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Study of Places in Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*

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Abstract

Setting like many other components plays an important role in a plot. It helps in establishing a tone of the work. It also sets a background for the character and the story. Reader attaches a lot of emotions through the setting. Malgudi, Wessex, Country Churchyard are the immortal settings of the respective works. There are many characters in the first part of MaddAddam trilogy and all of them except Jimmy dies due to the spread of infection. All these character relates to some of the places. These places presents a lot of information regarding the mindset of the chareacters and their tendency towards ecology. This paper delves down to find the connection between setting and ecology in the novel Oryx and Crake. It is kind of scrutiny of the places where Jimmy spent his time in. it also tries to u derstand the factor which shaped the behavior not just of Jimmy but also of other characters.

Keywords: Setting, Belongingness, Sustainable, Technology, Pornography, Industrialization

Introduction

Place has a special significance while reading a work through ecocritical perspective. Authors often take support of setting to reflect the ecocritical angles. It not only sets the tone of the work but also let its reader aware of many factors. There is no lie that person becomes what he grows with. The surrounding and the locations has a never ending impact on every individual. If it were not true then Wordsworth would have not written a poem as *Tintern Abbey*. Peter Berry in his book *Beginning Theory* writes,

“The Ecocritical reading, by contrast, focuses *outside*, on the house and its environs, rather than inside, on the owner and his psychology. It uses ideas of energy, entropy (which is a kind of negative energy within systems which tends towards breakdown and disorganization), and symbiosis (‘sym-biosis’, literally ‘living together’, denoting mutually sustaining, co-existing systems).¹

When we read Ruskin Bond or Thoreau plenty of nature in their works. It is always present as a background in those works. Even in children literature the fairies, ghosts, animals almost everything have some ecological attribute with them. The characters also are affected by the

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surroundings they live in. they goes to nature to find solace or to curse it for bad happening. Lawrence Buell in the chapter Space, Place, and Imagination of his book *The Future of Environmental Criticism* writes, “Place is an indispensable concept for environmental humanists not so much because they have precisely defined and stabilized it as because they have not; not because of what the concept lays to rest as because of what it opens up”.²

In the same chapter Buell says, “ That the concept of place also gestures in at least three directions at once – toward Environmental materiality, toward social perception or construction, and toward individual affect or bond – makes it an additionally rich and tangled arena for environmental criticism”.³ We while reading *Oryx and Crake* comes across several places. In the plot there one person but two character from whose point of view we see the story. This paper deals with the places of significance and their (possible) ecological connections. Snowman was Jimmy once. But things changed due to the invention and experiments of Crake. Not just the compound but the whole planet got empty. People died in the catastrophe brought by BlyssPluss Pill. The novel starts with Snowman pondering over how everything happened. Story is almost put in a perfect sequence to make the reader understand of every event that happened in the past. Although it’s not done intentionally. Snowman is on a journey and he keeps on connecting dots with the things that he come across during his journey. He is often disturbed due to these flashbacks and he shouts it out as, “I am not my childhood,” Snowman says out loud. He hates these replays. He can’t turn them off, he can’t change the subject, he can’t leave the room”⁴.

Places and their ecological significance:

OrganInc farms: this is the place where Jimmy aka Snowman lived for a good amount of time during his childhood. These farms were kind of community which Jimmy’s father and other used to work with. Farms had given accommodation to its employees. They were also called by some as Organ-Oinc farms because it used to provide organs to customers. One can visualize a poultry farm or a pig pen to understand this concept. Farm was the center of Pigoon project. Pigoon's official name was *sus multiorganifer*. They were tamed to fulfill the need of extra organs. It was a money-business which was also kind of service to humanity. People who had organ failure or some infection in their liver or kidney could have asked Farm for organs. Farm was kind of storage to help such humans in their need. The compound was technically equipped. It had all the facilities for the residents of compound. Even the house Jimmy had lived in was given by the farm. Not just the farm but it also had an indoor swimming pool and a small gym attached within. The description of furniture explains is one of its kind, "The furniture in it was called Reproduction. Jimmy was quite old before he realized what this word meant_ that for each reproduction item, there was supposed to be an original somewhere. Or there had been once. Or something."⁵

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Farm was a perfect system of security and discipline. The rules of entering and departure were fixed and strictly followed. Jimmy's mother, Sharon referred life of OrganInc as unreal. She often expressed her disgust toward the rules and restrictions of the farm. She had more fascination to a free life while Jimmy's father had a positive attitude towards it. He used to see compound as a safe place and safety was always his prime concern. He and Jimmy were more positive towards the life they had inside the compound. Although Jimmy hasn't shown it clearly if he liked it or not but his father was completely in favor of it. There is an interaction before Sharon's departure clarify the points of view of Jimmy's parents towards the project and the cost they were paying for the compound life.

