

Earth Abides and COVID-19 Pandemic: A Critical Analysis

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Abstract

There is literature and philosophy on viruses, plagues, epidemics, and pandemics. *Earth Abides* (1949) is a masterpiece of the science fiction-post-apocalyptic subgenre by an American writer George R. Stewart. *Earth Abides* approaches the wake of civilization's extinction in a very rational, functional, logical manner. This paper examines the novel as apocalyptic during the COVID-19 epidemic by looking Stewart's network of scientific inspirations. Coronaviruses are a group of viruses that may cause anything from a common cold to more severe diseases such as Middle East Respiratory Syndrome and Extreme Acute Respiratory Syndrome. In 2019, a novel coronavirus (COVID-19) found in Wuhan, China. The COVID-19 pandemic rocked the global economy, causing severe economic destruction across the globe. COVID-19 has inflamed divisiveness and politics worldwide, with heated disputes erupting about who should blame and who should assisted first. One of the concerns is the establishment of no-entry enclaves, which would further restrict international trade. The story of *Earth Abides*, set among the few survivors of a planet-wide pandemic, provides a view into the status of an interdisciplinary human ecosystem at a critical juncture. In light of the COVID-19 pandemic, this paper examined the American novel *Earth Abides* and provided a plausible vision of the future. Ish (protagonist) conquered by science, attempting to exist in a world in which he may be the last human, and relates the story of how scientific goals contributed to the abolition of human civilization. The researcher highlights how the fiction portrays reality and how individuals are at fault for the deterioration of their environment.

Keywords: Apocalyptic novel, scientific novel, COVID-19 pandemic, wilderness, environmental crisis, reel versus real

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Introduction

The COVID-19 Pandemic has wrecked and halted the whole globe. It is one of the worst pandemics in history, threatening the growth of science and technology. Despite the development of antimicrobial drugs, infectious illnesses and microorganisms continue to frighten people. Since the beginning of time, literature has dabbled with epidemics. These health issues, such as cholera, typhus, measles, plague, and TB, have impacted on both personal and socioeconomic relationships. Today, as the world joins forces to combat COVID 19, people are realising the importance of literature about the history of epidemics depicted in literature.

Earth Abides is a tale about Isherwood Williams written by George R. Stewart. The story follows Isherwood as he adjusts to a world devastated by the Great Catastrophe, which wiped out a large part of the populace. Isherwood is in college and working on his thesis as the plot begins. He is bitten by a rattlesnake but he survives the bite and the subsequent irrational fear. He has no idea how bad things have been in the country. All federal activities have halted by the vice president of the United States. Isherwood returns to his parent's house after his recovery. By the side of the track, he discovers a dead body with a newspaper explaining the Great Catastrophe. When he returns home, he learns that his parents have vanished.

Isherwood Williams or Ish the protagonist of the story *Earth Abides*, a student, returning from a solo field trip deep inside the mountains, healing from a snake bite, only to discover that a plague has destroyed the majority of the world's countries. Naturally, he seeks out other survivors. The few people he encounters, dislikes or believes are incapable of surviving the winter or are simply incapable of coping with the shock. It's the same story as ever, as he embarks on a cross-country journey in search of other refugees for whom he will restore civilization until he returns home and eventually meets a lady, Emma or Em, who is similarly agreeable to him. They choose and declare themselves married and vow to do their part to repopulate the world and remain alive, so things of love no longer exist. They are joined by a few other survivors, which marks the start of their little tribes. Ish aspires to uphold civilization and the ancient days, and he works hard. But, as he soon discovers, re-establishing society is neither simple nor common.

They call themselves the Tribe, and as the women in the community have children, they increase in number over the next few years. They eat processed food scavenged from supermarkets and also find many of the items they need in those shops. Isherwood remains confident that they will be able to restore the civilization he grew up in, even though he does little to ensure that it happens. As two of the Tribe's younger men journey through the United States, they learn that there are several peoples, many of which are trying their best to survive. Any people get guidance from faith. Then, a man named Charlie pays a visit and takes typhoid fever with him. Five members of Isherwood's Tribe, including Joey, die due to an outbreak.

