

**POSTHUMAN AND HUMAN-NONHUMAN RELATIONSHIP IN ORYX
AND CRAKE**

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Abstract

Recently, 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 trans-/posthumanism. Therefore, what it means to be human has been questioned by various theoreticians like Cary Wolfe, N. Katherine Hayles, and Donna Haraway. In this regard, concepts like Self/Other, human/non-human, body/mind are analysed in the framework of trans- and posthumanism. Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* (2003) not only indicates a posthuman condition but also illustrates the question of identity regarding the characters. Consequently, this study discloses breaking points which involve issues of authenticity, othering, as well as identity explorations of the individuals based on post-/transhumanist theories and significant issues of the contemporary age. In addition, the study scrutinizes the human-nonhuman animal relationship and how it contributes to the identity formation of the human in a posthuman era.

Keywords: Margaret Atwood, posthumanism, animal rights, othering, subject

**ANTILOP VE FLURYA'DA POST-İNSAN VE İNSAN-İNSAN
OLMAYAN HAYVAN İLİŞKİSİ**

Öz

Son yıllarda çeşitli bilimsel ve teknolojik gelişmelerin meydana gelmesiyle *insan her şeyin ölçüsüdür* fikrini savunan hümanist bakış açısına karşı trans-/posthümanist akımlar meydan okumaya başlamıştır. Üstelik insan olmanın anlamı, Cary Wolfe, N. Katherine Hayles, Donna Haraway gibi kuramcılar tarafından sorgulanmıştır. Bu noktada ben/öteki, insan/insan olmayan, beden/akıl kavramları trans-/posthümanizm çerçevesinde yeniden şekillenmiştir. Distopya türünün örneklerinden Margaret Atwood'un *Antilop ve Flurya* (2003) romanı sadece insan sonrası durumu gözler

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önüne sermekle kalmaz, aynı zamanda karakterlerin kimlik sorununu da gösterir. Bu çalışma özgünlük, ötekileştirme, kimlik arayışı kavramlarını post-/transhümanist kuramlar ve dönemin öne çıkan meseleleri bağlamında değerlendirerek ana karakterlerin kırılma noktalarını inceler. Aynı zamanda insan merkeziliğin radikal bir zemin bularak insan sonrası çağın da etkisiyle yaratabileceği felaket senaryolarında insan olmayan hayvanlarla ilişkinin nasıl şekillendiği, insanın kimlik oluşumuna nasıl katkıda bulunduğu da irdelenmiştir.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Margaret Atwood, posthümanizm, hayvan hakları, ötekileştirme, özne

Introduction

Margaret Atwood’s *Oryx and Crake*, the first novel of *MaddAddam* trilogy was published in 2003 and caused various discussions about the genre of the book. Because the novel contained characteristics of other types such as science fiction, gothic fiction, dystopia, survivor story, Bildungsroman, and quest romance, numerous critics attempted to identify the genre of the text. However, Margaret Atwood describes her work as speculative fiction setting it apart from “science fiction proper”:

I said I liked to make a distinction between science fiction proper — for me, this label denotes books with things in them we can’t yet do or begin to do, talking beings we can never meet, and places we can’t go — and speculative fiction, which employs the means already more or less to hand, and takes place on Planet Earth (Atwood, 2004, p. 513).

When we consider Atwood’s words, it is not difficult to realize a multitude of developments taking place each day and assume that a lot more will take place in the years to come. In this respect, as a work of dystopian speculative writing, *Oryx and Crake* (2003) contains events which might happen any moment due to the rapid growth in technology. For instance, it is widely known that animal hybrids exist. Recently, with the removal of certain genes and injection of stem cells enabling to create necessary organs, experiments about breeding mice with the pancreatic tissue of rats have become successful. Studies regarding the production of human-animal hybrids are also conducted in various institutions around the world. In 2017, scientists of the Salk Institute even published a paper entitled “Interspecies Chimerism with Mammalian Pluripotent Stem Cells” and shared their findings about a chimera (an organism including cells from two distinct entities) project. They announced that they finally managed to grow human cells in pig embryos. Although a pig host’s process of development differs from a human and it is necessary to solve this problem, the possibility of pigs as human organ carriers for transplants is brought into discussion in the novel.

