



DODGING DYSTOPIA

LITERARY ROUTES, GLOBAL CIRCUITS

Editors

**Pradipta Mukherjee
Konda Nageswara Rao**



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CHAPTER 5

Representation of a Post-Apocalyptic World: Reading Jack London's *The Scarlet Plague* in Contemporary Global Crisis of the COVID-19 Pandemic

Samit Kumar Maiti

The English word “apocalypse” is derived from the Greek word “apokalupsis,” which means “an unveiling, either of future events, or of the unseen realms of heaven and hell” (Glasson 1). However, the other conventional meanings of apocalypse are revelation or uncovering and disclosure. The concept of “apocalypse” has its origin in Christian tradition chiefly related to the Revelation of John, the last book of the *New Testament*, in which God displays a vision of the world’s end and subsequent resurrection. The idea of apocalypse attained critical currency in the West since the early days of Christianity, and many artists have been fascinated by the imaginative and fictional potential of the apocalypse. Apocalypse still remains a powerful source of inspiration for artists, writers, and film-makers. Amy Murphy rightly thinks that the apocalyptic trope happens to be one of the predominant metaphors in the cultural life of modernity that embodies the “collective unconscious for several millennia” (234).

Apocalyptic writings have been a very popular genre of writing in America. Charles Brockden Brown, Edgar Allan Poe, Ambrose Bierce, Herman Melville and William Faulkner are some of the most notable practitioners of this genre of literature. An apocalyptic writing is the writer’s conception of the destruction of an old world and the establishment of a new world. According to David Ketterer, apocalyptic imagination may be defined:

in terms of its philosophical preoccupation with that moment of juxtaposition and consequent transformation or transfiguration when an old world of mind discovers a new world of mind, which wither nullifies and destroys the old system entirely or, less likely, makes it a part of larger design. (44)

So, a preoccupation with the destruction of the old-world order happens to be one of the basic elements of American apocalyptic literature; but at the same time, the apocalyptic imagination requires that “the destructive chaos give way finally to a new order” (44).

Serialized in the *London Magazine* in 1912 and published in 1915 in book form, Jack London’s *The Scarlet Plague* is often categorised as “post-apocalyptic fiction”. Since the Apocalypse of John is associated with horror, the post-apocalyptic fictions invariably provoke a sense of horror through their narratives. The post-apocalyptic fictions are based on the prolepsis – an anticipation and answering – of future calamity and the fantasy of the total or near-total destruction of mankind from the face of the earth. Jack London’s *The Scarlet Plague* is based on another remarkable apocalyptic fiction, Mary Shelley’s *The Last Man* (1826), which is “an apocalyptic vision of earth’s depopulation through plague” (Snyder 435). *The Scarlet Plague* is also a “contemplation of the near extinction of the human race by a fast-acting and untreatable plague” (Berkove 251). It is a futuristic novel dealing with the cataclysmic effects caused by the sudden outbreak of a terribly infectious and untreatable plague in the city of San Francisco and offers the dystopian vision of a world with unfamiliar, uncontrollable, and unpredictable future.

The story takes place in 2073, sixty years after a deadly infectious disease, the “Scarlet Plague”, has wiped out almost the entire population of the fictional city of San Francisco. The novelist anticipates the events taking place in 2073, when people live in the forest in the most savage state. The picture of the city presented in the opening section of the novella is that of a post-apocalyptic America. Professor James Howard Smith, a professor of English Literature, who has luckily survived the plague is seen to be wandering in the forest with his three grandsons, Edwin, Hoo-Hoo and Hare-Lip. Deprived of education, these young children cannot understand a sophisticated language and lead a savage life. Professor James Howard Smith, now known as “Granser”, is the mediator between the two civilisations: pre-plague and post-plague. Granser recapitulates how the “scarlet plague” spread with astonishing

quickness to wipe out the entire population in the major cities of America. People “died everywhere – in their beds, at their work, walking along the street” (22). There were huge conflagrations in the cities. Granser describes:

The sights in the streets were terrible. One stumbled on bodies everywhere. Some were not yet dead. And even as you looked, you saw men sink down with the death fastened upon them. There were numerous fires burning in Berkeley, while Oakland and San Francisco were apparently being swept by vast conflagrations. The smoke of the burning filled the heavens, so that the midday was as a gloomy twilight, and, in the shifts of wind, sometimes the sun shone through dimly, a dull red orb. Truly, my grandsons, it was like the last days of the end of the world. (30)

The image presented in this section is that of chaos and the crumbling of a civilisation. This reminds us of the Biblical Doomsday. But apocalypse “usually tends to be not an absolute wipe-out, merely a clearing of the decks in the anticipation of a new beginning” (Lisboa 9). So, Granser’s survival is a necessity for the continuation of humankind into the future.

While most of the apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic fictions are typically labelled dystopian, the plots are organised in such a way as to reveal contemporary utopian ideals. Elana Gomel explains the rationale behind this apparent dichotomy in her article “The Plague of the Utopias: Pestilence and the Apocalyptic Body”:

The apocalypse is meshed in the logic of continuity.... The end is never final....The equivalent of the scriptural millennium today is utopia, a total transformation of the social (and even physical) universe, some ideologically scripted brave new world, arising from the destruction of the old....Millennial seduction is predicted on the relation between the horror of the closure and the pleasure of the sequel (407-8).

Apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic fictions present time as a linear sequence of moments. Apocalypse is not the final closure but a temporary moment of discontinuation. As an instance of post-apocalyptic fiction London’s *The Scarlet Plague* embodies a set of desires to be fulfilled in future: the desire for a society based on the socialist ideal of equality, and a balanced relationship with nature. London was a socialist who believed that the transformation of society would come through radical means. In an interview London had remarked: “I have always advocated [a] destructive theory of socialism because you must tear down before you can build up. That is why I have always assailed the existing order of things so savagely...” (Ruh et al. 70). London suggests that although the

characters in the story lacked the benefits of modern civilisation, their naturalistic life had its myriad advantages. The gross inequality and discriminations that existed among the people in the past are absent in the life of the forest. This is not surprising given the fact that London was a staunch advocate of the principles of socialism, hence he strongly believed in the equitable distribution of resources.

London is therefore critical of the social order that existed before the “scarlet plague” broke out: “Our food-getters were called freeman. This was a joke. We of the ruling classes owned all the land, all the machines, everything. These food-getters were our slaves. We took almost all the food they got, and left them a little so that they might eat, and work, and get us more food...” (London 14). This quotation brings out the crude instances of discrepancy and absurdity in the social patterns of modern society. This kind of inequality was unthinkable in the society in which Granser and his grandsons lived. As a sophisticated form of apocalyptic narrative, Jack London’s *The Scarlet Plague* offers a cultural critique of rigid class divisions based on economic conditions of the people in early twentieth century.

Like the majority of the post-apocalyptic fiction, London’s *The Scarlet Plague* pays special attention to man’s future relationship with nature. This is not surprising given the fact that the theme of conflict between man and nature had been a dominant theme in American literature. The Christians, like the Greeks and the Hebrews, believed in the linear perspective of time. So the belief in an impending apocalypse could hardly enhance any hope for a future harmonious relationship between man and nature, or between the pure and the impure.

The apocalyptic imagination finds its most exquisite expression in science fiction, because most of the corpus of science fiction is concerned with the philosophical explorations of some radical disorientation, particularly with the sense of an ending. Despite its faith in science, the modern world shows its propensity for the concoction of fantastic doomsday and apocalyptic scenarios. Jack London had been a prolific writer of fiction and his novella, *The Scarlet Plague*, belongs to the genre of science fiction. As an accomplished practitioner of science fiction, London in this novella has revealed, what Carl Gustav Jung, the eminent psychoanalyst, calls the “primordial vision.”

