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Climate Fiction and Environmental Collapse in Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*

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Abstract:

This paper examines climate fiction in Margaret Atwood's novel *Oryx and Crake*. Climate fiction, commonly known as cli-fi, explores human anxieties surrounding environmental collapse. The novel portrays a world transformed by rising sea levels, extreme weather events, and species extinction. This study analyzes two incidents from the text through the framework of climate fiction theory. First, it considers memories of rapid coastal erosion and severe drought. Second, it examines the digital game *Extinctathon* as a representation of biodiversity loss. The analysis demonstrates how Atwood employs speculative fiction to critique ecological destruction and corporate hubris.

Keywords :Climate Fiction, Cli-Fi, Oryx and Crake, Margaret Atwood, Ecocriticism, Environmental Collapse

Introduction

Climate fiction is a literary genre concerned with the consequences of climate change. The term is often abbreviated as "cli-fi." Drawing extensively on science-fictional and dystopian conventions, the genre uses speculative scenarios to envision possible environmental futures. By integrating these speculative elements, authors frequently navigate the intersections of ecological uncertainty and the ethical ramifications of unregulated scientific advancement (Badoni).

Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* is a significant example of contemporary climate fiction. The novel depicts a dystopian future in which anthropogenic global warming and corporate power contribute to the collapse of human civilization. Cli-fi narratives commonly portray settings undergoing profound environmental transformation and focus on characters confronting ecological deterioration. Through the lens of Snowman, the novel juxtaposes a pre-apocalyptic reality characterized by hyper-capitalism and rampant genetic engineering with a desolate post-apocalyptic aftermath (Lekshmi; Trexler and Johns-Putra

197). This paper examines how Atwood represents climate collapse through selected incidents in the novel and applies climate fiction theory to analyze their narrative significance.

Coastal Erosion and Climate Displacement

In the novel, the protagonist Jimmy reflects on his childhood and family history, particularly through memories of his mother's grief over the disappearance of the world she once knew. During her youth, global warming had already begun to transform the planet's geography and disrupt familiar ways of life. Coastal aquifers became contaminated with saltwater, permafrost melted, and extensive plains suffered from increasingly severe droughts. These changes were not presented as distant scientific possibilities; they directly affected families, homes, and local economies.

Jimmy's mother remembered the beach house that her family had owned when she was a child. The house was eventually destroyed when rising sea levels washed away the surrounding beaches and contributed to the disappearance of several eastern coastal cities. This loss represents more than the destruction of a building. The beach house had been connected to her childhood memories, family history, and sense of belonging. Its disappearance therefore demonstrates how environmental collapse can erase both physical spaces and the personal identities associated with them.

Her family also experienced the effects of changing weather patterns through the decline of her grandfather's fruit orchard. Once productive, the Florida grapefruit orchard withered when the rains stopped arriving regularly. The image of the dried orchard suggests the vulnerability of agriculture to prolonged drought and climate instability. It also reveals how environmental damage extends beyond urban infrastructure to rural livelihoods and food production. The orchard's destruction reflects the breakdown of the ecological conditions that sustain human communities.

Through Jimmy's recollections, Atwood presents climate change as a gradual but devastating force. The changes occur across different landscapes, including coastlines, frozen regions, plains, and agricultural areas. This geographical range emphasizes that environmental collapse is not limited to one location or population. At the same time, the personal nature of these memories prevents the catastrophe from becoming an abstract discussion of temperature or sea-level statistics. Jimmy's mother experiences ecological destruction as grief, displacement, and the loss of a world that once appeared stable. Her memories demonstrate how climate fiction transforms large-scale environmental processes into intimate human experiences. The passage consequently establishes a connection between global warming, social disruption, and the emotional consequences of losing familiar landscapes. Atwood describes these coastal and environmental losses through Jimmy's memories of his mother· the beach house her family had owned when she was little, the one that got washed away with the rest of the beaches and quite a few of the eastern coastal cities when the sea-level rose so quickly, and then there was that huge tidal wave,

from the Canary Islands volcano. (They'd taken it in school, in the Geolonomics unit. Jimmy had found the video simulation pretty exciting.) And she used to snivel about her grandfather's Florida grapefruit orchard that had dried up like a giant raisin when the rains had stopped coming, the same year Lake Okeechobee had shrunk to a reeking mud puddle and the Everglades had burned for three weeks straight. (Atwood 36)

Climate fiction theory foregrounds settings characterized by rapid and extensive environmental transformation. According to cli-fi scholarship, narratives within the genre frequently depict rising sea levels, coastal flooding, and severe drought. Atwood's portrayal of devastated coastlines reflects these defining features of climate fiction. Through speculative storytelling, the novel translates abstract scientific projections into tangible human experiences. Furthermore, these narrative strategies serve to challenge the normalization of ecological loss, compelling the reader to confront the ethical urgency inherent in our current warming epoch (Raju and Namratha). The destruction of the beach house illustrates how climate change can erase not only physical infrastructure but also the communities and memories associated with particular places.

