



Mary Shelley's *The Last Man*: Alienation in the Time of Global Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

With the rise of the modern virus Covid-19, the hostility, suspicion, and fearful attitude surround us. Self-isolation and social alienation are threatening our existence in the onrush of lockdown and social distancing. Considering this view, the paper is an attempt to examine Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* (1826) novel in the context of alienation. The paper explores the causes and the effects of isolation in the life of the protagonist, Lionel Verney.

Key Words: Literature, Lionel Verney, Alienation, Annihilation, and Compassion

INTRODUCTION

With the rise of the modern virus Covid-19, the hostility, suspicion, and fearful attitude surround us. Max Brook, the author of *World War Z* (2006), once viewed a virus is something which "just continue to spread, infect and consume, no matter what happens." The calls like to "Stay Home, Stay Safe" and "We Are All Responsible" counsel us to accept isolation and avoid the joy of human companionship. It seems, self-isolation and social alienation are threatening human existence, in the onrush of lockdown and social distancing as many of us are unable to cope with the Corona anxiety.

Alienation is the human condition. It has been the subject of discussion in various fields. In literature, alienation is studied as a theme. The literature contains virus, plague, epidemic, and pandemic fall under pandemic or contagion literature. The description of the pandemic record and the happening offers insight of suffering. Michael sums up the findings of Michael A. Riva, Marta B., and Giancarlo Cesana, and states that their research concerns the nature of pandemic fear and literature. They offer a study of London's *The Scarlet Plague* (1912), noting down the fear of human towards infectious diseases. They also show the calamity evoked by pestilence and plague in the ancient world. In Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* (1826), and Poe's *The Masque of the Red Death* (1842) are also viewed in the face of the threatening crisis. In modern literature, Camus' *The Plague* (1947) is considered the classic example of the pandemic fiction. The novel presents some of the characters who show compassion in the face of the hostile plague and thus finding meaning in their lives. Even the films depicting viruses like *Contagion* (2011), has drawn much attention recently. The story of the movie concerns the spread of a virus transmitted by respiratory droplets. Medical researchers and public health officials try to identify, to control and to introduce a vaccine to stop the spread of the virus.

Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* (1826) is an apocalyptic novel. It also falls under the list of pandemic literature. Murial Spark views the novel as, "the domestic romance, the gothic extravaganza and the sociological novel." Mary Shelley had used the personal element of isolation, loss, and suffering to create the world of intense isolation. She confesses in one of her interviews, "The last man! Yes I may well describe as the last relic of a beloved race, my companions extinct before me." Many critics have researched on the novel in the context of its close affinities with the romantic period. Lee Sterrenburg view this novel's political-or counter-political-nature as a

reaction to the state of Europe after the failure of the French Revolution, the defeat of the Napoleon, and the congress of Vienna (Morton 6). Anne Mellor explores the theme of the nuclear family in the novel and argues that “In social terms, the novel pits her personal ideology of the nuclear family as the source of the psychological fulfilment and cultural values against those humans and natural forces which undermine it: male egoism, female self-destruction, and death” (Morton 7).

The Last Man novel is structured into three volumes in length. The first volume discusses the childhood condition and personal turmoil of Lionel Verney. The second volume describes the outbreak of the deadly plague and its devastating effects upon the world, including England. The last and third volume narrates the last voyage of Verney, who survives the the pestilence. The plot is set between the years 2073 and 2100. England of this time is a democratic country. The story revolves around the six major characters- Lionel Verney, Adrian, Lord Raymond, Perdita, Idris and Evadne. The characters are supple. Shelley draws the characters from her own familial and social circle. Like Verney (Mary herself), Adrian (P.B.Shelley), Lord Raymond (Lord Byron), Evadne (Claire Clairemont) and Lionel's father (William Godwin).

VERNEY AND HIS ISOLATION

Lionel Verney is the main protagonist and the narrator of the tale. He is also the last man of the novel who survives the deadly plague. Alienation is something which Verney experiences throughout his life due to internal and external factors. The unpleasant childhood condition and complicated interpersonal relationships influence Verney's life. For Verney, isolation begins from early childhood. He grows up an isolated orphan, uneducated and an uncivilized shepherd boy in the Cumberland countryside. As devoid of parental love and lack of friends, Verney prefers to live alone. He distances himself from the people and the world around him. Gradually, Verney finds himself that he loves none and fears no one. But he suffers internal dilemma of belonging in a silence. “I continued my war against civilization, and yet entertained a wish to belong to it” (Shelley 14).

