The Apocalypse Myth in Louis de Bernières' novel *Birds Without Wings*: Rustem Bey and an Individual Apocalyptic Experience in the Kierkegaardian Frame

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to draw attention to the myth of apocalypse, which has grown in popularity in the literature at the turn of the millennium. Louis de Bernières in his novel Birds Without Wings *also illustrates this myth on the general and individual levels of existence. In this work, we have tried to connect the Kierkegaardian stages of man, aesthetic, ethical, and theological, to Louis de Bernières' character Rustem Bey in order to reveal the preoccupation of an individual for defining himself as an integral Self in relation to others and to God. This personal experience is of essential importance, as the character prepares himself to investigate the reason and the meaning of the world and his existence in the face of apocalypse.*

Key Words: *Louis de Bernières, apocalypse myth, Kierkegaard, self, stages of man.*

From the times immemorial the humanity has attempted to imagine and foresee the end of Time, and especially in recent period it has been noticed that the interest in the Biblical prophesies of Armageddon has increased tremendously. Especially at the turn of the millennium this fascination with apocalyptic predictions, whether from the Bible or from other different sources, as quatrains of Nostradamus or the prophesies of Maya civilization, seems to increase dramatically. The humankind's passage beyond the year 2000, as it could be expected, became imagined and celebrated by people and, at the same time, became a fertile ground for the artists to explore their imagination and immortalize the apocalypse in the fiction of the contemporary decades, and in this way perpetuating a particular myth, the myth of apocalypse.

In popular mind, the word "apocalypse" encapsulates, among other things, the idea of apocalyptic literature due to the association with various visions and revelations. Apocalyptic literature represents a body of literature with its own well established and highly complex historical, philosophical and theological characteristics that go far beyond the aim of this study. Apocalyptic literature has definitively influenced the rise of various myths, such as the creation myths, the myth of fallen angels, the myth of the expulsion from Eden, and, of course, the myth of apocalypse. The apocalypse myth is based on various traits and motifs of apocalyptic literature, such as the imminent time of crisis, the cosmic violence and disorder, human decay and immorality, the movement from an old to a new age, the figure of Antichrist, the fallen angel, the assistance of a divine being, the prophecy of the end of the world, and the Last Judgement

In the history of Western thought there are two fundamental ways of perceiving the philosophical meaning of the apocalypse myth. The first one takes on a linear model of temporality, a *chronological* perspective in which apocalypse is viewed as a final conclusion of history, of life and even of time itself. In this respect, we can mention Immanuel Kant's essay *The End of All Things* in which he considers that the thought of apocalypse is related to the question of the last reasons and the meaning of the world and of our existence. Therefore, this

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"thought contains something a bit horrifying, for it leads to an abyss, from which there is no possible return for whosoever falls into it" (Kant 93). As every vision of the end is accompanied by a terror, Kant suggests that there always has been a doubt that "if these [reasons and meanings] should not be attainable, creation itself would appear to those who believe in an end of the world to be as purposeless as a play that has no upshot whatsoever and has no rational design" (Kant 96). Even though apocalypse myth is based on the prophecy of the end of the world with its inherent damnation of the wicked and salvation of the elect, this myth functions mostly as a possible meaning of the cosmic design, as well as a possible relief that one finds in the otherwise tragic and unbearable thought of the absolute end.

The second philosophical view on apocalypse also explored in the Western thought is the one which develops from a different model of temporality. It has its origins not in Greek *chronos*, but in *Kairos*, and refers to the time in between, the opportune moment for a change, the supreme time for action. Viewed from this perspective, the myth of apocalypse focuses on the end as a supreme time which takes place in the present, and it becomes one's personal experience in the unique revolutionary present. It also removes the possibility for an objectified identity, creating instead an opportunity for the human subject to begin a quest for truth and experience a salvation from within.

