Jordan Journal of Modern Languages and Literatures Vol.18, No. 3, 2026, pp1247-1260

JJMLL

Echoes of Survival: Post-Traumatic Culture, Resilience and Renewal in the Post-Apocalyptic Novel A Beginning at the End by Mike Chen

Naghmeh Fazlzadeh *

English Department, Faculty of Literature and Humanities, Azarbaijan Shahid Madani University, Iran

Received on: 18-4-2025 **Accepted on: 9-12-2025**

Abstract

Observing the miseries of modern man in a post-pandemic world, this paper conducts an examination of the portrayal of post-traumatic culture in the post-apocalyptic novel *A Beginning at the End* (2020) by Mike Chen. The novel presents a world recovering from a devastating pandemic, focusing on the lives of characters who grapple with the aftermath and strive to rebuild their lives. Through a close analysis of the characters' journeys, this study highlights how they confront the psychological scars left by their experiences and cultural trauma. Drawing upon theories of trauma, resilience, and cultural adaptation, the analysis delves into the ways in which the novel explores the psychological and sociocultural impacts of trauma, and the strategies employed by characters to cope with and forge a new beginning. Ultimately, this analysis reveals how *A Beginning at the End* not only serves as a narrative of survival but also offers profound insights into the human condition in the face of collective hardship.

Keywords: Trauma Theory, PTSD, post-traumatic culture, post-apocalyptic fiction, resilience, hope.

1. Introduction

The earth is the ultimate shelter for its residents, providing them with their needs for survival. People living on the earth are rightful enough to fear the fragility of the so-called security fore brought with the advent of science. Historical accounts show how apocalyptical events have surprised the residents of the only livable (as far as we know) planet in the universe. The sudden emergence of Covid, for instance, was a real threat for the delicate security of the people all around the world. This was a reminder of apocalyptic movies modern man used to watch with the mixed feelings of fear and enthusiasm, curiosity to learn about what the unknown might look like. Wrapped up with such curiosity, the audience of apocalyptic movies found such a world far from themselves. However, Covid-19 pandemic warned about the proximity of such chaotic world and its aftermath for its occupants. Artistic expressions of different types, such as films, novels, poems, and music depict the ways disasters alter personal, social, cultural, and psychological identity among individuals.

Dystopia, a term closely used with apocalypse, was popular at the 20th century; two world wars, technological advancements and industrialization gave impetus to the rise of dystopian narratives. The

© 2026 JJMLL Publishers/Yarmouk University. All Rights Reserved,
* Doi: https://doi.org/ 10.47012/jjmll. 18.3.16
* Corresponding Author: **naghmeh.fazlzadeh@azaruniv.ac.ir**

world was becoming a frightening place to live in and imaginations were flying toward a complex and fragile future. Both dystopia and apocalypse rise from a single concept of catastrophe and this makes them intertwining. In contrast to utopia, which refers to an ideal place, dystopia is "an imagined place or state in which everything is unpleasant or bad" (Galley 2018, 9) and a wasteland remaining from an apocalypse. Apocalyptic genre usually reflects the features of dystopia and it is defined as "a massive catastrophic event leading to destruction and disaster upon the world" (Ferhat 2019, 18). It depicts the firsthand horror and misery at the moment when a catastrophe hits. The focus of present study will be on the other side of the coin; post-apocalypse. This is the point where the trauma theory can be injected into the post-apocalyptic genre because it is dealing with the aftermath; "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" (Berger 1999, 5). The thing that remains can be very similar to the aftermath of a traumatizing event; post-apocalypse is a restart where the traumatized victims of a universal catastrophe are resisting hard to regain order amidst chaos. They put in resilience and perseverance to overcome the belated symptoms of trauma brought upon them with an apocalypse. The post-apocalyptic genre functions like a lens through which one can explore human resilience, the fragility of order, and the psychological complexities of survival.

In the wake of catastrophic events, humanity's resilience and ability to rebuild often take center stage. Post-apocalyptic narratives have long captivated readers by illustrating the dreadful aftermath of global disasters and the subsequent struggles for survival. Mike Chen's gripping novel, *A Beginning at the End* (2020), offers a thought-provoking exploration of a post-traumatic culture, delving into the complexities of human nature, society, and personal growth in the face of overwhelming hardship. Set in a world ravaged by an apocalyptic event, *A Beginning at the End* takes readers on a journey through the shattered remnants of civilization, where the survivors of the catastrophe attempt to rebuild their lives and identities. Within this framework, Chen masterfully navigates the intricacies of post-traumatic culture, examining the profound psychological and sociological implications of such a cataclysmic event.

This paper, therefore, aims to delve into the manifold nature of post-traumatic culture presented in Chen's novel, shedding light on its impact on the characters' identities, relationships, and collective consciousness. By analyzing the characters' responses to trauma and the intricate dynamics they explore, we can gain a deeper understanding of the human condition and the transformative power of resilience amidst chaos.

