

THE THEME OF APOCALYPSE IN AMERICAN SCIENCE FICTION

Akhmedov R.Sh.

*Akhmedov Rafael Sharifovich - senior teacher,
DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH AND LITERATURE,
GULISTAN STATE UNIVERSITY, GULISTAN, REPUBLIC OF UZBEKISTAN*

Abstract: *the article is devoted to the theme that has always played an important role in American science fiction and continues to grip the imagination of authors – the end of the world theme, which is treated under a cluster of sub-themes including apocalypse, disaster, post-apocalypse, and survival. The research is done in a form of an overview of those American science fiction works in which the apocalyptic theme prevails over the others.*

Keywords: *science fiction (SF), apocalyptic theme, catastrophe, civilization, Asimov, Shute, Brin, posthumanism.*

UDC 821.111(73)

Apocalyptic vision, destruction of the world and annihilation of the human race, which have primarily been inspired by mythology, can be traced back to the naturalist writers, which works present the natural world and its history popularizing the notion that a series of worlds had occupied the Earth going through various natural cycles involving “erosion, floods, volcanoes and other natural phenomena” [1, p.20]. Post-apocalyptic narratives are set in a world or civilization after such a disaster has taken place. In this respect, cataclysm, natural or manmade, has been portrayed in American science fiction (SF) as being the product of a wide range of causes including “evolutionary changes caused by natural catastrophes, ecological changes” [2, p.85] which refer to the interference with nature, plague as an agent of holocaust, massive mutation in plants, animals and humans due to the use of “nuclear weapons, and nuclear power which has been the most popular agent of SF since World War II” [3, p.91]. It is important to note that such stories of disaster and apocalypse have not been particularly popular in the USA before World War II for the American optimistic attitudes and expansionist ideology run counter to the ideology of disaster and annihilation. Indeed, “most of the examples of this type are from the UK” [4, p.1], the fact which may be understood as being related to the UK’s decline as a world power throughout the 20th century after having enjoyed supremacy as a world-wide empire for centuries.

The period confirmed and warned of the danger of adapting the new scientific knowledge to military uses which might end human life in minutes, or hours at most. Consequently, there was a resurgence, to an even higher level, of the end of the world theme which stressed a distinctively apocalyptic atmosphere and concentrated on the results of nuclear power in general and radiation in particular. The mood depicted in American SF stories of the post-war era was darker and gloomier in that the catastrophes were primarily man-made and that humans might easily destroy themselves and their world as weapons became even more sophisticated and powerful.

The idea of wholesale destruction and nuclear holocaust gained ground steadily among writers both in the USA and Europe. All traditional concepts of courage, heroism and the noble sacrifice of soldiers became irrelevant as “war was dominated by machinery and the logic of combat was dictated by technological considerations” [5, p.42]. After the experience of global war, SF writers continued in the same tradition of disaster emphasizing “natural catastrophes, cosmic factors or biospheric changes which drastically affect human life and civilization” [6, p.91]. Notable examples from that period include W.Tucker’s “The Long Loud Silence” (1952) which is one of the most famous of the American disaster novels. The story depicts a veteran of combat duty on leave from service in the Korean War who awakes one day to discover that a nuclear attack has decimated the entire area east of the Mississippi with the effect that one half of the USA is in strife against the infected half. In N.Shute’s “On the Beach” (1957), a nuclear war has destroyed the Northern hemisphere and air currents slowly carry radioactive dust to the far south of the globe, the only part of the planet still habitable. The story ends with the complete extinction of humanity as radiation sickness appears due to the spread of the fallout and the Australian government provides citizens with suicide pills to avoid suffering from the symptoms of radiation poisoning.

A more horrific scenario is narrated in “Alas, Babylon” (1959) by P.Frank who depicts the aftermath of a nuclear war at a time when the Cold War was at its height. The war breaks out, nuclear weapons destroy all major cities in the USA, disorder prevails leading to killing, banditry and suicide, and people suffer from radiation poisoning. A similar spirit is found in I.Asimov’s “Hell-Fire” (1957) which focuses on the legacy of modern science that hastens the cataclysmic end of the world. Moreover, I.Asimov wrote a non-fiction book “The Catastrophe Choice” completely devoted to the apocalyptic theme in SF.

