



Representations Of Plagues And Pandemics In Literature: A Critical Study

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Abstract:

The paper contextualises the role of literature in pandemics to seek a nuanced understanding of literature and its functions in the changing paradigms of the world enmeshed in humanitarian crises. In the annals of literary history, there have been poets, novelists, dramatists belonging to different countries, cultures and different times, reacted to pandemics through the literary lenses chronicling the horrible times and harrowing circumstances that fell upon humanity. The world, even after such a long time since the outbreak of Covid-19 and the availability of vaccines; shows no signs of returning to normality; the impact is so unprecedented and immeasurable, and only literary works manifesting pandemics can tap into the trauma and losses incurred by the people all over the world. Thus, the study of literature involving pandemics in such uncertain times becomes inevitable and necessitates a humane understanding of the works under scrutiny. The study involves analysis of literary works documenting the impact of pandemics on social, psychological, educational and cultural spheres in terms of people's responses to the epidemics, the methods adopted for their survival, and techniques they followed to manage their pain and trauma due to the pandemics. The paper circumscribes itself to, for its study, select works, which essentially have a theme of pandemics and reflect on the issues: Trauma, catastrophe, loss of lives, and ensuing psychological ordeals.

Keywords: fear, pandemics, trauma, psychological ordeals, devastation, Covid-19

Introduction:

Pandemics and literature are intertwined entities: Pandemics, apart from a biological crisis, is a humanitarian crisis of epic proportions; and therefore is a subject of scrutiny for Humanities, Biology, and Epidemiology; there is substantial literature available on pandemics as there are pandemics, chronicled in history books and literary works. The Covid-19 pandemic has brought a paradigm-shifts in our lives and "it has become a common observation that the coronavirus outbreak makes it feel like we're living in a dystopian novel right now... it is unwelcome new territory for us, but humanity has been here before many times, and written about it"(Self 01).

The relationship between pandemics and literature is as old as humanity itself. Illustrating the link between humans and viruses, Cummings writes, "From the earliest days of recorded history, bacteria and viruses have stalked humans. Lurking in dirty corners and sewage-filled streets, stowing away on ships and aeroplanes, they waited for their chance to attack" (Cummings 03). The pandemics, since time immemorial, have had a close affinity with humans and striking similarities in their uniquely diverse forms. Orhan Pamuk, talking about the pandemic historically, draws on eerie similarities; he writes:

They are most curious about similarities between the current coronavirus pandemic and the historical outbreaks of plague and cholera. There is an overabundance of similarities. Throughout human and literary history what makes pandemics alike is not mere commonality of germs and viruses but that our initial responses were always the same (Pamuk 02).

Writers have meticulously documented that people exercised utmost care by obeying safety measures such as keeping distance while meeting, avoiding visits to houses and meeting on roads, enquiring for details and stories of their areas, discerning the larger picture of the pandemic. The same practices are seemingly ubiquitously followed by the people in current Covid-19 pandemics.

Literature of pandemics exhibits commonality of humanistic concerns; to explore the meaning of painful experiences through reading, reflection and storytelling, shaping our experiences of health, disease, and illness and providing us with insights into how our ancestors internalized pain and anguish from pandemics. Pandemic literature has always proved to be a window on societies inflicted with plagues and pestilences, thereby offering a close picture of semblances and differences, from minor to major, from social, political, health-related, and economic problems encountered by them. The uncanny resemblance between pandemics is more harmful than pandemics themselves:

Humanity's other universal and seemingly unprompted response to pandemics has always been to create rumours and spread false information. During past pandemics, rumours were mainly fuelled by misinformation and the impossibility of seeing the fuller picture (Pamuk 08).

Invariably, pandemics also became a breeding ground for the spread of misinformation, prejudice, religious polarization worsening the humanitarian crisis to epic proportions; this bears a semblance to the Covid-19 situation. Such divide, discord, and resentment amongst people of diverse races, cultures and ethnic backgrounds are exacerbated by state power, and "much of the literature of plague and contagious diseases present the carelessness, incompetence and selfishness of those in power as the sole instigator of the fury of the masses" (Pamuk 06).