To further the exploration of post-traumatic culture, it is crucial to examine the ways in which societal structures are reshaped in the aftermath of catastrophe. Chen's novel provides a nuanced portrayal of the struggles and adaptations necessary to establish new norms, as survivors grapple with the loss of familiar systems and confront extraordinary challenges. Additionally, the novel offers insight into the formation of new communities, the evolution of power dynamics, and the redefinition of cultural values within the post-apocalyptic landscape.

Moreover, this paper will explore the psychological implications of trauma on the individual level, as depicted through the development and transformation of the novel's central characters. By unraveling their emotional landscapes, motivations, and coping mechanisms, we can gain insight into the profound impact of trauma on personal identity, resilience, and the pursuit of meaning in a world forever altered. Through an in-depth analysis of *A Beginning at the End*, the present study aims to illuminate the intricate layers of post-traumatic culture, exploring the novel's portrayal of human nature and the complexities of rebuilding in the face of unimaginable devastation. By examining the characters' personal journeys and psychological resilience, one can gain valuable insights into the enduring spirit of humanity and its capacity to find hope and purpose even in the darkest of times.

The examination of individual responses to trauma reveals valuable insights into broader societal conditions, including the miseries of the real-life trauma victims and the evolving power of resilience and abreaction within chaos. The exploration of post-traumatic culture necessitates an examination of the ways in which societal structures are reshaped in the aftermath of catastrophe.

Closely related to science fiction genre, dystopian and post-apocalyptic fictions both reflect the fear and nourish the enthusiasm of the readers. In fact, writing about apocalypse is to bring forward what has long been pushed back and this is the meeting point of trauma theory and post-apocalyptic fiction where both are trying to find out about the clash between knowing and not knowing. Being exposed to apocalyptic events such as natural disasters and wars is a communal experience, therefore, the present paper choses the path of cultural and collective trauma rather than psychological trauma to trace the effects of scars left on the group of people living in society. Post-apocalyptic novel *A Beginning at the End* (2020) by Mike Chen is selected to achieve such goal. By examining the characters' personal journeys, societal transformations, and psychological resilience, we can gain valuable insights into the enduring spirit of humanity and its capacity to find hope and purpose even in the darkest of times.

Set in future where an unknown virus has caused extensive miseries, *A Beginning at the End*, tells the story of seemingly unacquainted three characters who struggle to free themselves from the trauma of an apocalypse. Rob, Moira and Krista are the survivors of a pandemic who grapple with their personal traumas in a world that has drastically changed due to the catastrophe. Rob, a desperate father who lost his wife during the quarantine, is struggling hard to keep the custody of her daughter Sunny; Moira, a teenage celebrity at normal time, is benefitting from the chaos of pandemic to hide her real identity and bury her traumas; and Krista, a wedding organizer with lots of familial traumas is trying to find hope and meaning in the post-apocalyptic culture. The tension rises when the three happen to meet each other and their life narratives intertwine with communal resilience to find Sunny at the end of the novel.

Mike Chen's narrative invites the readers to walk through the parallel life stories of three seemingly unrelated characters and their later coincidence at some point throughout the story. Writing about a post-apocalypse is "a study of what disappears and what remains and of how the remainder has been transformed" (Berger 1999, 7). The sudden switch of point of view in this postmodern novel portrays the chaos and instability of the post-apocalyptic world. The readers are presented with a journey of traumatized individuals through the devastated remains of survival, where the remnants of psyche

challenge to rebuild its sanity amidst the post-apocalyptic chaos. Mike Chen aptly explores the complexities of post-traumatic culture, examining the profound psychological and sociological implications of such a cataclysmic event. Rob, Krista, and Moira are the victims of a post-traumatic culture trapped in the post-apocalyptic remnant of their physical and mental lives. The novel portrays the journey of trauma and resilience as the characters go through the chapters of their lives parallel to the chapters of the novel; they start as strangers distinctively hit by a communal apocalypse, move ahead as they become partners to abreact their personal traumas, when they misunderstand each other's pains they become enemies but eventually they get to realize that their personal traumas are caused by collective traumas and they need to be friends to resist against the adversities of live. At the end of the novel, they even become a family because as stated at the end of the novel "relations are people with the same blood. But family, that's different. Family is about who gives you hope, who gets involved" (Chen 2020, 468).

