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Pandemic Apocalypse In Between Dystopias: Observations from Post-Apocalyptic Novels

Munir Ahmed Al-Aghberi

Introduction

- 1 In the wake of the COVID-19 viral pandemic (2020), interest in many apocalyptic fictions, particularly movies, has bloomed since such works could make sense of the real-life experience of the current pandemic. Apart from conspiracy theories which have dominated social media, the partial fulfilment in real life of the fictional construct of many of these stories has raised questions regarding the overlapping horizons by which the literary imagination can collide or visit reality. Importantly, literature can not only record the past but also envision the future to give our present some sense and value. Any imagined future remains fictitious, however, insofar as it may or may not be fulfilled, in whole or in part. The apocalypse is thus a possibility encased in a time shell, and several elements in today's world can pry it open. There remains the question of whether the imaginative drive behind apocalypse fictions is motivated by an attempt to *subvert* the existing order or by the hegemonic tools of the order itself which tries to describe its collapse in terms of the end of the world.
- 2 Based on the above insights, the present study surveys a number of pandemic apocalyptic novels, offering a comparative analysis of the dystopian elements which constitute these post-apocalypse fictional worlds. The novels examined are set against the backdrop of a pandemic post-apocalypse in the 21st century, although some of these novels date back to the 19th and 20th centuries. The major challenge to this study has been to determine whether applying a comparative approach proves useful, considering the limited depth to which each text can be pulled apart to ascertain the part the prevailing world systems play before and after the apocalypse. Given the variety of novels which only share certain tropes highlighted by the study, we found it

more convenient to explore them under three headings: prescient novels predicting a 21st century apocalypse, namely Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* (1826) and Jack London's *The Scarlet Plague* (1912); Postwar and Cold War novels relating the plague to power conflicts such as Richard Matheson's *I Am Legend* (1954) and Stephen King's *The Stand* (1990); and recent novels dealing with a biogenetic experimentation that leads to man's entrapped survival such as James Dashner's *The Maze Runner* (2009), Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* (2004) and Emily St. John Mandel's *Station Eleven* (2015).

- 3 Taking some Marxist views about power relations into account, the study compares the social and political standpoints from which the future was viewed in these novels to the present situation. It also highlights how the imagined future encompasses an implicit critique of the present systems governing the world. The novels are imbued with dystopian elements arising from the fact that the viruses causing the pandemics are engineered by man. Besides, the study intends to delineate how the pre-apocalyptic conflicts and leadership polarization get reenacted by the post-apocalyptic surviving societies whose moral codes regress to primitive stages. It stands upon the observation that the most dystopian practices of today's world systems are unwittingly held up with a sense of nostalgia over the novels' various contexts.

Literature Review

- 4 The word "apocalyptic," corresponding to *Apokalyptik* in German, was first introduced by Gottfried Christian Friedrich Lücke (Collins 2014: 1) while discussing the *Apocalypse of John*, or *Book of Revelation*. The term has been used thereafter in various scholarly contexts to refer to fiction dealing with the imagined end of the world. Gaining an increasing interest due to its popularity in recent years, apocalypse became a subject of theoretical works that examined its genre, function, and types. In this context, Paul Hanson proposed distinctions between "apocalypse" as a literary type, "apocalypticism" as a social ideology, and "apocalyptic eschatology" as a set of ideas and motifs (Collins 2014: 2).
- 5 Apocalyptic literature also gave rise to the post-apocalyptic text which imagines life in the aftermath of an apocalypse, the causes of which range from possible natural disasters and pandemics to man-made weapons of mass destruction or even alien invasions of our planet. Hence, by envisioning the catastrophic end of human race, apocalyptic novels tend to address significant issues and convey certain messages to the contemporary politics and societies. In this sense, the apocalyptic literature is defined in terms of its function as "intended to interpret present, earthly circumstances in light of the supernatural world of the future, and to influence both the understanding and the behavior of the audience by means of divine authority" (Collins 2014: 5-6). This is, however, a parable-bound reading inclined to theologize the discourse of representation and emphasize the final judgement of God as well.
- 6 Unlike the pre-modern approach, the modern significations of apocalypse suggest a life shaped by crises that lead to the dramatic end of the world. In other words, the modern apocalypse has something to do with the collapse of a universal order that fails to keep up due to dystopian defects in its nature. The thematic concerns, nonetheless, are not so much with the transformation itself as with the present problems causing it. Apocalyptic literature, accordingly, functions as "a conceptual tool that projects an imaginative catastrophic event onto a reality, through which questions of political,

economic, social, and cultural problems of the present era can be raised, thought, and answered.” It raises fears about the collapse of civilization so that “history can be reexamined and human nature re-interrogated” (Moon 2014: 4). Kim Stanley Robinson, the author of the alternate-history novel *The Years of Rice and Salt* (2002), traces the paradoxical relationship between science fiction and reality, “Maybe we can say that we need to see the real situation more imaginatively, while imagining what we want more realistically” (Robinson 2002: 255). The apocalyptic imagination, according to Joseph Dewey (1990) the American literary critic, represents an attempt by a puzzled culture to set its “present crisis within a larger context,” to judge that it is “part of an order as wide as the cosmos itself” which points “humanity toward nothing less than the finale of its history” (Dewey 1990: 10).