Due to Covid-19, the world caught in the manacles of a gruesome pandemic; the tremendous deaths and devastation have turned people into senseless creatures who are

trying to fill in the irreversible void of the deadly pandemic; trying to find solace, meaning and consolation by distancing themselves from the horrors of the pandemic. In such extraordinarily bleak times, it is inevitable to study texts illuminating humankind's responses to pandemics to ascertain the commonalities present in the pandemic literature. Hence, the paper explores in detail the following texts: Boccaccio's *The Decameron*, Defoe's *The Journal of the Plague Year*, Poe's *The Masque of the Red Death*, Ahmed Ali's *Twilight in Delhi* and Philip Roth's *Nemesis*, which eclectically delineate the insecurities, sufferings and tribulations of humankind.

The Decameron:

Literature, for the first time, started recording the black plague in 1348. It unleashed a rampage of death across Italy, Giovanni Boccaccio records in his book *The Decameron*. The contagion devastated the city, killing more than half of the population, Florentine's "dropped dead in open streets, both by day and by night, whilst a great many others, though dying in their own houses, drew their neighbours' attention to the fact more by the smell of their rotting corpses" (Boccaccio 10).

During the Black Death, the characters take refuge in the countryside area, Black Death wreaking havoc all over Florence, decimating the city on a social and human scale. The characters turn themselves to storytelling, accentuating the fundamental theme: The fight between life and death in the teeth of the Black Plague. Highlighting the failure of arranging funerals as the Black Plague was raging high and causing a collapse of the state power, the author maintains:

In this sore affliction and misery of our city, the reverend authority of the laws, both human and divine, was all in a manner dissolved and fallen into decay, for [lack of] the ministers and executors thereof, who, like other men, were all either dead or sick or else left so destitute of followers that they were unable to exercise any office, wherefore everyone had license to do whatsoever pleased him (Boccaccio 10).

Author describes the preventive measures people exercised during the contagion as "citizens avoided one another ... almost no one took care of his neighbours, and ... relatives visited one another infrequently" (Boccaccio 10). This plight reminds us of the turbulent times caused due to Covid-19 pandemic.

Through evocative, melancholic tones, Boccaccio presents the plague and the social and human disorder which follows it; "...the whole point of Boccaccio's description in the first pages of the *Decameron* of the great plague of 1348 is how badly the citizens of Florence behaved" (Sontag 41). The book cautions us that a pandemic can create enormous social disorders revealing the varied forms in which the Florentine community collapsed by the pandemic: parents relinquished children and vice-versa; dead bodies remained abandoned; infected women hired men to care for them, overstepping the bounds of

decency. The narrative recounts people following methods to protect them from the plague: some people ran away to distant places, some espoused decadent approach to life and some tried using herbal medicines. Through storytelling, the characters take their mind off the horrible effects of the Black Death, giving them the much-needed glimmer of hope that human communication in such critical moments can heal the pain and trauma with humour affection and charm. Writing about *The Decameron*, Francesco Ciannamea writes:

The book, both in the author's intentions and in the content, is an antidote against the feeling of death and the disruption of civil life brought on by the plague: literature can be the antidote, reconstructing values, and at the same time, the demonstration that life is a force that always prevails over adversities (Francesco Ciannamea 12).

Therefore, a closer study of *The Decameron* provides valuable insights into how our moral conscience changes during affliction, a grim and depressing reminder of the depredations inflicted by Covid-19 to our society

A Journal of the Plague Year:

Another illuminating text highlighting contagion is *A Journal of the Plague Year* by Defoe in 1722; it gives a first-hand description of the bubonic plague, spreading across London from 1565 to 1666 in a pellucid language. The striking similarity between the Covid-19 pandemic and Plague in England was the intentional undercounting of deaths; Defoe maintains the there was a marked difference between burials on the ground and the numbers declared by local authorities, he writes:

The next bill was from the 23rd of May to the 30th, when the number of the plague was seventeen. But the burials in St Giles's were fifty-three--a frightful number!--of whom they set down but nine of the plague; but on an examination more strictly by the justices of peace, and at the Lord Mayor's request, it was found there were twenty more who were really dead of the plague in that parish, but had been set down of the spotted-fever or other distempers, besides others concealed (Defoe 06).

The text brings forth accounts of fatalities and explores the authenticity of different reflections and anecdotes collected by the narrator. H. F., the narrator, tells the story of the plague, which bears semblance to the current crisis in many ways: Flouting of quarantine rules laid out by the administration, thousands of people succumbing to death due to the lack of cure and care, descriptions of sick and dying people are nerve-racking, the disease attacking doctors and nurses, people leaving cities for towns in fear of the contagion, leading to rumours and fake news, intensifying the atmosphere full of hatred and contempt against particular groups in the society. The novel also chronicles the sudden rise of greedy quacks claiming miracle cures, fortune tellers, and astrologers, who

jumped into the bandwagon, looting away the money and fortunes of terrified people caught into a vortex of contagion.

