



Pandemic : Mirrored in Literature

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Pandemic plays as much vital role in shaping literature as literature plays in framing our responses to the pandemics. Pandemic makes literature more sensitive to its disastrous consequences on humanity. Literature provides us deepest and insightful record of events during pandemics and tries to provide consolation in times of need. Pandemics are not unfamiliar to us. We, still, are undergoing one epidemic like Covid-19 which confined people in isolation, made street empty, shoppes closed and introduced a new mode of communication like virtual meeting and seeing our loved one in small corner of the screen.

Since time immemorial, epidemic has been a mass killer. Epidemics like Malaria, Cholera, Plague, Black death, Smallpox, Influenza etc took the lives of millions of people all over the world. These devastating pestilence and pandemic have impacted the lives of many writers around the world and manifested in the form of stories, poems and novels. These detailed descriptions give readers realistic insights into the restrictions and changes that these circumstances bring with it. These literary creations provide us comfort and solace and also help us to understand better the difficult situation and make us realize that we are not alone.

Ranging from the classics to contemporary writings, the list of pandemic literature offers something in the way of uncertain comfort, and a guide for what happens next. From Homer's 'Iliad' and Boccaccio's 'Decameron' to Stephen king's 'The Sand' and Ahamad Ali's 'Twilight in Delhi', stories about pandemic offeres much in the way of catharis, ways of processing strong emotion and political commentary on how human beings respond to public crisis.

Homer's 'Iliad' opens with a plague visted upon the Greek Camp at Troy to punish the Greeks for Agamemon's enslavement of chrryseis. In other words, The



Iliad' presents a narrative framing device of disaster that results from ill-Judged behaviour on the part of all of the characters involved.

'The Decameron' (1353) by Giovanni Boccaccio; set during the Black Death, reveals the vital role of storytelling in a time of disaster. The story is about ten people who kept themselves in isolation in a village near Florence for two weeks during the Black Death Pandemic. During this isolation period, they started telling story of morality, love, sexual politics, trade and power and in this way introduced a method of discussing social structure and interaction during the earliest days of Renaissance. The story provided the listeners ways through which to restruct their normal everyday lives, which have been suspended due to epidemic.

Another medieval writer Chaucer in his book, 'Canterbury Tales' laid emphasis on human behaviour and cites such as avarice, greed and corruption to be causes of moral and physical death.

'A Journal of Plague Year' by Daniel Defoe is a long narrative of events, anecdotes and statistics regarding the great plague of London of 1665. Mary Shelley's 'The Last Man'(1826), one of the first apocalyptic novels, set in futurist Britain between the year 2070 and 2100, details the life of Lionel Verney who becomes the last man following a devastating global plague. This novel laid emphasis on the value of friendship and concludes with verney accompanied on his wandering by a sheep-dog which reminds that pet may be a source of comfort and stability in crisis period.

Edgar Allen Poe, an American poet and novelist, got his short story. 'The Masque of the Red Death', published in 1842, which depicts the failures of authority and governance in terms of appropriate responses to the disaster such as Red Death. This fatal disease caused sever bleeding from the pores, was ignored by the monarch. On Contarary, Prince Prospero erected an iron gate and hosted a masked ball and gathered around a thousand courtiers at a luxurious place. Poe gives description of splendid festivities and personifies the disease as a guest . which ultimately takes the prince's life and then those of his Courtiers:

"And one by one dropped the revellers in the blood-bedewed halls of their revel, and died each in the despairing posture of his fall".

T. S. Eliot's world recognized creation "wasteland" depicts not only a devitalized world but it also does have the impact of pandemic which got expression through picturesque



of devitalized world. Eliot's painful feelings, due to his suffering from pandemic with his wife, got expression in his poem through this poetic phrase:

“April is the cruellest month”.

W.B. Yeats's celebrated poem “The Second Coming” is supposed to be his close observation of his pregnant wife approaching death in pandemic. Albert Camus's ‘The Plague’(1942) and Stephen King's ‘The Sand’(1948) brought reader's attention to the social implications of Plague-like Pandemics particularly isolation and failures of the state to either contain the disease or moderate the ensuing panic. The self isolation in Camus' novel creates an anxious awareness of the value of human contact and relationship in the denizen of the Plague-stricken Algerian city of Oran:

“This drastic, clean-cut deprivation and our complete ignorance of what the future held in store had taken us unawares; we are unable to react against the mute appeal of presence, still so near and already so far, which haunted us day long.”