Relevant to the scope of this article is the table of characters and symbols of Revelation, which has been outlined by David J. Leigh (based on the readings of Northrop Frye, Robert Denham, and James Resseguie) in an order derived from the philosophical great chain of being (Leigh 27):

Level of Being	*Apocalyptic*	*Demonic*
Divine	Triune God	Satan/Dragon
Human	Mother, Bride, Church	Whore, Jezebel
	Rider of white horse	Four Horsemen
Animal	Lamb, lion, four creatures	Beasts, lion, locusts
Vegetable	Tree of life	Tree of death (Cross)
Mineral	Jerusalem, temple, jewels	Babylon, desert
Fire	Angels, light	Demons, burning
Water	River of life	Sea

The apocalyptic patterns, characters and symbols become of essential importance in relation to Louis de Bernières' novel *Birds Without Wings*, published in 2004, but most probably imagined and written around the turn of the millennium. De Bernières, like many other novelists of the late twentieth century, might have renewed the emphasis on the end of the world and tried to express in his narrative the fervour of the last moment, which everyone wants to experience.

Since *Birds Without Wings*, which reveals the apocalypse myth, does not focus on a literal end of the world but presents instead an ending or a transformation of the world which the characters know as their world, it might be interesting to investigate the modes the novelist chooses to represent this change in relation to the dominant cultural beliefs and values. Louis de Bernières invites his characters, as well as readers, to reflect upon *the last things* from a perspective which is inevitably connected with the final meaning of history, belief and life. In other words, he wants his readers to consider and question the possibility of some "final answers" in a context when the traditional systems are in a process of change and the icons and symbols become a flexible part of this world of mutability and no longer possess the meaning they once did. In a period when Christendom has worn out its vocabulary and has exhausted its quality of moral leadership, the novelist tries to question radically Human identity, as well as his or her relation to God or to God's demise.

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Louis de Bernières inserts many apocalyptic symbols and characters on all levels of being in both divine and demoniac form. The structure of the *Birds Without Wings* relies upon the Revelation's pattern of stability-instability-stability. The novel begins with the depiction of an Edenic space, where most of the characters live in harmony and relative respect for each other. The name of the village – Eskibahçe – is also suggestive, being translated form Turkish as "old garden" and it symbolically refers to the Garden of Eden. This village is a multicultural and heterogeneous environment where Armenians, Greeks, and Turks live together, some of them being Muslim, some Christian, some sane, some insane, some rich, some poor, and all of them coexisting. Although heterogeneous, these people speak the same language and are united under the same identity as Ottomans. Even the religious differences are mediated by Abdulhamid Hodja and Father Kristophorus, these two having also a friendly relationship.

The harmony of Eskibahçe seems to stem out of its heterogeneity, as in this variety its inhabitants could have a chance to look at the others in order to see themselves. Iskander the Potter narrates of those old days as following:

> 'we knew that our Christians were sometimes called 'Greeks', although we often called them 'dogs' or 'infidels', but in a manner that was a formality, or said with a smile, just as were deprecatory terms for us. They would call us 'Turks' in order to insult us, at the time when we called ourselves 'Ottomans' or 'Osmalis'. Later on it turned out that we really are 'Turks', and we became proud of it, as one does with new boots that are uncomfortable at first, but then settle into the feet and look exceedingly smart'. (de Bernières 5)

The mixture of spiritual and cultural strands does not spoil at all the harmonious universe of Eskibahçe. This "unity in diversity" in fact strengthens the atmosphere of the initial paradisiacal space of Eskibahçe, which is also suggested through the beauty of nature, of the village, of Abdulhamid Hoca's horse, of Philothei, of people, a beauty which is almost unearthly. The metaphor of the Edenic space is also sustained by the beauty of the church and the mosque.

Louis de Bernières' characters are not Edenic though. They are benevolent, but flowed individuals who try to understand the mysticism of their eschatological identities by looking for the signs of the apocalypse. Among the vivid apocalyptic signs that they recognise are: the Rider of the white horse (Abdulhamid Hodja riding his Nilufer), the Mother, the Bride and Church (Mariora, Polyxeni and the church, as starting with the proof of innocence), Tree of Life (represented by Ali the Snowbringer's house made in the hollow of a tree), Jerusalem (the place of harmony suggested by Eskibahçe), the angels (the winged Karatavuk, Mehmetçik, the Goldfinch's wings of Philothei), and the angels with trumpets (Karatavuk and Mehmetçik blowing their bird whistles).

