



# **CRITICAL REFLECTIONS ON BIOTERRORISM IN REGARDS TO H.G. WELLS'S *THE STOLEN BACILLUS***

**Ms. Avnoor Makhu**

Assistant Professor

Post Graduate Department of English & Research Centre,  
Mehr Chand Mahajan DAV College for Women, Chandigarh, India

**Abstract:** Herbert George Wells, popularly known as H.G. Wells, was a renowned writer of late nineteenth and early twentieth century. He is considered as the 'Father of Science Fiction' due to his remarkable interest in scientific inventions and their portrayal in literature. His short story *The Stolen Bacillus* is a reflection of how biological agents developed by scientists may lead to nerve-racking events in life. Biological warfare equipment and bioterrorism may appear to be newer in time but they have been prevalent even in the nineteenth century. It can be claimed that Wells' vision of introducing the theme of germ warfare was an indication of futuristic scenario such as the global pandemic Covid-19 that lately awakened the world about the hazards of using germs and viruses as biological weapons. In the story, when the anarchist steals the bottle of virus with an intention of mass destruction, there remains no reason not to associate the episode with biological warfare. Thus, this paper highlights the concern of bioterrorism that can possibly be noticed in *The Stolen Bacillus*.

**Index Terms -** Anarchy, Bioterrorism, Germ warfare, Science Fiction, Weaponization.

Biological agents have been a threat to mankind since a long period in history. The intention of its usage might vary from political to personal interests. The prevalence of such offensive biological weapons can be traced not only in reality but in fictional works of literature too. Science Fiction novels that bring into light such activities are a constant reminder that biological warfare can exist in real-time world as well. The recent pandemic COVID-19 might exemplify this.

The renowned English writer Herbert George Wells, popularly known as H.G. Wells, has been entitled as the "Father of Science Fiction" and has remarkably contributed in the field with themes such as bio-warfare, time travel, and alien invasion along with many others. In some of his works like *The Invisible Man*, *The War of the Worlds*, *The First Men in the Moon* and others, he "made skillful use of the teeming possibilities of science to create a series of mythopoetic visions and speculations concerning man and his place in the universe" (Hammond 5).

His short story *The Stolen Bacillus* extracted from the collection 'The Stolen Bacillus and Other Incidents' begins with a bacteriologist celebrating the preparation of cholera germ in his laboratory. The bacteriologist is put forth numerous questions about the germ by a pale-face looking man, later revealed as the anarchist. No sooner than the bacteriologist answered his questions that the anarchist hesitantly yet keenly enquired further, "Are these— alive? Are they dangerous now?" (Singh 51) When the bacteriologist showed him the living disease bacteria, the anarchist becomes inquisitive and "a slight gleam of satisfaction appeared momentarily in the face of the pale man. "It is a deadly thing to have in your possession," he said, devouring the little tube with his eyes" (Singh 52). This clearly shows the potential dangers of researchers and scientists working in various labs that can possibly expedite bioterrorism. "The fact that many bio-weapon labs are heavily funded for research purposes show that a new era of war has penetrated into our global warfare system" (Makhu par. 2). With the world shutting down and coming to a standstill in the year 2020, it became a "moderate possibility of a warlike situation" between various nations (ibid).

A similar incident takes place in the story when the anarchist steals the test tube containing cholera germ in order to poison the water supply of London. The bacteriologist contemplated about it and cried in distress "blue ruin!" (Singh 54) The bacteriologist and his wife Minnie were dumbfounded because that tube had a chemical that could cause mass destruction. This event where the anarchist aimed to create chaos and devastation in the society may have been inspired from a real life incident when "on June 24, 1894, an Italian anarchist, Sante Jeronimo Caserio, assassinated the French president, Marie-François Sadi Carnot, an act that was the culmination of a series of anarchist attacks in France and Europe dating back to the assassination of Tsar Alexander II in 1881" (Clausson 19). It must be highlighted that Joseph Conrad's novel *The Secret Agent* was inspired by the event where a "Frenchman named Martial Bourdin blew himself up when a bomb that likely was intended to be set off in the Greenwich Observatory accidentally exploded as he approached the building" (ibid).

Likewise, the anarchist in Wells's fictional story and men or microbes in real-life with intentions of causing destruction and havoc all around reflect concerns about and points towards bioterrorism. It shows how the stolen bacterium in the test tube and the tiniest microbe like corona virus can become lethal and life wrecking. The use of germs and viruses as biological weapons has also been

discussed in works like *The Dynamiter* by Robert Louis Stevenson and Fanny van de Grift Stevenson in which “the anarchist narrator suggests the possibility of contaminating the sewage systems of British cities with typhoid bacilli” (Costa par.19). In the story *The Stolen Bacillus*, the anarchist runs away with the bacillus and the bacteriologist tells his wife, “the tube contains no cholera germs—only a harmless new species of bacterium he is working with that causes blue patches in animals. Thus, there is no danger to the city” (ibid 25). At the same time, towards the end the bacteriologist also informs the readers that “I shall have all the trouble and expense of preparing some more” (Singh 57). Therefore, the possibility of bioterrorism, or in other words, the storage, weaponization and utilization of germs for threat purposes can be seen in this fictional work.

## REFERENCES

- [1] Claussen, Nils. “The Anarchist and the Detective: The Science of Detection and the Subversion of Generic Convention in H.G. Wells’s “The Thumbmark”.” *Victorian Newsletter*, vol. 112, 2007, pp. 19-31. *ResearchGate*, <https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Nils-Claussen/publication/283516807/The-Anarchist-and-the-Detective-The-Science-of-Detection-and-the-Subversion-of-Generic-Conventions-in-H-G-Wells's-'The-Thumbmark'>.
- [2] Costa, Helena, and Josp-E Baños. “Bioterrorism in the Literature of the nineteenth century: The case of Wells and *The Stolen Bacillus*.” *Cogent Arts & Humanities*, vol. 3, 12 Sept. 2016. *Taylor and Francis*, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/23311983.2016.1224538>.
- [3] Hammond, J.R. *H.G. Wells and the Modern Novel*. Palgrave Macmillan, 1988.
- [4] Makhu, Avnoor. “De-centering the Perception of War: From Virilio’s ‘Desert Screen’ to the Ultra-Modern Era of Bioweapons.” *Café Dissensus*. 22 Aug. 2022. <https://cafedissensus.com/2022/08/22/de-centering-the-perception-of-war-from-virilios-desert-screen-to-the-ultra-modern-era-of-bioweapons/>.
- [5] Singh, Harbhajan. “The Stolen Bacillus.” *Colours of Expression*. Publication Bureau Panjab University Chandigarh, 2020, pp. 51-7.

