

Apocalyptic Vision in J. G. Ballard's "Billennium": An Eco-critical Study

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Abstract

J. G. Ballard's "Billennium" presents apocalyptic consciousness. This paper argues that Ballard uses the rhetoric of apocalypse to visualize the impending disaster caused by the problem of overpopulation. It attempts to analyze the story in the light of Friedrich Buell, Greg Garrard and Lawrence Buell's concept of apocalypse within environmental discourses. The nature of apocalypse in the story is not the usual presentation of violent or cataclysmic end of everything but comic in the sense that it 'unveils' or 'uncovers' the weaknesses and follies of human beings such as greed for money and power that are responsible for the looming threats of the problem of overcrowding and loss of space in the near future.

Key words: *apocalypse, overpopulation, ecocriticism, dystopia*

The paper argues that J. G. Ballard uses the rhetoric of apocalypse in his short story "Billennium" to visualize the impending disaster caused by the problem of overpopulation. The word apocalypse comes from the Greek 'apokalypsis' which means "unveiling" or "uncovering". It is a discloser of knowledge or revelation. In the field of religion, the word gives a sense of the end of the world. Garrard writes that the "distinctive construction of apocalyptic narratives that inflects much environmentalism today began around 1200BCE, in the thought of the Iranian prophet Zoroaster, or Zarathustra" (85). It also has its origin in the Book of Revelation of St. John the Divine, the last book of the Christian Bible. It refers to the "violent or cataclysmic end of all things that has persisted and most influenced our perception of 'apocalypse' through ages, as represented in literature" (Ania 155). It is concerned with what has happened and will happen.

Apocalyptic literature of the past often includes the extermination of the whole population before starting anew. But in post modernity apocalypse has gone beyond the field of religion. The rhetoric of apocalypse can be found in various ideological domains

from Nazism and Communism to ecology. The apocalyptic plot is widespread in movies and in countless science fictional dystopian novels. Today it is widely used in the field of environmental and ecological study to talk about the impending crisis because environmental concerns and fears have replaced the fear of nuclear attack and decreasing resources, overpopulation and the threat of global warming are the global problems we are facing at present. We are experiencing speedy economic and technological growth. These have increased our leisure and comfort level. But on the other hand it is also true that the same economic and technological growth have increased “the bewilderment, unease, frustrations and fears, which partly account for this proliferation of apocalyptic visions (Ania 156). From this comes the idea of eco-apocalypse: the environmental degradation with little or no possibility of renewal. Apocalypse is not so much about predicting the end of the world. It is more about making us feel as though we are a part of a critical moment in history. Elizabeth Rosen explains that apocalypse “is an organizing structure that can create moral and physical order while also holding the possibility of social criticism that might lead to a reorientation in the midst of a bewildering historical moment” (xiii).

The concept of apocalypse is connected to dystopia. Normally dystopia is the opposite of utopia. Utopia is the best of all imaginable worlds but dystopia, the worst. In Gillian Ania’s words:

Utopia focuses on as escape from present reality, from time itself; dystopia portrays that very reality, which is immanent. Utopia does not, or cannot exist: it is the projection of non-place, not just a good place, dystopia is portrayed as all-too-real, albeit often with some distortion. And while utopian writers believe in progress as a positive force, looking forward to the attendant freedoms, dystopian writers tend to show the unwanted or unforeseen consequences of progress. Utopia, then is an expression of desire, optimism, hope; dystopia of fear, pessimism, revolt. (157)

She argues that Dystopia often gives rise to apocalypse. In that sense apocalyptic literature results in when an individual writer has a sense of impending disaster. The apocalyptic narrative has some features. There is preoccupation “with running out and running into walls; with scarcity and with the imminent rupture of limits; with actions that promised and temporally imminent total meltdown; and with (often, though not always) the need for immediate total solution” (Buell 186).

There is a trend to use apocalyptic rhetoric in most of environmentalist discourse. Lawrence Buell argues that “Apocalypse is the single most powerful master metaphor that the contemporary environmental imagination has at its disposal” (258). In his book

Ecocriticism Greg Garrard mentions the name of several texts written in the environmentalist vein that make use of apocalypse as central trope. Some of them are Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, Paul Ehrlich's *The Population Bomb*, Al Gore's *Earth in the Balance*. He highlights on the use of apocalyptic rhetoric for environmentalist purpose. As it is "proleptic" in nature, it is connected with the imagination of the future. Apocalyptic narratives have been an important part of environmental thought.

