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Pandemic and Literature: A Saga of Human Survival

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Everybody knows that pestilences have a way of recurring in the world; yet somehow we find it hard to believe in ones that crash down on our heads from a blue sky. There have been as many plagues as wars in history; yet always plagues and wars take people equally by surprise. (Camus 18)

These prophetic words of Camus very well indicates the process of acceptance to an ongoing pandemic. Here, he describes the human tendency to react towards any unacceptable situation and the way people try to live initially in an imagined normalcy, trying to pretend as if nothing has changed till the time when inevitably they have to confront the dire reality that nothing has remained as it used to be...

COVID-19 and the paradigm-shifting events resulting in the present times promise to change us thoroughly in strange ways. It will certainly divide human lives and cultures into a before and after. The human race will emerge in a new light – changed, however, in the present times, those changes remain uncertain and mystery for us all. The sensory perception of this pandemic – empty streets, closed academic buildings, feared human faces, the masks, the worry and tension on the faces of doctors and nurses, the antiseptic smells, the increasing number of deaths - will survive in our minds and bodies till we die, making us realise and relive these horrified moments of human helplessness and inefficacy.

Pandemic - the word describes the widespread occurrence of disease, in excess of what might normally be expected in a geographical region. However, COVID-19 is not the first that is being faced by the human race. Right from the pre historic times till today, Cholera, bubonic plague, smallpox, influenza are some of the most brutal killers in human history; especially smallpox, which has killed between 300-500 million people in its 12,000 year existence.

The history of world literature, right from Homer's *Iliad* and Boccaccio's *Decameron* to Jack London's *The Scarlet Plague* and Albert Camus' *The Plague*, deals with the subject of such pandemics and not only recorded the dry facts of these happenings rather worked as a way of



catharsis along with recording the human emotions and the way human reacted during these situations and how strongly revived from these health crisis.

Similarly, Literature has a prominent part in the present times too, in framing the responses of varied classes to the COVID-19 pandemic. Ranging from the classics to contemporary works of literature, reading of these pandemic reactions offers not only a way of an uncertain comfort but also a guide for what might happen next. Undoubtedly, turning to a few contextual texts are worth to better understand human reactions and how the human race might be able to mitigate the present challenges to come out with stronger and with a positive mind-set.

Considering the English-language literature, the novel, *The Last Man* (1826) written by Mary Shelley (1797–1851), is believed to be one of the first apocalyptic novels, describing the future Britain between 2070 and 2100. Quite famous for her novel *Frankenstein* (1818), Shelly narrates a futuristic scenario that had been ravaged by a plague; hardly a few people appear to be **immune** and these **persons avoid contact with others**. The concept of immunization described by the author reflects her deep understanding of contemporaneous theories about the nature of contagion. Keeping the theme and the aspects dealt here into the consideration, it makes the reader realize of two major issues that can be directly connected to the present COVID – 19 situation. Not only the people are expected to isolate themselves from others but at the same time the problem of immunity is emphasised by medical teams dealing with the death of the effected people.

The same aspect of **self-isolation** is dealt with, in another light in Camus' novel *The Plague*. This isolation creates an anxious awareness about the necessity of human contact and relationships amongst the plague-stricken Algerian city of Oran:

This drastic, clean-cut deprivation and our complete ignorance of what the future held in store had taken us unawares; we were unable to react against the mute appeal of presences, still so near and already so far, which haunted us daylong. (Camus 34)



Giovanni Boccaccio's (1313-1375) celebrated work, *Decameron* (1353), situated in the times of the Black Death, explicitly reveals a prominent role of literature, specifically storytelling (in this case) during these disaster days. During the Black Death, the characters, ten people, self-isolate themselves, in a villa outside Florence for two weeks. To engage themselves for these many days in isolation, these characters decided to narrate stories of morality, love, sexual politics, trade and power. These narratives of theirs not only discuss about the social structures and interactions of the Renaissance times but also offer the listeners (story readers) possible ways through which they plan to restructure their "normal" everyday routine that has been interrupted because of this pandemic.

Tracing the mentions of these pandemics in the Greek Literature, there is overt mention of plague in the classical work of Homer, *Iliad*. The mention of plague in Greek camp at Troy is in the form of punishment against the enslavement of Chryseis by Agamemnon. It is believed that such disasters are devices of Heavens to make people realize their ill-judged behaviours. In the Holy Bible (e.g., Exodus 9:14, Numbers 11:33, 1 Samuel 4:8, Psalms 89:23, Isaiah 9:13) too, the plague (pandemics) was considered to be God's punishments for sins, so the Israelites were warned to behave morally providing the frightening description of the spread of plague.

