

Apocalyptic Vision in the Laotian Short Story “The Roar of a Distant War” by Viliya Ketavong

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Abstract

“The Roar of a Distant War” begins with a picnic in Southern California on the fourth of July. However, for Nanda, the fireworks-display brings back memories of the civil war in Laos that was known to the rest of the world as the Vietnam War. Nanda’s kneejerk reaction to the fireworks display is to drop to the ground, since, as she confesses she was “a child of war”. The narrative traces the trials faced by a family in Laos caught between communist forces and the American army. This paper examines the statement made by Martha F Lee that “In all its forms, environmentalism is – at least marginally – apocalyptic” (ix). It goes on to argue that unlike traditional apocalyptic narratives that are mostly ‘user-oriented’ - a term used by Herbert Gans to discuss the fantastical nature of apocalyptic fictions and to point to the distance that mostly exists between history and apocalyptic narratives - Ketavong’s apocalyptic short story is based on recent history, real politics and human instrumentality.

My friend from Asia has powers and magic, he plucks a blue leaf from the young blue-gum
 And gazing upon it, gathering and quieting
 The God in his mind, creates an ocean more real than the ocean, the salt, the actual
 Appalling presence, the power of the waters.
 He believes that nothing is real except as we make it. I humbler have found in my blood
 Bred west of Caucasus a harder mysticism.
 Multitude stands in my mind but I think that the ocean in the bone vault is only
 The bone vault’s ocean: out there is the ocean’s;
 The water is the water, the cliff is the rock, come shocks and flashes of reality. The mind
 Passes, the eye closes, the spirit is a passage;
 The beauty of things was born before eyes and sufficient to itself; the heartbreaking beauty
 Will remain when there is no heart to break for it.
 Robinson Jeffers “Credo” (1927).

The epigraph, “Credo” by Robinson Jeffers charts a clear divide between the mysticism of Asia and the consciousness of the unrelenting material reality of nature in those “bred west of Caucasus.” For the latter, “the water is the water, the cliff is the rock” and there is deep conviction that “the heartbreaking

beauty will remain where there is no heart to break for it.” The passage foregrounds two ideas both of which are central to the discussion in this paper. The first is an awareness of the supposed differences to the approach to nature between two civilizations, broadly and often inaccurately defined as West and East. The second is the awareness of apocalypse that is inbuilt into this consciousness.

Apocalyptic imagery has proliferated in the imagination of the human race since ancient times and is not exclusive to the West. Most religious texts paint a version of the end of time. In the Bible we have the ‘great flood’ brought on by God’s wrath, with Noah’s ark and its inhabitants surviving the disaster. We also have the concept of the Armageddon. In the Hindu tradition, we have *Pralayaa* (or dissolution of the world) and the coming of Kalki Avatar, as parallel examples. There are also two major points of Buddhist eschatology, namely, the appearance of Maitreya and the *Sermon of the Seven Suns*. In the Mayan calendar, the year 2012 was widely proclaimed as the year of dissolution. It is no wonder then, as Gary Baines has recognized, “apocalypse might well be embedded in our collective consciousness” (2009: 21).

In secular literature too, beginning with the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, dated around 1000 BCE, to the 21st century, we have texts proclaiming the end of time. Mary Shelley in *The Last Man* (1826), and Bram Stoker in *Dracula* (1897) construct doomsday scenarios in Victorian times. This was in response to growing imperial fears about the end of civilization, brought on by a series of factors. These included guilt over the excesses of colonial rule, fears centred on Darwinism and its theory of the ‘survival of the fittest.’ These fears were linked to anxieties about the growing effeteness and perceived ‘weakness’ of the European races and of the ‘robust native hordes’ taking over. The Twentieth century with its two World Wars was equally prolific in doomsday narratives, many of them forming part of the science-fiction or the fantasy genre. The most famous of these was H. G. Wells’s *War of the Worlds*, which he first began serialising in 1897. The culmination of World War II with the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki demonstrated humanity’s capacity for self-destruction. This inevitably led to a lot of anxiety and introspection, giving rise to a plethora of books that came to be labelled as apocalyptic fiction. Pat Frank’s *Alas Babylon* (1959), Stephen King’s *The Stand* (1978) and Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* (2006) are a few examples of this genre of fiction that captured popular imagination. The continued popularity of this genre of novels is attested to by the fact that we have seen several cultural artefacts from paintings, such as Albert Goodwin’s *The Apocalypse* (1903) to literary narratives that propound visions of ‘The End of the World’ in diverse ways. Most of these tales of an apocalypse operate primarily through representations of destruction and societal disintegration. Asian apocalyptic fanfiction too is on the rise. *Dusk* and *When Yesterday is Gone*, are some popular blogs that have a following.¹