- 7 Like the first wave of apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic narratives arising in the 1950s as a consequence to World War II, a second wave was revived in the 2000s as a result of various political, environmental, economic and biogenetic factors: the 9/11 attacks and the subsequent wars; the outbreaks of fatal viral pandemics such as AIDS, SARS, and H1N1; the possible natural disasters due to climate change; and the ensuing economic challenges and crises. These events signified dystopian flaws in the present universal order that usher in a possible end of the world. Besides, they represent harbingers that familiarize postmodern literature with the imaginative end of the world. In Jameson’s words, due to extraordinary postmodern alterations “the apocalyptic [...] diminishes abruptly into ‘something you have around the home’” (Jameson 1991: xvi). Jameson’s view is part of a factious argument over the prevalent preoccupation with the motif in contemporary fiction.
- 8 Taking Jameson’s familiarized apocalypse as a point of departure, the present paper places the pandemic catastrophe within a broader literary context. Perhaps the pandemic apocalypse represents the archetype of the genre as it reproduces actual experiences that have radically threatened human existence at certain historical junctures. The plague motif constitutes a recurrent theme throughout literary history that reflects the people’s consciousness of disease as an existential threat. The literary imagination of plague is rooted in the Greek texts, such as Homer’s *Iliad* and Sophocles’ *Oedipus King*, in which there is a causal relationship between plague and sin. In the modern pandemic apocalypse, the sin-punishment causality is given an additional dimension. The plague is not a punishment, but rather the sin invoked directly or indirectly by man to handle a difficult situation. The result is a pandemic apocalypse that leaves behind a prolonged dystopian society. Remarkably, each of the pandemic apocalyptic novels discussed in this study has imbedded pre- and post-apocalyptic dystopian worlds.
- 9 The literary dystopia designates a fictional future world within which a human existence is extremely difficult due to political oppression, natural disasters, or declining human systems. As a literary trope, dystopia has arisen in modern literature due to the failure to realize a dreamt-of utopia. In Veira’s words, “Literary Dystopia utilises the narratives devices of literary utopia, incorporating into its logic the principle of euchronia [...], but predicts that things will turn out badly; it is thus essentially pessimistic in presentation of projective images” (Veira 2013: 17). Veira’s insight is rightly applicable to the recent apocalyptic fiction though his idea about the pessimistic image seems too idealistic. In an interview, Robinson exclaims, “Doesn’t our inescapable biological fate mean the utopia should always shade into tragedy?”

(Robinson 2014: 248). Presumably, the human experience of utopia never goes beyond the mere idea.

- 10 Historically speaking, dystopia is human whereas utopia is divine. Dystopian novels depict more realistic images of humanity than the utopian ones as the problems they tackle are rechanneled from historical human experiences regardless of how dark they tend to be. Andrew Clements, the author of *Frindle*, stated “Perhaps the dystopian stories of today are darker because [...] a study of the world history shows that truly awful things have always happened” (qtd. in Nurhendi 2010: 19). When associated with science fiction, the critical dystopia usually implies a critique that warns against contemporary socio-political tendencies, with a central concern to provoke a reaction in the reader to possibly help change the present (Armitt 2000: 194). Hence, the dystopian future probed by the apocalyptic novels is no more than a temporal critique of the present. In his study “Keeping the Lights on: Post-Apocalyptic Narrative, Social Critique, and the Cultural Politics of Emotion,” Jeremy R. Grossman (2011) applies Derrida’s and Jameson’s ideas to argue that “stories about the future and about the apocalypse are strictly textual, and reflect current sociopolitical conditions rather than attempting to prophetically envision the future” (Grossman 2011: iii). Although it is often set in the future, the dystopian fiction is intent on addressing the contemporaneous issues of human concern. The modern dystopian literature has provided some satirical insights into the workings of corrupt, political and social systems by casting somehow exaggerated future images of them.

