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Humanity and Pestilence in John Christopher's *Empty World*

Tahura Tariq
Research Scholar
AMU, Aligarh.

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Abstract:

The present paper would dig out the positive attributes of human existence, humanity and the traits of optimism after any annihilation. And the present paper is about the plague of apocalypse that distorts the whole nation. Basically, Apocalyptic fiction is concerned with the end of human civilization. Therefore, the article belongs to the theme that delineates the psychological aspects of human being after any catastrophes.

John Christopher's *Empty World* (1977) is an apocalyptic fiction which connotes the disastrous disease plague which transforms the country into a holocaust. The title itself divulges the theme of the plot and the idea of development within plot. The positive attitude towards life and humanity sustains at every step, shown by the protagonist in order to help every other entity. However, the paper would highlight the valor of common human beings in acute petrified conditions.

Keywords: Humanity, Apocalypse, Holocaust, Catastrophes, Optimism, Psychological Attributes.

Introduction:

Dystopian fiction also includes science fiction which is further defined by Abrahams, as fiction which "renders plausible the fictional world by reference to known or imagined scientific principles" (56). So far as sci-fi concerns itself with the "sense of an ending, Kermode's understanding of the apocalyptic impulse acquires a new relevance" (Rose 12).

John Christopher being a prolific British Science fiction writer has also emerged as an apocalyptic fiction writer. John Christopher's novel, *Empty World* (1977) is broadly a piece of science fiction aimed at adolescent audience. However, critics have classified it as apocalyptic fiction too. The characters concentrate on the business of staying alive and making a life fit to

live in a post-holocaust world stripped of culture and society. *Empty World* falls under the category of fiction about natural calamity and post catastrophe. It exhibits the picture of doomsday or the end of the world.

Brian Aldiss coined the term “cosy-catastrophe” (*Billion Year Spree* 73) which is a part of science fiction genre. In novels dealing with cosy-catastrophe, destructive calamities occur that wipe out a large percentage of population, but the protagonists survive and thrive in the new world that comes into existence. These novels are little different from the disaster novels where natural disasters wipe out large percentage of population and protagonists also suffer the aftermaths of the calamity.

It seems that what Brian Aldiss means by the term ‘cosy catastrophe’ is a kind of science fiction based on catastrophe with an optimistic ending. This kind of apocalyptic science fiction is based on the concept of a new world where the entire humanity is not eliminated and the vision of a new life to be rebuilt mostly from the scratch is realized.

One such novel which may be categorised as “cosy catastrophe” novel is *Empty World* by John Christopher. The plot of the novel *Empty World* by John Christopher depicts a plague like calamity which has spread across continents. This bizarre calamity has hit the lives of old people especially. “Mostly the victims are over sixty years. There were one or two cases as young as the middle forties, and the results there were much more striking: wrinkling of skin, whitening of hair roots, calcium loss, atherosclerosis” (Christopher 12).

Empty World, the title of the novel itself reveals the theme of emptiness, alienation, and identity loss for the chief protagonist, Neil. Neil has to suffer in an empty world with different people, places, and diseases. The protagonist has to bear all kinds of trauma all alone and there is no one left with whom he can share his sufferings.

Empty World, is a novel that depicts not only adverse effects of plague on the population of England but also about the congruent battle to survive in the post-holocaust world. Plague eliminates the entire population of England, the protagonist of the novel fights with his entire might and strong survival instinct in order to save his life. The protagonist Neil is merely fifteen years old and has lost every one from his family and friends. The tragedy is that the plague eliminates adult population and leaves the city in the hands of the young.

Neil's trauma of life begins with the death of his family, secondly, when he has to leave his home land London and shift to a small town near country side with his grandparents. Neither his friends remain the same nor do any of his past habits like playing, having fun with family etc. According to Cathy Caruth, "trauma is not experienced as a mere repression or defense, but as a temporal delay that carries the individual beyond the shock of the first moment. The trauma is a repeated suffering of the event, but it is also a continual leaving of its site" (Caruth 10). Therefore, his trauma appears unintelligible for most of the people including his grandparents.