Isherwood and Em begin counting the years after the Great Catastrophe. They chisel a record of the years with the hammer Isherwood found when he was attacked by the snake. The hammer grows in importance to the Tribe until it is revered as a sacred relic. Isherwood attempts to stop it at first but then decides that if the hammer brings them peace, they should revere it. Another significant shift in Isherwood's perspective at this stage is that, rather than pining for the

civilization they once had, he now concentrates his efforts and hopes on learning new ideas that would better their lives.

He (Ish) shows the younger members of the Tribe how to make bows and arrows, as well as how to create a fire without using matches. After four generations, the Tribe members have honed their skills in all of these areas and rely less and less on what they can find in supermarkets. As Isherwood is about to die at the end of the novel, he is asked to leave the hammer to someone else in the Tribe. This companionship provides Isherwood and the Tribe with vital interpersonal bonds that help their continuous adaptation, in addition to integrating skills and experience. Isherwood eventually ceases daydreaming about the civilization he once knew because he now has the companionship he craves. The Tribe as a whole adapts to not only survive but to prosper. Ish is an older man after the book. His contemporaries have all passed away.

Younger members of the tribe have inherited power, despite their lack of knowledge of the old civilization. They have been skilled hunters, fishers, and cultivators. The majority of the Bay Area has been ravaged by fires. They use bows and arrows and behave similarly to the early California Indians. Ish is respected and cared for even though no one needs the expertise he has from the past. Ish learns after his death that the civilization he encountered was but one episode of Earth's long history. "Men come and go, but the earth abides," he consoles himself with a quote from Ecclesiastes.

Review of Literature

The covid-19 pandemic is the most severe public health epidemic of our day, posing the most significant threat since World War II. The virus, which first appeared in Asia in late 2019, is now present. Every day, new cases emerge in Africa, the Americas, and Europe. Though Covid-19 is undoubtedly natural, how it spreads is heavily influenced by social, political, and cultural influences. Pandemics have historically been blamed on both supernatural and naturalistic explanations. Although epidemics usually compensated for in biblical terms in the ancient world, the notion of contagion also persisted (Feder 2013).

Howard (2008) examined supernatural theories for the 1918 Spanish flu outbreak, including references to sin and an eschatological symbol of Christ's second coming. Pandemics signal the fragility of life and the universe, uncertainty, paralyzing fear that the world is disintegrating, a sense of alienation, and serious questions of significance, resulting in existential crises. Self-isolation and quarantine generate a feeling of being cut off from the environment and the environment at large, resulting in anomie.

As a source of revelatory literature concentrating on the end times, the apocalyptic tradition deeply entrenched in Jewish and Christian traditions (Derrida, 1982; Derrida et al., 1984). This genre and practice have reasserted themselves as a critical way of thinking about philosophy and education in the 'end times,' a geological, nuclear, and biological extinction-threatened Anthropocene epoch (Peters, 2011).

Garrett (2020) examined American preppers or people who brace for impending disasters by burying themselves in underground bunkers. According to Garrett, the term "prepping" refers

to practices of forecasting and responding to imminent disasters. Pagels (2012), apocalyptic literature, which contains dreams, prophecies, and projections of cataclysm, is primarily political, progressive and reactionary, liberal and traditional.

Akhter (2021) has pointed out the apocalyptic literature, “During this crisis, literature also plays an important role and apocalyptic literature has shown the disastrous consequences if humans didn’t stop their behaviour and attitude towards the world” (p. 235).

Lindsey and Carson (1970) claimed a close association between end-of-time prophecy and contemporary affairs, and it quickly became the most popular non-fiction novel of the 1970s.

In literature, television, and public discourse, the apocalyptic genre has become a popular cultural staple. Apocalypticism continues to be here to linger in modernity, rather than dissipating, and may even be escalating. Science is the primary prism by which humans perceive their environments in modernity. Although technology offers optimism for a new future through technological advances, the prospect of an artificial apocalypse grows ever more likely, and dystopian narratives shift from hope and purpose to the actual reality of humanity's self-destruction.