Bioethical discussions regarding medicinal advancements have not been able to curb the anthropocentric zeal for longer lifespans for humans, anti-ageing possibilities and cures for terminal diseases, organ failures and other illnesses. Anthropocene, a term defined and popularized by Paul Crutzen as “a new age defined by one creature –man- who had become so dominant that he is capable of altering the planet on a geological scale” (Crutzen, 2002, p. 23) only functioned to invigorate the preconceived notions about human superiority over nature. Anthropocentrism naturally precedes the Anthropocene by much longer and has been a reflex taken for granted when using natural resources and nonhuman animals as means for human ends. One of the most striking examples of anthropocentric genetic engineering of animals has been the Oncomouse, a mouse that is designed to have a genetic disposition to have cancer to enable oncological research was patented twenty six years ago by Harvard University genetic researchers. A transgenic animal, Oncomouse is given oncogenes of another animal and has come to be the first patented laboratory animal (Rimmer, 2008, p. 90).

MaddAddam trilogy introduces us to various genetically engineered, transgenic animals both designed for purposes of xenotransplantation, human consumption and anti-ageing such as ChickieNobs, a chickenlike bulby creature with no head, therefore no nervous system; bobkittens, created to destroy pests; rakunks, a hybrid of racoons and skunks; wolvogs, savage wolves that still behave like affectionate dogs to attract their victims used to guard corporations and are used as police dogs, and pigoons, genetically modified pigs used to harvest human organs who become much more intelligent than intended after the successful growth of human neocortex tissue in their brains. *Oryx and Crake* contains a warning about the future of humanity and possible consequences of human actions whether they are committed with positive or negative intentions. In fact, this concern becomes more complex when other issues regarding biogenetics, environmentalism, and commodification of nonhuman others in the light of critique of humanism are revealed. Public attitude towards nonhuman animal bodies becoming biofactories is overshadowed by corporate power and greed when corporations replace governments and are transformed into dictatorships.

There are no lawyers, court rooms, regulatory authorities or delays as HelthWyzer and RejoovenEssence seek regulatory approval based on health and environmental impact studies. Indeed, it seems that biotechnology in *Oryx and Crake* is subject to little or no regulation. Importantly, though, the absence of regulatory institutions and frameworks in *Oryx and Crake* does not mean that these actors are less important than other more obvious actors. Rather, the apparent absence or failure of the law to regulate the development and application of

biotechnology makes the widespread application of biotechnology possible. (Sanderson, 2013, p. 236).

The extreme commercialisation of nonhuman animal bodies however is rarely touched upon in the novel from an animal welfare or rights perspective. Animal welfare entails a concern for conditions under which the animals are being raised, experimented on and in general used for human means whereas animal rights activists mostly are against all forms of animal exploitation and speciesism regardless of how exploitation takes place. Richard Ryder coined the term in a leaflet in 1970, as he was very much concerned about experiments conducted on animals most of which he believed had no redeeming justifications to begin with. Just like race, sex or class he asserted that species is being used as an unjustified supremacist category (2010, 1). What we encounter in Atwood is speciesism running amok. The dystopian world created by Atwood is dystopian mainly because of various breaches of ethical boundaries in both human-human and human-nonhuman animal relationships and human life has become without exception full of suffering regardless of socio-economic status because of widespread discrimination which is normalized within the society and speciesism which people come to accept as part of their socialization process. Still, the novel, despite its optimistic ending does not promise an antidote for animal suffering and a guarantee that the same ethical boundaries would never be breached. Since human beings, as opposed to what we believed throughout the novel, actually have survived the man induced apocalypse. And if human beings survived, it is highly likely that speciesism did as well. Until that point, we believed Jimmy (a.k.a. the Snowman), our protagonist was the only survivor.

Unlike humanistic universalism, an opportunity for representation of what is different emerges. Here, Atwood’s novel presents many situations regarding the demise of human-centred position, and contemporary posthumanist debates about advanced capitalism, social construction, technological enhancement, as well as animal rights. Covering these issues, a repetition about the concept of death is revealed in several ways: first, as a warning about the destruction of the world; second, as a critique of the humanist subject; third, as a rebirth signalling the end of the Anthropocene. With the end of this period, the novel introduces “Post-Anthropocene”, which marks the interrelatedness of other species with human beings.

