
Moonlit Revelations: The Discourse of the End in Gina B. Nahai's *Moonlight on the Avenue of Faith*

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Young adult fiction often engages with what Derrida terms a discourse of the end, a paradoxical notion that is evident – yet hidden – in such fictions. For Derrida, a discourse of the end is the haunted existence that surrounds extreme events, where the presence of the end is the ‘staging for the end of history’ that we simultaneously comprehend, yet it is incomprehensible (1974, p.10). One aspect of the discourse of the end is the post-apocalyptic, which Berger describes as: ‘Everything that follows the revelation is post-apocalyptic’ (Berger 1999, p.138). The post-apocalyptic is evident in the novel *Moonlight on the Avenue of Faith* (Nahai 1999) where the women have sensed the ‘doom’ that surrounds a daughter in each generation for the last 1000 years. *Moonlight* is written by an Iranian ‘exile’ (as Nahai puts it) living in America, and set in a Jewish Iranian culture in the midst of political upheaval and religious persecution. The narrative focuses on the matrilineal heritage of Lili, a teenage girl, and the role that prophecy has played in her family’s lives. Particularly, the novel focuses on her mother (Roxanna) and the events leading to, and following, her disappearance when Lili was still a girl. In this paper, I first delve into the discourse of the end, and then comment on how this concept can bring the importance of the interwoven narration, the events of the story, and character constructions together into a post-apocalyptic understanding of the text. Although *Moonlight* has many potential avenues for exploration, I will be focusing on the role of the revelation by using concepts of hiddenness (Bull 1999), protention/portention (Derrida 1974), and the post-apocalyptic (Berger 1999). This combination of theoretical perspectives offers a new scholarly direction in the analysis of young adult fiction.

An apocalypse is a foreshadowing or a revelation regarding the end of the world, and as this paper will describe, many small revelations or prophecies can bring the end into hiding. While apocalypse is literally concerned with revelation, *post*-apocalypse is not ‘post’ in the sense of ‘after’ a disaster chronologically, rather it is post because it is a state of being that is after revelation or prophecy (Berger 1999). It is after the prophecy, after the vision of the future, but not necessarily after an event. Berger describes the post-apocalypse thus:

Once the prophetic words have been uttered, the event may as well have occurred, for it must occur. In the mind of the believer, it has occurred. He has seen it and described it. The physical manifestation is merely an echo – not even the confirmation – of the prophetic revelatory word. Prophecy, then, not cataclysm, is literally the apocalypse. Everything that follows the revelation is post-apocalyptic.
(Berger 1999, p.138)

As there have been prophecies for centuries, ‘post-apocalyptic’ is a constant state, reinforced with each new and overlapping apocalypse. Yet to have a constant knowledge of the end (of life, or a particular life) would not allow a sustainable existence, it must exist in the boundaries. To support and place this concept within a wider discourse of the end, I draw on another theorist, Malcolm Bull. In *Seeing Things Hidden* (1999), Bull posits that to be ‘hidden’ something has to be partially known, so it may be either sensed or perceived (p.12). Once the end of the world was even conceived of, it came *into* hiding as a possibility, and we live post-apocalypse after that uncovering. The women in Roxanna’s family have sensed the ‘doom’ that surrounds a daughter in each generation for the last millennium. Miriam the Moon, Roxanna’s sister, may not ‘perceive’, or have any epistemic knowledge of this legacy, yet she senses that there is something hidden. When, as a child, she discovers feathers in Roxanna’s bed she somehow knows to conceal them as she feels they are a portent.

References to death and the end are coupled throughout this paper. Whilst they may seem loosely related (the death of a person, the archive, or the end of the world, as explained below), I assert that they are almost ‘slippages’ in the signifying system. The archive, according to Derrida, is the cumulative work of the human race. There is also the personal archive, consisting of the memories of that person. In a family it is the archive of ‘signature, name, heritage, image, grief’ (1984, p.28) that constitutes that family’s combined utterance to the world. The loss of this is tantamount to a death. The death of a subjectivity is, as Watts suggests, ‘a termination as total and final as the end of the world itself’ (cited in Bull 1999, p.137). Without the subject there is no utterance, and without the world there is no referent for the subject to signify with that utterance.