2. Trauma and PTSD in Post-Apocalyptic culture

In his ground-breaking book, *Post-traumatic Culture: Injury and Interpretation in the Nineties*, Kirby Farrell illustrates trauma as a cultural phenomenon. For him, even experiencing a personal traumatic event will shape and reshape the collective social landscape. Depicting the site of a plane crash in his book, Farrell introduces his concept with the plot of a movie in which a lawyer, witnessing the aftermath of catastrophe, cannot get it out of his head although he has not experienced the disaster personally. Farrell goes ahead by positing that "The screenplay gives the crash survivors clinical symptoms of trauma, but the entire culture is figuratively afflicted" (1998, 8). He even traces the signs of such cultural trauma during Victorian era and the late nineteenth century. Rob Donelly, the male protagonist of Chen's novel, witnessed the death of his wife, Elena during the quarantine and is deeply affected by the aftermath of this apocalypse. The other two main characters of the novel, Moira and Krista, though not personally affected, are struggling with the effects of such cataclysmic event. The whole community is affected; this scene depicts the concept of cultural trauma that Farrell discusses in his book. Thus, post-apocalyptic fiction depicts the aftermath of a disaster in a post-traumatic culture. Characters carry the symptoms of PTSD throughout the novel and they try to heal the trauma by trying out different ways because there is no way out in the "traffic jam of bodies" (Chen 2020, 27) blocked in the chaos of post apocalypse. Six years passes and the characters in the novel suffer from what is called PASD: "Commission believes that the largest risk to stability in government-supported metropolitan zones is so-called "Post-Apocalyptic Stress Disorder" (PASD) and the way it destabilizes families, the building block of society" (Chen 2020, 32). The disorder is similar to PTSD which is defined as "a collection of chronic physiological and psychological symptoms that occur in response to the firsthand experience, or direct secondary witnessing, of an unexpected event that threatens the integrity or existence of the body, and elicits extreme terror and helplessness" (American Psychiatric Association 1994, 424). The main difference falls in the fact that that here the victim not only is a clinical case but also a member of a traumatic culture which has made trauma a dangerous contagious disease.

Calling on the repetitive nature of traumatic hauntings Cathy Caruth argues that "the experience of a trauma repeats itself, exactly and unremittingly, through the unknowing acts of the survivor and against his very will" (1996, 2). Trauma does not reside in the past; instead, it continually reemerges in the present and this compelling repetition highlights the immense dominance of trauma on one's psyche. This led trauma scholars to urge on the importance of the process of bearing witness and talking cure for healing the trauma. They believe that the victim has to relive and articulate the unspeakable experience of trauma in order to relieve their psychic injuries. The brain's inability to understand the shock of an unknown traumatic event pushes the experience to be presented in form of nightmares and flashbacks. That's why the traditional trauma theories are based on abreacted model "this Freudian concept of trauma and memory emphasizes the necessity to recreate or abreact through narrative recall of the experience" (Balaev 2008, 150). For Balaev abreacted model underlies the need for recalling the traumatic experience as a means to confront and process them. Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub are also among those trauma scholars who elaborate upon the need of testimony and witness and the significance of the fact that there must be a person who listens to the narrative of trauma because "if one talks about trauma without being truly heard or listened to, the talking might itself be lived as a return of trauma" (Felman and Laub 1992, 67). The main character of the novel Rob is traumatized with an apocalypse, lost his wife and his trauma is pictured as "His home, his old life was gone. His parents and brothers, killed by MGS. Their friends, their community, scattered and ravaged. And now Elena gone too. Sunny was all he had left" (Chen 2020, 162). He wanted to articulate his pain into words but whenever he wanted to talk, he was speechless, trapped in a cycle of silence which echoes inescapable presence of trauma. Rob was at the risk of losing the custody of Sunny because the Family Stability Board was suspicious of Sunny's misbehavior at school. All these forced him to find a way out of the trouble by trying to find a date and even by joining a daily support group. This attests the inevitable need to talk about the unspeakable catastrophe a person has gone through; "two weeks of going to daily support groups together, two weeks of peeling back the layers of each other's defenses to arrive at an honesty that no longer seemed to exist after five billion people died" (Chen 2020, 222). This shared suffering is vital, allowing him to face not just his own pains and fears but also with pains of a community of similar sufferers. However, the unreliability of a traumatized narrative required another level of therapeutic efforts that is a point that the following discussion will address.

The talking cure method of alleviating the symptoms of trauma might carry the risk for the listener of that trauma narrative. Drawing upon Caruth's claim that trauma is contagious, Michelle Balaev assets that "while the experience is isolated in the brain, it still carries the potential to infect another pure and integrated subject through the act of narration, or based upon a shared ancestry or ethnic origin". Therefore, the three main characters in the novel are all threatened by trauma because all are exposed to the act of narration or are directly affected by the pandemic six years ahead of the course of the novel. In fact, another fork in the road of trauma and post-apocalyptic genre is that "post-apocalyptic discourses try to say what *cannot* be said … and what *must* not be said" (Berger 1999, 14). Dealing with the concepts that are considered taboo, post-apocalyptic narrative looks eerily like trauma narrative in which the pain

the victim has gone through becomes terribly unspeakable, not because it cannot be articulated but because it is not expected by the society to be put in words; "What is withheld from the reader regarding traumatic experience is conditioned by social standards and narrative conventions available to the writer at the time of composition, which suggests other reasons for the silence or lack of vivid description of the exact experience than those based on an abreactive model of trauma that claim it is the "speechless horror"" (Balaev 2008, 157).

