

Epidemics in Literature: Literary Dynamics

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Abstract

Humans have experienced and endured harrowing situations and horrors beyond their bounds witnessing wars, holocausts, plagues and the spread of epidemics, floods, famine and numerous natural calamities. The study of epidemics has been a recurring theme of traditional literary motif in Literature for over centuries. Upon the insistence of the epidemic in literature, many writers have explored, illustrated and represented this motif in their literary genres, underscoring not just its terrifying tendency but also emphasizing the importance of nurturing human resilience and ways and means to confront them.

Keywords: Eschatology, Hermeneutics, Human Resilience, Literary Motif, Post Apocalypse, Reception Theory

1. Introduction

Since ancient time, humans have been experiencing and enduring traumatic situations and horrors beyond their bounds witnessing wars, holocausts, plagues, the spread of epidemics, floods, famine and many natural calamities. The study of epidemics has been a recurring theme of traditional literary motif in Literature for over centuries. Upon the insistence of the epidemic in literature, many writers have explored, illustrated and represented this motif in their literary genres, underscoring not just its terrifying tendency but also emphasizing the importance of nurturing human resilience and ways and means to confront them with courage and confidence.

2. Significance of the Study

The study of epidemics facilitates the understanding of socioeconomic and cultural background, psychological aspects of the human and their responses during the pandemic situation. Their outbreaks traverse over centuries and continents. Since ancient times, epidemics have a huge impact upon human history in numerous ways such as culturally, demographically, politically, biologically, financially and so on. So this theme of

epidemic study has received enormous attention right from time immemorial.

3. Epidemic Literature and its Role

The foremost rationale of the existence of epidemic literature is to reveal and remind the catastrophic pestilences that are yet turning up somewhere on the planet. In the present state, looking over the pandemic literature text is akin to looking throughout the Virtual Reality Glasses which shows everything nigher than anything. The first epidemic literature *The Last Man* was published in 1826 but the literature's contribution begins in 1353 with the work of Boccaccio *The Decameron*. The implicit awareness and warnings of literary work have been agreed with positivity by the readers as it gives the document of life chiefly in this day and age. Some of the notable epidemic works written and translated in English are *A Journal of the Plague* by Daniel Defoe, *The Last Man* by Mary Shelley in 1826, Edgar Allan Poe's short story *The Masque of the Red Death* in 1842, Giovanni Boccaccio's collection of novellas *The Decameron* in 1886, *The Scarlet Plague* by Jack London in 1912 and Albert Camus' *The Plague* in 1947. Epidemic literature resembles and has one

of the facets of wisdom literature that serve to enlighten our knowledge, teach us to deal with day-to-day living and provides assorted ways of ideas to come up against the state of undergoing despair, anxiety and affliction.

The author and readers' acquaintanceship has ripened as the theme of pandemic works assist to connect themselves with the realistic occurrences. No enormous differences between the literary composition and actuality could be discovered. It provides with the history and statistics but in a literary manner which it recreates. The loss of life, scarcity of food, financial ruin, sounds of roaring, shouting, lamentations, mourning, regret and happiness of victory, survival and the prayers and perseverance to get back the lost life are always the reflections of the authenticity in the writings of the apocalyptic authors. As Gadamer says in the Reception Theory that, "we understand a text only in terms of our cultural environment but, at the same time, the text is engaged in a dialogue with history. In other words, our present perspective and understanding involves a fusion with the past; the fusion of the past and present represents the hermeneutic's understanding"⁴.

4. Camus' *The Plague*

Camus' *The Plague* (1947) is found as a significant text of reference for the study of this literary motif in contemporary literary writing. It chronicles the spread of a plague epidemic that attacks and destroys a quarantined city of Oran on the Algerian coast. The catastrophic outbreak of this contagious disease has been witnessed through the protagonist, Rieux, a Doctor, a version of the author himself. The inhabitants of Oran lead a materialistic and mechanical life to the extent where they fail to notice even their mere existence. The novel highlights the inability of the individuals to change their destinies and it offers a glimpse of their lives as viewed through the author's distinctive absurdist perspective. The most essential scheme is the human condition and the novel's strongest point on the ethical note.

