

## “Survival is insufficient”: post-apocalyptic vision in Mandel’s pandemic novel Station Eleven

### “Hayatta kalmak yetmez”: Mandel’in pandemik romanı *Station Eleven*’da kıyamet sonrası bakış açısı

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#### Abstract

Writers on pandemic literature have concurred that “the end” has displayed the periods of significant changes in many aspects of human lives and that they have replaced new fashions of existence of the relevant ones. Such a mentality of thoughts has led to the reconstruction of societies after the apocalypse. Hence, some literary works focus on the optimistic or utopian side of the rebuilding instead of dystopian perspectives. In line with this perspective, *Station Eleven* (2014), by Emily St. John Mandel, takes readers into a new form of twist that puts forth catastrophe and its collapse with multiple aspects that rely on the reconstruction of the societies with high amount of hope after a 20 year of break. The novel displays what can happen to the people in post-apocalypse and the type of destruction in societies. So, this study tries to prove how *Station Eleven* handles the twist with the descriptions of the flu. It also gets into the examination of hope and utopia in a pandemic novel.

**Keywords:** Post-apocalyptic, pandemic fiction, Station Eleven, utopia.

#### Özet

Pandemi edebiyatı yazarları “sonun” insan yaşamının birçok alanında önemli deęişim dönemleri gösterdiği ve ilgili olanların yeni varoluş biçimlerinin yerini aldığı konusunda hemfikirdir. Böyle bir düşünce, kıyamet sonrası toplumların yeniden inşasına yol açmıştır. Bu nedenle, bazı edebi eserler, distopik bakış açıları yerine toplumun yeniden inşasının iyimser veya ütöfik tarafına odaklanır. Bu bakış açısına uygun olarak Emily St. John Mandel’in *Station Eleven* (2014) romanı, okuyucuları, 20 yıllık bir aradan sonra yüksek umutlu toplumların yeniden inşasına dayanan, birçok yönü ile felaketi ve çöküşünü ortaya koyan yeni bir deęişim biçimine götürüyor. Roman, kıyamet sonrası insanların başına neler gelebileceğini ve toplumdaki yıkımın türünü gözler önüne seriyor. Bu nedenle, bu çalışma, *Station Eleven* salgın hastalık döneminde deęişimi nasıl ele aldığını kanıtlamaya çalışıyor. Aynı zamanda, bir salgın hastalık romanında umut ve ütopya incelemesine de giriyor.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Kıyamet sonrası, salgın hastalık romanı, Station Eleven, ütopya.

#### 1. Introduction

The apocalypse and its aftermath have been a major concern for many sci-fi writers that have pushed growing numbers of novels in this genre. Post-apocalyptic novels have primarily focused their narration on the content of the-end-of-the-

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world plots, which has also triggered attention among the readers. Dystopian societies have become concerned with the post-collapse world, disregarding utopian teleology as a part of traditional apocalyptic logic.

The much-known end-of-the-world scenarios in today's fiction can be easily found in much apocalyptic literary products since such writings have been seen in the production in line with religious manuscripts, especially in the periods of great disasters and collapses. Furthermore, the recent climactic changes especially in the modernity have given the way to the increase of such writings particularly in dystopian novels [1].

Emily St. John Mandel's novel *Station Eleven* (2014) is known to have been awarded as the National Book Award's shortlist for fiction. With the notable themes of beauty, nostalgia, arts, and social memory, the novel received wide credit from the circles of literature. She designed the major themes in order to incorporate the vision of how the world would be with the major theme of collapse and its aftermath effects on the individuals [2]. Yet, the "aftermath" is displayed somewhat unusual from the ordinary disaster novels; so, this paper tries to show the "twist" in the understanding of a pandemic novel registered into a utopian cause and effect that sides with individuals rather than a post-collapse society. Further, the article tries to show the way in which *Station Eleven* incorporates escape from the theoretical background of post-apocalypse [3]. The novel takes readers' attention through making use of the descriptions of the pandemic in the pre and post-collapse in times of aftermath needs. It is observed that Mandel professionally cherishes hope and trust in mankind in the period of pandemic.