American SF writers have also been interested in this period of despair and grimly pessimistic reality in other kinds of disaster: “plague, pollution, climate change and the destruction of the Earth’s ecosphere” [7, p.4] which appear in such works as W.Moore’s “Greener than You Think” (1947), where grass grows uncontrollably and riotously engulfing Los Angeles as a result of spraying a lawn with untested chemical spray; J.Christopher’s

“The World in Winter” (1962) about terrible cold that persists all over the Northern hemisphere with thousands of miles of snow desert leading to a holocaust out of which only a few people could hope to survive.

Reflecting an eco-disaster, T.M.Disch tells in “The Genocides” (1965) about a world overrun by plants which are seeded by aliens and which grow rapidly draining the Earth resources and causing the extinction of humanity. B.Aldiss, on the other hand, deals in “Greybeard” (1964) with mass infertility and the impending extinction of the human race fifty years after the nuclear explosions in space irradiated the planet.

P.Wylie turns to environmental disasters caused by man’s heavy reliance on science and industry to illustrate the end of the world in “The End of the Dream” (1972). The same fate occurs in “The Inferno” (1973) by Fred and Geoffrey Hoyle where cosmic radiation causes a global disaster wiping out nearly all human life. The story of “Lucifer’s Hammer” (1977) by L.Niven and J.Pournelle offers horrifying details of the collision of a comet “Hammer” with Earth. The Hammer falls breaking up into several smaller comets that strike around the world causing volcanoes, earthquakes and tsunamis with devastating results leading to the crumbling of civilization and to battles between people for survival. It is believed that “Hammer” is “The Hammer of God” that punishes humanity for its destructive civilization.

S.King’s novel “The Stand” (1978) provides a different scenario for a massive cataclysm caused by the spread of a man-made biological weapon, a super flu virus, which wipes out most of the human population. The few survivors are engaged in a battle between the forces of good and evil to determine who will rebuild the world.

In addition to the previously mentioned causes of apocalypse, global warming, bio-warfare, endangered species, and refugees from ecological disasters are all featured in such novels as “Earth” (1990) by D.Brin, “Mother of Storms” (1994) by J.Barnes, “A Chilling Warmth” (2002) by J.Kaplan, “Nothing Human” (2003) by N.Kress, “Forty Signs of Rain” (2004) by K.S.Robinson, and “World Made by Hand” (2008) by J.H.Kunstler. The latter describes life in a village in Upstate New York after America collapses in 2025 under the combined disasters of peak oil, global warming, influenza epidemic, and nuclear terrorism. The surviving characters struggle to rebuild a pre-industrial and pre-technological society.

References

1. *Avin, S., Wintle, B.C., Weitzdorfer, J., Heigeartaigh, S.S., Sutherland, W.J., Rees, M.J.* Classifying Global Catastrophic Risks. // *Futures*, 102, 2018. –P.20-26. doi: 10.1016/j.futures.2018.02.001
2. *Blackford, R.* Science Fiction and the Moral Imagination. *Visions, Minds, Ethics.* – Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2017.
3. *Fest, J.B.* The Apocalypse Archive: American Literature and the Nuclear Bomb: PhD thesis. – Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh, 2013.
4. *Guo, J.* *McCarthy’s ‘The Road’ and Ethical Choice in a Post-Apocalyptic World.* // *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture*, 17(5), 2015. doi: 10.7771/1481-4374.2732.
5. *Jadwat, N.* Postmodern Apocalyptic Visions of the Future: Arthur C. Clarke, SF Film and the Quest for Final Meaning: MA thesis. – Westville: University of Kwa-Zulu Natal, 2005.
6. *Moon, H.* The Post-Apocalyptic Turn: A Study of Contemporary Apocalyptic and Post-Apocalyptic Narrative: PhD thesis. – Milwaukee: University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2014.
7. *Pavelecky, A.M.* Examining the Tribal “Other” in American Post-Apocalyptic Fiction: MA thesis. Cleveland: Cleveland State University, 2013.