Technoculture And the Propaganda: A Postmodern Reading of Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*

Narinder Kumar

Research Scholar, University of Jammu, Jammu

ABSTRACT

Propaganda has been used for centuries to manipulate public opinion, but with the rise of technology, it has become easier and more widespread. Technology has made propaganda more accessible, pervasive, and impactful and is used for its dissemination, through social media, bots, deepfakes, and other advanced media. Ethical implications of technology's role in propaganda and the need for technological solutions to address the issue are very prominent in this age of technology. This paper examines the role of technology in spreading propaganda through a postmodern lens, by studying Margaret Atwood's dystopian novel *Oryx and Crake*. Drawing from postmodern theory the paper argues that technology has become a powerful tool for propaganda dissemination and manipulation, and that it is increasingly difficult to distinguish between reality and fiction in the media-saturated environment. Through an analysis of the novel's depiction of a dystopian future society where technology is used to control and manipulate the masses, the paper explores how propaganda works to create and maintain power structures, and how technology can be used to subvert these structures. Ultimately, the paper argues that in the age of social media and the internet, it is more important than ever to critically evaluate the information we consume, and to remain vigilant against the ways in which technology can be used to distort reality and shape public opinion.

Keywords: Technoculture, technocracy, technology, postmodernism, propaganda, hyperreality, simulation.

INTRODUCTION

It is often believed that the well intended use of the technological advancements can lead to the betterment of society, yet throughout the history, it can be seen that the new tools and inventions have always been put to multiple other uses along with their intentional uses. As Neil Postman in *Technopoly* gives an example of the mechanical clock and explains how a simple tool that was invented in the "Benedictine monasteries of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries"(14) with one particular intention, finally ended up as a tool in the hands of people with completely opposite intentions, Postman writes, "The paradox, the surprise, and the wonder are that the clock was invented by men who wanted to devote themselves more rigorously to God; it ended as the technology of greatest use to men who wished to devote themselves to the accumulation of money" (*Technopoly*, 15). He argue that there always are unforeseen consequences that "stand in the way of all those who think they see clearly the direction in which a new technology will take us"(*Technopoly*, 15). It seems only logical to presume that

any future from today will have more developed technologies with a much bigger influence on society. Therefore, technology could exercise a stronger manipulative control over the minds of the masses. The inference that every society has some kin d of technology that impacts the culture of that society, provides a logical ground for an arguable premise that every culture can be referred to as a technoculture. This has also been elaborated by Debrah Banita Shaw, when she writes, "… an essential 'truth' … is that the 'essence' of human being is in subsistence… the use of tools in the pursuit of subsistence has always been part of the definition of human being and … a more accurate understanding of human ontology may arise from … a theory of technical evolution" (*Technoculture: The Key Concepts,* 14).Thus defining it in the simplest terms, technoculture is the impact of technology on the culture of a society in different forms. So to understand the culture of a society at any given point of time, it becomes important to analyse the technologies that the said society possess during those times.

The present paper focuses on the dystopian novel titled *Oryx and Crake*, written by Margaret Atwood andpublished in 2003. The novel begins with the description of a world that is falling apart after a catastrophe. Human race has been exterminated, and the only survivor is a man who calls himself Snowman, along with some genetically engineered and modified humanoids who have been created with an aim of perfecting the human species. These new creatures have been collectively named as Crakers or the Children of Crake. They have been named after their creator, a mad scientist, Crake, who is responsible for the catastrophe that wipes out the humans from the earth. The narration keeps on oscillating between the past and the present, and by doing so provides the context to understand the prevailing situation of the survivors by joining the missing dots. Thus, one organic story is formulated which seems to be narrated from Snowman's perspective. Although at times to tell precisely who is narrating is too confusing, therefore, throughout the novel the reader finds is difficult to assign the narration to the apparent narrator because of many irregularities and the revisions throughout the narration.

In *Oryx and Crake,* Atwood represent a future that being rich in technologies is a much-advanced era in every field. There are interspecies splices, genetically engineered animals forgrowing human organs, an alternative for chicken that is developed in labs, the Internet's unlimited and dark domains, medicines and surgeries for a youthful look, all the information of every individual ranging from their names to their biological imprints is available with the authorities. All this provides a glimpse of the advance technology which is a common thing in the futuristic society of the novel. However, the access to technology is not limited to certain elite people, but is available to even the humblest of the people and even to the children, but is under the surveillance of the big private corporations. The present paper will try to analyse the use of technology as a means of spreading propaganda through various media, particularly through the analysis of the hyperreal environment of the novel's society and the various online games. The paper will try to pin point the various manipulations exercised by the people in control by the use of technology, and how such manipulations subtly impact the perception of the people in such a society by the creations of new social realities. The paper will use the various postmodern concepts including technoculture, simulations, hyperreality to analyse the highly simulated world presented in the novels's society in order to understand the use of technology as a means of spreading and solidifying propaganda.

