

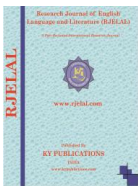


## APOCALPYTIC VISIONS IN STEPHEN GILL'S "A QUESTION" AND MAHMOUD DARWISH'S "THE ENEMY"

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### Abstract

Apocalypse is present in the contemporary society in the form of war and nuclear attack. Wars are not just actions but are in the psyche of mankind. The political imbalances form the major cause for war and the related problems. Interpretation of these political problems in the lights of apocalyptic writing helps the readers to comprehend the causes of the crisis from the past, through the present and in to the future. The present paper aims to unfold the apocalyptic elements in Stephen Gill's "A Question" and Mahmoud Darwish "The Enemy". Eventually it forges to identify the different types of apocalypses present in the select poems. It also discusses the political problems that are carried forward in the poems, irrespective of the differences among the poets.

**Keywords:** Apocalypse, nuclear devastation, artificial intelligence, political issues

Through ages, literature has widened its space to take in several practices. These practices reflect the social, economical and psychological conditions of the individuals. The contemporary society possesses both positive as well as negative stereotypes. The positive symbols and stereotypes aim at preaching the moral values and ethics to the society. The negative signs and the stereotypes warn the human society of the awaiting doom for their deeds. These warnings accompany with reference to the past apocalyptic events. The apocalypse tends to denote the end of the world. This end or doom symbolises the world which is corrupt with its sinful nature. The apocalypses are traced all through the eras starting from the Jewish apocalypse:

The rise of Jewish apocalypse coincide with the rise of apocalyptic literature as a whole; ... while some initial responses to the destruction were...while Jewish apocalyptic expectation never faded completely, the expectation of the End Times and of a

Messiah has remained in the background throughout Jewish history... (Johnson 200)

Apocalypticism is a religious belief which interprets human history from its roots to the present, as a sign of the upcoming end of the world, "The term apocalypticism refers to the attitudes, presuppositions, expectations, and beliefs that form the religious or cultural milieu of those belonging to movements similar to those that produce apocalypses" (Taylor and Howard 33). It is one of the traits of Christian eschatology, the branch of theology dealing with the state of the soul after death, purgatory, hell and heaven. Apocalypse, the German form *apokalypsis*, was first used by Gottfried Christian Friedrich Lucke. It is defined as unveiling or revelation. The literary pieces that focus on these apocalypses are termed apocalyptic literature.

Collins in his book *Apocalypse, Prophecy, and Pseudepigraphy: On Jewish Apocalyptic Literature* says that, "the end of the world is

associated especially with apocalyptic literature, and even there it does not occur consistently" (34). The apocalyptic literature dates back to the post Exilic Jewish period. It is popular among millennialist early Christians. The millennialism believes in the religious denominations. It is believed by millennialists that the golden age or paradise was present on earth before the revelation or apocalypse. The apocalyptic element is seen in the prophetic books of Joel, Zechariah and Isaiah. The book of Daniel covers a wide range of apocalyptic elements.

Apocalypse is best defined as, "...doomsday scenarios, images of cosmic battle between good and evil and final annihilation" (Aldrovandi 22). There is a constant fear among the individuals regarding the doomsday. The end is marked by different types of apocalypse. These natural events that tend to destruction are categorised under these types. The different types of apocalypses are cybergeddon, climate change, pandemic apocalypse, nuclear holocaust, asteroid, interplanetary contamination, scorching of earth, large scale volcanism, malthusian crisis, AI apocalypse and zombie apocalypse.

The cybergeddon refers to the destruction caused by cyber terrorism, cyber warfare and cyber hacktivism. The theft of knowledge and hacking is targeted on the banking and government control system resulting in economic disruption. The climatic change apocalypse affects the climatic condition and it also affects the living condition of humans, animals, plants, birds and celestial objects. The nuclear holocaust apocalypse is the use of atomic energy or nuclear weapon to destroy the world. This nuclear attack generates thermal and ionic radiation disrupting the whole world. The asteroid apocalypse is the fall of asteroid and the eventual wiping out the living beings from earth's surface. The interplanetary contamination causes destruction through alien invasion. The scorching earth apocalypse defines the end of the world by means of heat radiation through the sun. The volcanic apocalypse is the oozing of volcanoes and its release of poisonous gas that are too fatal.

The Malthusian crisis is the prediction by Thomas Robert Malthus, that the population of a

country will exceed the agricultural production. Creating imbalance in the eco system, causing starvation of living things. The AI apocalypse is the process wherein the robots turn against its creator and destroys humanity. This apocalypse tends to destroy the world by the robots. Zombie apocalypse is the pandemic apocalypse, which uses microbes to infect others. These microbes infect human as well as animals leaving the entire humanity to struggle.

