SEXUALITY AND GENDER IN MARGARET ATWOOD’S ORYX AND CRAKE

PORNOGRAPHY, SEXUAL POWER POLITICS AND MOTHERHOOD AS SYMPTOMS OF THE DYSTOPIAN SOCIETY

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0. **Introduction**

*Oryx and Crake*, published in 2003 as the first of three novels in the *MaddAddam*-trilogy, shows us the aftermath of a biotechnological apocalypse engineered by a mad scientist comparable to Shelley’s Victor Frankenstein. A virus, hidden in a sex pill in as a kind of Trojan horse, has caused the annihilation of the human population, leaving the protagonist, who calls himself Snowman, trying to survive as the last man on earth next to genetic manipulated animal hybrids and equally engineered humanoid creatures (Cooke 105). The novel is often compared to Atwood’s earlier work of speculative fiction *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985), which is told from the female perspective of Offred instead of a man’s as is the case in *Oryx and Crake* (Gerlach et al. 63).

In many ways however, as Howells explains, *Oryx and Crake* can be seen as a sequel to *The Handmaids Tale*, as “the pollution and environmental destruction which threatened one region of North America in the earlier novel has escalated into worldwide climate change . . . in the latter, and the late twentieth-century Western trend towards mass consumerism which Gilead tried to reverse . . . has resulted in an American lifestyle of consumerist decadence in a high-tech world” (161). *The Handmaid’s Tale* however serves as a cautionary tale whereas *Oryx and Crake* has already surpassed that; it is an extension of our “current biotechnological enterprise, a critique of capitalism and science out of control” (Gerlach et al. 63). This novel, bearing Atwood’s activism in mind, raises important questions about our present political, socio-economical, technological and climatological givens (Snyder 471).
Coming from a family of scientists, Atwood is well acquainted with the topic of popular science and utilises this knowledge to conduct an intense dialogue between scientists and her readers in *Oryx and Crake* (Bouson, “Part III” 125). Through characters such as Jimmy who lack ethical guidelines, Atwood urges to “redeem our moral selves and to repay our ethical debts” (Bouson, “Introduction” 126). The reader is challenged to form a critical image of the society that is portrayed and to reflect their lethal flaws onto present-day society through the narration of the perhaps slightly unreliable protagonist Jimmy-Snowman.

Atwood has been actively writing during the “second-wave feminism of the late 1960s and 1970s, the conservative anti-feminist backlash of the 1980s, and the third-wave power feminism that began in the 1990s” (Bouson, “Introduction” 8), thus making her, according to Howells, “probably the best known feminist novelist writing in English” (qtd. In Bouson, “Introduction” 8). She has reflected on feminist concerns as well as on the evolving feminist movement; starting with the protofeminist work *The Edible Woman* (1969), followed by the cultural feminism of *Surfacing* (1972), postfeminist novels such as *Bodily Harm* (1981) and, one of her most popular novels to this day, *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985) and eventually to the power feminist work of *The Robber Bride* (1993) (Bouson, “Introduction” 8).

Areas of human life that were once thought to be “non-literary or subliterary” such as “the hidden depths of motherhood, and of daughterhood as well, the once-forbidden realms of incest and child abuse” are made writeable through the influx of the women’s movement (Atwood, *Writing with Intent* 131). Although areas such as gender issues and sexuality are not one of Atwood’s major concerns in *Oryx and Crake*, they still are present and important evidence of the dystopian nature
of the patriarchal society this story is set in. Even though these issues are not transferred to the reader through the first-hand experience of a female protagonist, they are interpreted through the male protagonist Jimmy-Snowman, providing the reader with the male interpretation of these stereotypically female issues.

In this dissertation, I will focus on how Margaret Atwood makes use of the genre of the feminist critical dystopia in order to question the established gender roles in the patriarchal society, thereby focussing on the influence of pornography on the sexual development of Jimmy and Crake while simultaneously bringing the ongoing debate concerning pornography into account and how sexuality and established gender roles contribute to power politics, with the creation of the Crakers, the love triangle between Jimmy, Crake and Oryx and the expectations of motherhood as symptoms. The central question that I will try to answer in this dissertation is the following: how does Margaret Atwood criticise the established gender roles of the patriarchal society and how does the choice of genre contribute to this criticism? To substantiate my arguments, I will provide theoretical framework mainly based on Ruth Robbins, who provides an in-depth definition of feminism in her book *Literary Feminisms* as well as on Anne Cranny-Francis who presents an overview of feminist fiction, feminist science fiction and dystopian fiction in her book *Feminist Fiction*. I will explain how these (sub)genres changed over time and how they were influenced by the women’s movement. This theoretical framework will be used in order to establish the actual genre to which *Oryx and Crake* in my opinion belongs and to support my claims.
1. About the Author

Margaret Atwood is one of the most read and studied Canadian writers and is known to address contemporary issues in her literature such as the social construction of the female identity, male-female relations, Canadian nationalism and Canadian-American relations (Bouson, “Introduction” 2). Born on 18 November 1939 in Ottawa, she spent her early years there as well as in Northern Quebec where her father pursued his studies as a biologist (Staines 12). Atwood became acquainted with the Canadian wilderness, which “haunts her imagination”, during her childhood since her father led a forest-insect research station in the woods of Northern Canada (Bouson, “Introduction” 3). In 1946 Atwood and her family moved to the city of Toronto where she could not quite fit in with the other girls at school, so her primary companion and friend became her brother who made her familiar with the mind-set of boys (Bouson, “Introduction” 3-4).

Already at a young age Atwood became acquainted with scientific topics, since several of her relatives are scientists and she had to listen to discussions about “intestinal parasites or sex hormones in mice, or, when that makes the non-scientists too queasy, the universe” at family gatherings; her recreational reading would consist of pop science so she would be able to keep up with the dialogue (Atwood, Writing with Intent 285). Although she already started writing at the age of 5, it was not until she was sixteen she realised that writing was what she wanted to do with her life (Staines 12-13). Determined to become a writer, Atwood started the honours English Language and Literature Programme at Victoria College, and was awarded, even before she graduated in the spring of 1961, the E. J. Pratt Medal for Double Persephone, a collection of
poems (Staines 13-14). In the fall of 1969 her first novel *The Edible Woman* was published, which was soon followed by her first work of literary criticism *Survival* (1972), addressed to the average Canadian reader. With *Survival*, Atwood paves the path for the Canadian literary landscape and became the biggest exponent of Canadian literature herself (Staines 17-19). In that same year, she published another literary criticism, namely *Survival; A Thematic Guide for Canadian Literature* in which she unveils the key pattern in Canadian writing: victimisation (Tandon and Neeru 14).

She received the Governor’s General’s Award, the Los Angeles Times Award, was short-listed for the Booker Prize for her novel *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985) and won the Booker Prize for *The Blind Assassin* (2000), a meta-fictional fairy tale (Tandon and Neeru 15).

Margaret Atwood is not only a writer, she also is an activist in the Canadian society, which she incorporates in her literature. According to her, novels “may contain social comment and criticism”, “politics . . . is inevitable one of their subjects” and they “are linked with notions of morality, because they are about human beings” (Bouson, “Introduction” 3). Atwood’s main areas of interest that can be found in her literature can be divided into three main issues: political/ethical concerns, feminist concerns and the Canadian literary tradition. Atwood offers her view on and her definition of politics in an interview with Jo Brans:

“Politics, for me, is everything that involves who gets to do what to whom… It’s not just elections and what people say they are – little labels they put on themselves… Politics really has to do with how people order their societies, to whom power is ascribed, who is considered to have power. A lot of power is ascription. People have power because we think they have power, and that’s all politics is. And politics also has to do with what kind
of conversations you have with people, and what you feel free to say to someone, what you
don’t feel free to say. (Somacarrera 44)

Atwood’s definition of power is not only based on reading Shakespeare or historical and political books herself, but as well on Michel Foucault’s definition of power; stating that power exists in action only; power should thus be seen as a verb rather than a noun (Somacarrera 44). Foucault also believes that politics is relations, and that “[p]ower is unstable because it is diffused throughout all social relations rather than being imposed from above”, which makes it impossible to locate the given point of ‘power’. Atwood herself even questions the reality of power since people merely give it to each other and take it from one another (Somacarrera 44-45). Atwood makes power politics thus present in every layer of society, even on a personal level. The issue of sexual and national power politics makes its debut in the poems of *Power Politics*, which is later expanded to the discourse of national and international politics in her novel *Surfacing* and *Survival*. This engagement peaks in her novels *Bodily Harm* and *The Handmaid’s Tale*, her essays and interviews and even continues in the *MaddAddam*-trilogy, of which *Oryx and Crake* is the first novel (Somacarrera 43-44).

In her essay “If You Can’t Say Something Nice, Don’t Say Anything at All”, Atwood unfolds the everyday life of 1950s pre-feminist movement women and makes feminist observations when recalling the sexist insults men directed at her. Already at university she had to cope with sexism, through reading male authors as well as getting to hear that women who pursued a career as a writer “would have to suffer” (Bouson, “Introduction” 7). Because of these negative allegations concerning women writers, “she found it necessary to ignore not only the cultural dictate that
women should please others by being nice but also the available theories how she, as a woman, should write” (Bouson, “Introduction” 8). But although Atwood is highly engaged in gender issues, she is not at all fond of the present-day term of feminism, since it “has solidified into an orthodoxy” and there have been attempts to “dictate women writers, on ideological grounds, various ‘acceptable’ modes of approach, style, form, language, subject or voice” (Bouson, “Introduction” 8). Atwood insists that women who had to repeatedly hear from men that they could not do something, should not be hearing the same from other women today (Bouson, “Introduction” 8). She has also been sceptical towards the tendency of feminism to “place ideological constraints on contemporary women writers”, by saying women writers have a certain writing style or ascribing one particular type of female character to them, namely a female heroine trying to escape male oppression or lacking will to power. Atwood reacts to this tendency of female goodness in literature by reviving the female villain, which can be seen in works like *Cat’s Eye, The Robber Bride* and *Alias Grace* (Bouson, “Introduction” 10-11). On the other hand, the movement has benefited literature by paving and broadening the way for women writers and by portraying the way power influences gender relations, which seems to be mainly socially constructed (Bouson, “Introduction” 8-9). The feminist influence is most visible in works such as *The Edible Woman, Surfacing, Bodily Harm* and *The Handmaid’s Tale*, where she “offered trenchant critiques of the power politics of gender relations” (Bouson, “Introduction” 10) and, yet more concealed, in the novel central to this dissertation, namely *Oryx and Crake*.

According to Atwood, “we gave up a long time ago trying to isolate the gene for Canadianness”, which she counteracted by establishing herself as a Canadian writer (Rao 101). While teaching a course in Canadian literature at York University, Atwood discovered how little people knew about
the subject and wrote *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* (1972) as a reaction, which then caused a commotion among critics since they repeatedly denied there was such a thing as ‘Canadian Literature’ (Bouson, “Introduction” 11). In *Survival*, Atwood attempts to uncover a distinctly Canadian literature, as well as a national mind-set (Bouson, “Introduction” 11-12). The problematic discourse of a(n) (national) identity is made later visible in *The Robber Bride*, *The Blind Assassin*, *Cat’s Eye* and even *Oryx and Crake*, where dominant discourses of home and homeland are challenged. These novels show “how discourses of home are an extension of discourses of nation and national belonging, and how these are based on exclusion and oppression” (Rao 101). Atwood does not only try to create or define a Canadian identity, she also criticises the relations between Canada and the United States. She compares the position of Canada to the sexually dominated woman in an unequal heterosexual relationship by describing a passive Canada that is forced to lie still in missionary position, to keep quiet and pretend it likes what is happening (Bouson, “Introduction” 13). This controversial and provocative comparison combines her nationalist engagement as well her feminist concerns.

Where Atwood’s novels, as Gerlach et al. states, “effectively highlight changes in how post-industrial societies understand human reproduction, the proper place of technology in its development, and the role of women, scientists, economy and governments in its governance”, the Canadian state shows similar shifts concerning “the sexual politics of biotechnology” (63). Atwood, as “ambassador of Canada in the World” and a “Great Canadian Global Citizen”, she “continues to speak out not only on global feminist issues and human rights but also on the dangers of environmental degradation and global climate change, which, as she warns in her
futuristic dystopian novels *Oryx and Crake* (2003) and *The Year of the Flood* (2009), threaten the survival of us all” (Bouson, “Introduction” 13).