Atwood segregates the society of the futuristic world into the Compounds and the Pleeblands. The Compounds are the abode of the people in power who control, develop and then distribute the new and latest scientific developments and The Pleeblands are inhabited by the common population and here

this distribution mainly occurs. Such a divide can be referred to as a technical divide that is a consequence of the misinformation, disinformation, and the manipulations propagated by the use of communication and entertainment media. This is evident when Jimmy and Crake visit the Pleeblands for the first time and Jimmy is surprised to find the description in the TV quite misleading, and finds that the pleeblanders didn't look like the descriptions that were prevalent thorough out the Compounds. The society in the novel unknowingly has fallen a prey to what the French sociologist Jacques Ellul calls 'technical power of propaganda.' The division of the society into two sects, brainiacs and non-branisiacs, is a result of the propaganda that the people in control of the technology have spread in order to keep the machine of capitalism running. Konrad Kellen, in his "Introduction" to Jacques Ellul's book, *Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes,* states, "Propaganda … is the Siamese twin of our technological society. Only in the technological society can there be anything of the type and order of magnitude of modern propaganda." He furthers adds, "only with the all-pervading facts that flow from propaganda can the technological society hold itself together and further expand." ("Introduction" p. v)

Jimmy's father and others like him do not recognise that this safety of theirs comes at a cost. An interesting fact to note in the novel is that everyone of the main characters except Jimmy's father has been given a name, and some of them even have two names. This unnamed character has been used by Atwood to represent everyone who is under the hegemony of the Compounds. People like Jimmy's father, who work in the Compounds, consider themselves to be privileged, as they are away from the poverty ridden and diseases stricken wicked world of the Pleeblands. The products they create are mostly remedies or medicines for something that itself has been created by the Compounds. Atwood here tries to explain how the manipulative powers of technology help in the process of construction of new social realities. And the working of this process has been explained by Debra Banita Shaw when she writes, "technique of constructing 'situations' is designed to estrange us from the spectacle; to use the techniques of the spectacle against itself and promote consciousness of our own acquiescence to, and participation in, the construction of an illusive reality" (*Technoculture: The Key Concepts*, 22). The intentions of the Compounds can be seen clearly in the chapter titled "Hypothetical,"where Crake tries to explain to Jimmy that all the newly identified diseases are the creations of the Compounds. In a dark tone, Crake explains, "The best diseases, from a business point of view," said Crake, "would be those that cause lingering illnesses. Ideally - that is, for maximum profit - the patient should either get well or die just before all of his or her money runs out. It's a fine calculation." (*Oryx and Crake*, 211)

According to Marx, the labourer whoby his hard work and craftsmanship produces a good, but is unable to associate himself with the product feels an estrangement from the self. The labourer losses cognitive abilities to establish his relationship not only with the product but also with other humans and remains burdened by the role he plays in the big scheme to such an extent that it becomes difficult for him even to realise the situation he faces. As Debra Benita Shaw in her book *Technoculture: The Key Concepts*, while discussing Marxism realises, "the worker herself becomes a commodity whose value is determined by the fluctuations of the market. Thus, the worker is further alienated by being in a relationship of competition, rather than cooperation, with other members of her community" (13). Atwood has presented Jimmy's father and most of the Compound people as mental labourers who work in the scientific mines of the Compounds, digging so deep with their brains into the structures of Nature that the hollows created by them into the structures would remain there for eternity.

The securities in the Compounds are never compromised and there are regular night petrols, night curfews, Compounds are surrounded by high walls or as the narrator calls them "firewalls". It

gives a false idea to the Compound people that all this is for their protection. Combined with the power of propaganda, powerful technologies give the one in power an authoritative control over the masses, which mostly leads to the hegemony of the masses. Consequently, it changes the world they live into a hyperreal one. This is evident as Jimmy's father calls CorpSeCorp men as "*our people*" and also thinks of the Compounds as the modern idea for a Castle, he says, "Long ago, in the days of knights and dragons, the kings and dukes had lived in castles … and the Compounds were the same idea. Castles were for keeping you and your buddies nice and safe inside, and for keeping everybody else outside. (*Oryx and Crake,* 28). This is what Ellulin *Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes*, refers to as the hegemonic power of the modern propaganda, he says, "Most people are easy prey for propaganda … because of their firm but entirely erroneous conviction that it is composed only of lies and "tall stories" and that, conversely, what is true cannot be propaganda (Kellen, Konrad. "Introduction" p. v). Here it can be seen how the scientists who are the brains behind all the inventions are themselves the commodities for the Compounds. And that is why, they are protected inside the "modern castles".

