

Post-Catastrophe Futuristic Scenarios: A Perspective upon Aldous Huxley's *Ape and Essence* (1948)

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We are what we pretend to be, so we must be careful what we pretend to be.
Kurt Vonnegut

It is the devil who taught women to dance and asses to bray.
Old Chinese proverb

... hell is boiling over. And heaven is full.
We're chained to the world. And we all gotta pull.
Tom Waits

Abstract: Post-catastrophe literature related to futuristic scenarios, depicting the human race as extinct, focuses upon grim apocalyptic disasters, mostly as end-products of nuclear cataclysm, by simply projecting current scientific and technological adventurism to a logical outcome in the near future. Post-catastrophe writings become highly relevant as a warning to mankind to desist from use of atomic weapons and other technological innovations that cause irreversible damage to the ecological environment. Modern, and now postmodern, man is symbolically portrayed as the architect of the world of “nightmare and scapegoat, of bondage and pain and confusion”. It is a world of “perverted or wasted work, ruins and catacombs, instruments of torture and monuments of folly”.

Aldous Huxley's classic novel *Ape and Essence* (1948), becomes a landmark text among the post-second World War literary writings of diverse genres of the previous century. *Ape and Essence* portrays twenty-second century California in the United States as the locale of atomic disaster in the aftermath of World War Three. Human civilization has been wiped out, and savages who use half-burnt books as fuel, are shown as grotesque living specimens of genetic mutation, as the consequence of nuclear radiation. This paper focuses on all these factors as illustrated in *Ape and Essence*, closely approximating the current violence and mayhem, and the now established fact that man on this planet is sitting on the crater of a volcano which may erupt anytime.

Keywords: Post-catastrophe literature, dehumanization, higher ignorance.

Post-catastrophe literature till the 1960's and 1970's of the preceding century got consigned to the realms of fantasy and even science-fiction. But with the end of the

Second World War in 1945, writers across all prominent genres: fiction, poetry, prose, allegory, science-fiction etc, came to harbour in their minds the real destructive potential of modern mankind to annihilate the human race by a demonic use of nuclear cataclysm, ecological pollution, global warfare, and last but not the least, terrorism and the stockpiling of nuclear arsenals by the advanced nations of the world. Twenty - first century is already heading towards the completion of its first two decades, and, now, ISIS in Iraq has emerged as the current hydra-headed monster, beheading hapless and innocent victims in a grotesquerie of bizarre satanic executions. Focusing upon apocalyptic disasters mostly as end-products of nuclear cataclysm is justified by simply projecting current scientific and technological adventurism to a logical outcome in the foreseeable future. Post-catastrophe writings serve as a strong warning to mankind to desist from use of destruction-wreaking weapons like atomic bombs, chemical and biological warfare, proxy wars and damage to the ecological environment. Modern and postmodern man is symbolically portrayed as the “central protagonist”, the prime architect of the world of “nightmare and scapegoat, of bondage and pain and confusion”, besides being a world of “perverted or wasted work, ruins and catacombs, instruments of torture and moments of folly” (Frye, 1973). Aldous Huxley’s *Ape and Essence* (1948), attains the status of an iconic work of literature among famous post-catastrophe writings, reflecting an identical world as defined by Frye.

Ape and Essence portrays twenty-second century California in the United States as the bizarre locale of an atomic disaster in the aftermath of World War III. Human civilization is depicted as virtually extinct, as in Bernard Malamud’s *God’s Grace* (1982). The inhabitants of California in the twentysecond-century are mere savages, animals in human garb, with visible signs of bodily deformity as a consequence of genetic mutation, the net end-product of nuclear radiation. These “savages” celebrate “Belial night” as a tribute to Satan, the tempter and the architect of the Sin of Disobedience in the “Genesis.” Most of the savages of the twentysecond-century California, exhibit six fingers and toes, with women having two to three nipples on their breasts. After all, what does Huxley mean by the depiction of such a nightmarish scenario? The answer is simple: the current violence, mayhems, rapes, murders, unimaginable atrocities being committed all around the world, convey the stark and realistic message that the current human world of *Homo sapiens* is sitting on the crater of a volcano which may erupt anytime.

