(Re)Reading/Re-visiting the notions on Pandemic Literature, Literary theories and Humanitarianism in Covid -19 scenario

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"In the depth of winter, I finally learned that there was in me an invincible summer."

-Albert Camus

1.1 Introduction to Pandemic and Pandemic Literature:

Pandemic in general is defined as "an epidemic occurring worldwide, or over a very wide area, crossing international boundaries and usually affecting a large number of people". This classical definition includes nothing about population immunity, virology, or disease severity" ("What is the definition of a Pandemic"?). The literature that captures and shares the experience of the life during pandemic, in general, is defined as "Pandemic Literature".

World Health Organisation declared the outbreak of Covid in the year 2019.This new wave of virus has shook the entire world and continues to be a threat for the entire world. Many are affected and the death rates are recorded every day. This disease is considered to be more infectious as it can spread even through a touch, cough and saliva. A repeated warning has been given to wear a mask and maintain social distance. Washing hands repeatedly with sanitizer or soap has become a routine. Due to the incessant lockdown in

numerous countries, people were highly affected. The emotional and economic loss is uncountable. Some even interpreted this as bio-war on mankind. This unusual situation after many years has once again made us to re-visit the forum of Pandemic Literature. Numerous conference and paper publications were conducted on Pandemic Literature. Though Pandemic Literature is not new for us, still the term has become a primary source of discussion. Knowingly or unknowingly we have been studying "Ring Around the Rosie" rhyme for many years in Kindergarten which is a part of pandemic.

The below lines was considered to be the darkest rhyme in Kindergarten class as it referred to the Great Plague of London in 1665 (a Pandemic).

"Ring-a-ring-a-rosies

A pocket full of posies

A tissue, a tissue

We all fall down".

The above lines indeed have undergone various changes in due course of time. However the shades of dark remain the same. The "rosie" denoted the malodorous rash that developed on the skin of plague sufferers, and they needed "pocket full of posies" to keep away from the stench.

So, it is evident that Pandemic Literature keep surging among us every now and then during the times of Pandemic. The names of the disease may vary but it keeps reiterating in literature with a strong reflection of those horrible times.

1.2 Why we can reframe the idea of Pandemic Literature?

According to E.D Hirsch and the more recent work of structuralist,

> There can be no pure 'innocent' reader, for there is a whole array of presuppositions, beliefs etc., which come in the way intruding upon the reader in his response to a work. In this sense, there can be no sanctified and objcive texts storing a wealth of content in them. What matters is the process by which the content is formulate and realized in limitless ways. (Twentieth Century Criticism 131)

Based on the above ideology reading of certain novels based on war has led to the process of pondering about the concept of pandemic literature. It is natural for any reader to response to a work. So, based on the observations and beliefs as a reader, the notion of reframing and extending the framework of Pandemic Literature has dawned upon.

1.3 Reframing the idea of Pandemic Literature:

Why always the term 'pandemic' should be related only to the disease? It can be further expanded to one another major disease like 'war' which keeps reiterating throughout the world at different phases due to various reasons. One can compare the output of the disease and war. Both are severe and destructive.

1.4 Similarities between war and disease:

1. Both can be pandemic, epidemic, and endemic.
   a. Pandemic-Prevalent over a whole country or the world. (World war)
   b. Epidemic- a widespread infectious disease among a community at a particular time. (civil war)
   c. Endemic-Regularly found among a particular people in a certain area. (community war)
2. Economic and social disruption is inevitable.
3. Mental health is highly affected.
4. Loss of lives in large numbers.
5. Throughout history, both war and disease keep emerging now and then.

So, when war has all the qualities of disease and further interpreting war as a fatal disease, even war can be re-read as a recurring pandemic.

1.5 War/Pandemic: Curfew/Lockdown:

During war and pandemic, one could see a common factor like curfew and lockdown that is being imposed upon people. Though the former is related to be done for the subjugation of people and the latter as something which is being imposed on the people for their welfare, still the outcome is bitter. Except for certain things like there is no communication disconnection in lockdown, psychological impact created by

curfew and lockdown staying indoors is the same. Both curfew and lockdown keep a strong check on people's movement.

During lockdown and curfew, one could also see the urge of people to shop for accumulating things at home. Stocking supplies in case of war and disease hours is a common act amidst people.

