WORRYING ABOUT SEX WHEN THE WORLD ENDS: THE ETHICS OF ATTENTION IN ROONEY'S APOCALYPTIC PRESENT IN *BEAUTIFUL WORLD, WHERE ARE YOU*

Dr. Nitin Anandrao Mathankar
Late Vasantrao Kolhatkar Arts College, Rohana Dist. Wardha
Email: mathankar.nitin@gmail.com

Abstract :

This paper examines Sally Rooney's Beautiful World, Where Are You as a profound meditation on the ethics of attention in what the novel terms an "apocalyptic present." Rather than depicting a post-apocalyptic future, Rooney's work interrogates how contemporary subjects navigate daily life while acknowledging the imminent collapse of civilization. The central tension emerges through the novel's epistolary exchanges, where characters repeatedly question the moral legitimacy of focusing on personal concerns—particularly sex and friendship—amidst global crises. This paper argues that Rooney constructs an ethics of attention that neither dismisses personal concerns as trivial nor abandons political consciousness, but rather insists on the necessity of attending to both spheres simultaneously, even when such attention feels ethically compromised. Through close analysis of the novel's treatment of sexuality, historical consciousness, and beauty, the paper demonstrates how Rooney challenges the false dichotomy between the personal and political. The study reveals how the novel positions the persistent attention to personal relationships not as a failure of political consciousness but as a necessary practice of maintaining human connection through historical rupture. Ultimately, the paper contends that Rooney's work suggests that in an apocalyptic present, attending to beauty and connection isn't merely permissible—it's essential, representing what makes the world worth saving even as it appears to be ending.

Introduction :

Sally Rooney's *Beautiful World, Where Are You* presents a profound meditation on the ethics of attention in what the novel terms an "apocalyptic present." Rather than depicting a post-apocalyptic future, Rooney's work interrogates how contemporary subjects navigate daily life while acknowledging the imminent collapse of civilization as we know it. The central tension of the novel emerges through its epistolary exchanges, where characters repeatedly question the moral legitimacy of focusing on personal concerns—particularly sex and friendship—amidst global crises. As one character articulates this dilemma: "I agree it seems vulgar, decadent, even epistemically violent, to invest energy in the trivialities of sex and friendship when human civilisation is facing collapse. But at the same time, that is what I do every day" (Rooney 78). This paper argues that Rooney constructs an ethics of attention that neither dismisses personal concerns as trivial nor abandons political consciousness, but rather insists on the necessity of attending to both spheres simultaneously, even when such attention

feels ethically compromised.

The Apocalyptic Present and the Crisis of Attention :

Rooney's novel establishes what I term an "apocalyptic present"—a condition where the end of civilization is not some distant future event but an immediate, lived reality that permeates everyday consciousness. This differs from traditional apocalyptic narratives that position catastrophe in the future; instead, Rooney's characters inhabit what one describes as "standing in the last lighted room before the darkness, bearing witness to something" (124). This framing creates what Lauren Berlant might call a "cruel optimism"—an attachment to ways of living that are simultaneously sustaining and destructive (Berlant 1). The characters' persistent focus on romance and sex while acknowledging planetary collapse exemplifies this cruel optimism, where maintaining personal connections becomes both necessary for survival and potentially complicit in ignoring larger systemic crises.

The novel's epistolary structure—primarily email exchanges between the characters Alice and Eileen—foregrounds the crisis of attention as a formal concern. These emails oscillate between mundane details of romantic encounters and profound philosophical questions about the state of the world. This structure mirrors what Rita Felski describes as "the slow, patient work of attention" that characterizes contemporary life under late capitalism (Felski 87). Rooney's characters struggle with what to attend to: "Maybe we're just born to love and worry about the people we know, and to go on loving and worrying even when there are more important things we should be doing. And if that means the human species is going to die out, isn't it in a way a nice reason to die out, the nicest reason you can imagine?" (Rooney 189). This rhetorical question encapsulates the novel's central ethical dilemma: whether attending to personal relationships constitutes a meaningful form of resistance or merely a distraction from necessary political action.

The Ethics of Sexual Attention in a Collapsing World :

One of the most provocative aspects of Rooney's ethics of attention concerns sexuality. Her characters repeatedly question the morality of focusing on sexual desire when "humanity [is] on the cusp of extinction." Alice writes: "I have a terrible crush on him and get very excited and idiotic when he shows me affection. So of course in the midst of everything, the state of the world being what it is, humanity on the cusp of extinction, here I am writing another email about sex and friendship. What else is there to live for?" (115). This passage reveals the tension between what Rooney presents as competing ethical imperatives: the moral obligation to attend to global crises versus the embodied reality of sexual desire.

