

## **From Desolation to Consolation: The Post-Apocalyptic World of G.R. Stewart's *Earth Abides* in the Time of Pandemic**

Tessa Jose

Ph. D. Scholar, Institute of English

University of Kerala

[tessjo12@gmail.com](mailto:tessjo12@gmail.com)

### **Abstract**

*Post-apocalyptic fiction, a sub-genre of science fiction features a world where end has occurred due to some disaster or calamity and the world has turned topsy-turvy. In such a universe, characters struggle to make survival possible. The post-apocalyptic world, a world which contains ruins of the past hence becomes a site of trauma and torment. Reading novels belonging to the genre during this pandemic period gains relevance as they communicate tales of similar experiences to the readers. Stories of hope during times of crisis are immensely challenging, yet much required. Imaginings on apocalypse and post-apocalypse scenarios contribute to a better understanding on crisis situations and their post-phases. When dystopian visions have dominated the scenes of the fiction belonging to the genre creating a bleak picture, narratives that offer counter visions teach how precarious conditions are survivable by reinstating hope and courage. The paper attempts to read *Earth Abides*, an American post-apocalyptic pandemic novel by George. R. Stewart as a classic of the genre which performs the latter function. By tracing a transition from victimhood to survival in the novel, the paper examines how survival is challenging, yet possible in a world gone into pieces.*

**Keywords:** apocalypse, post-apocalypse, pandemic, trauma, victimisation, survival

What is left after a pandemic? Dust and ashes? Death and despair? Confusions and conflicts? The question gains great relevance during current times when the world is grappling in the clutches of a pandemic. The answer would definitely be challenging and not easy. Times of crisis often push humans into abyss of trauma and emotional trials. It takes great effort to address these concerns and move forward which makes survival possible. Fictional narratives or rather stories play a major role here, in reinstating hope during uncertain times. While articulating the turbulence of inner life, they also contain the potential to be antidotes to the existing crisis.

Dystopian visions of apocalypse and post-apocalypse have been subject to numerous literary works over centuries. Death filled atmosphere, threats and challenges, chaos, uncertainties, dehumanised and dreadful lives, tears and trauma dominate the worlds thus created. To offer constructive solutions and optimistic visions in the changing cultural-socio-political landscape struggling within an apocalyptic frame in a post-apocalyptic world is

definitely challenging. However there have been a handful of narratives that attempted the task and *Earth Abides* by G.R. Stewart stands out in this regard. One of the classics of post-apocalyptic fiction, the novel published in 1949, differs from other works of its kind in the universe it constructs. As opposed to the horrific background score that one associates with the post-apocalyptic fiction, *Earth Abides* offers a comparatively calm, serene atmosphere that does not traumatise the readers. Also unlike many other novels belonging to the genre, unrealistic, overdramatic elements do not dominate the pages of this work. Rather, things are dealt in a realistic fashion, brilliantly convincing readers to believe in the possibility of a world the writer foresees.

Pandemic has often been subject to various literary creations. The universe that Stewart constructs also deals with a similar kind of experience. Spanish Flu, also called Great Influenza Epidemic that took lives of millions of people across the globe and disturbed the world of nineteenth century, could be considered as the main source from which the novel took inspiration. Addressed as the second deadliest pandemic in human history, the pandemic brought an end to a world order thus forcing writers of the time to think anew on diverse themes and topics. Apocalypse imagery which effectually indicates deterioration of society and civilisation as well as end of an era, bringing with it ideas on abrupt changes and alterations in the prevailing world order always has been of interest to literary writers. Representations on post-apocalyptic world gain importance in this regard, since they prove to be an effective medium in analysing a world post-disaster. The novel by Stewart does warn and inform the reader of an impending doom, but at the same time deliberates on the possibilities of survival in such a world. The paper attempts to study how this is effectively employed through an analysis of traumatised characters in the novel who attempt to find a way out of their physical and mental crises. By examining the possibilities along with the challenges that the post-apocalyptic pandemic world of *Earth Abides* puts forth through an analysis of the representation of trauma in the characters and also various survival strategies they adopt, the paper traces a journey from victimisation to survival.