Derrida states that ‘catastrophe occurs with every individual death; there is no common measure adequate to persuade me that a personal mourning is less serious than a nuclear war’ (1984, p.28). With this in mind, death and the end are very much signifiers for the same referent: the cessation of the signification system, or ‘destruction of the archive’ (Derrida 1984, p.28), whether that be on a personal level (the death of the signifying subjectivity) or a societal one (‘death’ of communication signification).

Moonlight can be read in terms of the discourse of the end on all these levels, but first I want to look at how it is apocalyptic in order to establish the connections between prophecy and the end. When Miriam reveals the hidden feathers from Roxanna’s bed to her mother, ‘Shusha gasped as if she had been struck by lightning. Her body shook, only once, but with enough force that Miriam had to pull away from the impact’ (Nahai 1999, p.10). This is the moment that the ‘doom’ comes out of hiding as an apocalyptic revelation. It is apocalyptic as it reveals and unveils the future according to the prophecy each mother makes about her granddaughter, that she will bring ruin and damnation to her family. For Roxanna the moment of uncovering, the apocalyptic moment, is when Shusha pushes her from a roof top in a desperate attempt to rid her family of the ‘bad luck’ child (p.32). The scene is set with undoubtedly apocalyptic prose:

Years later, as she recounted the events of that evening, Miriam the Moon would feel an ancient sense of dread, and tremble with the force of relived emotion: the sky was crowded with stars... Just then something stirred. There was a breeze, like the breath of a Deev or a Jinn... In one instant, the chickens in the yard began to scream and bat their wings, and a flock of pigeons appeared in the sky like a grey cloud, shedding their feathers and blocking out the moon. Shusha pushed Roxanna off the roof.
(p.35)

This ‘ancient sense of dread’ that Miriam felt is a response to the protention (arising from the omens) in the family regarding the curse on the female line. Edmund Husserl’s use of ‘protention’ (Husserl & Brough 1990, p. 54) can be seen as a complementary term for the sense of the post-

apocalyptic. He describes protention within a musical paradigm, taken up here during the process of listening to a tune:

...I retain not only the individual notes of the tune, but the order in which they occurred. Similarly, at any given point in the tune I ‘protain’ its future course. If I have not heard the tune before, my protention is less determinate than my retention, but following a tune involves an expectation that its future course will lie within certain limits.
(Inwood 2005, p.3)

In a sense our future is a tune that has not been heard. We experience the note of the moment, which gives us a ‘primal impression’, and when the moment passes it is ‘retained’ (Inwood 2005, p.3). But the notes yet to come, that are assumed to follow, are ‘protended’ (Inwood 2005). This differs from anticipation, which implies some knowledge of what will follow (a tune we know or recognise, and have some retention of, can be anticipated). Yet there are ‘certain limits’ to the protention, based on what has been retained so far. ‘Portention,’ on the other hand, refers to an omen or foreshadowing, akin to a prophecy. Once we have experienced an event (such as watching a film about world destruction) we are in a position to portend (anticipate) rather than protend (to stretch forth). The apocalyptic can be portended, yet the post-apocalyptic can only be protended or sensed. Both portends and protends are necessarily hidden, as the portend is perceived (not sensed) and the protend is sensed (not perceived). In *Moonlight*, the presence of a protentious ‘ancient sense of dread’ before the revelation uncovers in fact that it has always been there, but hidden, and is at that moment coming out of hiding. The imagery of animals panicking and winds blowing, an archetypal apocalyptic scene, is the coming out of hiding (or becoming known) of Roxanna’s doom. However, at the same time it is the coming into hiding of the ultimate end; the possibility of the end of the archive, the world, and of the subjectivities that construct and represent them.

The significance of this protention for *Moonlight* is twofold. Firstly, the sense of the end arising from Roxanna’s fated existence is an echo of the future death of herself and any of her line. Secondly, the possibility of such a death brings into hiding the end of the archive (or ‘symbolic capacity’

Derrida, p.28). Shusha's mother BeeBee attempted to break the curse by shackling her daughter and forbidding her to marry, so that she would be unable to produce another daughter in their doomed line. However, to not marry and bear children would be a break not only in their line, but also in the archive, as it would be the end of their family's history too. BeeBee succumbs to letting Shusha the Beautiful marry Rahman the Ruler, keeping the archive alive. As Derrida states (with regards to the present state of language), the end of the archive threatens 'for the same reason, language itself is menaced in its very life, helpless, adrift in the threat of limitlessness, brought back to its own finitude at the very moment when its limits seem to disappear' (1974, p.6). The possibility of death for the family line is at the same time the possibility of being cast adrift into the infinity of death, and yet death is always limited by life, and BeeBee chooses to pull back from the boundary and allows Shusha to carry on their line. Roxanna attempts to end the suffering differently: casting herself adrift whilst leaving her daughter behind, she tries to take the doom and leave the archive.