Human and Non-Human Relationship

In *Oryx and Crake*, the relationality of species is best exemplified by the Crakers, which are presented as genetically designated hybrids including the qualities of both humans and nonhuman animals. Despite their artificiality, these beings live in peace with nature. They

are vegetarians and adapt to their habitat easily. At the same time, these humanoids are harmless. They respect each and every creature in the world. Thus, their design and humans' extinction imply a new period in history. Moreover, these hybrids are significant, for they are produced as part of both trans- and posthumanist aims. In this sense, the Crakers symbolise a better posthuman world as a part of Crake's (originally Glenn, Jimmy's best friend and the novel's mad scientist) utopia. This post-anthropocentric turn in the novel challenges human supremacy and causes the reader to rethink various modes of human behaviour. Ironically, the loss of duality is accomplished by the collapse of human beings. Crakers are created by Jimmy's childhood friend Crake who wants to eliminate all causes of human suffering by modifying innate human characteristics. Since Crakers are ultimately compassionate, can communicate with animals through telepathy and partially are animals themselves, one assumes animal suffering is also bound to end. Crake however is a utilitarian and have caused great amount of suffering during his experimentations until he genetically perfected his Craker humanoids.

Oryx and Crake discloses a social construction of the human and the nonhuman by the corporations in the Compounds. On the one hand, a positive stance regarding transhumanist issues about the use of technology is implied. However, on the other hand, the effects of highly developed technology on human subjectivity are introduced. Based on the memories of Jimmy, our protagonist, we recognise that scientific advances provide many opportunities for humans. Through bioengineering, both beauty products and animal hybrids are produced. The medication for terminal diseases to a certain degree is provided, and new cautions to prevent ageing are taken. For parents who decide to have kids, genetic manipulations or eugenics guarantee that the children will have better physical and cognitive capabilities. Nevertheless, the perception of humans has changed regarding their humanness, which signals the opposite of transhumanist aims and concentrates on the impact of this transformation. Just like Cary Wolfe indicates, a situation coming both *before and after humanism* occurs about posthumanist stance. We can even realize it by divulging into the memories of young Jimmy. As his earliest memory, he recalls a bonfire, and feels sorry about the death of the animals, but his father and mother assure him that the cows and sheep had to die, otherwise they could spread their disease to humans. Although Jimmy as a naïve child feels sadness for the pain these animals go through, if not his mother, his father seems quite insensitive. When he sees how anxious Jimmy is, he says the animals “were like steaks and sausages, only they still had skins on”, without showing any emotions, however Jimmy rationalises:

And their heads, thought Jimmy. Steaks didn't have heads. The heads made a difference: he thought he could see the animals looking at him reproachfully out of their burning eyes. In some way all of this – the bonfire, the charred smell, but most of all the lit-up, suffering animals – was his fault, because he'd done nothing to rescue them. At the same time he found the bonfire a beautiful sight – luminous, like a Christmas tree, but a Christmas tree on fire (Atwood, 2013, p. 20).

Being both affected and in awe, partly because he is overwhelmed by the extent of the fire, Jimmy feels guilty. The imagery he creates in his mind reminds us of animals' gaze back at the human and alludes to Freud's *unheimlich* (uncanny) towards nonhuman others. Freud defines the uncanny as “that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar” (1985, p. 340). When individuals encounter an event that makes them feel attracted and frightened at the same time, the notion of “uncanny” as something both strange and familiar might emerge. Unable to evade the event, Jimmy repeatedly asks his parents why the animals are on fire. Despite telling him that they can be dangerous, during most of their conversations, his father keeps working and assumes a distant position. Once Jimmy asks whether the same thing will happen to him or not when he has a cough, his father confirms recklessly, so Jimmy starts crying. In this respect, by means of a casual conversation, the normalization of dehumanisation over the other is emphasised, and the concept of the human as both rational and moral is distorted. In addition, this condition causes some metanarratives to emerge leading to construction of identities. The children raised under these circumstances get accustomed to the treatment *others* receive. Jimmy's mother says he is too young for these kinds of jokes, however, her words imply he will get used to them in time. And Jimmy does get used it, as he calls vegans fundamentalists, consumes animal products including ChickieNobs and has no moral scruples about working with Crake in the RejoovenEsense Compound as he grows up. As the narrative moves between the past and the present, the remembering sequences “signify the need of people to return to a forgotten past, no matter how traumatic this past is. However, in the case of a half-remembered, half-simulated experience it seems that memories abandon their bodies and exist as collective, disowned and disembodied present” (Golban, Benli, 2017, p. 308).

