

Reflection on Pandemic through the Lens of Literature

Mamta Trivedi

Throughout human history to date literature has reflected different societies through the lens of educational, social, environmental, religious and psychological conflicts. Literature always throws light on the spread of various diseases and epidemics. As there have always been pandemics so there has always been literature of pandemics. It represents the height of human fears during the time of pandemics. English literature reflects the helpless human beings in the time of different fatal epidemics existed in the past. By the time man forgot the crucial time and it seemed that he became the Lord of nature and did his best to change the climate but nature has taught that a tiny cold virus has more power than the whole army. Now he must accept the fact that he is not the master of this world.

Literature plays a vital role in framing our views to the covid-19 pandemic. From the classics to the contemporary novels the pandemic literature paves us a way to see what happens next. The W. H. O. declared covid-19 a pandemic in March 2020. Now the best practices are developed and it is mandatory to follow them. Survival of the human race has become the primary concern in the world. From the pandemics in history we should determine our best courses. Homer's *Iliad*, the first surviving work of European Literature opens with the plague visited in the Greek camp at Troy. During the Trojan War, the Trojan priest Chryses prays Apollo to rescue his daughter Chryseis whom Agamemnon has as a captive. Apollo in response sent there a Plague. Agamemnon returned Chryseis and the plague is taken back by Apollo. But then Agamemnon takes in Achilles the daughter of Briseus, as a captive. This anger and retribution gave birth to the well-known epic *Iliad*.

The Decameron (1353) by Giovanni Boccaccio.(a collection of stories) was set during the black death, portrays the role of storytelling in a time of pandemic. In the course of isolation, storytelling proved to be a method of discussing social structures of the societies, love, morality etc. The stories guide the people to restructure their everyday routine which was disturbed during the pandemic. Mary Shelley's novel *The Last Man* (1826) follows the global plague. The story of the novel revolves around a highly contagious disease. Like the novel coronavirus the plague is spread by the airborne particles and its carriers. This novel reveals the life of Lionel Barneby who became the last man to survive. Barneby is a humble shepherd boy who got married into a royal family at Windsor Castle. He quickly touches the top of leadership ranks. When the plague breaks out in Constantinople and then creeps towards London, he serves as an advisor to lords, ministers and legislators. He fails to lead the plague survivors from England to Italy. He is left alone in Rome to brood over the future. He climbs to the top of the dome of St. Peter's Basilica and carves the year -2100- in the stone. The novel portrays a bond of friendship as well. It concludes with Barneby who is accompanied by a sheep dog. It assures us that pets may

be a source of ease and stability when we suffer from any type of crisis. It also throws light on the institutional responses to the plague.

Edgar Allan Poe's short story "The Masque of the red death"(1842) depicts the failure of the higher authorities, as well, at the time of such a disaster. In the Red Death there used to be a fatal bleeding from the pores. Prince Prospero gathers his courtiers into a luxurious abbey where all the gates were closed. "The external world could take care of itself. In the meantime it was folly to grieve or to think. The prince had provided all the appliances of pleasure" (257). But the plague takes the life of the prince along with 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".(259)

The fear of the pandemic seems to be the ancestral fear of human beings. When the plague spread there was no medicine. The only way to survive was not to be in contact with infected persons. It was a common thought that the calamity was the punishment for the sins committed by humans. The advanced people of the 20th century considered that the epidemics were not punishments by the Supreme Power. In their opinion they were not supernatural events as well. The, then, bacteriologists declared that the germs infect the human beings. The epidemiologists and Public Health experts demonstrated as how the disease is transmitted from one person to another. At the same time they suggested the methods to prevent the pandemic to keep our society healthy and happy.

The classic novel *The Scarlet Plague* was written by Jack London (1876 -1916). London penned the disease even more frightening:

The heart begins to heat faster and the heat of the body to increase. Then came the scarlet rash, spreading like wildfire over the face and body. Most persons never noticed the increase in heat and heart beat and the first they knew was when the scarlet rash came out. Usually they had convulsions at the time of the appearance of the rash. But these convulsions did not last long and were not very severe... The heels became numb first then the legs and hips, and when the numbness reached as high as his heart he died. (5)

The scarlet death not only filled the fear of death but also a fear of being at the end of the world and the end of the civilization. In the novel London reveals the fact that pandemic brings forth the fear of human beings and broadens their attitude towards life. It makes us break all the barriers of caste, colour and creed and at the same time enables us to realise that human brotherhood is the only way for the survival of any society. The hollowness of the capitalism was criticized as our population and our crowded cities became hot spot. The people appeared not to be alarmed because they were living in a society of science and medicine. They were far sure that the bacteriologists would seek the way to overcome the pandemic as they had overcome the other diseases in the past. But the way of destruction of mankind by a tiny germ filled the people with terror. The fact that the germ killed the human body it entered. A man

would die within several hours or an hour or sometimes within half an hour after the first sign of the disease appeared.

The rapid decomposition of corpses which immediately released millions of germs and the scientists were not able to quickly find a specific treatment. By the time a serum against the plague was discovered but it was too late to stop the epidemic. People isolated themselves to keep themselves safe. Some started robbing, drinking and even killing. Thus *The Scarlet Plague* reveals all the aspects of human behaviour. That fear seems to be alive even today and it reflects the same concern we are facing because of the covid-19. So the only way today is to overcome the fear and equip ourselves to face the Invisible enemy.

In the 20th century Albert Camus' *The Plague* (1942) depicts an anxious awareness in self-isolation during the plague, Stephen King's *The Stand* (1978) reveals the isolation of the panic-stricken society. The novel follows the fictional pandemic *Project Blue* which spreads from an American military base. In his opinion covid-19 is less serious than his fictional pandemic. In his tweet on covid-19 he stated that NO corona virus is NOT like THE STAND. It's not anywhere near as serious. It's eminently survivable. Keep calm and take all reasonable precautions.

From the classics to the contemporary novels pandemic literature makes us aware of the God sent calamities as well as guide us for our future. These pandemic related fictional works of the past is that pandemic is not something new and we have been through this before and we have survived. So like the earlier days, we will go through covid-19 and we can win. We have won from the past and we can win in the future. All the literature from the past has taught us to cope up with isolation, terror and brutality of an invisible enemy. We have no other choice rather than to overcome the current circumstances and to cope up with the new realities of life in a post pandemic world. We have to accept the reality.

Many would be inspired to write their personal tragedies and future fears Literature continues to fight for a world where every human being has a right to defend and maintain his own health. We, ourselves, are the stories we tell and in this crucial time of pandemic these stories prove how we will survive through this crisis and move forward towards a bright future.

REFERENCES

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