As the novel begins, Isherwood Williams (Ish), the central character of the novel, returns from a field trip at Sierra Nevada to find himself alienated in the place which has been destroyed by a mysterious epidemic that wiped out vast majority of the population. Ish does not initially observe any oddity since the pestilence which removed majority of the human race leaves the place deserted, but otherwise intact. But gradually a slight sense of uneasiness creeps in him. Suspecting something has gone amiss, Ish sets out to find what has gone wrong and ends up discovering that a fatal disease has attacked the place leaving it desolate. He reads a news report stating that the United States had been totally taken over and thwarted by the attack of some unknown virus of unparalleled rapidity of spread and fatality. The profound and prophetic statements in the novel do not fail to strike a chord within the readers.

Ish travels through the place to find other survivors of the apocalypse, finding a few with whom he resumes his journey. Trauma which arises out of the void created as a result of the apocalyptic tragedy haunts the characters in the novel. The fall of civilisation and a new world order, place the characters in a fix. “The fading out of the lights had a strangely severe effect upon Ish. Even in the full daylight, he seemed to feel those shadows creeping in from the edges toward him. The Dark Ages were closing in” (Stewart 86). The survivors with a common and collective traumatic past strive hard to get out of the disturbing remnants of the apocalypse. Though Ish is spared of the primary experience or knowledge of the disasters since he was away during the time, his imaginations assisted by the information he gains from newspapers, radio and other leftover materials grant him an experience of the same. Thus though he neither did witness nor participate in the calamity, he too, gets traumatised although initially he refuses to admit it. However, gradual comprehension of the state of affairs evokes in him mixed reactions and responses. Ish throughout appears calm and composed, his mind undergoes complex tribulations. The distress and trauma affecting him do not appear at the periphery rather remains enclosed deeply within him. The trauma in him is hence repressed and subdued and for the same reason initially is unresolved. According to Kenny, “Unresolved trauma occurs when a child or adult is not given the opportunity to release emotions or when emotions are blocked. Trauma cannot be laid to rest until the trauma has been addressed mentally, emotionally, physically and spiritually, which is to say seen for what it was and openly acknowledged” (433-34). The world which remains intact helps him in wrapping up the trauma present within his psyche. It aids his belief that nothing has changed. The conscious mind of the character wards off the reality and hence the trauma associated with it. But the optimism he embraces battles with traumatic clutches, turning his mind into a battlefield. “I ought to be considering suicide. No, too soon. I am alive, and so others probably are alive” (Stewart 23). And finally he begins accepting reality as it is. “Ish went to bed, still with the unsatisfied feeling, ‘must be suffering from shock more than I realize consciously,’ he thought” (Stewart 57). “Now again he realized that, more than he thought from day to day, the chock of the whole catastrophe had affected him” (Stewart 89).

The collapse of civilisation is a cause of distress in Ish and as the novel proceeds, one witnesses the continuous struggles undertaken by him to restore civilisation and the past world order. The past civilisation which fills Ish with nostalgia follows him throughout his life providing him neither rest nor comfort. Ish, who introduces himself to the readers as an introvert, ironically strives to develop a community in a post-apocalyptic world rather than preferring an estranged life. His intense craving to be peopled around is in contrast to his initial attitudes of announcing himself to be an unsocial being. The man who went into the mountains having no one to accompany him, who had no one living within five miles of his cabin, who could not actually remember if he had seen a human for past two weeks, who preferred loneliness as a companion, ends up building up a tribe, leading a community life and desiring a populated world. According to Bessel van der Kolk, “Overwhelming

experiences affect our innermost sensations and our relationship to our physical reality-the core of who we are. . . .Trauma results in a fundamental reorganisation of the way mind and brain manage perceptions. It changes not only how we think and what we think about, but also our very capacity to think” (26). The paradoxical actions from the part of the protagonist hence clearly illustrate how trauma imposes changes in him. “. . . Ish felt himself growing weak with the cumulative piling up of horror and an overwhelming sense of solitude” (Stewart 14). The trauma in him initiates certain changes in his behavioral attitudes which even affect the very core of his identity.