According to Goldberg (2020), the Covid-19 crisis has sparked philosophical discussions about how we can think about the after-Covid universe. The Covid problem is exposing health-care disparities, class distinctions, unfair power-sharing, and the fact that America's most valuable jobs are among the lowest-paid. Health disparities are highlighted, and the epidemic has highlighted social disadvantages and injustice faced by members of the black, Asian, and minority ethnic groups.

Akhter, (2021) has shown Coronavirus as, “Corona-virus disease 2019 (COVID-19) emerged from the People's Republic of China's Hubei Province and has been declared as a global pandemic worldwide by WHO. This virus has infected most of the countries all around the globe” (p. 1).

Davis (2020), a political economist and sociologist, talks about the pandemic as:

It will take years or decades for the significance of 2020 to be fully understood. But we can be sure that, as an authentically global crisis, it is also a global turning point. There is a great deal of emotional, physical and financial pain in the immediate future. But a crisis of this scale will never be truly resolved until many of the fundamentals of our social and economic life have been remade. (p. n.p)

It showed how this pandemic had left a permanent scar on our physical and mental life and cannot be forgotten easily.

Some also speculated that the pandemic would be a once-in-a-generation chance to remake civilization and create a prosperous world. Although no one can predict how the novel Coronavirus would alter our lives, the near future is likely to be very different from the one we knew before

covid-19 in terms of how we live, function, and worship. Many countries have been forced to rethink their social policies, especially of social security and healthcare, as a result of Covid-19. There has been a shift in emphasis from benefit to life security. Attempts to assist workers in the informal sector can help to reduce inequality.

Akhter (2021) points out the role of fiction as,

Fiction is a means of entirely describing destinies, feelings, circumstances and interpersonal relationships seems much more appropriate. This is because skilful fiction does not merely tell, depict, describe and explain but eventually involves and captivates the reader. This way, it causes a kind of emotional intimacy between the reader and the fictional characters which lets the reader approach differently and allows different conclusions. However, this seems to be constructive only when fiction claims to be realistic in one way or another e.g. historically accurate, politically relevant or critical. (p. 596)

It makes clear how fiction represents our feelings and emotions. There is a close connection between the text and the reader.

Williams (1988) points out, “Dystopias are negative utopias, images of a future so terribly imperfect that, given a chance, people would prefer to flee as far as their wherewithal can possibly take them” (p. 384).

The Road (2006), in hard times, offers a unique viewpoint on the supposed dark side of human experience.

Post-apocalyptic literature is a disturbingly topical comment about the human experience because of its recent appearance in the literary imagination of a post-nuclear western world. Since World War II, humanity's understanding of its disruptive potential and desire to bring the world to an end has been as clear as ever. *Earth Abides* is a post-apocalyptic story in which humanity is almost wiped out by a lethal plague and forced to adapt to a future without technology.

The Handmaid's Tale (1986) by Margaret Atwood depicts a world that has been too toxic for human conception.

Objectives

The main objectives of this research work are:

- To explore the relationship between science and literature.
- To draw a relation between reel with real.
- To analyze the concept of apocalyptic literature.
- To build a foundation of realistic literature.

Research Methodology

Comparative and Analytical Approaches has chosen as the study's approaches. To explain the psychology of various characters in the novel, the article includes several apocalyptic perspectives. All of these approaches are relevant for the current research.

Analysis

Pandemics partly frighten us because they transform less real concerns about globalization, cultural transition, and community identities into real challenges. Writers and readers will discuss the non-medical aspects of infectious disease fears through representations of contagious diseases. Despite popular belief, pandemic fiction does not provide readers with a foreshadowing of the future. Instead, metaphors about infectious illness represent our darkest, most nebulous concerns about the present moment and discuss various potential responses to those fears.

