



Pandemic and Literature through Ages: A Case Study

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DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.5918681

Abstract

Tracing back to the past till the present day, pandemics have affected human history in innumerable as demographically, socially, culturally, politically, financially, and biologically. The study of pandemics helps one to understand politics, socio-economic structures, and personal relationships in a broader sense. Their outbreaks span across centuries and continents. The earliest recorded pandemics such as plague raised questions about existence and human's relations to God. Yellow fever virus which originated in Africa was brought to the western hemisphere during the slave trade era, with the first epidemic reported in 1648 in the Yucatan. This Yellow Fever led to the success of the Haitian revolution. Pandemics such as cholera, too, exposed how the industrial revolution created conditions for contagion to spread among the working class and the poor. The global influenza epidemic of 1918-1920 led to an outpouring of altruism, selflessness and self sacrifice. Throughout history, there have been people who have dealt with crises that caused untold pain and suffering. In early 2020, the novel coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic spread globally from its outbreak in China, negatively affecting economies and industries on a global scale confining people across the globe within the four walls of their houses under lockdown and restricting their movements. In such crisis, literature takes us beyond statistics of global deaths and degree of spread to show how the crisis has affected the individual lives of those infected as well as to that of families, friends, neighbors and the community as a whole. There has been a sharp upswing in the popularity of literary works dealing with plagues, pandemics and other forms of biological crises. This in fact becomes a reminder that even the hardest times can prompt and illustrate the triumph of the human spirit as reflected in numerous literary works.

Keywords: Pandemic Literature, Lockdown, Anxiety, Isolation, Vulnerability, Uncertainty.

As the coronavirus has spread throughout the world over the past years, pandemic-themed writings have appeared time and again in all manner of outlets, book form and magazines such as *Time*, *PBS*, *The Guardian*, *Globe and Mail* and many others alike. Literature has a vital role to play in casing our responses to the Covid-19 pandemic. To better understand the public reactions and how one might reduce racism, prejudice and antipathy in the narratives that surround the spread of this coronavirus, it is worth to introduce certain literary text for better understanding of the current scenario.



Stretching from the classics to contemporary novels, pandemic literature offers something in the way of a debatable and uncertain comfort, and an escort for what happens in the future. Likewise, certain topics such as the impact of pandemics on indigenous peoples and the effects of colonialism, for instance, have a well-developed historiography and relevant works are also referenced. It is noteworthy to mention that disease is not metaphor, symbol, or allegory; rather, it is simply something that kills the population without consideration. The effects of the pandemic evokes trauma and conveys profound loss or intense fear in diverse levels and these sentiments bear significance in the world of literature. Hence, story becomes a way of trying to impart a bit of that consideration and reflection that nature ignores.

Pandemics have, in myriad way, affected social life since the establishment of civilization. Hippocrates, a Greek physician of the Age of Pericles, who is considered one of the most outstanding figures in the history of medicine, recorded the first known pandemic in 412 BC, and numerous outbreaks were reported during the Middle Ages. The most notable epidemic was the ‘Spanish influenza’ that occurred in 1918. On a related note, J.F. Cheng and Leung assert:

Although more than 88 years have passed since that time, and memories of the disaster have become blurred, the sudden emergence of SARS and avian flu has reminded people of this painful past once more. (Cheng and Leung)

As mankind’s oldest deadly adversary, disease, has provided themes to literature since literature’s very invention. In order to clear the confusion, scientists, litterateur, poets, chroniclers and historians are trying to address local situations and at the same time possess a “desire to identify universal truths about how societies respond to contagious disease” (D. Jones). An English writer and journalist Daniel Defoe’s chronicle (Daniel Defoe) reflect that behind physical and mental suffering there also lies an anger against fate, against a divine will that witnesses and perhaps even condones all this death and human suffering. In modern times we are instrumented by our fear and the deaths. Set in 1655 and published in 1722, the novel, *A Journal of the Plague Year*, was likely based, in part, on the journals of the author’s uncle. At the time of publication there was alarm that plague in Marseilles could cross into England. Defoe’s fictional narrator traces the devastating progress of the plague through the streets of London. The novel talks about grief, sadness, death, survival, redemption, sin, hope, and faith. Defoe’s chronicler speaks of bodies piling up in mass graves, of sudden deaths and unlikely recoveries from the brink, and also blames those from elsewhere for the outbreak. A city has transformed: some of its streets suspiciously empty, some - with crosses on their doors - overwhelmingly full of the sounds and smells of human suffering. Defoe wrote about people keeping their distance when they met each other on the streets during the plagues, but also asking each other for news and stories from their respective hometowns and neighborhoods, so that they might stitch together a broader picture of the disease consumed with their blind faith:

With what blind, absurd, and ridiculous Stuff, these Oracles of the Devil pleas’d and satisfy’d the People, I really know not, but certain it is, that innumerable Attendants



crowded about their Doors every Day; [...] there was no Remedy for it, till the Plague itself put an End to it all. (Daniel Defoe)

Only through that wider view could they hope to escape death and find a safe place. (Pamuk)

An unmarried saddler, H.F is the narrator of the novel who lived in London during the plague. His *Journal* presents a multitude of anecdotes about masters of the house refusing to tell city officials of sick family members; people bribing watchmen to escape or engaging in violent altercations with them; sneaking out of houses through unwatched doors and windows; and many dead from being confined with a sick person. All of these reasons, coupled with the psychological trauma that resulted from forced confinement led to H.F.'s conclusion that this was a harmful and useless practice. He declares:

...in short, the shutting up of Houses, was in no wise to be depended upon; neither did it answer the End at all; serving more to make the People desperate, and drive them to such Extremities, as that, they would break out at all Adventures. (Defoe)

H.F. is keen to point out that the poor people of London did not rise up in rebellion as a manifestation of their fear and distress; they did not threaten city authorities or ravage nearby towns or break into the houses of the rich. He asserts:

..they rather went to the Grave by Thousands than into the Fields in Mobs by Thousands... (Defoe)

The lockdown as Defoe acknowledges had very great inconveniences in it, and some that were very tragic, was authorized by a law, it had the public good in view as the end chiefly aimed at, and all the private injuries that were done by the putting it in execution must be put to the account of the public benefit. Defoe's book emphasizes that the most prevalent way the contagion (virus) spread was via asymptomatic individuals who carried it. Much of the literature on plague and contagious diseases present the carelessness, incompetence, and selfishness of those in power as the sole instigator of the fury of masses can be compared with the current mismanagement of so many countries' governments. *A Journal of the Plague Year* tells us how in 1664, local authorities in some London neighborhoods tried to make the number of plague deaths appear lower than it was by registering other, invented diseases as the recorded cause of death.

Tracing back to early writings, such as *The Decameron* by Giovanni Boccaccio (1313–1375) and *The Canterbury Tales* by Geoffrey Chaucer (1343–1400), emphasized human behavior in a cynical manner:

...the fear of contagion increased vices such as avarice, greed, and corruption, which paradoxically led to infection and thus to both moral and physical death. (Riva, et al)

The Decameron published in English in 1886 presents a frame story centred on ten people fleeing the Black Death who gather in the countryside and as an amusement relate ten stories each. The stories are woven together by a common theme, the way of life of the refined bourgeoisie, who combined respect for conventions. The said mentioned vices were displayed by elite and sometimes common citizens in urban settings in the hoarding of



essentials from superstores and groceries which somehow resembles the situation of current lockdown due to Covid-19. Even in the current scenario, panic buying and hoarding essentials help people to believe they are in control and feel secured. Panic buying often leads to large quantities of necessities and medical supplies being purchased from vendors, and vastly limiting or even eliminating availability such that individuals and vulnerable groups, including the elderly or poor, are prevented from accessing them as they would normally do. (Emilie) However, writers like Defoe and Camus allowed their readers glimpses of scholastic and existential philosophies respectively underneath the waves of vulnerabilities, and fears, as something inherent to human nature.

