

A Study to Identify Trends in Pandemics with Pandemic Literature

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Pandemics are nothing brand new and almost all generations have suffered and eventually tackled them successfully. A lot of writers and poets from various cultures have written and documented their experiences during a pandemic ranging from the Spanish Flu outbreak to the Black plague to the Great Plague of London. Though the resources and technologies have varied across the numerous pandemics the emotion and mindset of the people have more or less stayed the same. The different works of literature based on the lives of people living through pandemics can teach us about ways to tackle the emotional stress that comes with being confined within the four walls of our homes. This literature also shines a hopeful light on life after the pandemic. The aim of this paper is to analyze how literature helps us make sense of the pandemic and life after its existence.

The outbreak of the bacterium, *Yersinia pestis*, ravaged the city of London from 1665 to 1666 and over 1,00,000 people of the estimated population of 4,60,000. *A Journal of the Plague Year* was published in March 1722 by Daniel Defoe and is an account of one man's experiences in the city of London during the bubonic plague. Daniel Defoe was born in the early summer of 1660 (considered most likely) in London and would only have been around 6 years old during The Great Plague which makes his recollection questionable. But as everything in the *Journal* is historically accurate, we can consider Defoe's work a viable option to understand life during a plague. This literary work beautifully describes the mindset of Londoners during an unsettling and uncertain time. Defoe observes that many people were confused and a cloud of uncertainty roamed over their heads. But some people were braver and more understanding of the situations around them. Some were also ignorant of the plague but a trait they all shared was fear. Everyone in London was scared of this unknown disease roaming their streets.

The novel is narrated by 'H.F.', an inhabitant of London who was present firsthand to witness the destruction caused by this invisible enemy. Though the literary piece is considered fiction it is riddled with statistics, charts and documents. H.F. shares his observations throughout the plague of how the rich leave the city to escape the grasp of the plague and how the poor are left in distress while city officials publish a set of rules which include appointments of watchmen to find the infected, shutting up of infected houses and the hired help of doctors, fortunetellers and astrologers in an attempt to make sense of the disease. H.F. shares his doubts over the shutting up of houses by acknowledging that the lockdown caused more inconveniences but as it was a law people adhered to it. He also tells many stories about people trying to escape London, the grief and loss of loved ones, monetary struggles and so on.

To reflect on the relevance of this literature it is important to study it over time. The observation of different characteristics within people is a good start. Every person reacts differently to a pandemic. Some try to understand the problems and face the troubles bravely. But some people cave into the fear of the unknown and aren't able to fully comprehend the situation. Reading through the *Journal* certainly teaches us to be strong and confident but still cautious in the face of a pandemic. Panic and fear will only birth additional problems. In the novel, the poor had to figure things out on their own while the wealthy fled the city rather than support and help their city when everyone should have helped each other and supported the economy together. This literature helps identify some common negative trends across various pandemics.

The Plague is a novel by Albert Camus and was first published in 1947. Similar to Defoe, Camus encourages the public to stand united and strong in front of death. He argues that a pandemic or not, death is inevitable and so everyone of us should be more critical of our responsibilities towards each other. Camus uses the cholera epidemic of 1849 as his source to write *The Plague*. The story is told from the point of view of an unknown narrator in the city of Oran, Algeria. Camus stresses how individual decisions can in turn affect the community as a whole. With characters like Dr. Bernard Rieux, Jean Tarrou, Joseph Grand and Father Paneloux among others, Camus has portrayed a magnificent account of the plague. The narrator tells us how doctors tried to warn officials about this new deadly disease but their concerns fell to deaf ears. But as death tolls started to pick up the city goes into a panic and shuts off all connections with its neighbors. Things quickly take turns for the worse as the city erupts into riots and protests. As seen in the Defoe's *Journal* the rich pay their way out of the city and leave the poor to fend off for themselves. Riots turn violent and the officials order the police to start killing the trouble makers. Months pass and the daily struggle of doctors is shared by the character of Dr. Bernard Rieux who selflessly treats patients while his wife is sick and dying in a different city. After months of struggle, the plague is in full retreat and the city gates are open. The happiness and relief of people are remarkable and the town is in a mood of celebration. People get to meet their loved ones from afar but everything isn't all rosy as the workers who helped patients tirelessly are now sick.

