

**‘Organic Farms’ as a ‘Compound of Control’: Decoding “Panoptic Gaze”
in Margaret Atwood’s *Oryx and Crake***

Anil Kumar

PhD Scholar

Department of English

Central University of Jammu

District Samba

Jammu and Kashmir 181143

Abstract: The Twenty first century is an age which begins with digitalization of human beings. Technology, as a pursuit of power, ‘immediate hold on body’, seems to have redefined the physiological nature of ‘body’. Through modern technology each action of body is captured, evaluated and then ‘censored’ to perform its social functioning. The body is set under what Michel Foucault says the “mechanism” of power “through which the basic biological feature of human species became the object of a political strategy” (*Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the College de France 1977-1978* 1). The paper, in this context, explores the dimensions of ‘power’ system that operate to control, navigate and “objectify” body as a system of performance. In order to bring close attention to human actions, this paper seeks to highlight how the power agency controls and regulates the masses through digital eye. The Booker Prize Winner (Twice), Margaret Atwood’s in *Oryx and Crake* is a dystopian text which gives a reflection of a state where ‘body’ as a site of ‘performance’ can be analysed through Michel Foucault’s “Biopolitical” theory.

Margaret Atwood’s dystopian work *Oryx and Crake*, having touched upon series of contemporary issues, shows how OrganInc Farms’ is depicted as power system which controls the movement of the people living inside and outside the compound. The paper studies the demonic face of CorpSecorp’s, which keeps unending check on human life as a quantified index. Having demeaned the physiological operation and appearance of ‘body’, CorpSeCorp acts as an independent agency to control the movement of people. The progress of technological advancement, in contemporary age, tends to situate human life on the nexus of ‘performance’ where inevitable bent towards the technology appears to be taking direct “hold on the body”.

Keywords: Posthumanism, Bio-power, Culture, Dystopia, Cyberspace and

Introduction

The interview, “Edward Snowden: If I Came Back to the U.S., I Would Likely Die in Prison for Telling the Truth”, reported by Amy Goodman on December 6, 2019 for *Democracy Now*, in Moscow, gives an account of the horrors and consequences of technology in contemporary age. The 29-year-old, Information Technology expert (IT) at National Security Agency (NSA) America, Edward Snowden, is accused with the allegations of leaking the secrets of NSA, says, “If I Came Back to the U.S., I Would Likely Die in Prison for Telling the Truth” (“Edward Snowden: If I Came Back to the U.S., I Would Likely Die in Prison for Telling the Truth”). In his another interview to *The Guardian*, on a ethical surveillance and on the ground ‘democratic principles’, he reveals how surveillance state has been keeping constant eye on the privacy on the individuals around the world. On ethical grounds, he challenges the undemocratic means and practices of National Security Agency. The idea, here, is to explore and highlight how human beings, in contemporary age, seem to have been encountering to what Agamben calls the ‘state of exception’. The state, according to Agamben, in case of “emergency” can witness the suspension of constitutional rights. However, on the name of constitutional security, it is evident that the ‘state’ which stands as the governing mechanism of social machinery also falls prey under its “exception” or regimentation. The ‘exception’, with the advent of technology, seems to have taken permanent control on the life of human beings. The CorpSeCorp observes the ‘body’ of individuals as if the unending state of ‘exception is prevalent.

The novel, *Oryx and Crake*, begins with the setting of post-apocalyptic conditions where Jimmy, now turned Snowman, witnesses the extinction of human beings caused by pandemic called “Waterless Flood”. Snowman recounts the horrors caused by genius bio-scientist named Crake. Nearby him live Crakers, gentle humanoid-species, bioengineered by Crake in his high-tech Paradise Compound. The novel reveals the pre-plague conditions of Jimmy’s life in OrganInc Farms, a place where he was confined within the boundaries of Compounds, where technocrat elites lived and controlled the society through advanced equipped technology. Through CorpSeCorp the life inside the walls appears to be suspended since the agency continuously snoops the privacy of the ‘people’ living inside and outside the Organic Farm. This gaze through electronic eye disrupts the liberty and state of *being* forever. It appears to be as one of the major threats to as Snowden states, “We live in a time where the politics of fear is persuasive thing on the table” (“State of Surveillance”). In order to highlight

how “biopower” takes immediate hold on body, Foucault argues, “It [Biopower] is a set of mechanisms through which the basic biological feature of human species became the object of a political strategy, of a general strategy of power” (*Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the College de France 1977-1978* 1). This operation of power is performed and installed by the ‘state’. Bio-power according to Foucault, is defined to be the ‘governmental rationality’ which, based on economic, social and physical grounds, aims to provide security to the people of its state. In order to perform this mechanics of rationality Foucault argues, “the supervision of the smallest fragment of life and of the body will soon provide, in the context of the school, the barracks, the hospital or the workshop, a laicized content, an economic or technical rationality for this mystical calculus of the infinitesimal and the infinite” (*Discipline and Punish* 140). Here, he wants to highlight how this power mechanism is performed and operated through the various *disciplines*.