It is usually considered that the apocalypse as a catastrophe of large dimensions with pressing results may lead to a dystopian post-apocalyptic scenario [4]. Such consideration gains weight when large relevant literary research is conducted as the dominant conclusion tends to produce an aftermath collapse society with disastrous features. Taken from this angle, *Station Eleven* puts forth the unusual sway between traditional and contemporary apocalyptic imagination. It is also interesting to see the dichotomy that, on the one hand, we have the character, the Prophet, who holds religious sentiments with the mentality of rebirth. On the other hand, the virus, the Georgia Flu, eradicates 99% of the world's population which is termed "apocalypse" [5]. As De Cristofaro states, "The dystopias of contemporary post-apocalyptic scenarios become all the more significant if one considers that they are set when the traditional apocalyptic paradigm posits the utopian resolution" [4].

## 2. Station Eleven

The novel's introduction is unique as it opens the curtains into the play of *King Lear* and on the stage, we see a prominent figure falling dead in front of a crowd: "Arthur's heart was not beating. Jeevan began CPR. ... Arthur's eyes were closed. ... They have called an ambulance" [5]. Yet, this occasion spots the start of the flu, as the global outbreak from Toronto and spreads all over the world in a short time; "like a neutron bomb over the surface of the earth" [5]. Ninety-nine percent of people die, leaving the world a small number of survivors: "It's the fastest incubation period I've ever seen. ... She started feeling sick a few hours into her shift ... You get exposed to, and you are sick within hours" [5].

*No one delivers fuel to the gas stations or the airports. Cars are stranded. Airplanes cannot fly. Trucks remain at their points of origin. Food never reaches the cities; grocery stores close. Businesses are locked and then looted. No one comes to work at the power plants or the substations; no one removes fallen trees from electrical lines* [5].

When the novel goes back and forth in the period of twenty years with the descriptions of the flu as it eradicates the living, it is seen that Kirstin Raymonde, as one of the living, brings about post-apocalyptic life into the narration. The stories of those who have survived the flu are woven into the plot as the mystery and suspense increase. The novel drags the readers forward into a fallen world that still carries features from the pre-collapse societies. Mandel's depiction of such features contains religious cults that threaten to wreck peaceful communities and starvation, and loneliness. Considering the general features of the novel and its main concept of the collapse, *Station Eleven* proves very calm and "noiseless," whose main concern lies in the views of nostalgia, memory, and art, rather than post-collapse tragedies and bloodshed. As Gomel states, "Post-apocalypse seems to be concerned not with the sharp moments of death but rather with an interminable duration of dying" [6].

*Station Eleven* does not bear the typical sense of post-apocalyptic novel. Its plot and target are not based on the dire straits of the pandemic itself [7]. The reader is taken into the awareness that the focus gets onto the conducts of the characters and the effects of the flu in society. Contrary to expectations, we do not get loaded with survival fights against the pandemic as told in an epic story. Yet, Mandel initiates the darker side of a pandemic through the rapid collapse of the civilization, which is considered worse than mere trials for survival, as the society needs to be realigned with its dynamics to stand resilient. She chooses the worst possible situation, a plague that results in the immediate and total collapse of civilization. However, the way how the survivors act, think or speak is quite different from those who are devastated in a catastrophe like this. "Survivors do not act differently from ordinary people in civilized times. Daily concerns and drastic needs also assault on them; yet, we do not have the feeling of critical struggles with vulnerable human beings bereft of basic essentials of life" [8]. On the other hand, most apocalypse novels drag characters into horror and dystopia. Next, the story takes place within a period of twenty years after the loss of civilization and when the survivors come united to

re-establish their settlements sprayed in a vast area. By time, it is seen that the novel incorporates required agents and capacities through dual frames of periods when the characters are living or deceased. Mond states, “*Station Eleven* is not so much about the apocalypse as about memory and loss, nostalgia and yearning; the effort of art to deepen fleeting impressions of the world and bolster solitude” [2].

