

Apocalypse: A World of Destruction in R.K. Madhubir's *The*

Shadow of Darkness

Yumnam Nirmala Devi

Ph.D. Research Scholar

Dept. of English

Pondicherry University

India

Abstract:

Indian Literature is a part of Post-colonial literature. Many writers try to analyse critically the kind of relationship between the colonisers and the colonised and the impact of that relationship on the colonised minds. They reiterate their themes on the political, linguistic and cultural experiences of the colonised people. In India too, some independent kingdoms which were not part of the then Indian subcontinent were former colonies of the British. However, after the British left, these kingdoms came directly under the supervision of Indian Government. Paradoxically, the kingdoms were colonised twice in their early dawn both by the British and the Indian subcontinent. They lie on the extreme north eastern periphery of India and now are known to the mainlanders as the North-East India. It consists of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura. The collective body of literature resulted from this region is called North-East Literature. R.K. Madhubir is a renowned Manipuri poet who had contributed his finest writings to Indian Literature by publishing three volumes of poetry in English. The paper will discuss the poet's observation on the events involving complete final destruction on a catastrophic scale from his poetry collection, *The Shadow of Darkness*.

Keywords: Apocalypse, New Literature, Post-Colonial Literature, North-East Literature, Cannibalism, AFSPA.

During the late 1970s and 1980s, the term 'New Literatures' or 'Post-Colonial Literatures' started using in literary field. It stressed the emergent nature of work from post-colonized societies and connoted freshness and difference. Some critics regard it as an 'emancipatory concept'. And even one African writer, Ben Okri distances himself to use the term 'post-colonialism' and prefers to use 'new' instead as literatures of the newly ascendant spirit. Such literatures are from the countries which were erstwhile European colonies but are products of Post-colonialism.

Indian Literature (either originally written in English or translated from the indigenous language or already there in regional/native language) is a part and parcel of Post-colonial literature. Many writers in their writings try to show and analyse critically the kind of relation between the colonisers and the colonised that existed before as well as the impact of that relationship on the colonised minds so many years after Independence. They reiterate their themes on the political, linguistic and cultural experiences of the colonised people. In India too, many regions which were not then part of Indian subcontinent were former European colonies especially the British. However, after the British left, these regions came directly under the supervision of Indian Government and got Independence in and around 1949. Some of these regions were independent princely kingdoms ruled by Kings. Paradoxically, they were colonised twice in their early dawn both by the British and the Indian subcontinent. These regions lie on the extreme north eastern periphery of the Indian mainland and now they are known to the mainlanders as the North-East India. "North-East is, of course, a blanket term that has been used to imply a homogeneous province, a single political domain, inhabited by kindred peoples with a common history". It consists of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura. The collective body of literature produced from this region is called North-East Literature. This literature is a very new literature and is considered a part of Indian Literature too. The kind of literature produced from this region is conspicuously different from the mainland literature in terms of its themes and subject matters. Often, either this literature is very rich in folklore or has depicted the breath-taking landscapes or is almost political literature or literature of violence. It is in this aspect, the literature from this region becomes different and provides freshness. And it is also in this aspect that North-East Literature is also a kind of 'New Literature' which is a result of both the British colonization and the Indian colonization. R.K. Madhubir is a renowned Manipuri poet who had contributed some of his finest writings to Indian Literature by publishing three volumes of poetry in English (*The Shadow of Darkness*, *The H-Hour Patient* and *The Time Bomb and Other Poems*) and many others in Manipuri language. The paper will discuss the poet's observation on the events involving complete final destruction or damage on a catastrophic