In this interaction Jimmy's father even taunts Sharon for criticizing the project he works on. After living in OrganInc for sometimes Jimmy's family got transferred to a bigger complex where facilities were better and space was larger than the previous one. But Jimmy's mother was not happy with the place even then. The conflict between Sharon and her husband seems like a conflict between morals and money:

"Anyway it's been paying for your room and board, it's been putting the food on your table. You're hardly in a position to take the high ground." "I know," said Jimmy's mother's voice. "Believe me, that is one thing I really do know. Why can't you get a job doing something honest? Something basic." "Like what and like where? You want me to dig ditches?" "At least your conscience would be clean".⁶

Farms therefore represents those areas of our times which are facilitated with everything. Which are owned by rich people who have nothing to care about what goes outside. These places are posh, clean and out of reach of poor people. There will be long fenced walls to keep the life aloof and private. In the work there is no mention of trees and natural environment. Animals which can be kept as pet are also checked and vaccinated properly. In Jimmy's case the rakunk is the result of genetic splicing happened in the farms only. In our real world we come across such compounds and often are they responsible for a lot of trash. They do have the power and money but they are least concerned for the ecology. They can bring a lot of changes due to their reach; they can bring some bills; they can invest in sustainable development policies but they won't do any of these as their life is good. They have money to buy everything so most of the times they don't even realize that the earth needs their action. Jimmy's father is one such human. He and his team is bus making money from those projects ignoring the major impact it will have on the Pigs and eventually on the life-systems of the planet.

Pleebland: people of OrganInc called the cities, the Pleeblands. Jimmy says that he had never been to cities; it was through TV or people that he knew about it. TV presented cities as hotspot of diseases, a place where people and vehicles were always moving. Different kind of noises, signs

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and buildings were all over the city. Compound people prefer to stay inside because pleebland's security wasn't as good as it was inside the compound. They were afraid of theft, diseases, attacks etc. Sharon often expressed enchantment towards pleebland in her dialogues. She refers it a free space where they could fly and walk without taking permission of any officials. She disliked OrganInc to the extent that she called it unreal according to her, "it was all artificial, it was just a theme park and you could never bring the old ways back".⁷ Pleebland and OrganInc are contrast to each other. Jimmy and everyone assume that she must be hidden herself in pleeblands.

Pleebland is not discussed much as the main characters of the work has spent most of their time either in the compound or in some other place. We only know what Jimmy hears from other people. The only confrontation is in the episode when Jimmy and his friend Crake are going to see the progress of BlyssPluss Pill and Craker. They are vaccinated and they cover their nose as people are doing during pandemic times with masks. It only adds the detail that the place is surely polluted. There must be more chances of getting infected hence, the vaccine. They remind us of that portion of city where lower class and poor people resides. It even bring the picture of slums to the mind of readers. Residents of this area have almost no share at making policies. They are only earning to feed their kids and to sustain somehow. Health is not their priority. All they care is of the food to live for the day. They have no say over the production or the destruction but when some cynical capitalist like Crake does an experiment all of them loose their life.

Pixieland: this was the place where little Oryx was taken by a new person other than uncle En. Oryx and other children were supposed to act in movies. They were kept in a store room near to the kitchen. The place had a 'rich smell' and they were well fed. This keeping and feeding was taken care because they had to look good in those movies. They were taken to a different city for the movie- making. Oryx confessed that she learnt an important lesson about life in Pixieland. She learnt that everything has a prize. She understood that there is always an exchange working. Is she will give something then only will she get something back in return. The place was especially meant to keep these kids away from the world. Children were also allowed to watch cartoon in that house. Their hygiene was the top priority of the organization. They were offered beer sometimes but smoking wasn't allowed at all. The camera person, Jack used to be with them. He would tell the gossips of the world to these girls. Though he had many things to talk but he would mostly tell about his sick stomach caused by the bad food of USA. Oryx never felt any embarrassment in admitting that she exchanged sexual favors to English lessons with Jack in Pixieland. This step helped her otherwise her English speaking skills would have never become so fluent.