The real animal meat for human consumption by this time have become very rare and quite prestigious to behold. Jovian Perry in his article “Oryx and Crake and the New Nostalgia for Meat” talks about the recent trends in the rising prestige of “real” or “natural” meat. And the novel is an accurate representation of a world desperate for the prestige of what is lost and what is arguably not even an essential part of a human being's diet. “In the broiling

world of climatic upheaval and deepening social injustice that Oryx and Crake so vividly describes, meat is becoming harder and harder to come by. Not only is a warming world wreaking havoc on agricultural production, but disease and biological terrorism are running rampant through the meat production sectors” (2009, p. 243).

An additional factor which contributes to the prestigious status of meat consumption is its assumed association with masculinity. When masculinity is constructed along the lines of man’s control and subjugation of nature, animals are perceived merely as a part of that nature and their conquest bolsters virility. In *Oryx and Crake*, Jimmy, who used to be quite sexually active before what is believed to be the end of human species aside from himself, is left without a possible mate as the novel begins yet still consumes fish. Ironically, the delicacy he consumes once a week is hunted and brought to him by Crakers who are strictly vegetarians. Therefore without the possibility of any sexual interaction, all that is left for Jimmy to validate his masculinity is consuming animal flesh.

That is not to say he does not grow up without learning to be selective in the way he feels compassion towards some animals. In this sense, the relationship of Jimmy and his rakunk exemplifies how a person can get attached to a being of another species. As explained by Jimmy/Snowman, this genetically engineered animal is his tenth birthday present. Around that time, the rakunks (hybrids of racoons and skunks) are produced as an “after-hours hobby” (Atwood, 2013, p. 57) at OrganInc laboratories. That is to say, playing God, the scientists bring these creatures into existence for entertainment. When his father gives the animal to Jimmy, he names it Killer. However, this rakunk becomes more than a distraction for Jimmy. At one point, he finds comfort in Killer as his best friend. Since the rakunk is the only being that seems to understand him, he forms a bond with his pet. His strong relationship with the rakunk indicates that it becomes a part of Jimmy. In other words, Killer comes to represent a companion species proving that it is possible to demolish the demarcations between humans and animals. Also, Jimmy’s closer ties with a genetically enhanced hybrid calls for a distanciation effect.

Apart from that, Jimmy’s bondage with his rakunk shows a “positive kind of alienation effect” which suggests oneness with other creatures. Since he does not perceive them as *nonhumans*, he is able to recognize the cruelty such beings receive. Thus, the protagonist starts forming a moral consciousness when his mother leaves home, and this event marks an important breaking point in Jimmy’s life. At this point, Jimmy’s connection with Killer signals a critique on the human essence. Despite possessing rationality, humans treat

other beings in an inhumane manner. They laugh at jokes about eating pigeons. Personal interests take precedence over everything. With scientists playing God through bioengineering, the aim of science also changes.

On the day of her mother’s escape, Jimmy finds a note written by her on the table. This paper informs him that she has left, and taken Killer with her to liberate the rakunk. In her note, she tells Jimmy she will try to communicate with him, but since the CorpSeCops men will check everything, she cannot give an assurance. At the same time, she slams the computers at home with a hammer so that no one can discover the messages she has sent as well as the people she has contacted. Here, Jimmy gets angry with his mother, but his rage does not only stem from her disappearance. It is related to a more significant issue. She goes away because she cannot cope with her guilty conscience, but what she does creates an ironic situation: first although Jimmy might need her, she leaves her own son without even telling him where she goes, so he thinks that she does not trust him; second, she takes the rakunk that has grown up at home. Therefore, her position as an ethical person comes into question. Jimmy says “Killer was a tame animal, she’d be helpless on her own, she wouldn’t know how to fend for herself, everything hungry would tear her into furry black and white pieces” (Atwood, p. 69-70). Through the voice of Jimmy, who is still a child at that time, the reader questions whether Sharon’s action is right or wrong.

