



Literature and Pandemic: Are the Literary Characters really Motivating?

Dr. Gurpreet Kaur

Assistant Prof. & Head
Post Graduate Department of English
Sri Guru Teg Bahadur Khalsa College,
Anandpur Sahib, Punjab, India

“the first thing that the plague brought to our fellow citizens was exile” – Albert Camus, *The Plague*

Abstract: Quarantine, isolation, loneliness are some words we hear frequently in the Covid- 19 pandemic situation. These bring with them nothing but questions about constant fear and existential crisis. There is anxiety, despair, hopelessness, and of course meaninglessness of existence. It is necessary to find a means of grasping the reality and gaining an ability to cope and heal mentally, physically, emotionally and socially. Researchers are working hard in providing prophylactics in the light of this novel yet not new viral pandemic. There are many philosophical questions which need to be answered so as to cope up in this situation like, constant fear of being affected, especially when among people; problem of self-isolation; self-alienation; not finding moral support during and after being affected from the disease; some citizens' self-interest and immoral behavior. These problems are taking the psychological form. Literary works are replete with many such prevalent issues and problems. Literature has, since ages, been a means of escape from the reality as well as a strong and effective way of facing the reality in a rehabilitative manner. In this paper the aim is to read and reread some selected literary works which give glimpses similar to the current pandemic and study how the tragic literary heroes become role models and help finding answers to some questions on existential anxiety.

Keywords: literature, pandemic, hero, fear, empathy

Infectious diseases have been out breaking since ages and are so not new to the human race. It is that they occur with increased intensity every time. Every time people have made desperate attempts to contain the disease but have never learnt from past experiences. Pandemics have affected social life since the establishment of civilisation. In an online article, Cheng, J.F. and P.C. Leung write, “*Hippocrates recorded the first known pandemic in 412 BC, and numerous outbreaks were reported during the Middle Ages. The most notable epidemic, that of the ‘Spanish influenza’, occurred in 1918. Although more than 88 years have passed since that time, and memories of the disaster have become blurred, the sudden emergence of SARS and avian flu has reminded people of this painful past once more*”.

It is the pandemic literary genre which brings forth the human cost of pandemic, and of course, the emotional quotient resulting from it. Writers have attempted to put a human face to this global terror and portrayed thoroughly through literary characters’ ordinary lives and socio-economic implications of the cataclysmic event. Literature is replete with such characters.

The current situation, which has left human generation helpless, has been well depicted by Norwegian playwright Henrik Wargeland in *The Indian Cholera* (1835), which portrays how Cholera transformed from endemic to pandemic in the first half of 19th century. Albert Camus’ *The Plague* is considered as the best example of epidemic-oriented literature. It depicts a killing of around half of the generation of Oran in 1849. People were helpless and there was an attitude of high-handedness of the state governments.

A short story by an Indian writer, Rajinder Singh Bedi, entitled ‘Quarantine’, focuses particularly on the ‘quarantine’ aspect of the pandemic. It portrays the heart-rending experiences of people generously contributing to helping, aliened and secluded patients who are full of despair in the quarantine centres. It’s a story of deaths due to fear of quarantine than the disease itself.

Lawrence Wright is an American author, in 2020 published *The End of October*, wherein he puts his reporting background to use as he imagines what would happen if a novel virus were to spread across the globe. The scenario he conjures is eerily close to the one we are currently living through.

The situation and theme of these novels resonate with the current unexpectedly emerged pandemic of novel corona virus (Covid-19). It seems either the world in the novel has leaped out and engulfed the reader or the world surrounding the reader has jumped into the pages of the novel. The aim of this paper is to concentrate on the ‘heroes’ of some selected writings of this genre and understand how they have motivated and helped the readers to pass through the period of pandemic.

