



## Loss and Hope in the Pandemic Condition of *The Scarlet Plague* by Jack London

Dr R. Ravindran, Assistant Professor, Department of English, K. Ramakrishnan College of Engineering, Samayapuram, Trichy.

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4077-2609>

Dr T. K. Vedharaja, Assistant Professor, Department of English, Alagappa Govt. Arts College, Karaikudi.

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3270-733X>

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.5918671

### Abstract

*This paper discusses two phenomenal things of human beings. i.e hope and loss. Loss in life is always inevitable, so the hope. The more one has hope, the more he can postpone his loss. Time is a precious one. Hence one should not lament the loss. He should immediately react to it in a positive way. He should encourage his hopeful nature to step forward. Both the world and life have uncertainty as Covid-19 has shown the uncertainty of life. Literature is not the mere representation of society; sometimes it shows, teaches or educates people to live happily. On that stance, epidemic literature has been done great works or miracles in giving people hope during and after the pandemic time. Now the whole world suffered from Covid-19. Jack London is one of the famous writers who had written different themes. His “The Scarlet Plague” is an epidemic novel and the situations orient to the present pandemic. Nowadays, people’s hope has been scattered away but Pandemic literature can help them to motivate themselves to stand against the loss. Rather than lamenting on loss, one should develop hope to do better in the future.*

**Keywords:** Loss, Hope, Pandemic Condition, *The Scarlet Plague*, Jack London.

Jack London (1876-1916) was famously known as the forerunner of commercial fiction writer. He was the first American writer to be found under the limelight. He has earned much fortune from his writings. Thus he is not only the first commercial novelist but also the inventor of the genre that people called today as science fiction. He served as journalist and social activist. As a writer, he always inspires his readers. His choices of themes were very novel when he was writing it. The way he narrates the story attracts the audience which results in his popularity as a writer. *The Scarlet Plague* is a dystopian fiction which pictures the world after its apocalyptic state. This book was published in London magazine in 1912 and received well by the readers. The reception of this novel is getting well especially after the Covid-19. The theme of the novel *The Scarlet Plague* is just signified the post-covid situation of 2020, 2021, etc. Thus, this novel is so relatable to the today’s condition. The pandemic is so similar to the post-apocalyptic setting of this fiction and has lots of similarities in the lives of the fictional characters and the real characters.



The pandemic situation across the world during 2019-2021 has shown the immediate response towards pandemic literature. Pandemic situations often occur in the world as various vigorous virus spread. But Corona virus reaches its peak as it shuts down the world. The normal nature of the world turns topsy-turvy. People cannot come out of the house to avoid the spreading of the virus. The lives of the people become so temporary as many of them have lose their hopes. Many business men faced loss during the period. It affects both rich and poor people. It raises the question of existence among the people. Literature is one of the arts which helps the people by engaging their time and giving hope to the people. Thus, pandemic literature once again becomes famous.

Literature deals with every sort of human life. It also talks about disease and pandemic whenever people faced quarantine time. This pandemic literature is not a new one as it always registered in literature. Plague is one of the diseases which threatened the world once. Many Holy Scriptures and classic books have discussed on plague. Especially The Bible shows that plague is a kind of punishment for the people who commit sin. Exodus 9.14 (KJV) says “For I will at this time send all my plagues upon thine heart, and upon thy servants, and upon thy people; that thou mayest know that there is none like me in all the earth.” English literature is very rich with pandemic literary works. It has pandemic related works in all its periods. Besides English, pandemic literature is still available in all literatures. For instance, *The Decameron* by Giovanni Boccaccio, the Italian poet, has dealt with pandemic and quarantine. In *Decameron*, seven women and three men were made themselves to live in a villa which is outside the city. To kill time, they were shared stories among themselves. This book refers bubonic plague which is also called as Black Death that ravaged Europe during 14<sup>th</sup> century. Daniel Defoe’s *A Journey of the Plague Year* and Albert Camus’ *The Plague* also dealt with the theme of plague, pandemic, loss, hope and quarantine etc.

Hope can be defined as the perseverance to reach the desired goals and how one motivated himself to reach success. Being hopeful is necessary for every creature in this earth. For Synder, this hope has been associated with three factors. First one is that one should have the goal-oriented thoughts which may act as fuel for their life. Many people who have hope will also have loss in life if they have not the proper plan. So the second important factor is strategies to attain their goal. Many times when the plan doesn’t work which is the place where people tend to loss their goal. The third important factor is motivated mindset which helps people to take tireless effort until they reach goal.

Hope is nothing but a state of mind which is filled with optimism. A hopeful person expects positive outcome for his actions. It is a kind of anticipatory emotion where a person expects things with confidence. From the definition of Snyder, Irving and Anderson, “Hope is a positive motivational state of successful (a) agency (goal-oriented energy), (b) pathways (planning to meet goals)” (Snyder 287)

Loss is a worst state of human beings. People feel emotionally when they lose something. This feel is double the time of their joy when they achieve at something. So obviously people prefer not to loss than to win. They have aversion feeling towards loss



which makes them even doing some illegal or immoral way to avoid loss. A student can take a risk of copying in exam to avoid getting failure marks in his exam.

*The Scarlet Plague* describes how a man should face post-apocalyptic era where there is no ray of hope. The protagonist James Howard Smith is as called as Granser remaining as a role model to face loss with the pinnacle of hope. Hence hope is the basic as well as a mandatory habit of the man. This book shows how he faces both loss and hope in his life and the pandemic trauma changes the whole world. The Covid-19 has been proven that anything can happen in life. The effect of Covid-19 will be there even after many centuries. It affects people financially, physically and mentally.