However, for the cosmic catastrophe to take place there is a need for an enemy or a devil figure which will trigger the cosmic battle. The demonic characters and symbols are not absent in the world of Eskibahçe, and by their presence they strengthen the idea of the final days. The first bestial presence is the Dog, followed by the evil spirit of Azazel (represented by Selim who corrupts The Bride, Tamara Hanim), The Whore (Tamara Hanim who is stoned publicly for adultery), The Bride who is in fact The Whore (The Circassian Mistress Leyla Hanim), The Horsemen (Hamidiye, The Kurd tribesmen who came to remove the Armenians), and Babylon's spirit of confusion and split (which is created by various political or nationalist leaders who attempt at establishing some false utopias, like those ideologists who try to make a Holy War or the others who imagine the re-establishment of the Great Greece).

The paradisiacal atmosphere of Eskibahçe changes gradually with the decadent image of the fallen city of Babylon. As we see in the novel,

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> [in] the long years of those wars here were too many who learned how to make their hearts boil with hatred, how to betray their neighbours, how to violate women, how to steal and dispossess, how to call upon God when they did the Devil's work, how to enrage and embitter themselves, and how to commit outrages even against children. (de Bernières 5-6)

This apocalyptic frame renders strong dichotomies which are obvious in the human beings, families, nations, languages, politics, and religion. The eternal aspiration of the individual for an angelic status in the great chain of being, attained through love, care, generosity, gratitude, and compassion fails in attempt, causing his decay into bestiality, exposed through violence, loss of wisdom, callousness, and sexual frivolity.

This degree of moral degeneracy announces the need for a saviour, who will cure this dissoluteness and cure all the dichotomies which created the splits. Will there be a Second Coming? Or, is there a messiah among them?

The display of signs of the cosmic battle make the people of Eskibahçe acknowledge their divided consciousness. This inner dividedness has brought to the dissolution of the family bonds, friendship, of social organization and religion. Most of the characters in the novel are searching for the opportune moment, the time of that supreme change that will make their personal presence a meaningful event. This makes them start the quest for the self, as one's personal experience, in this unique revolutionary present.

Rustem Bey is one of these characters who develop a fragmented philosophy of existence. However, he wants to discover a solid inner self which will cure all the inner splits that dominate him. The status of Aga in Eskibahçe makes him feel both the pressure and the responsibility for the people in his community. He is god-like, almost effortlessly loved and respected by everyone, both Christian and Muslims. Everybody asks him for a piece of advice or assistance. Even his physical appearance imposed authority:

> His hair and moustache were freshly oiled, his cheeks were recently shaved, his bearing was proud, his scarlet fez was well brushed, his boots were gleaming with new polish, and in his sash he carried his silver-handled pistols, his yataghans and the knife that he had taken from Selim. (de Bernières 96)

In his imponent position, as their Aga, he wants to be their saviour each time one needs his help. Acknowledging some prophetic signs, Rustem Bey becomes more and more preoccupied with human perfection. As he thinks that he will face that *opportune moment*, he strives to be an infallible human being and make his presence in this world memorable. He also acknowledges that there are some differences between this new age and the old world and he lives in vigilance, paying attention to every detail of his life.

In fact, Rustem Bey's preoccupations and aspirations remind us of the Kierkegaardian pattern of three types of human beings: aesthetic, ethical, and religious. His movement through the "stages on life's way" reveal a preoccupation with defining himself as a solid inner self in his relation to the others and to God. He is a man who has pursued pleasure and happiness for himself, but this hedonist, aesthetic stage does not confer to him the feeling of fulfilment, accomplishment. He chooses to entertain himself with various people, experiences or vocations. However, the more he searches for his own felicity the more he discovers his lack of one true, inner self. He sees instead a myriad of multiple roles, of masks which become incoherent and complicated in one single person and make him experience a sense of inadequacy. Rustem Bey discovers his inner emptiness, so far concealed by the multiple role-playing that he has assumed in life. This acknowledgment leads him inevitably to despair. He is confronted with the challenge which Kierkegaard calls as "becom[ing] single individual[s] before God" (Kierkegaard, "On My Works as an Author" 11).