According to Webster's dictionary, the hero is “a mythical mythological figure, often with extraordinary qualities, with extraordinary powers and abilities, an invincible fighter with rare nobility and courage.” Marilyn Donahue in an article provides a checklist which includes such characteristics as —honesty, commitment, good sportsmanship, sense of humor, fairness, determination, good self-image, and high moral values (25). In short we can say that sometimes our heroes are the people the reader desires to be like. These qualities seem to suggest that the hero is an individual who has the ability to make us feel that we are better people or more accepted as a member of society's elite.

In the well-researched *The End of October*, the main protagonist, Henry Parsons, is the deputy director for infectious diseases with the Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta. Like other literary heroes, Parsons has a lot of qualities apart from having certain human failings. He is working to understand a hemorrhagic fever that first emerges in an Indonesian refugee camp among a group of immune-compromised HIV-positive refugees. But when Parsons visits the camp to investigate the new disease, he accidentally exposes his driver to infection. And the infected driver, carrying the disease asymptotically, proceeds to make the pilgrimage to Mecca.

The novel highlights some incidents readers have been already familiar with in real life. In a situation when the cases are increasing, to have a control over it, a public health officer in the White House situation room has an advice: “We need to urge people to shelter in place”, she says and audience is surprised, “borders closed, sports and entertainment facilities shuttered, nonemergency cases discharged from the hospitals, schools closed, public meetings postponed” (*October* 65). All this is incomprehensible to the listeners in the book but not to the readers anymore. Camus writes in *The Plague*, “It remained compulsory to declare the disease and isolate patients. Houses of sick people were to be closed and disinfected, their

relatives put in preventive quarantine and burials organised by the authorities in conditions that will be described later”(49).

Literary heroes are ‘heroes’ in the real sense. Especially heroes from pandemic literature are humane, generous, kind, empathetic, motivational, enthusiastic in their concern, dutiful, courageous, intuitive and what not. Wright writes about his hero in *The End of October* “In the never-ending war on emerging diseases Henry Parsons was not a small man; he was a giant” (*October* 65). Parsons is on a journey, desperately and passionately, chasing the new Kongoli virus from Switzerland to Indonesia to Saudi Arabia. Parsons seems to be a hero of a typical action thriller movie, full of enthusiasm, with an urge to conquer this virus, confident and experienced. But unfortunately before he contains the pathogen, the pathogen has contained Indonesia, Saudi Arabia and gradually the whole world leading to the death of millions, followed by recession, depression, corruption, and unethical environment.

It is indispensable to mention here Camus’ hero ‘Dr Bernard Rieux’, the objective narrator of *The Plague*, who has been considered by critics as ‘exemplary and inspiring’. He senses the emergence of the signs of plague and informs the authorities who apprehensively respond and neglect, resulting into infections, first occurring in numerous dying rats and then the human beings until it becomes unmanageable. Parsons, in the similar tone used by Dr. Rieux in *The Plague*, opines about the pandemic, “I am not just talking about containing a pandemic. I am talking about saving civilization” (*Plague* 36). Dr Rieux in *The Plague* and Henry Parsons in *October*, have similar doubts of rodents being already affected and possible recurrence of some form of pathogenic infection resulting into an epidemic.

‘Bhagu’ from the story ‘Quarantine’, is one who is courageous and fearless. He ‘believed that if death is around you cannot escape it, wherever you may go’ (44). He was a philanthropist who was the relative of everyone in the quarantine centre, where no one else was there to help, support or even cry for the ones who died of the disease. The extent of fear in the quarantine centre is so much that when ‘a patient fainted with the fear of plague. He was mistaken for dead and dumped on a pile of dead bodies’ (45). Bedi has given words to such a trauma which defies expression. Bakshiji, another character, a doctor in the story, is highly motivated by the generosity of Bhagu, and ‘works more sincerely’ (47).