Afterwards, Jimmy’s father’s job as a geographer, and his position in the pigeon project at OrganInc Farms are revealed, so the irony intensifies. As a scientist, he seemingly works for the benefit of humans, but when the novel progresses, we see that other interpretations are possible. While remembering the pigeon project, Jimmy adds:

The goal of the pigeon project was to grow an assortment of fool proof human-tissue organs in a transgenic knockout pig host – organs that would transplant smoothly and avoid rejection, but would also be able to fend off attacks by opportunistic microbes and viruses, of which there were more strains every year. A rapid-maturity gene was spliced in so the pigeon kidneys and livers and hearts would be ready sooner, and now they were perfecting a pigeon that could grow five or six kidneys at a time. Such a host animal could be reaped of its extra kidneys; then, rather than being destroyed, it could keep on living and grow more organs, much as a lobster could grow another claw to replace a missing one. That would be less wasteful, as it took a lot of food and care to grow a pigeon. A great deal of investment money had gone into OrganInc Farms (Atwood, 2013, p. 25-26).

Here, the function of the pigeons is stated, and the reader is informed about what they are. Being a genetically engineered species, the pigeons serve as pig hosts to cultivate human

tissue organs, so we realize that they increase the lifespan of human beings, which represents a kind of evolution, but this topic brings about ethical dilemmas about whether these treatments are morally acceptable. There are other forms of subjugation, this time regarding people which is revealed through physical segregation. Humans in the pleeblands are used lavishly for experiments, whereas people in the Compounds become more and more dependent on the medication promoted by the corporations. So the victims of this era are not discriminated based on their skin color, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation or gender (although young girls seem to be forced into prostitution more frequently than young boys both of whom are bought from destitute families), but whether or not you are born as one of the experimenters or the test subjects.

Conclusion

There is also a posthuman uncertainty in *Oryx and Crake*. The hybrids go out of control in the following days of the catastrophe. The replacement of the human/nonhuman is exemplified by the behaviours of genetically engineered animals. Once they are liberated, both pigeons and wolvogs get wild and constantly threaten Jimmy’s safety. While Jimmy is on the road for supplies, a group of pigeons trap him. Although he manages to escape and hide for the moment, he drops his garbage bag on the stairs. When he moves on to get it back, he sees “they were waiting for him, using the garbage bag as bait. They must have been able to tell there was something in it he’d want, that he’d come down to get. Cunning, so cunning” (Atwood, p. 319). Understanding Snowman might need something, the pigeons wait closer to the bag, and this situation proves that they have a form of consciousness which is quite significant because the way that they act demonstrates these hybrids are not simply hosts for transplantations. They improve themselves representing evolution, challenging the speciesist discourse created by the human race.

Likewise, when wolvogs (mixtures of wolves and dogs) are released, they start inducing anxiety in Jimmy. Although they are designated to provide security for the companies, they exceed their capacities in time. Jimmy explains why he is afraid of them mentioning that their appearance still resembles dogs wagging their tails and making funny bounces, but once somebody gets attracted, they go for them, and eventually kill their targets. As opposed to wolvogs, nothing domesticated stands a chance. In a way, we realize that in a post-apocalyptic world or to be more precise, in a post-humanist environment, even the power relations regarding domination and exploitation based on centrality of the human race might change. While biotechnology can be used to manipulate and assert individual freedom over

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others, it can signal the opposite, deconstructing the established beliefs about Homo Sapiens. From the examples above, we understand that Cartesian wise “Man” who presents exceptionality through mind is challenged by the technologically developed *posthumans*. Still, since *Oryx and Crake* does not answer our questions about what happens to the survivors, the future seems unclear about whether human beings will face total destruction.

Here, on one hand, humanity’s survival is in question. On the other hand, when we consider Crake’s bioengineered humanoids, this ambiguity is easily dissolved, and a rebirth is suggested. As a scientific genius, Glenn/Crake designs these “floor models” to replace human beings. For him, they are what humans lack: a symbol of perfection. Like other human/animal hybrids, the Crakers blur the divide between humans and nonhumans, but their reason for existence differs radically from other hybrids. First, they do not function as commodities necessary for human race, so the Children of Crake carry a higher purpose. Second, unlike pigeons, bobkittens, and wolvogs, they have not gone out of control. We observe that they do not show any vengeful behaviours against others. Last, despite being products of science, they are pure beings. They respect everyone and everything in the universe without putting themselves at the centre. In other words, at the outset, it seems *–hopefully–* the world will never become Crakercentric.

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