Apocalyptic fiction habitually deals in fantasy and envisions future events. The important tension in the genre appears to arise from imagining the future but also simultaneously reflecting the present. Aside from these narratives, there was a rise in the number of ecologically charged narratives such as *Silent Spring* by Rachel Carson (1962); Bill McKibben’s *The End of Nature* (1989); *The Revenge of Gaia* by James Lovelock (2006); and *The Enemy of Nature* by Joel Kovel (2002). All these point to the fact that most apocalyptic narratives, whether of the science fiction, fantasy or ecological genre, articulated visions that are heavily based on current societal and ecological problems. Thus, though they all reflected some apprehension about a contemporary predicament, often political and/or ecological, the fictional texts at least were almost always speculative and projected their plots into the near or distant future. One major and consistent theme in these books is annihilation through nuclear destruction. This can be identified as a response to the fears brought about by the arms race between the two great competing powers, USA and USSR during the Cold War era.

It is against this background that I explore a Laotian text. Viliya Ketavong, a Laotian-American, lives in the USA, where she works to educate people from around the world about Laotian culture and history. She writes poems, short stories and also translates Lao folklore. Ketavong's "The Roar of a Distant War" is an apocalyptic narrative that is distinctive in that it is not speculative but is a recollection, hence, set not in the future but in the past. Nevertheless, the picture it paints is indisputably apocalyptic since the narrative vein is akin to 'end of time' chronicles permeated by gloom and predictions of doom. Secondly, unlike most such narratives that are vested in sketching out a collective human destiny, making only occasional inroads into the personal, this story is entirely built on the personal history of one family with only occasional references to the larger collective of the nation. But one great similarity connects it to many other apocalyptic narratives in that the climactic moment in the story, ending the apocalyptic past, is indeterminate, poised between despair and promise.

The narrative begins with Nanda, the protagonist, and her family celebrating the fourth of July in Southern California, with a picnic in the nearby park. The Independence Day fireworks-display unexpectedly brings on a panic attack that her rational mind attempts to soothe her out of:

BOOM! BOOM! BOOM! BOOM! *Nothing to be afraid of.* The dark night sky was aglitter with harsh explosions of light. *Nothing to be afraid of. I am just watching fireworks in the loving presence of my family.* (Ketavong, 96; italics and upper case in original).

This contrapuntal dialogue alternating between instinctual terror versus reasoned calm culminates with instinct taking over. Despite her rational mind repeating the phrase, "*Nothing to be afraid of*" like a chant, her scarred, subconscious self, fearfully queries "...or is there?" (97). Nanda's childhood fears surface and she confesses, "I dropped to the ground" to cower in fear since she "was a child of war" (97). The innocuous picnic becomes the catalyst that catapults her into the past, to her childhood in Laos. The moment becomes the entry portal to a past trauma. Cathy Caruth explains how victims recover repressed memories of traumatic events long after they have ended.

Traumatic experience...suggests a certain paradox that the most direct seeing of a violent event may occur as an absolute inability to see it; that immediacy, paradoxically, may take the form of belatedness. (Caruth, 1996: 91)

Nanda's adult picnic is one such 'belated seeing' of violence. The lingering and belated effects of trauma are clearly catalogued in this story since what strikes us about Nanda's childhood self in the midst of war is her mettle and indomitable spirit. One of the first impressions that emerges from Nanda's recounting of her childhood in Laos is the absolutely ubiquitous nature of war that surrounds people in many developing countries and ways in which even children get irrevocably embroiled in it. Nanda recalls:

In some ways my coming into this world was marked by a dramatic foreboding of the terrible horrors that my family would soon experience. At the very moment I was born, Laos was erupting into a terrible civil war. Gunfire cracked, bombs thundered, and bursting shells roared every second to welcome my birth. (97)