This links the discussion to the concept of collective trauma which is the response to a catastrophic event by the entire society. The notion of collective trauma emerges as a critical theme in the aftermath of crisis, representing the responses of entire society to this shared traumatizing event. In addition to the psychological trauma experienced by individuals, an apocalypse also generates collective traumas that impact a community. However, it doesn't simply mean that the reaction is given because the entire society experienced the calamity but it suggests that "the tragedy is represented in the collective memory of the group, and like all forms of memory it comprises not only a reproduction of the events, but also an ongoing reconstruction of the trauma in an attempt to make sense of it" (Hirschberger 2018, 1). This type of transhistorical trauma "indicates that a massive trauma experienced by a group in the historical past can be experienced by an individual living centuries later who shares a similar attribute of the historical group, such as sharing the same race, religion, nationality, or gender due to the timeless, repetitious, and infectious characteristics of traumatic experience and memory" (Balaev 2008, 152). Trauma narrative can go way beyond this and affect the readers and listeners as well. The world of the novel is polluted by a virus called MGS but Rob nicely calls it a "multi-generational syndrome" (Chen 2020, 195) reminding the reader of the contagious nature of trauma. This destructive virus has affected the sense of community among human race and created a unprecedented bond between the characters of Chen's world. As Kai Erikson aptly defines collective trauma as "a blow to the basic tissues of social life that damages the bonds attaching people together and impairs the prevailing sense of communality. The collective trauma works its way slowly and even insidiously into the awareness of those who suffer from it" (1976, 154). Rob admits his fears and coming back from The Weekly Survivors Anonymous Group in church tells Moira that "Someone told me the other day that it's like we've paused as a society" (Chen 2020, 151). This depicts the dominant sense of dislocation and interruption within their world; their shared experiences have changed the very meaning of their being.

Referring back to the individual experiences of trauma, some scholars believe that trauma is in fact a psychological representation of apocalypse and both events are confusions between knowing and not knowing, between before and after because "in both cases, the event itself is so overwhelming as to be fundamentally unreadable; it can only be understood through the portents and symptoms that proceed and follow it" (Berger 1999, 21). Therefore, one might conclude that the three main characters of the novel are personally and collectively traumatized. Starting with Rob, the reader realized multiple cases of his trauma in post-apocalyptic era of his life. In a post-apocalyptic era, individuals are traumatized under the pile-up of stressful and tragic events, however, in such a situation the culture is also at risk because "in trauma, terror overwhelms not just the self, but the ground of the self, which is to say our trust in the

world. In this way trauma is an injury not just to the central nervous system or to the psyche, but also to the culture which sustains body and soul" (Farrell 1998, 6). In the novel, the government encourages marriage and family life as a way to rescue individuals and consequently their culture from perishing under the impact of the traumatic pandemic. Family Stability board, above its all intentions, is implicitly leading Rob to find a date and by doing this it cuts the progress of traumatic thoughts rescuing the whole society from detrimental aftermath of catastrophe. Trauma narrative tries to "reshape cultural memory through personal contexts, adopting testimonial traits to prevent and bear witness against such repetitive horrors" (Vickroy 2002, 5). After his first failed attempt to date, and his first failed attempt to put his miseries in words, Rob contemplates that "Maybe he was ready to take a step back into the world. But fate—or everyone else in the world—didn't seem quite ready yet" (Chen 2020, 215). Both the post-pandemic world and his resented psyche prevented him from stepping back into the testimonial process of his healing.

3. Cultural Adaptation and Survival amid chaos

The novel starts with a sudden fall of elevator, a symbol for the fall of order, but fortunately it comes to a halt, which symbolizes the delicate self-organizing system at the edge of chaos. Rob and Krista are caught in the elevator trying to survive. The very beginning of the novel seems to lead us through a narrative of survival on a bigger scale; Rob knows that after the pandemic "this world isn't easy. But we keep trying… I try everyday" (Chen 2020, 91). This is very noteworthy because in fact a post-apocalyptic narrative is "a study of what disappears and what remains, and ... how the remainder has been transformed" (Berger 1999, 7)

To further contextualize these themes, James Berger in *After The End: Representations of Post-apocalypse* (1999), shows how a minority group of survivors, like the four major characters of the novel, are left bewildered and trying hard to put the pieces together; such fiction, Berger believes is the account of a narrative where "the ending, paradoxically, both does and does not take place" (1999, XII). As stated in the introduction section, for Berger the most significant is post-apocalypse because he wants to deal with the aftermath; he asserts that "something is left over, and the world after the world, *post-apocalypse*, is usually the true object of the apocalyptic author's concern. The end itself, the moment of cataclysm, is only part of the point of apocalyptic writing" (1999, 6). The moment of cataclysm here is the historical moment of trauma which is of less significance compared to the aftershock of traumatic symptoms.

