



# INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

## Words to the Rescue: Literature as a Therapy in Time of Pandemics

Govind Pandit Rathod

Department of English, Vasanttrao Naik Government Institute of Arts and Social Sciences, Nagpur.

Email: govindunipune@gmail.com

In the dark times, will there also be singing?

Yes, there will also be singing. About the dark times.

— Bertolt Brecht

### Abstract:

The paper aims at investigating how literature down the lanes of time became the beacon light in the times of pandemic alleviating overall impact of widespread viral pandemics. In addition to that paper also catalogues representative examples of literature from selected nations from Homer to incumbent poet laureate of England, all that tried to dress up the human wounds in a parade of disappointments and 'naked dance of death'. Nonetheless, it also proffers how literature has shaping effect on society during the pestilence.

**Keywords:** *Pandemic Narratives, Dance of Death, Morality, Humanity, Love, Patience, Soothing.*

Tales of pandemics have, in the historical narratives of western literature, offered much in the Sway of purgation, cooking human soul and processing strong vaccinated emotions. Nonetheless, these narratives are socio-political, medical documentation of how humans have responded to the catastrophe. Ranging from the classics to contemporary fiction, pandemic bibliography offers something in the way of an uncertain comfort and shepherds to marshal future course of action.

One of the earliest recorded accounts of pandemic in literature goes back to Homer. In classical epic Iliad, book I, Apollo, the god of son inflicts a plague upon the Greek camp causing death of many soldiers. Calchas, the most astute interpreter of bird and powerful seer, reveals that the plague was a strategic and vengeful move by Chryses and Apollo. Daniel R Blickman in his book Role of Plague in Iliad states that the quarrel between Agamemnon

and Achilles should not blind us to the role the play plays in setting the tone for what follows or more importantly, in providing an ethical pattern which lies at the heart of the story. This account offers a fine case study of ill judgement of all the characters involved and tells us more about inherent hubris the humans have and how that can lead to catastrophe if left unbridled.

Boccaccio's Decameron set on the backdrop of Black Death brings forth threads of narratives that how words come to rescue fractured human soul through story telling. Literature during forced confinement operates more constructively. Charlotte Gilman's protagonist soothes her 'slight hysterical tendency', caged soul through metaphorical 'yellow wallpaper of literature'. Although the analogy seems a bit far-fetched but in both the cases words heal the wound. Boccaccio's characters take their turn to tell stories of love, sexuality, politics, trade, morality and social and power construction. Through the discourse of narrators, Boccaccio helps to keep 'mental issues and worries at bay during highly contagious and deadly Black Death'. His accounts ensured normalcy and order in allegorical hard time which was 'out of jolt'.

Geoffrey Chaucer, representative poet of medieval Britain, handcrafted best prose on the model of Boccaccio's novellas. His Pardoner's Tale preaches dictum "Radix malorum est cupiditas" ("Love of money is the root of all evil"). Always employing an array of documents and objects, he constantly announces that he can do nothing for the really bad sinners and invites the good people forward to buy his relics and, thus, absolve themselves from sins. Then he stands in the pulpit and preaches very rapidly about the sin of avarice so as to intimidate the members into donating money. His humanity during the pestilence is worth following and accounting for to keep light camaraderie burning in 'the worst of the time.' Succinctly, the tale 'values virtue of giving' and malady of greed.' During Chaucerian Era, Black Death wiped off 75 million of England's the then total population. John Kelly in *The Great Mortality: An Intimate History of the Book of the Death, the most Devastating Plague of all-Time* notes that 'to many Europeans the pestilence seemed to be the punishment of a wrathful Creator.' Moreover the era witnessed the most debased form of human existence. Medical historian, Roy Porter in his *Flesh in the Age of Reason* caught the tragic milieu.

Black Death of Mid Fourteen century and subsequent outbreak had off course cast a long, dark Shadow and, their aftermath was the culture of Dance of Death, worm corrupted cadaver, the skull and of Halloween to the pirates' flag. (Porter:2004)

The sensation of the Dance of the Death was so unpredictable as where the arrow will land. It was everywhere and nowhere. Death during the pestilence equalized human identity. It was a levelling agent that made everyone bend their knees. Death metaphorizes levelling power of nature. The bubonic, death personified, lead a row of dancing figures from all echelons of life to the grave including King, Pope, Monk, Youth, Beautiful Girl, all in skeleton state. This all resulted in production of gritty and realistic literature. Thomas Nash's sonnet records the horror:

"Rich men, trust not in wealth,  
Gold cannot buy you health;

Physic himself must fade.