The strange, twisted parallels set up in the narrative between the fourth-of-July- fireworks and the bombs that killed thousands of people clearly registers the stark differences that demarcate the privileged lives of those in the developed world from that of the so-called 'Third world' nations. Nanda's stark recital paints the scene vividly:

From 1964 to 1973, Laos was the most bombed country in the world and my province of Savanaketh was the most bombed province in Laos. Villagers perished by the thousands from the bombing. Tons and tons of bombs changed the face of Laos into a cratered surface like the moon. (97)

The passage is a brutal reminder that wars between super-powers—here between USA and USSR—are rarely played out in their own backyards. It is the ‘remoter’, poorer countries of the world that get embroiled in the power struggles and suffer the devastations that follow. Ironically, despite the heavy American involvement, we cognize the fact that no child from America or indeed any developed country would have been placed in a position to make this observation:

All through my childhood, I lived about 100 kilometres away from the atrocity of the war. It escalated as American T-28s and B-52s unloaded bombs in Laos along the Ho Chi Minh trail. Although only the trail was targeted, along the way people, animals, villages and fields were not spared. (97)

The helpless entrapment of the disenfranchised peoples of the world is made visible by these words. This idea of the clear binaries that exist between mighty and impoverished nations is foregrounded by the story’s title, “Roar of a Distant War”, which is an echo of the eighteenth century, British nature poet, William Cowper’s lines from the poem “The World at a Distance” where he ruminates from his sitting room about the distant war and repeats just such sentiments as are implied in the story:

’Tis pleasant, through the loopholes of retreat,
To peep at such a world; to see the stir
Of the great Babel, and not feel the crowd;
To hear the roar she sends through all her gates,
At a safe distance, where the dying sound 5
Falls a soft murmur on the uninjured ear.
Thus sitting and surveying thus at ease
The globe and its concerns, I seem advanced
To some secure and more than mortal height,
That liberates and exempts me from them all. 10
It turns submitted to my view, turns round
With all its generations; I behold
The tumult, and am still. The sound of war
Has lost its terrors ere it reaches me;
Grieves, but alarms me not. I mourn the pride 15
And avarice that make man a wolf to man,
Hear the faint echo of those brazen throats,
By which he speaks the language of his heart,
And sigh, but never tremble at the sound.

Cowper’s reflections on the comfort of merely “sigh[ing], but never needing to tremble at the sound of war”—displaying his transcendent position above the tumult—is an unknown luxury to residents in these blighted nations. The story, like Cowper’s poem, underscores the untroubled locations of people in power. Cowper’s lines demonstrate this difference: “I behold the tumult, and am still. The sound of war [h]as lost its terrors ere it reaches me; grieves, but alarms me not”. Cowper’s “nature” is unsullied by war

unlike the landscapes of Laos. Here, some visible differences emerge between the positioning of the West and the rest. It makes us ponder about the historical reasons which have enabled a “harder mysticism” that Jeffers insists has been “bred west of Caucasus” to emerge (Jeffers, “Credo”). Indeed, the title of Ketavong’s story with its ironic insistence on the adjective ‘distant’ in relation to War, already points to the relative situatedness of the powerful and the powerless.

The effect of war on the landscape, on the flora and fauna, is also a recurring theme. Nanda recalls that “bombs rained down at a rate of twenty to three hundred loads per day” (97). Again, a few lines later, she recollects that

The unholy brightness of the night sky and the shimmering whiteness of the trees reminded me of the hell I had heard so many times being described in my grandmother’s stories. The raining fire, the heat, the shaking earth, the howling of the dogs, the mooing of the cows, *everyone and everything was in agony.* (97-8; emphasis added)

These lines seem to carry resonances from Buddha’s *Fire Sermon*. The Buddha’s *Ādittapariyāya Sutta* (which in Pali means “Fire Sermon Discourse”) is also referred to as the *Āditta Sutta*. Here, the Buddha preaches about achieving liberation from suffering through detachment from the five senses and the mind.

Bhikkus, all is burning. And what is the all that is burning?

The eye is burning, visible forms are burning, eye-consciousness is burning, eye-contact is burning ... Burning with what? Burning with the fire of greed, with the fire of hate, with the fire of delusion, with birth, ageing and death, with sorrow, with lamentation, with pain, grief and despair it is burning.