21st Century Apocalypse in Prescient Novels

- 11 Anticipation novels written in the 19th and early 20th centuries represent the literary prototype as well as a prophetic herald. Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* (1826) and Jack London's *The Scarlet Plague* (1912) indeed ignite the farsighted imagination of the pandemic apocalypse.
- 12 *The Last Man* is an apocalyptic, dystopian science fiction novel first published in 1826. The story is set in the late 21st century with a pandemic wiping out the world. Mary Shelley proclaims in the book's introduction that her novel is an edited version of a prophetic writing that she discovered in the Sibyl's cave near Naples in 1818. Taking place between 2073 and 2100, the first-person narrative commences with political events like the end of monarchy in England and the Turkish-Greek war and concludes with the unknown plague claiming the world's population as well as the appearance of a false messiah. It ends with Lionel, the last man, living alone with a sheepdog as a wanderer on the now-vacant continents of Europe and Africa.
- 13 The plague does not stand alone in the novel as a cause of collapse, but rather as a consequence invoked by man's endless desire to gain power at any cost. Small wonder then that Shelley makes use of the term "labyrinth of evil" (171) to refer to the entire state of affairs. The novel's major conflict between the Islamic and Christian cultures is nourished by the greed for power of such corrupt leaders as Raymond, whose quest is not overwhelmed by the desperate condition of the world he seeks to rule. The account sent by Karazza to Raymond is highly suggestive:

Take it, Christian dogs! take the palaces, the gardens, the mosques, the abode of our fathers—take plague with them; pestilence is the enemy we fly; if she be your

friend, hug her to your bosoms. The curse of Allah is on Stamboul, share ye her fate.
(Shelley 1996: 150)

- 14 The germ of the plague, conjured in Constantinople/Istanbul ("Stamboul"), is carried forth by the greed for power to the rest of the world, though it can be inferred that Shelley blames the political interests behind conflict rather than a particular religion.
- 15 Envisaging the recent characteristics of viral pandemics, Shelley draws an air-borne plague which is more calamitous since it is invisible and difficult to avoid. The wind, which inspired the revolutionary spirit of the romantic poets, becomes a carrier of death. In McWhir's words, "Through such adaptation of familiar images, Mary Shelley demonstrates that bad political and moral decisions render human beings complicit with the external means of their destruction." (McWhir 1996: xxxi). Nature's wrath is represented in the novel as a response to man's evil impulses, "a tempest arose wilder than the winds, a tempest bred by the passions of man, nourished by his most violent impulses, unexampled and dire" (Shelley 1996: 231). Hence, the plague which becomes an alternative agent of death assumes its air-borne form from the destructive interplay of politics and cultures. The fatal plague can never be more harmful than man's institutional idea that he can build his own domain upon the ruins of others. In fact, Shelley's novel pries open the human shell coating a core of jungle law which is discussed in London's novel *The Scarlet Plague*.
- 16 Originally published in *London Magazine* in 1912, Jack London's post-apocalyptic novel *The Scarlet Plague* has been brought into the limelight again with the COVID-19 outbreak (2020). The novel is overwhelming since it is prescient of the events that take place over a century later and provides fodder to conspiracy theory supporters. The novel's fictional events are set in 2073, sixty years after an uncontrollable pandemic known as the scarlet (red) death has depopulated the planet. James Smith, one of the survivors, is still alive in the San Francisco area. He travels around with his grandsons Edwin, Hoo-Hoo, and Hare-Lip, who are young but with limited intellectual and language abilities due to the primitive, hunter-gatherer type of life they lead in a deserted world.
- 17 The story of the apocalypse, the scarlet plague itself, is recounted in a flashback by Smith—'Granser' as his grandsons prefer to call him—when he was an English professor. The disease outbreak took place in 2013, a year after "Morgan the Fifth was appointed President of the United States by the Board of Magnates" (London 2015: 19). Victims would turn scarlet, particularly on the face, could not move their limbs, and usually died within 30 minutes of symptom occurrence. Doctors and scientists not only failed to find a cure for the germ-carried disease but died in the attempt.
- 18 The few survivors left in the San Francisco area are now broken into tribes and lead Smith's way of life. Smith's main concern is that he has to carry forth the memory of the pre-apocalypse civilization. His efforts, however, go in vain since his grandsons ridicule the value of knowledge, social class, technology, etc. that he tries to pass over to the young generation. In their eyes, such senseless stuff is as unbelievable as a myth since they have neither seen that world nor even possess the intellect to imagine it.
- 19 London's novel is focused on the social plague that accompanies the microbiological one, one which proves worse. The real collapse of humanity is caused by social injustice. This is expressive of the slogan stated by one of the characters in Robinson's novel *2312*, that "social justice is a survival technology" (2012: 259). Many social entities that have been always recognized as byproducts of capitalism arise during the plague

and retaliate for the injustice done against them in a barbaric, evil manner. Like the plague itself, they blindly attack perpetrators and innocent victims alike.

In the midst of our civilization, down in our slums and labor-ghettos, we had bred a race of barbarians, of savages; and now, in the time of our calamity, they turned upon us like the wild beasts they were and destroyed us. And they destroyed themselves as well. (London 2015: 105)

- 20 Berkove finds in Granser's statement evidence of social Darwinism that generally breaks loose during a moment of crisis.