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Therefore, in his quest for developing a solid inner self, Rustem Bey establishes his goal, which is, as Kierkegaard says, "[t]o come to oneself in self-knowledge *and before God*" (Kierkegaard, "Judge for Yourself!" 106). As Kierkegaardian aesthete "leaps" into the next stage, Rustem Bey pursues his desire of self-knowledge by moving into the ethical stage through the commitment to others. His acts become motivated by undertaking some responsibilities, based on the needs of the others. Thinking of the benefit of his society, Rustem Bey tries to reconcile all the spirits in his community, even in situations which depend on superstitions and religious differences as experienced in the episode of the "Proof of Innocence" of Mariora. As we see in the novel,

> [h]e looked at Polyxeni levelly. 'I always knew that your mother was innocent, and for that reason I have brought this purse, as my contribution. Use it well in the memory of your mother, who was a good woman. And let us have no more bad blood.' (…) 'Wasn't it enough that I should lose all my family in the plague? Wasn't it enough that Polyxeni Hanim and her brothers and sisters should lose their mother? It's a mean-spirited and ignorant people that rubs salt and sand in other people's wounds with all these stories of poison and conspiracy! No more stories! No more bad blood!' (de Bernières 97)

The priority of the other becomes significant in Rustem Bey's life. He tries to connect his thoughts to the necessary ethics in order to abandon all the prejudices that try to dominate his individual or collective identity and attempts to bind himself to an absolute rationality. However, in his dedication to the others, he develops some hubristic desires, as he is preoccupied with ethical, bodily, and emotive happiness.

To satisfy his erotic and emotional longings he marries Tamara Hanim, thus creating a paradisiacal expectation. Rustem Bey hopes that

> their marriage might become more than the usual formal dance of strangers that only grows into anything better with the slow passage of time and the mutual concern for children. He knew families in Smyrna where there was a comely intimacy between man and wife, and that was what he wanted when he married. (de Bernières 118)

Rustem Bey by his nature is a committed man; he wants to labour both for his family and his community, to pursue his personal and communal paradisiacal expectations. With Tamara Hanim, he has gone to all lengths to create an erotic paradise where the two of them will experience ultimate happiness. As we are told in the novel,

> For Tamara, he had expanded the women's quarters from something bare and functional (…) into a heaven of warm red drapery, cooling draughts that could be controlled by the judicious opening and closing of shutters, and smooth furniture shaped out of walnut and inlaid with satinwood. He had even bought her a bed that had arrived in pieces on the backs of two refractory camels, and he had bought chairs. (de Bernières 118)

However, his private longings for felicity collapse as soon as they get married, as

> Rustem Bey knew with angry resignation that much as he might invade her body, he would never touch her heart. Thus it was that he reaped nothing but heartache from his assaults on happiness, and he was lonelier than he had been before, living with this lovely girl (…). (de Bernières 122)

Instead of healing his inner splits by the feeling of love in the security of his earthly paradise, the sense of failure only increases his fragmented self. Although he wants to do the things right and to choose the moral, without any prejudice, his code of honour and his sense

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of morality become completely shattered when he is confronted with the loss of morality in the other, in particular Tamara Hanim's adultery.

Like in apocalyptic frame, the Bride is "the one who welcomes the people into heaven, a woman of beautiful clothes and fine jewels, a symbol of perfection and thus of the New Jerusalem, or of the heavenly Church" (Leigh 28). However, the Bride that Rustem Bey feverishly expected to open the gates to heaven for him, Tamara Hanim, becomes ironically the Whore of Babylon, as she destroys the faithful and the committed man through her adultery; unwittingly she triggers violence and releases the forces of evil.

The apocalyptic pattern is also revealed in Rustem Bey's inner world. As an ethical man he thought he knew what is good and what is evil, what is justice and what is injustice, but Tamara Hanim's unfaithfulness brings about the cosmic inner catastrophe. Rustem Bey kills Selim, Tamara Hanim's lover and exposes his wife to be stoned publicly because he thinks that he must do it, he thinks that this is a legitimate act in front of his community as well as in front of God. However, he looked how Muslims and Christians threw stones into his wife and instead of satisfaction or relief he felt as if those stones had been thrown into him. At that moment he felt as exposed and vulnerable as Tamara Hanim because the certainty concerning his code of morality as well as his own position in this world has been destroyed. As we learn from the novel, "[he] leaned forward, placed his elbows on his knees, and began to choke with sorrow as the muezzins in the minarets sang out in harmony with each other that God is great and there is no God but God" (de Bernières 134-5).