From the instant Roxanna believes she is doomed, she lives after the uncovering of her mother's murderous intentions. Thus, she is living post-apocalypse. The sense of an ending is inescapable and all consuming, and affects all who are in contact with Roxanna. Just one example of the post-apocalyptic in *Moonlight* appears after Shusha gives birth to Roxanna: Shusha's estranged mother, BeeBee, arrives, 'the door burst open with the force of an apocalypse, and BeeBee appeared' (p.27). She declares outright that 'this is the bad-luck one... Give her away if you can. Or else, kill her yourself' (p.26). This utterance of the prophecy is the apocalyptic moment, after which everything is post-apocalypse. Roxanna is then the cause of all misfortune, 'It's *her* fault... *She* brought that disease in here' (p.32). Shusha 'lived in constant fear of the ruination that Roxanna was going to bring upon them' (Nahai 1999, p.39), and so is also living post-apocalypse, in fear of the prophesied future.

As Berger notes with respect to the post-apocalyptic, the event has already occurred from the moment of utterance. Similarly, the people in Roxanna's village already know that Roxanna will be the cursed child of Shusha, 'They knew

it with such certainty... like the existence of God, like the inferiority of women' (p.27). The narration is layered (as will be explained below) and begins by telling the story of the first cursed woman in Roxanna's lineage, the Crow. Since the shameful acts of the Crow, and the prophecy that offspring from the Crow would be doomed to follow in her ways, the doom has already occurred because they have made it happen. It has previously seemed that the Crow is destined to bring shame, as 'women were most often the source of evil' (p.12). In the 18th Century, The Crow, her strictly Jewish Rabbi husband, and her four children moved to Tehran to 'educate the Jews in the ways of virtue' (p.12). The Crow and her daughters are not allowed basic personal freedom, never allowed to speak, and covered from head to toe in black cloth. One day, on Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement), the Crow unveils herself, and walks naked through the temple singing her song, with her four daughters following behind entranced, and then she disappears. This sparked a series of escapes by the women in her line. The men of the family, and even some of the women, began trying to tie the cursed ones down, shackling their feet or locking their doors. This is how Shusha (Roxanna's mother) has been raised, in order to stop her having a daughter to continue the shame. From the apocalyptic unveiling of the Crow's body and delight, the women have been forced to live *as if* the shame has already been delivered. The crow itself is considered a bad omen, or as an intermediary between life and death, and just as all names in *Moonlight* are portentous, the Crow is perceived to be the beginning of the end for her lineage. Through Roxanna, the family have sensed the end, and it infects their lives.

The narration of the text enables the reader to more easily comprehend the impact of this sense of the end. What at first seems to be third person narration is later revealed to be Lili re-telling what Miriam has told her of her family's history in a desperate attempt to convince Lili to help save Roxanna's life. There are three threads of narration: Miriam's third person narration (through Lili); Lili's third person narration of her time in America, and, Roxanna's short first-person narration in the final chapter. Miriam's narration is only uncovered towards the end of the novel, as it initially appears to be an omniscient narrator. Lili's

story frames the journey and provides a sense of purpose. This interweaving of narratives is not explicit, and the stories become the family archive from the moment of telling, rather than the point of view of one individual. The story incorporates conventions of the magic realist genre, which allow irregular aspects of the story to be regarded as fact, such as Roxanna's flight and the naming of the characters.