Atwood’s protagonists “almost all dwell on their childhood years in flashback or in the chronological telling of their stories” (Goldblatt 275). Whereas some of her protagonists’ early lives are situated in comfortable milieus in a “virtual Garden of Eden setting”, others are not as fortunate as “their backgrounds suggest an unhealthy, weedy soil that causes their young plants to twist and permutate” (Goldblatt 276). The women in Atwood’s novels discover that they must reconstruct a braver and self-reliant character in order to survive the society which burdens them and treats them unequal. Her novels uncover societies in which women seemingly “must be made malleable to men’s desires, accepting their proposals, their advances”; if they do not submit to these roles determined by society they are seen as “demons” (Goldblatt 277). These women who “struggle to overcome and to change systems that block and inhibit their security” transform from ingénues to insightful women in Atwood’s stories (Goldblatt 275). Having learned that a woman is a commodity and should ideally be submissive, Atwood’s female characters connect and project their “image of self” and self-worth onto their bodies and bodily functions such as childbearing (Goldblatt 278). Unlike in her previous novels such as *The Handmaid’s Tale* and *The Edible Woman* for example, these types of women are not the protagonist in *Oryx and Crake*, yet they are represented by women in Jimmy’s direct environment such as his mother and his lover Oryx who are introduced to the reader through Snowman’s flashbacks to his childhood and adult life.
2. **Plot summary**

In *Oryx and Crake*, the reader follows the narrator Snowman who believes to be the lone survivor of a plague deliberately engineered by his high school-friend Crake. Through flashbacks to his former life Snowman, who was called Jimmy before the epidemic, unveils what and who has caused the extinction of the human race.

The civilisation that is portrayed in the novel is divided in several Compounds for the rich scientists, surrounded by Pleeblands where the poor part of the population lives. Since Jimmy’s mother being a microbiologist and his father a genographer at OrganInc Farms, they live in the corresponding Compound. When Jimmy is six years old, his mother resigns from her job due to a nervous breakdown, which causes her to neglect Jimmy and the household. In the meantime, it seems as if Jimmy’s father is not interested in his wife, Sharon, anymore and it is suggested that he is having an affair with his colleague, Ramona. After numerous arguments between Jimmy’s parents about the moral ethics of his father’s work, his mother disappears unexpectedly. In the next few weeks, Jimmy is repeatedly interrogated by CorpSeCorps, the security unit of the Compound, about the whereabouts of his mother.

A few months before Jimmy’s mother vanishes he met Glenn, later called Crake, a transfer student who quickly becomes his best and only friend. When they spend time together after school, they play computer games such as Barbarian Stomp, Blood and Roses and later Extinctathon, where he gives himself the nickname ‘Crake’ for the first time, named after the extinct Australian red-necked crake. Crake and Jimmy surf to various websites to watch decapitations, hands being cut
off, animal abuse, porn and even child porn as their entertainment. But while Jimmy feels this is immoral and does not enjoy watching it, Crake “[d]idn’t seem to be affected by anything he saw” (99). While watching HottTotts, a website where sex tourists had intercourse with women and children, they first see Oryx as an eight-year-old victim of this kind of porn. Jimmy immediately develops an inexplicable fascination for her and does not seem to be able to forget the frozen frame of her that Crake saved onto his computer.

After they graduate from high school, Crake is able to attend the scientific Watson-Crick Institute since he was the top of the class. Jimmy on the other hand, being a mid-range student, is assigned the Martha Graham Academy where he takes Problematics, “[a]nd even that only after a long spell of lacklustre bidding” (205). They keep in touch during their education and after not seeing each other for over a year, Jimmy takes the bullet-train from Martha Graham to Watson-Crick to visit Crake. Once there, Crake guides Jimmy through the whole campus, showing him the genetic engineering projects he finds interesting; but unlike Crake’s admiration, Jimmy only feels worried: “Why is it he feels some line has crossed, some boundary transgressed? How much is too much, how far is too far?” (242). On the last evening of Jimmy’s visit to Watson-Crick, Crake suggests they play Extinctathon once more. Crake has evolved to one of the Grandmasters of the game, monitored by MaddAddam, which turns out to be a group of people able to develop lethal bio forms. To get access to this part of the “game”, Crake uses the picture he saved of Oryx years before as a gateway, which infuriates Jimmy even more than the possibility of hostile bio forms released into society.
After graduation, Jimmy finds a summer job at the Martha Graham Library, where his job is to decide which books to discard and which books to keep in digital form, but he soon is fired since he is not able to throw anything away. In the meantime, he moves in with his girlfriend Amanda and two other artists. When Jimmy is hired by AnooYoo to write ad campaigns for their products and is offered an apartment in their Compound, the relationship between him and Amanda ends. From then onwards, he becomes some sort of Casanova who is able to seduce women by profiling himself as a broken, insecure man who needs someone to cure him, using the story of his mother abandoning him as bait. During his fifth year at AnooYoo, the CorpSeCorps men finally have found footage of Jimmy’s mother in the Pleeblands and they pay Jimmy a visit to show him; and while he is forced to watch his mother’s execution, he is not able to admit to them it is in fact her. He tries to find solace in going to bars, watching Internet porn, and finds himself eventually drinking alone at home, feeling depressed.

At this point, Crake visits Jimmy at the AnooYoo Compound, gives him a vaccination against diseases and takes him to the Pleeblands to “[t]roll a few bars” (337), during which Crake offers Jimmy a job at RejoovenEsense, where he holds a respectable position. In the Compound, Crake is working in a unit called Paradice where he is working on immortality and gives Jimmy the responsibility to write advertisements for his new BlyssPluss pill, which would eliminate the external causes of death, but on the other hand function as a permanent birth control pill, a side effect which would not be advertised. In addition to the BlyssPluss pill, Crake is simultaneously working on Paradice, where Crake has employed numerous Grandmasters from Extinctation, as well as the woman Oryx who they saw for the first time on HottTotts and has been slurring in Jimmy’s mind ever since. Oryx functions as a teacher for the Crakers, a prototype for a new
humankind he has developed, something Crake is not able to do since he does not have the patience to interact with these humanoids. After meeting her through the prostitution service of Watson-Crick, Crake offered Oryx a position in the Paradice unit but he still takes advantage of her sexual services. Not much later Oryx seduces Jimmy and they start meeting each other regularly after working hours. Through their conversations, Oryx reluctantly unveils her troublesome past to Jimmy: how she as a child was sold to a stranger and was used to blackmail men trying to take advantage of her and how she eventually ended up in the pornography industry and prostitution.

The evening after he asks Oryx to elope with him, a worldwide plague breaks out, wiping out every person alive. During their last conversation, Oryx tells Jimmy the virus was secretly added into the BlyssPluss pill by Crake and makes Jimmy promise to look after the Crakers. After this conversation, he meets Crake at the Paradice Project, where the story takes a rapid turn: Crake tells Jimmy he has secretly been vaccinating him during their visits during the Pleeblands, after which Crake slits Oryx’s throat and Jimmy immediately shoots him. The days after these events, Jimmy witnesses the extinction of the human race while he is left behind with the humanlike Crakers. After a few weeks, he decides to guide them out of their simulation into the real world, and finds them a safe place to live by the beach where they can start practise their skills and knowledge learnt from Oryx. This is the moment Jimmy feels the need to create a new identity for himself and starts calling himself Snowman, derived from the Abominable Snowman.

This is where the flashbacks catch up with the present: Snowman is in need of supplies and has to undertake a dangerous two-day trip back to the Paradice Unit. When he eventually, after
overcoming several obstacles and being confronted with the dead bodies of Oryx and Crake, arrives back at the beach where the Crakers now live, the men tell him they saw some “[m]en with the extra skins” (423), just like Snowman. He then decides to go looking for them and eventually finds them at the beach. The novel ends with the dilemma Snowman is facing: should he just walk up to them, threaten them or just kill them right away?
3. Theoretical Framework

3.1. Feminist Literary Criticism

When trying to define feminism, it is important to make a distinction between the words female, feminine and feminism, which Ruth Robbins explains in her book *Literary Feminisms*:

Female is a biological category which defines the behavioural characteristics associated in different contexts and at different times with female biology: feminine describes gender, and tends to suggest that gender is not the natural attribute of sex. Feminist refers to a political category which suggests that the confusion of biology with culture (sexual characteristics with socially acceptable behaviour on the grounds of sex) can and should be questioned: feminist describes politics. (6)

The objective of feminism is not merely to refer to certain categories, but to address issues and actually make a change in present-day society. Feminists are activists that want to “change what happens to biological women because of the social structures of gender” (Robbins 7). In order to reach gender equality, women should be able to control their bodies, sexuality and the option to reproduce. Feminism has thus focused on “rejecting the patriarchal domination of women’s sexuality in which women have submitted to marriage, reproduction, and raising children” (“Feminism, History of” 315). Although the objective of feminists might, for the most part be similar, Robbins refuses to classify these individual activists with distinct values in one ‘feminism’, but rather uses the plural form ‘feminisms’, hereby disrupting “the notion that ‘feminism’ is a single category, with clear limits, fixed in a single semantic space” (Robbins 3).
The beginning of feminist literary criticism can be situated in the aftermath of the second-wave feminism, a term ascribed to “the emergence of women’s movements in the United States and Europe during the Civil Rights movement campaigns of the 1960s” (Plain and Sellers 2). The idea arose among British and American feminist critics that women had been largely silenced by and excluded from literary history: the key desire then was to rediscover the works of women writers, to provide a supportive context for contemporary women writers and to manifest ‘what it is to be female’. Instead of aiming to fit women into the “male-dominated tradition”, they wanted to create a tradition among women themselves (Eagleton, “Finding a Female Tradition” 1).

Yet with the rise of a feminist literary critique or ‘movement’, some additional problems arose which Elaine Showalter addresses in her essays. The first problem being the male-orientation of feminist critique: “if we study stereotypes of women, the sexism of male critics, and the limited roles women play in literary history, we are not learning what women have felt and experienced, but only what men have thought women should be” (Showalter, “Towards a Feminist Poetics” 223). Additionally, women’s victimisation tends to be naturalised by “making it the inevitable and obsessive topic of discussion” to which the programme of gynocritics is presented as a solution which moves away from the male models and theories and develops a new model for literary criticism based on the study of female experience (Showalter, “Towards a Feminist Poetics” 223-224). As a second problem, Showalter questions the term ‘movement’, since the female literary tradition is perpetually disrupted, even though in some parts such as influences, borrowings and affinities there is a strongly marked tradition, it seems impossible to speak of a ‘movement’ (Showalter, “A Literature” 11-12). The third problem, which lies in the same line as the previous one, is the notion of a particularly ‘female imagination’: attributing an imagination specific to
women runs dangerously close to the familiar stereotypes, while as well suggesting “permanence, a deep, basic, and inevitable difference between male and female ways of perceiving the world” (Showalter, “A Literature” 12).

At the end of the 1970s, another problem arose when lesbians and women of colour began to question the processes of inclusion and exclusion from feminism itself: the female stereotypes such as the submissive housewife for example that were dealt with by the white feminists did not apply to them even though they were seen as the dominant stereotype as well as “widely relevant” (Eagleton, “Finding a Female Tradition” 3). Around the period of the millennium, a “self-reflexive impetus” became visible in feminism as the scope and trajectory of feminist thought was reviewed by critics (Eagleton, “Towards Definitions” 195). Eagleton explains it as “a moment of taking stock, of evaluating what had been achieved and what still needed to be done” (“Towards Definitions” 195).

