

*Resisting the Apocalypse:
Representing the Anthro-
pocene in Indian English
Literature*

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Since its emergence in the last half of the twentieth century, environmental discourse in connection with the anthropogenic Climate change has always betrayed a steady adherence to the rhetoric of the apocalypse, a rhetoric that has always been decidedly western, despite its global reach. While the apocalyptic representation of Climate crisis in western Climate fictions has interested literary critics, there hasn't been, to our knowledge, any exploration of its alternative in other literary traditions. With that in mind, this paper will look at Indian English literature where encounters with the Anthropocene are

meagre yet to have a decided shape. We have tried to investigate the presence of apocalypse as a trope in the plot itself or as part of the rhetoric and aesthetic of the text in Indian English literature, asking the extent of western Climate fiction's influence on our tradition and the possibility of Indian English literature becoming an alternative in terms of representation.

The question of representation has generated a fair amount of debate and contesting opinions surrounding the Anthropocene, most controversial of which comes from the Climate change deniers who view these representations in arts and the media as propaganda of environmentalist activists, “pathological crisis-mongers, chicken littles...joyless, puritanical doomsters” (Buell 2003, 30). Though this stance is generally credited to be political, stemming from its own conservative economic policies, corporate lobbying, and industrial interests, the present approach and the predominant tone of the environmentalist discourse often seems more than eager to embrace the binary and add fuel to the fire. For the western culture and its colonised global reality, representing Climate change after all demands, above all else, a careful invoking of spectacular disasters – either imminent, underway or situated in the near past amidst a bleak dystopian world. “Apocalypse”, as Lawrence Buell notes, is “the single most powerful master metaphor that the contemporary environmental imagination has at its disposal”(1995, 285).

In environmental studies, this trope arguably found its most potent shape in 1962 with Rachel Carson's highly influential *Silent Spring* that begins with imagining a nameless American town, a scene of pastoral bliss, coming under a "strange blight" – an "evil spell" that brings with it the "shadow of death" unto the land (2002, 1-3) and that is revealed to be the pervasive poisoning of the environment with synthetic chemical pesticides. A similar example from around the same time is Paul Ehrlich's *The Population Bomb*. Published in 1968, it is one of the most popular environmental books till date where the human species itself becomes the impending threat to civilisation. Greg Garrard describes the book as a Neo-Malthusian classic that relies on horrifying apocalyptic projections for its persuasive force (2004, 96) where the author goes as far as describing the present world to be under attack by "three of the four apocalyptic horsemen – war, pestilence, and famine" (Ehrlich 1988, 45). Yet Ehrlich is still compelled to interrupt his catastrophic musings with caveats that emphasise his scenarios to be only possibilities, not predictions (1988, 49) and epilogues that use Pascal's wager to justify the validity of assumptions (1988, 179); the author of fiction, on the other hand, is free from such responsibilities and can provide the reader with a more sensationalist, more adventurous narrative of disaster than any scientific discourse can risk offering. In fact, Climate fiction, since its origin in the sixties as a subgenre of science fiction, has held on to an established position in the western lit-

erary market. Building upon the post-apocalyptic dystopian works of J. G. Ballard, it continues the Thoreauvian contemplation of Nature from the subjective response of an eremitic figure (Irr 2017) who stands as a witness to the encircling spectacle – the product of an uncritical obsessive gaze that remain present even with politically conscious works like Octavia Butler’s *The Parable of the Sower* or Margaret Atwood’s *The Maddaddam Trilogy*. It is in Hollywood, however, that the tyranny of this gaze is allowed to reduce Climate change to just another disaster where environmental crises stand alongside Nuclear Wars, Alien Invasions, and Zombie outbreaks as modern inflections of the apocalyptic narrative.