Further, Parsons tries to guess why the disease took hold. He says, “We could be dealing with a disease that is not normally found in humans, but because of lowered immune response the disease took hold and adapted to human host” (*October 52*). As has been proved in the occurrence of the disease in 2019 with the name of Covid-19, Henry feels that panic was more contagious than the disease. As it spread, it brought anxiety, discomfort and panic among the society. As faced by us in reality some months before, “the world was on the verge of a major pandemic of terrible lethality’ (*October 58*). It was ‘a disease that hadn’t even been described” (*October 62*). When the infected started taking tolls, Wright writes about its seriousness: Dead for five days, ill for possibly ten. Who knew how many people the man had infected during that time? A full-bore infection team would have to get to work immediately, interviewing family members and anyone they or the gravedigger had come into contact with outside the encampment. That might be thousands of people. If an epidemic was already under way in Jakarta, it would soon make itself known. (*Ibid*)

Literature gives us an opportunity to empathise with these great souls, also remembering and correlating with people the readers know in the real world, who have worked day and night, selflessly and tirelessly. *October* is about many generously dedicated specialists who lost their precious lives because they, like Henry and Dr Carlo Urbani, ‘wanted to stay in the field, not in some prominent office in global medical bureaucracy’ (*October 57*). Understanding his responsibility, and when being resisted from taking over a hospital with patient dying due to aggressive influenza, Carlo says, “If I don’t do this now, what am I doing here? Further he adds, “Just answering emails and going to cocktail parties? I am a doctor. I have to help” (*Ibid*). Wright writes about how dedicated these medical professionals were at the ground zero.

As Bedi’s, Wright’s and Camus’s heroes deserve respect and honour, so do the real Covid-19 warriors. In a discussion with her children about why ‘he’ left for Saudi Arabia, Henry’s wife, Jill has high words for her husband:

I wish there were someone else who could do what your dad does, but he has a special talent, I guess. Think of him like a policeman. There are times when people have to be protected from danger, and that’s what your father does, he protects us from disease. He protects all of us. (*October 71*)

So it's not that just the doctor or the medical professionals have to be dedicated and courageous, their family members have to be even more understanding, adjusting and sympathetic. So such writings make the readers more aware of the situation and prove to be quite motivational.

These characters also bring up some ethical questions. His wife, Jill, left at home in Atlanta, observes that the contagion has destroyed any sense of community that once existed. She believes that other natural disasters always prompted humanitarian outreach and collective efforts to help. But this disease, by its nature, makes people afraid of one another. It destroys the essence of human connection. As soon as the news of the pandemic gets out, there is a problem of managing public fear. "There will be runs on the stores," the public health officer says. "Pharmaceuticals, groceries, batteries, gas, guns, you name it. Hospitals will be overwhelmed, not just with sick people but with the worried well" (October 54). There are situations of panic and anxiety. Camus in *The Plague* informs: 'Intercity telephone calls, permitted at first, caused such overcrowding in public phones booths and on the lines that they were entirely stopped for a few days, then strictly limited to what were described as urgent cases, such as deaths, births and marriages. So telegrams became our only recourse' (*Plague* 54). So these are some incidents that the readers have probably experienced themselves or seen happening around them.

But even after all that, in the real life many people have shown themselves to be far better than those we meet in *Quarantine*, *The Plague* and *The End of October*, far braver and kinder than many of those in power, and there's at least some comfort to be found in that.

Further, *The Plague* is about illness, pandemic, exile, loneliness and separation. Because of these particular reasons, it could not be exempted from discussion in this paper. Camus has an acute first-hand experience of pain and loneliness brought by the plague. The narrator of the plague states, "the first thing that the plague brought to our fellow citizens was exile" (56). And it brought separation and loneliness due to seclusion and quarantine, "being separated from a loved one ... (was) the greatest agony of that long period of exile" (53). Therefore, effects of the disease are such one has never expected for and never prepared beforehand. This is a universal saga, a story about 'us' told from third person point of view. It is about being in a situation of extremity where there are no possibilities of being good or bad, right or wrong. The possibility is of survival, and that too, only of the fittest.

Camus believes this catastrophe to be an event in the history, which has a past and may have a future as well. These events should be taken as models and should lead to more preparedness every time. In this current situation of novel Corona virus pandemic one must take it as yet another catastrophe which has taken a good toll of population and believed to have covered a very long period of time in the history of such events.

