

# Adapt, Survive and Evolve: Changing Environment in Two Post-Apocalyptic Novels *The Stand* and *Earth Abides*

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**Abstract**—The following research which is grounded on natural selection uses text analysis to find out the significance of survival in the post-apocalyptic narration mainly with reference to Stephen King's *The Stand*. The intertextuality of this work with *Earth Abides* is also pointed out. The saga of survival in the post-apocalyptic period, Darwin's concept of survival of the fittest and the human ability for adaptation are elucidated in the article. The survival stories teach us how to reconstruct the fallen society, providing an insight into how the affected people handle the situation (Leon C Megginson). It is not the strongest or the most intelligent who will survive but those who can best manage change. The pandemic narratives can serve as an important area in the classic to contemporary literature in throwing light on future survival issues, teaching how to overcome the precarious situations. It can be reiterated that the post-apocalyptic narratives speak volumes about the above-mentioned significant areas. Ipso facto, the popularity of Pandemic literature should make humanity sure-footed in prevailing over the pandemic threats, and assuring new life and hope.

**Index Terms**—post-apocalyptic period, pandemic narratives, pandemic threats and survival

## I. INTRODUCTION

America, essentially a haven of safety and fortune has always been a center of universal attraction. American literature provides a remarkable understanding of the tradition, philosophy, history and way of life of the nation. The various categories of American literature highlight the nation's history. The youngest genre, science fiction and its sub-genre, the post-apocalyptic fiction helps us recognize and analyze the aftermath of pandemics. The pandemic narratives refer to the complex as well as simple methods resorted to, by the survivors concerned in different periods of crises. The post-apocalyptic narratives have caught the attention of a large number of readers as it addresses areas like, war, disease, death, fallen civilization, resilience, faith, fresh life and hope. This genre has global appeal, hopefully engaging readers of all age groups. The researcher probes the significant contribution of the genre with the portrayal of timeless ideas and characters in it. The study aims to point out the role of pandemic literature in providing hope for humanity despite the catastrophes. The relevance of crucial information regarding pandemics becomes more worthwhile in the wake of the recent Covid-19 crisis. This recent crisis has also led to certain adaptations and interpretations of the earlier works. The majority of contemporary American literature comprises pandemic narratives, particularly after the World Wars. Literature plays a vital role in crisis management and its impact on the development of society.

The article explores how the literature has responded, lending a helping hand in apocalyptic emergencies. Select pandemic texts are analyzed, highlighting how pandemic stories play instructive roles, showing proper guidelines to humanity to tide over the crisis. Stephen King's post-apocalyptic work, *The Stand* published in 1978, narrates the story of Stu, one of the few survivors of super-flu, a deadly biological attack that has destroyed the United States and possibly the rest of the world. The narrative is set in crumbling Los Angeles, in the aftermath of the tragedy. It chronicles Stu's journey and efforts to bring together the survivors with the help of mother Abigail, the 108-year-old character with superpowers which eventually leads to the rebuilding of the community from the scratch. The novel, with its typical characteristics of the pandemic narrative can be identified as a worthwhile contribution to the genre concerned.

It can be noted that there is an intertextuality or intertextual connection between George Stewart's masterpiece *Earth Abides* and Stephen King's *The Stand*. Stephen King mentions, "With my Patty Hearst book, I never found the right way in... and during that entire six-week period, something else was nagging very quietly at the back of my mind. It was a news story I had read about an accidental CBW spill in Utah.... This article calls up memories of a novel called *Earth Abides* by George R Stewart" (King, 1978). Pandemic literature mainly focuses on the survival saga and both the books *Earth Abides* and *The Stand* have an extensive accent on connection to human adaptation and survival. Both the works provide guidelines to reconstruct the society after catastrophes and they are ultimately beneficial to the future

generation. Pandemic literature invariably stresses survival. Those who can best manage change, survive, as pointed out by Leon C Megginson.

Man had two key advantages, he said, our brains and our capacity for culture. Our brains are essentially social brains, he added. We share information, we create and pass on knowledge. That is the means by which humans are able to adjust to new situations and it is what differentiates humans from other earlier ancestors and our earlier ancestors from primates. (Massey, 2013)

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

In the year 1984, the article, *Apocalypticism in the fiction of Stephen King; Extrapolation* (Egan, 1984) explains the fallen world and destruction of civilization which make the areas inhabited by humans, a wasteland. Another article, *Earth Abides; Learning from a Post-apocalyptic view of the library* (Horne, 2009) highlights the importance of education, knowledge and libraries to human civilization. The research reveals the nature of libraries and the role of information in any civilization undergoing change. The biological research conducted by Nathaniel Massey for Climate Wire, says humans may be the most adaptive species (Massey, 2013). It analyzes the evolution of human brain, which had the advantage of capacity for culture. The study in the article, *The persistence of horror and our worldview of texts on post-apocalyptic world order* (Mukherjee, 2022) Investigates catastrophes, the massive destruction of the world and how it leads to the end of the world. The article, *Earth Abides and Covid-19 Pandemic* (Akhter, 2022), examines the novel by Stewart which stimulated networking of scientific inspirations during Covid-19 pandemic. In fine, the literature review throws light on outliving the catastrophe with unique human abilities to adapt and rebuild.