1.6 Worst consequence of War/Pandemic:

Lack of Proper Funeral:

In war and pandemic, it is difficult to get a decent burial even to a near and dear one. An untimely death at an untimely age with no proper reference is a part of every war and disease havoc. Due to the fear of disease spread, funeral crowd and decent burial are restricted.

Financial burden:

The utmost inevitable effect which happens due to war and economics is financial loss. When everything goes down in curfew/lockdown, the people became less fortunate. The business gets shut down and always they close the business with the hope to recover.

Migration:

It is evident that any natural outcome of any financial burden is migration in search of livelihood which is nothing but giving up one's identity falling into displacement. Pandemic and war direct outcome is financial stress followed by migration. Already every individual has witnessed a vast migration even during this covid-19. The shortage of money and the fear of hunger force people to move to some undesirable places. Initially one would try to cut off his/her expense. Then later they try to find their own bread through the means of migration.

Physical/psychological damages of Pandemic/war:

The pandemic and the war always leave a worst physical and psychological effect on people. For instance, according to the medical field after covid-19 one may have strokes, seizures and certain syndromes. A risk of parkinson's disease and Alzheimer's disease is also predicted. Similarly after war, several people would

have been left amputated and got affected with various chronic diseases. Hiroshima and Nagasaki bomb destruction is one such instance. Both pandemic and war could cause severe generic disease even for generations after generations.

Prevention of war/pandemic-UN/WHO:

No wonder pandemic and war are supposed to be prevented and controlled. When WHO (World Health Organisation) takes care of the pandemic prevention and cure, UN (United Nations) acts as a barrier to prevent war. Peace and security are the major mantra of UN. It has always tried to settle the conflicts since the worst impact of war is well-known for everyone in and around this world. No country is free from experiencing war and pandemic.

Isolation:

Every pandemic and war forces an individual to spend time in isolation. The reason behind it could be different but relationship falling apart both physically and psychologically is the most common factor between the two. Impact of isolation on an individual is indispensable. Mental turmoil and the agony is uncountable. Isolation also results in unwanted elements like fear, insecurity of life and further it may lead to bizarre imaginations.

Based from the tracing of similarities between war and pandemic, it is evident that the ideology on Pandemic can be re-read from the background of any literature that deals with war. The canon of pandemic literature can be expanded and its horizon no wonder may extend in future.

2.1 Introduction to Reading:

Reading is much younger when compared to speaking and writing. Reading is said to be just 6000 years old, but the impact created by it in society is immense. Reading civilized the man. It made him to raise questions, kinder inner spirit and raise voice against the injustice. The benefit of reading is abundant and reading of religious text like bible and the invention of printing press during industrial revolution has further paved way for the production of more books and the readers. Traditionally reading was associated only with book but now reading could happen in any text and context. Roland Barthes laid the foundation for this idea.

2.2 Barthes Concept of Text:

In his work "From Work to Text", Barthes does not actually defines the term 'text' but instead he differentiates the former and the latter thereby he gives a vivid picture of what exactly could be considered as 'text'. He differentiates using seven major criteria namely method, genre, signs, plurality, filiation, reading, and pleasure. By Method, Barthes explains 'work' is something concrete whereas text is nothing but the meaning which the reader assumes from a work. Genre is a rigid classification that can be applied to work but a text can never be placed in a genre or hierarchial system. Pertaining to Signs, A work is completely 'signified' and a sense of arbitrariness is not involved in it whereas a text is incomplete. As it is incomplete, it highly encourages the readers to come up with their own associations and overlapping ideas. Text in short is an open-ended material with multiple layers of symbols and signs.

Through Plurality, Barthes denotes that a text could consist of more than one meaning (plural). Filiation in work is related to the authorship and previous work of the author is associated for a better understanding whereas text is not limited to author's signification. Further, text promotes an interaction between a reader and the writing. In a text, a reader will never passively consume the words and its meanings. Last but not the least, he adds that a text will provide more pleasure since the reader and the writer will not have any seperation in feeling due to the interactions. The text can transcend any language or social barriers.

