Intermental Interaction in Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*: A Cognitive Narratological Approach

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Abstract
This research explores the externalist perspective projected by Margaret Atwood's Oryx and Crake through the protagonist's perception of the unification of social thoughts. It dynamically examines the dystopian scenario presented as a tool for expressing the shared consciousness of fear and uncertainty, thereby engendering a feeling of socialised deviation. The potential strength of the situated identity is essential as a basis for initiating interaction in this narrative and tracking a unified mind. This interface is developed and centred on social interactions rather than individual thoughts or feelings. The study also analyses the representations of characters' minds with textual cues that prompt readers to draw particular kinds of inferences about the contents and dispositions of those thoughts. It considers ways in which the dystopian world depicted in the novel, to various degrees, serves as a reflection of the change of events signalled by changes in the thoughts of the character. The social mind of conflict, competition, and exploitation are also outlined in this study.
Keywords: Social Minds, Situated Identity, Theory of Mind, Cognitive Narratology, Dialogic Interaction.

A true expert in encapsulating a wide range of critical thoughts and themes in writing without stating them, Margaret Atwood illustrates them with a variety of imagery that sticks with the reader long after finishing the book. As an affluent maker of novels, poetry, short fiction, and literary criticism and acclaimed as Canada's most decorated and famous writer, the debut of the television adaptation of her 1985 novel *The Handmaid's Tale* saw an increase in popularity and introduced Atwood's writing to a new audience. With the release of *Oryx and Crake* in 2003, another Booker Prize finalist, Atwood's interest in science fiction, once more came to the fore. Like *The Handmaid's Tale*, she places *Oryx and Crake* in a dystopian future that mirrors our reality in many unsettling ways. *The Year of the Flood* and *MaddAddam*, released in 2009 and 2013, respectively, are the second and third books of Margaret Atwood's *MaddAddam* Trilogy, which continues the tale of *Oryx and Crake*. The narrative occurs towards the end of the twenty-first century, following a devastating pandemic that has wiped out most of the world's population and left only a few scattered survivors.

A dystopian story with satiric undertones set in the near future, *Oryx and Crake* centres on the breakthroughs of gene

splicing and its effects. The story follows Snowman, a survivor of gene plague, as he battles for survival and takes care of a new bioengineered posthuman race known as the Crakers. The narrative progresses with the past and present descriptions when Snowman returns to his old workplace at the bioengineering plant to look for supplies. In flashbacks, he describes his life before the apocalypse as Jimmy, Crake's best friend and an unintentional collaborator who helped spread the illness and create Crakers. The novel's two distinct time frames present the events leading up to and after a bioengineered plague has killed nearly all of humanity. It alternates between the pre-and post-apocalyptic periods as it follows the lives of the main character Jimmy, who, following the disease, has adopted the name Snowman. As he thinks he is the final member of the human race, he survives with the scant necessities he can gather from what is left of civilisation while living in a tree, along with taking care of the Crakers, who are perfectly adapted to surviving in the ecologically brutal climate, after escaping Crake's genetic disease. On the other hand, being the sole survivor and caretaker of the Crakers causes him to physically and mentally regress. Talking to himself and sharing his thoughts, he is ritualising his duty while also trying to preserve the memory of what occurred before the disease, thereby sharing the survivalist social mind of a community affected by dystopian bioengineering.

From an intuitive and factual standpoint, Alan Palmer's difference between personal (intramental) and shared (intermental) thought is unquestionably correct. It is easier even to envisage a narrative with conflict between characters and the prevailing societal conventions, attitudes, or biases. All narrative has some form of this essential component, and it is projected that Palmer's call for systematic research on this topic will be heeded, given narratology's neglect of the representation of intermental thoughts. This analysis of the select passages of *Oryx and Crake* involves identifying textual features that represent and observe the social minds epitomised and shared by the protagonist Snowman concerning the thoughts of general humanity in terms of chaos and destruction. *Palmer's book, Social Minds in the Novel (2010)*, underlined that narratives depict the cognitive aspects of individual experience and give considerable narrative presence to collectives. It becomes clear that both fictional and factual tales present various constellations of group cognition, albeit Palmer does not focus on the latter form.

The novel's epigraphs set forth the intermental thoughts that the narrative will eventually share. The initial epigraph is taken from *Jonathan Swift's Gulliver's Travels*, stating how the narrative is planning to inform the readers about the dystopian time ahead, "I could perhaps like others have astonished you with strange, improbable tales; but I rather chose to relate plain matter of fact in the simplest manner and style; because my principal design was to inform you, and not to amuse you". Similarly, the second epigraph is taken from *Virginia Woolf's To the Lighthouse*, regarding negotiating the perilous paths that the world takes as "Was there no safety? No learning by heart of the ways of the world? No guide, no shelter, but all was miracle and leaping from the pinnacle of a tower into the air?".