Verney's adult life goes through many emotional and psychological upheavals. He experiences much of sadness and distress in his relations with close ties. Perdita, his younger sister, falls in love with Lord Raymond. They both get married. The couple is soon blessed with a daughter whom they name Clara. But the marriage is doomed soon when Perdita finds out Raymond's affair with Evadne, a Greece princess. She fails to deal with the betrayal and under the stress of the emotional disorder, she commits suicide. Clara is left in the care of Verney. Verney himself suffers trials and tribulations in love. He loves Idris, Adrian's sister. But Idris mother, the countess does not consent their relation and separates them. However, Verney marries Idris and bears all the hatred and revulsion of the countess.

VERNEY AND HIS COMPASSION

Verney suffers voluntary and involuntary isolation. But he decides to continue his existence despite of loss and misery. The episodes, in the wake and the spread of the deadly plague, throw a light on the reasons which offer Verney to find meaning. He puts aside his loneliness and chooses compassion. Compassion serves as a life-preserving force for Verney. It gives him the strength and the potential to stand in the face of the universal catastrophe. Shelley's plague appears as “invincible monster” (Shelley 173). The deadly pestilence starts sweeping across the world. In England, initially, people believe that they can be safe as long as England avoid the plague-stricken people. Verney also claims, “We on our stable abode could not be hurt in life or limb by these eruptions of nature. We could not fear-we did not” (Shelley 183). At first, the English natives lack compassion and sympathy towards the sufferers of the pandemic. They do not share communal feelings until the plague hits England badly. Soon, they realize that they cannot avoid the crisis.

Ryland, Lord Protector of England, flees the hotspot of the plague. Lionel observes the corruption and the greed of the political and the religious system. He views, “During the whole progress of the plague, the teachers of religion were in possession of great power; a power of good, if rightly directed, or of incalculable mischief, if fanaticism or intolerance guided their efforts. In the present instance, a worse feeling than either of these actuated the leader” (Shelley 294).

Believing in the principle that one must, “...stretch out a hand to save” (Shelley 186), Verney takes command of the country along with Adrian. They both call for co-operation and service. Verney states, “My friends, our risk is common; our precautions and exertions shall be common also. If manly courage and resistance can save

us, we will be saved. We will fight the enemy to the last” (Shelley 90). Under the direction of Verney and Adrian, many people come forward to assist those who are in need. They welcome refugees and try to help them without any cost. Though, the people themselves suffer, yet they reach out the plague victims to supply aid. Thus, Adrian and Verney continue to keep order in the midst of the chaos. It is amazed to think, how suddenly, every life becomes precious regardless of differences in place, origin, or race. Shelley’s depiction of creating the compassionate relationships, among people in such devastation, shows the necessity of compassion to human welfare.

At the end of the novel, Lionel Verney, with the few remaining survivors, decide to leave England. All the survivors travel towards Switzerland. By the time they reach Switzerland, all are dead except the four-Lionel, Adrian, Clara and Evelyn. Evelyn dies of typhus and Clara and Adrian drowns at the sea when their boat is attacked by a sudden storm. Lionel Verney is the last man who survives the pandemic. “...the numbered remnant of the English nation, into the tenantless realms of the south, there to die, one by one, till the Last Man should remain in a voiceless, empty world” (Shelley 261). Verney’s intense isolation create a wish within him. He befriends a sheepdog and resolves to look for a human companion. “Neither hope nor joy are my pilots-restless despair and fierce desire of change lead me on. I long to grapple with danger, to be excited by fear, to have some task, however slight or voluntary, for each day’s fulfilment. I shall witness all the variety of appearance, that the elements can assume- I shall read fair augury in the rainbow-men-ace in the cloud-some lesson or record dear to my heart in everything” (Shelley 367). Thus, Verney finally withstands the temptation of self-annihilation.

CONCLUSION

Shelley, through the portrayal of Verney, presents a kind of an affirmative action. Shelley shows that isolation is human condition. Nobody can escape it, but finding a path to deal with it, depends on the will of man. She also emphasizes the necessity of compassion for humanity in the face of the deadly crisis.

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