This is very difficult to imagine a place where little girls are kept and they are compelled or encouraged to act like a sex slave. Jimmy and Crake had seen Oryx in one such sex tape. Oryx also comes back to the life of these two through thee services and for that purpose only. Crake for a longer time doesn't treat Oryx as a lover but just as someone who can quench his needs. This

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is a harsh reality of our world that has been shown in the novel. There are people and children who are forced to do such things due to poverty. How disappointing is to think of a girl who is ready to sleep with someone because she know she will get some English lectures in exchange. This exchange of body with knowledge is disgrace upon the humanity. These descriptions only ascertain that Pixieland was only rich in smells but poor in values.

HappiCuppa: Jimmy and Crake was at Moosonee HelthWyzer Gated Vacation Community for their summer break. HealthWyzer subsidiary had developed Happicuppa bean and there were riots all over on it. This invention threw the local growers out of business and cost them huge loss. Its advantage over normal coffee beans was that all of its beans would ripen simultaneously. It saved time, labor and other expenses which are usually faced by traditional coffee Planters. HealthWyzer being a technical company uses technology and machines for the all the steps but it was a loss to those several people who were engaged in coffee plantation.

Here Atwood gives us a glance of the conflict that is happening all around the globe between natives and the money mafias. The land, forest and right of plantation has been taken from the people. The shift of ownership is not a new incident. Just on the name of civilization aboriginals and tribal communities have been exploited since a long. We know that the Happicuppa is established just to make money keeping the ecological impacts aside. Their sole motive is to grow more coffee in less time and neglecting its adverse effect on people and environment. This was the basic rule which worked for colonies as well. This conflict between machine and human is interesting. Author blended industrialization and Marxism beautifully into the plot. And the link was Jimmy's mother! Sharon is seen on TV with rioters protesting against Happicuppa beans.

Martha Graham: Martha Graham Academy is the school from where Jimmy did his undergraduate with Problematics. He was disappointed to see the condition of the campus; it was unlike the place he had lived in. Jimmy compares this place with pleebland due to bad security, poor food qualities and wrecked buildings. He was already depressed due to the academic and physical condition of Martha Graham. His roommate, Bernice came as cherry on the cake; she was a radical vegan who kept annoying Jimmy with her weird actions. Later on he started dating other girls of the school too and that was done by using his mother's story as a trap. The school stands for the condition of Arts and Humanities in the age of advanced technology. It reflects that people who will choose otherwise in the era of machines (which we are already progressing to) will suffer Jimmy especially shows a condition of a person who have 'nowhere to go'. He doesn't want to go back to his father and Ramona who continuously asks him to visit them. Also he doesn't like the campus he studies in.

Asperger's U: Jimmy went to Martha Graham while Crake was recruited by Watson Crick. His institute was called Asperger's U because students pay no heed to others, they walked like robots

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in a fix pace and style without noticing much of their surroundings. The campus room, food, and laundry services everything was magnificent in Watson Creek. Crake took Jimmy to several departments, the Decor Botanicals, Neoagricultural and Bio Defences. This campus provide us of an image of a space which is scientifically-equipped. He explained Jimmy about those various projects they came across. His place was full of scientific inventions, everyone was a techno savvy. It gives us a picture of upcoming age where everyone will be a computer literate. No hard copies and organic material will be seen. Everything will be created by such experimentation and cross breeding. Just a click will be enough to take you to any information you need. There will be machines to produce oxygen, to change saline water into drinkable water and much more. Little possibility for woods in a world like that!