Apocalypse then is not merely a trope that permeates the discourse around Climate change but a genre that according to Garrard predates it by at least three thousand years. Garrard locates its origin in the thought of the Iranian prophet Zarathustra who bequeathed to Jewish, Christian and later secular models of history a sense of urgency about the demise of the world (2004, 85). With the *Book of Revelation* of the *New Testament*, the apocalypse – literally “unveiling” from the Greek *Apokalupsis* – found its traditional form while developing all the eschatological connotations that we associate with it today. It is notable however that this genre was as much an end as it was a new beginning. John of Patmos, the putative author of the book, was likely a Jewish war refugee who was prophesying in a highly symbolic language

the downfall of the Roman Empire that will give way to the inheritance of New Jerusalem and a thousand-year-long reign of Christ on Earth (Morrell 2012, 35). Yet the apocalyptic narrative of Climate fiction is generally devoid of any such sense of hope. In her work *Apocalyptic Transformation: Apocalypse and the Postmodern Imagination*, Elizabeth Rosen dubs the contemporary apocalyptic narratives as neo-apocalyptic precisely because they break away from the anticipatory positive elements: “(t)he traditional optimistic conclusion and intent to inspire faith disappear in neo-apocalyptic literature, replaced by imaginative but definitive End scenarios” (Rosen 2008, xv). Looking at environmental discourse, Fredrick Buell finds the “culture of hyperexuberance” (2003, 194) to be the source of this apparent pessimistic proclivity in climate fiction where “(d)epictions of future societies in the midst of perpetual environmental meltdown multiplied as sexy backgrounds for new kinds of excitement and environmental crisis in full bloom was recruited as an only nominally dystopian background against which thrilling high-tech adventures might unfold” (2003, 197).

The relation between apocalypse and Anthropocene thus stands calcified in western culture for all to see, yet the ever-growing anthropogenic impact on our ecology is not exclusive to western reality. Compared to the dystopian impulse prevalent in Western literature of the last fifty odd years that has attracted apocalyptic rhetoric if not at times the narrative of the apocalypse, the paral-

lel brief history of Indian English literature presents a preoccupation with identity above anything where the sense of loss does not extend to the world but remains attached to the self. Furthermore, the socio-political experience of India from the second half of the twentieth century is that of a decolonised developing country and hence, a sense of impending doom hardly comfortably sits with its literary sensibility. Thus, Indian English literature's meagre response to the Anthropocene is always marked with an uneasy influence of western Climate fiction – an influence nonetheless that demands urgent critical attention for the cultivation of a politically conscious approach towards representing the Anthropocene. With that aim, our paper will look at four texts – Arun Joshi's final work *The City & the River* published in 1990, Amitav Ghosh's 2004 novel about the Sundarbans *The Hungry Tide*, Indra Sinha's 2007 published novel about the Bhopal Gas tragedy *Animal's People*, and Sarnath Banerjee's graphic novel *All Quiet in Vikaspuri* published in 2015 as different examples of how Indian English fiction interacts with the apocalypse motif of Climate fiction.

The only novel of Arun Joshi in the Post-Rushdie period, *The City & the River* breaks away from the realist approach of his earlier fiction for formal experimentation akin to a modern parable. Primarily seen as a political allegory of the Emergency period, this work of an epic tone does also lend itself to interpretations that redirect the all-pervading dichotomy of Joshi's vision (Piciucco 2004,

175) through an ecocritical lens. Recounted through the narration of the Great Yogeshwara to his disciple the Nameless One, the novel tells the tale of an unnamed city ruled by the Grandmaster whose arrogant vision of greatness and development for the city is resisted by the boatmen who are not ready to shift their allegiance to him from the river whose children they consider themselves. In his rise to power and ultimate political control over the city, the Grandmaster continues to ignore the plight of the mud-people, the lower class of the city, erasing them by declaring his time as “The Era of Ultimate Greatness” while taking more and more oppressive measures against the boatmen. This depiction of State oppression against characters directly connected to Nature through their names or actions extends the symbolic dimension of the narrative. In fact, while noting the allegorical characterization of Joshi, Nirmala Menon argues in her postcolonial reading of the novel how the two rival camps are represented as belonging to the same time but different historical trajectories with characters such as the Headman, Dharma, Bhumi Putra, the Hermit, Grandfather, and so on who bear resemblance to rather primitive, rural or even tribal traditions and cultures and characters such as the Commissioner, the Captain, the Advisory Council, the Grand Trader and the Minister of Trade whose names suggest a thoroughly modern system of bureaucratic functionaries – a division that elaborates the binary difference between city versus river (2014, 68) . Thus, going beyond direct parallels with

