



SOCIOLOGICAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL TRAUMA: AN ANALYSIS OF SELECTED POST-APOCALYPTIC TEXTS

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Abstract

The root cause of environment degradation is the widening gap between human and nature. Man has efficiently committed ecocide making the planet inhospitable for any kind of life. The technological progress has made man blind, destructive and dehumanizing. Human beings have become blinded by the advancement of civilization and hence have stopped thinking themselves as part of the natural world. This paper focuses on writers who have foregrounded the aftermath of a disaster through their works. It is probable that the cultural and ecological climate have inspired these writers to focus on future which is unpleasant but sure to come to reality if man continues to move through the current trajectory. McCarthy's *The Road* (2006) John Christopher's *A wrinkle in the skin* (1965) and David Brin's *The postman* (1985) falls into the genre of post-apocalyptic fiction. In the novels under study we find that the catastrophic event caused by man or a natural disaster has left the landscape barren. The barren landscape is a reflection of the mind of people under distress. There is also trauma of pain within oneself and within society. In such a bleak situation we find that there is an attempt to rebuild civilization and reconstruction of humanity.

Keywords

Environment degradation, ecocide, ecological climate ,post-apocalyptic, barren landscape

Post-apocalyptic literature is a literary genre that deals with people's response to a worldwide disaster which has resulted in the death of many people and the destruction of the entire society. Over time the emphasis has shifted from sceneries of pollution, population growth to disasters, biodiversity loss and destruction of physical world. In the back drop of a post-apocalyptic fiction is the aftermath of a nuclear war, a climatic disaster or an alien invasion. The cause of the disaster is not given any importance; the emphasis is on how the survivors deal with their new lives in a changed world. Post-apocalyptic narrative explored the perplexing nature of natural disaster. These natural disasters made human beings rethink about their participation and responsibilities to the larger world. Disasters whether it is manmade or natural have led to the collapse of an ordered world into a disordered one. Humans have become too anthropocentric, their environmental misbehavior too unconcerned about non-human beings have made nature violent. The so caused doom is self-inflicted which was the result of human dominion over nature. Human experiences and feelings which were at the center till then have been moved to the margins. These situations gave way to the post-apocalyptic narrative which focused on a society after a disaster. This narrative focuses on the impact of destruction of a major city, medical pandemic, nuclear holocaust, climate change etc. on society.

Post-apocalyptic literature has a number of characteristics which holds the genre together. This is a distinct narrative but related to dystopian literature. It also falls under the genre of science fiction detailing events like alien invasion, characters developing futuristic technology. Science fiction and futuristic narratives focuses on possible futures as a result of the development in science, politics, technology and culture. Post-apocalyptic narratives imagine worlds where social and scientific progress has also been devastated and the survivors are expected to build up an existence from the residue. True post-apocalyptic fiction usually takes place soon after the apocalypse. These fictions take place in a world that has been destroyed by cataclysmic event. It mainly focuses on human survival and asks questions about the nature of humanity. Common themes that many of the post-apocalyptic fiction tend to address are survival, breakdown of morality, importance of human connection with nature, inevitability of death etc. The importance of these fictions is that they help us to imagine a different world where the society has returned to savagery. These fiction portray a depopulated world where communication is disrupted, living condition is sparse and society has become degenerated. It also tries to examine the ecological, psychological and sociological changes that take place after the apocalypse. The focus of post-apocalyptic fiction writers is the possibility of reconstruction of society in a post-apocalyptic environment. They also try to reinforce the belief that all humanity is not eradicated. The attributes which established order in pre apocalyptic world is absent in post-apocalyptic world. Post-apocalyptic fiction writers criticize the current social situation and warn us about future. This paper focuses on Cormac Mccarthy's *The Road*, John Christopher's *A wrinkle in the skin*, David Brin's *The postman*.

The setting associated with post-apocalyptic narrative is a barren landscape. This devastated landscape is the absent presence of a landscape that was present earlier. In Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* we find a desolate and barren setting where the father and son move along with other survivors. In most of the post-apocalyptic novels we find deserted buildings, empty cities, and abandoned highways all these once inhabited spaces are now left barren and uninhabited. McCarthy's *The Road* (2006) portrays a post nuclear landscape where a father and son are trying to survive in a primitive setting with little humanity. The father in the novel tries to enthrone moral ethics into the son thus providing hope for the future. McCarthy describes how in the post-apocalyptic world humans have returned to the primitive state of mind. Humans have turned savage for it is the only means of survival. Society has become lawless and brutal "by then all stores of food had given out and murder was everywhere upon the land. The world soon to be largely populated by man who would eat your children in front of your eyes" (*The Road*). There is anarchy, violence, cannibalism and everywhere and it seems as if human race will come to an end if this situation prevails. The novel ends with the hope of creating a new better world.

