

PORTRAYAL OF PLAGUE, PESTILENCE AND PANDEMIC IN CONTEMPORARY WRITINGS

Dr. Sapna Sharma

Assistant Professor,
Amity School of Liberal Arts,
Amity University, Gurugram

Abstract

Literature has reflected different societies dealing with a wide range of issues like political, social, environmental, gender, educational, religious and psychological. It has also shed light on the spread of various diseases and epidemics that describe human fears amid the spread of pandemics. Disease defines us, it narrates us. We know about its arrival but are completely unsure about its departure. As mankind's oldest deadly foe, disease has provided themes to literature since literature's very invention. Much of the literature of contagious diseases presents the carelessness, incompetence and selfishness of those in power as the sole instigator of the fury of the masses. When the global focus has mostly been on testing, finding a cure and preventing transmission; people are going through a countless psychological problems in adjusting to the current lifestyles and fear of the disease. Illness sees no social stratification—it comes alike for bishop and authoritarian, king and beggar. Final theme of the literature of pandemic, born from the awareness is that this world is not ours alone. We can't avert our eyes from the truth, no matter how cankered and ugly it may be in the interim. The present paper discusses various writings on Pandemic literature, both English and regional during the tough times of diseases, with special focus on the writings written during the current lockdown of 2020. Some literary works, both Indian and Western will be discussed to justify these objectives.

Key Words: Epidemic, Disease, Contagious

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“In this period of isolation, one turns to literature and art to come to terms with reality and place it in context of history. As I continue to stay indoors because of the pandemic, spring has given way to summer. I follow the turn of seasons with elations I look out of windows, see the flowers blooming and the changing shades of green on trees. Yet this tranquil radiance invites dark thoughts as scenes of pandemic recorded in literature – bodies piled sky high waiting for burial, cries of pains searing through the London smog- crowd the mind.” (Walia, 2020)

Literature has reflected different societies dealing with a wide range of issues like political, social, environmental, gender, educational, religious and psychological conflicts. It has also shed light on the spread of various diseases and epidemics that describe human fears amid the spread of pandemics. English literature has always been touched by human helplessness in the face of various fatal epidemics, which existed in the past. (Ashraf, 2020) Pandemic literature exists not just to analyze the reasons for the pestilence rather the telling of stories is a reminder that sense still exists somewhere, that if there is no meaning outside of the quarantine zone, there’s at least meaning within our invented stories. Literature is a reclamation against that which illness represents—that the world is not our own. The initial response to any pandemic has always been denial with the state machinery playing down the number of fatalities to conceal the seriousness of situation. Everyone is equal in the eyes of a pandemic. As May Shelly writes in *The Last Man*, “The vast cities of America, the fertile plains of Hindostan, the crowded abodes of Chinese are menaced with utter ruin.” (Shelly)

Albert Camus published the novel *The Plague*, the story of Oran, a French territory in the Algerian coast affected by an epidemic of bubonic plague. The helplessness that we are experiencing during the current corona virus was eloquently described by Camus. *The Plague* takes place in the deserted town of Oran, Algeria, in northern Africa. It is the perfect setting for the story to take place. The ordinariness of Oran is contrasted with the extraordinary business of the plague. In Oran, life for its inhabitants has lost meaning. The plague offers them a chance to give meaning back to their lives. The plot of the story is revealed in five parts, over which we see the characters undergo changes. Through the Oranian's attitudes towards death in *The Plague*, they go through stages, which leave them with a final hope for life.

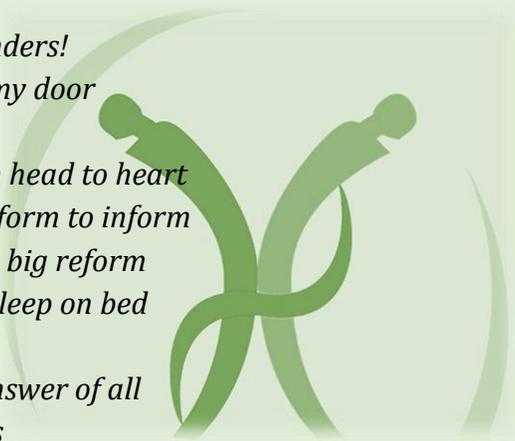
The disease did not occur in reality according to the historical documents but has been fabricated fictively by the writer. Camus relates how the epidemic disease besieges Oran city and causes a chaotic situation to the inhabitants. Throughout *The Plague* we see both the town of Oran and its citizens change along with various stages of the *The Plague*. It seems to go through stages of unawareness, awareness, death, commitment and life. This way we see a change that occurs from the beginning of the novel from an unawareness of what's happening about them to a new sense for life. Margaret Atwood's *The Year of the Flood* talks about the greatest fear for society whether it is global warming, species destruction, out-of-control corporate greed, an entrenched gap between the rich and poor, religious fundamentalism, rampant crime, or a global pandemic.