According to Robbins, “all literary feminisms worth the name share a double commitment to place women at the centre of their literary-critical discourses, and to do so as part of a wider political progress” (14); she thus requires a focus on women, which signals some sort of unity. Although not all women are the same, they do share some similarities in “subject positions related to the cultures in which they live” (Robbins 14). Feminism focuses on oppression related to their female bodies as well as their economic situation, certain social deprivations that do not necessarily have to be unique to women but may impinge more on women than on men, physiological oppression, cultural oppression and psychological oppression. The overarching term for these issues is called patriarchy, and feminist theories have located patriarchy “in the home, the state, religious
institutions, the law, education systems, the work-place, in culture at large and even in women themselves, since women as well as men are formed under patriarchy and come to subjection under its aegis” (Robbins 14-15).

Even though Atwood has not always established herself as an advocate of the feminist movement and its influence on literature, she has acknowledged the benefits the movement has had on literature: “the expansion of territory available to writers, both in character and in language; a sharp-eyed examination of the way power works in gender relations, and the exposure of much of this as socially constructed; a vigorous exploration of many hitherto-concealed areas of experience” (Atwood, Writing with Intent 132). There is, however, a weakness to this political movement, namely the tendency to “cookie-cut”, “to write a pattern and to oversugar on one side”; some writers were polarising morality by gender, making women intrinsically good and men bad, but these simplifications proved to be problematical for novelists since the choices concerning writing would feel restricting to feminist writers. (Atwood, Writing with Intent 132). The female character could for example rebel against social structures or flout authority, but a woman’s will to power or the seven deadly sins in their female version still seemed unthinkable to write about (Atwood, Writing with Intent 133). In Atwood’s eyes however, the female ‘bad’ characters can “act as keys to doors we need to open”; they can explore moral freedom and pose the question of responsibility (Atwood, Writing with Intent 135). As a reaction to this ideological constraint on women writers, Atwood revives the character of the female villain in her own works of fiction (Bouson, “Introduction” 10-11).
Over the course of the last forty years, the attention of feminist criticism has turned to a “proliferating number of literary genres, sub-genres and forms, both canonical and popular”: The Gothic, romantic fiction and the middlebrow novel have for example been frequently associated with both female authors and readers as well as with femininity in general (Eagleton, “Gender and Genres” 138). In the theoretical framework of this dissertation, the focus will be on feminist science fiction and utopian/dystopian fiction, genres who have proved very popular and useful in feminist writing.
3.2. Feminist Fiction

How can a reader recognise a work feminist imaginative writing or feminist literary criticism? Should a woman-centred novel automatically be categorised as feminist because a large number of feminists read it? Does the writer’s intent make it feminist? Emphasising female experience does not necessarily make a work of fiction feminist (Eagleton, “Towards Definitions” 191-192). The definition of feminist (genre) fiction that is used for this research is based upon the definition given by Anne Cranny-Francis in *Feminist Fiction*; she defines the term feminist genre fiction as “the feminist appropriation of the generic ‘popular’ literary forms, including science fiction, fantasy, utopian fiction, detective fiction and romance” (1), or in the case of this novel, speculative fiction. For a work of fiction to be considered as feminist fiction, it should be written from a feminist perspective, “consciously encoding an ideology which is in direct opposition to the dominant gender ideology of Western society” (Cranny-Francis 1).

With this genre, a specific discourse is adapted, namely the feminist discourse, which main objective is to challenge the naturalisation of sexist discourse; and to challenge it is to make it visible (Cranny-Francis 2). The feminist discourse stands opposed to the masculinist one, “derived from sexism which is specifically male directed”; it defines and limits what it is to be masculine in a male-controlled society (Cranny-Francis 2). The intention of this new feminist genre fiction is to “give the traditional readership, whether of fantasy, utopian fiction, detective fiction, romance, a new stimulating experience” (Cranny-Francis 2). The feminist use of genre fiction enables these women writers to reach a wider audience that they would otherwise not have been able to reach, since there is already a readership present in these genres, which is now presented with an
otherwise possibly new feminist discourse in a familiar format, providing them with a new perspective (Cranny-Francis 3). According to Robbins, reading is an important agent in the process of becoming who we are, it is a “mode of political praxis” (15). The feminist genre fiction is thus able to make the reader reflect on political issues that they perhaps would not have encountered.

Although the use of generic literary forms by women writers was merely adapted out of economic necessity in the 19th century, it is now used as a political practice, as “it may be a site for the allegorical description of social injustices displaced in time and/or place from the reader’s own society, but still clearly recognizable as a critique of that society” (Cranny-Francis 5-9). Feminist generic fiction does not merely construct a female counterpart of a male hero; this might even reinforce the ideology it naturalises by lending it a new legitimacy. Instead, it is a “radical revision of conservative genre texts, which critically evaluates the ideological significance of textual conventions and of fiction as a discursive practice” (Cranny-Francis 9-10).

Next to the specific feminist discourse used in feminist genre fiction, the choice of the genre in itself also bears a particular social function since these genres encode ideological information. The conventions by which genres work are social constructs and are “subject to social pressures and social mediation”. As society changes, these conventions are simultaneously revised, and as a result one must see changes in genre in relation to social changes (Cranny-Francis 17). These social changes, according to Cranny-Francis, “are the result of changes in the dominant discursive formation, of the renegotiation and reconfiguration of the discourses describing society at a particular time”. Feminist genre fiction is thus an “intervention in this configuration” since it is
challenging the control of the patriarchal discourse of one semiotic system and genre writing (Cranny-Francis 17). Since these feminist writers are challenging the established or expected discourse of a certain genre, they intervene in the relationship between reader and text, disrupting the reader’s already acquired understanding of the genre; the real challenge here is to do it without causing a “traffic jam or major crash” (Cranny-Francis 18). For example: detective novels that have a female detective is an affront to many traditional, more conservative reader since they see detecting as a ‘man’s job’ (Cranny-Francis 20-21). The act of proposing a female detective in itself is already a change in genre, an intervention in the configuration of the discourses describing a certain society.

Writers of feminist genre fiction are trying to break away from the “binary” characterisation of women in literature, meaning they are merely being represented as basically good or bad, thus lacking complexity. By moving away from this simplistic characterisation, they are challenging the patriarchal discourses and in addition to breaking these boundaries, they are also making them visible where readers should not be able to see them. This means the reader experiences “an increasingly complex engagement with narrative, with genre conventions, and with the discourses they mobilize” (Cranny-Francis 24-25).
3.3. Feminist Science Fiction

Science fiction developed as a genre in the nineteenth century as a literary response to the current crises; the Industrial Revolution caused numerous work practices to disappear, cities were growing rapidly yet simultaneously huge slums were formed and in the meantime Darwin’s theory of Evolution “shook the white middle-class male belief in their unique position as the pinnacle of God’s creative achievement” (Cranny-Francis 38-39). *Frankenstein* can be seen as the pioneer of the new genre, as it is one of the first novels in which science plays a pivotal role. The monster that Victor Frankenstein created embodies “a technology out of touch with its society” as well as “the distortion of gender relations produced by sexist discourse”, since by creating the monster, Frankenstein seizes the role of women (Robbins 39-40). By writing both about social consequences of technological change and the debate about gender roles, Shelley suggests there is a correlation between these two issues. (Robbins 39-40).

These two issues did not receive an equal amount of attention because the next generation of writers in the nineteenth and twentieth century using the genre were mostly male, for example H.G. Wells and Jules Verne. To them, gender issues were not as obviously problematic as to women writers such as Shelley since they did not have to deal with the “limiting consequences of patriarchal discourse” in their own professional and personal lives (Cranny-Francis 40). The domination of male writers in this genre can be explained by the emphasis on science, which was an area women had little access to (Cranny-Francis 71). Wells did not address gender issues in his work despite being a supporter of women’s rights, but he did use science fiction to “speculate about the nature of his own society”. Verne in his turn evaded gender issues and even female
characters almost completely, which signified the exclusion of women from this new technology and the power politics that were related to it. The difference between these two writers is that while Wells describes unreal pseudo-scientific situations and “environments by which to explore his own environment”, thereby following the tradition of Mary Shelley, Verne’s work establishes a new tradition with technology while showing little interest in the social repercussions of that technology (Cranny-Francis 41). This latter kind of science fiction is what dominated the genre throughout the first half of the twentieth century; the mayor preoccupations were “scientific extrapolation” and monsters from outer space. Socially conscious science fiction was still being written at that time, but mostly in the form of the utopian or dystopian novel, which shared some similarities with science fiction but also incorporated important differences (Cranny-Francis 41).

Whereas in ‘mainstream’ science fiction science is represented as a solution for critical issues of human culture, this critical issue in feminist science fiction is gender itself to which science is put forward as solution (Donawerth, “Gender is a Problem” 117).

The 1960s were a time of economic ease in the West; there was experimentation with drugs, exploration of the fantastic and bizarre and the freeing of pop culture which generated changes in the genre of science fiction. Prominent writers at that time such as Philip K. Dick and Kurt Vonnegut Jr. reanimated Shelley and Wells and “transformed pulp into philosophy”, yet they still seldom wrote about gender issues (Cranny-Francis 41-42). With the rise of the 1960s Women’s Movement, feminist science fiction surfaced. Science fiction is able to present women in a different, emancipated role, “liberated from the sexism endemic to their society”, which consequently provides science fiction with a task of imagining which is fundamental to change (Cranny-Francis 42).
The legalisation of the birth-control pill and the rise of artificial insemination inspired the first generation of feminist science fiction to imagine “distinctly posthuman and non-patriarchal futures, where new reproductive technologies enable women to reorganize the relations of science, society, and sexuality in surprising new ways (Yaszek and Ellis 80). The second generation then built on the work of their predecessors “by exploring how both new information technologies and other issues of social justice – including civil rights and environmental issues – might impact the production of posthumanist feminist futures” (Yaszek and Ellis 80). In this second generation of feminist science fiction novels, especially those between the 1970s and 1990s, some authors, Joanna Russ and Eleanor Arnason for example, have even gone so far as presenting the disappearance of men as a solution to the problem of gender (Donawerth, “Gender is a Problem” 117).

Unlike realistic fiction that could best “convey the anguish of women’s oppression”, science fiction provides a “wider range of possibilities that women writers can use to criticize patriarchy” which feminist writers used to present alternatives to their current society (Roberts 137). By presenting this better future for women, the necessity for change becomes apparent:

This imaginative visualization of a different society is seen as a key element in the perception of the mechanisms of patriarchal ideology, the breakdown of its naturalization. No longer will it be obvious or commonsense or natural that women are better adapted to ironing or food preparation than men, that women are intellectually inferior, that men are more aggressive. Rather the economic and social determinants become visible and with that visibility comes the possibility of change. (Cranny-Francis 43)
Another task for feminist science fiction is to challenge the already established conventions which place female characters in ordinary roles; this is done by writing about female heroes instead of male ones while representing a social system in which women might even be dominant. This literary challenge demands a “greater degree of textual awareness than had been exercised in the past by writers of science fiction”, a self-awareness that should accord to the self-consciousness of postmodernism (Cranny-Francis 43). Despite the rise of the women’s liberation movement coinciding historically with the advent of postmodernism, the relationship between women writers and the latter movement is ambivalent. There are, however, “strong points of contact” (Waugh 3):

both have embraced the popular, rejecting the elitist and purely formalist celebration of modernism established in the American Academy during the Cold War period … Both movements celebrate liminality, the disruption of boundaries, the confounding of traditional markers of ‘difference’, the undermining of the authorial security of the ‘egoistical sublime’. (Waugh 3-4)

These similarities have thus been exploited by feminist science fiction writers, by showing that the ideas of postmodernism can be used for political ends even though many post-modernist writers lack political engagement (Roberts 137). As a result, it is argued by numerous critics that feminist theory is in fact a subset of postmodern theory. In addition, there are similarities between postmodernist art and science fiction that make it a “doubly rich field for feminist appropriation”, since “SF’s emphasis on being suits it for discussions of gender, a fundamental feature of every human being. This emphasis also evokes post-modernism’s obsession with issues of representation as the only “real” form of existence” (Roberts 137).
Feminist science fiction writers also used cognitive estrangement, which means making the everyday world look strange; by doing so they were able to show and deconstruct “the operation of the patriarchal gender discourse of sexism”. This estrangement is realised by construction a society that is very different from the reader’s, in which the alien technology is far in advance from that of Earth and it occurs in the process of making the unfamiliar technology intelligible (Cranny-Francis 60-61). According to Cranny-Francis, the quest narrative structure is often used in feminist science fiction, but “avoids the cliché by building it into the story and deconstructing it as part of the text. The process of this deconstruction then becomes the process of construction of the feminist reading position, which is the major political strategy of the feminist science fiction text” (74).