Ape and Essence is bifurcated into two parts: “Tallis” and “The Script”. The first part reflects a dissection in retrospect, of twentieth-century mankind, human civilization and society, from the perspective of a futuristic twentysecond-century society, a post-apocalyptic world, depicting the human race as that of wild savages with repellent genetic mutation, as their trademark. The mutation, as pointed out earlier, is the consequence of atomic and nuclear radiation, the inevitable fall-out of the Third World War in which annihilating weapons like atomic and hydrogen bombs were used. The state of affairs narrated in the second part “The Script” climaxes with the twenty-second century savages of a destroyed California celebrating “Belial Night” as a glorification of evil forces represented by Satan. The evil and horrendous acts of twentieth-century humans who employ their advanced scientific, technological and nuclear prowess to annihilate their own race and civilization, besides propitiating Belial by assassinating a God-fearing, non-

violent individual in the form of Mahatma Gandhi. On January 30, 1948, Bob Briggs, a Hollywood movie-writer and director is ruminating about how to carry on with his girlfriend without making his wife suspicious, when the news is broadcast that Gandhi has been shot dead. The news fails to evoke any kind of response or interest in Briggs. Saints cannot be tolerated in politics, that is why twentieth-century cohorts of Belial had no option but to annihilate Gandhi.

The plot unfolds in an unusual manner: Briggs goes to the studios of Hollywood in the company of the narrator, ostensibly Huxley's persona, and on the way they encounter a truck loaded with rejected movie-scripts, some of which spill over and fall out. Among these spilled movie-scripts is one titled *Ape and Essence*, by a certain William Tallis. This script arrests the narrator's attention and evokes interest in him to meet the author William Tallis. Unfortunately, Tallis is not traceable and his daughter informs that her father is already dead. The "Tallis" section concludes with this and the narrator resolves to print the movie-script *Ape and Essence*, as completely as he found it. It is with the next section, in the form of Tallis's movie-script, that the reader is served with the demonic "feast": a nightmarish, horrific apocalyptic scenario of evil-addicted, war-devastated humanity in general and the United States, in particular. This nuclear war, clearly the Third World War of the future, has occurred towards the end of the twentieth-century or the beginning of the twenty-first, and even a century after the catastrophe, the scars of destruction and annihilation are not only visible but, un-eroded as well.

The fictional "present" of *Ape and Essence* is February 2108. An exploratory expedition from New Zealand, the New Zealanders being the only humans to have remained unharmed by the nuclear war, reaches the North-American continent. New Zealand's geographical remoteness has saved it from the apocalyptic destruction by atomic war. A geologist, a nuclear physicist, a biologist, an anthropologist, a psychologist, an engineer and two botanists are on an expedition to rediscover America, after Christopher Columbus.

Dr Alfred Poole, one of the botanists in the New Zealand expedition, gets captured by the savages of Los Angeles who, besides being inveterate Belial-worshippers, indulge in a grotesque mockery of civilized ways. Their style of functioning constitutes "a savage parody of what were once civilized mores" (Hight 173). Besides Belial worship, a demonic parody of love and marriage takes the form of mass copulation and erotic frenzy on Belial Night. The depravity, dehumanization, and slavish addiction to evil is ironically illustrated by a romantic relationship which blossoms between Dr. Poole and a genetically mutated young woman, known as Loola. Poole and Loola cannot openly express their love for each other. Normal sex or love is taboo in post-catastrophe California of the twentysecond-century. Only mass sex or intercourse during the celebrations of Belial Night, is admissible. Women are dubbed as the vessels of the "Unholy Spirit", sources of deformity as they give birth to deformed babies, thanks to atomic war induced genetic mutation. Huxley's narrative really unfolds a carnival of animalism, transcending the apes like gorillas, chimpanzees, orangutans and baboons. Metaphorically, it can be said with a modicum of finality, that the California of 2108 is an ironic transmogrified 'Devil's Discotheque'. In war-devastated California, nothing is

available except poor food. The savages have to depend upon the stripping of corpses of the victims of nuclear war, for valuables like jewellery, clothes, watches, half-burnt currency notes, etc.