All things to end are made,

The plague full swift goes by;

I am sick, I must die.

Lord, have mercy on us!" (Nashe)

The poet's plea to the task master to have mercy upon the humans during the period of calamity exposes of futility and ephemeral nature of much boasted positions and laurels like beauty, wealth, health, honor, youth etc. 'lead but to the grave' and signify nothing. This is path showing. Like death, virus too does not discriminate. Anglo de Tura of Sienna records this spectacle: 'and those who were sparsely covered with earth that dogs drag them forth and devoured many bodies throughout the city'.

Ben Johnson also made use of plague in his famous Play The Alchemist. The play is writer's reflection on the complexities of intersections of plague and theatre. He exploits the theatre within theatre tactics to debunk superstition, apocalypse and the popular theatre and literature that provides narratives structure of everyday life.

Very famous writer Daniel Defoe who witnessed two greatest calamities of the time as a child, gives vivid, clear and realistic description of the time that he lived in. His Robinson Crusoe not only recounts adventurous trials and tribulations of shipwrecked individual but also misfortune of a dreadful calamity. If Robinson Crusoe personifies nation then the motif of the writer is to suggest Crusoe's ways to approach the calamity. Robinson Crusoe like a bricoleur uses tools at hand for the optimal outcome, overcomes the personal tragedy. Crusoeian modus operandi advocates that how during the catastrophe, equilibrium of means and resources can be achieved. In wake of the Great Plague of London Swift's account becomes parallel to celebrated diarist Samuel Pepys's account who refers great plague of London 'as never seen before'. Swift's personal self HF in A Journal of the Plague year records: "Many consciences were awakened; many hard hearts melted into tears; many a penitent confession was made of crimes long concealed.

Swift offers an anecdote of how returning plague has reshaped human psyche. Many people become aware of their loopholes, shortcomings and sins. HF, the narrator tells how humans coveted religion and believed in branchless societal order during the epidemic. Moreover, in addition to providing multiple of anecdote, the first-person narrator catalogues survival tactics during the times of catastrophe. Firstly, was to run away from it as you did in Chaucer's tale and second to shore up enough provisions for the duration of the plague and quarantine themselves. This sounds like a perfect recipe these days, too. Government across the globe have adopted these strategies of practicing social distancing during covid-19 and altogether lead a hermetic life help to flatten curve of the collective tragedy.

Existential philosopher Albert Camus novella The Plague dramatizes one of the most rudimental and challenging questions for humanism. In Orange, Algeria, due to pandemic dead bodies were multiplying rapidly.

The whole village became virus stricken. The strange virus boiled flesh, made them nauseated. Rieux, darkly handsome doctor risks his own life to treat human to health. He does that tirelessly with tremendous energy and unflinching dedication. Suffering is combining force of humans. The doctor's attempt to cure them all sparks from his concern for humanity. He represents the class of doctors who are paragon of virtue through them humanity shines, smiles by endangering their own lives. " Do we strive toward virtue or do we succumb to the plague? When honey touches your tongue -- it still is sweet. " Says the doctor.

Dr. Rieux's ultimate concern here is to be a human. His ultimate concern is humanity which grows in the innermost chambers of our being, in a moral fibre that one cannot abandon unless one abandons the soul.

Pamuk, speaking about power of literature during Pandemic opines:

Much of the literature of plague and contagious diseases presents the carelessness, incompetence and selfishness of those in power as the sole instigator of the fury of the masses. But the best writers, such as Defoe and Camus, allowed their readers a glimpse at something other than politics lying beneath the wave of popular fury, something intrinsic to the human condition. (Pamuk:20)

"The symptoms of love, says Marquez were same of Cholera". Marquez's overdrawn, strange analogy may seem like metaphorical conceit, but it has 'unified sensibility' as Eliot Says. Love like disease, is emotional and physical plague. Cholera burns body; love burns heart and soul. Cholera rots body; love rots heart. Lovesickness is a literal illness. Florentino Ariza suffers lovesickness as one would suffer from Cholera enduring both physical and emotional pains as he longs for Fermina Daza.