Interestingly, the phantasmagoric scenario presented in the novel is emblematic of the contemporary scenario with the unprecedented global crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. As plague was an infectious disease, people made their desperate attempts to isolate themselves from the affected people. Similarly, the terms and phrases like “social distancing”, “physical distancing”, “isolation”, and “quarantine” have acquired new currency during the pandemic. Apart from this, there was a prevalent mass madness for accumulating food and necessities when lockdown was announced. This situation finds a striking parallel in the novel in which London describes the robbery of a grocery shop:

There was a grocery store – a place where food was sold. The man to whom it belonged – I knew him well – a quiet, sober, but stupid and obstinate fellow, was defending it. The windows and doors had been broken in, but he, inside, hiding behind a counter, was discharging his pistol at a number of men on the sidewalk who were breaking in. In the entrance were several bodies – of men, I decided, whom he had killed earlier in the day. Even as I looked on from a distance, I saw one of the robbers break the windows of the adjoining store, a place where shoes were sold, and deliberately set fire to it. I did not go to the grocery man's assistance. The time for such acts had already passed. Civilisation was crumbling, and it was each for himself. (London 30)

The novel draws our attention to some cardinal aspects of human behaviour during a crisis, but most importantly, the novel serves as a warning about the vulnerability of our state and civilisation.

While trying to explain the cause of rapid spread of the plague in the major cities of America, London puts forward the argument that it was population density in the big cities which was the key factor for the deaths of a huge number of people. He says:

Long and long and long ago, when there were only a few men in the world, there were few diseases. But as men increased and lived closely together in great cities and civilisations, new diseases arose, new kinds of germs entered their bodies. Thus were countless millions and billions of human beings killed. And the more thickly men packed together, the more terrible were the new diseases that came to be. (17)

This is equally true for the present COVID-19 pandemic situation. Although the Corona virus has affected 219 countries and killed, till date, more than three million people, the statistics show that it has severely affected the metropolitan cities like Venice, Paris, Madrid, New York and almost all the other big cities of the world. Comparatively less affected are African countries like Congo, and

countries like Bhutan, Vietnam, Peru and Uruguay. Moreover, people living in the villages and the communities living in forests were less affected than the people living in the cities.

In the plague novels, plague is usually presented as a force that destabilises social hierarchies and works as a social equaliser. Clayton Carlyle Tarr justly remarks: “Plague fiction invariably exposes the chaos of social breakdowns to reveal that the economic and ideological barriers that society constructs are easily conquered by indiscriminate and capricious forces” (142). This is one of the reasons why the plague novels like Mary Shelley’s *The Last Man* did not initially receive a favourable reception after its publication. The harmful effects of the disease are not confined to age, sex, rank, or wealth and thus it works as a benevolent force to destroy the artificial boundaries and barriers in society on the basis of class, caste, economic status. Richard Fenn thinks “an apocalyptic vision...seeks to exorcise the complexities of the social order...” (109). There is a suggestion that social good may come out the pandemic. The radical changes in the social and community life during the pandemic may bring about some radical reformation and improvement, making people conscious about healthy lifestyles and practices. For instance, wearing masks particularly while going outside may help to fight many forms of health hazard.

The closing pages of *The Scarlet Plague* are reflective of the despondency of the author, as Granser laments over the decreasing impact of his tale. In the concluding section of the novella Granser comes to accept the cyclical nature of human fate to repeat its mistakes. Granser grows despondent as he thinks that though there is reliable information to share nobody is interested in listening to those narratives. Tarr’s remarks in this context demands special attention:

There is a dark skepticism that colours London’s novel, an alienating anxiety about the role and responsibility of art either to solve or to prevent threats against humanity. London’s modernist take on plague fiction not only questions the capacity of the novel to effect change, but also distrusts the promise of readers to heed its message. For, no matter the books that Granser hoards, and regardless of who may read them, humanity is doomed to its fate. (153)

