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RELEVANCE OF POST-APOCALYPTIC FICTION IN THE PRESENT CENTURY WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO MARGARET ATWOOD'S *ORYX AND CRAKE* AND ALEX SCARROW'S *AFTERLIGHT*

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Abstract:

The present century has witnessed a spate in the post- apocalyptic and speculative writings and movies. None of the previous centuries have witnessed such strong a cultural fixation on the post-apocalyptic calamity as the twenty first century has. From literature and comic books to movies, television shows, and video games, the end of the world is an omnipresent topic. These novels portray the worst catastrophes forcing the readers to face urgent socio-political questions like, fragility of human civilization, threats posed by globalization, effects of neo liberal capitalist supremacy, ecological disasters and so on. Post-apocalyptic stories are mostly set in a time after the final cataclysm, in a non-technological world- a world where only scattered elements of society and technology remain; religion and God have gone extinct; and civilization has totally perished. The time framework may be either immediately after the cataclysm, centering on the psychology of survivors and their sufferings, or quite later, portraying a primitive world inhabited by the survivors of the pre-catastrophe civilization craving for the lost comforts and luxuries that seem to be mythologized and living a difficult life. Post- Apocalyptic fiction portrays a ruined world in which humanity is dying and human beings are turning into cannibals. The reason of the cataclysm may be disease, flood, zombie menace, nuclear war, technology failure, global warming, or even the excessive advancements in medical or technological fields going haywire. In this situation, people know that life will soon come to an end but can't stop living, nor can they avert the catastrophe. This leads to not only the physical and material crises but also critical existential crisis which reaches the peak in Post-Apocalyptic fiction. It is notable that this kind of literature gained extensive popularity after the Second World War probably because the idea of global extermination owing to the nuclear weapons started getting into public consciousness. People started worrying about the aftermaths of a nuclear war, which might lead to the end of the world. Later on, with the advancement in technology, increasing use of computers, and dependence on gadgets and motor vehicles made society and civilization even more vulnerable to collapse. The Post-Apocalyptic Prepper fiction quite clearly represents the 21st century situational anxiety and apprehensiveness of people all over the world, about the impending danger of an apocalypse event. The Post-Apocalyptic fiction has been written in almost all parts of the world: USA, Canada, Britain, Germany, Russia etc., as the fear and anxiety instilled by the present threatening conditions are ubiquitous.

Key Words: Post-apocalyptic, ecological disasters, catastrophe.

Some powerful Post-Apocalyptic novels deserve to be glanced at. Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* (2003) is about the ill effects of globalization and capitalism. *The Year of Flood* (2009) carries forward the story of the survivors of the previous novel. Stephen King's *The Stand* is about total collapse of the society after the accidental release of influenza which was actually meant for a biological warfare,

causing a pandemic, killing majority of the human population. Similarly, in A G Riddle's *The Atlantis Plague* (2015) a pandemic sweeps away the world, killing billions of people. Those who are not dead have been transformed at the genetic level. Some clever entrepreneurs develop a drug which just postpones the problem but never cures it. Finally a war is waged by the competing capitalists. Maggie Gee's *The Ice People* (1998) is set in the period of new ice age, caused by excessive global warming, with infertility and homosexuality on the rise. Though J G Ballard's *The Drowned World* (1962) and Stephen Baxter's *Flood* (2008) have been written with a time lapse of around half a century, both depict the ill effect of global warming leading to heavy floods, forcing people to abandon their habitats. Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006) is probably the most brilliant and multiple- award- winning American novel, set in the world after the unnamed disaster struck, killing most of the population. The journey of the unnamed father and son towards south is the most touching post-apocalyptic story. The plot of John Christopher's *The Death of Grass* (1956) concerns a virus that kills all the forms of grass, including wheat and barley; leading to a worldwide famine.

Hugh Howley's *Wool* (2004) and Russian novelist Dmitry Glukhovsky's *Metro 2033*, both present an underground claustrophobic world, where the survivors of the nuclear holocaust take refuge. In *Wool*, they are living in a multistory silo while in *Metro 2033*, they are living in Moscow metro trains. Both these habitats are complicated and mysterious and reveal many secrets as the stories unfold. Alex Scarrow's *Afterlight* (2010) is about a small civilization surviving on organic ways of life after the world is shattered by a worldwide oil crisis. Matthew Mather's *Cyber Storm* (2013) is a brilliant cyberpunk portraying a world which comes to a standstill after the logistic systems of shipping companies, cell phone services and power are shut down and people start to panic. James Herbert's *48* (1996) comes under the alternative history subgenre. It is the story of a stranded American pilot stuck in London after Hitler uses a biological weapon, wiping out most of the human race. He lives for three years among the debris and the dead bodies, hunted by a group of Fascists. Frank Tayell's *Surviving the Evacuation, Book 1: London* (2013) is one of the seven volumes of the journal series describing the zombies taking over London and the mysterious evacuation process going on. Brian Aldiss's *Greybeard* (1964) is about impotency and infertility, leading to decay of human species.

