

Apocalypse Then and Now

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The present research paper attempts to trace the genesis of apocalypse in all the major religions like Christianity, Islam and Hinduism. It also attempts to answer how traditional religious apocalypse is different from the literary apocalypse or secular apocalypse as used by the writers in the nineteenth century. Finally it aims to show how the writers across the world and primarily American writers exploited this concept starting from the nineteenth century and continuing even upto today. Hence the essence of this paper could be summed up as the concept of apocalypse as used in antiquity and in the present times since there is a clear cut shift from the traditional apocalypse to the literary one. Literally, the word apocalypse means a revelation or revealing the shape of things to come. The Greek word "apocalypsis" means uncovering, a kind of a prophecy about what the future holds in store for men. It is in the last book of *The Bible*, *The Revelation*, that apocalypse, signifying the end of the world, finds its full expression. To one of his disciples, St. John, Jesus appears in a vision and conveys the message of God about the end of the world. In *The Revelation* the main points conveyed about the end of the world follow a definite pattern, a series of happenings or occurrences, which shall precede the end. *The Book of Revelation*, also called *Revelation to John* or *Apocalypse of John* is the last canonical book of the *New Testament* in *The Bible* and the only biblical book that is wholly composed of apocalyptic literature.

The inaugural signs of the apocalypse, as described in *The Revelation*, shall be occasional natural disturbances like earthquakes and floods, followed by the most turbulent reign of the Antichrist. This is called the period of the Great Tribulation, followed by the second coming of Christ; and the Armageddon, a cosmic warfare, shall result in the inauguration of the millennium or the messianic kingdom. A gradual moral and physical degradation of human nature will set in as the rule of the Messiah is over. This total degeneration of human nature will be characterised by the last loosening of Satan, to be followed by the ultimate catastrophe, the end of the world by fire. Finally comes the judgement, followed by God's making of a new heaven and earth.

Apocalypticism is a feature of all three monotheistic religions. *The Book of Daniel* describes the Hebrew Prophet's vision of the end. In Islam, the resurrection, the Day of Judgement and salvation are apocalyptic features of orthodox belief as is evident in *The Quran*. The Hindu doctrine

teaches that the human cycle called *Manvantara* is divided into four periods. These periods correspond with the Golden, Silver, Bronze and Iron Ages of the ancient Western traditions. It is believed that we are now in the fourth age, the *Kali-Yuga* or Dark Age. In this Dark Age, cyclic development proceeds in a downward direction, from higher to lower, a course which appears to be perceived to be the complete antithesis of the idea of progress as understood by the moderns.

The traditional apocalypse is different from the modern one in that the modern apocalyptic imagination in contemporary literature is secular because it actually reflects the demonic aspects of the apocalypse world of *The Bible* in secular terms. Modern man's secular imagination pictures an apocalypse of despair, in which the end of the world will be final, without the promise of any renewal. No new heaven or earth will follow. A sense of helplessness and despair envisioned about the future of man are final and total. Apocalyptic literature has some basic characteristics. It deals with secret or hidden information which can only be disclosed by supernatural means through dreams or visions from God or angelic intermediaries. The message of apocalyptic literature is communicated in mysterious, enigmatical forms through the use of bizarre, often-times obscure symbolism and imagery. Its fantastic world of beasts, signs, colours, numbers and angels seem to have functioned as a type of code which effectively communicated its message to a secret group while concealing the message from the uninitiated. Apocalyptic literature finds expression in literature either through utopia or dystopia. Both utopian and dystopian writers have the same end in their minds but they approach it differently. In utopian writing, the writer ends on a note of hope, thus leaving a scope for the establishment of an ideal society. The dystopian writer on the contrary, offers/envisions a completely pessimistic picture of the world, without any renewal or hope. When it is pessimistic, there is little possibility for progress or positive development within the normal framework of human endeavour. From the dystopian apocalyptic point of view, things are bad and they are only going to get worse as far as men are concerned. This literature is written in times of catastrophe change as previously well-ordered world views collapse. Apocalyptic writers see themselves in the midst of the catastrophic destruction of a way of life, even of the entire universe. The utopian apocalyptic writers, on the other hand, proceed on the firm conviction that in his own good times, God will intervene to bring the evil of this world to an end and proclaim His ultimate victory. It has been aptly described as the anticipatory raising of the curtain to display the final scene. It is, in a way, conveying pictorially and symbolically the conviction of the ultimate victory of God. In recent times, the term apocalypse has been used to refer to that kind of literature which

incorporates certain dominant features of the apocalypse discussed above. Critics have identified apocalypse in genres such as *Science Fiction*.