The burning attests to the agony suffered by all of humanity, which directly echoes Ketavong’s sentiments. This is not surprising since this central Buddhist tenet, which T. S. Eliot in a footnote to *The Waste Land* equates to the “Sermon on the Mount” for Christians, would be central to Laotian Buddhists. It is also noteworthy that all these three texts—*The Fire Sermon*, “The Roar of a Distant War” and *The Waste Land*—are apocalyptic in their tone and content and can be said to emanate from allied locations. All three are aware of the relentless turbulence of life and the very real possibility of the death of hope.

What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow /Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man,/ You cannot say, or guess, for you know only/A heap of broken images, where the sun beats,/And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief, /And the dry stone no sound of water. (Eliot 19-24)

The above words could well have been uttered by Nanda. In *The Fire Sermon*, the Buddha describes the sense-bases and their resultant mental phenomena or states as ‘burning’ with passion, aversion, delusion and suffering. Even here the tone is apocalyptic and speaks to a Buddhist soteriology. Buddha’s text is concerned with overcoming human passions in order to attain transcendence, a theme that is also relevant to Ketavong’s text. “The Roar of a Distant War” signals through its title the complex web of associations that exist between privilege, politics and war, but equally links the (auditory) senses to human passion and violence. It is pertinent to note that the passage also reinforces Martha F Lee’s claim that

apocalypse is at least peripherally concerned with the environment and that you cannot deal with one without encountering the other (ix). Ketavong's narrative emphasizes the close interconnectedness between not only human passion, violence and destruction, but also between the earth, humans and the environment. All of these images are collectively invoked through the several textual echoes. Nanda avers:

To my young mind... [t]he shaking earth and the booming sounds pierced my heart and soul....The coldness chilled my bones. I shivered, my soul left my body. But I still felt Mother Earth beneath the house shaking and rattling. (98)

The shivering is more than symbolic. The bombs, the young Nanda records, cause a climactic upheaval in the tropical country. It is no surprise therefore that it was only when the Cold War ended that, within the decade, climate change issues would be gradually acknowledged and addressed as part of the global political agenda, at first at the *World Conference on the Changing Atmosphere* in Toronto in 1988 and subsequently in various other world forums. The story thus underlines the socio-political dimensions of apocalyptic narratives. As Jonathan Coward observes,

[E]nvironmental literatures ... can be seen to have traditionally served the two primary functions of criticism: diagnostic, and remedial. The inclusion of an apocalyptic tone adds a third aspect, oriented to the future. Put simply, this teleological-critical function says implicitly or explicitly: Either the status quo must change, or humanity and nature will end. Second, in uncovering this desire or need to change, the implementation of the apocalyptic narrative in environmental literature is political. It is employed both to increase the saliency of environmental issues in the minds of the public and to encourage change on an individual or collective level. (2013: 5)

When one links Coward's expressed sentiments about apocalyptic narratives being "oriented to the future" to the thesis discussed earlier, one can make a case for Ketavong deliberately attempting to carve a link between a distinct historical moment in her past and her present. Coward argues that apocalyptic rhetoric has a counter-effect as well, making people more sceptical about the alarmist scenarios that are presented. In Feinberg and Willer's study (2011), it was observed that individuals who were informed of the just-world hypothesis², followed by exposure to dire messages of the severity of global warming, reported higher levels of climate change scepticism (Ibid. 36). These participants, it was found, were less likely to change their lifestyle to reduce their carbon footprint. This reveals that apocalyptic narratives may not have positive outcomes with the public.

Accounts such as Ketavong's can have a more powerful impact, since it is a story of personal fear and loss, the blighting and recovery of hope, and the unpredictability of life. Although it is a story with apocalyptic dimensions, it is also about resilience, especially of the women folk and is based on a specific historical moment in American (human) consciousness. As their village is bombed, Nanda listened to her mother "whispering to grandmother." She realises that "[t]hey were sitting next to each other planning our escape from hell on earth" (98). But even in the midst of the chaos, Grandma admonishes the seven-year old Nanda, "Remember to put a smile on your face, Nanda ... It will help us keep calm and ward off all evils" (100). Nanda's grandmother, a storehouse of traditional wisdom, would often tell her folk stories:

A princess can do anything and overcome any obstacles... [Grandmother] always began her stories with 'tell me what you learned from last night's story, Princess Nanda. She then listened to my answer and sniffed the air from my cheek, a Lao version of a kiss.