George Stewart's novel set in a post-apocalyptic world decimated by infectious diseases. The novel is seen as a case study to further explain the societal reaction to COVID-19. The new pandemic heightens concerns about our societies' relative insecurity. *Earth Abides* coverage asserts that the text is uniquely applicable to the COVID-19 scenario. This response approaches Stewart's novel as if it foretells what will occur due to the COVID-19 crisis. Some news sources about the novel have also referred to the novel as a blueprint for how we could react to an apocalyptic pandemic. In *Earth Abides*, such concerns are expressed in scenes in which cultures must redefine their relationship with one another. The pandemic in the novel stresses to the characters not how to react to a virus, but how powerfully intertwined they are precisely what COVID-19 is doing to us right now. Part of what pandemic fiction illuminates is how our humanity was diminished by threats of invasion and the potential threat of outsiders.

Ish travels into the desert to get away from humans, and this is when *Earth Abides* starts. It works nearly too well, as Ish learns as he returns home after being trapped for weeks while healing from a rattlesnake bite and meets almost no one. The human race has been decimated by an epidemic that, "mankind seems merely to have been removed rather neatly, with a minimum of disturbance" (Stewart, 1949, p. 16). The homes are deserted, the shops are deserted, and as if everyone has died without a trace except for the built environment, infrastructure, and everything else mankind has done to alter its surroundings.

The vital plot follows a standard plotline in which a tragedy necessitates and offers the opportunity to rebuild society from the bottom up. When Ish has fully accepted the epidemic's reality, he begins travelling, first from city to city and eventually throughout the world, experiencing societal breakdown everywhere. His trip is slowed by impassable roads caused by falling trees and deteriorating ground; he encounters a few survivors along the way, but the environment is still deserted. Ish encounters a previously wealthy couple in Manhattan's Upper West Side who do everything they can to maintain a sense of bourgeois normalcy; the only changes in their lives are the inability to ice drinks and the difficulties of meeting other couples for Bridge. Ish returns to his house on San Lupo Drive, just outside of San Francisco, and subsists on scavenged food for a while.

The distinction is essential in this post-human world. Stewart is wondering what will happen if mankind vanished; the solution has serious consequences for considering humanity's location in the earth's overlapping processes. If formerly human ecosystems soon recover to their pre-human state, humans' dominion over the planet has been a disturbance of anything that may have followed a natural course. If, as appears to be the case at the novel's conclusion, a new sort of non-human existence emerges that reacts to and assimilates humanity's traces, the human period

has simply become one dominant environmental condition with worldwide repercussions, but one that is less of a “disturbance” than an impact. In this case, the globe will survive, but it will be a new earth; “pure nature” is no longer so pristine that is, it is no longer so non-human and must instead reconcile with the built environment rather than simply recovering it.

The 1949 novel, which is a seminal text of the American post-apocalyptic canon, can be read in environmental words that are more nuanced than the simplistic image of a “return-to-wilderness” that is commonly attributed to it. Rather, it is a human ecology thought experiment in which the size and scope of humanity's effect on the world are evaluated by abruptly destroying it. Ish, the novel's protagonist, is one of the few survivors of a global plague, a combination ecologist-geographer who seems almost eager to see the results of the experiment as, “What would happen to the world and its creatures without man? That he was left to see!” (p. 25). Ish finds himself all alone in the world and his feelings are,

He had started out in the morning with a Robinson Crusoe feeling that he would welcome any human companionship. He ended with the certainty that he would rather be alone until he found someone more congenial than the day had offered” (p. 47).

Earth Abides envisions post-human ecological succession as the framework for an ecologically rooted conception of historical succession, a term fundamental to ecological science that explains the shifting composition of plant and animal species in an ecosystem over time as it advances from barren ground to mature forest as it advances from barren ground to mature forest. As nature either reclaims or just appears among the relics of the manmade world that civilization has left behind, Earth Abides returns to unique successional imagery on a regular basis.

Rethinking *Earth Abides'* environmental thinking is a way to rethink the ecological possibilities of post-apocalyptic speculation more generally, both in science-fictional terms and in terms of the wider environmentalist context in which such speculation appears. The parameters of the human-nature balance have been drastically altered, and nature is free to do as it will with what remains. Street cracks widen and become havens for weeds and bushes as they erode. As the natural re-emerges from the ruins of civilization, Ish waits with bated breath to see what direction the renaissance of the natural will follow and what its endpoint, if one exists, will look like when rediscovering a way to survive inside the new nature.

