
**Dimensions of Defamiliarization for the Epidemic in Margaret
Atwood's *Oryx and Crake***

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Abstract:

Since the literary arena is the locus where facts and fiction blend, epidemics are represented in literature to address the reader's intellect. Readers are the recipients of texts, whose reactions and interpretations are the yardstick by which the literary texts are measured. Some authors present themes and literary techniques in a new form, either explicitly or implicitly to defamiliarize what has already been deemed familiar. Authors address epidemics in their novels to highlight the gravity of these incidents in the present and to attract the reader's attention. In Margaret Atwood's novel titled *Oryx and Crake* (2003), the epidemic is the major incident that influences the subsequent events in the text. The current study aims to explore the multiple dimensions of the epidemic in *Oryx and Crake*. It also argues that these dimensions are represented in the text to achieve defamiliarization effect by applying reader response theory.

Key words: Epidemic, defamiliarization, reader response, indeterminacy, Margaret Atwood.

Introduction

Margaret Atwood (1939-), a Canadian poet and novelist, was born in Ontario, Canada. Her father, Carl Atwood specialized in forest entomology and her mother Margaret Killam Atwood specialized in Nutrition. She joined University of Toronto and obtained BA in English in 1961. Later, she obtained an MA when she joined Radcliffe in 1962 (Stade et al., 2010, p.12). Atwood wrote more than forty books; among which are short story collections, essays, and novels. She is known for being affiliated with environmental issues, especially, her ecopoetry and the manner by which she tackles climate issues in her novels (Abolfotoh, 2015, p.165).

Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* is a text in which the plot is nonlinear and two narratives are being alternately narrated. The first one is narrated in the present and the second one is narrated in the past through utilizing flashbacks and memory. The chapters alternate between the past and the present. Further, the novel is narrated through the third person and from the perspective of a protagonist named Snowman/Jimmy. Atwood envisions the future through this character and through a pre-apocalyptic society where social distinction prevails. The society portrayed in the text is divided into two classes; the first is that of the "Compounds" owned by the large corporates and the second is the "Pleeblands," which is derived from the Latin word "Plebs": "common people" and "land". The novel revolves around two friends, namely, Jimmy and Crake, as well as Oryx who enters their lives in a later stage. The novel is deemed to be "Bildungsroman" that traces the progression of Snowman/Jimmy from childhood to middle age (Mitchell, 2022, p.197). The protagonist's two names indicate the present and the past:

The Abominable Snowman—existing and not existing, flickering at the edges of blizzards, apelike man or manlike ape, stealthy, elusive, known only through rumors and through its backward-pointing footprints...For present purposes he's shortened the name. He's only Snowman. He's kept the _abominable- to himself (Atwood, 2003, p.4).

Basically, the protagonist's name was Jimmy, but Snowman is the name that he gives to himself in the present.

In " 'Time to Go': The Post-Apocalyptic and the Post-Traumatic in Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*," Katherine V. Snyder argues that dystopian narratives affect readers, especially when they recognize plausible social facts in the narrative. Hence, those novels that convey warnings from a dystopian future instigate readers through a strange world depicted in the novel. Moreover, what is

already found in real world is taken and molded imaginatively into a near future leading to “Dystopian Speculative Fiction” (2011, p.470).

Additionally, in “Transhumanism in Margaret Atwood’s *Oryx and Crake* Trilogy and the Importance of Speculative Fiction,” T. Verwolf (2018) sets the relation between the genre of the text and the notion of transhumanism. He observes that transhumanism conveys a set of values that are changeable, especially in a place where aggressive attitudes prevail. The salvation can be found in technological and scientific advance. Hence, transhumanism is the reason behind categorizing the text as a “dystopian” or a “Utopian text.” In “Disasters and Epidemic Literature: An Analytical Study of Margaret Atwood’s *Oryx and Crake*,” (Nikam & Chalop, 2022, p. 147), the two scholars note that the disease was intended by Crake to eliminate wars, starvation, and violence. Nevertheless, in *Oryx and Crake* the disease caused by the pills leads to total devastation. Further, in the aforementioned study, the text is analyzed thematically in light of COVID-19 and by referring to “Survival theory” (Nikam & Chalop, 2022, p. 145), with no reference to literary theory or reader response theory. The previous studies tackled epidemics focusing on the scientific aspects, genre, or themes in Atwood’s text by following the analytical approach. The current study will address the dimensions of the epidemic in Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* from the perspective of literary theory, specifically, defamiliarization and reader response.