Collapse of the civilization and government and the extinction of human population are doubtlessly the most fertile topics for writers and filmmakers to speculate on. An earth which has been wiped off of its history and people; where all rules, relationships, manners, society and even faith have to be made from a scratch, seems terribly frightening. Jenny Sutherland's society at the North Sea Complex has its own rules and manners, to suit the requirements of the 400 people who have made these rigs their home, struggling to lead a normal life. The lines from Alex Scarrow's *Afterlight* impressively sum up the negative role of religion in dividing people in present times, leading to mass killings by the fanatics and hence Jenny's decision to do away with it completely.

'There's a very good reason why I don't allow prayers over meals, why I'd rather we don't have organized prayer meeting on any of the platforms.' ...

'We've got ... shit, I don't know how many different faiths on these rigs. Catholics, Protestants, Jews, Muslims... at least half a dozen Hindus that I'm aware of....

'There'll be people here petitioning me for segregating mealtimes for different faiths, for periods of fasting, for calls to prayer at all times of the day. This community won't work that way. It'll fall apart.' (237-238)

Quite close to this is an example from *Oryx and Crake* by Margaret Atwood, where the new human beings- the humanoids or Crakers have been designed to suit the new world. The new world, where not only old human species but almost everything from the old world has been obliterated, has its own new humans also. The properties of these customized humans are succinctly worded by Crake:

In fact, as there will never be anything for these people to inherit, there would be no family

trees, no marriages, and no divorces. They were perfectly adjusted to their habitat, so they would never have to create houses or tools or weapons, or for that matter, clothing. They would have no need to invent any harmful symbolisms, such as kingdoms, icons, gods, or money. Best of all, they recycled their own excrement. By means of a brilliant splice, incorporating genetic material from... (359)

Now, these sets of lines echo each other and also convey the real purpose of this kind of fiction. The kind of life human beings are leading in the today's world is very prone to fall prey to any of these reasons of ruin. The highly advanced capitalist society of *Oryx and Crake* with its excessive bioengineering and guarded compounds for those working for the corporation- Organ Inc. Farms where Jimmy's father was the top geographer, can find a real life parallel in almost every part of the world. The increasing capitalism and commercialization of fundamental facilities of life, like education and health, as it is being done in most countries of the world, including India, may lead to a similar catastrophe not very far off from now. Most of the post-apocalyptic fiction can be called as speculative fiction as the writers of such novels speculate on the fate of the people, after the technologically advanced, democratic civilization in which they are living, falls apart. When looked at deeply, it is found that with the fall of the civilization, the worst human traits are exposed, i.e. greed, cruelty and hunger for power. Such human traits as killing fellow men to meet the scarcity of food; and eating them to satisfy the hunger- with nothing else left to be eaten, are quite vividly delineated in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* and also in Maggie Gee's *The Ice People*. The survivors show their true colours- their animal instincts, hidden behind a decent exterior when everything is easy and smooth in the world. The post-apocalyptic fiction works for the readers like an acceptance of the warning being continuously given by various factors which may lead to an apocalypse in near future. *Oryx and Crake* warns of the debacle which will be a sure result of the increasing privatization of medical goods and facilities. Similarly, *Afterlight* is a warning of the easy fall of the most developed, fast moving and highly advanced societies of the world due to something as simple as the unavailability of oil. The dependence of the human life on fuel for each and everything they do is something that seems harmless and natural till the time its effortless supply stops, as it happens abruptly one day, shattering Britain as portrayed in the novel. So, post-apocalyptic fiction helps the readers come out of their comfort zones and give up the cultural need to deny the underlying problems of the glowing and sparkling civilizations.