Connecting the same to the present situation, this can be directly observed as a result of human behaviour towards Nature. The environmental issues are at their peak and the ethical responsibility of ours are neglected conveniently. This pandemic can be seen as Nature's rebooting mode where air pollution has dropped significantly all over the world. The level of carbon dioxide has decreased on a large level. The water in the canals are cleaner and the sea creatures are visible even near the shores. The consumption of fuel has gone low drastically and Nature is alive once again.

Undoubtedly, these situation has negative consequences too. COVID-19 has shaken up the economic systems worldwide and has destructed the typical institutional processes. But at the same time, the world has seen a drastic shift at many levels. Considering the education institution front, the major shift is observed towards remote learning in universities all around the world. Such crisis are the severe blows from the Almighty to awake people from their age



old conventionalities and push them to lean towards new ways of life. Learn to go with the flow and adapt new ways of survival.

Jack London's *The Scarlet Plague* (1912), is quite a noteworthy example of a post-apocalyptic fictional wright-up in modern literature. The story is situated in a ravaged and wild America, moving around 2073, narrating the happenings of 2013 when the Red Death turned out to be an uncontrollable epidemic, depopulating and almost destroying the whole world. Though it was published nearly a century ago, *The Scarlet Plague* soundstoo contemporary as it lets the modern readers reflect on the fear of pandemics, a fear that has been very much alive. When the disease like plague spread, no medicine can be of any help, and nothing can stop it from striking; the only escape is to stay away from infected persons and contaminated objects.

The heart began to beat faster and the heat of the body to increase. Then came the scarlet rash, spreading like wildfire over the face and body. Most persons never noticed the increase in heat and heart-beat, and the first they knew was when the scarlet rash came out. Usually, they had convulsions at the time of the appearance of the rash. But these convulsions did not last long and were not very severe. ... The heels became numb first, then the legs, and hips, and when the numbness reached as high as his heart he died.(London)

Another thing quite worth noticing in London's novel is the role of media. The "newspaperman" (as the media was limited to newspaper only and no other source of information was available) was called a hero along with a bacteriologists. There seems to be a positive role of media providing reliable news to public and keeping them attached to the world. But in modern times, the media (newspapers, internet, TV news channels etc.)is accused of exaggerating the grim situation and contributing to the misunderstandings. They manipulate the research evidences regarding public health. Media is accused of spreading false information and exaggerate fear in public. Albert Camus' *The Plague* (1942) and Stephen King's *The Stand* (1978) brought readers' attentions to the failures of the state to either contain the disease or moderate the ensuing panic. The disease seems like a wold fire that cannot be stopped.



The narrator is well aware of how regrettable is his inability to record at this point something ... In the memories of those who lived through them, the grim days of plague do not stand out like vivid flames, ravenous and inextinguishable, beaconing a troubled sky, but rather like the slow, deliberate progress of some monstrous thing crushing out all upon its path.(Camus 88)

The situation is befitting at present times too where the government worldwide is putting their best efforts to control this situation. The media is playing their own role in best possible unbiased manner. Still, it's not in our hands yet. It seems that the pandemic is a kind of river that has divided the world in two sides. In the words of Katherine Anne Porter, the experience has "simply divided my life ... and after I was in some strange way altered ... it took me a long time to go out and live in the world again." (Outka) In her collection of three short novels *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* (1939), she narrates her experience of facing plague and reviving through it.

One of the most profitable aspects of literature is the catharsis it avails to the reader. The above-mentioned texts describe troubled realities of pandemic and apocalypse conditions in varied manner by indigenous peoples and the experiences of the characters dealing with these situations. The readers can use their period of self-isolation for possible alternate structures to replace the after-corona world. Simultaneously, one might pen out stories about how we live and what stories to be told to the generations who would survive this pandemic?

One more thing to be done while reading these texts is comparison. Comparison between these pandemics and COVID-19 can be a very useful and thought worthy process. The medical situation can be compared with fatal ratio and the outbreak of the virus. The spreading ways can be compared. The useful one would be the human reaction and the emotional state. One might unfold the mistakes committed and the actions that needed to be avoided. To compare the public life – then and now. The last and the most necessary things not to compare but to learn from these literary works are the survival instinct, the fighting spirit and human endeavour that beat any deadly virus at any point of time.



At last, one need not forget “necessity is the mother of all invention” and the social distancing made people learn the ways to deal with it, too. However, literary texts provide us an opportunity to observe how similar crises were managed previously, ponder over the ideas applied in the past and meditate on how to restructure the societies more equitably, avoiding the mistakes committed by the people previous.

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