from stores and when Jimmy sees it in the News, he just laughs at the false belief of people who think that these things could actually save them from the pandemic. The virus is named JUVE which is the acronym of Jetspeed Ultra Virus Extraordinary. Atwood pictures the actions that take place the next week. There are efforts to set up isolation tents, quarantine initially starts with towns and later whole cities are quarantined. Field clinics are set up but very soon it proved to be a failure as the doctors and nurses were themselves infected or fled due to fear. All airports and ports were closed, communications from countries had slowly ceased. Jimmy waits in vain for more information about the situation outside Paradise Dome for there were no more News readers or any form of communications. Everything is dead. The uncertain death turns out to be certain.



## The powerlessness of the powerful

Hope starts to flicker and fade as more and more deaths are witnessed. Man's invasion into the unfathomable world of science has now left him in a place of no return. All his meritorious achievements crumble down in front of his eyes. Atwood brings to light that no great scientist or an expert in the field of medicine could save himself or the dying multitudes that perish in front of their eyes. All the corporate establishments could only watch their fortified walls of riches being crashed. No power or money or intelligence could save the dying mass. The human species drastically starts to dissolve and disappear from the face of the earth. They once had sole dominion over the entire habitations of the earth, but they are now being trampled upon and lie helpless.

The most difficult situation for a person is to witness the death of a loved one. The pandemic is the time when such things become too common to brood. It starts with just the loss of one member of the family and soon the entire family succumbs to the fangs of death. Atwood brings out the sad fact that initially there is a feeling of grievance for the dead but later there is no one left to grieve for the dead. Dead bodies are strewn on the streets and many more were found lying dead in their own homes, corpses are found everywhere and become food to the birds and animals. The powerful man and his achievements are mere spectators to the events that are happening around him.

The novels *Oryx and Crake* and *Year of the Flood* are best examples to attest to the world the dire consequences when the growth of science and technology are left unchecked and when man plays God. Robert S. Gnanamony in *Dialogues of Digital Aesthetics in Margaret Atwood's Oryx and Crake* says "Atwood is undoubtedly the most prescient of the major dystopian works, and it seems to tell us that unrestrained progress is the key to environmental degradation and eventually man's extinction." (239) Margaret Atwood is rightly called as the futuristic writer and this is rightly proved in the pandemic situation of Covid 19 which has shaken the foundations of the world. The reader sees a striking resemblance of the horrific pandemic situation with the novels. The pandemic which started in one particular place has rapidly spread to other parts of the world and the world has been greatly affected and is still fighting hard to free itself from its clutches. It has not only led to the loss of numerous lives but also to the recession of world economy and psychological turmoil.

## A wake up call for the Apologists of science

The novels and the unpleasant pandemic scenario that the entire human race is recently witnessed is a wakeup call for us to ponder and reflect on our actions and the sincerity of our desire to save the earth for the future. J. Brooks Bouson in “*It’s Game Over Forever*”: Atwood’s Satiric Vision of a Bioengineered Posthuman Future in *Oryx and Crake* says about Atwood’s concern for the dying world,

For she fears that in our new age of genetic manipulation and biological control, we may be blindly entering a catastrophic posthuman future as our scientific mavens sit in judgment on the world and play God with the building blocks of life while we, like Jimmy–Snowman, remain unaware of the perils that surround us until things have gone too far for us to reverse humanity’s slippery-slope downward course.” (154)

The incidents that are depicted in the novels were once fictitious and a part of fantasy. But it is horrifying to see that in the present state of affairs it is all turning out to be true and too real to ignore. The two novels, *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood* leave a strong message to the readers that it is high time for people to mend their ways and deal with nature and science with great care and caution, failing which will lead to dire consequences as pictured in the novels, a more fatal outcome than the recently experienced Covid 19 pandemic.

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