The historical incidents associated with the plagues are drawing the attention of a universal prerequisite and they are examples of a constant reality that human beings are vulnerable to being suffered by the actions of fellow humans. The process of dehumanization is a significant and striking characteristic feature of this novel. People are compared to animals and reduced themselves to their

primal desires and instincts. The experiences over plague as claimed by Camus are that human lives are primarily on the edge of the absurd. "So all a man could win in the conflict between plague and life was knowledge and memories"¹. He strikes a right chord on this issue that proper attention to this experience will save us from despair. It should be rightly delineated. Camus detests the human behaviors like the rigidity of heart, materialistic inclinations, forgetting the real joy of life and lack of gratitude. "Nobody is capable of really thinking about anyone, even in the worst calamity"¹. He leaves a caution note that there is no escape from human frailty. Therefore the foremost lesson of Camus' plague emphasizes that humility is very important. Perhaps less central is the idea of an overwhelming and inexplicable cosmic evil. Instead, the extreme to which human action and will have reached, is what seems to frustrate the understanding. Camus has also used plague as an allegory for war and the text proposes the imminent struggles, despair and destruction brought about by Nazism. It is considered to be a reflection on the Nazi occupation of France and the willful acts of confrontation against it.

Dr. Rieux's struggles and tenacious persistence in fighting against the plague have special resonance with the COVID 19 pandemic situation the world is fighting now. We connect this with the health care and front-line workers today. The love and the solidarity and the dedication through death and loss — that was very meaningful to Camus. His focus was on resistance and on how people can gather together in a situation to resist during the crisis.

These thematic and critical questions are most relevant to contemporary literary writing. Epidemic literature articulates extensively about moral impoverishment with specific literary innovation. By studying the insistence and importance of the epidemic in literature, it is apparent that the patterns and events repeat themselves or perhaps that returning to eschatological issues is one important trait of writing. These apocalyptic realities are not only in fiction but also in the present moment is representative of a time that threatens with wars and the spread of new epidemics, and that identifies the ethical and the aesthetic as in a state of crisis. Different authors illustrate and represent this literary motif within their rewriting distinctively, dialoguing and confronting their perception of reality accordingly. These motifs in literature are highly impactful, which are representing our contemporary

cultural and critical milieu. These works compel us to reassess and reexamine ethical values and our decisive factors for critical evaluation.

5. Boccaccio's *The Decameron*

The 14th-century Italian author Giovanni Boccaccio's *The Decameron* is a meta-narrative and it was originally written in 1353, later translated and published in English in 1886. It is a collection of novellas. Boccaccio's motive through this novella is to amuse and create awareness among the readers, especially about the pandemic situation. It recounts how a certain group of 10 people alone flee out of the city to get free from the black death and how well they spend their days and night together by forgetting the situation of danger. Geoffrey Chaucer was inspired by the theme of *The Decameron* and produced *The Canterbury Tales* in the 1380s. *The Decameron* is driven by 10 different characters that are believing and becoming rich in integrity and traditional values which are inherited over a generation. "it is a matter of humanity to show compassion for those who suffer and although it is fitting for everyone to do so, it is especially desirable in those who, having had need of comfort, have received it from others – and if anyone ever needed it or appreciated it or derived any pleasure from it, I am one of them"².

A group of seven women of age ranging from 18 to 25 and the rest three young men schemes to depart from their residence and abide in an isolated accommodation outside Florence for two weeks to secure themselves from the black death. People who are being so meticulous about their existence in life never get into afflictions. People of the group devised to spend the days by narrating 10 tales each day by each one of them and 100 tales eventually and this is not merely to get entertained but also for an ethical note. Keeping themselves engaged in a fruitful way to get rid of the despair and dolefulness and transmute it as a cool circumstance. The tales are highly dealing with love, lust, practical humor (especially about corrupted clergymen), life lessons, an erotic, philosophical, tragic and happy ending of love tales, and it also includes actual situation like taking one's benevolence for granted, betrayal, brilliance and cleverness to escape the tangled problem and morality and ethical behaviour. "You must read, you must persevere, you must sit up nights, you must inquire, and exert the utmost power of your mind. If one way does not lead to the desired meaning,