From the very beginning, the narrator captures reader's imagination with a detailed description of horror and disaster with the news of plague being aired on radio and also reported in the print media. The focus is on Neil's psychological trauma with which readers can empathize. The writer delineates, in detail, Neil's gradual mental and emotional deterioration. Neil is shown feeling lonely from the beginning of the book. However, he manages to live in the harsh world that throws at him innumerable problems. Nostalgically he seems to remember his old days he spent with his family and friends. Plague proves to be the most disturbing element of life for Neil.

What aggravates the trauma Neil undergoes is the fact that he loses his roots and other material things he is attached to: soon he comes to know that his family house at Dunhill is to be sold. It has a benumbing effect on him and he feels unnerved psychologically. He has uncountable memories associated with his family of the time he spent in the house when his parents and sibling were alive. So, he decides to collect some memorabilia in form of items which are left at the house. The collection of such items appears as a heavy emotional baggage for Neil's psyche. The narrator plays with Neil's psyche, which has been marred with anxiety and emotional trauma. Despite the huge psychological burden of these collectibles, they are the source of his past happiness.

The sense of apocalypse is accentuated at a personal level for Neil when he buries his grandparents himself. The reader feels the acute sense of doom and loneliness, despite the knowledge that the epidemic is a collective social and global phenomenon. The vast scale of the tragedy in no way lessens the sense of loneliness. The world becomes completely empty for Neil. Now there is no one in the entire world whom he can call his relatives, friends or well-wishers.

“He walked out across the fields and found a farm house. It seemed to have been deserted: there was no sign of human life and no one came when he knocked” (Christopher 47).

Apocalypse stretches out its foot in every sector of the society-rural as well as urban. No one left out in both sections of the society. Hence, the holocaust does not attack some particular class of the society, it basically demolishes the humans.

Neil's survival instinct is put to test in the dire circumstance after he loses not only his parents and grandparents, but also the house he was brought up in, and all kinds of human contact. Despite being a young boy trapped in a bleak situation, Neil tries to survive somehow. “Loneliness is painful experience which is usually not welcomed and that has consequences that are detrimental to ones emotional, physical, and spiritual wellbeing” (Ernst and Cacioppo 15).

After a few days he finds companion in cows near his home and as he gets fed up with the tinned milk so he decides to get cow milk in the bucket. The description of the cows that must also have been affected by the deserted look of the city without human inhabitants they were earlier accustomed is interesting to note: “The others still looked gorged, but presumably she felt a little happier. He wondered how many other cows were wandering in distress, probably thousands throughout the country” (Christopher 49).

Apocalypse becomes a leveler for the society and it's inhabitants, caste, class status all come under the same roof. According to Kierkegaard “when leveling destroys the singularity then it creates an alienation from self and mass” (Heinemann 35). Therefore, Neil is the sole character up to this point in the narrative who has faced estrangement from his own self.

Neil's sense of loneliness and disaster forces him to go to another place to find human company. To his utter disbelief, he finds a grocery shop with a shopkeeper. Neil buys few items with pound notes which is useless for the shopkeeper. Neil and the shopkeeper stand face to face on the same alienated platform with no one to look up to and share their emotional baggage to.

The author tries to highlight the importance of capital system and economy of the country. But the condition of the country is very profound in matter of economy and government. The power of money has been shaken due to no life and society. At present sheer health and life matters utmost. What the author highlights in the novel about human psychology

is that in the face of a calamity the need for human company is greater. Narrator continuously highlights the urge of companion in the life of Neil; because one might conclude that extreme loneliness can generate as much terror in its suffering as horror in those who witness it. And Neil is the best one who throughout the book witnesses the hollowness of loneliness.

Pestilence has started its adverse effect on the young ones too, earlier it attacks only adult ones. That shows the horrifying picture of future society. The first notable sign of plague on young people is transformation of their face and body into wrinkles. Therefore, he becomes nervous as well as scared by the thought of plague and death.