particular referents in Indian politics, the events and the characters of the novel become part of a critique of the discourse of development, of modernity itself. As Pier Paolo Piciucco analyses the symbolic code of the novel: “the city, in particular, is surrounded by the Seven Hills, as Rome is; is crossed by a sacred river reminding one of the Ganges; has some nearby pyramids like Cairo; finally, it has dungeons in the Gold Mines, possibly evoking South African scenery” (2004,175). This city of everywhere is ultimately destroyed by a flood when the river’s embankment is accidentally blown away by the military forces during the bombing of a State-declared terrorist’s house. As waters rise for 13 whole pages at the end of the novel, the diluvial vision is almost traditional in its apocalyptic potency:

The waters now reached the top of the fourth hill on which the offices of the new Grand Master stood. A wave went up encircling the base of the building. The touch of chrome and glass seemed to cause a special reaction in the fuming waters because all of a sudden the river was not a river anymore. Under the all-pervasive glow of the searchlights, it turned into an ancient sea, like the sea that had first condensed on the whirling planet a billion years ago. Waves nearly as high as the building rose in quick succession and threw a lock around the shining structure. The inmates of the palace shuddered in horror as the new Grand Master’s building broke in the middle and floor by floor, frame by frame, fell into the sea. One

last wave uprooted the foundations and sent them flying into the sky. The waters swept over the top of the hill and cascaded on to the other side in a loud waterfall. (1994, 257-58)

In fact, from the looming presence of an enigmatic prophesy to a mythicised river with its own agency, the narrative of Joshi is almost an inflection of the ecological crisis on an apocalyptic narrative and not the other way around. Even before the cataclysmic end, the authorial voice is unquestionably marked with an apocalyptic tone that finds its eschatological validation in the carefully threaded atmosphere of Hindu religious antiquity so that it is never the apocalypse but the novel itself that does not sit well with other works of Indian English literature.

If the apocalyptic predilection of Joshi's allegorical vision may somehow be traced back to the marginal position of ecological consciousness in his political critique, Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* presents us with a more careful, central and invested approach. Compared to Joshi's mythification of ecological crisis and recourse to a symbolic violation of Nature, Ghosh's novel politicises climatological concerns and is decidedly rooted in specificity. His preoccupation with the Sundarbans archipelago, already addressed in one short essay in the public domain "Folly in the Sundarbans", finds further expression in this novel through a constant movement

from the present to both the mythic past and the historic past – a conscious counterapproach against western Climate fiction’s staple direction to the future away from the present. Through the experiences of Kanai Dutt, a translator in sudden possession of his uncle’s journal about the Marichjhapi massacre, and Piyali Roy, an American cetologist in search of the nearly extinct Gangetic river dolphins, the novel addresses the crises that threaten the Sundarbans ecosystem while also forming a critique of the State-sanctioned environmentalism that forces Nature and human in a conflicting binary.

The representation of the prevailing ecological crises in *The Hungry Tide* is negotiated through a careful balancing of the voices of History, Science and Poetry that has earned Ghosh praises from various critics who have attempted to interpret his ecological approach through different radical frameworks (see Giles and Richa for example). Critics have also taken note of the authorial focus on representational politics and the privileging of the subaltern narrative in looking back at history. Such political clarity, however, seems at odds with the end of the novel where Ghosh provides a spectacular depiction of a storm with gradual rising tension and a catastrophic end that destroys lives and habitats as well as the novel’s carefully cultivated engagement with nature in a moment’s abandon. If as Jana Maria Giles writes, the aim of Ghosh in *The Hungry Tide* has been the developing of a postcolonial sublime that does not distance the subject