take another; if obstacles arise, then still another; until, if your strength holds out, you will find that clear which at first looked dark"². Boccaccio suggests a perfect way to get rid of the black death and its hasty and horror circumstances. His literary techniques provide us solace, cheeriness, anticipation and optimistic thoughts chiefly in times of despondency. Boccaccio's *The Decameron* is always been the best example for epidemic literature and that is principally for its sense of timelessness as it suggests the best way of human resilience during the period of an endemic pandemic. As per the quote provided in *Contemporary Literary Theory*, "The logical consequence of the assumption that good literature is of timeless significance and universal is that human nature is unchanging and constant; great literature is not for an age but for all time, not for any particular region or people, but for all regions and people because elevated thoughts, passions and emotions and human values are the same throughout human history"⁴.

6. Jack London's *The Scarlet Plague*

Jack London's *The Scarlet Plague* is a post-apocalyptic fiction published in 1912. London's protagonist, James Smith is the only leftover by the scarlet plague and he is the mere human to witness the devastation. In comparison to other works, in this novel, the vulnerability by plague is so terrible and mind-boggling. The afflicted human, 15 minutes from the discovery of the primary sign tends to turn scarlet and happen to have an instantaneous death. Once the government officials issued an affirmation about the precariousness of plague, people try to come up against the disease by the trait of being cautious. The efficacy of doctors is of no use and redemption of doctors from the contagion fails. James Smith, an American University English professor finds one of his students turned red-faced followed by death which startles him. When he tries to shelter himself in his home the rejection of the entire family emotionally wounded him. The author relates that the disease not just kills the human physically but also the love, pity, care, mercy and, humanity inside him. He devised to discover accommodation and move towards northwards along with his colleagues. An isolated dwelling is the mere rescuer of his life from this communicable affliction but it pushes in the timidity and egomania and fills us with the haunting phobia of the

incursion of disease. “It was amazing, astounding, this loss of communication with the world. It was exactly as if the world had ceased, been blotted out”³. Pestilence is unbiased and it never has partisanship between poor and rich, good and evil, crook and benignant, even human and animal. In the eyes of plague, each one is the same. “And after all, what did it matter? Everybody died anyway, the good and the bad, the efficient and the weaklings, those that loved to live and those that scorned to live. They passed. Everything passed”³. People either unwittingly accept or hatefully avoid and be cautious about the terrific evil and at a certain point of time, one became quandary about their existence and livelihood. Humans have been deprived of their residence and social conventions and stayed in safe housing to guard themselves against epidemic plague.

Jack London’s portrayal of the disease and its effects and signs are realistic and even more breathtaking. The catastrophes, the backlash of the people and his own experience of his survival which happened in 1913 during the epidemic are being recounted by the protagonist to his grandsons after sixty years in 2073. The author suggests that the only way of hindering ourselves from the contagion and phobia towards it is being in isolation and having contact with none, especially infected people. London’s faith in the actions of God is reflected through the character, James Smith as he contemplated that the agony and assorted deaths are the retribution of God for the committed sins of humans. Edgar Allan Poe’s *The Masque of the Red Death*, a short story published in 1842 inspired Jack London to some extent. The Red Death from Poe’s short story is taken by London which on contraction turned out red the entire body but not merely the face. The readers get brief tranquility when the scarlet plague is compared to other contagious infections especially the current COVID which is not as rigorous as London’s scarlet plague. Furthermore, London through his narrative and structure puts his readers in a threatened state and pulls inside his world of terrifying adventure.

7. Conclusion

Literary writings are always there for guidance in all cases. Literary dynamics propose human resilience through the recurring topos of pandemic literature in assorted ways and it never gives a false alarm. But the precedence and execution are the choices of readers. Humans are being caught by a contagious disease like a fish in a fishing pole. To my knowledge, though the initial stage of transmittance and the deaths are caused by the virus, only humans take the disaster to the next level out of their fecklessness. It also upends the means of serving the necessities of life and highly affects the status quo. The cognizance of the seriousness that one human is capable of assassinating the rest of the human race is obligatory. It is highly complicated to combat with the invisible murderer. Hence, people with humanity, perseverance and precociousness come up against it. Since anything lost in life can be regained but getting back the life is out of the question.

8. References

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