A “Killer-Type Virus” Ends the World! By Pat Joseph talks about the novel as, “the 1949 novel *Earth Abides*, about a viral pandemic that wipes out most of humanity” (Pat, 1).

In that generation there will be neither father nor mother, nor wife, nor child, nor friend. But it will be as in the ancient tales when the gods reared up a new people from stones or dragons' teeth, and they were all strangers with strange faces, and no man knew his fellow's face. (Stewart, 1949, p. 73)

The novel follows the misery of the tribe he assembles around him, beginning with Em, who serves as both his wife and a mother figure, and continuing with Ezra and his multiple wives—a start that succinctly illustrates the novel's sexual politics. They are accompanied by the working-class

George and Mary, and then by Evie, “a woman whose disabilities give her the unsettling title half-witted” (p. 143). They endure and respond to improvements in the built world when lighting, automobiles, sanitation, and the calendar fail. With the exception of Joey, his youngest son and the heir apparent of the academic legacy Ish self-consciously reflects, Ish suffers and eventually fails to pass on the fundamentals of reading, writing, algebra, and history to the rising second generation. When a stranger infected with Scarlet Fever appears, another plague kills a few members of the tribe. Most importantly for Ish, it destroys Joey and, with him, the illusion of an academic upper-class capable of easily restoring modernity. The novel fast-forwards through the years that follow, lingering on Ish's last days as a tribal elder and demigod. We can see that the tribe has evolved from scavenging to a hunting culture. It bears no resemblance to twentieth-century American society.

A “Killer-Type Virus” Ends the World! By Pat Joseph, “When COVID-19 arrived on our shores; there were not even enough masks and gowns for doctors and nurses to protect themselves from infected patients, let alone ventilators to keep critically ill patients breathing” (p. 2). Stewart explained the same as:

Civilization had retreated, but it had carried its wounded along, and had faced the foe. Doctors and nurses had stayed at their posts, and thousands more had enlisted as helpers. Whole areas of cities had been designated as hospital zones and points of concentration. All ordinary business had ceased, but food was still handled on an emergency basis. Even with a third of the population dead, telephone service along with water, light, and power still remained in most cities. (Stewart, 1949, p. 15)

Coronavirus and World

China: On December 1, 2019, the first person suspected of being ill as a result of the new outbreak was in Wuhan. On December 31, a formal disease alert was issued. On the same day, the outbreak was reported to the World Health Organization. The Chinese government focused on COVID-19 avoidance and control from January 7.

Italy: On January 30, Italy, a member of the European Union and a renowned tourist destination, was added to the list of coronavirus-affected countries after two positive COVID-19 cases were discovered among Chinese tourists. In Europe and outside of China, Italy has the highest number of coronavirus infections.

Iran: Iran reported the first confirmed cases of SARS-CoV-2 infection on February 19th, when two people died later that day, according to the Medical Education and Ministry of Health. All concerts and other cultural events have been cancelled for one week by the Ministry of Islamic Culture and Guidance.

France: On March 12, the number of coronavirus cases registered in France increased dramatically. Cases have been registered in Paris, Amiens, Bordeaux, and Eastern Haute-Savoie. On February 15, the first corona viral death occurred in France, making it the first death in Europe. On February 26, the death of a 60-year-old French national in Paris was confirmed for the second time.

Germany: Germany has a well-known Regional Pandemic Strategy that outlines the functions and activities of healthcare system actors in the event of a major epidemic. The federal government, such as the Robert Koch Center, and the German governments are in charge of epidemic monitoring. The German states are preparing for an epidemic. By March 2020, the federal plan for treating the new coronavirus outbreak will have been extended. This strategy has four main goals: (i) to reduce death and morbidity; (ii) to ensure the welfare of ill people; (iii) to secure essential health services; and (iv) to provide succinct and accurate information to decision-makers, the media, and the public.

United States: The first case of coronavirus in the United States was verified in Washington on January 21, 2020, by a person who traveled to Wuhan and returned to the United States. Another person who had visited Wuhan recorded the second incidence in Illinois. Novel coronavirus infections have been found in California, Arizona, Connecticut, Illinois, Texas, Wisconsin, and Washington, among other places.