During the celebration of Belial Day, Poole learns this fiendish information from Loola: “And then comes the Belial Day... and then... well you know what that means. And afterwards if you have a baby, the chances are that He’ll punish you for what He has made you do” (Huxley 63). Tattered, mauled and shattered remnants of mankind, blindly and wholeheartedly implement what Satan wills, and yet are punished by Hell’s monarch. About the baby, Loola may be having she tells Dr Poole: “I just know it’ll have more than seven fingers. They’ll kill it, they’ll cut my hair off, they’ll whip me... and He makes us do these things.... It’s because He wants us to be miserable” (65). The savage Californians are blighted physically and spiritually by radiation, and their collective memory of the extinction of human civilization has eventually evolved into a blind eulogization of the Devil. Even the church of 2108 is “the body of which Belial is the head and all possessed people are members” (70). A more shocking spectacle witnessed by Dr Poole is how these savages make drinking cups, knitting needles, flutes, ladles, shoe-horns, etc; from bones and enormous piles of human bones, “dry bones of those who died, by thousands, by millions in the course of those three bright summer days...”(74).

During the celebration of Belial night, the Arch-Vicar of the devil becomes Huxley’s spokesman for enumerating one by one, the main causes of mankind’s degradation and destruction during the twentieth-century. Progress and Nationalism are the two main facades, “the two great ideas” which the devil put into man’s head. Under the bogey of progress and nationalism, twentieth-century humans indulged in an orgy of atrocities, which, befittingly, brought about their eventual ruin. Even science and technology, of which modern and post-modern *Homo sapiens* feel so proud, became Satan’s cardinal instruments with which the “Prince of Darkness” wreaked havoc and brought about the apocalyptic end of the human race. The novel identifies man’s perfectionist plans as ape-chosen: “Doesn’t every schoolboy know it? Ends are ape-chosen; only the means are man’s” (11). The words on the gate-post of Tallis’ house condemn man: “The leech’s kiss, the squid’s embrace, the prurient ape’s defiling touch, and do you like the human race? No, not much” (15). The “Leech’s kiss” suggests the blood-sucking nature of contemporary man, the “squid’s embrace” his monstrous disposition, squid being a sea monster akin to the Octopus. “The prurient ape’s defiling touch” symbolizes the excessive lust, lascivious and lecherous tendencies which defile and deconstruct the soul and mind of a human being. Huxley, here, presents a repellent demonic parody of the human and animal worlds, in sheer apocalyptic imagery.

Dr Alfred Poole and Loola dream about establishing their own “Garden of Eden” and, eventually, they succeed in running away from the Californian Kingdom of Belial. The climax of the narrative presents an ironic kind of redemption of the two central protagonists, Poole and Loola escape as fugitives to the community of “Hots”, an oppressed minority of those who do not conform to the society of priest-dominated savages, the minions of Belial. The young lovers as runaways break eggs over the grave

of their “creator,” Tallis. Poole feels inspired with a new meaning and an ardent hope for a better and a beautiful life. He recites lines from Shelley’s *Epipsychidion*. The celebrity English romantic poet is made a symbol of love and hope, of revolt and defiance, Poole and Loola as ‘rebels’, feel a catalytic impact upon their minds and souls, thanks to the iconic rebellious euphoria which inundates their psyches on reading Shelly’s poetry. The narrator asks: “is there already the beginning of an understanding that beyond *Epipsychidion*, there is *Adonais*, and beyond *Adonais*, the wordless doctrine of the Pure in Heart?” (148) Huxley concludes the novel with Poole reciting one of the concluding stanzas of *Adonais*. Just as Huxley’s persona retrieves the manuscript of *Ape and Essence* from being burnt with other rejected manuscripts, so does Poole retrieve Shelley’s volume from the ovens of the Californian doxified savages.