## III. RESEARCH GAP

Most of the researches conducted can be identified as restricted to religious and psychological aspects. Character analysis, science and technology aspects can be explored further. Though contemporary American literature is studied and explored exponentially in the light of post-apocalyptic narratives, the works of Stephen King and George R Stewart from the perspectives of Darwin's theory, still remains under-explored. Therefore, the knowledge gap identified by this article is regarding how the contemporary texts point out humans may be the most adaptive species in the environment, as humans believe that 'survival of the fittest' is the ultimate source of life. With each successive revival efforts, human adaptation is found to be more satisfactory. The study aims to stress the human efforts to survive, overcoming crisis which leads to healthy evolution.

## IV. MATERIALS AND METHODOLOGY

The study involves qualitative research, a comparative study of select American post-apocalyptic novels such as *The Stand* and *Earth Abides* through the lens of Darwin's idea of natural selection, specifically on survival using textual analysis. Significantly, the noted author Lailah Gifty Akita makes it clear that adaptation is the key to human survival as humans can adapt to various environments like hot or cold, climate changes and apocalyptic events. The study in this direction can be quite worthwhile and it analyzes the various aspects related to how the human beings concerned can solve the problems when faced with pandemics and survive better than other organisms. In the first place, the study uses a close-reading method to analyze the survival related elements in the select post-apocalyptic novels. The researcher evaluates the existence of survival needs, appropriate human behaviors, symbolic elements representing human survival and tries to show how humans are the most adaptive species which leads to human evolution.

Close-reading is reading the text closely with rapt attention. This kind of dedicated close-reading of the select works is essential to understand the recurring themes, to pursue the themes through the history of the post-apocalyptic genre and explore how they get implemented in specific works. The necessary familiarity with post-apocalyptic narratives can be cultivated by close-reading as well as watching post-apocalyptic movies carefully. Close-reading is extended to related studies like apocalypticism, the theories of genre and post-modernism by the researcher. Post-apocalyptic writers introduce the context and show how historical narratives and inferences from different periods of human history throw light on the topic in question. The researcher is mainly guided by the exhaustive textual analysis and the study proposes to highlight narrative's main theme through close, deeper, insightful reading. The study explores the theoretical representation of the survivors, their characterization, the images and symbols used in the narration, with due focus on history and human responses, in the select works.

## V. DARWIN'S THEORY AND ITS IMPACT

The word 'survival' comes from the Latin word 'supervivere', which means to outlive. The term 'survival of the fittest', related to natural selection is the mechanism that drives evolutionary change. The philosopher Herbert Spencer, *In the Principles of Biology* (1864) first used the term 'survival of the fittest' after reading Darwin's *Origin of Species*. Darwin also preferred this term to Natural Selection. Our brains are essentially social brains," he added, "we share information; we create and pass on knowledge. That is the means by which humans are able to adjust to new situations and it's what differentiates humans from our earlier ancestors from primates" (Massey, 2013).

The research, *Darwinism in Literature* (2009) by John Holmes discusses Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* and *The Descent of Man* as the important causes of crisis in religious belief in the Victorian era. Writers from Victorian and Edwardian periods also explored the social and ethical implications of Darwin's concept in a wide range of genres and forms, including science fiction, epic poetry, children's fantasy, personal lyrics, satire and sonnet sequences. Some of the works directly connect with Darwin's ideas. HG wells, Thomas Hardy and George Eliot point out Darwin's works as central to understanding humanity's place in nature. During the First World War days, authors addressed Darwinism and implications of evolution for the future of mankind. Darwinian influence was striking in the Victorian and Edwardian periods, in all kinds of fiction from transferred fantasies to realistic fiction. A few critics have concentrated on the literary qualities of Darwinian prose. Joseph Carroll believed that evolutionary psychology can provide the key to literary interpretation. Certain critics state that arts are adaptive mechanisms, and they support evolution in order to ensure human survival. Awareness and popularity of Darwinian themes in literature are likely to continue. The article, Introduction; Darwin and the Evolution of Victorian studies (Smith, 2009), also elucidates this observation.

