

MOTIFS IN PANDEMIC NARRATIVES: FEAR AND HOPE

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Abstract

The situation due to COVID-19 pandemic and the strict lockdown imposed to contain it has baffled a generation of people that believed that technology had all the answers, and has impelled a search for answers. Such outbreaks in the past have been documented as medical history and also as literature that has recorded both physical and psychological symptoms. Pandemic narratives enable an understanding of the event through some recurrent motifs. The article explores these to understand how the narratives offer answers and solace despite dire omens and bleak manifestations. It depicts how survival lies in inter-dependence and cooperation. Though a lone, heroic figure may be seen to fight the disease single-handedly, the ultimate message is to emphasise the shared burden of humanity.

Keywords: pandemic, isolation, metaphor, fear, hope, humanity

No longer were there individual destinies; only a collective destiny made of plague and emotions shared by all.

(Albert Camus, *The Plague*)

Human history is scarred by natural disasters and man-made tragedies that have, time and again, taken a heavy toll on human life. Calamities and catastrophes – floods, earthquakes, diseases, wars, terrorism – in the history of the world are far-reaching events that leave their mark on the people, and the physical and psychological collateral they extract has affected the creative impulse powerfully. Confronted by such situations, we struggle to understand the why's and how's from various sources – from media, art, film, and literature. Disease and epidemics,

too, have yielded a rich harvest. The year 2020 has witnessed COVID-19 pandemic sweep through the entire world. This article looks at literature along with few paintings and films as a means of succour and solace in times of isolation and fear engendered by the pandemic. Rather than present a catalogue of fiction centred around pandemics, the article shares a few observations on some recurrent motifs that we can recognize in today's scenario.

The past century has been all about the colossus that humanity has become, with asupreme confidence in one's own capacities to overcome any hurdle – natural or manmade. After the end of the World Wars, technological advancement led to the creation of a global village. The internet connected distant dots on a map as nothing had ever done in the history of humankind. Advancement in science and medicine, indeed, in almost every field, brought us closer to the eighteenth-century Enlightenment individual that seemed to know no limitations. Travel to the remotest corners of the planet was extended to a real possibility of space travel in the foreseeable future. Debates around climate change, despite clear warnings, did not burst the bubble of everlasting prosperity and the incremental movement towards peace (even if, fractured), and towards a better future. Diseases seemed less intimidating than natural catastrophes due to advanced medical research to tackle even deadly, high toll diseases.

That the evils of modern civilisation have been largely overlooked is not to argue that the century has seen no conflict or misery. The very real issues of discrimination on various levels, poverty, malnutrition, etc. never ceased to plague humanity. However, our hubris, our 'overweening pride' in scientific and technological advancement hid the lack of progress in our social civilisation. The current pandemic has brought home to us our fragile invincibility. It has once again exposed the woefully inadequate investment across the world in the most basic of human needs – healthcare. Dealing with such an event has not been a part of our toolbox – of even of the previous generation – and we are floundering to make sense of the rapidly spiralling events. Memories of the last pandemic to strike the world a century ago lay buried under the swanky skyscrapers as we dared to hope that scourges like the Black Death and the Spanish Influenza were the dead past (no pun intended). Even the comparatively contained pandemics like SARS, H1N1, Ebola, HIV, etc. had not changed life for a large part of the population. But this is the first time that a single event, the COVID-19 pandemic, has affected each and every person on the planet, directly or indirectly.

A pandemic is an epidemic that occurs all over the world, beyond international boundaries, and affects a very large number of people. The Latin word 'plaga', means 'stroke' or 'wound', the Greek 'plaga' means 'strike' or 'blow'. Paul M V Martin and Estelle Martin-Granelin their essay, "2,500 Year Evolution of the term Epidemic" trace the etymology of the term 'epidemic' to ancient Greek civilization. They write, "the Greek word epidemios is constructed by combining the preposition epi (on) with the noun demos (people), but demos originally meant 'the country' (inhabited by its people) before taking the connotation 'the people' in classical Greek". They further suggest that Homer, Plato, Xenophon also used the word epidemios to refer to arrival of a person or stay in a country. Hippocrates, ancient Greek physician gave it a medical nuance in a title of one of his famous treatises, to mean "which circulates or propagates in a country," giving rise to the noun, *epidemia*. This is regarded as the first description of an epidemic and later the succession of epidemics of the plague or the influenza in Europe helped define it further as the transmission of a specific disease. Today we use it also for non-infectious diseases, ranging from cancer to obesity – to indicate a problem affecting a large number of people.