Rooney challenges the assumption that sexual attention is inherently trivial or politically regressive. Through Alice's reflections, she suggests that sexual desire operates with an "exhausting and debilitating power... compared to the limited ways of thinking and speaking about sexuality" (82). This gap between experience and articulation becomes a site where the ethics of attention must be negotiated. Rather than dismissing sexual concerns as irrelevant to political crises, Rooney suggests that how we attend to sexuality reveals our relationship to

power structures: "How are we ever supposed to determine what kind of sex we enjoy, and why? Or what sex means to us, and how much of it we want to have, and in what contexts? What can we learn about ourselves through these aspects of our sexual personalities?" (81).

This questioning aligns with Audre Lorde's argument that the erotic represents "an assertion of the importance of our experience" and "the sharing of joy and power" (Lorde 55). Rooney's characters implicitly engage with this framework, suggesting that attending to sexual desire isn't merely self-indulgent but potentially a form of political consciousness. When Eileen writes to Alice about her sexual experiences, she frames them within a larger understanding of power dynamics and emotional vulnerability: "She loves you very much, but sometimes she's anxious that she doesn't really know you. Because you can be distant. Or not distant, but you can be closed off" (85). Here, sexual attention becomes a practice of ethical relationality, requiring the same care and consideration that political action demands.

The Collapse of Civilizations Past and Present :

Rooney complicates the contemporary apocalyptic narrative by situating current crises within longer historical trajectories of civilizational collapse. In one pivotal passage, a character reflects: "After the 'collapse of civilisation', many of them moved elsewhere, and some may have died, but for the most part their lives probably did not change much. They went on growing crops. Sometimes the harvest was good and sometimes it wasn't. And in another corner of the continent, those people were your ancestors and mine—not the palace-dwellers, but the peasants. Our rich and complex international networks of production and distribution have come to an end before, but here we are, you and I, and here is humanity" (123).

This historical framing serves two crucial functions in Rooney's ethics of attention. First, it challenges the contemporary tendency toward exceptionalism—the belief that our current crises are uniquely catastrophic. As Dipesh Chakrabarty argues in *The Climate of History*, the climate crisis requires us to "provincialize Europe" and recognize that historical time operates differently across cultures (Chakrabarty 205). Rooney's reference to past civilizational collapses similarly provincializes the present moment, suggesting that human beings have repeatedly navigated the end of worlds while continuing to attend to the immediate concerns of daily life.

Second, this historical perspective reframes the ethics of attention by suggesting that attending to personal concerns during civilizational collapse isn't a failure of political consciousness but a pattern of human resilience. The character's assertion that "here we are, you and I, and here is humanity" implies that the persistence of ordinary life amid collapse isn't merely passive survival but an active continuation of human meaning-making. This perspective challenges what Lauren Berlant calls "cruel optimism"—the attachment to conditions that simultaneously sustain and harm us—by suggesting that attending to personal relationships might be less a form of false consciousness than a necessary practice of maintaining human connection through historical rupture (Berlant 24).

The Problem of the Contemporary Novel :

Rooney's novel self-consciously engages with what it calls "the problem of the

contemporary novel," which the text identifies as "simply the problem of contemporary life" (78). This metafictional dimension reveals Rooney's awareness that her own work participates in the very ethical dilemma she explores. The novel critiques contemporary fiction that "works by suppressing the truth of the world—packing it tightly down underneath the glittering surface of the text. And we can care once again, as we do in real life, whether people break up or stay together—if, and only if, we have successfully forgotten about all the things more important than that, i.e. everything" (137).

This critique positions Rooney's own work in a precarious space: if the contemporary novel requires forgetting global crises to attend to personal relationships, then how can a novel simultaneously attend to both? Rooney's solution lies in the novel's structure and tone, which refuse to resolve this tension. The epistolary sections maintain an unresolved dialogue between personal and political concerns, while the third-person narrative sections often depict characters moving through landscapes that bear the marks of both natural beauty and industrial decay. This formal strategy embodies what Rita Felski calls "postcritical reading"—an approach that "does not reject critique but seeks to expand the range of our engagements with texts" (Felski 15). Rooney's novel doesn't offer a solution to the ethics of attention but rather creates a space where the tension itself becomes the subject of attention.

The novel's title, drawn from Schiller's poem "Die Götter Griechenlandes" ("The Gods of Greece"), further contextualizes this tension. As Rooney explains in the novel's afterword, the phrase "Schöne Welt, wo bist du?" ("Beautiful World, Where Are You?") represents a lament for lost beauty and meaning (272). This reference suggests that Rooney situates her contemporary concerns within a much longer tradition of grappling with the loss of meaning in a changing world. The title's invocation of lost beauty frames the novel's central question: how do we attend to beauty and meaning when the world appears to be ending?