2.3 Classroom as Text:

Pertaining to the concept of Barthes, it is comprehensible that according to his explanation of text, any medium can be considered as text. Based on this ideology, even a classroom can be considered as text for study. In Indian context during ancient era, Guru's house (Gurukulam) was the classroom. Later, we had a separate infrastructure labelled as schools, colleges and various other bodies in the name of education institution. However, due to covid-19 classroom scenario has transgressed itself into virtual space. With mobiles, laptops and i.pad as a means of communication, every space according to the convenience has been transformed into virtual classroom. Lots of platform like Google meet, Zoom and Cisco Webex took over the classroom platform. No more blackboard and chalk piece in classroom and it has been replaced by

pictures and videos shared from various websites. So, after Covid-19 we are forced to re-read about the concept and ideology of classroom. The text 'classroom' no doubt has undergone immense changes. Mobile which was once forbidden inside the education premise has converted itself into a classroom. Educationist, teachers and parents have to accept it as a new sign of positivity for developing knowledge since there could be no other better option.

This is one of the most notable changes that have happened throughout the world. One could strongly establish the new possibility in re-reading the context of classroom.

2.4 Re-reading Barthes idea on classical works:

According to Barthes, Classical works are something which cannot be untouched. While differentiating work from the text, he clearly points out the impossibility of assigning arbitrariness to the signified. Further, he states the superior hierarchy of classical works where it would remain untouched with no possibility of assigning plural meaning. However, this idea of Barthes should be re-visited since after the arrival of social media, this idea has been totally shattered. The classical works or their characters are easily revisited and used according to the convenience of the context. Both the purpose of signifier and signified is changed. Some of the best examples could be seen during Covid-19 context as below,

Wash Hands Like LADY MACBETH.

Seclude Yourself Like MISS.HAVISHAM.

Postpone Your Tasks Like HAMLET.

Eat Like FALSTAFF.

Wear Masks like BENEDICT.

Be Proud Like DARCY and Avoid Dancing With LIZZIES.

Don't Touch Or Steal Others' Kerchiefs Like IAGO.

Unlike ROMEO, Avoid Meeting JULIETs Who wait in the Balconies. Let Them Wait Till Morrow.

Don't Wander Around Like Ulysses.

Be Wise Like Beatrice.

Let The West Wind Blow

Listen to Nightingales,

Admire Daffodils.

Stay Home

Stay Safe. (Courtesy: Watsapp Message)

In the above poem, a precaution measure that has to be taken for covid-19 has been excellently rendered to the great classical works and its characters. Now one could see that how the signifier is used for a different purpose and there is an arbitrariness in signified. Further once again for the vaccination too, such a poem has been circulated based on Shakespeare's play title as given below,

William Shakespeare came to get vaccinated.

Nurse: Which arm?

Shakespeare: _*As you like it.*_

Nurse: Was that painful?

Shakespeare: _*Much ado about nothing.*_

Nurse: You will have to have a second jab.

Shakespeare: _*Measure for measure?*_

Nurse: So what do you think of the govt handling of Covid?

 Shakespeare: _*Comedy of Errors.*_

From the above two examples, one is forced to rethink about the ideas on classical works by Roland Barthes.

2.5 Re-reading the concept of Subalterns:

Gayathri Chakravarthy Spivak in her essay "Can the Subalterns Speak"? raise some crucial questions related to Subalterns. Covid-19 on the other hand also enforces us to think about the term subaltern. Can we consider trashmen/trashwomen subalterns based on their subjugation and socio-economic status. Nevertheless Covid scenario has made us to rethink about their significance and their role in society. They are the one who act like our Xavier and rescuers in current context. We are dependant more on them.

2.6 Deconstructing the marginalized:

For a safe environment, the entire society relies upon the trashman/trashwoman. They can no more be marginalized. We could see a displacement in center and marginalized. Contemporary Covid has enforced us to re-read their position. They are the center of need. We seem to be marginalised as we do not have any crucial role like a trashman/trashwoman whose contribution can be equated to the service rendered to the country as any defence force would do for the nation.

Janice Gassam Asare in her article published in Forbes titled "4 ways to Deconstruct Systems of Oppression" discusses on the four methods as below,

1. Speak Up

2. Share Your Resources

3. Amplification

4. Show Your Support

The above four methods are effective to voice out the problems of the marginalised but in this covid-19 situation, the marginalised have come up with another source to prove their importance in society. We could label that role as "Speak Up through Action". Through their vital service to the society at the most important time, they have proved their significance. Their voice is heard through their actions. It could also be included as one of the most effective method to voice out the marginalised.