In the novel's society to tell what is real, becomes almost impossible. This matrix seems so real that humans do not even realise that they are in one because it gets imbibed into the system so well that it gets normalized. The novel points at this when the narrator says, "They spent the first three years of school getting you to pretend stuff and then the rest of it marking you down if you did the same thing" (*Oryx and Crake,* 40). The society in the novel is clearly a hyperreal one, and the descriptions of the Compounds clearly back this as the Compounds have copies of similar-looking houses, which themselves are the architectural copies of the houses from the bygone eras. The houses in a particular Compound are so similar that it is difficult to tell them apart. Snowman, after the catastrophe, breaks into a house on one of his regular hunting and gathering trips to the crumbling buildings of the Compounds, and he finds the decaying corpses of a man and a woman and has an eerie feeling that it's the same house in which he grew up: "The back of his neck prickles again. Why does he have the feeling that it's his own house he's broken into? His own house from twenty-five years ago, himself the missing child" (*Oryx and Crake*, 234). The hyperreal is something which has no original, or whose original cannot be traced and this has been defined by Baudrillard as, "It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality…and it can be reproduced an indefinite number of times from these. It no longer needs to be rational, because it no longer measures itself against either an ideal or negative instance. (*Simulacra and Simulation*, 1)

The houses are the copies of the copies, which in turn have been the copies and this ends on the real, whose existence is doubtful. Not only the houses but the furniture in them is also an endless reproduction of something that has been lost ages ago. Atwood's clever use of the word "*reproduction*" for the furniture present in the Compounds hints at the loss of the reality in the society, as the narrator, while describing one of the houses says, "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" (*Oryx and Crake,* 26). The blurring of the line between the copy and the original is the main function that a hyperreal serves and it does this by the process of "simulation". Even with a knowledge of the real, it becomes difficult to point out the irregularities or the defects of the copy because, the copy in itself is real but what it tries to represent is not real. Umberto Eco in, *Travels In Hyperreality*, says, "This occurs partly because, making a pedagogical decision we can hardly criticize, the designers want the visitor to feel an atmosphere and to plunge into the past without becoming a philologist or archeologist(9).Once while watching "dirtysockpuppets.com, a

current-affairs show about world political leaders," Crake says, "with digital genalteration [a play on the words gene and alteration] you couldn't tell whether any of these generals and whatnot existed any more, and if they did, whether they'd actually said what you've heard" (*Oryx and Crake*, 82). In another incident, while watching the online live executions, Jimmy asks Crake, "Do you think they are really being executed? . . . [a] lot of them look like simulations." To which Crake replies, "You never know . . . What is *reality*?" (*OryxandCrake*, 83)

DebrahBanita Shaw, focusing on the teachings of Marx, tries to state that the social realities of any society are the creations of the social conditions prevalent in that particular society. Technology, therefore, also helps in the creation of new social realities in a society, which further results in the social conditioning of the people of that society. It can further have an authoritative control over the minds of the masses and can exercise this control without even being suspected because of the new social conditionings. Such is the power of technology that it slowly incorporates its control in the form of new realities as Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno conclude that in the process of fulfilling the insatiable demands of the consumes, "technology is gaining power over society [and it] is the power of those whose economic position in society is the strongest. Technical rationality today is the rationality of domination. It is the compulsive character of a society alienated from itself." (*Dialectic of Enlightenment,* 95)

This blending of the virtual reality with the world's physical reality is an important aspect of the novel's society. Such a conflation further smudges the line of distinction between the real and the virtual. Furthermore, the new and improved technologies mentioned in the novel help the dominant power to transform such representations into simulations. Finally, the representations, gradually slipping away from the original, reach to the point where locating the original becomes impossible. Jimmy's ability to recognise the real reaches to its lowest in the chapter titled "Gripless", which is totally justifiable as Jimmy has almost lost his grip on the reality. The Corpsmen show Jimmy the video of his mother being publicly executed and Jimmy's thoughts at that particular moment have been narrated as, "It didn't occur to Jimmy to ask when the execution had taken place. Afterwards, he realized it might have been years ago. What if the whole thing was a fake? It could even have been digital, at least the shots, the spurts of blood, the falling down(*Oryx and Crake,* 259). Jimmy's emotional response at that particular moment is surprisingly almost nothing. Although his next few days will be totally 'gripless' after this incident, but at that particular moment what Jimmy thinks is absurd and is a consequence of the live executions that Jimmy and Crake have been so fond of. Atwood prominently uses the illusion of what is real and what is simulated throughout the novel.

