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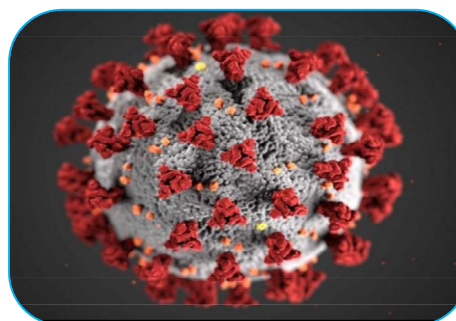


CORONA PANDEMIC AND LITERATURE

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ABSTRACT

As we are confined within the four walls of our homes under lockdown in the wake of Covid-19, literature helps break the barriers, connecting us across different historical periods and time zones with others who have experienced similar tragedies. More importantly, literature shows us that we have a lot in common with others who are from distant lands and different times, encouraging us to appreciate the fact that we are not the only ones who are dealing with the worldwide devastation wrought by the pandemic.



KEYWORDS: *historical periods and time zones , importantly, literature.*

INTRODUCTION

Throughout history, there have been people who have dealt with crises that caused untold suffering. We must see the striking similarities between the current Covid-19 pandemic and the historical outbreaks of plagues across time. What makes pandemics similar across geographic locations and time is not the presence of germs and viruses but that the human response follows the same pattern regardless of culture and time.

This paper states, that the study of the pandemic is already or going to be an important part of literary studies. The world has witnessed numerous plagues and pandemics in different times. The pandemics have made, no doubt, a huge impact on the social, cultural, and economic fields, bringing a change in human life. Writers and poets of various nations and cultures have responded to the pandemics, mapping the times that they have witnessed and commenting on their precarious experiences. There are many seminal books written on the tough times of plagues and pandemics in which sometimes even half of a nation or a city has been devastated. The present world is immensely affected by Covid-19, which is a deadly virus allegedly spreading from Wuhan, China. The virus is killing thousands of people every day, infecting millions and putting the whole world at risk. The writers and poets of the contemporary world are also writing wonderful fiction and poetry, responding to the crisis and seeking ways of healing and surviving. Drawing on the great works produced on the impacts of the pandemic in different times of history, the paper explores how humans survive amidst such pandemics; seek ways to heal themselves, and what it means to study literature during the pandemic. The paper also briefly focuses and comments on how the contemporary writers and poets are encountering the present world of corona and recording their experiences in their work.

These are unprecedented times. We have been challenged to the core – physically, socially, psychologically, and more importantly, ideologically – by what now appears to be another take on

Conrad's eternal call to humanity – 'the horror, the horror.' It is during such times that human potential for creativity finds fertile ground to take root and flourish.

How will the pandemic impact literature?

The very question is based on confusion, assumptions, and precariously slippery hope. A brief look at the history of literature that emerged out of natural or man-made crises reveals a trend depicting the commonality of experiences and specificity of its impact. The human endeavour to survive through the challenges and come out successful and have the grit to resume the journey is perhaps what defines or informs existence in this world.

The extensive accounts of pandemics in literature, especially whenever they are necessitated by circumstantial realities, reflect the human capacity to document history in creative moulds to make it digestible to the consumers. The account of Egyptian plague in the Book of Exodus, mention of the devastating plague which inspired Sophocles to reify Oedipus's kingly traits, and Thucydides's description of the plague that struck Athens and claimed Emperor Marcus Aurelius's life are some of the earliest attempts to capture the essential nodes of history along with the human urge to stamp an aesthetic mark on the written oeuvre of that age.

Whether the paradigm shift comes in the form of pathological reasons such as leprosy, influenza, smallpox, malaria, the Black Death, cholera, Spanish flu, SARS, MERS, and Ebola or through events of phenomenal significance such as World Wars, apartheid, Great Depression, 9/11, and mass migrations – historical and political happenings have influenced literature of their times, leaving an indelible mark on the literature written during the supposedly 'normal' circumstances.

The best book ever written about pandemics is Daniel Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year*, published in 1772, 57 years after the Great Plague of London in 1665. Concerned that a plague decimating Marseilles in the south of France might find its way into the British Isles, Defoe wrote *A Journal of the Plague Year* as a warning. The 1665 Great Plague of London had killed an estimated 20 percent of the city's population. Defoe provides a brilliant account of a community's response to the arrival of a pandemic. Some flee, especially the wealthy and the privileged. Others hunker down and hoard whatever they can. Some live in stubborn denial until the plague reaches their own street or house. Con men, quacks, and charlatans appear out of nowhere to take advantage of the panicked population. Desperate people do desperate things: murder their own children, commit suicide and strike out at those who are thought to be responsible for introducing the virus.

Eventually something like martial law is imposed to prevent the spread of the virus. Houses in London were literally boarded up in 1665, with warning marks on the doors and windows, while armed guards stood on every street to prevent people from visiting or leaving the houses where the disease had been concentrated.

Stephen King's *The Stand* was published in 1978. In the book, when a strain of influenza deliberately concocted by the U.S. Army as a biological weapon gets out of a secret underground laboratory, it spreads within weeks to every corner of the planet, eventually killing 99.4 percent of the world's population. The handful of survivors wind up fighting an apocalyptic battle between good and evil in Las Vegas. *The Stand*, King's fourth novel and still his longest, eventually descends into a kind of post-atomic silliness, but his extremely detailed account of how a plague spreads is utterly fascinating and accurate.