Re-reading the concept of 'power':

Covid-19 once again leads us to re-read the notion of Marxism with relevance to power. According to Marxist, power is linked to class relationship in economics, politics and ideology. Marxism constantly talks about class domination which results in economics, politics and ideology. Marxism also talks about class domination which results in economic imbalance and conflicts. Covid-19 has resulted in the reversal of class domination. In this Covid-19 crisis, Marxism has to be re-read to understand how the lower-economic strata have all of a sudden gained power over the strong economical capitalist class. The capitalist society cannot go through a day without the aid of trashman/woman who belong to a economically poor-strata. Even in case of marketing or promoting a product via advertisement, there is a shift in representation. The promotion for the benefit of capitalist was based on the portrayal about the importance of economically affected class. Since, most of the population in countries like India spent their time before television and other electronic gadgets, all the advertisement were re-designed based on the concepts and importance of social workers.

According to Focault, power is maintained by discourses which are social constructs. Discourses like religion, science, fashion, and law maintain the flow of power in the society. Though the power is social construct, still we accept it as natural. At times great devastative elements like pandemic also decide the flow of power. The circulation of power within the discourse is questioned and it evokes us to rethink about the factor that has designed all these flow of power for the functions of society.

2.7 Reading/Re-reading of Anthropocentrism:

In general Anthropocentrism is defined as a "belief that human beings are the most important entity in universe. Anthropocentrism interprets or regards the world in terms of human values and experiences" (Wikipedia). This term over a long run has begun to be used to justify the violence against non-human world. When man become the center, due importance was not given to the other species of nature. Exploitation of nature was freely allowed. Gradually nature's species did not have enough space to breathe. They slowly evaded from the scene. The human beings dominated the entire space of this universe as if they are the sole heir of this earth. During this covid-19, man had an opportunity to re-read and go back to the ideology of Anthropocentrism. When human kind was confined to his habitat, nature's species came out and

made a mark through their presence. They had a free road to walk. They made us to realise that world is not meant only for homosapiens. They too exist and they have all rights to enjoy the privilege in this earth. We had time to look back at those nature's species who are not our subordinates or slaves. They are our fellow living beings in this world. Covid-19 gave us that space to rethink the perspective on Anthropocentrism which purpose is not only to promote the mankind but the simultaneous growth of all the species in this world.

2. 8 Revisiting Semiotics in Covid-19 context:

The term semiotics recognises any language system as sign. For a semiotician, always the formula could be sign=signifier + signified. It is further established that the relationship between the signifier and signified is neither natural nor necessary, but arbitrary. One could observe this concept well in advertisements during Covid-19 crisis. As advertisements and popular culture rely on semiotic system, let us take an advertisement for analysis. The image of the advertisements are given below,

(Courtesy: Google Image)

The above two images are about a bathing soap. In the first image beauty is signified. The secret of younger looking skin and sandal smell is emphasized whereas after the covid-19 the role of signifier changes. Now the signifier signifies 'care' and the beauty evades from the scene, replaced by another purpose of Germ shield. It is interesting to note that as semiotics pointed out, the relationship "between the signifier and the signified is neither natural nor necessary, but arbitrary" (English Literary Criticism and Theory, 154). The meaning is attributed to the sign. During this covid-19, most of the signs in advertisements were attributed only to the protection from Covid-19.

3. 1 Revisiting humanitarian sense – optimistic note in covid-19:

"Love the world as your own self, then you can truly care for all things" opined Lao Tzu. However, every human being realizes the above mentioned truth only during the time of crisis. We have a series of incidents like Tsunami, cyclones and flood which has reiterated this truth. We, the HomoSapiens who are at the top of animal Kingdom exhibit our humane quality only during the catastrophe.

If every bad thing happens for a real good reason, then no doubt this pandemic covid-19 has yielded two good things namely (a) the revival of nature and (b) the revival of our humanity. As Shelly lines establishes a fact that, "Our sweetest songs are those that tell of the saddest thoughts", these saddest time has given us a sweetest thought to revive and rejuvenate our refined thoughts towards nature and humanity. The shackled humanitarian sense and the subjugated nature have spread their wings wide apart during this pandemic. Despite a handful of inhumane incidents due to the fear of Corona, in majority one could observe the goodness of humanity thronging in the air.