The theme of love as a plague is recurrent throughout the narrative fabrics of the novel Love in time of Cholera reaches its apogee in the last chapter. For Florentino nothing is more noble than to live for love. Isn't it surprising that he doesn't want to die for love.? For him feeling of, love is one is the best feelings and worth waiting for. It seems that he practices Latin dictum Amor Vincit Omnia. He offered crazy pursuit and passion of love even during pandemic is take away for millennials who face emotional catastrophe during such time of crisis.

Life offers great many opportunity along the thorny ways. Sometimes we have to wait for right time to come. The most beautiful thing is to wait for right time to come seems to be the tagline of the novel. Florentino practices patience and is ultimately rewarded. In zoonotic like Covid 19 and other epidemic what human being needs most is to hold their nerves to see new reconstructed, proliferated utopian existence. Fermina has all amenities of life but still she says "I am unhappy. There is not enough room for the things." Her depression and dissatisfaction are the result of excessive wealth. She has everything as a wife of doctor but she still is unsatisfied, distressed soul. Human race during pandemic becomes emotionally ill. Fermina stands as a microcosm for the unsatisfied being. Excess of anything is destructive. Excess is an ailment that kills appetite to live, to celebrate what one has. Fermina's contentment parched existence testifies that.

"I am claustrophobic, almost nauseous. I feel terribly ill. However strong your experience, others had it too. However far you travel in mind, in illness the make-believe world ceases to exist. "(Woolf: 1925)

Woolf's experience during metaphorical illness transcends individual claustrophobia prevailing the malady as 'melting pot' of all subscription that we ascribe with. She urges the reader to 'find undiscovered countries within' in time of emotional illness by outfoxing 'tired hearts'.

Ahmad Ali novel *Twilight in Delhi* offers a tragic and moving account of the Spanish influenza. Delhi, during the pandemic, became city of the dead, where shroud thieves were rampant, grave diggers over restrained their fees, cloth merchants raised prices of winding sheets for the dead and songsters wrote ironic verses and sold them as pamphlets. This detail raises the questions of humanity? In trying time when the helping hands should be extended to the needy, the opportunistic class tries to loot the helpless, voiceless subaltern posing serious concern for human ethos. This is nothing but throttling down of humanity, dragging it towards dystopian existence.

"There was not a single hour of the day when a few dead bodies were not carried outside the city to be buried. Soon the graveyards became full, and it was difficult to find even three yards of ground to put a person in his final resting place. In life they had no peace, and even in death there seemed no hope for rest." (Ali:1940)

Write offers investigative peace of cultural and religious differences of Hindu and Muslim. He gives minute and photographic details of respective final rites of both the religion. But he doesn't sound xenophobic in his approach; celebrating the native culture and demeaning the other culture. xenophobia is one of the serious threats to humanity during such dark time. The writer addresses the problem.

Poetry is "by definition consoling" because "it often asks us just to focus and think and be contemplative", said Armitage. The poet laureate's occasional verse *Lockdown*, brings to the fore consoling, contemplative power of verse during Covid 19 outbreak.

And I couldn't escape the waking dream

of infected fleas

in the warp and weft of soggy cloth

by the tailor's hearth

in ye olde Eyam.

Then couldn't un-see

the Boundary Stone,

that cock-eyed dice with its six dark holes,

thimbles brimming with vinegar wine

purging the plagued coins. (Armitage: 2020)

His description echoes Black Death of medieval Britain. In 'the cock-eyed dice with six dark holes' borne and forced captivity of star-crossed lovers, he offers picturesque landscaping of Meghaduttam, well known poem of Sanskrit poet Kalidasa. The cloud messenger is more soothed with the scenery he witnesses when he carries the message of Yaksha for his wife who are estranged and are far away from each other. The poem also references how people in the Derbyshire village of Eyam, who were affected by the plague in 1665, took a series of selfless steps to help minimise the spread. Heroic villagers who quarantined themselves amid the outbreak of the Black Death in the 17th century is at the heart of a new poem on the coronavirus by the poet laureate

Moreover, the poem suggests how those who were infected left money soaked in vinegar - which was believed to kill the disease - was placed by villagers in exchange for food and medical supplies. He believes that it is about patience, as opposed to the frantic way of life we are often used to, could be learned with regards to dealing with the ongoing Covid-19 crisis.