Although feminist science fiction is nowadays widely acknowledged, the genre still has misconceptions surrounding it, which are related to the readers who want their science fiction “untainted by the wild women” (Lefanu 179). The first misconception, that science fiction written by women is dull, sprouts from a debate that started in the mid 1970s about so-called ‘soft’ and ‘hard’ science fiction. The ‘hard’ science fiction on the one hand was concerned with traditional science and technology and the “hardware of the future”; this kind of science fiction was associated with the traditional male writer. ‘Soft’ science fiction on the other hand dealt with the new sciences such as ecology, linguistics, psychology and critiqued the uses of technology; this was associated with women writers. The second misconception is that feminist science fiction is merely “political polemic disguised as science fiction”, and that it entirely exists of descriptions of dominant men using women for breeding and nothing else (Lefanu 179). According to Lefanu, these critics are not entirely wrong in saying that women writers have brought politics into the
science fiction genre; “they have broadened its scope and have taken its possibilities seriously” (180). In the 1990s feminist writers are challenging the distinction between soft and hard science fiction that sprouted from the 1970s-1980s as well as wanting to show that a writer can be feminist without being feminine (Lefanu 180).

Atwood highlights the importance of science fiction narratives in *In Other Worlds* by explaining what it can do as opposed to novels: firstly, it can visualise new technologies by making them fully operable and consequently show the possible effects of these technologies. By doing that, it can help us decide whether these apprentices “could maybe use a little supervision” (Atwood, *In Other Worlds* 62). Secondly, science fiction can explore the boundaries and limits of the human and what it means to be human by “pushing the human envelope as far as it will go in the direction of the not-quite-human”, which she does by creating the Crakers in *Oryx and Crake*. These science fiction narratives can also rearrange social organisation as to interrogate them; this is often used as a tool to reconsider gender structures, which brings us back to the branch of feminist science fiction. Finally, science fiction narratives are used to explore the boundaries of our imagination, simply by taking the reader “where no man has gone before” (Atwood, *In Other Worlds* 62-63).
3.4. Dystopian Fiction

The pioneer for the utopian genre was Sir Thomas More’s *Utopia*, written as a report in two books in 1516, and even though it seems as if it should be read as a blueprint for a future or alternative England, More wanted to engage readers “in a critical analysis of the customs and institutions, the dominant ideological practices, of their own time” (Cranny-Francis 109-110). Where the utopian form was highly popular in the nineteenth century, it was replaced by the dystopia as a popular form in the beginning of the twentieth century, represented by Huxley’s *A Brave New World* and Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (Cranny-Francis 125). The dystopia is used as a “prophetic vehicle” for writers to warn us for terrible socio-political tendencies that are already present in the society of that time (Baccolini and Moylan 2), where the central concern is to provoke a reaction in the reader to possibly help change the present (Armitt 194). It is usually labelled as the opposite of the utopia, meaning they are bad places where people suffer and are oppressed (Atwood, *In Other Worlds* 85). To critique the reader’s or writer’s society, the dystopia “combines empathy with this main character [who is a member of the dystopia] and recognition of the contemporaneity of the social formation described” (Cranny-Francis 125). However, the dystopian form is confronted with the inability of readers to recognise the society as a representation of their own, thus unable to convey the critical message (Cranny-Francis 125).

In the second half of the twentieth century, the utopian form appeared again in a postmodern society and it is seen as the product of the three main areas of the political debate ongoing at that time: feminism, ecology and self-management (Cranny-Francis 126). In the 1980s the utopian tendency ended and the dystopian genre was revived and reformulated (Baccolini and Moylan 2);
the utopia has become outmoded since “consumerism has come to represent the contemporary modality of happiness” (Baccolini, “Persistence” 518). Especially Orwell’s novel 1984 drew attention and general interest towards the genre again as well as Atwood’s The Handmaid’s Tale, published in 1985. By the end of the 1980s, dystopian strategies were used “as a way to come to terms with the changing social reality” (Baccolini and Moylan 3). But according to Atwood, one should see the utopia-dystopia more as a “yin and yang pattern” and not as two separate notions, meaning that there lies a dystopia concealed in each utopia, even it is lies only in the world that existed before the dystopia took over (Atwood, In Other Worlds 85). By combining the utopia and dystopia, Atwood came up with the term Utopia, because “each contains a latent version of the other” (Atwood, In Other Worlds 66). In Oryx and Crake for example, the Crakers are the attempt at creating a utopia in the dystopia, in the sense that they will never be prone to the ills that Homo Sapiens Sapiens have to endure (Atwood, In Other Worlds 91).

Both utopias and dystopias can only be fully understood in relation to their historical context; the utopian society entails a suspension from real time and space, it is often located in a separate place or even planet and in the future; it can be seen as a “product of history”, as an alternative to problems of a specific time and space (Baccolini, “Memory” 114). It is often even satirical since the utopia is directed at the society the writer is living in; making these superior arrangements reflect badly on society (Atwood, Writing with Intent 94). The dystopia on the other hand functions as a warning about the possible repercussions of our present-day world and society (Baccolini, “Memory” 115). The contemporary dystopia is defined by its “transgressive potential”, particularly concerning binary oppositions such as human-animal or male-female; it functions both as a symptom and a critique to its contemporary political context (Marks de Marques 135).
The portrayal of sexuality in a utopia differs from the dystopia: where some utopias go for communal sex, some go for sexual neutrality, and some even allow men to participate almost equally in childrearing for example by giving them the ability to breastfeed. Dystopias on the other hand feature some form of slavery or extreme sexual repression (Atwood, *Writing with Intent* 95). The feminist dystopia envisions living conditions that would be described as unfortunate places for women, characterised by suppression of female desire “and by the institution of gender-inflected oppressive orders” (Cavalcanti 49).
4. Genre Discussion

Since Atwood “weaves together numerous themes and draws upon different literary traditions in this book”, reviewers and critics cannot seem to agree on the genre that should be ascribed to *Oryx and Crake*: J. Brooks Bouson describes the novel as a detective thriller, dystopia and castaway survivor, whereas Shuli Barzilai argues that the revenge tragedy is the crucial genre form (Stein 141). These are only two examples taken from the whole debate in which Margaret Atwood herself has even participated: according to her, *Oryx and Crake* should not be read and classified as a classical science fiction, but as speculative fiction as “it invents nothing we haven’t already invented or starting to invent” (Atwood, *Writing with Intent* 285). Atwood does not conform the novel to be a classic dystopia either; the novel does not show an overview of the structure of society, “we just see its central characters living their lives within small corners of that society, much as we live ours”. Instead, Atwood would label the novel as an adventure romance; the hero goes on a quest while dealing with intellectual obsession (Atwood, “Context” 517).

To make speculative fiction more understandable in relation to the classic science fiction, Atwood explains the distinction as follows: “Speculative fiction may be used as the tree, for which science fiction, science fiction fantasy, and fantasy are the branches.” (Atwood, “Context” 513). However, as she explains in *In Other Worlds*, the terms science fiction and speculative fiction are fluid: “some use speculative fiction as an umbrella covering science fiction and all its hyphenated forms . . . and others choose the reverse. SF novels of course can set themselves in parallel imagined realities, or long ago, and/or on planets far away” (61). To Atwood herself however, speculative fiction is the genre that deals with issues that at the time the author writes the book have not
happened, but easily could happen; it “takes what already exists and makes an imaginative leap into the future, following current socio-cultural, political or scientific developments to their potentially devastating conclusions” (Snyder 470), as opposed to ‘proper’ science fiction which signifies “things we can’t yet do or begin to do” (Atwood, “Context” 513).

If the popular definition of the feminist literary critic Ruth Robbins who says that a work of feminist fiction should put female experience at the centre of the discourse is taken into account, *Oryx and Crake* should, at least theoretically, not be read as a work of feminist fiction. Here is where a disagree with her definition: choosing not to have a female protagonist can be seen as a feminist motive, as it emphasises the suppression of female characters in a patriarchal society. By opting for a male protagonist, Margaret Atwood critiques and questions the trend of centring the feminist novel around a female character. Gender oppression still is the source of the conflict, yet it is more concealed due to the fact that she is challenging the established discourse concerning feminist fiction. An important aspect of this feminist speculative fiction novel is the exploration of non-traditional gender roles in the dystopic society order to critique the present-day attitude towards gender. In *Oryx and Crake*, Atwood draws attention to “the artificiality and instability of both masculinity and femininity that leads to porous gender and sexual boundaries” by presenting the reader both traditional and non-traditional characters (Irshad and Banerji 587).

Within the genre of speculative fiction, Atwood portrays a dystopic society that has lost touch with reality, resulting in the eradication of humankind and the creation of genetically engineered humans as a utopic solution. The borders of utopia and dystopia as a genre are porous, meaning that they can “absorb the characteristics of other genres” thus making them ideal for generic
blends (Donawerth, “Genre Blending” 29). These genres thus provide the writer with a liberty to combine them as they please, choosing the genres or forms that are most suited to convey their message. Atwood herself, when writing *Oryx and Crake*, blended utopia, dystopia and feminist speculative fiction in order to deliver her message, hereby conveying to the genre of the feminist critical dystopia, “a subgenre of literary utopianism that has become a major form of expression of women’s hopes and fears” (Cavalcanti 47).

In order to be considered a feminist dystopia, gender oppression should function as the source of conflict, yet it can vary in intensity and approach (Cavalcanti 48). The ‘critical’ refers according to Cavalcanti to three interrelated factors: negative critique of patriarchy and “certain trends in feminist praxis and theory”, “the textual self-awareness in generic terms with regard to a utopian tradition and concerning its own narrative constructions of utopian “elsewheres”, and thirdly in the “critical mass” which is required to have an “explosive reaction”, meaning that the work may have a crucial effect in the formation and consolidation of a critical-feminist readership (48). Looking at the genre in terms of narrative techniques, it paints “an exaggerated picture of the existing power relations between the sexes” (Cavalcanti 53), which effects in “world-reduction”, an “attenuation in which the sheer teeming multiplicity of what exists, of what we call reality, is deliberately thinned out through an operation of radical abstraction and simplification (Jameson qtd. In Cavalcanti 53). Atwood does so by limiting the boundaries of known society to Jimmy and Crake to the Compounds they live in. This strategy is “more easily achieved in the speculative fictional modes” and they “amount to a feminist political stance and a rather radical critique of empirical power relations (Cavalcanti 53). Considering the factors above, *Oryx and Crake* can thus be read as a feminist critical dystopia, situated in the genre of speculative fiction.
5. Discussion of the Novel

5.1. Pornography as a Symptom of Distorted Sexuality

MacKinnon defines sexuality, as “a pervasive dimension throughout the whole of social life, a dimension along which gender pervasively occurs and through which gender is socially constituted; in this culture, it is a dimension along which other social divisions, like race and class, partly play themselves out” (318). If the theory of sexuality would be looked at from a feminist point of view, it would be located within a theory of gender inequality, yet it only becomes feminist when “it treats sexuality as a social construct of male power: defined by men, forced on women, and constitutive in the meaning of gender” (MacKinnon 316). If whatever defines women as “different” is the same as what defines them as “inferior” and what defines their sexuality, the feminist theory of sexuality is in fact its theory of politics, “its distinctive contribution to social and political explanation” (Mackinnon 318). MacKinnon continues: “To explain gender inequality in terms of “sexual politics” is to advance not only a political theory of the sexual that defines gender but also a sexual theory of the political to which gender is fundamental” (318).