Granser's confession also exposes the pattern that the most advanced civilizations have always had, and probably always will have: an underclass of relative barbarians ("they") and an [upperclass] of more talented and affluent leaders ("us") that exploits and misuses fellow human beings from the underclass. (Berkove 2011: 136)

- 21 The logic of intra-class discrimination is a capitalist self-righteous pose to hint how things would look like in case the underclass breaks loose.
- 22 Furthermore, capitalism is carried forth through objects with which it has been inseparably bound. Standing out as a token of the pre-apocalypse dominating system, a coin is the only monument left back from the ruined world, "a battered and tarnished silver dollar," to which the "old man's eyes glistened, as he held the coin close to them" (London 2015: 18). The coin, in this context, could be an object of nostalgia. Yet, like a piece of a bomb in the bombarded site, it evidently stands for capitalism as the system which was in charge in the moment preceding the catastrophe and, thus, responsible for it. "In particular, in London's opinion, capitalism led to the rise in population and to overcrowding, and overcrowding led to plague. Consequently, capitalism is presented as the ultimate cause of the pandemic and thus harshly criticized" (Riva et al. 2014: 1755). Surprisingly, Shelley's and London's novels not only set out the far-sighted imagination of apocalypse but also insightfully diagnosed its underlying circumstances.

Power Conflicts and Moral Polarization

- 23 Postwar novels dealing with the apocalypse are noticeably charged with lingering power conflicts and moral polarization. *I Am Legend* and *The Stand* project an image of the post-apocalyptic world where the boundary between evil and good is clear-cut. However, much road has to be travelled before a realistic civilization can be rebuilt.
- 24 *I Am Legend* is a 1954 post-apocalyptic horror novel by American writer Richard Matheson. Though it was influential in the development of zombie and vampire literature, the novel falls within the pandemic apocalypse literature. The central character is Robert Neville, a sole survivor of a pandemic that has killed most of the human population and turned the remainder into "vampires". Set in Los Angeles, the novel details Neville's lonely life in the aftermath of the outbreak as he struggles to study and find a cure for the disease. Meanwhile, he has to combat the swarms of vampires haunting his house every night.
- 25 The novel is striking as it reenacts the plot of Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* with a reversal, as Crusoe leaves while Humanity stays, whereas Neville outlives civilization in its entirety, and while Crusoe is responsible for his fate, Neville is a victim. The moral message conveyed by the novel can be derived from the three categories of the pandemic's victims: the dead, the vampires, and the survivor. The normal mortal considerations

are deconstructed as those less affected by the pandemic are those who have perished. To survive is either to lead a cursed vampire life or to fight unaided against an incredibly hostile environment.

- 26 Apart from the heroic role of the protagonist, the novel represents the survivors as bloodsuckers who further the destructive power of the disease. Comparing the vampire's deeds to those of people, the novel contemplates the existing evils caused by politics and the capitalist pursuit of profits.

The vampire may foster quickened heartbeats and levitated hair. But is he worse than the parent who gave to society a neurotic child who became a politician? Is he worse than the manufacturer who set up belated foundations with the money he made by handing bombs and guns to suicidal nationalists? Is he worse than the distiller who gave bastardized grain juice to stultify further the brains of those who, sober, were incapable of a progressive thought? (Matheson 1997: 15)

- 27 Symbolically, the vampires in the novel render literally Karl Marx's metaphor that: "Capital is dead labour, that, vampire-like, only lives by sucking living labour, and lives the more, the more labour it sucks" (qtd in Canavan 2014: 13). This implicit image of the blood-sucking capitalism is, somehow, traceable in Stephen King's *The Stand* as well.

- 28 Stephen King's *The Stand* is a post-apocalyptic novel which was first published in 1978. The plot centers on an influenza pandemic that kills almost the entire world population except for few survivors who establish opposing social systems and engage in nihilistic conflicts. The virus causing the infectious and deadly strain of influenza was, in fact, developed as a biological weapon within a secret laboratory at the U.S. Department of Defense under the codename "Project Blue". It is accidentally released by Campion, a laboratory security guard who afterwards runs away to avoid the other staff members' fate. Campion's unwitting step spreads the infection to Arnette, Texas, across the country, and beyond US borders. It becomes an apocalyptic pandemic known as "superflu", "Captain Trips", "Choking Sickness" or "Tube Neck" killing within a month approximately 99.4% of the world's population. The fatal disease results in an escalating collapse of social, moral, economic, and health systems leading even survivors to die from despair and acute sense of loss.