India: The first case of COVID-19 in India was registered on January 30, 2020. The Indian government has ordered a nationwide lockout to commence on March 24, 2020, with a staggered unlock commencing on June 1, 2020. Around half of all registered cases in the globe are in Mumbai, Delhi, Ahmedabad, Chennai, Pune, and Kolkata. On June 10, 2020, India's recoveries surpassed active events for the first time. India beat the US record for the most instances reported in a single day on August 30, 2020, with over 78,000 cases reported, and established a new record on September 16, 2020, with approximately 98,000 cases reported. India's case fatality rate was 2.3 percent as of 30 August 2020, compared to 4.7 percent globally. As of September 2020, India had the most confirmed cases in Asia and the second-highest number of confirmed cases in the world, after the United States. A second wave hit India in April 2021, placing healthcare services under severe strain. By late April, the government had registered almost 400,000 new illnesses and 4,000 fatalities every day, raising concerns about undercounting.

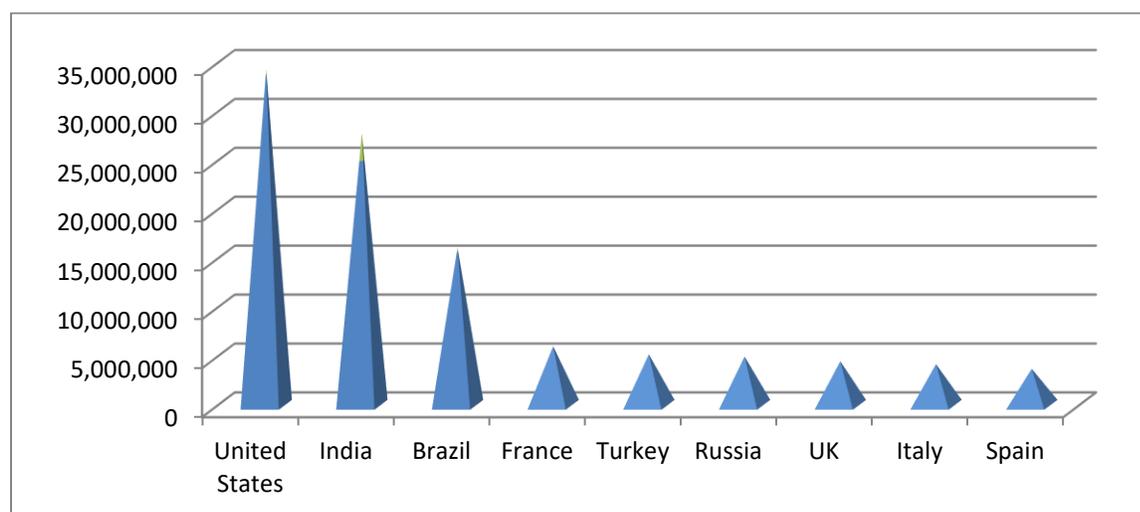


Figure 1. Countries with highest COVID-19 cases

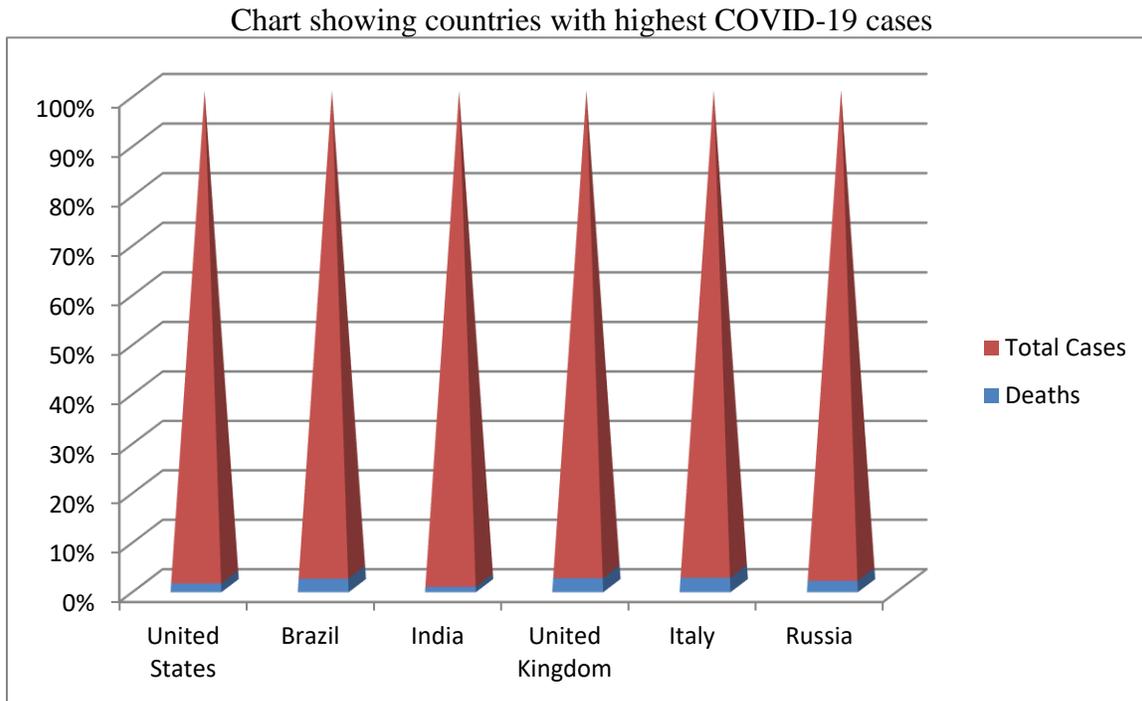


Figure 2. Countries with highest COVID-19 deaths

The last words of Ish from *Earth Abides* are:

Then, though his sight was now very dim, he looked again at the young men. “They will commit me to the earth,” he thought. “Yet I also commit them to the earth. There is nothing else by which men live. Men go and come, but earth abides”. (p. 302)

It clearly explained that if we the humans didn’t stop our materialistic activities soon this earth will vanish.

Conclusion

Earth Abides follows Ish, one of the few survivors of a nuclear holocaust that wiped out America and perhaps the rest of the world. The novel recreates a new world and the names ‘Ish’ and ‘Em’, the main characters, are derived from the Hebrew words for ‘man’ and ‘mother’. The story’s hero is Ish and his self-identification as the first man, and an apocalypse survivor, that creates a deliberate