Avijit Ghosh writes, "Pandemics are mass murderers. Diseases like plague, smallpox, influenza and cholera ruin families, destroy towns and leave a generation scarred and scared."(Ghosh)

During this pandemic, some of the corporate professionals also took it as an opportunity to explore their hidden talent to show the world other side of their personality. Ashudeep Chadha, Founder and Group Chief Executive Officer, On Demand Agility, expressed her emotions about this lockdown period in her poem "Let's Parent our Minds"

"The silent house
The quiet lane
The deserted look

The neutral steer with no momentum from a gear
The missing calendars
The emptiness in abundance
The unshaken hands
The legs abandoned
With useless projections,
Hanging transactions
Lost timelines,
And Alas! With no insight!
The far away children
Sounding sweet
And I thinking the voice echoed out of borders
As they are fencing street
The Old parents divided by a highway tweet..
The spread out siblings
The virtual friends
The drained coffees
The lonesome diners
And Alas, with none reminders!
All came and knocked at my door
As loud as a human roar
And to parent myself from head to heart
And make me Wear a uniform to inform
And act upon to nurture a big reform
Clean air, food by hands, sleep on bed
Will win the MARS
Globetrotting is not the answer of all
Until you bring full marks
Dreaming of straight lines
Optimizing the circles
Simple thinking, living nice with low price
Will pour the shine on your sky
To rekindle the cells of life
And will make you all Survive
Board meetings
Hard resolutions
Thundering bottom lines
Flying flights and still no light
Chasing investors to sit on a side



Asking me to train my adult mind

And think alike as the time needs to be revived.” (Chadha, 2020)

Shrikant Verma’s *Bukhar mein Kavita* is a meditation on a lived life, with strong allusions to mortality and the fleeting nature of existence. He writes,

“Chechak aur hiaje se marti hain bastian

Cancer se hastiyan

Wakeel raktchaap se

Koi nahi marta , apne paap se”

(Small pox and cholera empty colonies,

Cancer kills the well-known,

Lawyers die of blood pressure,

But no one dies of their ill-deeds.) (Nirala)

Seema Chishti in her article on *Reference to Death and Disease in Hindi Literature in The Indian Express* writes about Indian writings by various Indian writers. Phaneshwar Nath Renu’s landmark novel *Maila Aanchal* (1954) has, as its protagonist, a doctor who leaves his city life behind to work in the hinterlands where malaria, kalazar, and numerous other epidemics ran havoc. Based on the true story of a doctor named Alakh Niranjana, who battled not just diseases and infection but also ignorance and superstitions in one of the most under-developed areas in Bihar, *Maila Aanchal* shows how poverty is the biggest social malaise. (Chishti) Suryakant Tripathi Nirala’s memoir *Kulli Bhat (A Life Misspent)* captures the misery of the Spanish Flu that swept through India in 1918. Indian soldiers in the British army who had participated in World War I, returned home, becoming unwitting carriers of the disease.

During the tough times of pandemics, literature provides escape, relief, comfort and companionship. Many books written during pandemic times give a realistic chronological progression from first signs to the worst times and the return of normality. They show us that we have been through this before and we have survived (Ciabattari, 2020). Science, industry, governments and civil society will all have important roles to play in this future which cannot be too far away. Disease demands and finds a language in which

these components figure, varied in degree and kind, but never absent. The language of epidemics is central to how we see, believe, reject and assimilate 'truths' about pathogens, people and mortality. This language is as material to decoding the virus as it is to decoding suffering, resilience, or healing. To understand this language we require Humanities. Dramatic times have always inspired great fiction, which will be one small consolation when we come through this.

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