The novel also portrays how a post-apocalyptic world throws a generation into the grip of shock and distress. The collective memory of the tribe formed by Ish and others is affected and all strive for a detachment from those memories. The past memories inhabit the mind of the members, making frequent visits in their lives. The community comprises of Ish, who reflects about the lost civilisation, Evie who is half-witted, Jean who turns anti-religious, Molly who goes into periodic depressions, George and Maurine who lets go of all rationality and Ezra who lacks any convictions. Though Emma is portrayed as a potentially strong figure, she too is frequently seen to retreat from activities and maintaining silence for long periods. This in a way suggests the numbness that trauma inflicts upon her. Jeffrey C. Alexander in his *Trauma: A Social Theory* states, “Cultural trauma occurs when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways” (6). Apart from these major characters around whom the story evolves, the novelist also sheds light on some other survivors who wandered like “bees who had lost the hive, sheep without a flock” (Stewart 120), Mr. Barlow, who consumed too much alcohol since he couldn’t survive a world going to pieces, Milt and Ann “. . . walking in a kind of haze . . . people without hope” (Stewart 70) and the old man who was “. . . essentially dead . . . close to insanity . . . piling up things around himself, living to himself, withdrawing farther and farther” (Stewart 31). These descriptions hint at the impacts of a traumatic world on the people left behind. Ish supposes that in the post-disastrous world, “. . . everyone he had so far seen was obviously suffering from shock” (Stewart 34).

Ish and the community formed under his leadership (called Tribe), however make deliberate attempts to lead a life forward relying on the things found around. Ish is disturbed about the Tribe’s excess reliance on the ‘leavings’ of the past, and he hence attempts to find alternatives to change the practice. But as one notices, whatever he does, he remains deeply bonded to a hammer, which he had collected during his field trip as it belonged to an ancient miner and hence symbolised an actual link to the past. Ironically, the hammer turns out to be a link to the immediate past, a reminder of the pre-disaster world. Hammer, which functions as a lynchpin in the novel, thus turns out to be a significant symbol which effectively brings out the theme of trauma and its effects on an individual and a community. “. . . the hammer occupied an unduly large part of his consciousness” (Stewart 7). The instrument is

‘omnipresent’ in the text, recurring periodically to make strong suggestions on the turbulent mind of the protagonist. “. . . he knew that he did not want to be separated from the hammer and that it had come to mean a great deal to him in some strange way” (Stewart 261). The traumatic past which is imprinted in the psyche of Ish hence becomes evident. The hammer which ‘completes’ Ish, hence turns out to be a metaphor of his memories and recollections of the past that occupy a major part of him and continuously haunt him. As per Herman:

Long after the danger is past, traumatized people relive the event as though it were continually recurring in the present. They cannot resume the normal course of their lives, for the trauma repeatedly interrupts. It is as if time stops at the moment of trauma. The traumatic moment becomes encoded in an abnormal form of memory, which breaks spontaneously into consciousness, both as flashbacks during waking states and as traumatic nightmares during sleep. Small, seemingly insignificant reminders can also evoke these memories, which often return with all the vividness and emotional force of the original event. Thus, even normally safe environments may come to feel dangerous, for the survivor can never be assured that she will not encounter some reminder of the trauma. (27)

Hammer is also seen as a relic of the past by the successive generations. “The hammer- all the children associated it vaguely with something strange and mystical in the far past. . . . The children had come to think of it as an implement of power, dangerous for any of them to touch” (Stewart 201). The past and associated trauma which has the potential to destroy the survivors is suggested in the novel. It is addressed as ‘dangerous’ and hence disastrous by the author. In the concluding chapter, when Ish is about to die, he is forced to bequeath the hammer to one of his successors. The transference of hammer from Ish to his great grandson Jack in a way symbolically denotes the traumatic legacy passed on from one generation to the next. “Ish felt within himself a strange pang of sorrow for the young man to whom the hammer had descended” (Stewart 310). There is a suggestion on how this exchange would continue throughout the coming generations, which points to the marks and traces of trauma which would remain even after centuries. Anne Whitehead in her *Trauma Fiction* summarises the argument of Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok, psychoanalysts notable for their works on transgenerational trauma. According to them, “the psyche of the next generation becomes a ‘crypt’, a container that houses the seemingly unthinkable and unrepresentable residue of the past” (qtd. in Whitehead 14).