Rudyard Kipling's transcendental poem If that urges the people to reach the state of illumination resembles Lord Krishna's concept of shtitaprajnya- the one is unshaken by oddities and overjoyed by accomplishment. Human existence is put on ventilator during the pandemics. We should learn to stay shtitaprajnya taking leaf of advice from literary prophets. Literature like Eliot's prajapti, comes to rescue when the world is disillusioned, fractured and infected by unwanted guest pandemics. Literature functions like vaccine and therapy during pandemics curing woos and wounds of cramped, plagued soul. It processes, cooks plagued lives, resulting in emotionally vaccinated human existence during dark time and also in the hedonistic treadmill of life. As a result, literature produces 'sage of steady intelligence' who meet two imposters-triumph and disaster the same and make the world a better place where 'the sweetness and light' filters down.

Literature during pandemics tops up the society with human values and helps us to subscribe to eternal shine within to make best out of life, says Dickens. It gives birth to utopian world where not survival of the fittest but survival of all becomes the human cry.

References:

Ali, Ahemad. Twilight in Delhi. Oxford University Press, 1966.

Daniel R. Blickman. The Role of the Plague in the "Iliad". (1979).  
[www.jstor.org/stable/25010855?seq=1](http://www.jstor.org/stable/25010855?seq=1). Retrieved on 11th May 2020

Dickens, Charles. Hard Time. Harper Collins. 2010

Boccaccio, Giovanni. The Decameron. Oxford University Press, 1993

Camus, Albert. The Plague. Hamish Hamilton, 1948

Chaucer, Geoffrey, and Carleton Brown. The Pardoner's Tale. Clarendon Press, 1935.

Defoe, Daniel. Robinson Crusoe. Athenaeum Books for Young Readers, 2003

----- A Journal of the Plague Year. Penguin Books, 2003

Eliot, T.S. "Wasteland". Dial, 1922.

García, G. Marquez. Love in the Time of Cholera. Alfred A. Knopf, 1988.

Gilman, Charlotte. "The Yellow Wallpaper". The Charlotte Perkins Gilman Reader: The Yellow Wallpaper, and Other Fiction. Pantheon Books, 1980.

Haith, Chelsea. From Homer to Stephen King: Lessons from literature in times of a pandemic. The Conversation <https://amp.scroll.in/article/956674/from-homer-to-stephen-king-lessons-from-literature-in-times-of-a-pandemic>. Retrieved on 5th May 2020.

Homer. The Iliad. The Chicago University Press, 1998.

Kipling, Rudyard. "If". www.poemhunter.com. Accessed on 11 May 2020.

Jonson, Ben. The Alchemist. Methuen Drama, 2010.

Kelly, John. The Great Mortality: An Intimate History of the Black Death, the Most Devastating Plague of All Time. Harper Collins Publishers, 2005.

Nashe, Thomas. "A Litany in the Time of Plague". www.poemhunter.com

Pamuk, Orhan, What the Great Pandemic Novels Teach Us. The New York Times, opinion, 23 April, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/23/opinion/sunday/coronavirus-orhan-pamuk.html>. Accessed on 10 May 2020.

Porter, Roy. Flesh in the Age of Reason. The Modern Foundations of Body and Soul. W.W. Norton & Company, 2004.

Pepys, Samuel. Samuel Pepys' Diary. De Luxe Editions, 1932.

Saunders, Tristram F. Poet Laureate Simon Armitage on How to Improve your Self Isolation Verse Plus Read his poem Lockdown. The Telegraph, May 14, 2020.

[www.telegraph.co.uk/books/authors/poet-laureate-simon-armitage-improve-self-isolation-verse](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/books/authors/poet-laureate-simon-armitage-improve-self-isolation-verse). Accessed on 14 May 2020.

The Bhagwada Geeta: The Song of God, Mukundanand, Swami. Gorkhapur Press, 1992.

Woolf, Virginia. On Being Ill. Sage Journals, 1993.