Thematically, the novel depicts modern man “crushed by the cataclysmic collapse” (Firchow 134), and the utter failure of contemporary man to “transcend both ape and essence” (Firchow 137). What twentieth-century humans called knowledge is in fact “another form of ignorance highly organized and eminently scientific, but for that very reason all the more complete, all the more productive of angry apes” (27). Thanks to this “higher ignorance” which constitutes our knowledge, “man’s social stature has increased” and “the least among us now a baboon, the greatest an orangutan or even if he takes a rank as a Saviour of Society, a true Gorilla” (27). *Homo sapiens*, Huxley seems to suggest, may well be the final ape of history. Man’s total subservience to the machine, to the wonders of science and technology, has made him a dehumanized heartless robot which makes the devil’s task easier: “Needless to say nobody ever gets anything for nothing.... Take these machines for example. Belial knew perfectly well... that the flesh would be subordinated to iron and mind would be made the slave of wheels” (91). Nuclear weapons and unbridled sex would be enough to annihilate the human race, “copulation resulted in population...with a vengeance” (91).

The Arch-Vicar of Californian savages, while anatomizing the causes of the twentieth-century man’s destruction in a holocaust of hate, explains the annihilating increase in human population in these words: “...bodies that grow progressively sicklier, scabbier, scrubber, year after year.... The overcrowding of the planet... up goes spiral of industry, down goes the spiral of soil fertility” (93). He goes on to say, “bigger and better, richer and more powerful – and then almost suddenly, hungrier and hungrier...the New Hunger, the Higher Hunger... the hunger that is the cause of total wars that are the cause of yet more hunger”(93). An orgy of criminal imbecility in the name of progress can be witnessed in the present times as well. To cater to the “myth” of Progress and Nationalism, humans adopt a cataclysmic posture, something we witness in the ‘whirlpools’ of global politics these days. Orwell’s Big Brother culture of his celebrity work *1984* which is apparently enforced upon the hapless humans operating within the fictional cosmos of the novel, can be witnessed as dominating the human race across the globe these days in a kind of demonic apotheosis of Satanic politics and global hegemony, enacted by powerful nations. Needless to say, the current state of affairs in world politics seems akin to what Huxley portrays in the post-catastrophe analysis of the Arch-Vicar when he enumerates the main causes which led to twentieth-century man’s destruction of human civilization. The Last Loosening of Satan, the penultimate stage

before the end of the world as described in ‘The Revelation’, propels and drives mankind with an “ape-mind” to action. Robert C. Elliot is right in saying that *Ape and Essence* (1948) “is Huxley’s dystopia, his *1984*, a hideous picture of the United States after the next nuclear war” (147). Finally, it would be befitting to conclude with these unforgettable lines, which Huxley quotes from Shakespeare’s *Measure for Measure* (II. ii. 117-122):

But man, proud man,
Drest in a little brief authority...
Most ignorant of what he is most assured.
His glassy essence... Like an angry ape,
Plays such fantastic tricks before high heaven
As make the angelsweep. (26)

The current species of *Homo-Sapiens*, Huxley seems to suggest, may well be the final apes of history. The ape is still inside the postmodern man, more ferocious and virulent than ever, symbolized by such activities as beheading of innocents by ISIS in Iraq, the bestiality of Boko Haram, and many such terror groups around the world. *Ape and Essence* in a collective mix of plot, characterization, theme and imagery, vis-a-vis twentieth-century human civilization, reflects an such an ambience.

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