The survivors of Chen's post-apocalypse are very similar to the victims of trauma since "trauma is the psychoanalytic form of apocalypse, its temporal inversion. Trauma produces symptoms in its wake, after the event, and we reconstruct trauma by interpreting its symptoms, reading back in time. Apocalypse, on the other hand, is preceded by signs and portents whose interpretation defines the event in the future" (Berger 1999, 20). Three main characters in this novel try hard to adapt to the new cultural landscape and they look for ways in which they can redefine norms, values, and social structures. They are trapped in a chaotic, unimaginable post disaster world but they try to understand this incomprehensible situation by establishing order in their lives. Rob looks for order in a family which lost

its center, Krista is trying hard to find long-lost stability in her adulthood by having a successful job, and Moira is fleeing from her pre-apocalypse jet set life style.

Throughout the post-pandemic world, the characters encounter disturbing change from their previous lives; Moira enters a café and "look[s] around the small café, at the empty tables around them, at the baristas who brewed drinks and served pastries from behind silicone breathing masks" (Chen 2020, 32). Rob finds himself in a unique period of history when he enters Sunny's school,

> Half of the room contained elementary school standards—photos of students and historical iconography—but sprinkled throughout stood various cartoonish safety protocols that applied only to the world that existed today. Rob had seen it all before, but there was still something disquieting about an anthropomorphized elephant giving tips on washing hands and putting on gas masks. (2020, 79)

As illustrated above, the survivors sharing traumatic pasts, strive hard to get rid of these disturbing psychological and cultural remnants of catastrophe. This makes them feel an urge to come together and form a community in order to adapt and rebuild. Here, Mike Chen explores the importance of community and the idea that people need each other in order to thrive. Rob asks Krista to "get a few more socially normal things" in order to both satisfy the Family Stability Board and to sooth his secret psychological wounds (2020, 144).

The novel also depicts how a post-apocalyptic world puts a generation into despair and distress. The collective trauma experienced due to a disaster affects all the characters leading them to struggle hard to detach themselves from the memories. According to Jeffrey C. Alexander "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" (2012, 6). In the context of the novel, the trauma of the apocalypse affects not only the characters' identity but also reshapes the community's collective consciousness, leaving everyone to struggle with a new reality defined by loss and uncertainty. This creates a feeling of sympathy and empathy among the members of society. When Krista and Moira learn about Rob's problems, they are united to solve the problem because all have been struggling in a culture of trauma, even Moira mentions at some part that "I think we're all family these days" (Chen 2020, 335). Trauma, with its transformative power forges deep ties similar to that of a family. In regard to the depiction of collective trauma in post-apocalyptic fiction, it can be argued that "any destructive event causing the end of the world, or rather civilization, affects the sense of community between all members of the human race, which eventually influences the reestablishment of a new civilization" (Galley 2018, 46). In *A Beginning at the End*, this idea is illustrated as the characters navigate their attempt to rebuild not only their individual lives but also the fragmented remains of their citizens. This shared sense of trauma highlights the necessity of creating a community in the wake of a catastrophe. Supportive bonds can lead toward healing and new sense of identity.

The interplay of personal and collective trauma reveal that Rob, Moira and Krista are struggling to heal their individual and collective traumas by reconstructing their identities upon the debris of a

traumatized psyche. They underline the significance of belonging, responsibility and community in healing their traumas. In his "Toward a Theory of Cultural Trauma", Jeffery C. Alexander elaborates on the individual exigencies in a culture of trauma. He argues that in order to cope with the symptoms of cultural trauma, individuals have to reestablish a sort of collective memory. They are willing to preserve things from the time before the calamity; Alexander furthers that "'lessons' of the trauma become objectified in monuments, museums, and collections of historical artefacts" (2004, 22). Mike Chen's narrative attests this by referring to a photo exhibit that Sunny and Krista visits; the exhibit is called *How We Remember: Life in Quarantine*. As Sunny and Krista progress through the images starting from normal days till the catastrophic days, they arrive to the last devastating image that shows "a toddler with a mop of black hair sat on her father's shoulders as he was shoved out, his hand reaching to a woman falling to the ground" (Chen 2020, 181). This monumentalized moment of crisis reminded Krista of Rob's haplessness and thus generated more willingness to help him out. It evokes memories told by Rob and his sufferings in Krista and inspires her to take action, illustrating how some events can bridge personal and collective trauma, motivating individuals to help one another in times of need. In another section of the novel Rob goes back to his normal days memories by looking for the remnants of his happy life with Elena amidst the ruins of his looted house. Across the Bay Area, on their way to City Hall, Rob and Moira walked through the reconstruction site where they see a young looter putting a house in fire. This reminds Rob of his home: "My home was just like this. Burned up by looters …They used my photo albums as kindling. They trashed our belongings. Our lives. Our home, gutted and destroyed" (Chen 2020, 221). Amidst this devastation, the only things that remain and triggers his normalcy memories, are some old pictures and the wedding album. This recollection serves not only to illustrate his sense of loss but also underlies how traumatic past can erode the sense of self and identity. It is in the act of recollection and remembering that Rob builds a connection with past, letting him a new path toward future and healing. In this regard Tanja Galley concludes that "Similar to individual psychological trauma, collectives can suffer from PTSD and its symptoms, which is why recounting and understanding the collective's past helps affected communities and individuals to work through their traumas" (2018, 48).