scale in his poetry volume, *The shadow of Darkness* published in 1998. Born on 10th September, 1942 at Kabowakching, Manipur, and died in 2004, he was a recipient of the Sahitya Akademi for Manipuri language and literature. He received so many appraisals and accolades from abroad universities and as well as from home. Madhubir can be considered as an apocalypse poet. "Apocalypse poets are a group of poets mostly born in the middle of 20th century who wrote and lived in the atomic and nuclear age when weapons of annihilation brought about the constant fear of nuclear war and the possible scenario of the end of the world". And he is no exception. He is a poet who often asks questions to himself. In his comments, *Through the Mirror* from the same volume, he asks, "What type of poetry are we to write? What type of life are we enjoying now? Are we happy? Or are we in peace? No, we are living in the triangular epitome of science and technology, socio-economic crises and the enduring political affairs". According to him, the world has become so mechanical. And he says that many writers and thinkers expressed the world as "sick hurry life" (Matthew Arnold), "hard and dry" (T.E. Hulme), "age of anxiety" (W.H. Auden), "desert of human beings" (J.P. Sartre), "the waste land" (T. S. Eliot) etc. Everywhere he sees the approaching destruction and apocalypse. The world today, according to him, "is not a world which is a God-made" but "is a Satan-made world". Everywhere he sees the world falls into ruins and pieces. He sees a universal and widespread destruction or disaster everywhere. According to Robin S Ngangom, a renowned Manipuri poet and critic, R.K. Madhubir is "a Bohemian in his outlook, indecorous, and deliberately tried to shock his readers and mock everything sacrosanct or sedate". Madhubir's outlook and perspective is always pessimistic and he sees a world of apocalypse. He deliberately satirises whatever is calm and sacred. He sees his native place a place of topsy-turvy. When the social calamities become everyday experience, it is hard for a poet to come to terms with his times. To be a poet in Manipur today is to be at a crossroad according to M. Priyobrata Singh, a renowned Manipuri writer. But the poets write because they cannot be simply muted away of whatever they see. They have to write in spite of the apprehension that they might be killed or they might end up meeting the same fates of their fellow poets who had already encountered tragic ends. They are often restricted to write in anguish expressing their vivid anxieties of immediate local themes. Therefore, they suffer a period of spiritual crisis and often such crisis is expressed in terms of violence, despair, psychological disorder or in terms of apocalyptic vision. This is the crux of every modern poet in Manipur. Madhubir, born in such inhuman circumstances, is facing this spiritual crisis at some point of his life and as a result he sees this world through apocalypse. Everywhere disorderliness reigns and therefore in the poem, "Let Us Leave Mother", he says:

The Cows, the goats, the sheep are eating

red meat and fish, instead of greens
eating their mouthful, the bloody gristle.

.....
.....

The harmonious soft notes of birds
where are they gone now, I do not know.
Instead, the shrill sound of vultures
always I hear, shattering my ear.

.....
.....

Today they seem all dying
like dead desert camel-thorns
they all are dead today to roots.

.....
.....

Has set now the sun of the age and
there will be darkness everywhere
and will come now many a wild beast
amidst the dead and the decayed.
Will thunder now with groaning cries
and we will not be able to move a step.

Let us leave mother, our motherland today. (2-41)

Therefore, the poet is calling to his mother that they should leave forever the motherland as everything ruins and apocalypse is approaching before their eyes. Darkness has shrouded his native place and there is the sound of groaning cries and sobs. All are dead and are like wasted land and desert. He tells his mother to leave because this place is not human beings' place but a place for wild beasts. In another poem, "Nostalgia", he is nostalgic of his previous peaceful life. Now everything has changed and nothing is clear, quiet and peaceful. So, he laments:

the sky is dark, the hills are cloudy
the roads are muddy and the ponds ruddy.

It's not a place enchanted by human faces
all the people here wear ruddy dresses
all the time they're whispering and sobbing
with melancholic hearts, roaring. (3-8)

There are various imageries the poet uses when he is trying to prove his overall view of presenting the world as ultimate doom. The world, according to the poet, is overturned. The normal seems abnormal and abnormality seems normal. The world is devastating and doomed and a new world is born. In the poem, "Juxtaposition", the poet says:

The tigers are now eating soft and tender grasses
the fishes are dwelling in the burning deserts
in the zoos only human beings are in cages
where the cows are eating the red flesh of tender children.

I breathe fresh air to keep my dead body alive
suddenly electrified my mind when listening the news
of giving birth to a new earth by this old and dead world.

Everybody will get now a serene solitude. (1-8)

Always there is a pessimistic tone here and there and even goes to the extent of calling the world a dead world. He is indeed shocked to hear the news that a new world of solitude will be born out of the dead world. It is in fact satirical and here lies the poet's subtlety of using the right words at the right time. The imageries of tigers, fishes, human beings and cows are nicely juxtaposed with other opposite things like grasses, deserts, cages, red flesh respectively. It seems the world clock is ticking in opposite direction and there is nothing except doom and disaster.