Then she gave the inevitable moral of every story. 'Remember, Princess Nanda, a princess will always overcome any obstacle.' (101)

Such moments that are culturally validating and shore up Nanda's self-confidence are revealed as vital to her growth and determination to survive. But reality cannot be wished away. By midmorning of a day, when Nanda, her mother, grandmother, her younger sister and two younger brothers had trudged a few kilometres outside their village, Nanda recalls witnessing a strange spectacle:

Airplanes were buzzing and giving birth to mushroom-like objects – scattering, dangling, and slowly descending, from the sky. Each night I saw more and more of the horrific balls of fire, falling out of the dark sky. (100)

As they struggle through the war, constantly on the run, with villages around them on fire, they are very aware of their father, who, fighting against the communists on the American side, was a wanted man. With the disbanding of the Royalists' army, he would have gone into hiding to save his life. Nanda's infant brother dies of an undiagnosed and untreated infection. The ailing grandmother wants to return to the village, and Nanda's younger sister, Salee, is assigned to lead her back. As Nanda bids them a farewell, she realises that she will probably never see them again. After days of struggle and gaining sanctuary from various friends in their houses, they finally hear from their father who instructs them to come to a secret meeting place at the bank of the Mekong River.

Through the month-long journey, Nanda realises her embedment in nature. The family live hidden for days in "a rat-hole" like rodents (101); at night she realises that her "eyes adjusted to the darkness like an animal's" (107). Also, when it comes to death, there is little that marks the humans, for "the mutilated and bloody dead bodies of humans and animals exposed on Mother Earth or half-buried" are both indistinguishable, because "the green leaves turned red instantly upon the scorching liquid from the exploded lifeless beings" (110). All these incidents bring home to her that war with all its technology, ironically, only reemphasises their inescapable connection to 'Mother Earth'.

The passage gains clarity if one references Heidegger's notion of 'dwelling'. Heidegger speaks of the fourfold primal order. In this order, the sky, earth, the divine and mortals unite in a primordial unit. According to Heidegger, it is acknowledgement of the fourfold oneness and our role as mortals within it that establishes 'dwelling' (1993: 346). One could argue that for Nanda, at some primeval level, a critical dissonance occurs because this fourfold unit has been disrupted and hence she is no longer a 'dweller'. However, even in her dissonance, Nanda can pause to enjoy the music made by the wind as it whispers through the long, graceful bamboo stems tied with colourful kites, reinforcing her embedment in her natural surroundings (107). Eventually, Nanda, her brother and mother are reunited with her father, while two secret canoes wait to paddle them away to safety in Thailand. But as they leave the shore, Nanda's uncle is shot down by communists hiding in the jungle nearby. At the end of the narrative, an adult Nanda, now living with her parents, her brother and her sister, Salee, safely restored to the family, is still haunted by the past, though now it seems a different world:

It seems so long ago that I lived in constant danger, in the midst of the crashing and booming catastrophic nightmare of bombs and bullets...the flashing brightness in the night sky, the executions.... (110)

The strange juxtaposing of the family's innate reverence for earth, their relationship to it and to the flora and fauna, which appears emotional and inclusive, contrasted to the stark images of the 'rain of fire that befell Mother Earth' also becomes a consciousness-raising exercise more effective than any future-based alarmist speculation can be. The overall message that is conveyed is powerful and points to humanity's deteriorating relationship with nature. It also highlights the differing relationship to violence between the powerful and the powerless.

I have argued that Ketavong's narrative, though articulated from within a discursive and historical formation that has shifted, and may be seen to belong more to the genre of historical fiction emerging from the post-World War II and Cold-War era nuclear narrative genre, is distinctly apocalyptic in tone and mood. It thus helps to rearticulate our perceived future in a way that reflects the present ecological predicament as simultaneously a concomitant and a defining historical moment.

Endnotes

1. For more information on Asian apocalyptic fanfiction, please see <https://www.asianfanfics.com/browse/tag/apocalyptic/O>
2. The just-world hypothesis is "[t]he idea that people need to believe one will get what one deserves so strongly that they will rationalize an inexplicable injustice by naming things the victim might have done to deserve it" (Grinnell n.p.).

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