Writers like McCarthy and Christopher write with the assumption that humanity is not completely eradicated; there is always some hope for a better future. The aim of these writers is to solve the remedy by bringing about a social change. Thus the focus of Cormac McCarthy is the possibility of reconstruction of society in a post-apocalyptic environment.

The characters in the novel are generalized as Father and Son. No particular name is given to these characters. It could be any father and son in any part of the world. The treatment of nature in 'The Road' is different. The landscape has been destroyed by the disaster and so there are no landmarks to show what region of the country the father and son are travelling. Buildings are wrecked and blackened, meadowlands are grey, roads and rivers are covered with thick layer of ash. Similar to the 'The Road' in John Christopher's *A Wrinkle in the Skin* we have a detailed description of the aftermath of disaster on earth. "He stared in disbelief as he came down the last stretch of hill, steeper now, and looked out to where the sea should have been. It was like a glimpse of another planet, a strange savage and barren world. He could see the tangled green of the great weed beds, the rawness of exposed rock and sand. Here and there the glint of water; light thrown back from pools trapped in hollows. But the blue sweep of wave was gone. A sunken land was drying in the early summer sun." (*A wrinkle in the skin*, 26). Father and son in the "Road" have a roadmap with them, but there is no mention of towns, mountains, valleys or rivers throughout the novel. "The weather lifted and the cold and they came at last into the broad lowland river valley, the pieced farmland still visible, everything dead to the root along the barren bottomlands. They trucked on along the blacktop. Tall clapboard houses. Machine rolled metal roofs. A log barn in a field with an advertisement in faded ten foot letters along the roof slope." (*The Road*, 20). They also come across a billboard announcing "See Rockcity" (20), the disaster has completely damaged the city it is as if the whole city has been transformed into stone. As the father and the son walk through the barren land in a state of

hunger, illness, fear and unbearable weather there is always some sort of resilience which help them to boost up their psychological and moral balance.

“what is it papa?”

Nothing. We are okay. Go to sleep. we are going to be okay. Aren't we papa?

Yes, we are

And nothing bad is going to happen to us.

That's right

Because we are carrying the fire. Yes, because we are carrying the fire”.(The Road,87).

The fire within them as they assume is the representative of goodness which they believe will overcome all the evil. The fire they believe will lead them further on to surpass all the negativities and which will help them create a community devoid of social unrest. The dislocation of the people after the disaster is the aftereffect of their own misuse of intelligence. McCarthy pictures the survival tactics adopted by people when they come abreast with a surroundings that is on the verge of extinction. The survivors find themselves returning to a primitive state of mind as it is a question of their survival. The landscape plays a decisive function in portraying the psychic condition of the characters. The father and the son are travelling through landscape which is silent and motionless destroyed by a disaster.

“The long concrete sweeps of the interstate exchange like the ruins of a vast funhouse against the distant murk.... The mummied dead everywhere. The flesh cloven along the bones, the ligaments dried to tug and taut as wires. Shrivelled and drawn like latter day, bog folk, their faces of boiled sheeting, the yellowed pailings of their teeth. They were discalced to a man like pilgrims of some common order for all their shoes were long since stoten.(The Road,23-24) The father tries to picture memories of the old world to the son. He tries to recreate the world that was destroyed.” he tried to think about something to say but he could not. He had this feeling before, beyond the numbness and the dull despair.... The names of things slowly following those things into oblivion. Colours, The names of birds. Things to eat. Finally the names of things one believed to be tone.”(93)

Mc Cathy's descriptions and representation of land is as if the characters are aching with nostalgia for the world they once lived:

“He slept little and he slept poorly. He dreamt of walking in flowering wood where birds flew before them he and the child and the sky was aching blue but he was learning how to wake himself from just such siren worlds. Lying there in the dark with the uncanny taste of a peach from some phantom orchard fading in his mouth. He thought if he lived long enough the world at last would all be lost. Like the dying world the newly blind inhabit, all of it slowly fading from memory.(The Road,17).The character are all dislocated in the aftermath of the disaster. They are dislocated mentally and physically very much reminiscent of the

modern era. The dislocation of the individual leads to social unrest taking them to a world of savagery where physical power plays dominance. They return to the primitive state of mind where communication are disrupted and collapsed. Mc carthy's *The Road*(2006) shows how the activities of man has resulted in a landscape which has become barren. The unnamed protagonist walks through the houses that are barely recognisable. "The house was tall and stately with white doric column across the front. A port cochere at the side. A gravel drive that curved up through a field of dead grass. The windows were oddly in tact"(The Road,111).In '*The Road*' we have the after effects of a man-made disaster while in Christopher's '*A wrinkle in the skin*' it is the natural disaster which affects man." Matthew walked down the slope of land, towards the brightening east. There were a few hundred yards of lane, leading to the main road. Near the top a clump of trees had been uprooted and had fallen barring the way ;he climbed the bank to get round them. Their exposed roots thrust towards the sky, on the edge of a fissure several feet deep. He could see the empty road now and the remains of a couple of cottages. The same total destruction, the same silence."(*A wrinkle in the skin*,20-21).What holds these two works similar is the behaviour of man in anarchic world.

Mc carthy has often been compared to Melville and Faulkner for his use of language by Harold bloom and others. Mc carthy's language and theme of the novel '*The Road*' is such that it crosses national and cultural boundaries. Mc carthy's '*The Road*' depicts a world after devastation he while doing so brings forth the images of depopulated land, barren landscape, wasteland, decentring of man, the ecological concerns all of which are not restricted to any one particular locale. In these diverse situations there emerges the need to survive the evil. The father and son in their journey happen to meet the ravages, refugees, thieves who have survived the disaster. The father is bent upon showing the right path to the boy, and enhances the ability to distinguish the good guys from the bad guys. It seems as if only the father and son have some ethical values within them after the apocalypse. The father who lived in a civilized society cannot come to terms with the savage society. But the son seems unperturbed by the circumstances because the visions of the dead are ingrained in his mind. But the boy displays compassionate behaviour and hence becomes the representative for the recovery of a society after the apocalypse. There is one instance where the boy sees an abandoned dog but he does not harm it. Yet another instance is where the boy meets another young boy and is very much concerned about him." What if that little boy doesn't have anybody to take care of him? What if he doesn't have a papa? I'm afraid for that little boy"(The Road ,85).Post-apocalyptic fiction tries to portray a depopulated world and tries to examine the ecological ,psychological and sociological changes that occur after the apocalypse. There is also an image of burnt library symbolizing that the past , the world of knowledge recorded as laws ,science ,history have vanished. People's access to the past, power of knowledge has been lost. In post-apocalyptic fiction, the writers write with the belief that all humanity is not eradicated; there are remains of humanity, So the focus of these writers is the possibility of reconstruction of society in a post-apocalyptic environment. They have the didactic aim of warning current society. They also criticize the current social situation and warn us about future worlds.

“He was beginning to think that death was finally upon them and that they should find some place to hide where they would not found. There were fines when he sat watching the boy sleep that he would begin to sob uncontrollably but it wasn’t about death. He wasn’t sure what it was about but he thought it was about beauty or about goodness. Things that he would no longer any way think about at all. They squatted in a bleak wood and drank ditch water strained through a rag. He had seen the boy in a dream lay out upon a cooling board and woke in horror. What he could bear in the waking world he could not by night and he sat awake for fear the dream would return.(*The Road*,137)

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In the sparse living condition and the degeneration of society there emerges a situation in which human beings transform making way for behaving like animals . It seems as if the nature reflecting the filthy condition that the father and son are going through.” at evening, a dull sulphur night from the fires. The standing water in the roadside ditches black with the runoff. The mountains shrouded away. They crossed a river by a concrete bridge where skeins of ash and slurry moved slowly in the current charred bits of wood. In the end they stopped and turned back and camped under the bridge. (52).In the barbaric world of frail and disaster, we are still led on to a world of relentless light of faith, the light of fire of goodness they carried with them.“Old dreams encroached upon the waking world. The dripping was in the cave. The

light was a candle which the boy bore in a ring stick of beaten copper. The wax spattered on the stones. In that cold corridor they had reached the point of no return which was measured from the first solely by the light they carried with them." Post-apocalyptic fictions are associated with a wasteland. In this world the attributes which established order in pre-apocalyptic world are absent. The barren landscape is actually the absent presence of a physical world that was there before. The survivors of the disaster face loss of people, place and time. Towards the close of the novel there is pastoral imagery representing peace. This serene beautiful image stands in contrast to the hellish road which the father and son were traveling. The novel ends with the hope of creating a new better world. The novel is open –ended leaving hope that the boy will carry on the 'fire' within him for the betterment of humanity.