The novel shows how Sharon, Jimmy’s mother is victimised at the gates of one of these compounds, ““this barn.” She complained about the tight security at the HelthWyzer gates – the guards were ruder, they were suspicious of everyone, they liked to strip search people, women especially” (*Oryx and Crake* 53). The state of *being* is suspended in the novel and the politics of controlling and regulating its power by ‘state’ on masses turns out to be what Althusser calls “repressive state apparatus”. The natural functioning of ‘body’ produces what Foucault calls *objects* rather than physiological bodies. The ‘state of surveillance’ through continuous watch-over confines it to function within restrictive state which creates ‘body without order’. This performance of body does not produce human beings rather ‘abnormal’ bodies.

As an inquiry to the functioning of the ‘body’, in the age of technology where science seems to have taken immediate hold on it, mobile phones regulate biological order of life, ‘internet appears to have become modern opium’. The paper, in this context, aims to liberate ‘body’ from the politics of ‘governmental rationality’ the novel is perfect a reflection of the state where ‘body’ operates its function according to the “mechanics of power”.

Margaret Atwood’s depiction of Crakers and other lives in and outside the OrganInc compound is determined by the functioning of power structure. In Foucauldian sense, the “technology of power” is sketched through CorpSeCorpse in the *Oryx and Crake*. The novel from Jimmy’s point of view touches upon socio-cultural fabrics whereas, Crake, completely

opposite figure to Jimmy is depicted as a bioengineering scientist. Jimmy, having graduated from Martha Graham academy, follows humanitarian approach, as novel portrays:

As for Film-making and Video Arts, who needed them? Anyone with a computer could splice together whatever they wanted, or digitally alter old material, or create new animation. You could download one of the standard core plots and add whatever faces you chose, and whatever bodies too. (*Oryx and Crake* 187)

In order to stand with the principle of just society Jimmy stands the dominance of scientific practices followed by Crake. Here, the paper intends to bring the focus on inhuman practices of Crake where he wishes to replace human beings on the planet. In the formulation of the progressive principles, the progress must remain democratic and ethical and here Crake's idea of punishment for better world appears to be unethical. As Foucault states, "penalty must remain 'humane' is expressed by the reformers in the first person" (*Discipline and Punish* 91). The aim of progress, according to Jimmy, should not be carried out on the stake of life.

On the other hand Crake, driven mad by his knowledge and unethical approach to replace human beings through humanoids, called Crakers, seeks for the reestablishments to systematize the social structure. His scientific approach tends to study the dynamics of body through experiment performed in Paradise Laboratory. Crake, having educated from Watson Crick, learns to give direction to his ideas accordingly, "Watson- Crick was a fridge-magnet culture: people bought them, traded them, made their own" (*Oryx and Crake* 209).

The power function is prevalent in the setting of *Oryx and Crake* as it depicts, "The house, the pool, the furniture – all belonged to the OrganInc Compound, where the top people lived" (Atwood 26). Those people lived in the compound created a separate society, which was highly sophisticated and governed by strict rules and regulation. The text provides a reflection of OrganInc as Platonic *Ideal* state whereas dehumanized Pleebrats, as less-human beings on the planet:

Compound people didn't go to the cities unless they had to, and then never alone. They called the cities *the pleeblands*. Despite the fingerprint identity cards now carried by everyone, public security in the pleeblands was leaky: there were people cruising around in those places who could forge anything

and who might be anybody, not to mention the loose change – the addicts, the muggers, the paupers, the crazies. So it was best for everyone at OrganInc Farms to live all in one place, with foolproof procedures. (*Oryx and Crake* 27)

The Panoptic idea within the realm of power obtains control and diffuses power on masses as what Foucault calls *discipline*. In disciplinary state he argues, “In discipline, it is the subjects who have to be seen. Their visibility assures the hold of the power that is exercised over them” (*Discipline and Punish* 187). The textual reading of text highlights the same structure which controls the activity of men by having regular check on their movements:

CorpSeCorps men – the ones Jimmy’s father called our people – these men had to be on constant alert. When there was so much at stake, there was no telling what the other side might resort to. The other side, or the other sides: it wasn’t just one other side you had to watch out for. Other companies, other countries, various factions and plotters. (*Oryx and Crake* 27)

The body as a ‘site of contestation’ is constantly constructed and reconstructed, as Foucault states, “body is also directly involved in a political field; power relations have an immediate hold upon it; they invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs” (*Discipline and Punish* 25). The representation of Foucauldian Panopticon enquires about analogy of ‘power’, which focuses its transmission on the masses. In disciplinary states Foucault argues:

It is the fact of being constantly seen, of being able always to be seen, that maintains the disciplined individual in his subjection. And the examination is the technique by which power, instead of emitting the signs of its potency, instead of imposing its mark on its subjects, holds them in a mechanism of objectification. (*Discipline and Punish* 187).

The CorpSecorp agency, having kept constant gaze on human ‘body’, gives Jimmy to evaluate life through a series of questions, “When did the body first set out on its own adventures? Snowman thinks; after having ditched its old travelling companions, the mind and the soul, for whom it had once been considered a mere corrupt vessel or else a puppet acting out their dramas for them....”(Oryx and Crake 85). After Jimmy’s mother, Sharon

liberates herself by leaving compound forever, Corpsmen never gave Jimmy chance to walk freely:

The CorpSeCorps had never lost sight of Jimmy. During his time at Martha Graham they'd hauled him in regularly, four times a year, for what they called *little talks*. They'd ask him the same questions they'd already asked a dozen times, just to see if they got the same answers. *I don't know* was the safest thing Jimmy could think of to say, which most of the time was accurate enough. (*Oryx and Crake* 256)

The exercise of controlling through electronic device is what Foucault calls "Precision and application are, with regularity, the fundamental virtues of disciplinary time" (*Discipline and Punish* 151).

In order to define the horrors of surveillance state text highlights how, "The Corpsmen were really anal about airspace, she said; they suspected everyone of wanting to nuke stuff from above, and you practically had to let them climb into your underpants before they'd let you fly anywhere in a hired copter, unless you were some graft-ridden prince from a Compound, that is" (*Oryx and Crake* 244-45). As a controlling and regulating mechanism, "Disciplinary control does not consist simply in teaching or imposing a series of particular gestures; it imposes the best relation between a gesture and the overall position of the body, which is its condition of efficiency and speed" (Foucault 151). It, therefore, tends to control the mental state of human beings.

Conclusion

Thus, the paper highlights how CorpSecorp is depicted as an agency which appears to have immediate hold on the 'body' of individual. The major threat of technology, paper highlights, appears in navigating, controlling and modifying not only the physical nature of body but also the mental state of individual who carries it. The contemporary age, where human-machine interaction appears to be next form of human evolution, the posthumanism also brings a major threat to human life in form of technology. The idea of liberty in the novel *Oryx and Crake* is dispersed since the CorpSeCorp acts as a power agency. The troops deployed, through camera, to run their programs on human body is a march into the personal space which appears to be a one of the major threats to the privacy of human beings in the

contemporary age. The punishment of scaling body, according to structural order, in Foucauldian sense appears to be a modern torture.

Work Cited

Agamben, Giorgio. *A Critical Introduction*. Stanford University Press, 2009.

Althusser, Louis. *On the Reproduction of Capitalism: Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*. Translated by G.M. Goshgarian, Verso, 2014

Atwood, Margaret. *Oryx and Crake*. Bloomsbury, Bloomsbury, 2009.

Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish*. Translated by Alan Sheridan, Vintage Book, 1995.

---. *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the College de France 1977-1978*. Edited by Michel Senellart, US: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.

Goodman, Amy. "Edward Snowden: If I Came Back to the U.S., I Would Likely Die in Prison for Telling the Truth." *Democracy Now*, <https://www.commondreams.org/news/2019/12/06/edward-snowden-if-i-came-back-us-i-would-likely-die-prison-telling-truth>. Accessed 10 December 2019.

Smith, Shane. "State of Surveillance." *Youtube*, Commentary by Edward Snowden, 8 June. 2016, [youtube.com/watch?v=ucRWyGKBVzo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ucRWyGKBVzo). Accessed 05 December 2019.