## VI. DISCUSSIONS

### *EARTH ABIDES*-A CLASSIC TALE

*Earth Abides* which can be ranked as a classic post-apocalyptic novel by George R Stewart was published in 1949. It depicts the tale of one of the few survivors, Ish, after a nuclear holocaust. The tale is set in Ish's chronicle journey to find out other survivors and rebuild civilization from the scratch. The work comprises three sections that is, book one, World without End has eight chapters, book two, The Year 22 and book three, The last American, have eleven and three chapters respectively. The story mainly projects the fall of civilization, survivors struggling in a wasteland and their spirited efforts to outlive the crisis.

"He had started out in the morning with the Robinson Crusoe feeling that he would welcome any human companionship. He ended with the certainty that he would rather be alone until he found someone more congenial than the day had offered" (Stewart, 1942). This portrays the desolate, bleak journey of emptiness in the survivor and at the same time Darwinian quality of adaptation and accepting change in order to survive. "For the (almost) lone survivor of apocalypse there can surely be no greater glorification than knowing that the whole world has been transformed into an area for one's own self-aggrandizement. Ish is caught in the paradigmatic position of being both last and first man" (Wells, 2007, p. 474). His predicament takes him closer to Darwin's views. He is determined to survive. His readiness to adapt and change makes him the fittest to survive and lead.

He comes across various crucial stages in his journey: "Experience or discovery of the cataclysm (2) journey through the wasteland created by the cataclysm (3) settlement and establishment of a new community (4) the re-emergence of the wilderness as antagonist and (5) a final decisive battle or struggle to determine which values shall prevail in the new world". (Wolf, 1983, p. 8)

### *THE STAND* - MASTERPIECE OF STEPHEN KING

Stephen King's *The Stand*, a post-apocalyptic dark fantasy novel narrates the tale of the male protagonist, Stu Redman. The book has four sections. They are, The Plague, The Dream, The Betrayal and The Stand. The first part depicts the spread of the tragic events and the struggles of survivors. The second part explains how the survivors split into two groups and adapt in their own ways. The third part elaborates the issues between the two different groups. The fourth part shows the ultimate victory of good over evil. The good is symbolized by mother Abigail. Randall Flagg, the dark man is the symbol of evil and human mind with devious designs creating nuclear, biological and chemical weapons for destruction of humanity. America's great fears of the period are projected in the book. However, certain characters were determined to outlive the tragedy, adapt and change testifying to the words of Darwin that the fittest will survive. Their fitness is their readiness to adapt and change as well as their boldness and resilience. This facilitated evolution on better lines. "Herbert Spencer believed that evolution equaled progress for the better, in the moral sense of the word and that anything which supported evolutionary forces would therefore be good" (Maxwell, 1984, p. 231).

Pandemic issues rarely come up in academic discussions and so this discussion highlights the fact that such discussions are pertinent. The researcher wishes to throw light on human abilities to adapt, bounce back and survive even with limited resources. The pandemic narratives provide a historical background in literature review, which makes inference from the past to the present. It is also demonstrated how human beings overcome the crisis with their innate survival abilities proving down the centuries that humans are the more adaptive species than others. "Through every kind of disaster and setback and catastrophe, we are survivors - And we teach our kids about that" (Resnick, 2007). Different ancient societies, such as Judaic and Babylonian also have apocalyptic mythology and literature that deal with the fallen societies and the end of the world. They include the epics, *Epic of Gilgamesh* and *Sumerian creation*. Notable apocalyptic fiction originated in the nineteenth century and gained popularity after World War 2. *The Last Man*, the dystopian novel by Mary Shelley was first published in 1826.

"Survival had to start with me. In my experience, a castaway's worst mistake is to hope too much and do too little"- Life of Pi (Lee, 2012). Invariably the predominant theme of the apocalyptic narratives is the role of survival and the male protagonist is the central commanding figure. In the novels, *Earth Abides* and *The Stand* the male protagonists, Isherwood Williams and Stu Redman occupy the leading roles. In the words of Gary Wolfe, "such novels depict the power of humanity to remain dominant in the universe by relying upon ideologies grounded in a deeply patriarchal and

conservative worldview to contain anarchic forces” (Wells, 2007, p. 472). Isherwood in *Earth Abides* is projected as the last as well as the first man based on his awareness, knowledge and scholarship. He is elevated to the position of the leader of a messy, non-descript group of survivors by the sheer dint of his scholarly acumen. It is also seen that Isherwood continues to give importance to the so-called outdated values of the world. A significant Christian touch of spiritual knowledge and deliverance can be identified. Isherwood’s wife gives birth to Joey and he becomes the symbol of hope in the future civilized world.