Stephen King's ‘The Sand’; a post apocalyptic novel, based on bio-engineered super-flu named “Project Blue” leaks out in American military base, warns of the apprehensive danger of pandemic.

Some other interesting literary works worth mentioning are that of American novelist Catherine Anne Porter's short novel ‘Pale Horse, Pale Rider’ in which she depicted her acute sufferings and her difficult recovery from Influenza. The novel unfolds the ravaged picture of pandemic that killed people on large scale.

In Indian literature, too, we find a several illustrations of pandemic. Bankim Chandra's ‘Anand Math’ illustrates the pathetic picture of starvation, a natural calamity, not less than pandemic.

But the long poem ‘Puratan Bhritya’ (The old servant) of Rabindra Nath Tagore tells a painful story of an old servant, who during his service to his master, succumbs to Small pox, a dreaded viral disease which originated in ancient times, killed 300 million in the 20th century.

Ahmed Ali's novel ‘twilight in Delhi’ which accounts a ravaged description of Swine-flu of 1918 which claimed an estimated 12-17 million lives in India and between 50 million and 100 million globally. An extract from the book:

“They did not bother to see that the grave was properly dug or deep enough or not. They had so many more to dig”.



The book calls Delhi a city of the dead and how the people remain true to their traditions and make song and sold them.

Renowned Hindi poet Suryakant Tripathi Nirala's 'Saroj Smiriti' is a by-product of 1918 Influenza which took lives of half of his family including his wife and daughter 'Saroj'. The poet narrates how there were no wooden logs left to cremate the dead and how even the Ganga grew heavy and seemed exhausted with its burden of corpses.

Premchand's 'Edgah' is one of his most remembered short stories whose protagonist 'Hamid', the five years old boy, had lost his father to Haija (Cholera). In 'Doodh ka Dam', based on the narrative of untouchability, one of characters succumbs to the Plague.

Similarly, literature from different Indian regional languages provide the ravaged picture of pandemic such as 'Rebati' an Odia short-story of Fakir Mohan senapati; Vasoori (Small Pox) of Malayalam writer Kakkanadan; 'Samaskara' of Kannada writer U.R. Ananthamurthy and many others.

Another famous book, 'Love in the Time of Cholera' by Gabriel Garcia Marquez, is a love story of the epidemic time. It gives us the ravaging picture of epidemic Cholera. An excerpt from the book:

"After the first two week of cholera epidemic, the cemetery was over-flowing and there was no room left in the churches."

Some eye-catching postapocalyptic literature such as Shweta Taneja's dystopian story "The Daughter that Bleeds" and Manjula Padmanabhan's novel 'Escape' are remarkable in the sense that they deal with the subjects which are relevant in present context. Taneja's story is of a woman who has become infertile by bio-wars. Fertile women are rare and auctioned for marriage to the highest bidder.

Manjula Padmanabhan's 'Escape' imagines a future India where women are "vermin" because technology has provided an alternative route to reproduction.

Besides, there are many other books and novels depicting the outbreaks of various diseases and trying times. A few of them being "Earth Angle" by George R. Stewart; "I am legend" by Richard Matheson; 'Oryx and crake' by Margaret Atwood; 'Station Elven' by St. Jhon Madel; "Guns, Germs and Steel". by Jared Dimond and many others.

In this way, literature having impacts of pandemic and other natural calamities on humanity strongly indicates unwanted interference in our eco-system. Men's



unquenchable greed for natural resources made them unkind and insensitive to our ecology which eventually create conflicts with environments, animals and human disturbing the health and ecosystem. Hindi author Mridula Garg says writers all over the world constantly wrote about the havoc outbreaks. But she believes that the emergence of a new breed of pandemics is linked to human behaviour; she says:

“They are the result of the destruction of forest, closer contact with wild animals as food and consequent lowering of the biological barrier that kept the viruses prevalent in animals from affecting human. We writers are concerned about this phenomenon and some works should emerge from it”.

Learning from all these narratives and writings we come to conclusion that human beings are strong enough to endure such sufferings as calamities and difficulties are part of our lives and we generally overcome them and emerge stronger. However, these narratives and writings help people in eradicating the misconception and misunderstanding regarding the traditional belief about pandemic and its origin. They also help people in better understanding and better handling of calamities, and thereby, reducing the burden on government and ultimately on public exchequere .

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