The Defamiliarized Dimensions of the Epidemic in Margaret Atwood’s *Oryx and Crake*

Defamiliarization or “Ostranenie” is a concept and a term coined by the formalist Victor Shklovsky in his essay titled “Art as Technique.” Shklovsky argues that the value of art relies on its ability to “defamiliarize” or renew things (2000, p.528). Shklovsky (1988, p.22) argues that “habitualization” extremely affects people’s lives, but art is the means by which the vitality of life is regained. Art helps people feel things again. Hence, the purpose of art is to “impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects ‘unfamiliar,’ to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception” (Shklovski, 1988, p.20). Further, defamiliarization is multi-dimensional. First, defamiliarization in terms of language, for instance, when the difficulty of language is intentional to extend the time of perception. Secondly, defamiliarization in terms of content is when the content opposes thoughts and notions that are taken for granted by manifesting these notions from a new perspective. Thirdly, there is defamiliarization in terms of literary forms by overlooking

dominant literary canons and utilizing new literary forms or genres (Makaryk, 2000, p.528). Defamiliarization is associated with reader response theory, and the point of convergence between the two notions is the influence of the literary text on the reader.

One of the notions that are highly relevant to defamiliarization is the indeterminacy and the lacunas found in the text. The notion of indeterminacy is proposed by the reader response theorist Wolfgang Iser (1926-2007). Iser (1997, pp.196-197) argues in “Indeterminacy and the Reader’s Response,” that the indeterminate parts in literary texts should not be considered faults or blemishes; rather, they are essential components to achieve response on the part of the reader. The lacunas found in the text can be filled by reading the text through the lens of factual events in real life so that they might echo these factual events. Further, he also argues that texts with indeterminacy engage the reader to take part in the interpretation of the text. In addition, “texts with such minimal indeterminacy tend to be tedious” (Iser, 1997, p.198). Because texts do not attract the reader’s attention and do not evoke readers to continue reading. Further, as Jawad (2018, pp.122-123) observes the “images and the senses the reader builds in an early stage of reading are reassessed in a later stage.” The text provides reader with clues about Crake’s schemes, which are not explicitly explained, but in the second reading, facts are unfolded.

Defamiliarization is multifaceted. First, it is manifested in terms of language; the cause of the epidemic is the pills called “Blysspluss” which is one of the many words coined by Atwood in the text to evoke defamiliarization on the part of the reader. Secondly, defamiliarization in terms of content; the symptoms of the epidemic in the text resemble the symptoms of Ebola: “The symptoms were high fever, bleeding from the eyes and skin, then breakdown of the inner organs, followed by death,” (Atwood, 2003, 168), but Ebola did not annihilate humanity like “Juve” virus did in the text. Further, defamiliarization is also found in terms of literary form. The epidemic is the climax in the text and it is the motif that leads to the open end.

In *Oryx and Crake*, Atwood establishes a relation between commerce and epidemics. The epidemic is manmade and it is the consequence of corporate projects represented by advances in science. Crake, a scientist, was working on the BlyssPlus pills to be commercially distributed, but his project led to devastating results. His project led to an epidemic that inflicted the upper class represented by the Compounds and the Lower class represented by the Pleeblands (Banerjee, 2014, p.49).