Another commonality in post- apocalyptic narratives is clothing and the presence of physical objects like gun for survival. The characters in these type of novels have faded and worn out clothes probably because of the losses they have suffered due to catastrophic event. Clothing becomes a symbol of power in David Brin 's *The postman* when he borrows a jacket of a dead postman to protect himself from cold.

Post- apocalyptic narrative is a narrative of survival .It is the survival story of an individual or a group of people who have survived catastrophic event and struggles to survive in a collapsed/devastated world. The communities that are formed in such situations by these diverse individuals are unstable and they are unable to make strong social and emotional connections. Whether it be Mccarthy's *The Road* ,John Christopher's *A wrinkle in the skin* or David Brin's *The postman* we find that the characters are dislocated mentally and physically. After the devastation in each of these novels we find the societies to be degenerated , living condition collapsed. All these circumstances have paved the way to savagery which for them is the only means of survival. In spite of all these diverse situations there is still a spark a positivity towards the future. These novels help us to understand how they confront the diversities and also try to pacify their anxiety about the future. These novels also makes us understand that these uncertainties and ambiguities as in the novel may happen any time .It is also in a way of making the individuals realize that they must make changes in the social, political and personal scenario.

The conflict between the protagonist and the antagonist leads us to the theme of survival in post-apocalyptic novels. It also leads us to rethink about life and death. The notions of a structured /ordered life/death is broken. There is struggle for survival which we find at its prominence in a post- apocalyptic novel. There is also the picturization of what the society would be like after the collapse of an ordered govt, law, religion, justice. In a post- apocalyptic fiction there is always the tension between trying to return to normal while there is always a threat of disaster. In John christopher's yet another novel *The death of grass* the main protagonist John Custance is warned of the cities being attacked by hydrogen bombs. He journeys with his family and had to face so much of dangers that he is confused as to maintain

certain moral stands or abandon the moral values for the sake of survival. At the end of the novel we find that John had taken possession of the valley but at the expense of his morals.

In post-apocalyptic narratives we find that it is set in blasted and inhospitable landscape the ordered world has collapsed into a disordered one. The landscape is uninhabited but there is scattered human presence. We find abandoned cars and other technological devices made useless because of lack of energy. All the developments that man boasted of as his achievement becomes useless at this juncture. For once man feels that he can lead a life bereft of technology. The force of wilderness has had its play where one witnesses different stages of nature taking back the earth. "Further down the road, he came on the ruins of more houses. He stood and called out, listening after each call for a sound that might indicate that someone was still living. But there was nothing". (*A wrinkle in the skin*, 23) One is reminded of the words of Roy Scranton in his *Learning to die in the anthropocene* where he says "we cannot escape our fate. Our future will depend on our ability to confront it not with panic, outrage or denial but with patience reflection and love". The importance of post-apocalyptic narratives is that it is a journey, a return to basics. These narratives help us imagine a different world – a world where there is only social commotion and disruption. "He did not know how one was supposed to cope with a lunatic in a world broken down to the bed rock of existence" (*A wrinkle in the skin*, 34). Communities are formed for reasons of survival-forming groups among individuals who possess strength and leadership qualities. There is question of survival and breakdown of morality in such adverse situations. But communities are formed. Such communities are formed and evolve because they believe in the renegotiation of trust and morality in the post-apocalyptic world. Thus the post-apocalyptic text makes us aware of recent cultural trauma and encourages us to take immediate action in order to avoid self-annihilation and destruction of our communities. It was Mary Shelley's *The last man* which set the groundwork for the later post-apocalyptic texts which would imagine a future world. The future is uncertain but post-apocalyptic texts will help us to visualize the probabilities and improbabilities and thereby helps us to navigate towards the uncertain future.

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