4. Resilience and Hope

In analyzing the components of the novel, one can categorize it into three distinct sections: trauma, cultural adaptation and resilience the last section will well depict individual and communal resilience faced to an apocalypse. One has to find hope in the most desperate situation, even in an apocalyptic one: "Apocalyptic narratives have always offered up the hope of an absolute truth—the cleansing of the world from evil and corruption, the separation of the righteous from the damned, and of right from wrong" (Heffernan 2013, 98). Resilience is in fact a sort of struggle to regain the missed mental health among the victims of trauma; it is defined as "the process of psychological growth where one adapts to difficult life circumstances and adopts a healthy living" (qtd in Dhungana et al. 2021, 1). Rather than an outcome, resilience is considered more as a process in which the victim is trying to cope with the new norms in the post-apocalyptic culture. The victims of trauma are usually bewildered in the clash of knowing and not

knowing; the knowledge of the historical traumatizing event and the confusion over its recurrence. So, some look for methods to overcome this confusion; adaptation and resilience are among these methods. Whether beneficial or not, resilience is an evolving process. Every character in Chen's novel manifests a different adjustment to the catastrophic exposure and all are trying hard to cope with the situation. The ending of the novel proves the positive outcome of resilience in the novel since "resilience… emphasises the strengths that the people have, rather than their vulnerability, through exploring the coping strategies that they exhibit" [*Sic*] (Mlambo and Pasi 2010, 39).

In the paper "Chronicles of Psychological Resilience: A Study of Geraldine Brooks's Year of Wonders: A Novel of the Plague and Mohamed Diab Ghazzawi's Love in the Time of Corona", Asmaa Gamal Salem Awad studies resilience at the time of crisis and she maintains that in Brooks's narrative, resilience is linked to the main character, Anna, and her inner strengths like determination and bravery. This is exactly the same feature the reader can notice in Chen's protagonist. As mentioned before, Rob admits his fear to Moira in the gathering for survivors "Everyone is talking about fear. Even in this meeting. It's all fear but why? Why hide behind that?" (Chen 150). However, his blatant personality and his devotion to Sunny keeps him resisting against this destructive fear. Equally important for resilience is the presence of support from others during tough times. Awad furthers this by showing the support Brook's protagonist received during hard times "Without the help and care of Elinor during plague time, Anna would have never been able to adapt positively, and without Ahmed Bey's assistance and open-mindedness, she would not have had the chance to mature and develop" (2025, 599). Rob receives same support from Moira and Krista. The point here is that while receiving such support, Rob himself supports the others to alleviate their pains. Though Chen's characters are giving round-the-clock mental struggle throughout the novel, their communal resilience is very evident in the last chapters of the novel, when they get together to find Sunny. From the moment they set on their quest to find Sunny with Moira's Jeep, they are confronted with problems but they never give up. Rob, Moira and Krista all confess that they want to rebuild what was lost. Rob joins dating programs, Moira wants to rebuild her life by having a fake identity and a fake marriage and Krista wants to forget all her childhood traumas by looking "Only forward. Never back" (Chen 2020, 443). Their collective trauma of post-pandemic world, taught them a collective resilience which was also a soothing for their individual traumas; "Bathed in fluorescent loading dock lamps … the world seemed to have changed. They were still on a mission and there was still an outbreak, but maybe it was finally okay for two people like Rob and Moira to stop running from the past and look toward the future together" (Chen 2020, 424). This moment captures the nature of their collective resilience; it acknowledges that their shared resistance strengthens them to face their past traumas, enunciating of the potential for a better future. At the beginning, they have personal resilience with no result but later they resist all together and win because as Kirby Farrell puts "A particular disaster may immediately cripple some survivors, but most will begin repairing their lives, often with a renewed sense of solidarity" (1998, 9). This sense of solidarity strengthens them when they depart for finding Sunny. Rob's fruitless effort to find a date in the paradoxically called Love Solution Daters is an example of a failed individual effort of gaining control over the post-apocalyptic chaos. Rob shows his

disappointment in the chaotic atmosphere of the center as he retreats to a quiet corner of the bar and looks at "men and women [who] stood in various frozen poses, looking everywhere except at one another" (Chen 2020, 186). Emotional disconnection is felt among the individuals after an apocalypse but this can be surpassed with solidarity and friendship, like the one established between Rob, Moira and Krista.

