



DEPICTION OF PANDEMIC AND EPIDEMIC IN LITERATURE: FROM FRUSTRATION AND FEAR OF DEATH TO RESILIENCE AND REJUVENATION.

Dr. S. Jerald Sagaya Nathan, M.A., M.Phil., with SET & NET., M.J.M.C., Ph.D.,
Assistant Professor, Research Department of English
St. Joseph's College (Autonomous), Tiruchirappalli-620002

Abstract: The history of human tryst with epidemics and pandemics is as ancient as history itself. Writers down the ages have also projected these crises in their works. They in their works underlined the impact of epidemics and pandemics on the globe and society along with the portrayal of the resilience of human minds to tackle them. Giovanni Boccaccio's *The Decameron*, Albert Camus's *The Plague*, Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year Written by a Citizen who Continued all the While in London, History of the Plague in England*, and *In Due Preparations for the Plague as well for Soul as Body*, Jack London's *The Scarlet Plague* from the western literature and Suryakant Tripathi Nirala's memoir, *A Life Misspent*, Tagore's *Chaturanga* from Indian Literature have been analysed in this paper to see how Literature while narrating pandemics down the ages celebrates the enduring range of human responses charged with spirit of resilience and rejuvenation that stand against the onslaught of disease and death.

Key Words: Epidemic, pandemic, Literature, Resilience, Rejuvenation

I. INTRODUCTION

The history of human tryst with epidemics and pandemics is as ancient as history itself. Writers down the ages have also projected these crises in their works. They in their works underlined the impact of epidemics and pandemics on the globe and society along with the portrayal of the resilience of human minds to tackle them. Banerjee in the article "Who is Afraid of a Virus Wolf?" has made an observation that the western world had suffered much because of the Antonine Plague (165-180AD), the Plague of Justinian (541-543 AD), and the Great Bubonic Plague in Europe (1346-1353) to the Spanish Flu (1918-20) HIV (1981-) and the Asian Flu (1957-58). South East Asia has suffered the onslaught of cholera because of its poverty, lack of development, and high population density added with its susceptibility to extreme environmental factors, such as frequent and widespread flooding, that can contaminate water sources and dislocate populations. ("Cholera in Southeast Asia.")

II. ORIGIN OF THE TERM PANDEMIC

Banerjee again in the article "Who is Afraid of a Virus Wolf?" states that it was Homer who first used the term *epidemios* to refer to the returning natives in his epic *Odyssey*. Earlier Hippocrates had used the word as a medical term in a treatise by to mean "that which circulates or propagates in a country."

III. PANDEMIC AS DEPICTED IN WESTERN CANON

The western world down the ages has lot of literary works that speak about the causes and effects of pandemic. The Black Death of the 14th century that lasted till as late as the early 18th century is considered to be the most virulent pandemic in human history because it recurred at sporadic intervals. It initially broke out in Italy and devastated it. It inflicted heavy casualties on Florence, Marseilles, and France.

3.1. GIOVANNI BOCCACCIO'S *THE DECAMERON* & CHAUCER'S 'THE PARDONER'S TALE'

Giovanni Boccaccio's *The Decameron*, which was composed in the 14th century chronicles the pestilence in Florence and provides authentic description of the causes and its effects. Boccaccio in the Introduction chronicles the devastation he witnessed:

In this sore affliction and misery of our city, the reverend authority of the laws, both human and divine, was all in a manner dissolved and fallen into decay, for (lack of) the ministers and executors thereof, who, like other men, were all either dead or sick or else left so destitute of followers that they were unable to exercise any office, wherefore everyone had license to do whatever pleased him." (*The Decameron, First Day, Introduction*)

Chaucer who was inspired by Giovanni Boccaccio's *The Decameron* has also portrayed plague in 'The Pardoners Tale' which is part of his Magnus opus *The Canterbury Tales*. The portrayal of plague was because of the influence of Boccaccio even when England had been repeatedly ravaged by plague between 1348 and 1376.

3.2. ALBERT CAMUS'S *THE PLAGUE*

The French existentialist Albert Camus has also chronicled the plague that he observed during his life time. His famous novel *La Peste* (1947) is translated into English as *The Plague*. In January 1941, Albert Camus began working on a story about a virus that spreads uncontrollably from animals to humans and ends up destroying half the population of "an ordinary town" called Oran, on the Algerian coast. Before embarking on this literary endeavour Camus studied diligently the history of plagues. He acquainted himself with information about the Black Death that killed an estimated 50 million people in Europe in the 14th century, the Italian plague of 1630 that killed 280,000 across Lombardy and Veneto, the great plague of London of 1665 as well as plagues that ravaged cities on China's eastern seaboard during the 18th and 19th centuries. After analysing the causes of plague to both natural and manmade which is triggered by materialist, consumerist and political moves of humans societies, Camus started writing his monumental work which stands till date as a prominent work in pandemic literature.