Though preoccupation with the past complicates survival tendencies in the characters, it is possible to draw out certain survival strategies adopted by the characters, at individual as well as the collective realm. Their willpower and resolve remains strong and ardent as portrayed in the text. The novel thus though points to the end of an epoch that eventually poses threats and challenges, also dwells on prospects and possibilities. Berger remarks, “The apocalypse, then, is The End, or resembles the end, or explains the end. But . . . the end is never the end. The apocalyptic text announces and describes the end of the world, but then

the text does not end, nor does the world represented in the text, and neither does the world itself. In nearly every apocalyptic presentation, something remains *after the end*" (5-6). He adds, "The study of post-apocalypse is a study of what disappears and what remains, and of how the remainder has been transformed" (7). *Earth Abides* well supports these statements. Through subtle suggestions and poignant representations, Stewart sketches an end as well as a beginning in *Earth Abides*.

The multidimensionality of traumatic experience makes survival not an easy one for the victims in the novel. Trauma interrupts and reorients the consciousness of the victims infecting their thinking abilities. The distortions made in the mind, leave them in the same time, place, and state as when the traumatic event occurred. According to Levine, "Survival depends increasingly on developing our ability to think rather than being able to physically respond" (48). Hence, healing of the mind becomes crucial in the healing journey from trauma. The traumatic conditions alive in the psyche of the victims refuse to fade away completely. In addition to that, the inability of the victims to completely comprehend the sudden unexpected shock created by the traumatic situation out of the apocalypse leaves the mind in chaos. Holding on to the traumatic memories often offers false security. This too impedes the healing process. The recurrent haunting memories hinder the healing journey of the victims. Stating Freud and holding up his findings, Caruth comments 'What returns to haunt the victim . . . is not only the reality of the violent event but also the reality of the way that its violence has not yet been fully known" (6). Since the victims have no hold over the reality- exterior as well as interior, it turns out to be difficult for them to be resilient. Hence it takes time for the victims to cope up with such situations and hence the journey from victimisation to survival becomes a time-consuming process. However, the time period offers a space and freedom to the victims to heal and calm their mind and body.

Fritz Perls' theory of "homeostasis" illuminates the process of transformation whereby people who are traumatized, after going through some stages (such as receiving support from others, getting therapeutic help, or using personal resources), proceed from the stance of victims to survivors, and eventually arrive at the stage of healing. Perls (1973) argued that human living is about the constant play of balance and imbalance in the organism, which is connected to two goals: survival and growth. These goals explain people's strength to regain balance and to move on with their lives. Beyond survival and growth, some individuals are able to thrive as they persevere the experience of desolation, moving toward consolation. (qtd. in Levers 534)

The frequent responses that trauma creates in a victim include denying the reality, turning frozen or numb to the situation, transforming into an aggressive and violent being, entering into depressive states etc. Though trauma evokes varied reactions in the victims, the above mentioned responses at times arise as survival techniques adopted by the people. Sophie Fuggle in her essay "To Have Done with the End-Times: Turning the Apocalypse into

a Nonevent” makes use of the five stages of grief identified by the psychiatrist and theoretician Elizabeth Kübler-Ross, in an apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic setting, which could potentially serve as coping strategies. These stages which “follow the knowledge of a tragic or terrible event . . . are denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance” (32) of which acceptance is capable of producing the most healing effects leading to the initiation of a new beginning.

Rather than succumbing to the traumatic situations, Ish and others accept the crisis situation which helps them gradually to devise methods to counter its effects. They fight against the oddities to bring about a new beginning. “He had known despair, but now he knew hope” (Stewart 116). In the healing journey, they get affected by fatal illnesses and other depressing affairs, but the people neither lose their heart nor let go of their hope. With a strong determination, they fight against the situation to overcome their disappointment as well as to restore a lost world. These fights aid them in taking control over their life, reducing traumatic impacts, regaining a sense of self and security and thus opening possibilities of growth and transformation. They fight against the traumatic situations by healing themselves, inculcating belief and trust in themselves and restoring relationships. The positive undertones in the text point to the endurance, resilience and survival which the characters deliberately choose over their traumatic circumstances.