The backdrop of the characters' collective endeavor makes the reader justify Rob's search for the lost Sunny as a normal reaction and resilience of a father losing his child. However, Moira and Krista's exceptional sacrifice is the exact demonstration of how collective trauma ends up in individual resilience. First, Moira lives her fiancé in the city hall and then Krista turns a blind eye to 18000 hundred dollars cash, the "safety net" (Chen 2020, 414) she saved to restart her live and keep her independence. Both are huge acts of scarify on the verge of devastation. On their way to find Sunny they face multiple obstacles from petrol to the riot but in all the three victims show stony resilience toward the halts. The hospital they wanted to break in was fenced around but a traumatized individual's resilience could easily break this through "a long chain-link fence around, all topped with barbed wire- basically security for a hospital in a post-pandemic world, one that might slow an angry mob but nothing that could truly keep out individuals who really wanted to break in" (Chen 2020, 421). Their resilience was strong enough to challenge the physical barriers in their search for hope and healing.

5. Conclusion

Mike Chen's compelling *A Beginning at the End* serves as a touching exploration of how individuals and communities confront and navigate the aftermath of trauma in a post-apocalyptic landscape. Mike Chen masterfully navigates the interplay between personal and collective healing, highlighting the adaptive strategies that characters employ to embrace their traumas, reclaim their identities and rebuild their lives. Through their journeys, the novel highlights the importance of resilience, connection, and cultural memory as essential components in the face of an apocalypse.

This analysis demonstrates that post-traumatic culture extends beyond individual trauma; it becomes a collective phenomenon where the aftermath of apocalypse, reshapes identities and communal bonds. Drawing on trauma theory, it is evident that the protagonists embody different responses to their shared experience of catastrophe, highlighting the necessity to navigate through trauma by both despair and renewal. The psychological and sociological implications embedded in their struggles reveal that healing is not merely an individual journey but a communal process, where resilience emerges as a shared strength.

Moreover, as the characters confront their traumatic pasts and look for meaning and healing amidst chaos, they exemplify the notion that resilience is an evolving journey. This journey gets more productive by their connections with one another, fostering a sense of solidarity that ultimately leads hem toward resilience and collective healing. Chen's novel thus acts like a commentary on the human capacity for renewal, asserting that even when the world seems permanently transformed by a catastrophe, the spirit to resist, rebuild, heal and find purpose still remains. In synthesizing these theoretical findings, this paper

underscores the crucial interplay between trauma, cultural adaptation, and communal resilience, emphasizing the enduring capacity of humanity to foster hope and connection after devastation.

At the end of this research, it has to be mentioned that in this novel ~~a~~ catastrophe seems to be a blessing in disguise for some characters. In the novel we learn about two individuals fed up with their status quo and pandemic was a way to release them form such situation. Moira was a teenage celebrity who went incognito for the rest of her life and was in "an admirable effort in covering up who you were" (Chen 2020, 94). Krista, an adult suffering from childhood trauma acclaimed herself dead and restarted a life on her own without any familial bonds to her mother and her famous Uncle Dean, "a future free from the bloodlines that tide her to a life and family she'd never asked for" (Chen 2020, 451). And finally, a group of orphaned kids who found the chance to be adopted during post-pandemic era because the government was encouraging marriage and family life in order to regain the social stability; "Can't make a baby? Adopt one or three… Sorry, that's a bad joke. I shouldn't make fun of orphan epidemic… It's just nice to be accepted. It took only an apocalypse" (Chen 2020, 97). In order to encourage trauma victims to resist, one can point to the dim light of hope like the ones mentioned above amidst the most desperate catastrophes. This might help foster patience with oneself and others in face of trauma.

Although Rob, Moira and Krista were victims of different traumatizing events the traumatic culture in which they get to know each other created a bond between them unaffected by the fear of the contingency of the trauma. Through a textual analysis of *A Beginning at the End* this paper contributes to the understanding of post-traumatic culture in post-apocalyptic novels. It highlights the ways in which literature can illuminate the psychological and sociocultural dimensions of trauma and its aftermath, offering insights into the human condition and capacity to rebuild and create new beginnings.