RejoovenEsense: description of Rejooven after apocalypse is just like the other places. Humans are vanished and the compound is inhabited by hungry pigeons. Atwood gives detail of outside but focuses more on interior of the room. Snowman enters a room in search of food. He calls for the people but no human replies him back. The house is taken over by rats. Snowman finds a half bottle of Bourbon and nothing else. He is disappointed as someone else has looted the house before him. Narrator describes the decor of the bathroom. It used to be celebrated as a place to mediate and confession. Snowman guessed that the place belongs to a word person because he find books, dictionary in the house. Along with it computer and a stash of CDs is also on the study table. A vase of withered flower was also there. It symbolizes that flower which are kept inside withers after a while. It can also be taken as a symbol of the withering of life but also indicates that earlier there was life. Jimmy has a strange feeling of belongingness with the house; with the picture of father and son. He thinks, "Why does he have the feeling that it's his house, he's broken into? His own house from twenty five years ago, himself the missing child".⁸

Rejooven essence was one of the society people used to live in. Snowman is visiting it as he have not much supply of food left now. He believes that people must had kept something to eat in their kitchen, fridge or storage. As the infection gave no time to save themselves so the things must be there. it is a cruel reality of life that one who is saved cannot die with others. That person will have to survive as long as there is any possibility to sustain. Death is an eternal truth but other reality is you cannot die as you want to. It's not easy to die until it is granted.

Anooyoo: this is the place where Jimmy moved for a new job. Life at Anooyoo was better than Martha Graham. He had to write ad for the products like cosmetic creams, workout equipment, pills etc. His social life was depressing; he had no friend or girlfriend in the compound. He occasionally got emails of his father and Ramona who kept asking him to visit home but he would refuse giving excuses of overwork. He was informed by Ramona that his brother hadn't arrived and they were still trying here but this information only irritates him more. This is one of the disappointment we observe in the novel. Jimmy's father and Ramona both were helping number

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of people through science but when it came to their own life they couldn't themselves much. It only reminds us of the Sharon comments when she says, " what you're doing_ this pig brain thing. You're interfering with the building blocks of life. It's immoral. It's sacrilegious".⁹ Well here in AnooYoo after a few months Jimmy got promotion and the money brought changes too. He upgraded himself with some advance equipment. His deserted life got filled with women too. He used to call them 'lovers'. These women didn't want to spend the whole life with him. He recalls, "They were all married or the equivalent, looking for a chance to sneak around on their husbands or partners, to prove they were still young or else to get even. Or else they were wounded and wanted consolation. Or they simply felt ignored".¹⁰

Shift from less to more technical life started at AnooYoo compound. He was reusing his childhood tactics at Martha Graham by storytelling sessions. People used to take interest in his narration; girls would fall for him due to the painful mother's departure story. In Martha Graham the condition of the building and the organization was really poor. Transfer to AnooYoo helped him, it prepared him for more perfect life at Paradise. Jimmy decked himself up with the facilities which made him more mechanical then he was at Martha Graham.

Paradise: Paradise contained Crake's dream project, Crakers. It had a dome complex with tight security and "a dense climate-controlling plantation of mixed tropical splices above which it rose like a blind eyeball".¹¹ Paradise was like the compounds Crake and Jimmy had lived in before but a better version! The place where Crakers were kept had an artificial environment. Crake had created the space with earth's idea in his mind. It had rain, moon, blue sky, stars, trees but everything was artificial, they just gave the feel of real things. Crake obviously built this on the concept of real paradise. He wanted a perfect species to live there. He had taken best characteristics from numerous creatures for his perfect generation. These beings were not prepared fully by the time Crake and others expired. Everyone including Crakers' teacher Oryx died hence the education remained incomplete.

Snowman passes through several places and it reminds him of his past. These flashbacks construct the plot of the novel. Two things are going parallel to each-other: Snowman's journey to arrange food and Jimmy's journey to become Snowman. We are made up of the surroundings we live in. it is assumed that a person of countryside must be more attached with natural environment than a person from cities. In the novel we saw that life has extended even far from cities. Cities are no fascination here, they are trash storage. People cover their nose with cone and vaccinates before entering them. Rural background is mentioned only once when Oryx is brought by Uncle En. All the places which are actually compounds have no environment as such. Characters are not feeling the rain or responding to west winds. Life in such places is very mechanical, monotonous and perfect. The perfection swallows naturalness though!



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³ ibid, 63

⁴Atwood Margaret. (2004), *Oryx and crake*. Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group. Pp. 52.

⁵ ibid, 17

⁶ ibid, 42

⁷ ibid, 17

⁸ ibid, 139

⁹ ibid, 42

¹⁰ ibid, 149

¹¹ ibid, 175

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