The actual danger does not lie in the external factors; rather it comes from the people themselves. The Rig society of Jenny is not shattered by some animal or natural disaster, rather by human beings- the cruel, aroused, wild human beings. The first assault is by the men who are too young to be even called men. Jenny's thoughts in the morning after she sees the same nightmare are "It was worse than the other memories perhaps because the boys had been so young, just babies really- drunk, dangerous babies." The second one is by the Belgian man who seems to be a faith preacher but turns out to be a pedophile and molests and kills two baby girls, Hannah and Natasha. Similarly, Snowman is not afraid of the three humans he sees towards the end of the book. Though he is happy to see the ones of his own kind, still he is afraid of being killed or eaten by them and decides to refrain from meeting them. This shows that the unfulfilled needs like hunger and sex make human beings the deadliest creatures among all because survival at any cost is the motto of all the survivors. The post-apocalyptic fiction helps the readers to empathize with the characters and understand these problems which may affect them some day. This does not mean that these novels would work like survival guides for them rather they give them an alertness to keep a check on the existing problems, on the role of the government and the entrepreneurs, the power structures and the economic equations of their country which can help in averting these cataclysms.

The deepening interest in post-apocalyptic fiction in the present century is significant for every society, as it has a cathartic function for general anxiety, functioning both as a lesson and a warning. The speculative novels work as a warning of a current crisis, such as climate change, or even rising impotency that could become apocalyptic in nature if proper precautions are not taken. The escalating popularity and

complexity of this subgenre comes from the fact that certain traumas are communicated through highly unsettling scenarios, so that they may in due course be processed and prevented. The world of Brian Aldiss's *Greybeard* presents one such scenario, which is highly disturbing and ought to be prevented:

Childhood itself lay in the rotting drawers of the world, a memory that could not stand permanently against time. Since that awful- accident, crime, disaster, in the last century, there had been no more babies born. There were no more children, no more boys like this. Nor, by now, were there any more adolescents, or young men, or young women with their proud style; not even the middle aged were left now. Of the seven ages of man, little but the last remained...

The old had inherited the earth. (38)

The post-apocalyptic novels tend to give the readers the feel of the traditional living, without any use of technology, in short living with the basics. In *Afterlight*, Leona and Jacob remember how the electrical gadgets, lights, music and video games had been an inseparable part of their life and they could not do without them, like most of the youngsters in today's world feel. Leona can't stop herself from telling the kids about the amazing things they had in the old world, who have only "...campfires, candles, oil lamps and only recently, the miracle of flickering strings of light- bulbs. The only music they heard were nursery rhymes and Bob Dylan songs..." Jenny tells her to restrain herself:

It's not good for them, Leona. You can't fill their heads with the things as they were. They're never going to see any of those things. This is all they have....

You have to let go. That world's really not coming back any time soon...

We've witnessed enough to know that... (35)

These novels may motivate and help the readers to imagine taking a break from these wonderful things but the quick, easy and necessary use of these gifts of modern world make them indispensable as long as the availability is there. Similarly, the high tech gadgets and comforts which Jimmy enjoyed were like extended organs and so much taken for granted. *Oryx and Crake* is a warning about the potentially destructive capacity of a highly techno scientific culture. Jimmy's life was enriched with these blessings of technology which he misses as Snowman in the post-apocalyptic world. He misses the food, the lifestyle and the ambiance of the disease free, sophisticated compounds of the totalitarian pharmaceutical companies.

The sense of time is lost in the post-apocalyptic world, which is the most disturbing and scary thing for the characters. This concept is taken up in all the post-apocalyptic novels, but Snowman's feelings are quite clearly expressed by Atwood:

Out of habit he looks at his watch stainless- steel case, burnished aluminum band, still shiny although it no longer works. He wears it now only as a talisman. A blank face is what it shows him: zero hour. It causes a jolt of terror to run through him, absence of official time. Nobody nowhere knows what time is. (3)

The loss of time and the deterioration of language are the worst culprits behind the existential crises that are being faced by the survivors. Loss of words is partially due to their disuse due to the destruction of most of the objects, ideas, activities and situations. In short, the loss of language indicates the total decay of a civilization. The post-apocalyptic world lacks the need and availability of books. This also contributes to make language extinct. The life shown in these novels takes the reader back to the primitive times, when there was no language, no time, no society, no civilization and no rules. Indeed, the horror generated by these books is mighty enough to disturb the readers' peace of mind, but the good thing is that they warn them of the impending dangers for humanity. Most of these novels end at a hopeful note, indicating a fresh start for the establishment of a new society and budding of a civilization.

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