Susan Gubar defines pornography as “a gender-specific genre produced primarily by and for men but focused obsessively on the female figure” (713), thereby noticing that pornography has moved away from “obscenity”, referring to the sexually stimulating effects of a picture, film, or novel for example, towards “dehumanisation”, evoking the objectification of women (Gubar 713). The pornography debate has been ongoing for decennia: on the one side, there are feminists arguing for women’s sexual freedom, questioning the need for any kind of censorship; on the other side, there are the feminists who see pornography as an “infringement on women’s freedom” (Gubar
However, these women do not seem to include homosexual pornography as well as child pornography in their attempts to focus on the position of women. Alison Adam, as read in Bray’s article, has observed that the specific topic of child pornography is rarely addressed although pornography has been the topic of extensive feminist discourse. While being one of the fastest growing internet industries, the commodification of child sexual abuse material remains a neglected subject (Bray 134).

Margaret Atwood started her research on pornography for her novel Bodily Harm and soon realised, thereby agreeing with Susan Gubar, that the “cutting edge” for pornography nowadays has shifted from “simple old copulation” to “death, messy, explicit, and highly sadistic” (Atwood, Writing with Intent 12-13). She suggests that society should stop thinking about pornography as entertainment and hereby highlights the importance of asking critical questions such as “is pornography a power trip rather than a sex one?” (Atwood, Writing with Intent 14-15). To make people think about the answer to the central question ‘what’s the harm?’, Atwood suggests three models for looking at the violent and extreme kind of pornography.

Firstly, the material should be treated similarly to hate literature, which is illegal because such literature might “incite real people to do really awful things to other real people”. Atwood uses the mass-murderer Ted Bundy as an example: he mutilated and murdered several women and even though pornography is not the only factor involved in these cruelties, it has provided him with a “variety of techniques” while also making such actions seem socially acceptable (Atwood, Writing with Intent 15-16).
A second way to perceive pornography is as sex education for young men, as it is proven to be a large part of the market for both soft and hard pornography. While they used to learn about sex from girls, their parents, or in school, they now educate themselves watching pornography and, to use Atwood’s words, “are being taught that all women secretly like to be raped and that real men get high on scooping out women’s digestive tracks”. In that respect, pornography functions as an educational tool as well as some sort of propaganda on how to behave masculine (Atwood, *Writing with Intent* 16-17).

Thirdly, pornography should be looked at as an addiction, since it shares some common characteristics with addictive substances: it can induce “chemical changes” in the body, which is perceives as exciting and pleasurable by the user. Atwood compares it to an alcohol addiction: if the user develops tolerance, the boundaries need to be pushed, not only in quantity viewed but also in quality of explicitness: “once the deal was big breasts, then it was genitals, then copulation, then that was no longer enough, and the hard users had to have more. The ultimate kick is death” (Atwood, *Writing with Intent* 17). Atwood urges society to research the harm pornography can cause, which is reflected in *Oryx and Crake* by showing the negative influence the frequent exposure to hard-core pornographic images can have on the development of young people.
5.2. Jimmy’s Masculinity and Sexuality Influenced by Pornography and Parental Figures

Jimmy and Crake started visiting pornographic websites when they were in their early teenage years, before actually acquiring first-hand experience with women which results in both of them lacking the ability or need to build sincere relationships. Irshad and Banerji stress the harm pornographic images can cause as “media representation [of pornography] complements and promotes the image of women as ‘body’, a sexual commodity supposedly always available for the consumption of men and the image of men as consumers” (588). Pornography thus presents women as an economic good with their sexuality constructed by males, thereby contributing to gender inequality.

When Jimmy and Crake were young teenagers, they had unlimited access to pornography websites when Crake’s mother and Uncle Pete were not home to supervise them. Apart from HottTotts, a global sex-trotting website, they also watched “Tart of the day, which featured elaborate confectionery in the usual orifices, then went to Superswallowers; then to a Russian site that employed acrobats, ballerina’s, and contortionists” (102). In fact, the internet that is portrayed in the novel, filled with pornography and every fetish that could possibly exist, does not differ that much from the current state of the internet; Atwood however chose to downplay the commercial aspect in order to highlight the sexual and voyeuristic (Cooke 115). The pornography industry has even influenced mundane broadcasting programs such as the news, which they have adapted into Noodienews which featured naked news anchors. By trivialising sexuality, Atwood “openly
satiﬁzes our culture’s glamorization of violence, its exploitative sexuality, and its disregard for the natural environment” (Stein 149).

They did not only watch pornography in their pastime in high-school, but also live executions, animal abuse, hands being cut off, assisted suicides… The boundaries of entertainment have shifted from witnessing regular intercourse to more extreme scenes, as Atwood also explains in her essay “Laughter vs. Death”, published in Writing with Intent. Jimmy does not seem to make a distinction anymore between sexual scenes and violent scenes and treats them similarly:

The executions and the porn – the body parts moving around on the screen in slow motion, an underwater ballet of flesh and blood under stress, hard and soft joining end separating, groans and screams, close-ups of clenched eyes and clenched teeth, spurts of this or that. If you switched back and forth fast, it all came to look like the same event. Sometimes they’d have both things on at once, each on different screens. (99)

Jimmy only realises the harmful nature of the pornography industry while watching Oryx on the sex-trotting website HottTotts; she seems to be making eye contact through the camera, making him feel as if she is looking right into his eyes: “for the first time he’d felt that what they’d been doing was wrong. Before, it had always been entertainment, or else far beyond his control, but now he felt culpable” (104). Jimmy is one of the characters that deviates from the established feminist literary theory that prefers binary characters, making all females good and all males bad. Even though he still is a consumer of pornography, he is the only male character that questions these sexual practices.
Jimmy also challenges the established discourse of the genre of science fiction by becoming aware of the artificiality of their society: “None of these girls had ever seemed real to Jimmy – they’d always struck him as digital clones – but for some reason Oryx was three-dimensional from the start” (103). In a society where every image and even every object in their surroundings can be manipulated, it is even harder to make a distinction between what is real and what is not, thus making it hard to feel responsible as a viewer for contributing to the industry of pornography. Even though he seems able to grasp “his agency in perpetuating a global demand for child pornography”, his understanding still is limited since he is looking at Oryx as an individual victim (Foy 417).

The person who enables and encourages Jimmy’s critical thinking concerning their society is his mother, who describes the Compounds and their house as being “all artificial, it was just a theme park” (31). The pornography industry thus reflects their dystopic society as a whole: similarly to how it is almost impossible for Jimmy and Crake to make a distinction between what is reality or staged and what is not in pornography, the same goes for the Compounds they live in. They are already raised in a society where nothing is “real” anymore: genetic manipulated meat or other animal by-products, unnatural appearances of people, or even the houses they live in: “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. Or something” (30).
On the other hand, however, Jimmy’s father counteracts Sharon’s critical influence by presenting Jimmy stereotypes of masculinity and femininity:

“Never mind, old buddy,” said his father. “Women are always hot under the collar. She’ll cool down.” . . . Women, and what went under their collars. Hotness and coldness, coming and going in the strange musky flowery variable-weather country inside their clothes – mysterious, important, uncontrollable. That was his father’s take on things. But men’s body temperatures were never dealt with; they were never even mentioned, not when he was little, except when his dad said, “Chill out.” Why weren’t they? Why nothing about the hot collars of men? (19)

Already at a young age, his father makes him aware of his perspective on the different behaviour of women as opposed to men; he alludes that a woman’s temperament supposedly is similar to “unstable weather conditions”, while never mentioning a man’s temper (Irshad and Banerji 587). Analysing him as one of the traditional patriarchal figures Jimmy’s life, he is part of the dominant group in society that prevents problems such as gender inequality and sexual power politics being solved.

Jimmy only seems to feel “righteous indignation” (Foy 417) concerning Oryx when hearing about her experiences of human trafficking and the sex industry and tries to overcome the feeling of guilt that has been haunting him for several years by trying to discover “a link between the story Oryx had told him and the so-called real world” (161), hoping he would find out that it was not real after all. By being isolated from the atrocities in the Pleeblands and only being exposed to the
artificial environment of the Compounds he has lived in, Jimmy was never taught the difference between reality and what had been reproduced. Even after hearing what Oryx had to endure and seeing it himself while watching HottTotts, he still does not seem to be able to accept the reality of the industry: “‘It wasn’t real sex, was it?’ he asked. ‘In the movies. It was only acting. Wasn’t it?’”

“But Jimmy, you should know. All sex is real.’”” (169)

This uncertainty concerning the reality of the pornographic images reflect present-day society: in her article, Bray gives the example of a website where men are encouraged to take advantage of a drunk or drugged girl, to film everything and upload it into the website called “Passed Out Pussy”. While ensuring all the girls are at least eighteen years old at the time, many of them only seemed to be thirteen or fourteen. This website demonstrates “that the line between child sexual abuse material and consensual adult-to-adult pornography is . . . deliberately transgressed in order to maximize profits” (Bray 144-145). In that perspective, the website HottTotts that Jimmy and Crake frequently visit contributes to that same industry and can be seen as a reflection of these types of websites. The expansion of this particular industry within late capitalism shows that “this is not about perverts but about markets and profits: about exploitation and children as object of trade” (Haug qtd. In Bray 145). Atwood incorporates this issue in the dystopic society of Oryx and Crake by making Oryx the ultimate example of child molestation and human trafficking.

Jimmy struggles his entire life to form a realistic image of women, to which the frequent exposure to pornography has contributed; he is unable to judge and interpret behaviour of women in his surroundings. Already during childhood, he objectified women, even going so far as thinking
about them “a lot in the abstract, as it were – girls without heads” (67), being estranged from a realistic image of women. At school, he is distracted by his female teacher, nicknamed Melons Riley, whose “NooSkins T-shirt [was] tucked so tightly into her zipless shorts” (82), adding the thought: “He liked to imagine that if he hadn’t been a minor, and she his teacher and subject to abuse charges, she’d have been gnawing her way through his bedroom walls to sink her avid fingers into his youthful flesh” (82). When looking back on this unrealistic scenario as Snowman, he realises “Jimmy had been full of himself back then […]. He’d been unhappy too, of course” (82). By looking back and criticising his own thoughts, Snowman challenges the naturalisation of the sexist discourse he grew up with, as well as making it visible to the reader. In fact, the scenes of his childhood that Snowman recalls almost all foreground “albeit in different ways, sexual violence, unknowable origins, and the paradoxical status of the witness and survivor of trauma” (Snyder 479).

Being unable to remember the actual first name of the teacher nicknamed “Melons” only adds to the visibility of the sexist discourse and Jimmy’s inability to look past the female sexualised body. The exposure to pornographic scenes thus provides him with a false sense of confidence which he uses to mask his profound unhappiness. Even when he already adapted the identity of Snowman, supposedly being the last human on the planet, he still thinks in these condescending terms about women, for example about his teacher Ms. Stratton: “Let’s pretend I’m here with you, big butt and all, getting ready to suck your brains right out your dick” (44). These thoughts of his former life as Jimmy are so embedded they are impossible to forget.
After graduating from Martha Graham, Jimmy uses sex as an escape and becomes addicted to it, thereby failing to make a connection to women and merely using them for their bodies. He mostly came across married women who were “looking for a chance to sneak on their husbands or partners, to prove they were still young or else to get even. Or else they were wounded and wanted consolation. Or they simply felt ignored” (294). Once again, Jimmy chooses the easy option as it is the impulse he was taught by watching pornography; the female body should always be readily available for consumption. Thinking of women as such highlights the socially constructed power in gender relations: these women should always be submissive and their main objective should be to satisfy men, thereby giving up their own sexual desires. Jimmy however takes advantage of their inferior position so he could manipulate these imperfect, slightly weak women so he could feel needed:

It was the thumbprints of human imperfection that used to move him, the flaws, the design: the lopsided smile, the wart next to the navel, the mole, the bruise . . . After his indiscriminate adolescence he’d preferred sad women, delicate and breakable, women who’d been messed up and who needed them. He’d like to comfort them, stroke them gently at first, reassure them. Make them happier, if only for a moment. Himself too, of course; that was the payoff. A grateful woman would go the extra mile. (115)

With his history of frequently watching online pornography, sexual experiences have always been easily available to him, which “permits or encourages potentially self-destructive sexual behaviour” (“Addiction, Sexual” 26). On the other hand, sex itself also holds power over him, he is not in control of himself anymore: “Even sex was no longer what it had once been; though he
still was addicted to it as ever. He felt jerked around by his own dick, as if the rest of him was merely an inconsequential knob that happened to be attached to one end of it” (297). He is functioning as an addict who is depending on sex in order to function normally, he lets his need for affection guide him, which is one of the ways Atwood suggests to look at pornography in “Laughter vs. Death”. Even Snowman himself makes the comparison between sex and addiction by comparing the “temporary oblivion of sex” to an alcohol addiction: “Sex is like drink, it’s bad to start brooding about it too early in the day” (12). He is constantly tormented by women’s voices from his past, sometimes they are Oryx’s, sometimes “some tart he once bought” (12), or sometimes a girl he actually knows, which he thinks is even worse, similarly to an alcoholic whose mind constantly focuses on alcohol.