*Earth Abides* could be read as an account of one’s capability to survive any traumatic circumstances. Though negative thoughts pop up often in Ish’s mind, he shields himself from those negative thoughts and contemplations. At the individual and the collective realm, the willpower and the resolve remains strong and ardent. In the novel one not just witnesses an individual’s fight for survival, but a community’s as well. Rather than succumbing to the traumatic situations, Ish and others fight against the oddities to bring in a new beginning. “He had known despair, but now he knew hope” (116). In the healing journey they get affected by fatal illnesses, intrusions and depressing affairs, but the people neither lose their heart nor let go of their hope. The people fight against the situation with a determination to overcome their disappointment as well as to restore a lost world, “. . . suddenly he gave a quick start, and he realized that he had again a will to live!” (24). These fights help them to take control over their life, reduce traumatic emotions, regain a sense of self and security and offer potential for growth and transformation. They fight against the traumatic situations by healing themselves, inculcating belief and trust in themselves and restoring relationships. The positive undercurrents in the texts point to the endurance, resilience and survival which the characters deliberately choose over their traumatic circumstances.

Concept of ‘Fight or flight’ put forth by Walter Cannon an American physiologist, is considered one among the automatic survival responses to trauma which points to the physical act of fight or flight at the moment of traumatic situations as chief reactions towards trauma. In *Earth Abides*, one may trace the physical as well as psychological processes of “fight and flight” as the major survival techniques adopted by the characters. People move

from place to place to overcome traumatic memories created by the site of apocalypse. Rather than being still and motionless, Ish sets off from one place to another in search of human company. It is a quest for cure and survival. In order to escape the grips of trauma, he travels in his car from place to place. Though hit with trauma of being isolated in a huge world, in his heart's core he believes in the existence of people and civilisation somewhere. His optimism drives him forth in spite of the traumatic circumstances which he encounters in a post-apocalyptic world:

Great fear came upon him, and he cringed in vague dread and listened for noises in the darkness, and thought of his loneliness and of all that might happen to him....A wild desire for flight and escape came upon him. He had a feeling that he must go far away and move fast, and keep ahead of anything that might be pursuing him. Then he rationalized this thought with the feeling that the disease could not have fallen everywhere upon the United States, that somewhere must be left some community, which he should find. (37)

Similar to Ish, Ezra, George and others who voluntarily undertake a journey and later join with Ish are also on their way to survival and healing. By fleeing from one place to another they expect to reduce the traumatic impacts of the catastrophe. And the movements suggest a curative process in the victims aiding them to shed off their identities as victims.

However, a collective fight against the ordeals of a post-apocalyptic world could be considered as the major survival strategy opted by the community, though individual battles against trauma are noticeable. Trauma isolates people and a group recreates a sense of belonging. Community formation through which the people connect, bond and rebuild hence becomes a chief survival strategy adopted by the victims in *Earth Abides*. They call themselves a 'Tribe' and they believe that a new community life would relieve them of their sorrows and distress. It adds to their healing journey and helps them in reclaiming what was once lost. Communities are formed so that they could make individual survival possible. Balaev argues that optimum circumstances for healing exist when a "society organizes the process of suffering, rendering it a meaningful mode of action and identity within a larger social framework" (401–2). *Earth Abides* portrays a person's journey from alienation to companionship through community formation. When a group of people come together, their traumas are shared, lessened and eliminated. "There must be others that he could find also to join with them—good people who would help in the new world. He would start looking for people again" (Stewart 116). Therapeutic implications of community formation are put forward as a means of survival by the victims in a post-apocalyptic scenario. Herman notes that "The fundamental stages of recovery are establishing safety, reconstructing the trauma story, and restoring the connection between survivors and their community" (2). By finding inspiration to initiate a new beginning, the characters shed their status as victims in the novel. The merriment, ceremonious lifestyles and celebrations of a community life help the victims to survive the traumatic clutches of the apocalypse. The novelist announces, "Gaiety—that