The novel ends with a conclusion similar to that of this study. Catastrophes leave millions with personal and collective traumas, yet they enable the dynamics of communal bonding, resilience and hope. "Memories are meant to fade. They're built with an expiration date" (Chen 2020, 468); though memories of calamities hurt the victims, they are part of individuals one must never hide but find ways to cope with. The end of catastrophe is announced by these lines in the novel: "… it is time to understand that some things cannot be undone. In this situation, there is no reset. But we as a people can be smarter, better, and more focused on keeping it at bay … God bless every survivor of the MGS virus. We will persevere" (Chen 2020, 464). Ultimately, this narrative not only sheds light on the psychological impacts of a trauma in a post-apocalyptic world but also affirms the resilient human psyche and the possibility of forging new beginnings from the remnants of despair.

Echoes of Survival: Post-Traumatic Culture, Resilience and Renewal in the Post-Apocalyptic Novel A Beginning at the End by Mike Chen

اصداء البقاء: الثقافة ما بعد الصدمة، والمرونة، والتجدد في رواية ما بعد الكارثة بداية في االنهاية لمايك تشين

نغمه فضل زاده
قسم اللغة الإنجليزية، كلية الآداب والعلوم الإنسانية، جامعة أذربيجان الشهيد مدني، إيران

الملخص

من خلال مراقبة بؤس الإنسان المعاصر في عالم ما بعد الجائحة، يجري هذا البحث دراسةً تحليلية لتصوير الثقافة ما بعد الصدمة في رواية ما بعد الكارثة بداية في النهاية 2020 لمايك تشين. تصور الرواية عالما يتعافى من جائحة مدمّرة، مع التركيز على حياة شخصيات تحاول التغلب على آثار هذه التجربة واعادة بناء وجودها. ومن خلال تحليل معمّق لمسارات الشحصيات، يسلط هذا البحث الضوء على كيفية مواجهتهم للندوب النفسية والصدمات الثقافية الناتجة عن هذه المحنة. وبالاعتماد على نظريات الصدمة، والمرونة، والتكيف الثقافي، تستكشف الدراسة التأثيرات التفسية والاجتماعية–الثقافية لهذه الصدمة، الاستراتيجيات التي توظفها الشخصيات للتكيف والبدء من جديد. في نهاية المطاف، يكشف هذا التحايل ان رواية بداية في النهاية لا تكتفي بسرد حكاية عن البقاء، بل تقدّم أيضًا رؤى عميقة حول الحالة الإنسانية في مواجهة المحن الجماعية

الكلمات المفتاحية: التأثير البيئي-النقد البيئي –غير الإنسان- فهرس.

References

Alexander, Jeffrey C. 2012. *Trauma: A social theory*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Alexander, Jeffrey C. 2004. Toward a theory of cultural rauma. Eds.n*Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*. 1-30. Berkley: University of California Press.

American Psychiatric Association. 1994. *Diagnostic statistical manual of mental disorders*. 4th ed. Arlington: American Psychiatric Publishing.

Awad, Asmaa Gamal Salem. 2025.Chronicles of Psychological Resilience: A Study of Geraldine Brooks's Year of

Wonders: A Novel of the Plague and Mohamed Diab Ghazzawi's Love in the Time of Corona. JJMLL 17 (2): 581- 605.

Balaev, Michelle. 2008. "Trends in Literary Trauma Theory". *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal* 41(2):149-166.

Berger, James. 1999. *After The End: Representations of Post-apocalypse*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Caruth, Cathy. 1996. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Chen, Mike. 2020. *A Beginning at the End*. Mira. Epub

Dhungana, Saraswati et al. 2022. "Resilience and its association with post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety, and depression symptoms in the aftermath of trauma: A cross-sectional study from Nepal". *SSM-Mental Health* 2 (1): 1-8.

Erikson, Kai. 1976. *Everything in its Path: Destruction of Buffalo Creek*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Farrell, Kirby. 1998. *Post-traumatic Culture: Injury and Interpretation in the Nineties*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Felman, Shoshana, and Dori Laub. 1992. *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*. New York: Routledge.

Ferhat, H. 2019. Dystopia in Contemporary Post-Apocalyptic Films. MA Thesis, İhsan Doğramacı Bilkent University

Galley, T. 2018. "When Apocalypse Strikes: Post-Apocalyptic Fiction as Trauma Narrative". MA Thesis. University of Salzburg.

Heffernan, Teresa. 2013. "On Apocalypse, Monsters and Mourning". *Frame* 26 (1): 93-107.

Hirschberger, Gilad. 2018. "Collective Trauma and the Social Construction of Meaning." *Frontiers in Psychology* 9 (1): 1-14.

Mlambo, Nelson & Juliet Pasi. 2010. "Review of the *Undisciplined heart* by Jane Katjavivi". *Nawa Journal of Communication* 4 (1):156-158.

Vickroy, Laura. 2002. *Trauma and Survival in Contemporary Fiction*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press.