Even though Oryx is the first and only woman Jimmy seemed to love sincerely, he is not able to be comfortable and trusting in this relationship. When she would leave him to go to the Pleeblands for Crake, Jimmy sometimes “felt he was merely a house call on a secret itinerary of hers – that she had a whole list of others to be dealt with before the night was over” (374). It seems as if he is not able to forget both her and his own past. Being in the prostitution and pornography industry for several years, it affected Oryx’s mind-set about sex and affection, making it unclear to Jimmy if she really loves him or if she just obliges to his sexual desires because she senses the tension between them: when she seduces him, she tells Jimmy she does not want to see him “so unhappy” about her, and that she always knows when men are unhappy. Jimmy on the other hand is still carrying the trauma of his mother leaving him with him, which makes him constantly think that Oryx will leave him. By their childhood traumas and influence of pornography, neither of them are capable of maintaining a well-functioning relationship.
5.3. Crake’s Lack of Sexual Desire

Crake “didn’t seem to be affected by anything he saw [on the internet], one way or the other, except when he thought it was funny” (99) and does not seem able to realise that these scenes are not staged: “[Crake] said the men were paid to do it, or their families were. The sponsors required them to put on a good show because otherwise people would get bored and turn off” (95). Influenced by the economical consumerist mind-set of the dystopic society they are living in, Crake looks at these cruelties from an economic perspective as opposed to a humane one.

By frequently watching pornography and merely perceiving it as entertainment, Crake now identifies sex and love as a weakness intrinsic to humankind: “Falling in love . . . was a hormonally induced delusional state, according to him. In addition it was humiliating, because it put you at a disadvantage, it gave the love object too much power. As for sex per se, it lacked both challenge and novelty, and was on the whole a deeply imperfect solution to the problem of intergenerational genetic transfer” (227). Crake thus thinks of love and sex in terms of power politics: being in love with someone renders you weak, which makes you prone to oppression and makes the loved one more powerful. If we look at pornography in terms of addiction, as Atwood suggests to do in Writing with Intent, the pornography holds a certain amount of power over the viewer, the addict; the mark of sexual addiction is “a person’s inability to manage his or her life as a result of sexual behaviour” (“Addiction, Sexual” 25). This subjection to his sexuality would thus signify a decreased attention towards his job, something which Crake does not at all stand behind, which is directly opposed to Jimmy, who is unable to control his sexual desires and lets them lead his life.
Never having acquired first-hand experience concerning intimacy, Crake is educated by what he watched for years at HottTotts and other pornographic websites, which caused the development of a simplified attitude towards intimacy. In fact, Crake seems to detach himself completely from weaknesses such as love and submission to sexuality in order to pursue his scientific endeavours. At the Watson-Crick University, Crake uses a student service where the student can hire prostitutes; the price will then be deducted from the scholarship, thus equating the prostitutes with an economic good such as housing or food. Looking for a suitable partner seems like a waste of time to him, which completely accords to the ideas of the University that sex as a distraction from working on scientific improvements: “‘Pair-bonding at this stage is not encouraged,’” said Crake, sounding like a guidebook. “We’re supposed to be focusing on our work . . . I can’t waste time in unproductive random scanning” (243).

While to Jimmy it seems unbelievable that student services provides prostitutes, to Crake it seems more than logical, since it “avoids the diversion of energies into unproductive channels, and short-circuits malaise” (244). Crake is now finding himself in an environment where it is actually encouraged to not find a life partner or to find someone to emotionally connect to. When looking at pornography as a moral barometer, as the conservatives in the currently ongoing pornography debate do, it reveals the “state and character of social sensibilities”; more people prefer to spend their time watching pornography instead of “pursuing activities that enhance themselves, others and their communities” (“Pornography” 813). As a result, social isolation, self-indulgence and degenerate desires increase. However, instead of treating pornography as the cause for the decrease in traditional values, it should be seen as a symptom (“Pornography” 813).
Crake thus puts science in a superior position over sincere human contact and companionship. The scientists, or ‘number people’, merely consider sex to be a distraction as they see how sexual desires make humans weak, thereby trying their hardest to distance themselves from these kinds of people. By abstaining themselves from personal sexual relationships, they reorganise their social relationships and even their own sexuality. Later, when he hires Oryx who he met through this student service, to teach the Crakers about nature and its dangers, he still keeps exploiting her sexual services as well. Just like his vision on sex, his sexual needs were “direct and simple” (369) as well. Comparable to the pornography he watched when he was younger, sexual intercourse is merely a distraction to him, a form of entertainment that should not intervene with his productivity. As a solution to all the problems that sexuality causes, Crake creates his own perfect humans, namely the Crakers.
5.4. The Creation of the Crakers

For the entire human race, their uncontrollable sexual drifts will be their downfall; by surrendering to the Blysspluss pill that promises them protection against all sexually transmitted diseases, “an unlimited supply of libido and sexual prowess, coupled with a generalized sense of energy and well-being, thus reducing the frustration and blocked testosterone that led to jealousy and violence, and eliminating feelings of low self-worth” and prolonged youth (347), they sign their own death sentence. Crake however added a fourth, hidden function in the pill: it acts as a “sure-fire-one-time-does-it-all-birth-control pill, for male and female alike, this automatically lowering the population level” (347). This pill takes advantage of people who are subject to their sexual drifts such as Jimmy, who is immediately intrigued by the concept and actually wants to try it himself. Crake finds test-subjects who can easily be persuaded and exploited, such as poor people, sex clinics, whoreshouses, prisons and desperate people in general (349). Crake exploits the dominant position of sexual drifts in people’s lives, establishing yet again power politics in connection to sex. Crake himself, as a slightly autistic scientist who does not attach great importance to sexual relationships, uses the human weakness for his own benefit and thereby eradicates the human race.

By creating the humanoid Crakers, Crake wants to get rid of the intrinsic human qualities that, according to Crake, contribute to our human weaknesses. They are the personification of his utopian vision on society. Next to dietary adjustments and the addition natural defence mechanisms, Crake made some ground-breaking alterations in terms of reproduction, hierarchy, race and gender. Crake’s attitude towards sex and affection is reflected in the genetic
programming of his humanoid Crakers: mating was a “rare-enough occasion”, “once every three years per female was more than enough” (193). Moreover, when the female is ready, her buttocks becomes bright-blue and releases pheromones that stimulate the males, so “there’s no more unrequited love these days, no more thwarted lust; no more shadow between the desire and the act” (194). Crake alters the human reproduction habits as to “eliminate domination and psychological suffering” (Dunlap 8); “their sexuality was not a constant torment to them, not a cloud of turbulent hormones: they came into heat at regular intervals, as did most mammals other than men” (359). In Crake’s eyes, sexual torments, such as his own sparse love life, the love triangle between him, Jimmy and Oryx and Jimmy’s successful sexual encounters do eventually lead to violence and domination (Dunlap 9). “Sex is no longer a mysterious rite, viewed with ambivalence or downright loathing, conducted in the dark and inspiring suicide and murders” (195).

Here Crake shares the opinion of Kathleen Barry, who states that pornography [and consequently sexuality in itself] functions as “handbooks or blueprints for sadistic violence, mutilation, and even gynocide” (qtd. In Gubar 726). This elimination of human sexual impulses has thus some advantages, which even Snowman realises: “No more no means yes, anyway, thinks Snowman. No more prostitution, no sexual abuse of children, no haggling over the price, no pimps, no sex slaves. No more rape” (194). This realisation is ironic since he himself is guilty of visiting brothels and watching children being abused on HottTotts.

By limiting the need for sexual intercourse, Crake simultaneously solves the problem of overpopulation. The problem that is the downfall of the *homo sapiens* is that he “doesn’t seem to
be able to cut himself off at the supply end”; he “doesn’t limit reproduction in the face of dwindling resources” (139). The flawed manner of reproducing and having unnecessary intercourse that does not lead to reproduction is indirectly the biggest external cause of death according to Crake: he describes war to be “misplaced sexual energy”, which is considered to be “a larger factor than the economic, racial and religious causes often cited” (345) and religion to be based on “misery, indefinitely deferred gratification, and sexual frustration” (348). By eliminating the unnecessarily high sex-drive of humankind, he would, in his eyes, automatically remove the need for war and religion. Crakers do not see women as some kind of trophy they win when they get them to have sexual intercourse with them; they do not have a sense of rivalry between them. If they do not succeed in their attempts at mating, they do not feel rejected or jealous in the slightest, thereby eliminating one aspect of sexual power politics.

Additionally, Crake increased the growth rate of the children, since in his opinion “far too much time was wasted in childrearing . . . and being a child” (187). This increased growth rate also makes for the women having to spend less time raising their offspring, thereby criticising the ‘new Momism’ which states childrearing is the most fulfilling job a woman can have, while at the same time still holding onto the gender roles of the patriarchy by not having the male Crakers show interest in the nurturance of children. In Crake’s eyes, nurturing a child is a waste of time, while Snowman thinks of the fire-tending as “the only thing the women do that might be classified as work” (186). Neither of them thus think of raising children as work; “the home and the hard remain the un(der)value responsibility of the women” (Banerjee 237). The men however need a new important task since that cannot bear children, which is seen as the only important task of the Craker women: “Woodworking, hunting, high finance, war, and golf” (183) are activities that are
not practised anymore yet the men need “something important to do, something that didn’t involve childbearing, so they wouldn’t feel left out” (183). As a solution, Crake attributed a special feature to their urine that would keep the wolvogs and rakunks at a distance; this serves as a skill to make the men again feel important and superior to the women (Banerjee 238). While deliberating every detail concerning the creation of the Crakers, their creator Crake did not once think about an alternative to the patriarchal society they are living in.

By altering the ancient primate brain, Crake was able to eradicate the destructive features, “for instance, racism . . . had been eliminated in the model group, merely by switching the bonding mechanism: the Paradice people simply did not register skin colour. Hierarchy could not exist among them, because they lacked the neural complexes that would have created it” (358). However, the “sex-based division of labour”, which can be seen as one of the most noteworthy factors contributing to gender inequality in a patriarchy, is not considered necessary to improve while creating his creatures (Banerjee 237). Crake, as a radical thinker, cannot “think beyond the prevalent norms of gender”, which reflects “the depth and the force with which gender ideologies are naturalised in patriarchal cultures” (Banerjee 237).

What Crake is trying to achieve by eradicating the human race and replacing it by his Frankenstein-esque creation of the Crakers is what Allision Dunlap calls an “ecological utopia or ecotopianism in which society is not defined by a hoarding of resources and domination but by the sharing of resources and often a “natural” harmony among species” (2). Instead of offering a utopian vision of the collapse of humankind, Atwood offers a dystopian picture, showing the negative consequences rather than the positive ones (Dunlap 2-3). As Dunlap has concluded in her
article in *The Journal of Ecocriticism*, “the Crakers are designed, in short, to solve the inconsistent approaches to hierarchy that are deeply embedded in the capitalist-scientific world that surrounds Crake” (10). Even though this might sound like a solid solution in theory, Snowman discovers flaws that Crake failed to eradicate. By making these flaws visible to the reader, Atwood shows her condemnation for this type of ecological utopic vision. By the end of the novel, the Crakers have shown tendencies to form a religion, have “claimed roles according to gender” and one of the men has seemingly taken some form of leadership (Dunlap 11).
5.5. Sexuality and Gender Roles as a Form of Power Politics

5.5.1. Oryx Undermining the Binary Gender Roles

While Crake detaches himself completely from his sexuality and Jimmy does not seem to be able to control his, Oryx, to Jimmy’s surprise, refuses to be defined in terms of her sexuality. By not letting men define her in terms of her body, she reverses the established power politics between men and women. Oryx is an example of how Atwood’s female characters “show marked signs of bodily unease”, their bodies are “battlefields where anxieties relating to wider power structures are written onto female flesh” (Davies 58). When Jimmy tries to bring back memories by asking Oryx numerous questions, she refuses to provide Jimmy with clear answers. Instead of becoming angry when thinking about her past, as Jimmy would have expected, Oryx even shows understanding towards her mother that had sold her and her brother at the same time; she took it as “evidence that her mother had loved her” (141), which is a highly unusual view on child trafficking.