Supposedly, the BlyssPluss Pill “was prophylactic in nature, and the logic behind it was simple: eliminate the external causes of death” (Atwood, 2003, p. 151). The pills were intended by Crake to prolong life and sterilize humanity, but these pills led to an epidemic that transcended the boundaries to be a global pandemic. It spread rapidly in the Northern and the Southern hemisphere:

Taiwan, Bangkok, Saudi Arabia, Bombay, Paris, [and] Berlin. The pleeblands west of Chicago. The maps on the monitor screens lit up, spackled with red as if someone had flicked a loaded paintbrush at them. This was more than a few isolated plague spots, this was major (Atwood, 2003, p.168)

The virus was given a name “Juve;” an acronym that stands for “Jetspeed Ultra Virus Extraordinary” (Atwood, 2003, p.175). As for the vaccine, “Crake himself had developed a vaccine concurrently with the virus, but he had destroyed it” (Atwood, 2003, p.179). Crake wanted to annihilate humanity and replace it with the crakers. Snowman is the only survivor, because earlier he was unknowingly given the vaccine; Crake reminds Jimmy of an incident that will explain Jimmy’s immunity: “The antibody serum was in the pleeb vaccine.” (Atwood, 2003, p.170). Unaware of what has happened, Snowman was given a vaccine in the form of another vaccine, which explains his immunity to the virus.

There are several dimensions regarding the epidemic: the first is contextual. The novel was published in 2003, at the same time when SARS (severe acute respiratory syndrome) spread (Ingersoll, 2014, pp.118-119). Hence, it has real life relevance when the world was going through an ordeal of which the results were unknown. The second dimension is factual. The motif of epidemics has been used by the author to coincide with issues on the ground, for instance, the Ebola virus, which is a morbid disease that inflicts humans. It is characterized by the following symptoms: fever, pain, exhaustion, and headache as well as bleeding from nose or gums, which occurs in an advanced state of the disease. Only strict measures of intervention can stop the outbreak owing to the contagious nature of the disease and its unforeseen occurrence. (“Ebola Disease, 2025”)

The third dimension of the epidemic is scientific. The epidemic is the outcome of Crake’s scientific research. The pills of Blysspluss are not only contraceptive. They caused a virus to spread and annihilate several countries in no time. The epidemic was Crake’s scheme to replace humanity with a new species called “the Crakers” (Sherkow, 2015).

Crake summarized the purpose earlier in the novel: “‘All it takes,’ said Crake, ‘is the elimination of one generation of anything. Beetles, trees, microbes, scientists, speakers of French, whatever. Break the link between one generation and the next’” (Atwood, 2003, p. 115). Humanity will be replaced by a new species called the “Crakers,” who are “programmed to drop dead at age thirty-suddenly, without getting sick. No old age, none of those anxieties. They’ll just keel over. Not that they know it; none of them has died yet.”(Atwood, 2003, p.156) The Crakers exemplify the assumptions of Posthumanism, which is a movement that adopts enhancing the capacities of humans, such as the human’s intellect and emotions as well as the eradication of illness. It aims to transcend the capabilities of humans. In addition, it is the ultimate phase after the process of transhumanism (Wolfe, 2010, pp.xiii). The Crakers are the new species bioengineered by Crake. They materialize the posthuman notions of ideal creatures, who are immune to human defects, such as diseases and negative feelings. In this sense, the conventional idea of being human is defied, thereby, posing questions regarding identity and age (Mir, 2024, p.233).

Moreover, the epidemic is used here as a motif to accelerate the pace of the plot. It is the instigator to more events and it is the reason why Snowman is alone. Further, it is the cause of devastation and annihilation that inflicted on humanity. It is the climax that catches the reader’s breath and it is also the reason for the stagnant situation at the very beginning of the text. The epidemic causes indeterminacy and inquiries on the part of the reader, because it leads to an open end and a plot twist. Snowman discovers that he is not alone and that there are other survivors, which is an unexpected twist. Such an incident astonishes Snowman and takes readers by surprise given the multiple thoughts and plans that occur to Snowman’s mind:

There are three of them and only one of him. They’d do what he’d do in their place: they’d go away, but they’d lurk, they’d spy. They’d sneak up on him in the dark, conk him on the head with a rock... he could finish it now, before they see him, while he still has the strength. While he can still stand up. His foot’s like a shoeful of liquid fire. But they haven’t done anything bad, not to him. Should he kill them in cold blood? Is he able to? And if he starts killing them and then stops, one of them will kill him first. Naturally (Atwood, 2003, p.191).