or reify the object but “enables discovery of our interpenetrations with the natural world, spurring us to witnessing and activism” (2014, 223) then such witnessing is reduced at the end to the spectator’s gaze. The motif of the apocalypse resides here again in the diluvial vision, in the foreknowledge of the characters as they anticipate the disaster and in the repeated prophecy of the rising river itself. Thus despite the successful rejection of many generic conventions, it must be asked whether it is western readership or the burden of tradition that ensures that the apocalypse does overtake Ghosh at the end in his only foray into Climate fiction.

Animal’s People, Indra Sinha’s postcolonial novel of the 1984 Bhopal Gas Tragedy marks a shift from the approaches of the two earlier texts which exemplify, at least in part, the hegemonic presence of western Climate fiction in literary representations of the Anthropocene. In writing about the most important environmental disaster of the post-independent India that has become a symbol in the political discourse of the continued violence on the decolonised East by the neo-imperialist West, Sinha consistently calls into question the western literary tropes that pervade the accompanying representations of such violence. The novel tells, in the first person, the story of Animal, a young victim of the gas attack, whose bent spine forces him to walk on all fours. Through Animal’s account of Khaufpur, the fictionalised Bhopal, Sinha represents the squalid living

conditions of the victims of the underclass Bhopal as they wait for justice that is perpetually deferred. Apocalypse, in Sinha's novel, is an overt authorial concern with recurring presence as the "Apokalis" – a translation of the idea in Animal's hybrid language that foreshadows the agency the narrative voice will have over the trope. Rather than its inflection into the realist disaster narrative, a good example of which may be found in Amulya Malladi's representation of the event in *A Breath of Fresh Air* (See Malladi 2002, 1-7), apocalypse is brought in Sinha's work with all its eschatological authority as the senile imaginings of Ma Franci, an old French nun who believes the gas attack to be the beginning of the apocalypse. As Animal records,

Once Ma's eyes were bright blue, now they're milky with coming cataracts, but when she speaks of Sanjo [St. John] such a look comes into them, you'd expect their milky clouds to part and light come streaming through. Ma brings out a small black book, its the one written by Sanjo that tells about the end of the world, she holds it up close to her nose (Sinha 2007, 63)

But the blind prophet is left unheard in Khaufpur for her exposure to the toxic gas has taken away her understanding of the language of the Other that now she can only understand as gibberish. Such symbolic separation doubles in the narrative as the distance between the Christian imagery of the apocalypse (as related by

Ma Franci) and *Animal's* depiction of Khaufpur to the audience (whom he calls "Eyes") brilliantly problematises disaster representations and forces the scopic drive of Climate fiction into an act of engaged witnessing all the while questioning the presence of voyeuristic pleasure. The brilliance of Sinha's work lies in the unspoken sardonic question that whether in their apocalyptic obsession, western culture and its conditioned global gaze have missed the Second Coming. Rather than locating it in distant global future, *Animal's People* marks the apocalypse as the third world present, thus politicising and contextualising it in an act of subversion, reminding us that "(a)ll things pass, but the poor remain. We are the people of the Apokalis. Tomorrow there will be more of us"(Sinha 2007, 366).

The people of the apocalypse are also the concern of Sarnath Banerjee's fourth graphic novel *All Quiet in Vikaspuri*. Set in a post-apocalyptic Delhi torn by the crisis of water, the narrative moves in a distracted manner among a series of characters across the class division to form a critique of the nexus between capitalism and Anthropocene in a bafflingly new and disarming approach. At the decentred centre of the novel stands Girish, the psychic Plumber from Banerjee's work *The Harappa Files*, who displaced from his hometown of Tambapur, Orissa, as a result of the rising privatisation of Indian Public Sectors, finds himself in Delhi as a migrant labourer, working under the villain Rastogi