The Literary Encyclopedia defines Binary Oppositions as follow,

> According to Ferdinand de Saussure, the binary opposition is the "means by which the units of language have value or meaning; each unit is defined against what it is not". Essentially, the concept of the binary opposition is engendered by the Western propensity to organize everything into a hierarchical structure; terms and concepts are related to positives or negatives, with no apparent latitude for deviation: i.e. Man/Woman, Black/White, Life/Death, Inside/Outside, Presence/Absence, and so on. Thus, the binary opposition is fundamentally a structurally derived …

In modern era like the binary opposites in structuralism, man/woman growth was in juxtaposed to the nature's destruction. Nature was repeatedly murdered and ransacked in name of development. Animals and birds lost their home, food and peace. In contrary during this pandemic, the word 'life' overtook the concept of development. To save the life of man/woman, they were imprisoned which in turn provided freedom to the nature. The nature began to breathe freely devoid of pollution. Birds and animals visited us who were confiscated in curfew and quarantine. Every now and then Nature gives a time phase for the humans to realize its power but once again humans move back to pavilion forgetting those learned lessons.

The current situation aptly fits to the process of deconstruction too. The modern times placed money and the power at the centre and marginalized nature and humanity, on the other hand, this pandemic raised the question against the centre-money and power. If money and power could not put an end to the pandemic then how the humans can consider money and power to be in centre. A key question is placed before mankind which shattered the centre's position presenting the importance of marginalized people.

Nature and quality of humane who were treated as 'subalterns' and 'other' had risen from their assigned status. The question "Who are Subalterns"? exactly throbbed in the heart of all human kind. The scavengers/trashman (woman) are no more subalterns. They are celebrated for their service to the society. Due to the leisure time at home, man had time to look and celebrate nature. Barking dogs, perching birds at the windows and rising/setting sun were no more the subalterns.

The women who have been confined in the kitchen were not given due recognition despite the efforts of literary feminism or theory but rather this pandemic had turned them into a celebrity. They are being thanked in social media and end numbers of videos are posted in praise of them. They are celebrated for their service devoid of wages. The struggle of women all of a sudden had been realised and recognised during this pandemic.

This pandemic no wonder has promoted the importance of humanity through the concept of standing together by heart. We have witnessed the economical and moral support provided among the human beings. The importance of sharing has been experienced. The following is a sample. Below is the testimony from facebook by one of my friend. To Quote,

Yes, it's a guilt feeling that makes me write this. I'm not ashamed to admit that I feel guilty. In fact, it's a matter to be shared publicly.

'Sharing' is probably the most misleading word after the advent of social networks. I'm not an oldie bee to say, Social networks ruin us. On the other hand, what is shared at what point of time matters a lot.

This post of mine is about one such a thing. If you follow me on my whatsapp, you would've noticed me posting pictures and videos of Biriyani I made in the recent times. Just like you, I'm a Biriyani lover and I was craving for the dish ever since the announcement of lock down. I was craving like anything that I decided to cook it myself and eat. I cooked not once but twice. There should the craving end but does it? No, It doesn't. I posted it on my whatsapp status. Nothing strange, it's just a common thing that everyone does nowadays, isn't it?

Yesterday, I happened to see a video in YouTube, where a homeless- physically challenged man, runs towards a policeman on seeing him offering food packets. On seeing this, something broke loose in me.

It is then, I felt guilty of my action. While I'm enjoying the priviges, someone somewhere is starving. I really felt bad. I asked myself a series of questions: Wouldn't one atleast of those who checked my whatsapp status have been starving that day? Why? And for whom are we uploading

what we eat in whatsapp? Isn't it inhuman to seek pleasure by announcing to public you can afford what they cannot? When did this inhuman behaviour become a common attitude?

I really felt ashamed of my act and I decided not to post any such photos or videos in whatsapp status update, atleast till the end of the lock down.

We, in course of tuning ourselves to technology, sadly have started losing values. We have a saying in Tamil which insists on developing the habit of sharing your food with the needy. Since the word 'sharing' has got a whole new meaning now, we share the food on social network and not with the needy.

No wonder, currently one could observe the nature's recreation, humane nature and the humans' heart throbbing towards it. Let us uphold the same feel even after the end of this pandemic.