*The Scarlet Plague* sets in the year 2073 when a survivor of the pandemic, the Granser shares his experience when the plague bursts out in 2013. The plague has been a terrific one to kill the people and spread contagiously. Though, this novel was published a century before, it is still relevant. Granser was traumatized by the attack of plague. He has then explained his savage grandson about the life before and during the plague. But his efforts are in vein as his grandsons couldn't believe the story he has said. The only idea Granser has during the plague time is "survival". Many times he had lost his hope but then he retrieved his hope to survive in this earth. Through the words of Granser, Jake London has shown the intensity of the plague by describing it as:

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 73-74)

Those picture heavily terrified Granser when his closed ones were attacked like this from plague. London showed how positive the media worked during the scarlet plague. People from media have their own responsibility especially during these situations. In his novels, phone calls, writer and newspaper were the only media sources they had. But nowadays the graph of media has been raised much. On these days, radio, TV, print media and most significantly the social media like WhatsApp, Twitter, Facebook and Instagram have been spreading news. Though these social medias are mainly handled by the younger generations, old people also started to believe the news from it. Thus, the credibility of the news has become diverted.

Hope is the much needed thing during these pandemic situations but people who spread fake news or TV channels which spread low-scientific truths put people in worst situations which lead to the loss of mental health of the people. Panic spread by the media has to be stopped as it affects the hope of the people. The fear of losing life makes people as savages. Faith is the only better way to handle these situations. The result of not having hope ends in unethical behavior. People who are so civilized also act like uncivilized people.



People still have fear of lockdown so they just fill the store room with the basic things they want. But what actually happens is that they overload their store room with the things which are not necessary. Still one can find people in the grocery shop buying too much of milk which is more than sufficient. People also suffer by the shortage of necessary things to face their days because of some people's uncivilized behavior. Covid, Omicron and lockdown should be faced unanimously. Unity is mandatory one among people during the difficult situations. People indulge themselves in uncivilized activities like robbery, rape and killing. Jack London shows the uncivilized act of the people as:

In the midst of our civilization, down in our slums and labor-ghettos, we had bred a race of barbarians, of savages; and now, in the time of our calamity, they turned upon us like the wild beasts they were and destroyed us. And they destroyed themselves as well. (London 105 – 106)

During the pandemic situations not only the brutality is witnessed but the humanity also. Whenever a calamity happens people grouped together to save themselves and to save other. This humanity has been witnessed throughout the world. Though the calamities like earthquake, Tsunami, storm and virus bring unpleasant things to the world, it also helps to view the humanity in people. During the pandemic situation one can observe that the front-line workers sacrifice their life for the people. It is also shown in the novel as:

The sanitary committee was called upon to act, and it responded nobly. Two men were required to go out and remove the corpses, and this meant the probable sacrifice of their own lives, for, having performed the task, they were not to be permitted to re-enter building. One of the professors, who was a bachelor, and one of the undergraduates volunteered. They bade good-bye to us and went forth. They were heroes. They gave up their lives that four hundred others might live. (London 116-117)

Granser does not want to lose his hope. He is in a situation when he finds that he is the only human being alive. He has built the hope and wandered in search of people. He finds people and starts to live with them. He has created a community in which he has all relations. Yet he has nostalgia towards his past when people were super-civilized. He wants that kind of change in his region so he gives many lectures to his grandson which results in vein. Still he believes that his people will change though it takes years to change. So he has saved many books in a cave which he believes give his people wisdom. Finally books become his ray of hope.

In that dry cave on Telegraph Hill, where you see me often go when the tribe is down by the sea, I have stored many books. In them is great wisdom. Also, with them, I have placed a key to the alphabet, so that one who knows picture-writing may also know print. Some day men will read again; and then, if no accident has befallen my cave, they will know that Professor James Howard Smith once lived and saved for them the knowledge of the ancients. (London 175 – 176)



Nowadays pandemic, endemic, quarantine, lock down, vaccine, and death are the words that haunting the people. These things definitely make the people afraid and make them lose their hope in life. Through the pandemic literature one has to understand that everything passes. Until then people should motivate themselves to have hope which the energy of life. Reading pandemic literature may help the people to face the situation and make them to face their life with hope. Jack London's *The Scarlet Plague* has been a wonderful piece of works which is so relevant even now. Through the Granser character London has shown how loss is inevitable in life and how one has to keep hopes to survive and live in the world. As London shown in the novel, pandemic is make people afraid and change the behavior of the human. Everyone has responsibility to save the society irrespective to race, class and gender.

### References

- [1] London, Jack. *The Scarlet Plague*. The Macmillan Company, 1915.
- [2] Cooke, Jay. *Legacies of Plague in Literature, Theory and Film*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.
- [3] Snyder, C.R, D.R. Forsyth (Ed), *Handbook of Social and Clinical Psychology: The Health Perspective*. Elmsford, 1991.
- [4] Snyder, C.R, Irving, L & Andersin, J R. "Hope and health: Measuring the will and the ways. *The Holy Bible*. The King James Version. Oxford, 1769.
- [5] Watts, SJ. *Epidemics and History: Disease, Power and Imperialism*. Yale University Press, 1997.

**Author (s) Contribution Statement:** Nil

**Author (s) Acknowledgement:** Nil

**Author (s) Declaration:** I declare that there is no competing interest in the content and authorship of this scholarly work.



The content of the article is licensed under Creative Commons Attribution4.0 International License.