who is on a quest to find the mythical underwater river Saraswati. Working through his fundamentalist followers, suggestively named the Saraswati Sena, Rastogi succeeds in exacerbating the paranoia of a struggling community into a violent war on water for profits in real estate while Girish digs deeper and deeper into the Earth for a water-source, discovering instead more and more people wilfully exiled, in hiding, or imprisoned all of whose lives have been somehow connected with water. As Aakriti Mandhwani notes in her review of the book, Banerjee's strength lies in the wry humour and the deadpan ironies that qualifies the entire narrative (2016, 127), the prime example being the titular allusion to the First World War itself. The persistent mocking tone and the general comic approach in engaging with environmental issues mark a welcome change and are effective in jolting the readers, desensitised to traditional apocalyptic rhetoric. The "sparse, simple and not very skillful sketches" (Mandhwani 2016, 126) of Banerjee have a similar role in resisting the elaborately detailed and grand depiction of disaster. In fact, the post-apocalyptic imaginary of Banerjee is quite radical in its playful treatment of the trope. Thus the water crisis of Delhi, itself a serious issue, is made ridiculous by imagining the city as a bleak landscape of staple post-apocalyptic fictions where the narratives of individual and communal survival are reduced to stories like that of the self-exiled Colonel Gambhir whose dark past is revealed to be drinking water from his neighbour's tank (2015, 28-29)

or the people of Panchsheel Enclave, an upper class colony in Delhi, who erect an uranium enrichment plant to defend their water sources (2015, 111). It is notable that here again the post-apocalyptic world is located not in the future but the present. Rather than depending on a changing alien world to suit the post-apocalyptic aesthetic, Banerjee displaces our present and at times mundane reality to a post-apocalyptic scenario so that the ensuing comic spectacle achieves to undermine the trope. Nowhere is this perhaps more apparent than in the representation of the water war itself where Banerjee does away with the narrative completely to opt for a string of cringe-worthy captioned images, a series of single panel spectacles that serves as a parody of the action trope in western representations of environmental crisis. The single panel images are also important in understanding how the privileging of the visual over verbal in multimodal representations opens new, perhaps more effective ways of summoning the apocalypse and consequently of commenting on that action. Pramod K Nayar points out at the conclusion of his book *The Indian Graphic Novel* how the mediated nature of storytelling in graphic novels destabilises the traditional verbal narration to bring to our attention the problematic domains of representation (2016, 193). While Anthropocene in graphic narrative may be expressed by a simple hyper-visibility of the issue such as Orijit Sen's *The River of Stories*, to provide an Indian example, Sarnath Banerjee's work is the only Indian English example we could find

where such hypervisibilisation is also politicised through layers of irony and satiric humour in a way that written fiction can never hope to achieve.

Hence the four texts reveal a range of approaches of engaging with the Anthropocene in relation to the motif of the apocalypse. Although the discussion of the texts has been chronological, we must warn against any presumption of progress at such close quarters. Neither do the works exhaust the possibilities of interacting with the apocalypse, though most of the Indian English fictions of the Anthropocene that we have encountered definitely fall in this spectrum. We are also limited in our choice of texts that do not include non-fictional works where, as our opening discussion attest, the apocalypse has its own pervasive tradition. Finally, in recognition of the liminal position of the author of Indian writing in English, we want to move away from the western influence of the apocalypse to remember not only Indian Bhasha literatures' long tradition of ecological works but its recent literary efforts to capture the Anthropocene as well. Among recent works in Bengali literature that critique the anthropogenic impact on our ecosystems, Manindra Gupta's *Nuri Bandar* published in 2016 and Parimal Bhattacharya's *Satyi Rupkatha* published in 2011 may very well be mentioned. The first is a fictional experiment in imagining the non-human through fantasy and philosophy while the second is a development in the genre of travelogue that tells the story of an Odisha

tribe's struggle for survival against the developing India. Both represent the era of the Anthropocene, generate discourses regarding its anthropogenic root, and help initiate reflection in the reader in confronting such reality – all without invoking the end of the world.

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