had survived the Great Disaster!” (Stewart 302). The belief and devotion of George and Maurine, the temper and competency of Jean, amicability of Ezra, hard works and prudence of Ish and courage and inspiration of Emma ties the Tribe together. At times of crisis, strong interpersonal relationships help in resolving the issue. As the novel ends, the Tribe widens its contours and more and more people join the community. “Each of the adults had for a time lived alone, had experienced what they now called the Great Loneliness, and the strange dread that went with it . . . their little group was . . . a tiny candle against the pressure of surrounding darkness. Each new-born baby seemed to give the uncertain flame a stronger hold and to push the darkness of annihilation back a little” (Stewart 124).

The novel which places trust on one’s ability to survive any extreme traumatic conditions also takes a look into other survival techniques that the characters employ to survive the catastrophic world. In the novel, Em assumes the role of a God figure. Showcasing extraordinary courage, knowledge and skills, Em acts as a source of strength which sustains Ish and other members of the community. “Thus even when the shadows drew in most closely and the little candle seemed flickering and smoky, she knew no despair and sustained them all” (252). Her judicious responses and reactions drive the members and the Tribe forward. The reverence Ish and others preserve towards her strengthens the assumption. “Her courage burned too brightly. She was life. He could not associate her with death. She was the light for the future. . . . ‘O mother of nations! And her children shall call her blessed!’” (116). Survival from trauma is made possible with the help of Em in the novel. These unique, distinctive connections and associations in a way enhance other survival mechanisms like the fight or flight technique or the community formation. Survival made possible through these survival strategies thus turns the victims to survivors in the novel.

Though *Earth Abides* portrays an end of the world situation, it does contain positive undertones which become evident in the transition of the individuals concerned from victimhood to survival. Post-apocalyptic fiction or Trauma fiction not always narrows down to describing trauma and its implications. It becomes a cause for inspiration and insights with its depictions of courageous fights, diplomatic strategies and judicious use of resources. *Earth Abides* while at the same time revealing traumatic difficulties and its gruesome impacts does not limit itself to representations of an utterly bleak world. Instead, it functions as a mouthpiece that offers the potential for survival in such pressing circumstances, thus imbuing something pessimistic with a positive stroke. This positivity shines bright amidst a widespread darkness that has blanketed the world.

#### **Works Cited:**

Alexander, Jeffrey C. *Trauma: A Social Theory*. Polity Press, 2012.

Balaev, Michelle, editor. *Contemporary Approaches in Literary Trauma Theory*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.

- Berger, James. *After the End: Representations of Post-Apocalypse*. U of Minnesota P, 1999.
- Caruth, Cathy. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. John Hopkins UP, 1996.
- Fuggle, Sophie. "To Have Done with the End-Times: Turning the Apocalypse into a Nonevent." *Apocalyptic Discourse in Contemporary Culture: Post Millennial Perspectives on the End of the World*, Edited by Monica Germana and Aris Mousoutzanis, Routledge, 2014, pp. 31-43.
- Herman, Judith. *Trauma and Recovery: The aftermath of violence--from domestic abuse to political terror*. Basic Books, 1992.
- Kenny, Michael G. "A Place for Memory: The Interface between Individual and Collective History." *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, vol. 41, no. 3, July 1999, pp. 420-437. *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/179434](http://www.jstor.org/stable/179434). Accessed 10 June 2020.
- Levers, Lisa Lopez, editor. *Trauma Counseling: Theories and Interventions*. Springer Publishing Company, 2012.
- Levine, Peter. *Waking the Tiger: Healing Trauma*. North Atlantic Books, 1997.
- Stewart, George R. *Earth Abides*. Orion, 1999.
- Van der Kolk, B. A. *The Body Keeps the Score: Mind, Brain and Body in the Transformation of Trauma*. Viking, 2014.
- Whitehead, Anne. *Trauma Fiction*. Edinburgh UP, 2004.