



Reflections of Apocalypses and Epidemics in the Literary Genres

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Abstract: The outbreak of Covid-19 has paved a way for writers, researchers and academicians to focus more on the study of epidemics like flu, cholera, small pox, plague, etc. and their dreadful effects in the community. A detailed survey on literature proves that a pandemic situation similar to the ongoing encounter of Covid-19 in various ways including wearing masks, washing hands, adhering to quarantine procedures, self-isolation or community isolation, imposition of lockdown, social distancing, strengthening immune system, work from home policies, scary news about containment zones, migration hurdles, managing livelihood, mental depression, mass deaths and mass burials is not something new, but such an uncertain comfort is a cyclic disaster which has been incessantly troubling people from the classical age to the contemporary era.

Pandemics are mass murderers.

Diseases like plague, smallpox, influenza and cholera ruin families, destroy towns and leave generation scarred and scared. – Times of India (1)

Keywords: Apocalypses, epidemics, cholera, fever, malaria, plague, red death, pandemic, pestilence, isolation and quarantine

I. INTRODUCTION

Two Historians, Suranjan Das, Jadavpur University Vice-Chancellor and Achintya Kumar Dutta, Professor of Burdwan University in their recent article on *Isolation Centres Existed in 19th Century Bengal* reveals the outbreak of cholera, smallpox and malaria during the British Era and the effective responses and measures derived by the colonial leaders to the dreadful situation.

Even in the late 19th century, it was advised that patients afflicted with highly contagious diseases were kept in isolation and suspects in quarantine centres, Das told PTI – The Indian Express (2)

It is evident that Pandemic Literature is not a new origin as it has been prevailing from the great epic of Homer's *Iliad* to the modern writers today. This paper entitled *Reflections of Apocalypses and Epidemics in the Literary Genres* focuses on a range of dreadful experiences undergone by the people because of certain epidemics like Plague, Red Death, Fever and Cholera in the literary genres of Homer's *Iliad*, Boccaccio's *The Decameron*, Edgar Allan Poe's *The Masque of the Red Death*, Albert Camus's *The Plague*, Deon Meyer's *Fever*, Ling Ma's *Severance* and Keki N. Daruwalla's *Pestilence in Nineteenth-Century Calcutta*.

II. HOMER'S ILIAD

Homer is the renowned author of the most significant works *Iliad* and *Odyssey* of ancient Greek literature. His epic *Iliad* is centered around the themes of love and war. The epic opens the ceaseless war for nine years between Achaeans and Trojans. Achilles, one of the Achaeans' most powerful warriors, is portrayed as the greatest Greek hero to fight in the Trojan War as Achaeans capture the Trojan town along with two beautiful maidens, Chryseis and Briseis. Agamemnon, the chief commander of the Achaean army takes Chryseis and Achilles claims Briseis. Chryses, Chryseis's father pleads Agamemnon to return his daughter and he offers to pay huge wealth as compensation for his daughter. Agamemnon refuses to accept the words of Chryses and Chryses becomes angry. He seeks Apollo, the God of Archery, for help. Because of the tremendous amount of piety and faith of Agamemnon, Apollo curses the entire Greek army with the epidemic plague, which takes the lives of many Greek soldiers and the apocalyptic situation lasts for ten days.

That god was Apollo, son of Zeus and Leto.

Angry with Agamemnon, he cast plague down onto the troops—a deadly infectious evil.

- Homer's *Iliad* - Book One, *The Quarrel by the Ships* (Lines 10-12)

III. BOCCACCIO'S *THE DECAMERON*

Giovanni Boccaccio is an Italian writer and philosopher. He lived during the outbreak of plague and encountered its ravaged experience in his native city, Florence in Europe between 1347 and 1352 and got inspired to write *The Decameron*. The book was composed in 1349 and published in English in 1886. It is a collection of novellas, structured with 100 tales narrated by a group of seven women and three men, who try to escape the disease by migrating to a villa outside the city. Boccaccio depicts the outbreak of plague in the introductory part of *The Decameron*.

Let me say, then, that thirteen hundred and forty-eight years had already passed after the fruitful Incarnation of the Son of God when into the distinguished city of Florence...there came a deadly pestilence. Either because of the influence of heavenly bodies or because of God's just wrath as a punishment to mortals for our wicked deeds, the pestilence, originating some years earlier in the East, killed an infinite number of people as it spread relentlessly from one place to another until finally it had stretched its miserable length all over the West. And against this pestilence no human wisdom or foresight was of any avail; quantities of filth were removed from the city by officials charged with the task; the entry of any sick person into the city was prohibited; and many directives were issued concerning the maintenance of good health. (3)

IV. EDGAR ALLAN POE'S *THE MASQUE OF THE RED DEATH*

Prominent American writer, Edgar Allan Poe published an apocalyptic short story *The Masque of the Red Death* (original title *The Mask of the Red Death: A Fantasy*) in 1842. The story takes place at the castellated abbey of the Prince Prospero, who, along with more than one thousand nobles, has taken refuge in this abbey to escape the Red Death. It is a terrible plague with gruesome symptoms including sharp pains, sudden dizziness, high bleeding at the pores and death within half an hour.