One of the striking thoughts shared by Snowman about his situation that reflects a typical chaotic society is the lack of perception of time and is clearly stated in his observation of zero hours, "Out of habit he looks at his watch – stainless-steel case, burnished aluminum band, still shiny although it no longer works. He wears it now as his only talisman. A blank face is what it shows him: zero hour. It causes a jolt of terror to run through him, this absence of official time. Nobody nowhere knows what time it is" (Margaret Atwood 3). Snowman mourns the destruction of society through his observation of the lack of comprehension of the time and reality. But even amid this chaotic survival, the social mind reflected in the text adheres to a life routine for survival, as it states, "It is the strict adherence to daily routine that tends towards the maintenance of good morale and the preservation of sanity," he says out loud" (Atwood 4).

According to Alan Palmer, "The reader uses existing knowledge or prestored knowledge of other minds in the actual world in order to process the emergent knowledge that is supplied by fictional-mind representations. The everyday work we put into constructing other real minds prepares us, as readers, for the work of constructing fictional minds from the text" (11). Thus, the readers are prepared to delve into the nostalgic mind of the narrator about the bygone times. As an echo from Snowman's past, a woman's voice enters his ear as he muses on his yearning for another human voice, "He feels the need to hear a human voice – a fully human voice, like his own" (Atwood 5). Snowman frequently gets reminded of his loneliness by echoes from the past that he hears. The voices suggest that Snowman is troubled by his past life and perhaps even haunted by memories of it. In addition to other voices, Snowman converses with himself. Snowman cannot seem to recall the titles of the novels he ever read, but some of what he speaks aloud is taken from them.

As a result of this shared social consciousness that Snowman represents, the narrative becomes a platform about similar minds trying to navigate calamitous circumstances, and the inclusion of these collective thoughts at the beginning of the story sets the tone for a tense and troubling story ahead. The voices in his head further prove his disconnection from the past, his history, and himself. Even his voice is indistinguishable from others. However, despite his best attempts, he cannot free himself from the past, as every being in our reality, since we are all still ingrained in the memory of our precedent. As Palmer points out, "Narrative progression is regulated by the flow of information that the narrator of a novel makes available to its reader. This information frequently concerns the workings of fictional minds" (64).

As the memories of the past trouble him, so does Snowman losing his proficiency in the language as he has nobody to interact with. He comes across many words and phrases he once knew in his thoughts, but placing them in the exact context was a tenuous task as he remembers the word "Mesozoic. He can see the word, he can hear the word, but he can't reach the word. He can't attach anything to it. This is happening too much lately, this dissolution of meaning, the entries on his cherished wordlists drifting off into space" (Atwood 32). Notably, an illustration of Snowman's concern over losing his command of words showcases a loss of humanity which is the recurrent intermental reflection in the text.

Further, the image of a mental prison is also expressed in this state where the mind is imprisoned by the past and perplexed future, and the social urge to escape it reverberates in Snowman's thoughts, "Get me out! he hears himself thinking. But he isn't locked up, he's not in prison. What could be more out than where he is?" (Atwood 37). He perceives the past as it appears in his mind to be rife with deceit, manipulation, and dishonesty. As a solace to these disturbed thoughts, humans tend towards nature for comfort, especially in the forms of animals or so; "[h]e does have a listener: it's a rakunk, a young one" (Atwood 38). He wonders if he can find consolation in animal friendship without human company.

To move past his dysfunctional past, Snowman feels that language preservation will save him. This book concerns the loss of civilisation and extinction of every known species and language. He states, "Hang on to the words," he tells himself. The odd words, the old words, the rare ones. Valance. Norn. Serendipity. Pibroch. Lubricious. When they're gone out of his head, these words, they'll be gone, everywhere, forever. As if they had never been" (Atwood 57). The Crakers are in search of stories because they are curious about their origins and that of other creatures. Snowman ends up taking on prophetic qualities as a result. The fact that Snowman is discovered adhering to the norms of those stories shows that, at first, he is not aware of their influence, but they do. His memories and attempts to make sense of what happened is the only way the reader learns the past is catching up to the post-apocalyptic present and the causes of the catastrophe, providing insight into the origins of the catastrophe and why the human race came dangerously close to extinction. It becomes more obvious where Snowman and the Crakers differ in communicating with each other.