If we reflect the literature to the modern day we can feel the struggles and emotions of what the people went through then. People are still rioting as they did a century ago for a livelihood amongst the pandemic. Many governments were and still are late to react to a deadly disease and blatantly ignore the advice of science. Literature may not always provide concrete solutions but it certainly teaches us not to be better than we previously were. People should be aware of our actions and actively help each other to tackle everyday problems because as literature and history show, such a disease does not vanish overnight.

The year of 1974 in India saw over 15,000 lives taken away by one of the worst smallpox epidemics in the world. India reported over 60,000 cases in just five months. It wasn't until 1980 when smallpox was completely eradicated from the world. But the sad poem "Puratan

Bhrityawas” written on 23 February 1895 by Rabindranath Tagore, long before the smallpox epidemic. But this poem is still relevant to this day for its themes of loyalty, care and brotherhood. The poem is from the point of view of a wealthy zamindar who has a servant named Keshta who by all means is a lousy and lazy servant. Even the zamindar’s wife considers him a nuisance for the family. But his loyalty is remarkably shown when the zamindar travels to Vrindavan to pray and falls prey to the deadly smallpox disease. When all his fellow travelers left him on his own it was Keshta who took care of him with no regard for his health.

And time and again assured he, "Master, mark my words, have no fear -
You will get well, return back home, and once again see the mistress dear."
Before long, regaining my health, as I was up and about, the fever set upon him
My life-giver appropriated my fatal disease as each day his prospects grew dim.
Losing consciousness, he lay there for a day or two, until no pulse in him was left
For so long had I tried my all to be rid of him, at long last of him was I bereft.(lines
50- 55)

The zamindar’s lifesaver fell into the hands of smallpox but fulfilled his words of sending his master to his wife safe and sound. When all his dear friends left him to suffer it was the loyalty of his servant that gave him the strength to fight off the disease. In the face of uncertainty, a flash of hope goes a long way. Keshta’s love and loyalty towards his master saved a life. This poem should serve as a lesson for us to help each other in whatever way we can. A small glimmer of hope can go a very long way for someone in need. Even something as small as encouraging words can help brighten a patient’s day and give them positive energy to fight against a common enemy.

We have had pandemics and epidemics in almost every century and we have always been better equipped to deal with them than the time before. Yet it is surprising to see that the traits of denial, selfishness and fear carry over each time. All social, economic and technological advances suddenly null out against a vicious disease. All three literary works mentioned above inform us that the first response to a pandemic is always denial. Science and health are disregarded for economy and pride and this leads to ill preparations for a chronic time. Defoe and Camus both wrote on how the officials have ignored the doctors over a few deaths and didn’t want to concern themselves with the disease. In the modern-day too, many countries and governments disregarded the disease only for it to cause devastation later. As literature tells us the small numbers only continue to rise as Defoe and Camus witness the loss of thousands of life which could have been partially avoided. Defoe also provides medical insights on how the plague seems to spread through asymptomatic people which in modern-day could have helped us as individuals be more cautious of the virus. As Defoe and Camus observe, doctors and nurses will always be selflessly on the frontlines but we must support and help them in any possible way.

The positive thing this paper gathers from this research is that as a society we are getting better as a society in tackling the post-pandemic life. In Defoe's post-pandemic account, people had returned to their original ways as if the outbreak had never happened. But this changed in Camus's version of the post-pandemic. People were considerate of the deaths and tried to change their ways of living to try and avoid another plague. In Tagore's poem, we can feel the sadness and regret of the zamindar when he loses his most loyal "friend". As the literature has shown us, pandemics can and will be beaten, the damage done however is the reaction of our actions.

Literature is a mirror to society and through these past accounts, we can gain help in tackling the problems we are facing in the modern pandemic. We need to rid away from negative habits and try and improve ourselves. We also learn that pandemic literature is far more useful than given credit to. These are a fabulous portrayal of human emotions and mindsets going through an uncertain period and a beneficial tool for future generations. We must keep alive the streak of immortalizing our actions, emotions and experiences of living during a pandemic in the form of literature.

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