Albert Camus's *The Plague* deals with an epidemic of plague that strikes the town of Oran in Algeria and how people of the town including the medical community and volunteers fight to resist it. The novel is in the form of a narrative or chronicle made by Dr Bernard Rieux, who is one of the doctors of Oran in charge of treating the afflicted people. The novel's main focus is about the plague epidemic however one can find general comments and observations about pestilences which are both natural and man-made, and it gives vivid account of the ensuing human suffering and their efforts to combat the onslaught of the pestilence or pandemic. Metcalf in the article "Albert Camus' 'The Plague' and Our Own Great Reset." speaks of Albert Camus's *The Plague* as an allegory of fascism in France and states that the novel presents no anger or bitterness but just immense spirit of forbearance and pity as the novel presents the capitalist and ideological agenda petrified and humiliated before the power of pandemic. Death by pandemic was seen by Albert Camus as a meaningful act in the face of the absurd human living condition that human beings are pushed into because of capitalism, fascism, imperialism, materialism and consumerism.

3.3. DEFOE's *A JOURNAL OF THE PLAGUE YEAR*

Defoe in *A Journal of the Plague Year Written by a Citizen who Continued all the While in London* (1722) gave a first-hand account of the plague that devastated Europe during his times. W. Hazlitt's edited book *The works of Daniel Defoe* describes the nature of plague and the attitudinal change that set in the minds of the people because of the plague thus:

Innumerable dismal stories we heard every day on this very account. Sometimes a man or woman dropped down dead in the very markets, for many people that had the plague upon them knew nothing of it till the inward gangrene had affected their vitals, and they died in a few moments. This caused that many died frequently in that manner in the streets suddenly, without any warning; others perhaps had time to go to the next bulk or stall, or to any door-porch, and just sit down and die, as I have said before.

These objects were so frequent in the streets that when the plague came to be very raging on one side, there was scarce any passing by the streets but that several dead bodies would be lying here and there upon the ground. On the other hand, it is observable that though at first the people would stop as they went along and call to the neighbours to come out on such an occasion, yet afterward no notice was taken of them; but that if at any time we found a corpse lying, go across the way and not come near it; or, if in a narrow lane or passage, go back again and seek some other way to go on the business we were upon; and in those cases the corpse was always left till the officers had notice to come and take them away, or till night, when the bearers attending the dead-cart would take them up and carry them away. Nor did those undaunted creatures who performed these offices fail to search their pockets, and sometimes strip off their clothes if they were well dressed, as sometimes they were, and carry off what they could get. (*The works of Daniel Defoe* 28)

Again Daniel presents the effects of pandemic that he observed in chapter 15 of *History of the Plague in England* thus:

I am not physician enough to enter into the particular reasons and manner of these differing effects of one and the same distemper, and of its differing operation in several bodies; nor is it my business here to record the observations which I really made, because the doctors themselves have done that part much more effectually than I can do, and because my opinion may in some things differ from theirs. I am only relating what I know, or have heard, or believe, of the particular cases, and what fell within the compass of my view, and the different nature of the infection as it appeared in the particular cases which I have related; but this may be added too, that though the former sort of those cases, namely, those openly visited, were the worst for themselves as to pain (I mean those that had such fevers, vomitings, headaches, pains, and swellings), because they died in such a dreadful manner, yet the latter had the worst state of the disease; for in the former they frequently recovered, especially if the swellings broke; but the latter was inevitable death. No cure, no help, could be possible; nothing could follow but death. And it was worse, also, to others; because, as above, it secretly and unperceived by others or by themselves, communicated death to those they conversed with, the penetrating poison insinuating itself into their blood in a manner which it was impossible to describe, or indeed conceive. (*History of the Plague in England*)

Daniel Defoe's description of plague presents a condition of helplessness and fear of death lurking in the minds of people. However he does forget to mention the efforts of the government and people in the service sectors to control the devastating effects of the plague.

Daniel Defoe in *In Due Preparations for the Plague as well for Soul as Body* (1722) narrated the extraordinary precautionary measures taken by the head of a family during a self-imposed quarantine that lasted an amazing five and a half months in 1665. He describes how the head of the family meticulously gathered provisions for the family (husband, wife, three sons, two daughters, two maids and an apprentice), and how the family followed elaborate measures to prevent infection. He comically states that the fictional characters even purified letters delivered by the postman:

...he caused the porter to smoke them with brimstone and with gunpowder, then open them, and to sprinkle them with vinegar; then he had them drawn up by the pulley, then smoked again with strong perfumes, and, taking them with a pair of hair gloves, the hair outermost, he read them with a large reading-glass which read at a great distance, and, as soon as they were read, burned them in the fire; and at last, the distemper raging more and more, he forbade his friends writing to him at all. (68)

The narrative found in Daniel Defoe in *In Due Preparations for the Plague as well for Soul as Body* (1722) somewhat similar to the precautionary measures that is being prescribed by WHO to check the spread of Covid 19 pandemic.