Borrowing the concept of Brummett, Christina Foust and William Murphy remark the essence of apocalyptic rhetoric as "a linear temporality emphasizing a catastrophic end-point that is more or less outside the purview of human agency" (152). Apocalyptic rhetoric takes shape in narrative form indicating a catastrophic end-point in the future. There are two different apocalyptic frames: a tragic apocalypse and a comic apocalypse. O' Leary differentiates them as:

Tragedy conceives of evil in terms of guilt; its mechanism of redemption is victimage, its plot moves inexorably toward sacrifice and the 'cult of the kill'. Comedy conceives of evil not as guilt, but as error; its mechanism of redemption is recognition rather than victimage, and its plot moves not toward sacrifice but to the exposure of fallibility. (qtd in Garrard 87)

A tragic apocalypse is related to cosmic fate. In tragic apocalypse there are certain events and experiences that appear inevitable and unchangeable and they are determined by external forces beyond human control. It moves towards a foretold ending. On the other hand a comic apocalypse suggests that "humans are responsible for a course of actions, giving them some play in influencing their fate" (Foust and Murphy 154). In comic frame time is open-ended, allowing for the possibility of change. Comic apocalyptic rhetoric presents global problems such as over population, global warming as material reality forcing human choices. Humans are expected to make right decisions though in limited sense. There is an attempt to adapt even though total meltdown is implicitly acknowledged. In comic temporal frame the effects of the problem do not happen all at once. So it allows the possibility of human agency.

The present paper focuses on the etymological understanding of apocalypse that is "unveiling" or "uncovering" rather than bringing about the end of the world. It studies Ballard's "Billennium" using the ideas of Friedrich Buell, Greg Garrard and Lawrence Buell. The story is set in future. The city is facing the problem of overpopulation. The problem becomes clear when Rossiter, a character in the story remarks, "Thirty million people packed into this city now, a million increase in just one year" (128). As more land is needed for agricultural use "95% of the population" get "permanently trapped in vast

urban conurbations" (130). World population has reached to twenty thousand millions with 3 percent annual increase. The government hides the real data to avoid "a mass attack of claustrophobia" (130). There is complete control of living space by the Housing Department. Every single resident of the city is forced to live within a space no longer than 4 square meters and there is rumour that "they may reduce the allocation to three and a half meters" (128). There is the use of vivid descriptions of cramped quarters, unending lines and state controlled atmosphere to generate an image of the city as a site of deprivation, physical suffering and mental anguish. Ballard shows the horror that comes from finding that there is nowhere to go. The story then shows how the central characters Ward and Rossiter manage to survive in such claustrophobic environment. The apocalyptic environment of the story can be depicted in the following headings.

Physical confinement

In the story, too much importance is given to physical dimensions of space. As more and more people move to the city, there is shortage of space. All country sides have been occupied by factories and crops and all human life has been urbanized. An individual is allowed to have a space no larger than 4 square meters. There is constant danger of a further restriction of private space. As a result there is decreased mobility. The city is facing its limit to house its population. The claustrophobic environment of the city can be imagined by the description of Ward's 'cubicle' and its surrounding:

Built into a narrow alcove in a bend of the staircase between the fourth and fifth floors, its plywood walls flexed and creaked with every footsteps like the timbers of a rotting windmill. Over a hundred people lived in the top three floors of the old rooming house, and sometimes Ward would lie awake on his narrow bunk until 2.00 or 3.00 A. M. mechanically counting the last residents returning from the all-night movies in the stadium half a mile away. (125)

The word 'cubicle' used for a room shows the physical dimension of space. It lacks emotional and humane feelings. The landlords are seen using flexible clapboard walls to give the illusion of more space. The tenants fight to protect every inch of their cubicles. The value of the cubicles is measured in terms of per square meter. All the sidewalks and road ways are crowded with pedestrians making it very difficult for easy movement. Dining options, workplaces and entertainment places must be carefully selected because of the problem of the traffic. The following lines show the worst imaginable situation of the traffic:

Often locks would occur when a huge crowd at a street junction became immovably jammed. Sometimes these locks would last for days. Two years earlier ward had been caught in one outside the stadium; for over forty-eight hours he was trapped in

a gigantic pedestrian jam containing over seventy thousand people, fed by the crowds leaving the stadium on one side and those approaching it on the other. (127)

The feeling of confinement can also be measured by the fact that even a broom closet is given on rent.

Lack of personal space and loss of privacy

With the depiction of physical confinement Ballard also shows the impact of living within overcrowded city of the future. As physical confinement increases, it leads to “a state of chronic exhaustion” (125). The writer enlarges the scope of urban dystopia by showing its mental stress. He captures the horrifying fear that comes with a lack of control over personal space. The protagonist Ward describes the ways in which the crowds in the city affect his life physically, mentally, and emotionally. He shares his memory of the “nightmare of swaying helplessly on his feet as the jam shifted and heaved, terrified, of losing his balance and being trampled underfoot...and his body blue with bruises” (127).

As the city is overcrowded, the authorities are careful in executing the control of the population. One of the carefully controlled elements is the living space. Living space is meant to be private place. But in the world of Ward there is no private space. The boundary between the private and public place has collapsed. He is a lonely being living under the threat of the government. He has lost his contact with his parents. They live on the other side of the city and they are “unable, or unwilling to make the journey to see him” (129). Competition for the space has strained his relationship with his friends. In the story Ward and Rossiter discover a large, concealed room. In the beginning they live there happily with two other friends. But as more people start to move in, the space lessens and tension increases. The room could be the world itself where, as more and more people come in, the problems increase. It is very difficult for seven people to adjust in a single room. Nobody is willing to leave the room. At the end they decide to dismantle the wardrobe which has occupied some space in the room. Though Ward is not happy to dismantle it, there is no option. He is already used to living on the rent given by the occupants. In the end he has a prospect of an extra small space in the room after the wardrobe is removed. The wardrobe is a symbol of privacy. When it is thrown, the privacy is gone.

