

Perilous Nature

The Resonance of Ecological Crisis in Contemporary Literature

Editor

B. Ayça Ülker Erkan



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**Perilous Nature:
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Contemporary Literature**

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B. Ayça Ülker Erkan

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Abstract

As a prominent novelist and one of the most acclaimed representatives of the twentieth century, J. G. Ballard portrays in his novel the psychology of humankind trapped in the grip of apocalypse in modern times with his surrealist style and analysis of 'inner space' and 'outer space'. Labelled as a (post) apocalyptic speculative science fiction writer, Ballard brings his reader closer to his revelation of the apocalypse stemming from climatic, uncanny cataclysms and the detrimental effects of incontrollable technological and scientific developments. *The Crystal World* focuses on the strange experiences of Dr. Sanders in a quasi-modern Cameroon, where he goes to treat people in the grip of leprosy. To the surprise of both Dr. Sanders and the reader, the forest in this area starts to crystallise gradually and spread to other parts of the world. Based on this symbolism, Ballard reveals in his novel the multi-layered discourse of imminent and immanent apocalypse that he thinks humanity will face humanity soon.

Key Words: J.G. Ballard, *The Crystal World*, (post)apocalypse, eco-apocalypse, humankind, nature

Öz

Yirminci yüzyılın önde gelen romancılarından ve en beğenilen temsilcilerinden biri olan J. G. Ballard, romanında sürrealist üslubu ve 'iç mekân' ve 'dış mekân' analizleriyle modern zamanlardaki kıyametin pençesinde sıkışıp kalan insanoğlunun psikolojisini tasvir etmektedir. (Post) apokaliptik spekülâtif bilimkurgu yazarı olarak nitelendirilen Ballard, okuyucusunu iklimsel, tekinsiz felaketlerden ve kontrol edilemeyen teknolojik ve bilimsel gelişmelerin zararlı etkilerinden kaynaklanan kıyamete yaklaştırmaktadır. *Kristal Dünya*, Dr. Sanders'ın cüzzam hastalığına yakalanmış insanları tedavi etmek için gittiği yarı modern Kamerun'da yaşadığı tuhaf deneyimlere odaklanmaktadır. Hem Dr. Sanders'ı hem de okuyucuyu şaşırtan bir şekilde, bu bölgedeki orman yavaş yavaş kristalleşmeye ve dünyanın diğer bölgelerine hızla yayılmaya başlar. Ballard, bu sembolizmden yola çıkarak romanında insanlığın yakın zamanda yüzleşeceğini düşündüğü yakın ve içkin kıyametin çok katmanlı söylemini ortaya koymaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: J.G. Ballard, Kristal Dünya, (post)apokalips, eko-kıyamet, doğa

Ballardian Discourse of (Eco)Apocalypse: Nearing the End of Crystallising World

Kaya ÖZÇELİK

One can see from space how the human race has changed the Earth. Nearly all of the available land has been cleared of forest and is now used for agriculture or urban development. The polar icecaps are shrinking and the desert areas are increasing. At night, the Earth is no longer dark, but large areas are lit up. All of this is evidence that human exploitation of the planet is reaching a critical limit. But human demands and expectations are ever-increasing. We cannot continue to pollute the atmosphere, poison the ocean and exhaust the land. (Hawking 76)

1. Introduction

One of the curiosities that humankind has nurtured from the very beginning of history to the present is, no doubt, the ominous lies in the questions about ‘the end of the world’. Of many, global warming, artificial intelligence, unpredictable and extreme climate change that is felt more today, uncontrollable advancement in biotechnology, an ecological disorder that has already begun, risk of nuclear war that is today’s concern, and rapid depletion of natural resources are among the omens that foreshadow the nearing apocalypse at present. For centuries, such questions as what will trigger the outbreak of apocalypse and how it will be are only a few unanswered questions that preoccupy the human mind. Delving into essence of these questions, one of them manifests itself in the cause-and-effect relationship between nature and humankind resulting from the irresponsibility of humanity against nature—the one-sided interest of humankind—for more benefit from nature. Yet, the best picture of the impending doom is best illustrated by David Howard Davis’s observation of the present world in accordance with what Hawking states above:

Global warming threatens to destroy the world climate, turn the Midwest into a desert, flood Florida, Long Island, and much of the East Coast, and

spawn hurricanes, fierce storms, and forest fires. Hurricane Katrina's destruction of New Orleans is just the beginning. Overseas, the ocean will flood Holland and Bangladesh, and fertile farmland in Europe and Asia will dry up. This is one apocalyptic future many environmentalists predict. Another apocalyptic danger is the population explosion, with the number of people growing from 6 billion to 8 or 10 or 20 billion, far outstripping arable farmland, oil supplies, and forest resources. A third is the shortage of energy. Even President George W. Bush has spoken of an energy crisis. The gravest danger, however, comes from nuclear warfare. The Americans and Russians have about 10,000 atomic missiles. Exploding even a few hundred could trigger nuclear winter, where dust and smoke would prevent sunlight from penetrating the atmosphere, leading to starvation and the death of the human race. (1)