The use of force against a human being shatters considerably his assumed morality and also his fidelity to his faith. When all through his entire life he struggles for justice and love of the human being and God, he does not understand now how legitimate is according to divine rule or human ethics an act of cruelty. If in the battle with the demoniac the human is demonized, what is then the value and meaning of such battle from the first place? As an Aga who are then the embodiment of authority in Eskibahçe, a superior man who considers himself as a measure of all things, he decays so easily to bestiality and commits such an outrageous act in the name of justice, and therefore his entire system of values should be questioned anew. In such a deception, he gradually loses the central consciousness of the self as well his faith.

If Kierkegaardian man as a result of his spiritual journey moves forward into the theological stage, preparing himself, as a good man, to enter the Kingdom of Heaven, Rustem Bey avoids this ultimate commitment, as he is a man who has lost everything. He acts neither as an ethical individual nor as a religious one, indulging himself instead into a sexual paradise, which seems most promising and most certain for him at this moment. His tendency of searching for the ultimate happiness of all has turned now into the quest of the absolute happiness for himself.

Mechanically he is still looking for God's blessing in his new enterprise. When he thought of finding a new Bride for his paradise he wanted "to enlist the assistance of God. In this he was perhaps, from the Deity's point of view, rather like those old friends who suddenly remember their affections when they have run out of money, or when one has suddenly become famous (…)" (de Bernières 221).

The signs of apocalypse develop even more with Rustem Bey's dehumanizing symptoms. In his search for a new Bride he abandons any expectation of affectivity and even his mental abilities his was so proud with. He pays for the woman he chooses from a bizarre place, from a garrulous stranger in the most awkward manner. He wants a Circassian Mistress, a virgin, who will help him throw off any sexual inhibitions and finally experience the earthly paradise he dreams of. He fails to discern that Leyla Hanim, who is expected to be the Circassian virgin, is in fact a Christian Greek girl, Ioanna, who is declared 15 years old and virgin each time a suitable man shows up. The Whore of Babylon is inverted into the Bride, and the real is

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no longer what it was, it loses its significance and it becomes what Jean Baudrillard would call "simulacrum".

The seduction episode with the special treat for evening meal full of aphrodisiac, the sea of glimmering and moving golden lights, the music Leyla played on her oud, and, above all, the chicken blood which would provide a guarantee of her virginity create the simulacrum of paradise that Rustem Bey has yearned so much for. It was an experience without precedence, "[it] was as if the stars had been captured from Heaven and been set in motion there in the small square of the lower world" (de Bernières 296). In this case, the state of being conscious or having a mind does not reveal any value, since a Reasonable mind cannot make such an experience possible.

In a way this fits the idea by Kierkegaard that Reason cannot dictate the whole reality, including ourselves. For him, Reason fails to grasp the whole of our Being, as in human preoccupation with self-consciousness frequently the issue of existence has been neglected. However, far from creating a breach between Reason and existence, Kierkegaard sets our knowledge in the finite and temporal experience connected to ourselves. Therefore, the pursuit for knowledge includes the preoccupation of understanding ourselves and our Being. In fact, in the quest for the validity of knowledge something important is omitted, and Kierkegaard tries to stress it: "For all this positive knowledge fails to express the situation of the knowing subject in existence" (Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* 75). In other words, Kierkegaard tries to transfer the centre of attention away from Reason and Knowledge, pointing instead to Reason and Existence, which, connected to our Being, are finite and temporal.