Apocalyptic literature is best defined by *John Collins* in his book, *The Apocalyptic Imagination: An Introduction to Jewish Apocalyptic Literature* as,

a genre of revelatory literature with a narrative framework, in which a revelation is mediated by an otherworldly being to a human recipient, disclosing a transcendent reality which is both temporal, insofar as it envisages eschatological salvation, and spatial... as it involves another, supernatural world. (Collins 5)

The apocalyptic writings involve in the process of revealing the secret codes of God, the end of the world, and the creation of God's kingdom on earth. The main aim of apocalyptic literature is to bring out the righteousness of God on earth through visions, revelations and foretelling. This foretelling explains the future vindications of present evils and the effect of afterlife. The apocalyptic literature traces the outline of the history of mankind and of the world. It also discusses on the evil nature of mankind and its effects along with the final destination of all beings. The final destination might perish individuals, but the righteous person shall be resurrected and would reach heaven.

Apocalyptic writings interpret revelations through visions and dreams, combining fantasy and reality. The message is obtained through a heavenly messenger or an oracle, which is further developed into literature. Apocalyptic writing aims at revealing or disclosing something which is hidden. Apocalypse mentioned in the Bible uncovers a vision of future chaos that is about to happen during the end of times. The signs of the apocalypse include earthquakes and floods. This is also followed by the most disorderly period and this is called the Armageddon.

Armageddon is the place where the kings of the earth under the demonic head wage war against God at the end of history. The total deterioration of human character is followed by the final catastrophe which is the end of the world by fire, following which appears the judgment. The judgment executes all the evil souls and resurrects the good ones. This judgment is followed by God's making of a new heaven and earth. Mary Shelley's novel, The Last Man written in 1826 is considered as the first work of modern apocalyptic fiction. The idea of the true nature of modern apocalyptic thought or the demonic apocalypse becomes clear in the works of Northrop Frye also. Modern writers present the contemporary society in terms of the divine, human, and animal worlds along with the demonic apocalypse.

Apocalyptic writers consider themselves in the centre of the catastrophic destruction in a way of life and of the entire universe. The apocalyptic visions have been expressed by many writers all through the ages. The nineteenth-century American novelists including Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville and Mark Twain were the first of their kind to reflect the apocalyptic imagination in their fiction. These writers depicted how Satan and evil dominate the society.

The works like Hawthorne's *Blithedale Romance*, Melville's *The Confidence Man*, and Mark Twain's *The Mysterious Stranger*, explained the degeneration of human ethics and moral values under the reign of demon. This serves as prelude to the beginning of the social catastrophe. Edgar Allan Poe's short story "The Conversation of Eiros and Charmion" written in 1839, H.G. Wells novels *The Time Machine* and *The War of the Worlds* are some of the best example of apocalyptic fiction. The George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Norman Spinrad's *The Iron Dream* and C.S. Lewis's *Chronicles of Narnia* novel *The Magician's Nephew* are the best examples of nuclear warfare.

The nuclear war and the social disasters are penned down by Stephen Gill, an Indo-Canadian and Mahmoud Darwish, an Israel-Palestinian in their literary works. The India-Pakistan partition and Israel-Palestine exodus form the crisis background

for the writers. The poems of Gill and Darwish balance the tension between fear of the contemporary world and hope of deliverance in future. This future is marked by a new world where old ideas and deeds are replaced.

Stephen Gill, is a poet laureate of Ansted University and an adjunct Professor of European-American University. He was born in Sialkot, now in Pakistan. He was educated at Agra University, the University of Ottawa and the Oxford University. He is an expressive voice of India, Pakistan and Canada. He has taught in India, Ethiopia and Canada. He has also written number of critical studies on writers like G.B. Shaw, H.G. Wells and Yeats. His main themes include global peace and the societal concerns. Gill moved to India with his parents during the India-Pakistan partition.

Mahmoud Darwish was a Palestinian national poet. He was born in al-Birwa in the Western Galilee. He has published more than thirty volumes of poetry and eight books on prose. He has been an editor to several literary magazines in Palestine. The main theme in the works of Darwish is *watan* or homeland. He equates the loss of Palestine with that of the loss of Eden, birth and resurrection, and the anguish of exile and dispossession. In 1948, Darwish along with his family members was forcibly sent away from Galilee. Even in that critical situation, Darwish had hopes to return:

The poet-speaker assures him, basing his argument on history and the laws of nature, that his tragedy will end because it is an abomination to both human history and nature. Human history does not allow for such injustice to continue in perpetuity, and nature has the mechanisms to eventually undo it. (Mattawa 41)

The voluntary movement from the homeland or forcible exile had a major impact in the life of Gill and Darwish. The exiles of the poets were compared to the exile of Adam and Eve from Eden garden. The political imbalances and the corrupt nature of the society explain the presence of evil. This evil nature finds its path through the minds of innocent folks.