The protagonist of *The Stand*, Stu Redman, considered one of the last leading survivors, manages to unite the other survivors under the influence of mother Abigail. A new community is formed, which includes educated people like doctors, lawyers and engineers. Stu embarked on a bold, noble task and he wanted to give education and religion paramount importance in the lives of the community’s children. In *The Stand* there is the conflict between Good and Evil as the survivors are split into two groups. Boulder Free Zone, is organized by mother Abigail and Stu becomes the symbol of goodness. The evil character Randall Flagg, also known as ‘Dark Man’ moves to Las Vegas, Nevada and sets up another community. Boulder Free Zone followed democratic ideals while Randall Flagg was tyrannical in his approach. Flagg’s plan is to destroy the Boulder Free Zone but the hand of God appears and destroys the ‘Dark Man’ and his followers. The final victory goes to the good forces. Stu survives his injury and leads his life with his girlfriend and baby who recover from super flu. They become remarkable symbols of evolution. The characters who successfully survived showed the ability to adapt and change, proving Darwin right.

Human evolution is a significant factor that is inevitable. There is both a Good and Evil in the world. The Good is preferred always though we may not get a full explanation as Huxley put it.

A long-winding explanation of the term might be, “The thief and the murderer follow nature just as much as the philanthropist. Cosmic evolution may teach us how the good and evil tendencies of man may have come about but in itself it is not competent to furnish any better reason why what we call good is preferable to what we call evil”. (Huxley, 1906, p. 80)

The survivors with their penchant for adaptation and change in *The Stand* and *Earth Abides* struggle for their lives and succeed in the reconstruction of society. The environmental changes during the pandemic and post-pandemic periods posed serious threats, but life’s struggle and need for evolution are realities. The fittest managed to survive overcoming the obstacles. Both the works, *Earth Abides* and *The Stand* explore numerous issues like education, family structure religion, custom, superstition and purpose and meaning of civilization. The select works show that along with adaptation and survival, evolution of human nature is also significant. The remarkable human traits of adaptability, adjustability and the ability to accept change resulted in the rebuilding of the lost world.

## VII. CONCLUSIONS

According to Darwin's concept all human beings might survive together if they are fit to survive. At the same time there is the challenge that each survivor evolves depending on his or her environment. The individual ability to accept change and adapt is also significant. Global pandemics can wipe out a major part of the population. In such situations, the factor, ‘survival of the fittest’ assumes great significance by resisting the decay of human life and safeguarding humanity. Certain other post-apocalyptic narratives depict the survivors leading the life of savages and primitive hunters after the catastrophe, as they are deprived of culture, knowledge, education and social life. But the select novels discussed in this study, Stewart's *Earth Abides* and King's *The Stand*, represent altogether different pictures. *Earth Abides* is a fiction with futuristic vision. Modernity’s need to colonize the future, to project new world for ourselves (McCracken, 1998, p. 14). The characters of Ish and Stu may be considered as part of a continuing tradition in Western literature. The post-apocalyptic survivors in the two select works have to blaze their own trail, utilize their land profitably and unite their followers. The survivors realized that their continued existence on planet Earth is not guaranteed unless they adapt, change and evolve. *The Stand* shows how to build a new society and the omnipresent influence of evil. A stand has to be taken against evil with the determination to change, adapt and evolve. “Men go and come; but Earth abides”. We can sustain life on Earth provided we strive to adapt and adjust to the reality of the new circumstances. The concept of destruction and revival with human ability to change kindles interest in post- apocalyptic works.

## VIII. IMPLICATION FOR FUTURE

The nature of pandemic diseases is portrayed in six films, 28 Days Later, The Children of Men, World War Z, The Scorch Trial and The Death Cure. Some of the infectious diseases caused by deadly viruses, plague, cholera, smallpox have resulted in shocking levels of fatality and certain viruses still continue to pose a threat. Novel virus outbreaks are depicted in the film Virus. Ebola is a new emerging category. The films, Deluge and I Am Legend portray zombie apocalypses. The Andromeda Strain and The Road deal with alien invasion. Blindness and Bird Box project unexplained mysterious diseases. The Time Machine too has a message and implications for the future.

The films in question, turn the spotlight on the determined struggle on the part of survivors as well as their adaptive mechanism. The Rover portrays the situation ten years after a global economic collapse and A Boy and His Dog deals

with the post-apocalyptic desert of 2024. Besides presenting the various apocalyptic scenarios, the research also tries to highlight mankind's growing ability with evolved powers to control and overcome pandemic situations in future.

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