alignment of his character with Adam. The reader follows Ish’s transformation from a man desperate for human company to someone who begins to take on the task of recolonizing the whole human race, albeit in a manner that upholds western universal principles. The reader follows Ish’s transformation from a man desperate for human company to someone who begins to take on the task of recolonizing the whole human race, albeit in a manner that upholds western universal principles. As a result, Ish's importance as the last man as well as the first is entirely calculated in terms of an Enlightenment contribution to education and erudition; his avowed intellectual supremacy is the criteria by which he takes command over a motley crew of survivors. Ironically, it quickly becomes clear that Ish is the only one who ever cares for the

survival of this antiquated ideology. The novel offers a comforting worldview in which man is once again returned to the head of the family by restoring to old world ideals in a patriarchal re-stratification of culture. The story Ish says is about more than just nature's revival. As his beloved bridges rust, water mains break, and rivers run dry, there's also the gradual devolution of human infrastructure. Food is plentiful, and refrigeration and ice are no longer required. The electricity eventually fades away. The sun marks the passage of time, leaving a record of years carved into stone. Many of these elements, including the resurgent wilderness, the crumbling of man's handiwork, the raging flames, and even the Berkeley landscape, can be seen in a much earlier dystopian book. The COVID-19 pandemic has halted the whole world and has infected every corner of the world. This pandemic is the deadliest pandemic in human history—wiped out all the fields of humanity, as in *Earth Abides*. Although it is possible that high-speed world travel hastens disease transmission, the speed of knowledge and the effectiveness of current drugs such as vaccines and antibiotics can, in principle, prevent the worst-case scenario.

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