4.1 Conclusion:

Covid-19 has given us a lot of didactic, moralistic and philanthropic approach to our life. Pandemic which is more or less a bio war against humanity is revisited through the lens of reframing the notion of pandemic literature, re-reading the Barthe's concept of text and by refreshing the fact that how even nature's joy, its omnipresence and omnipotence has rekindled our passion for nature and humanistic behaviour during this crucial covid-19 time. Waves of Covid-19 may attack our planet but at the outset we will keep on drawing our inspiration and lessons from those experiences both academically and pragmatically. No wonder this pandemic has made us to rethink about human values and revisit the nature's path. Our resolution to fight will never get deteriorate by any source of unknown power and our thirst to learn values in difficult times will be in track. Human kind for ages has survived and they are the best testimony for this strong determination to survive in this planet. However, it is our duty to remember a fact that we are not immortals and act accordingly.

Every distress gives a message for us to learn in life and Covid-19 too has given us a strong message, which I have tried to represent in the following lines of the poem titled Corona: "Hey, you mortal beings!"

Hey, you mortal beings!

I am the Covid-19, "King of Kings"

Who left you in mighty despair!

Spared a few lives,

Smashed umpteen hopes,

Seized the day with - 'Corona'.

Hey, you mortal beings!

Mightiest kingdoms are dreaded upon by me

Stamping the grey shades of death and poverty

Captured millions of mortals....physically and mentally

You blame me of fear,

Placing many aspects rear.

Hey, you mortal beings!

Realise 'Who am I'?

Who am I.....?

I am a philosopher and truth vendor,

Core Value of life

Omnipotence of nature

Vitality of love

Ignorance of impermanence in you

Deconstructing the notion of power and money.

Hey, you mortal beings!
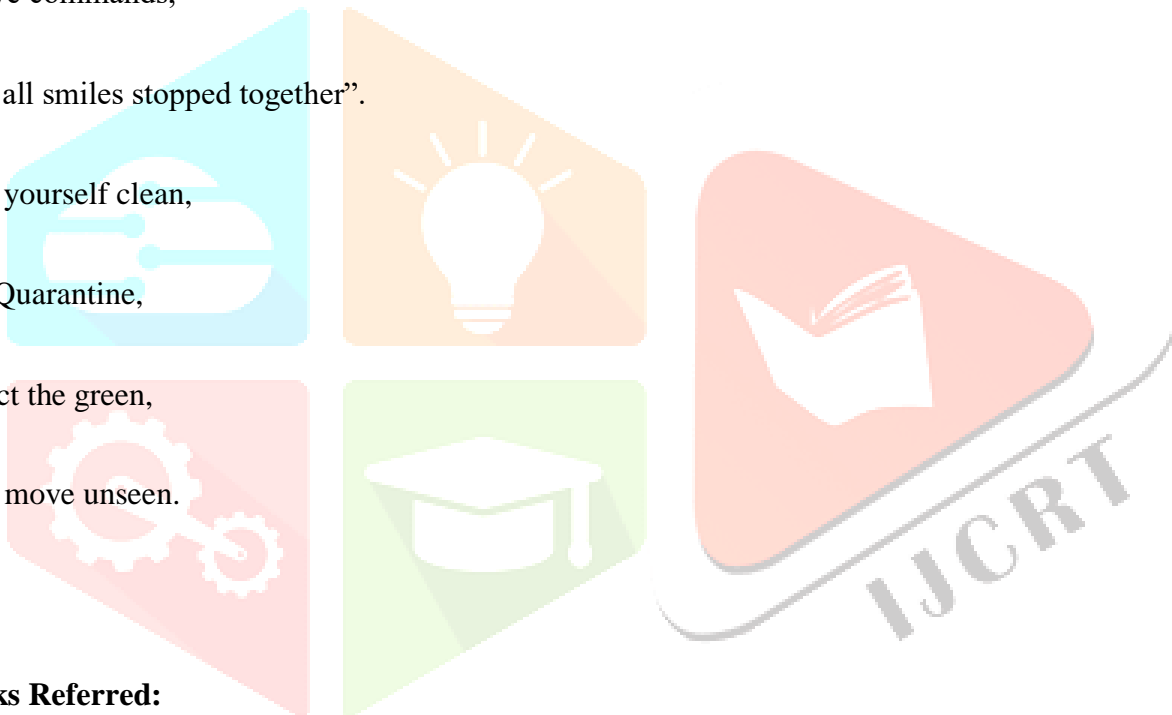
Remember

I am omniscient

"I gave commands,

Then all smiles stopped together".

Keep yourself clean,

Stay Quarantine,

Protect the green,

I will move unseen.

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