- 29 The survivors are divided into two polarized communities that echo the spiritual, moral, and political dichotomy of the pre-apocalyptic world. One community settles down in Boulder, Colorado, under the guidance of Mother Abigail, the spiritual leader whose telepathic powers attracted many other survivors to join. The group attempts to establish a utopian society that they call the "Free Zone" by restoring law and order, bidding respect for Boulder's native people and providing electricity to the town. Meanwhile, in Las Vegas, Randall Flagg, the "dark man" possessing supernatural abilities, creates his own society with people called by his visions. The people worship Flagg as a messiah and joyfully submit to his fascist dictatorship. Flagg makes up a team of previous criminals and abnormal people with the purpose of creating weapons and preparing for a war with the people in Boulder. They start by staging an attack with a bomb on the Free Zone's leadership committee, killing many members. To retaliate, Mother Abigail assigns the mission of destroying Flagg to a team who fail and are taken prisoners by Flagg's army. Moments before they are to be killed, an encounter between "the Trashcan Man" and Flagg results in the explosion of a nuclear warhead—by "the Hand of God"—destroying Las Vegas and killing all of Flagg's followers.

- 30 King's choice of the title, *The Stand*, is suggestive in terms of imparting survivors with free will. "Do you go full Darwin and indulge dark, selfish instincts or do what's right for the sake of others? 'I wanted to write about bravery,' says King. 'At some point, people do have to make a stand'" (qtd in Breznican 2020). In view of its moral conflict, the novel counterbalances Flagg's "demonic presence" and his "ability to bring out the worst in his followers" against the angel-like world of Abigail (Breznican 2020). Ironically, the author's own stand toward both leaders remains ambiguous. Like Satan in Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Flagg is intended by the author to play his part heroically and is granted a leader's charisma in contrast to Abigail who shows weakness and indecisiveness.
- 31 At the end, the main concern of Boulder's society is reduced to the fate of Frannie's new born baby, and whether he is immune to the superflu since his death would mean the end of humanity. The baby, Peter, eventually contracts and then manages to fight off the superflu, a sign that marks the end of the pandemic but not the end of war. In the novel's epilogue, Flagg has survived the nuclear explosion, though he wakes up with memory loss somewhere in the Southern Hemisphere. Regaining his former strength, he gives himself a new name and begins recruiting supporters among a preliterate, dark-skinned people.
- 32 Remarkably, utopian and dystopian societies are reenacted even after the end of the world. Furthermore, some chauvinistic images can be detected in the novel: the evil leader is 'dark man', he resuscitates in the south, and his new army is composed of dark-skinned people. The novel's ending note is that the world might not be destroyed by a micro-biotic enemy, but it might by man's insatiable appetite for power.

Conjured Plague and Trapped Survivors

- 33 The contemporary novels written within the first two decades of the present century have a historical vantage point that helps them to see its atrocities with greater clarity. *The Maze Runner* (2009) and *Oryx and Crake* (2004) address recent issues associated with biogenetic experimentation by capitalist corporations that lead to the death of the world's population and the entrapment of survivors. Human beings are no more than lab rats whose survival is no better than death in the catastrophe. From a postmodern perspective, humanoid survivors outlive both the end of the world and, unfortunately, their human nature. A similar existential entrapment can also be traced in *Station Eleven* (2014), a post-apocalyptic novel by Emily St. John Mandel.
- 34 Mandel's novel takes place in the Great Lakes region after the swine flu pandemic known as the "Georgia Flu" has broken out, killing most of the world's population. It starts with the outbreak of the pandemic in Toronto. Jeevan leaves the city after the death of Arthur—an actor playing the role of Lear—on stage and the subsequent death of many actors and actresses attending the funeral within three weeks of the plague's outbreak.
- 35 The novel implies an invitation to break with the old world; meanwhile, the post-apocalyptic era is not easy to live through. Kirsten, a member of the Travelling Symphony tells her fellow survivor Diallo "the people who struggle the most with [this current era] are the people who remember the old world clearly [...] the more you remember, the more you've lost" (Mandel 2015, p. 195). Apparently, the characters are

caught in between a utopian world which is not reached and a lost dystopian one for which a sense of nostalgia is stirred. This is further reinforced by the slogan of The Travelling Symphony, “survival is insufficient” (Mandel 2015: 332). The slogan suggests that to outlive the plague does not make any difference from death unless a real change is made.