The description of Ward’s everyday activities also shows the loss of privacy. He is forced to live in a narrow cubicle but the even in that cubicle he cannot sleep properly. The sound of footsteps coming from the people who move up and down throughout whole night is so distressing that sometimes he has to stay awake until 3 am in the morning. He shares his past experience of “hurrying to take his place in the bathroom queue” (126). His

life is vulnerable in the sense that his private world comes into the public. He is destined to flow with the crowd. Sometimes he has desire to move to a new space but the crowd is so big that he has to “surrender his initiative to the dynamics of the city” (129).

Nature-human collision and the impending meltdown

The story is set in a future city where there are only human beings and the buildings they have constructed for the settlement. There is reference to Malthus who has given “the gloomiest prophecies” regarding the growth of population (130). He argues that the power of population will override the power of nature to produce subsistence to people and this will lead to havoc. Over population and the resulting scarcity of resources seriously threaten the earth placing human beings against the environment. The fear of Malthus’s prophesy creates panic in the story. The unbalance in the natural system is clearly depicted in the following lines:

...95% of the population was permanently trapped in vast urban conurbations....The countryside, as such, no longer existed. Every single square foot of ground sprouted a crop of one type or other. One time fields and meadows of the world were now, in effect, factory floors, as highly mechanized and closed to the public as any industrial area. Economic and ideological rivalries had long since faded before one overriding quest –the internal colonization of the city. (130)

The scene depicted shows human being’s disregard for nature. All that is natural is pushed away and all there is mechanical intrudes. The price of such intrusion is lack of resources and space. The phrase ‘permanently trapped’ gives a sense that there is no possibility of escape and they are waiting for the final doom. Bird and Rossiter are show discussing about the possible cause of the problem. Bird remarks that “shortsighted nationalism and industrial expansion” are responsible for population explosion (131). This is in line with what T. C. Boyle says in an interview: “Who is the enemy of the environment? We people, of any race or ethnicity, so anybody coming from anywhere. The higher the population, the higher the pollution, the fewer (the) animals, the less open land. So the problem remains insoluble” (Boyle, Interview 7:35).

When Ward and Rossiter find a secret room, there is happiness in having enough space for them. But that happiness does not remain long. Their love of fellow human beings brings five other members in the room. Again there is space crisis. They reach to the same nightmarish situation which they have been trying so hard to avoid. The impossibility of avoiding such reality is what gives rise to environmental apocalypse and in Frederick Buell’s word impending “meltdown”.

The apocalyptic frame that the writer uses in the story is comic in nature. The story does not describe the end time as is done in tragic apocalyptic frame. The narrative is open-ended with an attempt to adapt to the situation. When there is space problem, Ward and Rossiter decide to dismantle the wardrobe. This brings the possibility of some space, "when it was gone it would make the room seem even larger" (140). According to Greg Garrard, the rhetorical strategy of comic apocalypse is not so much concerned with "anticipating the end of the world, but about attempting to avert it by persuasive means" (99). The exposure of the 'error' or the 'fallibility' is best articulated by the central character Ward in the following words:

Fifty years ago shortsighted nationalism and industrial expansion put a premium on a rising population curve, and even now the hidden incentive is to have a large family so that you can gain a little privacy. Single people are penalized simply because there are more of them and they don't fit conveniently into double or triple cubicles. But it's the large family with its compact, space-saving logistic that is the real villain. (131)

People are encouraged to get married so that they can get larger room. But that very logic is the cause of overpopulation. There is irony at the end of the story. Ward falls into the same logic that he criticizes in the beginning. Due to his love of fellow human beings and greed for money/power, his secret and spacious room gets overcrowded at the end. This is the problem outside. The newly found cubicle is the world at large. It gets overcrowded due to greed and desire for human company. Similarly the world also gets the apocalyptic over-population due to human error- too much focus on human propagation to the level of collapse and desire for power. At the end, to get more space the wooden wardrobe is dismantled. This symbolically suggests how human beings are clearing natural things for the human need of resources and more space. The story 'unveils' or 'reveals' human weakness or folly with regard to the problem of overpopulation.

The apocalyptic frame used in the story is comic in nature. The problem in the story is not presented as grand preparation for the disaster or catastrophe. The focus of the story is on a city where there is the problem of space. The problem is presented as local rather than global. But it symbolically indicates a larger problem outside in the environment and human society as a whole. The environmental apocalypse used in the story is in the sense of unveiling or revealing. It reveals how human weaknesses and follies in the shape of shortsighted nationalism and industrialization are causing the problem of overcrowding and loss of space.

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