3.4. DEPICTION OF PANDEMIC IN MODERN LITERARY WORKS

In English Language, Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* (1826) was one of the first apocalyptic novels, telling of a future world that had been ravaged by a plague. In 1842, the American poet and novelist Edgar Allan Poe (1809–1849) published *The Masque of the Red Death*, a short story unique in the literary tradition of the plague. Through the personification of the plague, represented by a mysterious figure disguised as a Red Death victim, the author meditates on the inevitability of death. The short story hints that people don't die from the plague, but that people are plagued by death. (*Plague writing: from Boccaccio to Camus*)

Modern literary reference to pandemic can be found in Jack London's *The Scarlet Plague* (1912) which is one of the first examples of a post-apocalyptic fiction novel in modern literature. The novel is set in a ravaged and wild America, in 2073, sixty years after the spread of the Red Death, an uncontrollable epidemic that depopulated and nearly destroyed the world in 2013. The narrator of the futuristic novel is James Howard Smith, alias "Granser," who is one of the survivors of the Red Death. He narrates how the pandemic spread in the world and how people react to contagion and death.

3.5. PANDEMIC NARRATIVES IN INDIAN LITERATURE

Indian literature too has pandemic literary narratives. The Celebrated Hindi poet Suryakant Tripathi Nirala in his memoir, *A Life Misspent* (2016), provides a heart touching account of the influenza epidemic that ravaged India during the early years of the 20th century. It provides an account of his friendship with Kulli Bhaat. It also provides a moving account of the influenza pandemic of 1918-19. The personal loss experienced by the poet along with the horrifying situation is filed thus:

My uncle was the head of the family. He, too, contracted influenza...Words cannot describe how pitiful the scene was, how helpless, how tender...Sister-in-law passed away on the third day of my cousin's death. The nursing child was also sick. I slept that night holding her. She, too, passed away in the morning. I buried her in the riverbank. Then Uncle died. One more corpse to cart to the Ganga. Sister-in-law's three sons contracted fever. Somehow, I was able to nurse them back to health. My family disappeared in the blink of an eye. All our sharecroppers and labourers died,

the four who worked for my cousin and the two who worked for me. (Suryakant Tripathi Nirala's *A Life Misspent* translated by Sutti Khanna as cited in *A Pandemic and a Literary Account*)

The memoir presents the horrifying situation that gripped United Provinces and the whole of India at that time in the absence of the basic health care facilities and the presence of an unsympathetic and exploitative colonial regime.

The Bengali writer Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay in his works presents malaria as an inevitable part of rural life. His central protagonists, Ramesh in Pallisamaj, Brindaban in Panditmasay, or Srikanta in Srikanta, are frequently portrayed as altruists, eager to take on the arduous task of rescuing pandemic-afflicted villagers, oblivious to the danger of contagion.

Epidemics also feature in Tagore's *Chaturanga* (1916) too. *Chaturanga* (1916) is set in Calcutta when it is scoured by plague. The uncle of the protagonist Saachish converts his home into an infirmary for the poor, but while nursing the patients he himself, succumbs to the disease. This novel has much relevance today as many dedicated doctors and nurse and those in para medical services are exhibiting their compassion and dedication and even risk their lives to control the spread of Covid 19 pandemic and save the lives of those that are affected.

IV. CONCLUSION

To conclude, Human beings have experienced many pandemics down the ages. Literature while narrating pandemics down the ages celebrates the enduring range of human responses charged with spirit of resilience and rejuvenation that stand against the onslaught of disease and death.

WORKS CITED

- [1] Banerjee, Argha Kumar. "Who's Afraid of a Virus Wolf?" *The Hindu*, The Hindu, 28 Mar. 2020, www.thehindu.com/books/whos-afraid-of-a-virus-wolf/article31172069.ece.
- [2] Defoe, Daniel. *A Journal of the Plague Year: Written by a Citizen Who Continued All the While in London*. Barnes & Noble, 2004.
- [3] - - - . *The works of Daniel Defoe* [ed.] by W. Hazlitt. United Kingdom, 1841.
- [4] - - - . "C 15." *History of the Plague in England - Daniel Defoe, Book, Etext*, www.telelib.com/authors/D/DefoeDaniel/prose/plagueengland/index.html.
- [5] Metcalf, Stephen. "Albert Camus' 'The Plague' and Our Own Great Reset." *Los Angeles Times*, Los Angeles Times, 23 Mar. 2020, www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/books/story/2020-03-23/reading-camu-the-plague-amid-coronavirus.
- [6] Singh, Aditya. *A Pandemic and a Literary Account*, 1 Jan. 1970, poemsandchronicles.blogspot.com/2020/06/nirala-1918-influenza-flu-india.html?m=1.
- [7] Steel D. *Plague writing: from Boccaccio to Camus*. J Eur Stud. 1981;11:88–110 10.1177/004724418101104202
Due Preparations for the Plague; The King of Pirates, by Daniel Defoe, Morris & Co., Philadelphia, 1903.
- [8] *The Decameron, First Day, Introduction*, chaucer.fas.harvard.edu/pages/decameron-first-day-introduction.
"Cholera in Southeast Asia." *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 7 Nov. 2014, www.cdc.gov/cholera/asia/index.html.