Davis blends his warning with a high level of anxiety and fear, much of which has already been highlighted in the novels of Ballard. Thus, the sheer prophecy of the impending apocalypse is what qualifies Ballard as one of the most prominent science fiction and (post)apocalypse and speculative fiction writers. It is again this endowment that places him as one of the most prominent novelists, short story writers, essayists, and satirists in the field of speculative fiction, including, but not limited to, science fiction, apocalyptic and postapocalyptic fiction in the world of literature with his surrealist penning style, even today. Leaving his reader a legacy of 20 novels, collections of short stories and many other non-fictional works, Ballard keeps his own as one of the influential men of letters on whom many writers modelled themselves, as Baxter and Wymer expounds with a stress on how he is difficult to introduce: "He remains one of the most influential. Writers as various as Martin Amis, William Boyd, Toby Litt and Will Self acknowledge the extent to which Ballard's literary imagination has impacted upon and shaped their own" (1).

....

His success reached such an extent that English language has rendered him immortal by coining a new word 'Ballardian' that later became a term to describe anything "resembling or suggestive of the conditions described in Ballard's novels and stories, especially dystopian modernity, bleak man-made landscapes, and the psychological effects of technological, social or environmental developments" (qtd. in Tereszewski 281).

Some of Ballard's famous novels include *The Drowned World* (1962), *The Atrocity Exhibition* (1970), *Crash* (1973), *Concrete Island* (1974), *High Rise*

them appeared to be crippled or diseased, with deformed faces and skeleton-like shoulders and arms. (*The Crystal World* 154)

This relationship between capitalism and colonialism/imperialism can also be obtained through several “What if” questions, which are not answered by Ballard openly but are left for the reader. Leaving the possibility that the crystallisation is the mysterious act of God that befell humanity, the following questions help one to find an answer to the interrelationship between the apocalypse and colonialism/imperialism, such as How are these gemstones processed into a diamond? What chemicals and technology are applied in this process? and how do all these influence people/characters living there? ... and so on. It is clearly illustrated in the novel that the crystallisation process has already started; it is progressing and spreading rapidly across the world, threatening all living in the world. Based on the assumption that the coloniser carries out the processing of gemstones through several advanced technologies and chemicals that are to the detriment of all the people/characters living there, then the discourse of eco-apocalypse can be analysed in parallel with the colonialist/imperialist discourse of apocalypse revealed through the diamond enterprise in/near the crystallising forest. In this regard, this kind of apocalypse is associated directly with the apocalypse, which Quinby defines as technological devastation—his second subdivision of the second mode of the apocalypse, technological apocalypse.

3. Conclusion

As a result, this chapter aims to depict the (post)apocalyptic discourse Ballard reveals in *The Crystal World* in parallel with eco-apocalypse from different aspects. Based on the theories of both Kermode and Quinn, the apocalyptic discourse of the novel is revealed in three separate discourses based on the many-folded interpretation of the symbol/metaphor ‘crystallising process’ of the forest. First, the apocalypse revealed by Ballard in the novel is the start of an imminent and immanent apocalypse that will sweep the world and all livings in it away at the very end. It has also been evaluated from the viewpoint of Kermode with reference to his notion of ‘a fresh start’ or ‘rebirth’, which he associates with the apocalypse, that both the characters and nature, with all its members, start a new life shortly after the forest starts to crystallise. In this regard, it has been suggested that nature seems to have adapted to its new form. On the level of humankind, this has specially been stressed with the protagonist Dr. Sander’s change of viewpoints, his adaptability and his determination to deal with all the hardship he faces in this crystallising forest. Including all, the discussion

of 'a new start' has been furthered and discussed in three separate cases which are revealed through a vivid depiction of the writer and thus the great admiration of the characters, the undeniable alluring power of the forest that people cannot succumb to and the reunification of the people and the nature. Of the third analysis of these, the eco-apocalyptic discourse of the novel has been emphasised with its close relationship with posthumanism, by which it has been noted that nature and humanity cannot be thought separate, thus supporting the post-humanist idea that the superiority of humankind over nature is not possible. In the analysis of the apocalyptic discourse, it has also been discussed that the apocalypse revealed by Ballard in his novel has much to do with the domino-effect relationship between colonialism/imperialism and capitalism, both of which cannot be thought separate from each other. This relationship showed that the driving force behind colonialism/imperialism is the idea of capitalism, and the result of this active relationship is nothing other than the outbreak of the apocalypse. It has been noted in the final analysis that both the characters and nature have been plunged into the hands of the imminent and immanent apocalypse, through which Ballard seems to offer a glimpse of hope for rebirth.

Finally, Ballard warns humankind not to violate nature or the environment by any means simply to meet humanity's needs more than necessary; otherwise, the results will be nothing other than the outbreak of an imminent and immanent apocalypse for the world and humanity.

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