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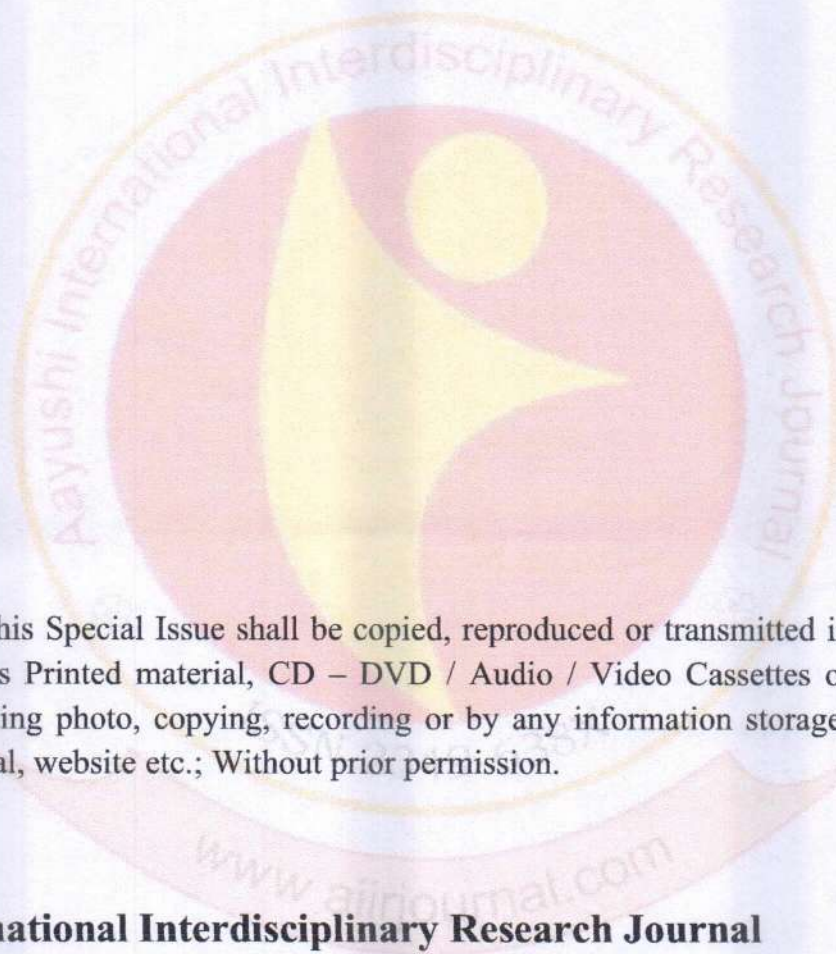
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Depiction of Water Scarcity And Its Aftermaths in The Novel *The Burning World* By J.G. Ballard

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Abstract

This paper examines how The Burning World (also published as The Drought) by J. G. Ballard portrays water scarcity—its causes, manifestations, and societal, psychological, and ecological consequences. It argues that Ballard uses the drought not just as a background crisis but as a mirror for human alienation, societal collapse, and ethical questions over responsibility, offering a prescient vision for environmental disaster. The paper considers how Ballard's depiction resonates with contemporary concerns about climate change, pollution, and water stress.

Key words : Apocalyptic, environmental degradation, disaster, distracted psyche

Introduction

An English novelist and short-story writer, essayist and satirist, he was recognized for his psychologically stimulating works of fiction that delve into the connections among human psychology, mass media, sexuality and technology. Some of his major works are *The Wind from Nowhere*, *The Drowned World*, *Empire of the Sun*, *Running Wild*, *Kingdom Come*, *The Day of Creation* and *Hello America* etc.

The Burning World (1964), expanded in 1965 as *The Drought*, imagines a global environmental catastrophe: industrial pollution in the oceans creates a thin film of saturated polymers that prevents evaporation, interrupting the precipitation cycle. Rivers shrink to trickles, lakes decline, the land becomes increasingly desertified, and populations migrate toward coastal areas where desalination plants are established, though insufficient.

Ballard's depiction of water scarcity serves three intertwined purposes: (1) to critique industrialization and human hubris, (2) to explore psychological transformation under environmental stress, and (3) to warn about the fragility of societal order and the moral consequences of our ecological negligence. The precipitating cause in the novel is human: over decades, vast quantities of industrial wastes including chemicals, atomic power-station waste, and other effluents are discharged into ocean basins. These form a mono-molecular film (a membrane) on the sea surface that is oxygen-permeable but prevents evaporation. Without evaporation, there is no cloud formation; without clouds, no rain. Southern lands, rivers, and lakes gradually dry. The mono-molecular film on the sea is scientifically described in the novel as follow