- 36 The novel moves forward twenty years after the pandemic’s “Year Zero” to record the events involving Kirsten Raymonde and a nomadic group of survivors. Kirsten is obsessed with Arthur as she witnessed his death. She keeps a graphic novel (a metafictional subtext) given by Arthur before his death titled *Dr. Eleven*. The novel is written by his ex-wife Miranda. Kirsten, along with others, have to leave the small town threatened by the mysterious Prophet who rapes young girls whom he claims as his “wives”. They fight with and kill him. Like the false messiahs who often prevail in post-apocalyptic fictional societies, the Prophet is a lingering piece of the dystopian world. In Leggatt’s words, “the patriarchal violence enacted by the Prophet offers an unpleasant re-enactment of the religious fanaticism that has punctuated human history” (Leggatt 2018: 2-3).
- 37 The prophet, however, presents himself to his followers as well as to readers as an enlightened figure that attracts their attention to the pestilence’s connotations. He believes that “everything that has ever happened on this earth has happened for a reason,” including the Georgia Flu, which he sees as a “perfect agent of death [that] could only be divine” (Mandel 2015: 59-60). He rhetorically manipulates his followers’ understanding of history and religion to convince them that he is a divine savior,
“The flu,” the prophet said, “the great cleansing that we suffered twenty years ago, that flu was our flood. The light we carry within us is the ark that carried Noah and his people over the face of the terrible waters, and I submit that we were saved”—his voice was rising—“not only to bring the light, to spread the light, but to be the light. We were saved because we are the light. We are the pure.” (Mandel 2015: 60)
- 38 The characters’ destination, thereafter, is the Museum of Civilization—the Seven City Airport where passengers locked themselves down to evade the pandemic—to reunite with the rest of the troupe. The entire world shrinks into a departure lounge where a group of survivors could find a safe place. Such a claustrophobic escape reverts the actual function of the places in the pre-apocalyptic world. By linking two eras, the airport stands here for what is referred to in some critical contexts as ‘chronotope’ which plays a “structure-forming role” (Chernetsova & Maslova 2019: 44). Yet, it loses its functional essence. The airport is a point of departure to the broad world or arrival home. Neither of these, however, are associated with the place. It stands for becoming stuck in the no-place.
- 39 The novel’s existential entrapment occurs at multiple levels: a group of survivors are technologically trapped in The Museum of Civilization; another group are entrapped within the violent regime of the prophet where he experiments his strange religious ideas and sexual practices; and symbolically art, represented by the metafictional novel *Dr. Eleven* and the Travelling Symphony, is trapped in the no-place.
- 40 The above existential dilemma is openly dealt with in *The Maze Runner*, a series of young adult dystopian science fiction novels written by American author James Dashner. Narrating the events in non-chronological order, the series consists of *The Maze Runner* (2009), *The Scorch Trials* (2010) and *The Death Cure* (2011), as well as two prequel novels, *The Kill Order* (2012) and *The Fever Code* (2016), and a companion book titled *The Maze*

Runner Files (2013). Though the series is not apocalyptic *per se*, the apocalyptic themes can be traced in the fictional background that is set after solar flares and coronal mass ejections have scorched the earth. As a result, the governments of the world releases a virus named “The Flare” to kill off some of the world’s population to save resources. They lose control over the virus, however, which turns out to be highly infectious causing its victims to lose their sanity and become animal-like.

- 41 Broadly speaking, *The Maze Runner* depicts a dystopian world caused by a natural disaster as well as the governments’ ham-fisted treatment that only adds fuel to the fire. Even the refuge called The Glade, where survivors are safely kept, is no more than an existential trap, practically worse than death. As suggested by the title itself, in order to survive one has to run and cross multiple places with fatal dangers. The worst predicament, however, arises from the great gap separating what Sartre ontologically describes as the ‘being-in-itself’ and ‘being-for-itself’ (1993: 18-28). The survivors, robbed of their human consciousness, are like robots designed by sophisticated technology to carry forth the seed of a vanishing world though they are completely cut off from its memory. Thomas’ memory loss, for instance, illustrates the point:

His [Thomas’] memory loss was strange. He mostly remembered the workings of the world—but emptied of specifics, faces, names. Like a book completely intact but missing one word in every dozen, making it a miserable and confusing read. He didn’t even know his age. (Dashner 2009:15)

- 42 The artificial utopia intention of the Creators of the Glade is reverted into a dystopia evacuated from the essential meaning of human existence. The characters have to combat many external and internal obstacles just to restore their original condition which, compared with the current one, becomes utopian *par excellence*. The events allow us to wonder whether the novel communicates to us Reagan and Thatcher’s slogan that “there is no alternative to capitalism” (qtd in Canavan 2014: 14). Like George Orwell’s *Animal Farm* (1946) the utopia that animals dream and toil for turns out at the end to be the one they have struggled to replace.
- 43 The novel’s idea is derived from a pure scientific fact: that a solar flare was predicted by NASA to hit the Earth in 2022. James Dashner fictionalizes the Flare as a lethal, airborne, highly contagious, man-made virus that settles in the brain, and developed and released by the scientists of the self-crowned governing body referred to as WICKED (World in Catastrophe Killzone Experiment Department). Its symptoms include many mental dehumanizing disorders. To cope up with the pestilence, the people’s social status determines their destiny: the poor who catch the virus become “Cranks” and are doomed to death, whereas the rich who can afford the expensive drug called the “Bliss” can live a bit longer. Importantly, both the drug and the virus are produced by WICKED as a sort of business in addition to its main purpose of culling the world’s population. While making profits from catastrophes can never hide the capitalist logic, the idea of controlling the world population casts light on such western theories as eugenics and practices derived from the inscriptions of the Georgia Guidestones, a granite monument erected in 1980 which features 10 questionable rules “for an age of reason” (see its Wikipedia description).
- 44 The most vicious part of the plot is WICKED’s physical and emotional experimentations with a group of human ‘lab rats’. WICKED scientists work under the following motto, “serve and preserve humanity, no matter the cost. We are, indeed, ‘good’” (Dashner 2009: 399). The slogan is suspicious since “they decide whom to serve and how to