Attention as Resistance :

Perhaps the most radical contribution of Rooney's ethics of attention is its suggestion that attending to personal relationships might constitute a form of political resistance rather than mere distraction. When Eileen writes: "Because when we should have been reorganising the distribution of the world's resources and transitioning collectively to a sustainable economic model, we were worrying about sex and friendship instead. Because we loved each other too much and found each other too interesting" (189), she frames this attention not as a failure but as a potentially redemptive human impulse.

This perspective aligns with what José Muñoz calls "the ethics of utopia"—the idea that "the here and now is insufficient for queer life" and that we must "imagine a future beyond the present" (Muñoz 1). Rooney's characters embody this ethics through their persistent attention to each other despite their awareness of global crises. Their relationships become sites where alternative ways of being together are practiced, even if imperfectly. As one character reflects: "We spend our lives trying to know that difference and to live by it, trying to love other people instead of hating them, and there is nothing else that matters on the earth" (138).

Rooney complicates this position, however, by acknowledging the class dimensions of

this ethics of attention. When Alice writes about contemporary novelists who "complain about the most boring things in the world—not enough publicity, or bad reviews, or someone else making more money. Who cares? And then they go away and write their sensitive little novels about 'ordinary life'. The truth is they know nothing about ordinary life" (120), she highlights how attention itself is structured by privilege. Those who can afford to focus on personal relationships while ignoring global crises often do so from positions of relative security, while others have no choice but to attend to immediate survival needs.

This class analysis brings Rooney's ethics of attention into dialogue with Nancy Fraser's critique of recognition politics, which argues that "the politics of recognition" must be accompanied by "the politics of redistribution" (Fraser 24). Rooney's novel suggests that an adequate ethics of attention must account for both dimensions—attending to personal relationships while also recognizing the structural inequalities that shape who gets to attend to what.

The Possibility of Beauty After the End :

The novel's most challenging contribution to the ethics of attention concerns the possibility of beauty in an apocalyptic present. One character argues: "I know that you personally feel the world ceased to be beautiful after the fall of the Soviet Union... But do you ever experience a sort of diluted, personalised version of that feeling, as if your own life, your own world, has slowly but perceptibly become an uglier place?" (145). This question suggests that the loss of beauty is both historical and personal, collective and individual.

Rooney responds to this challenge not by denying the reality of historical loss but by insisting on the possibility of finding beauty in the midst of collapse. When Eileen reflects on childhood spaces of imagination, "the cowshed behind their house, the overgrown reaches of the garden, gaps behind hedges, the damp shale running down to the river," she identifies these places as representing "the possibility of imagination, a possibility so much finer in itself and more delicate than anything she had ever managed to imagine" (198). These spaces of beauty persist despite historical trauma, suggesting that beauty isn't merely a relic of a lost world but an ongoing possibility.

This perspective aligns with what Elaine Scarry calls "the moral status of beauty," which argues that beauty "leads us to bestow care on what we find beautiful" and thus "can be a cause of justice" (Scarry 3). Rooney's characters, despite their awareness of global crises, continue to attend to beauty—not as an escape from reality but as a practice of care that extends to the world itself. When a character writes about Rome, "dark fragrant orange trees, little white cups of coffee, blue afternoons, golden evenings," they engage in an act of attention that refuses to let the world end without first acknowledging its beauty (121).

Conclusion :

Sally Rooney's *Beautiful World, Where Are You* develops an ethics of attention that deliberately maintains the unresolved tension between personal relationships and political crises within an apocalyptic present. The novel rejects the false dichotomy between the

personal and political, arguing that persistent attention to intimate connections like sex and friendship is not a failure of political consciousness but a necessary practice for sustaining humanity through historical rupture. Rooney refuses to offer easy resolutions, insisting that this very tension is essential for ethical living. By acknowledging civilizational collapse while simultaneously attending to enduring beauty and human connection, the novel suggests that such attention is fundamental; it sustains the capacity to care about anything at all and ultimately makes the world worth saving, challenging the notion that personal concerns are a distraction from global catastrophe.

Works Cited :

- Berlant, Lauren. *Cruel Optimism*. Duke UP, 2011.
- Chakrabarty, Dipesh. *The Climate of History: Four Essays*. U of Chicago P, 2021.
- Felski, Rita. *The Limits of Critique*. U of Chicago P, 2015.
- Fraser, Nancy. *Scales of Justice: Reimagining Political Space in a Globalizing World*. Columbia UP, 2009.
- Lorde, Audre. *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*. Crossing Press, 2007.
- Muñoz, José Esteban. *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. NYU Press, 2009.
- Rooney, Sally. *Beautiful World, Where Are You*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2021.
- Scarry, Elaine. *On Beauty and Being Just*. Princeton UP, 2001.