The repercussions of the satanic activities, corrupt the thinking process of the living beings. The demonic presence is evidenced through the happenings like nuclear bomb blast and terrorist attack. The war, terror attack, bloodshed and the dead bodies create the genesis of apocalyptic visions in the writings of Gill and Darwish. The poem "A Question" by Gill and "The Enemy" by Darwish are proved to be the best of its apocalyptic kinds for the use of the apocalyptic elements.

The poem "A Question" by Stephen Gill is taken from the poetry collection *The Dove of Peace*. This poetry collection was published in 1993. Gill in its preface has opined that, "... poem express a longing for a time when all men will strive for a better world"(12). The poem takes the readers on a quest for a better world that gets reflected all through the poems. The betterment is argued along with the worst of the times. The poem "A Question" is one such reflection on the cruelty of the nuclear age. The poem strikes a balance between the present world's knowledge and the forthcoming future.

The poem, "A Question", discusses the possible aftermath of the nuclear bomb blast. The poem is divided into four line stanza which is headed by the question, "If the nuclear bombs drop" (36). The four line stanza begins with the future possibility "will" and ends with a question mark "?" suggesting the intensity of the crisis. The nuclear missile is the deadliest weapon. It is created by nations in the name of safety and security. This missile is also used as a tool to create fear among other nations. The first stanza questions the presence of natural resources after the drop of nuclear bomb.

Gill is apprehensive whether the buds will bloom, birds will chirp or the spring season will return after the bomb blast is manifested through different questions. The blooming buds signify the birth. The birth cycle is sure to be affected by the blast. The chirping of the birds brings in the hope for a new day. However, after the nuclear blast there will not be any birds to chirp. The spring season symbolises rebirth and renewal. Spring also denotes growth, hope and love. The nuclear attack shall

never see the face of spring. So, the poet questions each of this as follows:

If the nuclear bombs drop  
Will the buds bloom again?  
Will the birds chirp again?  
Will the spring return again? (The Dove of Peace 36)

The next stanza explains the poet's doubt whether the maiden will be wedded, the love's moon will rise or the rain will kiss the earth. The maidens represent the fertility and the familial bonding. After the drop of nuclear bomb, the human race shall be destroyed. If some manage to live through the attack, they will be partially alive. The impact which the attack has created would stay forever in their mind, making wedding or holding onto a family unimaginable.

In "A Question", the "moon's love", refers to the emotional bonding among the people. The attack would neutralise everything, including the human mind. There are no spaces for positive emotion. The sorrow and sadness haunt the victims. The moon's love will be lost forever. The rain denotes the life source, but after the attack the earth is drenched with blood and flesh. The drop of nuclear bomb kills not only the individuals, but also their emotions:

If the nuclear bombs drop  
Will the maidens be wedded again?  
Will love's moon arise again?  
Will rain kiss the earth again? (The Dove of Peace 36)

The third stanza of "A Question" questions the birth of the dawn, play activity of the players and the swimming of the children amidst this chaotic situation. The birth of the dawn symbolises the new beginning. This new beginning promises a new day, but the blast brings to ground zero the hope for a new dawn. The mundane activities like players playing and children swimming shall also be affected by this attack. The nature along with human being and their daily routine comes to a pause with the holocaust. Gill in his work *For a Peaceful Future*, discusses on the effects of nuclear war and explosion:

These bombs will be launched on a missile even with the level of a tree top at a speed that is almost 30 times the speed of sound. When they explode, they will release the heat equal to the heat of the sun which is several million degrees centigrade...It will convert every human, every building, rock and dust to radioactive particle, which will shoot up into the atmosphere to form a mushroom cloud. (Gill 34)

The final stanza of "A Question" poses direct question to God, "Will God save anyone?" (36). The presence of God is also doubted. The doubtful nature of God's presence creates the space for the Satan's active participation. This duality of God and Satan proves this poem to be of apocalyptic nature. The next line, "who will cry, who'll console?", substantiates the uncertainty of life. The poet laments who will remain in the deserted place to console those who cry. The last line portrays the apocalyptic setting as, "Will not all be lost?" (36). The poet himself sketches the end. The rhetorical poem serves as a warning to the future nuclear age. The poet clearly paints the possible loss, which follows the end of the world.