As the present paper tries to extract the humanity level from the core of being selfish, due to utter catastrophes, Neil has proved his humankind towards other humans. He finds a six year old boy and a two year old baby girl inside the house. Both the kids are very dirty, hungry, and sick. Neil being a mature boy becomes caretaker. Neil plays a role of guardian for both of them. Neil discovers a human aspect in himself that he didn't know he had. In the face of misery, he attempts to find company and is ready to provide them care assuming the role of a responsible caretaker. Not only the caretaker, he plays the same role of his own parents that they had played for Neil. Nevertheless, his fortune has not been written with a golden pen and he has a big elephant in his room in face of loneliness and anxiety of alienation.

Life is always cruel for Neil and it gives him agony of loneliness one after the other. Hence, within two days he digs out a trench closer to the grave of his grandparents at the back yard of his house and keeps those two small bodies into it. "The house was empty, but so was the town, the world. It might be he was the last person alive on earth" (79). Neil has the spirit of resilience and continues to face the challenges that life is bestowing on him. "Time meant nothing, and day followed day on a treadmill of sun rise and sun set, light and darkness, rain and shine" (82). It can conclude that he is mentally ill a bit but if he would get some acquaintances then he would be relaxed enough. Critics like Robert Copian, Shannon Stewart, Nathan Fox highlight the idea of being alone, playing alone, acting and living alone in their article (129-137), which adversely affects the child's feelings and mind. Children face burden of anxiety and several negative thoughts form depressing images in their minds and hearts.

Thoughts of a future dystopian world loom large behind the common human psyche and can overcrowd one's consciousness. Neil also tries to evade his present dystopic world and crawls back to a perpetuating fading happy past filled with relief and happy memories. He becomes a scavenger, digging through vacant houses for some relief, some respite, some scraps of hope. One can escape from dystopia through mystic dimension that is unconsciousness. He was unconsciously doing all this and found relief, in a similar way the characters of Dorris Lessings depicted in her book "*Memoirs of Survivors*" which is a dystopian novel.

One more familiar human instinct, to release emotional encumbers; and it's high time for Neil to burst out. Firstly, he starts crying, sniffing then miserably and helplessly howl. It is the first time, he weeps since the narrator's introduction of Neil in the story. One cannot live all alone but at times life presents such situations that one cannot choose any other option but to face it. Monotony is also a severely cunning truth of life and Neil suffers both loneliness as well as monotony in his life. Few weeks have passed; he has lived very monotonously alone in the world.

Sometimes his own survival appears as punishment to him, he also believes that it's wickedness on the part of God which has caused him to be singled out. It is nothing else than purgatory for Neil, he always regrets that why he wasn't killed in that car accident with his family. The entire world seems to be a purgatory and he has no other choice except to run his drill. This issue is comparable with Richard Matheson's novel "*I am Legend*" in which Robert Neville, the protagonist who left unaffected survivor of a global pandemic like Neil in *Empty World*.

Before the onslaught of the endemic, Neil wasn't a believer in God but in the aftermaths of the plague and the circumstances he had to undergo, he started believing in a higher power which was blameworthy for the present situation and his own harsh ordeals; condemning him to a lonely and alienating existence. Kierkegaard believes, one should have to return to God. He wrote, "his hero (protagonists or human beings) after many entanglements in the world prepared himself to face God and they know well that they have to be present before God" (Heinemann 37). "Whoever has no God has no self, and who has no self is in despair" (37). Therefore, Neil finally submits his belief in God and accepts His power. Now Neil believes that only God can

provide all unattainable products to him, so that he may lead his life in an empty world. It can conclude that Neil is a great fighter and musters up courage to live in the alienated world. Every instance of Neil's life concludes on the courageous note and gives the glimpse of humanistic survival.

A sense of belongingness and company spells bound anyone who is all alone in the world. Same applies with Neil that after many weeks, he finds a live human being at the outskirts of London. His name is Clive P'Archy, basically belongs to a royal family yet lives in a big caravan, which has every product of his necessity. Although, Clive is least interested in worrying about the world, his world has a limit and made up of money and worldly materialism. When the world is on the verge of doomsday how could anybody think of ornaments in spite of food and proper shelter.