THE "RED DEATH" had long devastated the country. No pestilence had ever been so fatal, or so hideous. Blood was its Avatar and its seal—the redness and the horror of blood. There were sharp pains, and sudden dizziness, and then profuse bleeding at the pores, with dissolution. The scarlet stains upon the body and especially upon the face of the victim, were the pest ban which shut him out from the aid and from the sympathy of his fellow-men. And the whole seizure, progress and termination of the disease, were the incidents of half an hour. (4)

V. ALBERT CAMUS'S *THE PLAGUE*

The epidemic novel *The Plague* was written by Albert Camus in 1947. Dr. Rieux is portrayed as the unknown narrator in the beginning of the novel and his identity is revealed towards the end of the novel. It gives a clear picture of plague washing away Oran, the Algerian city in France. The novel was written based on the cholera epidemic that had killed a huge population of Oran in 1849. There were the outbreaks of diseases in and around Oran many times before Camus published his novel *The Plague*. The mindset of the people during such pandemic situation is revealed in the following text.

Nobody is capable of really thinking about anyone, even in the worst calamity.

We can't stir a finger in this world without the risk of bringing death to somebody. Yes, I've been ashamed ever since; I have realized that we all have plague, and I have lost my peace. (5)

The following lines from the novel *The Plague* portray the pathetic situation as a result of mass deaths similar to that of ongoing Covid-19.

Rats died in the street, men in their homes. And newspapers are concerned only with the street. (5)

VI. DEON MEYER'S *FEVER*

Deon Meyer is a popular novelist of crime and detective thrillers from South Africa. His novel *Fever* was published in 2016. Meyer constructs the plot of the novel based on the real epidemic outbreak in South Africa after a virus wipes out 95 per cent of the population in the world. The book narrates the pathetic story of survival in which Nico Storm and his son, Willem Storm are alone left in the town after 'the Fever', an airborne AIDS-related virus swipes out the majority of people there. The novel presents the epoch making incidents undergone by both Nico Storm and Willem Storm, who try to build a new community after the epidemics.

We are starting a sanctuary, a community

*that will have justice, wisdom, moderation and courage... (6) – Deon Meyer's *Fever**

VII. LING MA'S *SEVERANCE*

The China American Novelist Ling Ma published her novel *Severance* with exploring the deadly mood and situation of New York in the year 2018. The novel won the *2018 Kirkus Prize* and it was listed in the *New York Times Notable Book of 2018*. It was also shortlisted for the *2019 Hemingway Foundation/PEN Award*. In her debut novel, Ling Ma portrays the experience of apocalypse and the struggles faced by the young woman, Candace Chen, for her survival after the washing away of huge population in New York by a strange fungal infection called Shen Fever, in Shenzhen, China. Candace Chen is one of the characters left after the deadly tragedy in the city. The victims of Shen Fever repeat their old routine memories without any presence of mind till death.

Memories beget memories. Shen fever being a disease of remembering, the fevered are trapped indefinitely in their memories. But what is the difference between the fevered and us? Because I remember too, I remember perfectly. My memories replay, unprompted, on repeat. And our days, like theirs, continue in an infinite loop. (7)

VIII. KEKI N. DARUWALLA'S *PESTILENCE IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY CALCUTTA*

The Indian subcontinent was ravaged by a series of deadly epidemics between 1817 and 1821, which marked the beginning of the First Cholera Pandemic in India during the Mughal Empire. This pandemic was also known as the first Asiatic cholera pandemic or Asiatic cholera. It emerged out of the Ganges Delta with an outbreak in Jessore, Bangladesh near the city of Calcutta, stemming from contaminated rice and spread throughout South and Southeast Asia to the Middle East, eastern Africa and the Mediterranean coast. The disease quickly spread throughout most of India, modern-day Myanmar and modern-day Sri Lanka by the trade routes established by Europeans. The horrible effects of the pandemic are expressed by Lahore-born poet Keki N. Daruwalla in his poem *Pestilence in Nineteenth-Century Calcutta*, an extract from book *The Keeper of the Dead*, published in the year 1982. The beginning lines of the poem portray the mass suffering and death due to the pandemic at that time.

*'Black fellow die, much,'
said the sahib's barber to him
referring to the ghettos
beyond the esplanade
where people writhed
in the groaning calisthenics of cholera. - Pestilence in Nineteenth-Century Calcutta (Lines 1-6)*

IX. CONCLUSION

It is an undeniable fact that a series of epidemics have ravaged the world over the period of history. About 5,000 years ago, an epidemic wiped out a prehistoric village in China and the dead bodies were stuffed inside a house and the remains were burned later. The site has become the part of Archaeology Department today. The list of epidemics comprises Plague of Athens (430 B.C.), Antonine Plague (A.D. 165-180), Plague of Cyprian (A.D. 250-271), Plague of Justinian (A.D. 541-542), The Black Death (1346-1353), Cocoliztli Epidemic (1545-1548), American Plagues (16th century), Great Plague of London (1665-1666), Great Plague of Marseille (1720-1723), Russian Plague (1770-1772), Philadelphia Yellow Fever Epidemic (1793), Flu Pandemic (1889-1890), American Polio Epidemic (1916), Spanish Flu (1918-1920), Asian Flu (1957-1958), AIDS Pandemic and Epidemic (1981-present day), H1N1 Swine Flu Pandemic (2009-2010), West African Ebola Epidemic (2014-2016), Zika Virus Epidemic (2015-present day) and the ongoing Covid-19 Pandemic. Hence, it is understood that a range of pandemics have destroyed the lives of people including COVID-19 over the history. The studies show that these pandemics have yielded means for further opportunities, enlisting better healthcare, crisis management, advanced facilities and new social and behavioural norms. In this way, the Covid-19 will set back the normal life with establishing a new world which will definitely relish the fruit of humanity and the virtue of human love.

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