Essentially, the book revolves around the deadly contagion, and in many ways, it matches with the present Covid-19 crisis. In short, *The Journal of the Plague Year* demonstrates people suffering and grieving from disease, and finally, were involved in protests expressing their pent up feelings of boundless anger and ferocity against destiny, against the divine will, and rage against institutions of organized religion that remained clueless in dealing with the contagion (Pamuk 07). The narrator ends *The Journal of the Plague Year* on a sombre and evocative note with doggerel verse, "A dreadful plague in London was / In the year sixty-five, / Which swept an hundred thousand souls away; yet I alive" (Defoe 06).

Defoe's work portrays the pestilence-ridden city of London in a genuine and unpretentious style. The following extract from the book review by Alice Ford-Smith encapsulates the expertise of Daniel Defoe:

Defoe uses his skills as a journalist, novelist and Londoner to knit together evidence with storytelling. In doing so, he presents a vivid picture of a plague epidemic, but also the mean streets of seventeenth-century London. Some inhabitants are shown to be brave and caring, but many are understandably plain scared, confused and desperate. The most sensational and wicked acts tend to be reported as hearsay with the weekly bills of mortality acting as sobering anchors of evidence (Ford-Smith 01).

The multitude of things observed in Defoe's novel resonates with the current Covid-19 pandemic; it also helps people face the onslaught of a pandemic with better understanding and preparedness.

The Masque of the Red Death:

Another extraordinary work combining the thought of fear, isolation, and mask-wearing is Poe's short story *The Masque of the Red Death*, which offers new interpretations to the current Covid-19 pandemic. Poe starts his story breaking the news of a lethal contagion, Red Death: "No pestilence had ever been so fatal, or so hideous" (*Masque of the Red Death* 01). He narrates:

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 (*The Masque of the Red Death* 01).

Set in the 14th unnamed kingdom in Europe, the story depicts a catastrophic illness; the hideous red death sweeping through the kingdom, killing people consistently by striking the victims to bleed from the pores. Prince Prospero, attempting to save him and other close friends from the severity of the disease, isolates into an abbey. Prospero engages in

a lavish costume ball game to divert their mind away from the untold suffering from the Red Death; surprisingly, the Red Death, masked as a costumed guest, breaks into the fortified abbey only to kill Prospero and everyone present inside it: "And Darkness and Decay and the Red Death held illimitable dominion overall" (The Masque of the Red Death 15).

The theme of death supersedes the story; it underscores the inevitability of death: Prospero and his friends, having placed themselves into an impregnable abbey, could not stop the Red Death from creeping inside, and claiming their lives. Poe seems to caution us all with a tale concerning pandemic time and the price of inequity and denial. David Ulin maintains, "...although The Masque of the Red Death warns us, the real point is exactly the opposite. The plague is not a hoax, and no one is immune to its horrible effects" (Ulin).

The story philosophizes that Red Death spares no one, whether the downright poor or super-rich segments of the society; it also provides many lessons on how to better deal with the virus and bear the agonies of loneliness and misery in a pestilence-ridden world.

Twilight in Delhi:

Twilight in Delhi is a significant text highlighting the gruesome effects of the 1918 contagion in the capital of India by Ahmed Ali. Set in the backdrop of India's sweltering summer of 1918, the work describes Influenza, a deadly contagion, broken out in Delhi; every house had at least one or many members contracted by this scourge resulting in incalculable deaths. Twilight in Delhi offers a grim and depressing portrait of a metropolis that fell into the pit of gruesome pestilence:

Nature herself was rebellious and seemed angry with the people of Hindustan. Hundreds and thousands of Indians had been killed in the war, acting as fodder to the German guns. But not content with this and, as it were, filled with anger against the inhumanity of man, Nature wanted to demonstrate her own callousness and might (Ali 170).