The impact of technology on society is so subtle that it gradually blends itself into the people's consciousness, and in turn, helps in forming new realities. This has been explored by Postman when he refers to the process of evaluation in schools and explains how such a simple and harmless process can create new realities. He writes, "The idea that a quantitative value should be assigned to human thoughts was a major step toward constructing a mathematical concept of reality" (*Technopoly,* 13). The social realities of a society of a specific time do not necessarily make sense for the society of the earlier times because of the respective conditioning of the minds. And in a society with advanced technologies, the social realities for sure will be affected by those technologies in one or the other way. Social conditioning is inescapable and has a definite impact on the consciousness of the masses. Debrah Banita Shaw in the book, *Technoculture: The Key Concepts,* writes, "we cannot know who we are apart from the social conditions in which we find ourselves; that the idea of the competitive individual emerges

from an economic and social structure that demands that we understand ourselves in this way" (14). She also is of the view that any change in social and economic relations would lead to a change in our understanding of the human beings. Finally she concludes by saying that to understand the society today, it becomes necessary to focus on the "changes in the technologies which are an inseparable part of our social worlds" as technology produces a change "in how we conceive of *ourselves.*" (14)

The availability of a number of virtually simulated games in the present day is a well-known fact, and is becoming one of the major commercial scopes. Atwood has loaded the novel with the examples of such artificially simulated games, which the children could play online. By doing so, Atwood tries to show how such simulated games can be used as a tool for manipulation. Jimmy and Crake are also fond of such games and play a lot of such games. Barbarian Stomp (See if You Can Change History), Blood Nad Roses, Extinctathon are some of the gamesplayed by Jimmy and Crake during their childhood. The manipulative impact of this can be seen on Snowman through the following words of the narrator, "That was the trouble with Blood and Roses: it was easier to remember the Blood stuff … He didn't want to tell Crake that he was having some severe nightmares: the one where the Parthenon was decorated with cut-off heads was, for some reason, the worst" (*Oryx and Crake,* 80). Neil Postman's concept of conditioning of a particular society by the aid of some tool can help in further understanding the manipulative powers of the technologies. As Postman writes, "embedded in every tool is an ideological bias, a predisposition to construct the world as one thing rather than another, to value one thing over another, to amplify one sense or skill or attitude more loudly than another" (*Technopoly*, 13). And such conditioning achieved by the use of selective tools helps the dominant power to psychologically control the masses. And these manipulations usually come in the forms of some new social realities, which then become the new normal.

This is how the process of simulation helps in blending the images of the real with what actually is or was the real. The psychological impact this incidence has on Jimmy's mind shows how such apparently trivial technological manipulations help the dominant power to create a false impression in the minds of young children, which without any doubt works in the favour of the dominant power. This has been explored by the social psychologists, Zeynep Cerpmalcilar and Zeynep Tanes in their study titled, "Learning from SimCity: An empirical study of Turkish adolescents", in which they studied the impact of a simulated game, SimCity 2000 on the minds of young children and found that the adolescents who played the game had much greater appreciation for the government officials after playing (Zeynep, Tanes; Zeynep Cemalcilar).

To address the issue of late capitalism, Atwood uses the medium of the websites that Jimmy and Crake surf through whenever they are both together. They surf through all the dark areas of the web, including live executions, assisted suicides with live coverage, all sorts of pornographic content, and even the child pornography is easily available to them. Though the novels futuristic world is all under the authorities' surveillance, still one wonders why such content is available on the Internet, and why in first place nothing is done to stop any of these illegal and immoral practices? The answer is very simple, Atwood here is trying to present the impact of the late capitalism. All this in one or the other way is of material benefit to the authorities. Anyone who controls technology, controls everything. That is why, Atwood does not represent any political governance and the power is in the hands of the corporations that too, mostly private corporations. They control the new and the latest technological developments which they use to manipulate the masses through the use of the mass media.

CONCLUSION

Atwood, in the novel, presents a world where all forms of media are exploiting these loopholes to achieve their objective of manipulating the viewers. The mass media is a tool in the hands of the powerful to control and even colonize the minds of the viewers. This impact of technology on the consumers can be seen throughout the novel. The advanced technology impacts the consumers, and the social status of a person is automatically associated with the commodities that the person owns. The Compounds, the dominant power, use the available technologies to target the masses to gain more and more monetary profits. Technology and its products, that is, the new and latest inventions are being used by such corporations to target the insecurities of the gullible masses for profits. And these insecurities and the gullibilities of the masses are the main factors that would help Crake to achieve his goal of eradicating humans from the earth. Atwood's move of physically destroying the human life in the novel is a representation of the psychological destruction that the rampant use of technology could cause if controlled by greedy corporations.

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