In this ontological issue, Kierkegaard makes the important distinction between "human being" and "self", claiming that "a human being is not yet a self" (Kierkegaard, *The Sickness unto Death* 43). He sees human being as a "synthesis" which is comprised of psyche and body. The self, however, is distinct primarily for having one more factor, called by Kierkegaard as "spirit". This third factor, spirit, stands for existence, which enables the synthesis to relate to itself and, consequently, points to the extent a human being might be a self through its "degree of reflection":

> There being here some degree of reflection, there is also some degree of heed payed to one's self. With this certain degree of reflection begins that act of separation in which the self becomes aware of itself as essentially different from the environment and the external world and their effect upon it. (Kierkegaard, *The Sickness unto Death* 85)

In this Kierkegaardian frame we observe how Louis de Bernieres' character, Rustem Bey, tries to determine the degree to which he, as a human being, could be qualified as a self. He thought earlier that he knows himself, but the confrontation with death – killing Selim and exposing his wife to be stoned almost to death – made him consider earlier labels insufficient, especially in the growing "end-time" signs of the World War I. He struggles to avoid the violent part of himself and become integrated, as a self, or as a person of faith. The experience of the earthly paradise he has created by himself with Leyla Hanim did not satisfy his yearning for the ultimate wholeness. The feeling of boredom, together with the unsettled preoccupation with the measure, temporality and finitude make him ponder more and more about the self.

In his quest for the self, as an embodied spirit, he consults the imam Abdulhamid hoca, who is expected to know everything about existence and transcendence, asking him how one is supposed to know when he has done anything wrong. This existential question is a mystery even for the imam. However, he tries to lead Rustem Bey toward making his own choice between wrongdoing and righteousness. As Abdulhamid hoca explains,

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> ‘wrongdoing must be understood by standing it against righteousness’ (…) ‘like right against left’. (…) ‘Righteousness is good morality, but it is also about which the soul feels tranquil and the heart feels tranquil. This is what the prophet said to Wabisa ibn Mabad.’
>
> ‘As for the wrongdoing, Nawwas ibn Saman said that he overheard the Prophet saying that wrongdoing is that which wavers in the soul and which you dislike people finding out about, and Wabisa ibn Mabad said that he heard the prophet say that wrongdoing is that which waver in the soul and moves to and fro in the breast, even though people again and again have given you their legal opinion in its favour.’ (de Bernières 358-59)

If at first Rustem Bey’s preoccupation focused around the pursuit for knowledge about his place in this world or in the other world, we see how this preoccupation grows into an attempt at understanding his self. This attempt is made with his awareness of “spirit” and through the “degrees of reflection”. The extent of reflection triggers the act of separation of the self from the petty other issues of environment and the external world. His first quest for God and his place in the apocalypse changes with the quest for his human wholeness.

He claims that he feels “a terrible wavering in [his] soul”, although everyone agrees that he was right and this make him question the justice of Transcendence (de Bernières 359). In the “end-time” signs, he though he will capture *that* moment when his self will be caught in that unique revolutionary present of supreme justice. But through reflection and questioning, in his own self he acquires a new awareness of truth about the Absolute.

In his encounter with Absolute in that *opportune moment* he has a revelation; as he says: “I have an opinion about holy war, which in general I must keep to myself. I have no wish to be known as a heretic. It is … that if a war can be holy, then God cannot. At best, a war can be only necessary” (de Bernières 385).

The leap to religion in the “theological stage”, as Kierkegaard claims, follows generally a period of repeated frustrations, which are acquired after a long and futile contact with this world. The human is moved by this futility of the world toward the only meaning of existence, that is, God.

Louis de Bernières seems to have deconstructed this last Kierkegaardian stage, since his character, Rustem Bey, instead of proving the presence and value of the divine grace, sees its futility. His revelation is a shocking discovery that the quest for meaning lacks any meaning in this unintelligible world. As a result of his spiritual journey, Rustem Bey avoids the ultimate commitment, reaching instead a spiritual awakening.

The novel *Birds Without Wings*, as many other postmodern novels, explores the fundamental issues of sacred and profane through the invocation of the apocalypse frame in order to honour, interrogate or reject them. Louis de Bernières revises the religious categories in order to achieve some secular conclusions concerning the postmodern world. The characters in the novel, in their search for “end-time” signs and sacred idols feel the futility of this initial quest and turn their gaze to the search of an authentic answer of a secular experience, the self. The ultimate quest for transcendence gains a new significance – a quest for wholeness, which, in the modern context of split personality and fragmentation, is extremely relevant. The cosmic battle of good and evil becomes the perennial inner conflict of the human between spirit and flesh, mind and emotion, meaning and meaningless. Through the explicitly religious eschatology, Louis de Bernières dramatizes some implicit secular concerns.

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