They are cut off from entire words and their connotations. In addition to representing the extinction of man, they also stand for the loss of language:

> Crake made the bones of the Children of Crake out of the coral on the beach, and then he made their flesh out of a mango. But the Children of Oryx hatched out of an egg, a giant egg laid by Oryx herself. Actually, she laid two eggs: one full of animals and birds and fish, and the other one full of words. But the egg full of words hatched first, and the Children of Crake had already been created by then, and they'd eaten up all the words because they were hungry, and so there were no words left over when the second egg hatched out. And that is why the animals can't talk. (Atwood 82)

The narrative created by Snowman for the Crakers helps them feel a feeling of belonging in the world. "A story is what they want, in exchange for every slaughtered fish. Well, I owe them, Snowman thinks" (Atwood 88), but to prevent the Crakers from bombarding him with questions, Snowman must also try to keep his tales simpler. His story goes like this:

> The people in the chaos were full of chaos themselves, and the chaos made them do bad things. They were killing other people all the time. And they were eating up all the Children of Oryx, against the wishes of Oryx and Crake. Every day they were eating them up. They were killing them and killing them, and eating them and eating them. They ate them even when they weren't hungry.(Atwood 89)

Snowmen feels he must get drunk to deal with his fear, rage, and sorrow. He screams at Crake and tries to see or hallucinate her as he attempts to contact the missing members of his past. The wolvogs, a by-product of unrestricted scientific research that now represents a serious threat to him, are present around him while Snowman is under the power of another by-product of scientific control of nature. Along with these threats from nature, he has to find the necessities to survive. So he plans an errand to "Paradice," which is full of food and arms, as he states, "Paradice, was what they'd named the place. He'd been one of the angels guarding the gate, in a manner of speaking, so he knows where everything is, he'll be able to lay his hands on the necessary items. A quick in and out, a snatch and grab. Then he'll be equipped for anything" (Atwood 131).

We might deduce that a significant portion of Snowman's uncertainty stems from his anxiety about confronting the past again since his voyage back to the RejoovenEsense facility is also one into the past. But he is persuaded to return because of his need to survive. The name of Crake's dome, "Paradice," sounds similar to Paradise, but it makes the readers think of games and gambling, which science seems to be undertaking with human and animal life in the story. But the only console and comfort Snowman receives is from the Crakers and vice versa. Given that he is unready for this environment, the Crakers are just as concerned about their well-being as Snowman is with the welfare of the Crakers. They express sympathy, care, and appreciation for Snowman and Crake. Their emotional spectrum is becoming more pronounced; they may have more nuanced interior lives than Snowman thinks, thus forming a community of the shared consciousness of belonging to each other in a dystopian environment.

Snowman laments the lack of love in the Craker community and is eager for his "bride of Frankenstein" (Atwood 149), equating himself with the monster Dr Frankenstein created and then abandoned *in Mary Shelley's Frankenstein*, a monster who only wants to receive and give love and be accepted by society and turns violent when his wish is not granted. He is dubious of both his and humanity's place in history. Being one of the last of his species still alive, he worries about what this civilisation's legacy will be. He fears that all that will be left are laboratory concoctions that nature has overtaken. But even amid his perplexing reality, he wishes for some human existence:

> But suppose – just suppose, thinks Snowman – that he's not the last of his kind. Suppose there are others. He wills them into being, these possible remnants who might have survived in isolated

pockets, cut off by the shutdown of the communications networks, keeping themselves alive somehow. Monks in desert hideaways, far from contagion; mountain goatherders who'd never mixed with the valley people; lost tribes in the jungles. Survivalists who'd tuned in early, shot all comers, sealed themselves into their underground bunkers. Hillbillies, recluses; wandering lunatics, swathed in protective hallucinations. Bands of nomads, following their ancient ways. (Atwood 194-195)

Along with the thoughts and wishes, Snowman is traumatised by some nightmares from which he cannot escape. A bioengineered animal resembling pigs, the Pigoons, attempted to kill him in his nightmares, which mirrors his waking hours. He is alone and cornered, while the Pigoons are organised, in control, and have the upper hand, which reads almost like a reversal of man and beast. "He hates these dreams. The present's bad enough without the past getting mixed into it. Live in the moment" (Atwood 233).

The past and present storylines intersect when Snowman reaches Paradice, where the shadowy side of people and human history is revealed. The narrative ends with Snowman encountering some humans and thinking, "Time to go" (Atwood 328). Although they represent hope, Snowman is aware that they also constitute a threat because they can turn hostile towards him. Because he does not know how to shield the Crakers from evil, he concludes that he cannot make them comprehend; he can only try to make them feel better by telling them that Oryx loves them. So Oryx plays the same nurturing, safeguarding, and loving role for the Crakers as she did for Jimmy. She represented the ideal woman to Jimmy. For the Crakers, she represents a mythical deity.

He seeks the voices in his head for advice because he needs clarification about what to do. The conclusion needs to be clarified because his statements can indicate that it is time to meet these folks in person or to avoid them altogether. The climax is a cliffhanger and perfectly conveys his uncertainty as he weighs the potential joy of not being alone and safety from extinction against the potential horror of what humans have demonstrated they are capable of. Thus the social mind in the storyworlds of Snowman can exist in every reality, and this narrative sheds prophetic light on the dystopian reality of conflict, competition, and exploitation.

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