The mechanism of formation of these polymers remained obscure, but millions of tons of highly reactive industrial wastes—unwanted petroleum fractions, contaminated catalysts and solvents were still being vented in to the sea, where they mingled with the wastes of atomic power stations and sewage schemes. Out of this brew the sea had constructed a skin no thicker than few atoms, but sufficiently strong to devastate the lands it once irrigated (20)

While Ballard's mechanism is speculative, his framing gives it scientific plausibility in the context of mid-20th century chemical pollution fears. The film is thin ("no thicker than a few atoms") yet sufficient to "devastate the lands it once irrigated." Rivers shrink, lakes dry, soil cracks. Deserts expand. Fauna and flora suffer; dead fish and birds rot in exposed mud. The smell of stasis and decay pervades. People migrate toward coasts where desalination plants offer some hope. Fresh water becomes currency. Society fragments: wealthier groups try to hoard water; poorer populations suffer. Some stay behind, others leave, setting up camps or forming ephemeral communities under desperate conditions.

As conventional structures collapse, religious leaders or charlatans emerge, attributing the drought to punishment, sin, or divine retribution. The protagonist, Charles Ransom, becomes in some eyes a "bringer of death." Communities become divided, with mistrust of strangers. Characters become increasingly introspective, alienated from prior lives. Ballard often shows them as isolated, psychologically transformed

by the desert, the heat, the loss of water. Ransom, for example, oscillates between the desire to escape and a strange compulsion to remain and face the changed world. It is delineated in the following words

Ransome looked out at the deserted avenue. Most of the houses was empty, windows boarded and nailed up swimming pool emptied of their last reserves of water. Lines of abandoned cars were parked under the withering plane trees, and the road was littered with discarded cans and cartons. The bright flint like dust lay in drifts against the blistered fences. Refuse fires soldered unattended on the burnt-out lawns, their smoke wandering over the roofs. (16)

The novel frames the drought not as an act of God but as retribution in a naturalistic sense: nature's response to human pollution. There is a sense of guilt or at least responsibility though little possibility of effective remediation. Individuals struggle with choices: to help, to leave, to hoard, to sacrifice.

Ballard juxtaposes stillness and stasis with slow decay. The landscape becomes timeless in its dryness; people inhabit memories and ghosts of what life once was. There is also a recurring motif of things half-alive, half-dead: rivers reduced to white beds, lakes like salted sores. The present becomes dominated by absence as absence of rain, of green, of life. The novel underscores how human activity, especially industrial pollution, can disrupt fundamental planetary processes. Though Ballard uses a speculative mechanism, the warning is clear: interfering with nature can have cascading, irreversible effects. The crisis affects different strata differently: wealth allows for some buffer (pool water, desalination, mobility), while the marginalized suffer first and worst. Moral questions arise over equity, responsibility, and survival.

Desalination is offered as a partial remedy, but it is insufficient at scale. Technological solutions are slow, expensive, and often inadequate, especially when underlying damage is widespread. Because the novel was written in the 1960s, much of its scientific basis may seem speculative now—but Ballard was anticipating real contemporary anxieties: chemical pollution, acid rain, industrial waste, and droughts. The story warns against complacency regarding environmental degradation: it may seem remote or abstract, but ripples accumulate. Psychological depth: Ballard doesn't just show physical drought, but the internal drought in people. The speculative cause (polymer film) serves as metaphor: invisible pollution, gradual but cumulative, pervasive. The novel's resonance with later environmental science gives it enduring relevance.

Some critique that Ballard's characters are distant; the emotional catharsis is muted. The speculative scientific mechanism might strain plausibility for some readers (though this is typical of Ballard). The novel focuses more on experience than on solutions; little is offered in terms of remediation beyond human endurance. Water stress, droughts, desertification are now real and increasing due to climate change. In this regard Gopman in his book *James Graham Ballard's Shattered world* (1982) argues that

To Ballard, the psyche of a man who goes through the tragic changes in the age of an essentially new technology and essentially new environment is a serious sign of the present reality. (383)

Ballard's imaginary film over the ocean can be read metaphorically for pollution, plastic sheets, micro plastics, algae blooms, or atmospheric changes that reduce precipitation. The ethical issues of who suffers, who adapts, who is left behind, mirror real inequalities in climate change impacts. The psychological responses such as denial, superstition, migration, conflict are visible already in regions facing severe drought. The novel prompts reflection: is modern society prepared for systemic disruption of essential resources?

Conclusions

Thus, *The Burning World / The Drought* offers a haunting vision of what happens when water, which is a fundamental to life, is cut off. Ballard uses environmental catastrophe to explore deeper human concerns: meaning, alienation, moral responsibility, and the limits of our technological and social infrastructures. The aftermath of water scarcity is not only ecological and social collapse, but an inner drought that is a parched soul.

The novel remains powerful as a cautionary tale. Its speculative elements may not map exactly onto modern science, but its insights into human nature and societal vulnerability are increasingly relevant.

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