All the main characters have special names, and it becomes apparent that they are either the names that Lili has given them to understand Miriam's story, or names that Miriam herself has used in a metaphoric way. For example, Miriam's name, 'Miriam the Moon', reflects her role in the narrative, as a guide through Lili's and Roxanna's darker times. Moonlight can be seen only in the darkness of night, just as an omen is seen as an omen only in the darkness of portentous times. Roxanna the *Angel* could be named for her luminous qualities, or perhaps to reflect her living-dead status within the story. Through the characters' names it appears that they have no option but to fulfil their own prophecy: Teymur the Heretic is as his name portends; whilst Tala'at the Deceiver is deceitful to her husband at 36 years of age, even though she has been named that as a child (p.27).

This way of naming characters is a narrative technique employed to illustrate how Lili is following the story (told to her by Miriam) when she is eighteen. However, the naming also functions as a temporal device to bring to the surface how the story is being narrated from a time in the future, which is the present, with the benefit of hindsight. The problematic of presence is described by Derrida as; 'a 'dialectic' of protention and retention that one would install in the heart of the present... the past present and the future present constitute originally, by dividing it, the form of the living present' (1974, p.67). Lili's present is for most of the text narrating the past, through the words of Miriam, and towards the end of the narrative, according to Derrida, she is narrating her recent past-present. The events of the future are, at the end of the text, unknown by the characters, and yet the past tense requires that from the instant of experience every event is relegated to the past-present, as it is interpreted through the present. The past is retained, and the future is protended, and at

some place in the middle (that is impossible to hold) is the living present.

The narrative, thus, begins after the end. Even when the narrative declares Roxanna is the bad-luck child, this fact is already known by the narrators, Lili and Miriam, as the narration unfolds from the past-present where they sit in America looking back over Roxanna's time in Iran. As they know (to some extent) how events will unfold, the characters' names become portentous, as they are assigned after the end. There is a small section of the novel narrated in the past-present that occurs after Miriam's story, where Lili confronts her mother after 13 years of absence. This past-present narration unveils the postmodern post-apocalyptic nature of the text. To narrate from the living-present (looking back on the past-present) denotes that the narrator is alive. Regardless of the magnitude of the revelation there must be subjectivities through which to view that revelation, and therefore the end has not come. Despite all the portentous events in Roxanna's life, she is still there; her daughter still survives. At the end of the novel, they *can* escape the doom of generations past, as all the revelations eventually show to have revealed nothing. They are merely signifiers with no referents, as they refer to events in the future or label events from the past that perhaps only happened because of that signifier. This is coupled with the paradox of the end, that it has both come and gone (or we live as if it had), and cannot have happened (as the narrator is able to narrate).

What seemed at first to be set in stone is undermined by the postmodern postapocalyptic. It is Tala'at, not Roxanna, who actually brings ruin to her family by leaving her husband for his nephew, and Shusha commits suicide in response (p.130). Also, Miriam portends that the ghosts of Roxanna's marital home will 'wake up and haunt you to the grave,' and then 'Miriam the Moon spoke of the robber ghosts of the house on the Avenue of Faith and, by so doing, brought them to life' (p.141). The ghosts then purportedly steal things until almost no possessions are left. However, it is later disclosed that it is Roxanna's mother-in-law who has organised the thefts, and thus the original prophecy revealed nothing, yet the power of the prophecy had been seen in how they lived as if it were true and predetermined.

The end of the archive is hidden in the discourse of the end, in that it is sensed by the characters in *Moonlight* but not fully known. The narrative structure, and character naming enhance the need for a post-apocalyptic reading. They each take a different approach to dealing with a post-apocalyptic existence: BeeBee attempts to imprison her daughter, Shusha attempts to murder her daughter, and Roxanna abandons her daughter. Each attempt to escape the curse is unsuccessful, as it would also bring about the end of the family's archival history. Escape is not an option. For the two women who had the ultimate choice of ending or not ending the family line completely (BeeBee and Roxanna, who only had one child), find what Derrida terms 'survivance' at the very heart of life' (Derrida 1984, p.28). It is revealed at the end that they are all living post-apocalypse, yet it is an apocalypse that reveals nothing. Their fate is not predetermined, and their lives are their own. The reunification of Roxanna and Lili means the continuation of the archive, and a new existence for the family, where the legacy of the Crow is not a shadow of doom, but a dance to her song.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Anna Free is currently researching a PhD at QUT's Education Faculty. The thesis title is: 'Representations of (Post)Apocalypse in Young Adult Fiction' and is due to be submitted in early 2007.