One can conclude that apocalypse has not shown any trauma to Clive yet. Clive is least interested in talking about plague and present condition of England, he is very much busy to attract Neil by his money. Inhumanity prevails in the environment of epidemic. It is not at all possible, to see others to be empathetic for others. Hence, Clive is a materialistic person; who feels neither sympathetic towards the dead ones nor does he bothers about his own loneliness.

The writer focuses on the basic attributes of London its culture, society, economy, capital system. Moreover, not only life gets ruined from the London but its culture, society, trends, business, trades get devastated by the horrible plague. The most astonishing thing for Neil is the emptiness, barrenness, and lethal silence of void that haunts badly. Only buildings, monuments, markets, gardens, parks, museums etc are same as earlier but no sign of living beings, only traces of humanity.

It's the nature of human being to keep on moving, to work, to jell up with people and have some social life not merely live for food. According to Sartre, "reality is never beauty, therefore beauty can be found in realm of imaginary, unreal, and of nothingness" (Heinemann 167). Same goes with the protagonist Neil that he gets irritated with the collection of products for his life as well as his loneliness which is the utter truth of his life.

"Neil went up on the battlements and looked across the river. Tower Bridge was lowered, and there was no tall ship demanding passage. He thought of the old days, and the constant busy

traffic: barges, tugs, river boats, police launches" (Christopher 123). The lines are the description of Neil's regret about the present condition of London and he replaces the present picture of the city with the beautiful past in his memories.

It is quite common humanistic nature to place oneself in other's shoes called empathy. Empathy "signifies an identification of oneself with an observed person or object which is so close that one seems to participate in the posture, motion, and sensations that one observes" (Abrahams 103). Neil too is a very emotional boy and always tries to help others, which we see through the beginning of the text. Therefore, the title of this paper goes well with the character of Neil because he has the notion of giving respect to whole mankind and has value for human life.

Author is able to engross his readers with his speculative narrative; inserting one hope after the other in this apparently hopeless story. In spite of being alone for such longer time, he does not acquire the predicament of loneliness. Neil finds some glimpses of smoke from a shop nearby, when he goes; he finds marks of a girl's shoe nearby his house.

At times, loneliness makes a person foolish due to deep thoughts and an urge for belongingness from family, friends etc. Abruptly he hears some sound and he starts talking to himself regarding presence of some human. Writer has also used a narrative technique, interior monologue by the protagonist to throw powerful effect on the plot. He does not want to lose his hope once again, it keeps him awake whole night. He gives immense time in thinking about the girl.

Loneliness is malicious for every normal human being that he understands very well. The striking thing happens when he reaches the super market for collecting food at King's road. "There was plenty of food, but also section of shelf had been stripped. He looked more closely and saw signs of a recent human presence" (152). Therefore, he is very much sure now about someone's presence, and deep down in his heart, he is extremely happy with this probability.

Society is no longer same nor does the people, so it is quite difficult to trust anybody after the massive and catastrophic plague. So, the girl too would not trust him easily. But, Neil only wants to accentuate the comfort zone towards her and tries to talk to her. Things have brutally changed in the present scenario; therefore, that girl is not able to talk to Neil. Humanistic approach is not always being good for you, as other people would not understand your positive

and honest intentions. So with Neil, she does not trust him and places him under the same category of cruel men.

She is Billie Docket who is among the few survivors of England and stays at Chelsea near London. She is very quite but on the other hand he wants to share a lot about himself, as he is very excited; tries to help her but her dismal attitude stops him. One can question that why Neil is so much interested in talking to her in spite of her refusal. Is there no self-dignity or respect in him? Or is he urging for true human companion?

Neil's new hope of new friends gets submerged due to her stubbornness. He also tries to make her understand about his good and positive intentions for her and suddenly he sees one more girl. The other girl appears younger than Billie and her name is Lucy. Lucy also gets tense due to the presence of Neil in their home. Lucy meets Billie while wandering through the outskirts of London. One more survivor in the text, who makes Neil even happier. It can conclude that he is happy only because he suffered a lot in the global cataclysm.