Oryx was already at a young age taught by her surroundings that everything is for sale, even the human body, especially in the pornography industry, thereby highlighting the economic focus of society:

These men all had ideas about what should be in their movie . . . Sometimes they would say, *Just do it, I’m paying for it*, or things like that, because everything in these movies had a price. Every hair bow, every flower, every object, every gesture . . .

“So I learned about life,” said Oryx.
“Learned what?” said Jimmy . . .

“That everything has a price.”

“Not everything. That can’t be true. You can’t buy time. You can’t buy…” He wanted to say love, but hesitated. It was too soppy.

“You can’t buy it, but it has a price,” said Oryx. “Everything has a price.”

“Not me,” said Jimmy, trying to joke. “I don’t have a price.”

Wrong, as usual. (162-163)

As exemplified in this conversation, protecting and increasing profits in the pornography industry is one of the main concerns of those engaged in the production of pornography. Instead of restricting what is depicted, keeping the images somewhat civilised, there seemed to have been the realisation that “what was once thought of as excessive or extreme was becoming more commonplace”, resulting in crossing certain lines in the production of pornography and entering a taboo zone, which then again results in a demand for even more extreme materials, and so it goes on and on (“Pornography” 818). Oryx is well aware of the power she can exert over men, as she already showed as a child when she worked for Uncle En, luring men to a hotel room and blackmailing them for trying to take advantage of a child. “It made her feel strong to know that the men thought she was helpless but she was not” (155). Oryx is “deviating from her femininity by being sexually adept and expert against the prevalent myth of women as sexually passive, inferior and even sexless” (Irshad and Banerji 590). When attributing these characteristics of being sexually passive or even sexless to femininity, it can be argued that Crake himself also possesses some femininity in relation to his sexuality and the lack of desire towards sexual activity. Oryx
uses this inversion of stereotypical femininity to her advantage to manipulate men with her sexuality.

Oryx refuses to conform to the image of her as a vulnerable woman, scarred by her childhood. Instead of giving in to Jimmy’s attempts to open up to him, she “refuses to be fixed in time by Jimmy and to coincide with the fantasy object he has made her to be” (Staels 442). By not answering Jimmy’s questions about her childhood thoroughly, she is able to remain a somewhat ambiguous figure and to question the binary gender roles. In the vagueness of Oryx’s explanations, “the relationship between mind and body is stressed . . . so that fractured or disrupted psyches result in alienated bodies that become sinister enemies even to their inhabitants . . . ; it is the site on which power politics is exercised and on which abuse is practiced and in turn rehearsed” (Davies 58). By not answering to the image of Oryx that Jimmy has created in his mind, she is able to undermine the power politics that are present in their relationship. Oryx thus functions as a critique and alternative to the established gender roles in the patriarchist society.

In this novel, “science is associated and believed to represent masculine domain and intelligence, whereas art along with femininity is marginalized and suppressed” (Irshad and Banerji 589). However, these categories of masculinity and femininity are unstable and “constructed culturally in discourse” as is shown by portraying Jimmy as emotional and sentimental and Oryx as an “expert businesswoman” (368) (Irshad and Banerji 589). Yet even though women have full access to scientific research, the hierarchies concerning sexuality and gender remain (Capperdoni 53), as is exemplified by Jimmy’s father: “Ramona the lab tech from OrganInc made the move with him [to the NooSkins Compound]; she was part of the deal because she was an invaluable asset, said
Jimmy’s father; she was his right-hand man. (“Joke,” he would say to Jimmy, to show that he knew Ramona wasn’t really a man. But Jimmy knew that anyway.)” (59).
5.5.2. Lethal Love Triangle

Just as in Atwood’s previous novels Bodily Harm, The Handmaid’s Tale and The Robber Bride, sexual politics in Oryx and Crake “is not only a metaphor of global disaster but also one of its major causes” (Wilson 399). Sexuality is the one aspect in life where Jimmy feels superior to Crake: he easily succeeds in seducing women, even if it is by exploiting the story of his mom abandoning him and taking his pet rakunk with her. Jimmy mistakes Crake’s stoic attitude towards sexual intercourse as jealousy, since girls had found Crake always rather intimidating. “[Jimmy] couldn’t help but boast a little, because this seemed to be – from any indications he’d had so far – the one field of endeavour in which he had the edge over Crake” (226). Both men use their sexuality in order to feel superior: Jimmy by flaunting his female conquests, Crake by showing Jimmy he stands above these human needs.

When Jimmy and Crake were watching pornography during their teenage years, the latter made some type of archive of frozen frames of porno scenes which he kept in a folder on his computer, which he did with a frame of Oryx when seeing her for the first time on HottTotts:

Oryx paused her activities. She smiled a hard little smile that made her appear much older, and wiped the whipped cream from her mouth. Then, she looked over her shoulder and right into the eyes of the viewer – right into Jimmy’s eyes, into the secret person inside him. I see you, that look said. I see you watching. I know you. I know what you want. Crake pushed the reverse, then the freeze, then the download. […] So now he had saved that one moment, the moment when Oryx looked. (104)
By saving her image, Jimmy and Crake engage in “a form of fetishistic souvenir-collecting similar to those of the globe-trotting sex tourists whom they watch online” (Snyder 482). Oryx’s look, which Capperdoni describes as “both scrutinizing and nonchalant, defiant and disruptive”, escapes their control; she does not easily lend herself to objectification by Jimmy and Crake (45). As Jimmy later finds out, every move or gesture in these movies is staged and has a price, which raises the question of transparency of technology and the notion of reality. By freezing the frame of Oryx’s look, it turns her into a “sexual commodity for male consumption” (Capperdoni 45).

Years later, Crake uses the picture of Oryx as a secret gateway to open a playroom of Extinctathon. When watching Crake opening the gateway, Jimmy notices the folder is called “HottTotts Pinups” and the files are “dated, not named” (252), meaning Crake did pay attention to the individuality of these women but merely remembered them as a form of entertainment. Seeing Crake use this picture of Oryx as a gateway angers Jimmy in a peculiar way; when he was fourteen, the image made such a big impact on him that he came to see it as his private possession: “It was a private thing, this picture. His own private thing: his own guilt, his own shame, his own desire” (252). Even though he has not met Oryx in person and she merely is one of the many girls he watched online, Jimmy already feels a strange connection and has claimed her as his; she already has some sort of power over him. Crake, having a very observing eye, has sensed Jimmy’s weird sense of possessiveness towards this girl and decided to exploit it. By using her picture as a gateway, Crake has an unspoken dominance over Jimmy.

Years later, when Crake and Jimmy work together in the Revoojenescence Compound, Jimmy encounters Oryx yet again indirectly through a video screen. This encounter resembles so much to
the first one when he was fourteen, he immediately recalled the same feeling: “She turned into the camera and there it was again, that look, that stare, the stare that went right into him and saw him as he truly was” (362). The image of the girl that he was not able to forget now transcends to reality, giving him “a moment of pure bliss, pure terror, because now she was no longer a picture – no longer merely an image, residing in secrecy and darkness in the flat printout currently stashed between his mattress and the third cross-slat of his new Rejoov-suite bed” (362-363). Jimmy immediately is jealous of the connection Crake and Oryx have; when Oryx smiles admiringly at Crake, “Jimmy could have done without that” (366). Since he forbids himself to approach her, he reverts to women in the Pleeblands to forget her. He is, yet again, using women as an escape from his deepest feelings. “The first couple of times it was a thrill; then it was a distraction; then it was merely a habit. None of it was an antidote to Oryx” (367).

When Oryx seduces Jimmy, he describes her as being “clearly a practised hand at this, and so casual on that first occasion it took his breath away” (367). This raises the following question: is she acting upon Crake’s demands, thereby making Jimmy part of her job? Later the reader finds out she still functions like a prostitute in Crake’s presence, and that Jimmy is “for fun” (368), while having intercourse with Crake is almost business-like: “Crake’s sexual needs were direct and simple, according to Oryx; not intriguing, like sex with Jimmy. Not fun, just work” (369). Even though Crake is in love with Oryx, he still allows her to have an affair with Jimmy; by making her accessible to him, Crake knows that Jimmy will continue to work for him on the Paradise Project. This again shows how little importance Crake ascribes to his own feelings; not wanting to give in to his own human weaknesses, he represses his emotions in order to complete his scientific endeavours.
By creating a love triangle between Crake, Jimmy and Oryx, Atwood shows that sex and power politics are entangled in society. If it had not been for the relationship between Jimmy and Oryx, would Crake have slit her throat? And as a result, would Jimmy have shot Crake? Killing Oryx is Crake’s way of showing who really controls the entire situation, as well as humankind as a whole, and Jimmy recognises that this whole sequence of actions is a re-enactment of a script that Crake had already written to happen (Snyder 481).

In this novel, “women are passive objects of exchange”, where Crake uses Oryx’s to acquire Jimmy’s cooperation (Wilson 402). By using the picture of Oryx as a gateway to the Extinctathon playroom, as a reference to find a prostitute “that looked like – do you remember that Web show? … I used the girl for my Extinctathon gateway. That one” (364) and as a teacher for the Crakers, Crake shows his dominance over Jimmy, in the one endeavour where Jimmy thought he had superiority over him. The relationship between Jimmy and Oryx is “fundamentally mediated by the visual technology of the closed-circuit camera and by the prior claim that Crake holds over Oryx’s affections” (Snyder 483).

By having to share Oryx with Crake, Jimmy now feels insecure about the one part of his life where he always felt superior. This is exemplified in Jimmy never wanting her to leave him; he even suggests eloping together in order not to lose Oryx to Crake. The fact that Oryx has to tend to Crake’s sexual needs first shows how Crake exerts power over everyone. Jimmy constantly requires confirmation that she refuses him to give, thus reversing the established gender roles in the patriarchy where men are supposed to be self-confident and not prone to their emotions. When Jimmy asks her if she loves him, she just laughs, making him even more insecure: “That laugh of
hers. What had it meant? Stupid question. Why ask? You talk too much. Or else: What is love? Or possibly: In your dreams” (374). By always leaving Jimmy lingering for answers, Oryx has found a way to have power over Jimmy, to constantly keep him interested in her. This mystery surrounding her, already from when he saw her on HottTotts, is what makes her so desirable to him. The women that Jimmy could figure out in 2 seconds are the ones he was not interested in in the slightest. These women he just uses to kill time, having meaningless sex. When Oryx is going away with Crake for work, Jimmy once again becomes insecure: “Anxiety again, suspicion: were they planning to go off together, leaving him behind? What was it? Had he only been some sort of toy-boy for Oryx, a court jester for Crake?” (378).
5.5.3. Undermining Sexual Politics in Terms of Motherhood

The majority of the lives of the three protagonists are characterised by an absent mother figure, which goes directly against the established role in the patriarchy of a mother who devotes her entire life to her family, and Jimmy seems to be the one that is struggling the most with that situation. After his mother Sharon abandoned him and took his pet rakunk Killer with her, Jimmy mourned for months, not knowing exactly which one of the two he was mourning for. By choosing to leave her family and putting herself and her own values first, Sharon does the exact opposite of what is expected from a mother figure in the social environment that “rests on the preservation and active encouragement of the heterosexual family unit” (Capperdoni 53).