To write the book *The Plague* (1947), Albert Camus engaged himself in the history of plagues. He used several source materials ranging from the Black Death in Europe in the 14th century, the Italian plague of 1630, and the great plague of London of 1665 as well as plagues that ravaged cities on China's eastern seaboard during the 18th and 19th centuries embedding them in his writings. Camus was not writing about one plague, as one thought it to be, rather, his was a metaphoric tale about the Nazi occupation of France. Camus' attitude is that in a world without meaning the plague provides a moral opportunity for people to find themselves in the struggle of sacrifice to work for the greater good. Like Camus's *Plague*, *Blindness* (1997) by Jose Saramago uses pandemic as an allegory of society,

Blindness was spreading, not like a sudden tide flooding everything and carrying all before it, but like an insidious infiltration of a thousand and one turbulent rivulets which, having slowly drenched the earth, suddenly submerge it completely. (Saramago)

The novel talks about the presence of morality in a damaged society, and the lack thereof, and the consequences that result from right and wrong, where life is reduced to a substantial fight for survival and people succumb to a contagious form of blindness which can transform your vision into a visual milky sea. (Penguin)

A profound cultural and ethical aspect of all major pandemics is the loss of access to personal narratives. The collective replaces the individual as protagonist, and the health of the public takes precedence over that of the individual. "There is a paradox in the multiplication of personal catastrophe throughout a society" (Belling). The accounting of the past sufferings as narrated in different literary and historical texts in this context can produce thick memory with "subjective specificity." Prophetic traditions of pandemics including Covid-19 are deeply rooted in religious and community narratives that are turned toward the 'end times. (Peters)

One of the most widely read novels in the past decade that won the Arthur C. Clarke Award in 2015, is Emily St. John Mandel's *Station Eleven*. The novel, a New York Times Bestseller, takes place in the Great Lakes region before and after a fictional swine flu pandemic, known as the "Georgia Flu", has devastated the world, killing most of the population. The novel states that after a swine flu pandemic wiped out most of the world's population, a group of musicians and actors travel around newly formed settlements to keep



their art alive and to come up with meaningful strategies to keep going. Mandel showcases the impact of the pandemic on all of their lives, weaving together characters perspectives from across the planet and over several decades to explore how humanity can fall apart and then, somehow, come back together.

One of the first novels about the pandemic is Margaret Atwood's novels *Oryx and Crake* (2003) and *The Year of the Flood* (2009) that considers ways in which the pandemic of her dystopian world may, to various degrees, serve as a reflection of the Covid-19 global pandemic in 2020. The setting of both novels is the same dystopian world but each presenting different ideological perspective in dealing with the pandemic. The presentation analyses the creation of Crakers as the new humanoid species, which are supposed to inhabit the earth in its post-pandemic state reflects not only political and social structures Atwood borrowed from the real-world, but also types of behavior that some political national leaders display in the present scenario. While *Oryx and Crake* addresses the issues of power, exploitation, and God; *The Year of the Flood*, with its two female characters, scrutinizes the pandemic through the lens of ecofeminism, ecology, nature, suitability and sustainability.

Lastly, an American actor and author, Max Brooks' novel, *World War Z* (2006) reflects "oral history" of a virus that originated in China and spread across the world, converting millions of people into zombies. The thrilling novel is a sweeping look at the sociopolitical response to a pandemic. Brooks described how different countries reacted to the major virus and how the Chinese government tries to cover up the virus' spread. Also the U.S. government, in the midst of an election year, is seen too slowly to react to the impending catastrophe. It is insightful to note that the actual threat is not the virus or even the zombies per se but rather in its psychological response, especially that of denial and panic.

Even though projecting hard times, they also provide comfort and solace as these stories give us the hope and aspiration for a better future. Writing about such stories also helps us to understand and appreciate the difficult situation that one overcome and how one makes the best of the worst times. Similarly under Covid-19 strain one is expected to become more articulate in his/her artistic creations focusing on themes such as individual survival, isolation, vulnerability, uncertainty, and certainly the importance of collective introspection of inequality related to pandemic deaths. Throughout history, there have been people who have dealt with crises that caused untold suffering. As cited above, literature has always been home to numerous stories narrating the trials and tribulations of diseases, pandemics, plagues and the lives of those experiencing it. Devastating epidemics have impacted the lives of many writers around the globe and have manifested in the form of stories, dramas, poems and novels, some of which remains classics till date. Some writers strived with personal losses through writing about them as a form of deliverance. These stories give readers realistic perceptions into the restrictions and changes that these circumstances brought along with it.

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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.



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