The account concerning Spanish Flu 1918, which supposedly killed nearly 15 million lives in India alone, is located in Ali's Twilight in Delhi. World War I ended in 1918, and Indian soldiers returned to India from Europe, bringing with them Influenza; the city graves filled up, leaving behind many families torn in grief and sadness. Thieves started stealing sheets from the graves; the grave-diggers were so swamped with work, they increased their fees fourfold during the contagion. The author writes: "They did not bother to see that the grave was properly dug or deep enough or not. They had so many more to dig" (Ali 170). The book mentions Delhi, a metropolis of the deceased and how the people stay true to their culture and make songs and sold them: "How deadly this fever is/Everyone is dying of it/ Men become lame with it/And go out in dolis/The hospitals are gay and bright/But sorry is men's plight" (Ali 170).

Ali recounts the multiple deaths so poignantly lying naked on the streets of Delhi; people were scampering to arrange for funerals of their loved ones; during the second surge of the Coronavirus pandemic, such scenes were frequently observed across the globe. Ali writes,

Men carried dead bodies on their shoulders by the score. 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 had no peace, and even in death there seemed no hope of rest(Ali 141).

Ali's frightening portraiture of Delhi overtaken by the Spanish flu describes streets filled with "heart-rending cries and lamentation" (Ali 169). The predicament of the impoverished, the overcrowded graveyards and the callous profiteering of devious merchants and highwaymen; these experiences have uncanny resemblances with the Covid-19 pandemic situation, and therefore, we can draw lessons from reading this enlightening text.

Nemesis:

Nemesis, a gripping tale of a polio outbreak in wartime New Jersey by Philip Roth, the novel is set in the sweltering summer of 1944, recounts a life of a 23-year-old gym trainer Eugene Cantor, who is rejected from joining war due to poor eyesight and has become a playground director in Newark, New Jersey.

The novelist, in his interview with Terry Cross, for NPR show Fresh Air, revealed that he stumbled upon writing a novel on the Polio epidemic during his exercise:

I began [writing] as I sometimes do with a book [by jotting down] on a yellow legal pad all of the historical events that I've lived through that I've not dealt with in fiction. When I came to polio, it was a great revelation to me. I never thought of it before as a subject. And then I remembered how frightening it was and how deadly it was, and I thought, 'OK, try to write a book about polio(Roth).

He remarked, "Writing Nemesis became an exercise in recovering [my] own memories of childhood when both the polio epidemic and World War II were in full swing(Roth)." As the novel opens, the city comes under attack from the Polio epidemic sweeping through the city, encompassing the Jewish community of Newark. The novel begins with the sentence:

The first case of polio that summer came early in June, right after Memorial Day, in a poor Italian neighbourhood crosstown from where we lived. Over in the city's south-western corner, in the Jewish Weequahic section, we heard nothing about it, nor did we hear anything about the next dozen cases scattered singly throughout Newark in nearly every neighbourhood but ours(Roth 04).

Throughout the novel, the horrifying pestilence is raging, terrorizing the city of New Jersey, especially attacking children, killing, paralyzing and claiming their lives. Amidst the war and the spreading of the contagion, the city falls into the whirlwind of fear,

paranoia, prejudice and anti-Semitism: the Italian boys enter inside park premises and spit over the playground to spread the disease among the Jewish children.

Eugene angrily takes on the cold-hearted God on whose watch innocent children are succumbing to death. He takes on himself the job saving the children but to no avail. As the boys of Eugene Cantor group start succumbing to Polio, Roth, the novelist, very evocatively describes Eugene's sombre efforts: his visits to families of lost children, consolation of children in his charge. The eerie similarities between the Covid-19 pandemic and the Polio epidemic is that Polio targeted children, maimed them, and in some cases, the deaths; however, the Covid-19 pandemic has not spared anybody; it killed almost everyone who came under its wrath. The people are fraught with fear, misinformation, and prejudice. As the cases started increasing, the pressure on healthcare workers reached a breaking point, similar to the peak point during the first and second wave of Covid-19; the narrator says,

He could hear a siren in the distance...He heard sirens off and on, day and night now. They were not the air-raid sirens...these were the sirens on ambulances going to get polio victims and transport them to the hospital, sirens stridently screaming, 'Out of the way — a life is at stake(Roth 108).

As the news of the disease spreading through human contact broke out, the panic and frenzy amongst the people were overwhelming and inexpressible. The protagonist, Eugene Cantor, observes helplessly the contagion's devastating consequences and struggles to cope with terrible disaster.