*Station Eleven* employs a “twist” rendered in the aftermath of a collapse with the optimistic future vision. In the course of the novel, roads get conflicted, experiences are retold, love and emotions, sentiments are reinforced with a strong desire of survival. Nevertheless, at the epicenter of all those fights and trials stand unity, solidarity and ties bereft of betrayals, agonies and fears of the end. Its characters are not just people of the imagined future but people of now [9]. As being flawed and longing for being a human, they travel in far distant corners; yet, are not happy; they are desirous and determined for a proper survival. They actually want more than they have in the aftermath of the pandemic. The plot jumps ahead into twenty years in future, shading light onto the experienced characters who are scared of the possible results of such a large-scale outbreak. The fear has settled into the modernity of the civilization, as what has come out of it. In the basics of the novel, it is possible to assert that *Station Eleven* is a novel about subsistence and about deciphering the solutions that cleanse the remains of the outbreak which has led to the extinction. Kiehn states,

*Mandel’s world runs two ways: For those alive at the time of the epidemic, this is not a world anyone is prepared to face when the calamity strikes and they have fond memories of the previous world and do what they can to keep parts of it alive. For those born in post-apocalyptic America, this is the only world they know, and all they can do is to imagine what the old world was like* [10].

So, as seen, this shouldn’t be an ideal place for an American to live, as the pains to realize the survival are still fresh in their memories. Yet, they have no choice but cherish the hopes to win the struggle for survival.

The line “Because survival is insufficient,” is the commonly accepted code of life, which Mandel uses in order to refer to the struggles of the people who have to do more than survive. So, she employs the art group, the Travelling Symphony, which struggles to prove life is more than surviving. As for the Travelling Symphony:

*Twenty years after the collapse they were still in motion, traveling back and forth along the shores of Lakes Huron and Michigan, west as far as Traverse City, ... The Symphony performed music and Shakespeare. ... What no one would have anticipated was that audiences seemed to prefer Shakespeare to their other theatrical offerings* [5].

The actors of the group stage old plays by Shakespeare in an effort to do the most in order to keep past memories alive for the survivors who long for strong attachment to the past [11]. In order to display their determination in this line of efforts they have adapted the motto of “Survival is insufficient,” and it is this poetical line. The motto incorporates the supremacy of art that can save the humanity, so it is the required statement from poetry that glorifies the role of arts in many forms that can reshape the world with the desired goals. *Station Eleven* dictates tiny bits of hope and awareness into cherishing insight towards results of terrorism and misery on humanity. Throughout the novel, the readers are comforted by the hope that the doomsday can be survived; despite all misery and tragedy, Mandel tries to prove human beings will remain well attached to arts and relevant forms overcoming the obstacles in the process of reshaping the world. They are expected to adopt the best forms and ways of the old world as human beings deserve the best.

Most of the characters “remain good at heart, simple and clinging to memories that reflect the old world both profoundly and superficially” [5]. Mandel is saying for art; “They retrieved the weapons, dragged the men into the forest to be food for the animals, and continued on into Mackinaw City to perform *Romeo and Juliet*” [5]. For memory Mandel says; “The memory was sharper than most of her memories ... She remembered the drink (on the plane), but not her mother’s face” [5]. Remembrance is just as critical as the repercussions of the prominent cultural heritage. Thus, exposed to the weird face of the world after the collapse, survivors put forth the message in strong terms that measures must be taken to re-establish the old civilization together with cultural treasure. Seen from this angle, it can be claimed that *Station Eleven* draws the attention to collected memory, nostalgia and yearning rather than stereotyped, epic story effects of the outbreak. Kirsten says, “We have been lost for so long... We long for the world we were born into” [5], “the effort of art to deepen our fleeting impressions of the world and bolster our solitude” [5]. For long for pre-collapse world and nostalgia, Mandel states;

*I’ve been thinking lately about immortality. What it means to be remembered, what I want to be remembered for, certain questions concerning memory and fame. I love watching old movies. I watch the faces of long-dead actors on the screen, and I think about how they’ll never truly die. I know that’s a cliché, but it happens to be true. Not just the famous ones whom everyone knows, the Clark Gables, the Ava Gardners, but the bit players, the maid carrying the tray, the butler, the cowboys in the bar, the third girl from the left in the nightclub. They’re all immortal to me. First, we only want to be seen, but once we’re seen, that’s not enough anymore. After that, we want to be remembered.* [5].

Mandel incorporates the role of beauty and the best of art into the lines far more critically than other features that lead humanity over the boulders of obstacles.

*Beauty features far more prominently in descriptions and memories of the pre-apocalypse. 'Why in his life of frequent travel had he never recognized the beauty of flight? The improbability of it', muses Clark, who is echoed by Kirsten reminiscing about the urban landscape seen from a plane at night: 'clusters and pinpoints of light in the darkness, scattered constellations linked by roads or alone. The beauty of it' [5].*

The 'dazzling power' of electricity – 'floodlights', 'porch lights', 'candy-colored halogens', 'screens shining', the 'points of glimmering light' that are 'towns glimpsed from the sky through airplane windows' – populates Mandel's 'incomplete list' of what is lost in the catastrophe [5].