preserve as well as who will be the cost [...] [T]he lab rats whether prisoners or orphans, the secret government labs and the inhumane experiments are all historically documented and have true foundations in reality” (Alkhafaji & Yaroub 2019: 1122, 1127). The use of historical facts as the base for the novel makes it even more relevant as a fiction.

- 45 Remarkably, the pandemic provoked by genetic experimentation which occurs in *The Maze Runner* preoccupies the fictional texts of other 21st-century post-apocalyptic novelists, such as Margaret Atwood’s 2003 novel *Oryx and Crake* which envisions a post-apocalyptic world after a genetically-modified virus wipes out the entire population except for the protagonist and a small group of genetically-modified people. The novel is the first in a trilogy; it is followed by two sequels *The Year of the Flood* (2009) and *MaddAddam* (2013). Set in a both dystopian and post-apocalyptic world, *Oryx and Crake* is narrated through a third person retrospective perspective. To explain the events leading up to the apocalypse, the novel’s plot comprises a series of flashbacks depicting a world dominated by biocorporations. The main character Jimmy/Snowman thinks he is the only human survivor along with a group of children who are the progeny of biologically-spliced humanoids called Crakers. Moving back in time, the novel depicts the pre-apocalypse events leading up to the release of the virus and the subsequent annihilation of humankind.
- 46 Prior to the apocalypse, the ethical rules of biological engineering have been violated; animal and human DNA is spliced to create new species. Biocorporations are no longer satisfied with the present class system and think of finding an alternative to regular humans. Furthermore, pharmaceutical companies resort to spreading disease within their products in order to create a demand for more medicine. Crake, Snowman’s childhood friend, creates a virus to kill off what he sees as corrupt humankind. Imagining a situation similar to the present concerns, Crake believes that due to the increasing population, pollution of various kinds would lead to a deteriorating ecosystem. He comes up with the “Paradise Project” by which the entire human race is to be replaced by Crakers. His “BlyssPluss Pills” plan works out, leading to the death of humanity. Snowman, the sole survivor, witnesses the end of species “taking place before his very eyes. Kingdom, Phylum, Class, Order, Family, Genus, Species” (Atwood 2004: 344). Atwood envisions an advanced stage within the cycle of consumerism and capitalism.
- 47 The Crakers are now to be the dominant species. Crake has conditioned their genes removing aggression so that they will not have territorial ambitions nor will they develop a hierarchical class system. Their sexual drive “was not a constant torment to them” (Atwood 2004: 305) any more as the need to copulate has been reduced to the basic biological urge of heats that they practice seasonally. Crake’s race is reduced to the status of animals not only emotionally but also intellectually. Having a diminished IQ, the Crakers are only concerned about survival and giving life to the next generation. To avoid overpopulation, Crake has in addition “programmed” (303) the new species to die at age thirty which detracts the time they may have needed for intellectual development or even passing experience on to younger generations.
- 48 Crake’s project, nevertheless, contains an undefined moral code which echoes the paradoxical nature of the capitalist ideology begetting him. He is part and parcel of the capitalist corporations which destroy the earth with their ever-increasing demand for production and consumption. Yet, he annihilates the world in the process of creating a

specific race of consumers whose modified mental faculties cannot help them question what they are consuming. Such an advanced stage of consumerism prefigures what can be called the meta-capitalist apocalypse of the 21st century.