The nuclear holocaust is the type of apocalypse that is used in this poem. The holocaust cause widespread destruction along with radioactive fallouts. This brings down empires, leaving everything to be sterile. It does not end with the blast, but it produces firestorm, nuclear winter and radiation sickness. Even the future generation will be affected with defects and abnormalities.

The poem "The Enemy" by Mahmoud Darwish is from the collection, *A River Dies of Thirst* was published in the year 2008. The poetry collection covers wide range of themes like love, loss, and the pain of exile. The diary entries of Darwish also appear in this collection. The poem express Palestinian's longings and desires. The poems try to instill the spirit of Palestinian national consciousness among the Palestinians, juxtaposing the presence of evil and the hope for love through their naive reality.

Darwish portrays the inhumane nature of the terrorist in his poem "The Enemy". The poem is

written in free verse. The year 1982 mentioned in the poem refers to the Israelite invasion of Lebanon to attack Palestine Liberation Organisation. This attack killed nearly fifteen to twenty thousand people. These deaths and the resultant loss categorise this poem as an apocalyptic writing. The poet had visited the same place a year as well as a month ago. The poet was literally out of his mother land, but in heart he resided there, "I was always there as if I was never anywhere else" (*A River Dies of Thirst* 8).

In the poem "The Enemy", Darwish talks about how he and his people were besieged and killed. He speaks of how they also fought against the hell which they encountered. The poet stresses on how each individual possess a unique self with different physique and features. Being from different age, bearing varied names, the victims/martyrs are not the same, but the killers are the same. They are pieces of hardware who engage themselves in the process of operating electronic buttons to kill.

Darwish stresses how the victims look at the killer as a person under the steel mask. The victims see the killers as featureless, eyeless, nameless and ageless. Darwish reiterates this notion by his reference to them as "The Enemy", "It is he who has chosen to have a single name: the enemy" (8). It is the intentional motif of the killer to identify himself as "the enemy". This signifies how the killer is unwilling to take up names. The universal stereotyped term "the enemy" explains the killer's lack of bonding with the world. This poem picturises AI Apocalypse, as the steel mask denotes the robots. The robots are machines which are created for helping the humans. It is now viewed as one of the greatest threat to the world. The human race is supposed to end in the hands of these infernal machines.

Despite these two poems falling under the category of nuclear holocaust apocalypse and AI apocalypse, they also contain the elements of other apocalypses in them. Gill's poem, "A Question", explains how after the holocaust the ecosystem is meant to undergo a catastrophic change. This impact is versified by Gill through questioning. In the



proceedings of 1965 titled, "Ecological Effects of Nuclear War" the effects of the holocaust has been explained as, "... catastrophic impact that a nuclear war is expected to have upon major ecosystem can result from two sources: ionizing radiation, chiefly from fallout, and large fire started principally by thermal radiation emitted by the nuclear detonations" (Woodwell 11). The use of phrases like "buds bloom", "birds chirp" in the poem reminds one of the climatic change apocalypse.

The climatic change is a result of the nuclear holocaust evinced through the poem, "A Question": "Will the spring...// rain kiss again". These lines state the importance of seasons and monsoons. Both seasons and monsoons play a vital role in balancing the ecosystem. Gill elaborates on the importance of the change of season to maintain the standards of the nature. The arrival of monsoon helps in farming and also sustains the fertility of the land. The poet feels that after the holocaust, the season and the monsoon will change. This change encompasses freezing cold and acid rain. The fail of seasonal monsoon shall affect the living conditions of the human along with animals and plants.

Gill explains the conditions where the animals as well as birds are also affected by this attack. The lines from "A Question", "Will the buds bloom.../ birds chirp again" bring in the image of destruction wrought on the plants and birds. The plants and birds play a key role in the process of pollination and this pollination serves as a life source for the universe. By referring to buds and birds, Gill stresses on the significance of preserving them. He also laments that the drop of the bomb shall wipe away the plants and birds from earth's surface resulting in the ecological imbalance which in turn may shake the fabric of the universe.

The poem "A Question" discusses the effect of radiation and heat wave. The poetic line, "Will the dawn be born again" picturises the impact of extreme heat which is produced by the blast of nuclear bomb. Due to this blast, he spells out there will be no mornings, afternoons, evenings and nights. The "dawn" symbolises a new day, but Gill questions will there be another day after the attack. The extreme forms of radiation includes, "thermal

radiation, ionizing radiation, blast and shock and residual ionizing radiation" (woodwell 10). Gill is of the view that the extreme heat might turn every living being sterile. So, the poet says that the impact would be long lasting even after centuries.