Another indispensable work of literature is *My Hero is You, Storybook for Children on COVID-19*, published in 2020. It was basically a project developed by the Inter-Agency Standing Committee Reference Group on Mental Health and Psychosocial Support in Emergency Settings (IASC MHPSS RG). The book was based on the feedback from children, parents and caregivers affected by COVID-19. Through a fantasy character 'Ario', again a literary hero, this book explains how children can protect themselves, their families and friends from coronavirus and how one should manage difficult emotions when confronted with a new and rapidly changing reality. It is a story developed for and by children around the world. The world has changed in a very short interval of time and every individual is having a difficulty to deal with it. It is much easier for adults to understand how and why their world has changed than for children who all of a sudden have had their world turned upside down. So this book must essentially be read to the children by the parents or grownups and explained.

Through *The Plague* Camus advises the reader to have patience and decency in such a situation, to take time before one restarts. One should start believing there is nothing important than being with loved ones, and isolation, separation, and loneliness are the most torturous, even more painful than death. The abstract but actually concrete feelings of love, hope and strength lead to cure in the situation, which has befallen. So reading literature enables the reader to understand what life actually is or what it should be.

Basically, it is the time of crisis, discomfort, hardship, natural calamities, that gives the readers to understand how to deal with the situation and know what is one's priority among self interest or social responsibility. The literary characters like real life medical practitioners, army personals, media personals, and other volunteers have, without worrying for their own life, exposed themselves to harmful environment in the most recently novel Corona virus pandemic. They have proved that humanity is most important, and generosity is still there. Citizens must take responsibility in this critical situation. So, literature and literary

heroes tell us in this situation, about being concerned, kind to our fellow beings, being strong and giving strength and desired support to the society, finally proving that man is the most intelligent and best living species.

Works Cited:

- Bedi, Rajinder Singh. *Quarantine*. Trans. Madhu Singh. *Orientalia Suecana*. 2020. Vol. 69.
- Camus, Albert. *The Plague*. Trans. Robin Buss. Pearson. 1947.
- Cheng, J.F. and Leung, P.C., 2007, History of Infectious Diseases: What Happened in China During the 1918, *International Journal of Infectious Diseases*, Volume II, Issue 4, pp-360-364.
- Defoe, D. *Journal of the Plague Year*, in Jordison, S. (2020), Defoe's Plague Year was written in 1722 but speaks clearly to our times, *The Guardian*, 5 May 2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2020/may/05/defoe-a-journal-of-the-plague-year-1722-our-time>
- Donahue, Marilyn Cram. "Athletes as Role Models". In *Current Health 2* (January 2002): 22-25.
- Peters, Michael A. "*The Plague*: Human resilience and the collective response to catastrophe". Taylor & Francis Online. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2020.1745921>
- R, Jaya Gomathi Mirra. "Camus' *The Plague* in the times of Covid-19". National School of Journalism and Public Discourse.nsoj.in 20 Aug 2020.
- Rai, Saurav Kumar. 'Pandemics through Indian literary lens'. <https://www.livehistoryindia.com/story/cover-story/pandemics-through-indian-literary-lens/>
- Sen, Nandini. 'Pandemics, COVID-19, and literary studies: past and present'. <https://www.valpo.edu/christ-college/files/2020/08/CC-Reading-Group-Syllabus-2020-2021.pdf>
- Wright, Lawrence. *The End of October*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2020. <https://blogs.ed.ac.uk/covid19perspectives/2020/06/11/pandemics-covid-19-and-literary-studies-past-and-present-by-nandini-sen/>
- <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-53946103>
- My Hero is You, Storybook for Children on COVID-19*
- <https://www.unicef.org/coronavirus/my-hero-you>
- <https://www.vox.com/culture/2020/4/29/21239718/end-of-october-review-lawrence-wright-pandemic-thriller>