Furthermore, cli-fi often emphasizes the emotional consequences of environmental loss. Jimmy's mother experiences profound grief in response to the destruction of a once-familiar landscape, reflecting the genre's concern with psychological distress and ecological transformation. The novel also links corporate industrial practices to far-reaching climatic consequences, thereby presenting environmental collapse as a product of human activity and institutional irresponsibility.

Biodiversity Loss and Extinctathon

During their adolescence in corporate compounds, Jimmy and his friend Crake encounter an online game called *Extinctathon*. Crake discovers that the game is monitored by a secret organization known as MaddAddam. Players compete by identifying animal and plant species that have recently become extinct. The game records extinctions resulting from human activities, including pollution and habitat destruction.The novel introduces the online game with a specific rule and prompt·

EXTINCTATHON, Monitored by MaddAddam. Adam named the living animals, MaddAddam names the dead ones. Do you want to play?... The it would be some bioform that had kakked out within the past fifty years... What had snuffed it. (Pollution, habitat destruction, credulous morons...)(Atwood 47)

The quotation shows that Extinctathon transforms the knowledge of recently extinct species, their habitats, and the human causes of their disappearance into a competitive game, thereby revealing how technological entertainment trivializes anthropogenic biodiversity loss.

Cli-fi theory focuses on how literature represents human impacts on nonhuman life. Empirical ecocriticism emphasizes that climate fiction can make ecological severity, biodiversity loss, and the consequences of human activity more visible to readers. In *Oryx and Crake*, Extinctathon functions as a theoretical metaphor for anthropogenic mass extinction. Although the game appears to be an entertaining activity for adolescents, its subject matter is deeply disturbing: players compete by identifying species that have disappeared because of pollution, habitat destruction, and other forms of human interference. The game therefore transforms an environmental catastrophe into a system of rules, scores, and competition.

This transformation reveals the influence of technological culture on the perception of ecological crisis. The corporate compounds provide young people with constant access to sophisticated forms of entertainment, yet the same technological environment has contributed to the destruction of the natural world. Extinctathon reflects this contradiction by presenting extinction as both a serious scientific fact and a recreational pastime. The players possess knowledge about ecological devastation, but their participation does not necessarily produce empathy or action. Instead, the game risks making extinction appear familiar, manageable, and even entertaining. Atwood thus suggests that information alone cannot guarantee ethical responsibility.

Cli-fi works often critique human hubris and technological arrogance. Extinctathon embodies this criticism because it places the disappearance of entire species within a human-designed game. The rules imply that extinction can be classified, memorized, and controlled through language and technology. However, the game's structure cannot restore the species that have vanished or repair the habitats that have been destroyed. Its competitive format consequently exposes the limitations of human attempts to convert ecological crisis into knowledge and entertainment. The game converts real-world disaster into trivial entertainment for corporate youth, while also revealing their distance from the living systems affected by extinction.

The game tracks extinctions caused by habitat ruin, environmental pollution, and other forms of anthropogenic damage. In this virtual landscape, the characters engage in the systematic cataloging of vanished biodiversity without acknowledging the moral implications of their actions, effectively desensitizing them to the severity of the ongoing ecological collapse (Wisker 424). This emphasis connects biodiversity loss to industrial development rather than presenting extinction as a purely natural process. Atwood highlights how corporate power, scientific experimentation, and consumer culture contribute to the destabilization of ecosystems. Extinctathon therefore operates as more than a background detail: it condenses the novel's wider critique of institutions that treat nonhuman life as disposable. The game's catalogue of lost species becomes an implicit record of human irresponsibility.

At the same time, Extinctathon preserves the memory of species that no longer exist. By naming and classifying extinct organisms, the game prevents their complete disappearance from human consciousness, even though it cannot reverse their physical loss. This tension between remembrance and powerlessness is central to the novel's environmental vision. Knowledge can document ecological destruction, but it cannot substitute for conservation or ethical change. Thus, Atwood uses the game to highlight the rapid decline of global biodiversity and to show how technological society can both record and normalize that decline. Extinctathon ultimately challenges readers to recognize extinction not as an abstract statistic or a form of entertainment, but as evidence of the profound consequences of human choices.

Conclusion

Oryx and Crake serves as a significant work of climate fiction. Atwood portrays the devastating effects of global warming and human greed. The analysis of coastal destruction demonstrates how cli-fi depicts environmental transformation and displacement. Similarly, the discussion of Extinctathon illustrates how the genre confronts readers with the consequences of biodiversity loss. Together, these examples reflect central principles of cli-fi. The novel warns of the natural world's fragility and ultimately uses environmental catastrophe to encourage ethical reflection on humanity's relationship with the Earth.

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