The whole poem "An Assessment", is completely a disaster. The poet is assessing of every incidents and happenings minutely. His world is surrounded with devastation and hopelessness. He is worried that his Saviour is not arriving to save him from the clutches of doom. Here, the Saviour is connected to the image of Christ. After the world witnessed Apocalypse and Doom's Day, there will be a Second Coming where the Saviour will come and justify his sons and daughters according to their deeds. This is believed by the poet. But, on the contrary, he is dubious whether his Saviour will come or not in order to save him from this evil world. Therefore, he says:

Chants of God will do nothing
Over-flooded is now the number of killing
all peaks of the hills are now burning
and all the rivers I saw are shrinking.

No one could see now the flowers blooming
on the poisonous caps of thorns smiling

in temples now the armies are hiding
in offices only the thieves are serving.

Who'll go to fetch a bucket of water from there?
The train is also not arriving now here
I must be late when I reach my goal there
and worried I now, should I meet my Saviour. (1-12)

At the end of the poem, the poet feels strange and mysterious that in life there is always a lurking tragedy where he is not going to hear anything good. The last line in this sense carries a meaningful and prophetic vision:

It's a mystery to me and felt I so queer
life is such a tragedy surrounded by terrible fear. (15-16)

The prophecy of a dark world is also depicted by the poet in a poem, "Scientific Temper" where the earth is filled with killings and murder. The apprehension of something ominous is written in the following lines:

All the mountains are now falling down from lepers
all the surface of the earth covered with abysses
and no one comes and no one goes. (8-10)

The last line echoes the line from "Waiting for Godot" by Samuel Beckett where Estragon utters: "Nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes, it's awful!" The absurdity of the situation is conveyed to the readers by the words that an absurd character named Estragon utters. Madhubir is like Estragon in uttering the last line. Indeed, there is no hope, the earth is in abysses where everybody is in dilemma. "The Glutton" is also an apocalyptic poem in the sense that the poet depicts a world where everything i.e. good and evil are neutralised/naturalised. Because, like the Second Coming in the biblical book of Revelation, the world is presented as dead and new beginning of a new world is born. So everything becomes balanced and is in a state of equilibrium. All the world's evils will be gone, it is no more a place of battlefield:

Go away you greedy vulture
do not come to this place, get you out from here
you'll not get now a corpse
no more this place a battlefield
broken and trodden down are all the monuments
destroyed and ruined now all the cities
not a single soul living

you'll not get a dead body here, so
no enmity will be there among the people
no strong will kill the weak
no rich will stamp the poor and
will not listen the groanings of bed-ridden patients
so, do not come to this place, get you out from here. (1-14)

Nature has lost its vividness and vitality. Ecological imbalances mark his native place. Nature's once glory is passed and merged deep down in abyss. Nature's manifestation is stark and terribly ugly. It's charm is flown away leaving behind only devastation and ruins. From the Book of Apocalypse from the Bible (also known as the book of Revelation), the earth will face destruction in many forms. People will have to suffer from earthquakes, fire, plague, hailstorms, famine and many other calamities, in all shapes and forms. Therefore, in the poem, "Flower and Fire", the poet says:

From where does this river come?
Flowing poisonous water to the full brim
breaking my heart in having a drop
covering with cancerous wounds when bathed.

The green fields
the enchanting orchards and gardens
when its water is soaked by the soils
suddenly turned into hot deserts.

From where does this air come?
Terribly dark-brown air
sneezing at every breath
unable to breath into my lungs.

What fire is this which has no heat
.....
.....

wherever I've planted my steps
everywhere I find the faces of abyss. (1-31)

In another poem, "Inaudibility", the poet talks about savagery and barbarism. When we look into the Hindu system of cycles, inherited from the Vedic civilization, the cycle is broken down into four time cycles: Krita or Satya Yuga which is also called the Golden Age, Treta Yuga or the Silver Age, Dvapara Yuga or the Copper/Bronze Age, and the Kali Yuga or the Iron Age. Kali Yuga is known as the age of the male demon, Kali or Satan in The Holy Bible. The scripture like Srimad-Bhagavatam or the Bhagavata Purana teaches that during the age of Kali, humanity deteriorates and falls into barbarism. Religion, truthfulness, cleanliness, tolerance, mercy, physical strength and memory diminish with each passing day. Severe droughts and plagues are everywhere. Slovenliness, illness, hunger and fear spread. Nations are continually at war with one another. People in this age will be lazy, greedy and deceitful. The following lines suggest the characteristics of Kali Yuga which is also considered as an important part of Apocalyptic Theories:

From where does the sound of the drum come
in such a calm late and restless night?
The rarest raindrops from above the sky
are sucked and absorbed by the fallen leaves of autumn
the tender buds of the new spring
are veiled with shame by the new-born sunshine
looking at the scatterings by the barbaric guns
the smiling mothers glanced at their womb's broken sons.
.....
.....
down and destroyed by savage hounds and foxes thoroughly
settled down the beasts who came from the wild forests. ((1-13)

The poet is premonitory about the future generations. His heart is heavy and sad for his people and he questions about their existence and how his people will exist in this evil world. His prophetic vision is ominous. He sees the world's evils are spreading like epidemic. The epidemic becomes a pandemic when it spreads over a wide geographical area, or throughout many countries. This is surely a sign of Apocalypse. Therefore, he says in the poem, "Future Generations":

O coming century of the future generations
future generations of the coming century
how will you exist?

You will breathe the heavy, dense and dirty air

you will drink grimy, grubby and muddy water.

Amidst the dirty dark smoke
the real sunlight in daytime
you will not feel.

In the polluted frosty nights

.....
.....

Here, there, everywhere
among the ear-shattering sound of shrill engines
a single flower will not blossom
among the hearts of the cannibals
no one will greet and no one will come. (1-16)

In another poem, "Passing Out Parade", the poet presents to us a dark world which represents a looming threat of another World War III and it is a conspicuous sign of approaching Apocalypse and Doom's Day. The soldiers kill each other and everywhere is the sound of war cries. The poet laments that it is useless to fight each other since we are the children of same parents. The soldiers are heading towards darkness with no certain destination. God has abandoned his children and left them in the dark. Here he says:

Pilots are in the air
navies, on the water
and soldiers, on the border
but without a torch in the dark
no more you will find the God.
O, my sweet earth, where I took my birth
we are the children of same parents
but full of war-cries among ourselves. (19-26)

The poet reiterates his angst in lamenting over the fate of mother earth. He says that mother earth was once beautiful, serene and charming. He once enjoyed her gardens, streams, orchards, breeze, birds and far-off villages. Full of emotions and vigour were once her demeanour. But now it has become bare, naked and dry. It is like waste land. The last line of the poem, "Mother Earth" shows the economy of words and is very sharp in its significance where the poet reminds

us of T.S. Eliot's "The Waste Land" in conveying the idea that is intended. The poet wonders at what has become of mother earth:

But today!
Today!
My Mother Earth!
You are bare
naked
and dry! (14-19)

"Life Before Birth" is also another apocalyptic poem. Madhubir firmly reiterates his view points on destructions that happen in a catastrophic level. He sees the world a place where human's life is no more safe. The world has become a polluted place and its people are also like devils. Society has no justice. There is disorderliness and atrocity everywhere. Men are like wild beasts with inhumaneness. Mercy is long gone. Therefore, through the mouthpiece of one mother who warns her unborn baby, the poet says:

Do not come out my babe
do not be born my child
if you come out of the womb
you'll breathe the dirty, smoky and polluted air
the people, the society and the world
today, are bad
yes, all are bad today.
The plants, the woods are poisonous
the air, the water, all are polluted
do not come out my child now!
There's no flower in gardens
there's no fruit in orchards
there's no justice in the courts and
there's no man among the human beings.
Really, the earth is no more round
do not come out my child today. (13-28)

The poignancy of the lurking danger is felt by the mother for his unborn child. She does not want her child to be born in this harsh and cruel world. A mother's genuine concern for the unborn child is presented authentically by the poet. Cannibalism becomes the trend or the fashion of today's world. Men are living in a cut-throat society. No time to sit and share one's own experiences. Such feelings of the poet reminds us of W.H. Davies's *Leisure*: "What is this

life if, full of care/ We have no time to stand and stare.../ A poor life this if, full of care/ We have no time to stand and stare." Everyone is after money, power and fame. Life is always busy heading to no destination. Therefore, the poet says that "Really today, the world seems/a single family of cannibals." In another poem, "Modern Poetry", the poet connects different and various events from normal incidents to gruesome incidents. The world where the poet lives becomes utter disorder. Things are all in great confusion. The world is covered with burning flames and flaming fires are flowing like rivers. Harmful chemicals pollute rains. Such events were signs of Super Volcano Apocalyptic Theory. Volcanic eruption resembles burning flames rivers. The poet, hence, depicts such drastic changes of world's environment in the following lines:

Flaming fires are flowing down the rivers
heaven showers perfumed raindrops
on dark city streets the old folk-pairs loitering. (13-15)

Madhubir loves his native place. However, his home is not his home. He asks, "Whose home is this where I live" in the poem, "Whose Home". The title itself suggests the poet's anxious mind. Home is supposed to be a refuge, the place where it has to take you in, as Frost once said in his poem, "The Death of the Hired Man". But in the case of the poet, home becomes a battlefield. Home is a place where there should be peace and comfort at least mentally. Madhubir's birthplace, i.e., Manipur is a place where one day is not passed without firings and killings. It is a God's abandoned place in spite of its picturesque and heart-throbbing landscape. On one hand is the Indian Military troops whereas on the other hand the insurgent groups. The armies are given the rights to arrest and kill any person on the ground of suspects by AFSPA (Armed Forces Special Powers Act, 1958). Between these two powerful forces, common people are suffering every day, every moment. Killings, tortures, bomb-blasts, firings become usual happenings. People are living with death every day. Such incidents in such a small state is a blatant symbol of Apocalypse and can be linked to the prophetic Apocalyptic Theory of World War III. The imminent probability of a World War III was somehow predicted among ten Apocalyptic theories and was agreed to some extent to be analogous to the wars fought between the Iraqi and American soldiers. Likewise, the poet's native place is in constant war between the two powerful forces of military groups and insurgent groups. Hence, the poet expresses his home in such manner in the following lines:

Tens of thousands of guns were fired
Without a pause from every direction
Pillar, wall, the entire roof is perforated

.....

Mosque, church and from the temple
We hear devotional songs everyday
Accompanied by a slaughter,
Clashes, burning down of houses
We hear hair-raising news without end. (5-13)

Similarly, in another poem, "Our Home", the poet is lamenting on the fate of his native place. Home is a place of personal remembrance where we do not fight the battles for subjective gains, for political purpose. Home should be a well meaning world where freedom of choice, freedom of thinking, freedom of speech, freedom of living freely as a human being, freedom of everything should be found. Yet, home becomes a graveyard. The poet remembers his erstwhile home- a place where he and his friends played hide and seek, where he had dreamt many dreams. However, now "totally changed today our home / all the walls fallen down / all the pillars rotten now." He says that such a precious home where all the good memories belong becomes a graveyard and the Satan is tempting his people by stretching his bony fingers. He is in dilemma. The Satan tempting his people is analogous to the *Three Days of Darkness*, an apocalyptic prophecy. According to this prophecy, Satan will come in the form of your loved ones and tempt you in order to take your souls into hell. Here, we can connect this prophecy of Satan being tempting human's soul with the poet's ideas expressed in the following lines:

yes this precious home of ours
becomes a graveyard these hours
standing now at the gate the satans
their numerous bony fingers straighten
trying to gag our mouths mercilessly.

In the dark burial smoke of her breed
standing our mother her heart with throbbing breath
we too standing still in our home now
in such a sightless dark hour so
as if in an island unknown. (15-24)

The apocalyptic symbols and signs are abundantly found in Madhubir's writings. He, by using different imageries and symbols, puts his thoughts in such a way that when the readers read the lines, though the language is simple, there is always a clarity of thought and presentation by his profound insights into the happenings of world's surroundings. He sees the world as decayed and tattered where the word "beauty" is gone. He is pessimistic and sometimes misanthropic in his approach. According to him, the world is a dark place. The dark carries

double meaning. Metaphorically, the dark signifies evil. At the same time, the world is also dark now because of pollution and dirt. The lines connote double meanings. His world is a destructive world. Human values are lost. Everywhere, atrocity prevails. Humans become cannibals. There is no hope for this world. God does not exist according to him. The Saviour is all dead. The Second Coming as prophesied by the Christians is doubtful. He asks himself many dubious questions. He longs for a world free of all evils and destructions. Yet this vision is far, far away and becomes impossible to be consummated. Disaster and cataclysmic vision ends the poet's world. Hence, Madhubir's *The Shadow of Darkness* justifies its title.

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