Thus, readers in the novel don't find the widespread collapse of the old world or the injection of a utopian new order in civilization, but the despairing grief for the loss of marvels of the old world. They long for the revival of the technology which was in a way looked down on before the outbreak [5].

*No more Internets. No more social media, no more scrolling through litanies of dreams and nervous hopes and photographs of lunches, cries for help and expressions of contentment and relationship-status updates with heart icons whole or broken, plans to meet up later, pleas, complaints, desires, pictures of babies dressed as bears or peppers for Halloween. No more reading and commenting on the lives of others, and in so doing, feeling slightly less alone in the room. No more avatars" [5].*

In the novel, the Museum of Civilization symbolizes the tragic tone of the story in which modern times are referred to as hope to go back to glamorous old days and bygone hyper-globalized world. It is the location only left in hand to display the old remnants of the pre-collapse days with the objects as many as collected through the perseverance of the survivors. Among the objects, you can count the everyday objects like "a laptop, an iPhone, a credit card and a snow globe" [10]. These are elevated by the catastrophe to the status of artworks, 'beautiful objects' which move Clark because of the 'human enterprise each object had required' [5]. The Museum is remembered as the place where characters have the reason to cherish their hopes, as in Mandel's words, 'clin[ge] to the hope that the world they remembered could be restored' [5].

Religion is also handled in the struggle for the revival of the old order. They question the viability of organized religion, an entity to cling to and to remember only if the expectant doomsday is very near in time. It is seen as a force to deal with as it is still acknowledged in a proper society. The Prophet in the novel gives glimpses of religion in the collapsing world. In a talk with Sayid, "But I'm not sure I quite follow," Sayid was saying. "That part in your philosophy about being the light. How do you bring the slight if you are the light? I wonder if you could just explain to me ..." [5]. The Prophet replies, "We are blessed most of all in being alive today. ... "I submit," the prophet said, "that everything that has ever happened on this earth has happened for a reason" [5]. "And what about the papacy? Does that still exist?" [8]. Mandel's solution to this problem is to channel what religious fervor exists into malign cults, shedding blood at the behest of their insane leaders and twisted prophets.

### 3. Conclusion

Contrary to all expectations the novel concludes in peace and tranquility. The novelist pays the attention to render a peace of mind to the main characters. In the plot story zones of disputes are resolved and connections come together. We do not anticipate a dominant revelation throughout the story; yet, Mandel inserts the feeling that the ending is proper under all conditions. When the sun goes down, it radiates a feeling that it is a small moment that will happen under what condition the world is. Such small tiny moments connect to the others, identical all in the other parts of the world. And in that way, life is lived. "Hell is the absence of the people you long for." Everyone in the post-collapse world has lost someone; most have lost entire families, friends and lovers. Still, somehow, art persists – stories, drawings, music, and even Shakespearean language. "What was lost in the collapse: almost everything, almost everyone, but there is still such beauty." As the lesson a reader might derive, and as it intended by the novelist, it is required to be grateful for what we have and accumulated in the memories, and Mandel underlines that all is fragile in this so-called strong technology. Life deserves to cherish love and hope in all conditions, since survival may be insufficient, but the love of art can save humanity. If *Station Eleven* reveals little insight into the effects of extreme terror and misery, it offers comfort and hopes to those who believe that the apocalypse can be survived. For hope, Kirsten states, "In the distance, principles of light arranged into a grid. There, plainly visible on the side of a hill some miles distant: a town, or a village, whose streets were lit with electricity" [5], in which she longs for the pre-collapse condition of a town livable according to the unforgotten standards of a town. Despite all demise and destruction people need to stay resilient and hopeful in the core. If, one day, they were obliged to remake new world, they would extract the parts of the good old world and civilization. They are eager for survival, but hope for more.

### 4. Author contribution statement

The scope, content arrangement, writing and editing of this article were done by Yıldray ÇEVİK.

## 5. Ethics committee approval and conflict of interest statement

This study does not need ethics committee approval and author declared that this article has no conflict of interest.

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