Conclusion

- 49 The novels discussed in this paper are all in the 21st century, whether written in the 19th, 20th, or 21st centuries. They predict our century to be disastrous as though the literary imagination anticipated a climatic point beyond which history cannot go farther. This vision might be clear to the contemporary novel provided that tomorrow's implications can be inferred from today's scenario. Yet, one may wonder how the present century is somberly assuming a form close to the one prefigured by the post-apocalyptic novels belonging to bygone eras. Presumably, one could argue that the social and political standpoints from which the future was viewed in previous ages were similar to today's, despite the fact that no logical argument can justify their poetic vision.
- 50 Post-apocalyptic fiction necessarily envisions an irrevocable point in the future of humanity. This future, however, is no more than a reflective outcome of the present causes and complications. By addressing a problematic future, colored by the present influences of power relations, authors are actually accentuating critical parts of today. Hence, imagining the future that has never taken place except in text is no more than going a step further in the critique of the present systems governing the world. If socialism once developed into a horrible self-destructive totalitarianism, capitalism will probably end in apocalypse. The man-made pandemic is engineered with the purpose of harboring a utopian future, or so its creators might think. The event turns out to be a dystopian catastrophe rather than a utopian revelation. Things might sometimes escape mankind's control and lead to disastrous aftermaths.
- 51 The apocalyptic texts examined in this paper reveal a late version of capitalism that can sell its own deterioration along with the world as a commodity that resonates with what Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri call "biopolitical production" (qtd in Moon 2014: 615) This is a transformed state of capitalism—meta-capitalism—that outlives the world and even the consumers who feed its very existence. It is named meta-capitalism because it practices its own roles beyond the circumstances governing its being. Such a critical consciousness might have inspired Jameson's well-known observation that "it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism" (qtd in Canavan 2014: 14). No wonder then if a "tarnished silver dollar" in *The Scarlet Plague*, like the Coca-Cola can in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006), lingers on when the entire world turns into ashes. They are tokens of the capitalist domination which not only outlives the world but also stand out as nostalgic monuments and core carriers of capitalism (thereafter meta-capitalism) over into the post-apocalyptic world.
- 52 The first and foremost dystopian element in the novels discussed arises from the fact that the viruses causing the pandemics are summoned by man either willingly or unwillingly. Whether the virus is released to cope with a problem, occurs due to a scientific mistake, or is brought down upon humanity by man's vices and sins, it actually accelerates the prophesied end of the world. No world can be more dystopian than one where people engineer their own self-destruction. In the aftermaths, the surviving isolated societies, importing the pre-apocalyptic discriminations and

maladies, reenact the past conflicts and leadership polarization of the pre-apocalyptic world. It is this situation that paves the way for the emergence of false messiahs and opportunist leaders who exploit the people's spiritual void and reproduce corrupt governing systems. Besides, the human moral codes regress to primitive stages as culture and civilization are replaced by nature and "the survival of the fittest". It even leads to the most brutal versions of degradation and dehumanization. Imperialism, in the present sense of the concept, no longer exists, as smaller communities and even individuals play the part of empires. They think they can survive only through expansion and displacement over the neighboring communities or individuals. Metaphorically, the post-pandemic worldwide graveyard is still the object of the few survivors' conflicting interests and desire for power.

- 53 Thus, the most dystopian practices of today's world systems along with its sophisticated technologies are held up with a sense of nostalgia when compared with the outcome of the apocalypse. In almost all novels, the ending notes give a misty and unresolved code about the future of mankind. Implicitly, the surviving masses' worldview is too myopic to look beyond survival. They can manage their own affairs yet can never do without the ruling class or, to use Noam Chomsky's words, the "business groups" (1997: 14) whose absence from the post-apocalyptic scenery is paradoxically more present than the apocalypse itself.

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ABSTRACTS

Investigating the novels that deal with a pandemic apocalypse, this study highlights the dystopian elements preceding and following the end of the world. Inspired by the COVID-19 pandemic in the 21st century, it relates the fears of the pandemic to the literary history and political conditions nurturing that imagined end of the world in a number of post-apocalyptic novels. The novels are examined under three tropes: the early novels prophesying a 21st-century apocalypse; the postwar novels linking the plague to power conflicts; and the recent novels tackling biogenetic experimentation. The study pulls apart, with a limited depth, the parts played by the political and economic world systems in bringing about the pandemic apocalypse as well as the dystopian aftermaths. It concludes that although the novels lash a critique against capitalist recklessness, they ambivalently suspect the existence of a viable alternative.

En examinant les romans qui évoquent une apocalypse pandémique, cette étude met en lumière les éléments dystopiques qui précèdent et suivent la fin du monde. Inspirée par la pandémie de COVID-19 au XXI^e siècle, elle met en relation les craintes de la pandémie avec l'histoire littéraire et les conditions politiques qui nourrissent cette fin du monde imaginée dans un certain nombre de romans post-apocalyptiques. Les romans sont examinés sous trois angles : les plus anciens romans prophétisant une apocalypse au XXI^e siècle, les romans d'après-guerre liant la peste aux conflits de pouvoir et les romans les plus récents abordant l'expérimentation biogénétique. L'étude examine, de manière restreinte, les rôles joués par les systèmes politiques et économiques mondiaux dans l'apocalypse pandémique ainsi que les séquelles dystopiques. Elle aboutit à la conclusion que, bien que les romans critiquent la folie capitaliste, ils doutent de l'existence d'une alternative viable.

INDEX

Keywords: pandemic, apocalypse, dystopia, post-apocalypse, novel, COVID-19, capitalism, Shelley Mary, Atwood, Margaret, London Jack, Mandel Emily St. John, Matheson Richard, King Stephen, Dashner James

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