Granser’s remarks on the callousness of the people seem to be highly relevant when we consider the present global crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Like the plague, Corona is a highly infectious viral disease. Within a few months the virus had spread to

every nook and corner of the globe with astonishing rapidity. The scientists had prescribed, among others, the methods of wearing masks and maintaining physical distancing to restrict the spread of the virus. Most of the countries had to adopt the policy of “lockdown” as a final measure to control the deadly spread of the disease. Despite all these measures, the world still continues to suffer immensely, as the number of deaths and affected people increases every minute, the funeral pyres keep burning in India, and dead bodies keep floating down the river Ganga.

With the economic systems that sustain both the rich and poor countries collapsing, the sufferings and miseries of the poor people have become immeasurable. COVID-19 pandemic happens to be one of the most serious disasters in world history. Even before the world had recovered fully from the disastrous effects of the first wave of pandemic, there appeared the second wave to bring humanity to the nadir of suffering, horror and tragedy. Although there may have been several reasons behind the successive waves, one of the reasons is undeniably people’s callousness towards the warnings and recommendations of the doctors, scientists, and researchers. Despite repeated warnings, a large number of people show their apathy towards wearing masks and they refuse to pay heed to the warnings of the scientists. Washing hands regularly or sanitising them are also viewed as signs of eccentricity. Religious gatherings, political gatherings, celebrations still continue to occur rampantly, which remind us of Hegel’s succinct but very pertinent remark in *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*: “The only thing we can learn from history is that we learn nothing from history” (143).

Man’s instinct for survival is best exhibited in London’s novella where he describes the mass migration from the big cities affected by plague: “Already the people had fled from the city by millions – at first the rich, in their private motor-cars and dirigibles, and then the great mass of the population, on foot, carrying the plague with them, themselves starving and pillaging the farmers and all the towns and villages on the way” (24). This may bring to our mind the memory of millions of migrant labourers crossing hundreds of miles along Indian roads after the nationwide lockdown was announced in the month of March, 2020, probably each and every individual was desperately trying to survive the threat of the virus. We have, as a society, let us not forget, tried to survive ever since by either overlooking or consigning the horrible saga of suffering and

experience, the living dystopias of the migrant labourers, to some amnesiac limbo.

Jack London's novella is thus a testimony to his astonishing versatility as an imaginative artist and his remarkable ability to create a world of fantasy and macabre reality. A Biblical text is like a medical metaphor with its potential to offer insights to counter a disease. What Tarr remarks in the analysis of Charles Brockden Brown's *Arthur Mervyn* (1799) and Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* (1826), the two classic specimens of the plague novel, is equally relevant to London's *The Scarlet Plague*. Tarr comments:

...the novels (*Arthur Mervyn* and *The Last Man*) are as much concerned with the recuperative power of writing as they are with the devastating effects of the plague. Brown and Shelley not only promote novel-writing as an antidote against contagion, but also suggest that novels—through their particular properties as popular, addictive, and enduring sources of information and imagination—could prevent future outbreaks. (142)

Post-apocalyptic narratives do not usually depict the image of total annihilation of all living creatures. Rather, in conformity with the original Biblical connotation of the word “apocalypse,” an apocalyptic as well as a post-apocalyptic narrative offers a prospect for future resurgence of mankind. Structurally, an apocalypse has therefore dual functions: one represents the horrendous scene of catastrophe with the risk of extinction or near extinction of mankind, and the other offers a ray of hope for transition and a new beginning. The aesthetic function of an apocalyptic narrative is not merely to provide an element of horror but also a sliver of hope. It is this particular nature of post-apocalyptic fiction to function as a therapy, as a medium of recuperation, as a spiritual consolation, that has seen scholars show their renewed interest in re-reading a plague novel to counter the pandemic created by another infectious disease.

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