The Plague by Albert Camus is an excellent example of Pandemic literature. It talks about the contagion striking Oran, a city in Algeria, highlighting responses that bear unnerving similarities to the Covid-19 pandemic: the lacklustre handling of the crisis by government agencies, abrupt lockdowns, food shortage and plague-profiteering and overcrowded hospitals. Humanities have always dealt with pandemics, and John Self maintains:

The Plague highlights one reason why pandemics appeal to writers. It's an enemy, but not a human one, so it removes socio-political preconceptions about goodies and baddies and presents a level playing field for the writer to focus on how people respond to it (Self 05).

Critical Overview:

There are plenty of similarities and dissimilarities that have come to the surface while analysing the texts under scrutiny. In *The Decameron*, Boccaccio highlights the infliction of plague on all the spheres of the Florentine society. The trauma and agonies of indigent masses are nerve-racking; this highlights that plague not only dismantled Florence's socio-cultural framework but also attacked the health of occupants; almost Covid-19 has wrecked comparable effects on all over the globe.

The Journal of the Plague Year exhibits the inability of the administration to figure out the plague's lethality, authority's lacklustre responses towards handling the contagion, thereby failing to place timely measures in containing the contagion; rampant spread of the disease through asymptomatic carriers and undercounting of deaths. The horrible effects of a pandemic, especially on disadvantaged sections, their failure to access medical facilities, their exploitation at the hands of quacks and charlatans claiming cures amidst the rise of profiteering from the plague --all of these grim experiences are similar to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Poe's The Masque of the Red Death highlights the sudden outbreak of the Red Death wiping out half of the population, the utter negligence of Prince Prospero to the sufferings of poor, his efforts of saving elite friends by quarantining them in a secluded abbey; their decadent merrymaking; the divide between privileged classes, and poor masses in terms of resources; these concerns have frightful convergences with Covid-19 pandemic.

The Twilight in Delhi by Ahmed Ali highlights the bleak picture of Delhi being attacked by Influenza and ravaging the populace of Delhi, overcrowded hospitals, unprecedented deaths, overburdened gravediggers, rapacious merchants, rampant thievery, religious divide--these aspects are analogues with the Covid-19 crisis.

Philip Roth's Nemesis has, in fact, several similarities with the Covid-19 crisis. Firstly, the plague hits Newark city in the middle of the sultry summer of 1944; Covid-19 also hits most countries during the summer season. Plague attacked only children, whereas Covid-19 targeted the elderly or immuno-compromised people. As with all pandemics, there was initially denial of plague in Nemesis, giving way to panic, anxiety and shutdown of public places, jam-packed hospitals. The spread of misinformation and fake news divides the Jew community against the Italian community. Trauma, death, psychological distress emanating from plague-ridden Newark society is poignantly depicted in the novel.

The texts analyzed entail many common points across the spectrum. Firstly, the source and spread of the virus remain the mystery, and no tenable proof is available to make a definitive assessment. Secondly, the responses by government officials and the common public were haphazard, leading to cataclysmic losses and situations spiralling out of control. Thirdly, healthcare facilities were in shambles from the unavailability of medicines, human power and morgue and funeral rites of the victims. Lastly, the texts highlight the psychological trauma, deaths and devastation, the spread of fake information, pandemic induced prejudice or the religious divide, and finally, the covetousness of the affluent class in using crises for material gains.

Conclusion:

All the texts involving contagions affords us the insights that the plagues attacked suddenly, people failed to realize the contagion in its nascent stage, administrative responses were mostly of denial, leading to deaths and devastation because of their

reckless handling of the crisis. The feeling of anger, resentment amongst the people devolving into the social and religious divide, the woeful predicaments of the impoverished, the dishonest practices of local authorities such as undercounting of deaths--the texts have so effectively exhibited pertinent concerns of the plagues and pandemics in literature. The profound and everlasting relationship between pandemics and literature underscores that pandemics are recurrent phenomena and "their legacies lie in dreams, fears and languages, for they reveal the fragility of the social bond, the fascination of diseased spectacle and the literal and metaphorical power of pestilence" (Cooke 14). The literature describing the Covid-19 pandemic is indispensable as literature mirrors society, and the people's overriding collective feelings such as anguish and trauma will spring up through literary texts. The question persists on how writers in the times to come will describe the Covid-19 pandemic. How will poets, novelists and fiction writers weave the complex yet meaningful narratives of the pandemic? In short, we can hope for socio-culturally, educationally, and morally meaningful literature, focusing on the feelings such as endurance, alienation, helplessness, and shared reflection of inequity arising from the Covid-19 pandemic.

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