According to Susan Douglas and Meredith Michaels, a “new momism” has become part of the North American values nowadays, namely “the insistence that no woman is truly complete or fulfilled unless she has kids, that women remain the best caretakers of children, and that to be a remotely decent mother, a woman has to devote her entire physical, psychological, emotional, and intellectual being, 24/7, to children” (Douglas and Michaels, qtd. In Foy 407). In order to meet these expectations, women are forced to “sublimate all of their negative emotions as they strive to meet the omnicompetent ideal” (Foy 408). During Jimmy’s early childhood, Sharon did attempt to meet these expectations when she worked as a microbiologist at the OrganInc Compound. When Jimmy went to the first-grade, Sharon quit her job and stayed at home, “which didn’t make sense, because if she’d want to stay home with Jimmy, why had she started doing that when Jimmy stopped being home?” (34). As Jimmy only knows and expects this “new momism” the patriarchist society has assigned to women, he assumes the only reason his mother could have had
to quit her job was to look after him and to spend more time with him, without thinking about her own motives. During the following years, Sharon sinks into a depression and is unable to properly look after Jimmy, which he then again reflects completely onto himself: “She sounded so tired; maybe she was tired of him. (35)” Her depression in itself already proves that a woman does not per se benefit from fulfilling a maternal role, no matter how much the child may have desired that engagement (Foy 110). Jimmy’s preference for a mother who enjoys herself, for example when she is in one of her “explaining moods” (33) and appears “brisk and purposeful, and aimed, and steady” (34) signifies that “the postulation that a mother’s total selflessness is what the child wants and needs” (Banerjee 239) is in fact untrue. On days when Sharon enjoys explaining Jimmy what her responsibilities as a microbiologist were, she felt more like a mother to him as opposed to days where she actually tried to fulfil her maternal role by making him a lunch “that was so arranged and extravagant it frightened him” (36). Jimmy then tries to show his appreciation for her effort which he does by overreacting, making the whole interaction forced and unnatural: “‘Oh boy, my favourite!’ he would say, rolling his eyes, rubbing his stomach in a caricature of hunger, overdoing it” (36). This shows that both mother and child benefit “when the mother lives her life, and practices mothering, from a position of agency, authority, and autonomy” (O’ Reilly 11, qtd. In Banerjee 239).

After abandoning her family and fleeing the Compound, Sharon becomes a devoted activist against practices such as genetic manipulation practised in the Compounds. In the novel, Sharon emphasises the “dangers of unchecked corporate control of human societies and unchecked genetic experimentation” (Foy 409) by choosing her own ideals above looking after her family. She functions as a figure of hope and agency in a bleak future, a positive alternative to her son’s
lack of critical thinking towards the abuses happening around him as well as to Crake’s “pathological solution to the imperfections of human societies” (Foy 409). The challenge that Atwood provides her reader is to look past the representation of Jimmy as an abandoned child, and to not let the positive aspect of Sharon’s escape be overshadowed by “his recalled sense of loss and anger” (Foy 409). The lack of understanding coming from Jimmy already becomes clear when describing the goodbye note Sharon left him: “Dear Jimmy, it said. Blah blah blah, suffered with conscience long enough, blah blah blah, no longer participate in a lifestyle that is not only meaningless in itself but blah” (69). In the original note, Sharon probably wanted to warn Jimmy for what was to come, which is completely overpowered by his selfishness. Ironically, Snowman now has to bear the consequences of the scientific experiments that his mother fought for to avoid. Even after humankind almost going instinct and him being left with the genetically engineered Crakers, he still does not acknowledge his mother’s motives as valuable.

In order to fully grasp Atwood’s intentions, the reader has to move away from the focalisation of Jimmy, look past the role he attributes himself as the abandoned child and his subjective descriptions of his mother’s actions. For example, when spotting his mother at a riot against a genetic modified coffee bean, Jimmy experiences the following: “Love jolted through him, abrupt and painful, followed by anger” (212). The attention is drawn towards the abandoned child once again, instead of towards the gravity and ethical questions of genetic modified food, or as Nathalie Foy states: “It is the pathos of the descriptions of Jimmy as the abandoned child that most overwhelms the possibility of a positive characterization of the absent mother” (414).
The pathos of being abandoned by his mother is undermined by Jimmy’s use of the sob story to his own hands. At school, he enacted conversations between his parents, Evil Dad and Righteous Mom, by drawing eyes onto his hands, turning them into hand puppets: “Evil Dad blustered and theorized, Righteous Mom complained and accused. In Righteous Mom’s cosmology, Evil Dad was the sole source of hemorroids, kleptomania, global conflict, bad breath, tectonic-plate fault lines, and clogged drain, as well as every migraine headache and menstrual cramp Righteous Mom had ever suffered” (68). When doing this act in the lunchroom, a crowd would collect around him and cheer him on, which made him feel popular. Sometimes a sense of guilt would overcome him, but he still continued since “the other kids edged him on, he couldn’t resist the applause” (68).

Additionally, Jimmy uses the story of being abandoned as a child to attract women at Martha Graham. After breaking up with his girlfriend Bernice, he discovers he projects “a form of melancholy attractive to a certain kind of woman, the semi-artistic, wise-wound kind in large supply at Martha Graham”; these women then try to make him feel happier again. Jimmy, however “took care never to get any less melancholy on a permanent basis. If he were to do that they’d expect a reward of some sort, or a result at least […] But why would he be stupid enough to give up his grey rainy-day allure – the crepuscular essence, the foggy aureole, that had attracted to them in the first place?” (223). Unable to receive attention and love by his own mother, he uses the story to attract these women that he himself is not particularly attached or attracted to. The lack of confirmation he has gotten from his parental figures he tries to compensate by doing the act of Evil Dad and Righteous Mom, and later by portraying himself as a hopeless, unloved, broken man.
Oryx is the first person who is able to cut through his “personally inflected self-absorbed perspective on Sharon” (Banerjee 241): “So Jimmy, your mother went somewhere else? Too bad. Maybe she had some good reasons. You thought of that?” (225). She is the only character that is able to develop the understanding that a mother is an individual agent in society; her own mother sold her and her brother to Uncle En, and as a result she became a child porn star. However, she still “understands her mother’s behaviour in a wider socio-economic context than Jimmy’s individual familial perspective on his mother’s absence” (Foy 417). The difference between these two mother figures is that Sharon’s cause for abandoning her child was not self-centred, while Oryx’s mother was paid a large sum in order to give her children to a man who will exploit them.

Both Sharon, leaving her family for the greater good, and Oryx, who shows sympathy for her mother’s actions, offer an alternative for Jimmy’s “understanding of the world through individual victimization” and his inability to grasp that an individual is capable of effecting change (Foy 417). Additionally, Jimmy’s exploitation of his position as a victim in order to gain popularity makes the reader unsure of his reliability as a narrator. Is he actually suffering or is he merely using this sob story to his own benefits? To put it in the words of Nathalie Foy: “the instability of the narrative voice makes it possible to question Jimmy’s perspective of his absent mother and find a redemptive side to her desertion” (417).

Ramona, his father’s mistress, on the other hand, tries extremely hard to fulfil the parental role Sharon was not able to fulfil. Ironically, although Jimmy desperately wants a maternal figure in his life, Ramona’s attempts are not at all appreciated: “Honey, we’re so proud of you,” said Ramona, who’d come decked out like a whore’s lampshade in an outfit with a low neckline and
pink frills. […] Anyway he found Ramona’s new matronly air repellent” (205). If anything, the presence of a new mother figure made him even more bitter about being abandoned by his biological mother:

[Ramona] was allowed to say we and to kiss him, because she was now officially his stepmother. His real mother had been divorced from his father in absentia, for “desertion”, and the bogus wedding of his father had been celebrated, if that was the word for it, soon after. Not that his real mother would have given a wombat’s anus, though Jimmy. She was off having cutting-edge adventures on her own, far from the dolorous festivities. (206)

By portraying Ramona as the unwanted mother figure, Atwood again critiques the patriarchal institution of motherhood that assumes the presence of a maternal figure is always beneficial to a child. Simultaneously, Jimmy romanticises Sharon’s activist activities by sneeringly calling them “adventures”, as if she is enjoying herself while protesting against the hopeless future they are approaching, again failing to comprehend the severity of ongoing business. Even though a large part of the novel, as focalised by Jimmy, focuses on the consequences of a mother abandoning a child, the objective for the reader should not be to hope for new beginnings or the “perfectibility of mothers”, but rather to help the reader to recognise their own flaws and to bring about improvement based on that recognition. In fact, Jimmy’s mother is the “antidote to the passive surrender to corporate culture and to the abuses of scientific knowledge” (Foy 418).
6. Conclusion

Just as in Atwood’s previous novels Bodily Harm, The Handmaid’s Tale and The Robber Bride, sexual politics in Oryx and Crake “is not only a metaphor of global disaster but also one of its major causes” (Wilson 399). This dissertation was set out to explain how Margaret Atwood uses the genre of the feminist critical dystopia within speculative fiction in order to unveil the sexual politics in the dystopic society of Oryx and Crake and how they contributed to the downfall of the patriarchist civilisation. How Margaret Atwood criticises the established gender roles of the patriarchal society and how the choice of genre contributes to this criticism is the central question I tried to answer in this dissertation.

The choice of a specific genre encodes ideological information, which is why it was important to first determine the genre of Oryx and Crake. As explained in the genre discussion, several critics have different point of view, making the determination of genre open for discussion. I however concluded that the genre of the feminist critical dystopia would be the most fitting in the light of my dissertation. The feminist critical dystopia can be seen as “a subgenre of literary utopianism that has become a major form of expression of women’s hopes and fears” (Cavalcanti 47), where gender oppression functions as the source of the conflict, being the destruction of human race. The genre “opens a space of contestation and opposition for . . . women and other ex-centric subjects whose subject position is not contemplated by hegemonic discourse”, making her novel a site of resistance (Baccolini, “Persistence” 520).

As has been summarised perfectly by Alessandra Capperdoni, “the entire system is built on a series of opposites . . .: the rational, genial Crake and the soft, imaginative Jimmy; Crake, with his
male and cold abstraction and Oryx, now his lover, cast as both angel of death and nurturer of the Crakers . . ., the survivor of her childhood material conditions” (54). By questioning the binary opposites established in the patriarchal society through these characters for example by making Oryx an expert business woman who uses her sexuality to her own benefit, Atwood is able to shed a critical light on the culturally constructed gender roles.

Here pornography can be seen as the catalyser of gender oppression in the sense that it functions as a sex education as well as the equivalent of hate literature to males who do not have acquired first-hand sexual experiences yet in the sense that it could encourage sexual violence. Influenced by the extreme sexual images, both Jimmy and Crake think about women in bodily terms, thereby sexually oppressing them. While Jimmy is not able to control his sexuality, Crake completely distances himself from his by looking at it as a weakness intrinsic to humankind. Whereas Jimmy is a “product of the affective system”, Crake merely pretends to be in order to exploit the system to achieve his goal (Kroon). As a solution to free society from this weakness, Crake creates the genetically engineered Crakers and thereby eliminates the tension between desire and the act of intercourse itself; he is exploring the limits of the human in terms of sexuality. While improving sexuality, Crake still does not think about solving the problem of gender inequality: he does shorten childhood but still does not include men in the process of the nurturance of children. Hereby Crake proves how deeply the patriarchal encoded gender roles are rooted into society and that there still is a long way to go until gender equality could actually be achieved.

Oryx seems to be the only woman who can transcend her sexually oppressed position by not conforming to the image expected by Jimmy, which is already a small step into the direction of
rearranging gender roles. When being hired by Crake, she is described as an expert
businesswoman, thus challenging the established conventions that put females in an ordinary role
such as being a mother; she destabilises the categories of masculinity and femininity. Additionally,
Jimmy’s mother goes directly against the dominant gender ideology by abandoning her son and
husband to become an activist in the Pleeblands and thereby criticises the belief of the patriarchist
society that a woman’s life should evolve around bearing and raising children. The women in
*Oryx and Crake* are thus more successful in challenging the established gender roles as the men
are.

Margaret Atwood has provided the reader, including myself, with questions almost impossible to
answer at this moment: how will society solve gender inequality without creating other
disadvantaged groups? Is gender inequality inherent to our human nature? Should we rethink the
concept of motherhood and divide child nurturance more equally between man and woman?
Should we continue to explore genetic manipulation or is it too slippery of a slope?
Works Cited