The destruction of human beings and the celestial objects are portrayed by Gill in the poem "A Question". The lines, "will maidens be wedded...// love's moon kiss the earth again" explain how with the nuclear attack every minute being is destroyed. The maidens and the love's moon bring in the image of wedding and the act of love. Gill uses these set of words to refer to the act of fertilisation and thus reminds of the future generation. The nuclear holocaust not only damages the earth's surface, but also stops the act of love and birth. The poem proves to be apocalyptic by its very reference to the doom of buds, birds, spring, rain, maiden and moon. Thus, Gill creates a static environment where there shall be nothing left.

Darwish's "The Enemy" portrays the images of war apocalypse through the use of words like, "featureless, eyeless, ageless and nameless". The poet attributes all these features to the enemy. The apocalypse shall turn not only the enemy to be featureless but also the whole of the earth. The war kills the human beings and amputates them. The poet feels it is blessed to die rather to live as amputated. The pictures of living beings with one eye, half leg and broken arm creates a gloomy effect. By using such words Darwish warns the individuals of the future apocalypse. The war apocalypse mentioned in the poem reflects the real state of Palestine. Through the poem Darwish explains the real cause behind the war apocalypse:

...the empire included within its domains the two holy cities of Arabia, Mecca and Medina, and the holy city of Jerusalem. Possession of the three holy cities increased the importance of Palestine in the minds of the imperial elites. The Ottoman sultans invested great value in the annual *hajj* (pilgrimage) caravan that journeyed from Istanbul to Damascus to Egypt and Arabia. (Gelvin 20)

This lust for the land has resulted in war apocalypses and these are clearly explained through the poem "The Enemy".

The poem "The Enemy" also deals with the AI apocalypse or the artificial intelligence apocalypse. The AI apocalypse is the destruction caused by robots. The image of robot sketched by Darwish gets demonstrated through the poetic line, "pieces of hardware, pressing electronic buttons". The choice of words clearly depicts the AI apocalypse. The pressing of buttons is akin to Gill's idea of bomb blast. Darwish describes the enemy as a steel mask and this steel mask connotes to the robots. The AI apocalypse is defined as, "a powerful reconciliation of religion and science. The sacred categories of Jewish and Christian apocalyptic traditions have thoroughly penetrated the futuristic musings of important researchers in robotics and artificial intelligence" (Geraci 7).

The reference to "hardware" in Darwish's "The Enemy", brings to the fore the physical parts that are used in creating a robot that is with the "steel mask" akin to the human form. It is behind this "steel mask" that the human form engages itself in "killing and vanishing" (8). It destroys the martyrs and causalities and at last vanishes. It is being programmed so as to kill others and dismantle itself. However, like the robots the creatives behind the steel masks are not designed and controlled by scientists. They are chiselled out by the enemies with the sole aim of destroying the other nations by infusing just hatred. Darwish makes it very clear that the enemy is not a ghost, rather a "steel mask on an idea" (8). The idea reverberates the notion of doom and foretells the eerie end of the world in the hands of these programmed machines.

In the poem, "The Enemy", "He sees us but we don't see him" (8), hints at the sensor eye lenses which are attached to the robot parts that scans other objects but does not give scope to read its emotions. These eyes are programmed to attack and kill others, reminding the readers of how only the steel mask operates on the command of its users. These creations of artificial intelligence are "featureless", eyeless, ageless and nameless" (8). They are lifeless objects sans human characteristics.

Darwish's poem "The Enemy" echoes the creation of new enemies in the creation. Infact, this robotic creation is meant for the betterment of the society, but it is assumed to be of great threat by many scientists including Marvin Minsky, Herbert A Simon and John Hopfield. Darwish's poem reflects the modern concepts of robotics and the futuristic apocalypse. The poem is an example of AI apocalypse by the presence of robotic image.

The above discussed apocalyptic elements explain how the evil thoughts have corrupted the human minds. The corrupt minds create problematic society that abounds in terrorism, nuclear threat and pollution. These problems are the branches of evil tree. The nation as a whole should stand united to uproot this evil tree. This evil instinct foretells the future apocalypse. In this era of apocalypse, the human psyche should dismantle all sorts of pervasiveness. In contrast to the majority of the ancient and medieval writers, modern writers like Gill and Darwish use apocalyptic style to sketch the present forms of doom.

A comprehension of the different types and elements of apocalypses in the poems of Stephen Gill and Mahmoud Darwish, has brought out the apocalyptic problems that serve as a warning to the forth coming generation. Bearing in mind the repercussions of apocalypse on the human mind, humanity need to be wary of it and take efforts to grasp the purpose of life and move ahead battling all barriers to live a meaningful life on this earth.

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