The open end in the text resembles the image of the iceberg, because as Taher (2020, p. 129) observes “only part of the whole is being given and that part is taken to represent the whole just like an iceberg that hides other pieces but that piece seems self-sufficient and it represents the whole.” Moreover, the open end offers potentiality for another sequel, or it preoccupies the reader’s mind with questions and expectations. Subsequently, all the aforementioned dimensions are defamiliarized and presented to the reader in a new form to attract readers’ attention, and to extend the time of perception; thereby, defamiliarization will be achieved.

The text contains many gaps that could extend the time of perception. These gaps are questions that might be variously answered by readers, for instance, why did not the proactive measures contain the epidemic? Though the text manifests that there were measures to contain the epidemic, the attempts were fruitless:

In the second week, there was full mobilization. They hastily assembled epidemic managers called the shots—field clinics, isolation tents; whole towns, then whole cities quarantined. But these efforts soon broke down as the doctors and nurses caught the thing themselves, or panicked and fled (Atwood, 2003, 172).

If so as the text manifests, how come that the other survivors who appear at the end did not catch the disease? Further, why did not science provide any solution, any antibiotic, treatment, or vaccine? Such treatments and medications might have saved humanity. Was there enough time to have a vaccine or a medicine? Can the open end be considered the beginning for a new episode that commences a new narrative? Or is it a technique to preoccupy the reader’s mind with questions and inquiries? These questions are left to readers to think, consider, and judge, thereby, an interaction between the reader and the text will occur, which is the aim of having such gaps and indeterminacy in the text.

Conclusion

The epidemic is the motif used in *Oryx and Crake*, which is represented in a new form to affect the reader's reception. This is achieved by defamiliarizing the familiar and renewing the dimensions of the epidemic, namely, the scientific, the contextual, and the literary, thereby, presenting a text that urges readers to stop in order to fill in the gaps and understand the text in terms of language, context, and science. The text also encompasses indeterminacy that capture the reader's attention. Such indeterminate elements urge readers to delve into the text to satisfy their inquiries.

Moreover, the indeterminacy found in the text are motivation for comparisons between the epidemic in the novel and diseases on the ground. The outcome would be prolonging the reader's sense of perception. Ultimately, readers are confronted by the open end that urges them to recall what they read earlier. Concurrently, they are instigated to anticipate what is not written in the text to find answers to their inquiries and questions; thereby, actualizing the whole aim of defamiliarization and indeterminacy in the text.

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ابعاد الإغراب للوباء في رواية "أوريكس وكريك" لمارجريت آتوود

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المستخلص

بما أنّ المجال الأدبي هو الموضوع الذي تندمج فيه الحقائق والخيال، لذا يجري تمثيل الأوبئة كي تخاطب فكر القارئ. إنّ القراء هم المستلمون للنصوص وإنّ ردود أفعالهم وتأويلهم هو المحك الذي بواسطته يجري قياس النصوص الأدبية، لذا يقدم المؤلفون الموضوعات والأساليب الأدبية في شكل جديد، إما بشكلٍ جلي أو ضمناً لغرض إغراب ما كان يُعتبر مألوفاً. وفقاً لذلك، يتناول المؤلفون في رواياتهم الأوبئة لتسليط الضوء على خطورة هذه الأحداث في الحاضر واستقطاب اهتمام القراء. إنّ رواية "أوريكس وكريك" (2003) لمارجريت آتوود هي مثال حين يكون الوباء هو الحدث الرئيسي الذي يؤثر على الأحداث التالية في النص. تهدف الدراسة الحالية الى استكشاف الأبعاد المتعددة للوباء في "أوريكس وكريك". كما يذهب البحث الى أنّ هذه الأبعاد يجري تقديمها في النص لتحقيق أثر الإغراب من خلال تطبيق نظرية استقبال القارئ.

الكلمات المفتاحية: وباء، إغراب، استجابة القارئ، اللا تحديد، مارجريت آتوود.