The primary and basic feature of the secular or demonic apocalypse consists in showing contemporary civilization as passing through a phase corresponding to the last loosening of Satan, which in *The Revelation* just precedes the end. In contemporary fiction, the last loosening of Satan comes in different forms and under many different guises. Modern man's fondness for violence and destruction is considered to be symbolic of Satan's influence. Secular apocalypse is permeated with the images and themes from biblical writing, although major departure from religious apocalypse is the emphasis on disaster as the primary interest in secular writing. Hence, the most popular use of term apocalypse, which is used to mean not revelation but widespread destruction. There are many writers in the twentieth century who have expressed their apocalyptic vision in their own peculiar way. All of them have their own distinct views about it. Nineteenth century American novelists, such as, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville and Mark Twain were the first to reflect the apocalyptic imagination in its secular version in fiction, depicting Satan let loose in society. Hawthorne's *Blithedale Romance* (1852), Melville's *The Confidence Man* (1887) and Twain's *The Mysterious Stranger* (1916), each dwelt upon the degeneration of human morals under the influence of demonic tendencies in individuals as a prelude to a social disaster. R.W.B.Lewis (1966:184-234) was the first among the contemporary critics of apocalyptic literature to trace the genesis of apocalyptic imagination in contemporary fiction. In his book, he labels the secular version of apocalypse as 'Ludicrous Catastrophe' (1996:184-234) and traces its origin from Melville's *The Confidence Man* and Mark Twain's *The Mysterious Stranger* to Nathaniel West's *The Day of the Locust* and many other works of contemporary American novelists such as Ralph Ellison, Thomas Pynchon, John Barth and Joseph Heller. Lewis analyses the various interpretations of the last loosening of Satan, given by people in different centuries and finally discusses a few apocalyptic novels. John R May takes up some of the insights of Lewis and works these out by focusing upon the use of the apocalyptic imagination in some modern American novels. May says that apocalypse "is a response to a cultural crisis." (1972:19) He discusses the secular strain in apocalypse and remarks that the times "immediately preceding the end are characterised by a general breakdown of moral standards which explains the presence and acceptability of Satan in his many disguises." (1972:34) May also links it with the advent of *Kali Yuga*, the evil age through which modern civilization is passing at present. He is of the opinion that contemporary literature is caught between hope and despair. David Ketterer advocates that apocalyptic thought is an inextricable component of much of science fiction today and that

apocalyptic imagination finds its purest outlet in science fiction which is defined as “the search for a definition of mankind and his status in the universe which will stand in our advanced but confused state of knowledge (science), and is characteristically cast in the Gothic or post-gothic mode.”(1974:14-15)

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In the light of above definition Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* is certainly the first great work of science fiction followed by *The Last Man*. Both of them present dystopian visions of alternative possibilities for the human race. Science fiction established itself as a major genre of popular contemporary fiction in the magazines of the 1920s and 1930s, in which Arthur C. Clarke, Isaac Asimov and Robert Heinlein first published their stories. Science fiction is practically the only literary form that deals with issues that arise from this: the Vietnam War, revolutions in evil society, radiation, environmental degradation, even over-population, robotics and the issues of automation versus unemployment. Influenced by all this, Francis Ford Coppola produces and directs a film *Apocalypse Now* in 1979. The script of the film is based on Joseph Conrad’s novella *Heart of Darkness* and it also draws elements from Michael Herr’s *Dispatches*, the film version of Conrad’s *Lord Jim*. It is an epic war film set during the Vietnam war.

Kenneth L Woodward, Angus Deming and Judith Gingold are of the opinion that apocalyptic talk has become too common: “It used to be felt that the only people who cared about doomsday were fundamental preachers who paddled gloom as if they owned a piece of the Apocalypse. Today, however, Americans can hardly pick up a newspaper or magazine, tune in a talk or go to a movie that does not trumpet disaster.” (1975) The author furnished a relevant reason for this: “Why the sudden spate of doom saying? Partly because a number of things have undeniably been going wrong. A decade of assassination, debilitating war and civil strife...has given way to revelations of political corruption, dwindling natural resources and industrial mismanagement.”(1975) B. Magee asserts that there is a regular stream of doom saying and according to him fondness for prediction of the doom is the result of society’s betrayal or failure:

...the lip-smacking relish with which our twentieth century prophetics proclaim the imminent destruction of our society is unmistakable. They are thrilled by it. They want it. Perhaps they want to revenge themselves on it because it is not perfect. Perhaps, more particularly, they want to revenge themselves on it because it has not fulfilled the dreams of perfection they had...it has betrayed them, betrayed their hopes and ideals...made a mockery of their lives...” (1975:37)

The reasons furnished by B Magee form the background of the contemporary apocalypse and the motivating factor behind the apocalyptic visions reflected in contemporary fiction. In an interview with *Playboy*, Allen Ginsberg emphasizes that our planet is in the midst of a probably fatal sickness: “The by-products of that sickness include not only the political violence...but all the fantasies of the cold war-the witch hunts, race paranoi, projections of threat and doom. The sickness will end in our destroying our planet.”(1975:37)

Paul Ehrlich’s *The Population Bomb* (1972) has the reputation of being one of the most popular environmentalist books ever. He builds on Malthusian theory about population to argue that global famine was imminent and in 1995 Lawrence Buell’s path-breaking work on American culture, *The Environmental Imagination*, declared: ‘apocalypse is the single most powerful metaphor that the contemporary environmental imagination has at its disposal’(1995:93). The spate of literary and cinematic works dealing with ‘end-of-the-world’ scenarios-from Nevil Shute’s *On the Beach* (1957) to Margaret Atwood’s *Oryx and Crake* (2003)-showcase global ecological disaster, man-made or natural.

There are many pamphleteers who would have the public believe that we are nearing the end of our culture, even of life on this planet as we know it and that the end of the world “is coming very soon and you better be ready for it.”(1989:11) They hold the doomsday theory to be a realistic appraisal of today’s situation. The approach of the year 2000 and the next millennium has put the fear of God into a good many people. “After we get into the 90s, we’re going to see a lot more apocalyptic prophecy,” (2002:1) predicts J Gordon Melton, the Director of the institute for the study of American Religion. The conviction that humans are living in the latter days is shared by millions of fundamentalist Christians. In fact, Whalen Bridge argues that “by the late 1980s...the apocalyptic fundamentalists no doubt outnumber the members of the traditional (hardcore) end of the world sects.” (2001:37) Particularly, in the wake of terrorist attacks on new York City in 2001 and London in 2005, it is perhaps no surprise that literature and films have featured a steady stream of apocalyptic scenarios. For instance, in a five year period after 2001 just some of the disaster films released include *The Core* (2003), *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004), the remake *Poseidon* (2006), adaptations of novels such as *I, Robot* and *War of the Worlds* (2006) and tale movies including *Category 6: Day of Destruction*(2006), *Category 7, The End of the World*(2005), *Locusts: Day of Destruction*(2006), *Oil Storm*(2005), *Super Volcano*(2005), *10.5*(2005), and *10.5: Apocalypse (I)*(2006). *The Slate Magazine* in America published an article in 2009 by Josh Levin which talks about *How is America Going to End*. He has collected theories from futurists, doomsdayers, separatists,

economists, political scientists, national security experts, climatologists, geologists, astronomers and few miscellaneous crazy people. The result is a collection of 144 potential causes of America's death.

To conclude, it is noteworthy that the apocalyptic belief in American mass culture has become a big business. It has become an industry and Hal Lindsley is one of the most fascinating figures in the whole history of contemporary prophecy belief. He published a book *The Late Great Planet Earth* (1979) and he links it to the current events like the Cold War, Nuclear War, The Chinese Communist threat, the restoration of Israel. The book *Apocalypse Near* (2006), is a revolutionary book as it creates a new genre which fuses autobiography, metaphysics, science fiction, social activism and romance with dynamic media. The book has a clear and important message as it provides an idea of ways we can save this planet and may be ourselves. The ultimate meaning of this book is that the death of the world and thus of all mankind is not just approaching but it also near, hence *Apocalypse Near*. The other book entitled *America's Financial Apocalypse: How to Profit from the Next Great Depression* (2008) focuses on all the major problems America is facing from economic, social and global issues, to all of the financial ones. Wilfred Hahn's book *Global Financial Apocalypse Prophesied* (2009) uses current financial trends and biblical prophecy to show that sometime in the future during our lifetimes, the economies of the world will fail leading to tremendous confusion, revolutions and the emergence of a one-world currency and ruler. The discussion on current apocalypse is endless as there is still a lot that can be said as this industry of apocalypse in America is booming and there is hardly any writer in American who has not been bitten by apocalypse. It is in this way that we get a clear picture of how the traditional apocalypse is different the modern one and the modern one is also in turn different form the contemporary one.

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