Billie is most quite among three and she deeply observes the sheer personality of Neil. Girls are not happy with the presence of Neil in their home at night, which Neil could sense but it's good for Neil; "after months of solitude just to listen murmur of voice" (175). Here writer shows the importance of society, friends, and companions, that how important they are in one's life. Neil is also ardent in his decision to lead his life with them, at least till the time he doesn't find someone more compatible.

Few weeks of contentment for Neil have been passed but a kind of dissatisfaction pervades in the heart of Neil. "The most prevalent reason why people feel epistemologically lonely is their belief that others do not want to invest emotional energy in them, that others simply do not care enough" (Mggraw 319). Neil's emotional baggage is still with him despite of many weeks; the girls are not worthy enough to release his heart out in front of them. He considers himself very unfortunate.

Different mindsets and ages often argue with each other, so as this younger group. Billie is not totally against Neil but always condones his ideas. Lucy, at times, confers in good way with Neil. Days show dominant nature of Billie over Lucy, which Lucy does not like at all. But

she has no other option except to accept Billie's decisions. Lucy is under the dominance of Billie only because she had extended help and support in these dire circumstances.

Author has diluted every emotion in the present plot, like emotional bond, care, attraction towards opposite gender etc. An unspeakable bond has formed between Neil and Lucy which Billie notices and is envious of. From day one, Neil gets infatuated by Lucy. Neil kisses Lucy which is appreciated by Lucy's smile; but Billie makes no comment after confronting them. These instances show the human instinct and especially adolescence age of Neil and Lucy. "Adolescence stands apprehensive and excited at the entrance to the adult world, which is beckoning him or her" (Anthony 178). On the other hand, Neil is at the verge of adolescence where he is going through emotional as well as physical changes. "Adolescence, is of course, also the time of a new awakening of sexuality, which is first experienced in the form of a crisis of identity" (Flinter 227). John Christopher has added such incidents just to show the truth of nature and life. Life without friends and mates is useless.

At times, jealousy becomes the factor for many extreme crimes and destruction of lives. Text shows, their life runs smoothly until the day, Billie attacks Neil while they both are out for shopping in a supermarket for daily products. Billie has a sharp knife by which she tries to stab him on his chest but luckily, Neil manages to withdraw himself from her clutches and run back towards home.

Neil and Lucy are amazed and readers too, due to present incident and unable to extract the motive behind the attack. Few days have passed and there is no clue of Billie, as Billie has not returned home after that incident. Lucy and Neil seem to be very carefree for Billie and they are least interested in searching her. Therefore, they have started making plans to live together in future.

The state of their mind reaches the torment of trust and suddenly they see Billie, her presence makes them shiver. They decide not to take any chance in matter of Billie and not to forgive her and "that was the sensible principle for life in an empty world" (Christopher 224). This line tries to show that if one wants to live happy and safe in such an environment of chaos and survival of the fittest, then one should not trust everyone. However, humanity resides in both Lucy and Neil and they won't go against their teachings and give one more chance to Billie. In

spite of fear and terror they let her enter into their lives. Now the world becomes very strange and suspicious as no one can judge the other person's intentions.

Billie becomes the victim of psychological retardation, as she could not bear the sharing and loving nature of Neil towards Lucy. One can say that she is quite jealous in nature or the circumstances have made her so. She is enough mature but could not handle the inter mingling of Lucy and Neil. This may justify as, only due to the prevailing situation and her loneliness.

Conclusion:

The novel *Empty World* ironically empties everyone's life and life gives second chance only to few people. The protagonist's strife makes an optimistic rhythm in the novel and it ends on a positive note with an assurance of rebuilding of community and social life.

John Christopher tries to represent the vision of doomsday in his novel, *Empty World*, not only in the context of catastrophes but on the platform of loneliness that affects the human rigorously. Basically, the concept and literal meaning of doomsday is the final Day of Judgment.

Social life, society, relation, bond, friendship, companionship are the basis of one's life. How one would live all alone in a vacant land? It's against the instinct and nature of human survival. One can say pestilence of apocalypse is such an aura that enters definitely in one's life at some point of time and only humans can strife against it in order to survive once again and recreate the shattered stuffs.

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