When some scientists project that the coronavirus will eventually infect 150 million people, they are envisioning the scenario in *The Stand*, where one person infects two others, then 10, soon 250 and, within what appears to be a nanosecond, almost everyone everywhere, thanks to modern transport systems, the concentration of hundreds of millions of people in urban centers and the failure of governments at every level to react in a timely fashion. King takes time to humanize the carriers of the disease. They are people just like you and I, and in most cases, they don't know they are carrying the virus until it is too late for themselves and others.

King's interests were twofold: how an advanced civilization actually collapses when calamity outdistances science's capacity to deal with it; and how global civilization (and think how much more global it is today than in 1978) makes the spread of pandemics inevitable.

Giovanni Boccaccio's Decameron was completed in 1353. It consists of 100 short tales told by a group of seven young women and three men who have self-quarantined themselves for two weeks in a villa outside of Florence, Italy, to escape the Black Death of 1348. To while away their time in isolation, the 10 refugees agree to tell each other stories. Today we have television, including Netflix and Amazon Prime, to get us through periods of enforced cocooning, but in the late Middle Ages the oral tradition of storytelling provided much the same combination of entertainment and escapism.

The tales of the Decameron are witty, often erotic, bawdy, irreverent and sometimes hilarious. In other words, it is worth reading the Decameron no matter what is going on in the wider world. Boccaccio's masterpiece is thought by literary historians to have laid the foundations for the rise of vernacular (as opposed to Latin) literature in Europe. The Decameron is a masterwork of early Italian prose. The best recent translation is by Wayne A. Rebhorn in the Norton Critical Edition (2015).

When the world appears to be collapsing all around us, we search for assurances: that we will get through this, that this is not the first time that this has happened, that the world is fundamentally orderly no matter how chaotic it may temporarily seem, that life must go on, that there are things we can do to assert at least partial control over the nightmare of the unseen. Boccaccio's refugees tell stories to make the time of quarantine go faster, but they also tell stories because by its very nature narrative is reassuring.

Stories have what Aristotle called beginning, middle, and end. Crises get resolved. Things start small, spin out of control, reach a climax, and then they calm down again. Humans are a storytelling animal. Each of us will have stories to tell one, five, and 40 years from now about the Pandemic of 2020, as we have stories to tell of 9/11, Vietnam and the Challenger disaster in 1986. Athletes will tell their children of the year the Final Four tournament was canceled. Stat sheets of the NBA and the NHL will contain asterisks for the year the season was canceled in late stride.

Reading the Decameron teaches us that human nature is everywhere and always the same, that crisis brings out the best and worst of humanity, that every mountebank must be balanced against a Florence Nightingale or Dr. Benjamin Rush who perform selflessly in spite of real and present dangers. The Decameron reminds us that one of the best coping mechanisms humans have is laughter, the best medicine, as the Readers Digest used to put it and as Norman Cousins explained in his Anatomy of an Illness.

From all this literature what can we conclude? First and most important, humans are extraordinarily resilient. The Black Plague of the fourteenth century killed as many as one in four of all Europeans, but eventually it ran its course, and the social structure knitted itself back together. In fact, some historians believe that the European Renaissance was hastened and intensified by the disruptions of the pandemic. Labor shortages led to higher wages. The belief that disease was a visitation of God's wrath could not stand up against the gargantuan death counts. Survivors refocused their lives and many decided to seek pleasures on earth and not wait for the promise of a next world. Instead of producing a deepening religiosity, the havoc of the plague emboldened reason and humanism.

Second, while advanced epidemiology and the incredible capacity of post-17th-century science gives us an advantage over every previous pandemic in human history, the "medieval" methods of containment are still extremely important: quarantine where necessary, social distancing, diffusion of urban populations wherever possible, avoidance of body contact (hugging, kissing, holding hands), and government-enforced curtailing of social mobility. These coping mechanisms cannot cure the disease, but they can slow its spread and can save literally millions of lives.

Third, just as Boccaccio's Decameron inaugurated a new phase in vernacular Italian and European culture, we can expect the novel coronavirus to inspire a wide range of cultural activity, and perhaps even new cultural forms. Plagues bring out the worst but also the best in humanity, often side by side.

Fourth, the thin veneer of civilization breaks down fast in crisis. While these plagues bring out the best in some individuals, they also unleash the worst in masses, particularly in urban settings. Thomas Jefferson may have been right to believe that the only way to create a republic was to diffuse the American population more or less evenly across the landscape. Urban population density lends itself to infectious disease, mob rule, a restless proletariat and the rise of demagogues. In each of these great books, during disasters, societies must contend with the “Lord of the Flies” response of the most aggressive members of the community. Once food and gas start to disappear in a big way from American life, the knives will come out.

In 1623 the greatest preacher in England, John Donne, fell ill from an undiagnosed and nearly fatal disease, probably restless fever. He survived, and a year later he published one of the most fascinating disease books, *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions*. Donne’s illness became a metaphor for life itself. Donne’s Meditation XVII includes one of the most famous passages in English literature, “for whom the bell tolls.” Donne has two points to make. First, the one thing that unites all of humanity is the commonality of death. If you really understand life, the death notice for someone else (today an obituary, then a tolling church bell) is actually about you. Don’t kid yourself. Second, we are all in this together and we must find ways to unite and reconcile and commiserate and cooperate if we want to make the best of both the good and bad of life. Here is the key message:

“No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main; if a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as well as if a manor of thy friend's or of thine own were; any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind, and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.”

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