Like all human experience, disease has been portrayed in literature and other art forms. In an article, “Plague Writing: From Boccaccio to Camus”, David Steel says that as disease involves physical and emotional suffering, it is expected to cut more keenly than other aspects into an artist’s sensibility. The turn to literature and other creative expressions defines one of the coping mechanisms in the face of such pandemics. During challenging times of disease and quarantine, exacerbated by anxiety about physical and psychological health and economic hardship, literature has been a faithful companion. It has not just provided solace in solitude, but has also suggested solutions to make sense of our world, suddenly turned topsy-turvy. It has offered an excellent scope for reviewing life and the world around us as it reveals truth in its myriad facets. As Elizabeth Outkain “How Pandemics Seep into Literature” says:

... the literature that arose from the influenza pandemic speaks to our current moment in profound ways, offering connections in precisely the realms where art excels: in emotional landscapes, in the ways a past moment reverberates into the present, in the ineffable conversation between the body’s experiences and our perception of the world”.

That is to say, literature helps us to articulate and understand experiences that seem overwhelming and unprecedented.

Literature helps us not only to grapple with our fear but to cling to hope. As Susan Sontag says about her experience of dealing with cancer in *Illness as Metaphor*, “what marks the literature of plague, pestilence, and pandemic is a commitment to try and forge if not some sense of explanation, then at least a sense of meaning out of the raw experience of panic, horror, and despair. Narrative is an attempt to stave off meaninglessness, and in the void of the pandemic, literature serves the purpose of trying, however desperately, to stop the bleeding” (qtd. in Simon).

For Steel, the idea of the plague is as powerful as the disease was virulent and he feels that literature bears witness to the continuing vitality of its symbolic possibilities. In pandemic literature, disease replaces the conventional villains like dragons, ogres, terrorists, aliens as the dreaded foe that casts a shroud of death and needs to be vanquished. It is an insidious enemy – an invisible virus or bacterium – yet in popular imagination its hideous symptoms are depicted in garish, gory and ghoulish images. Graphic descriptions of painful and repulsive physical symptoms inspire both pity and awe at the relentless presentation of suffering and death. Such representations in literature and movies, in some ways provide a kind of mental simulation that prepares one to tackle similar real-life situations but it can have consequences too. A recent research paper titled, “Horror fans and morbidly curious individuals are more psychologically resilient during the COVID-19 pandemic” argues that “mental simulation of dangerous phenomena can bring about unpleasant emotions and comes with a non-trivial time-commitment. The extent to which an individual is motivated to learn about the dangerous situations in life may be described as morbid curiosity” (Scrivner et al.). The sudden rise in discourse around pandemic literature and arts and also the increase in viewership of pandemic films clearly hints at the abovementioned argument.

Not just the human mind and body, but the very physicality of space is scarred, for example, the red crosses that were painted on the doors of the affected people (or the slapping of a poster notifying the presence of COVID-19 on the doors of affected houses in the present scenario), or the creaking of the cart bearing the dead in the night over rutted roads, (or scenes from over-worked crematoria flooding social media today). Pandemic literature is usually supported by facts, data, and symbolism. It not only records the onset of a disease, but the initial

casualness with which it is treated, its rapid proliferation, the dramatic change that it wreaks in society, and finally the tapering off which sees the affected city limp back to a semblance of normality. During this protracted period, it bears witness to what Steel calls “a spectrum of human behaviour”. Usually, it also offers hope after a grim, hopeless phase and shows embattled humanity ultimately triumphing over all odds. Fundamental philosophical issues are foregrounded in an allegorical manner and the calamity is employed to critique the evils in society – it could be moral, religious or ideological aberration or depravity.

Historically, too, the plague has been a well-explored trope that epitomises the primitive fear of an unknown, infectious disease. Nothing could protect one from its widespread ravages except by shunning contact with the infected. Riva, in an article, “Pandemic Fear and Literature: Observations from Jack London’s *The Scarlet Plague*” says that the immense fright was also fuelled by a belief in the supernatural origin of pandemics, as it was thought to be an embodiment of divine wrath against mankind’s transgressions. Pestilence was posited as God’s will or divine retribution; striking the land with disease to punish people for their depravity. Greek epics like Homer’s *Iliad* (726 BCE) and Sophocles’ tragic play, *Oedipus the King* (429 BCE) also see it as a sign of moral degradation. The plague mentioned in the Holy Bible during the Exodus of Egypt is terrifying in its description and an exhortation to behave morally. A well-known painting, *The Plague of Ashdod* (1630) by the French artist, Nicolas Poussin, represents a story from the Old Testament. One interpretation of the story is the theft of the Ark of the Covenant by Philistines. The Judaeo-Christian God ravaged the city with plague, causing deaths on a mass scale.

However, to regard disease as divine punishment was problematic as it did not smite the sinners alone but the innocent as well. This could not be reconciled to the idea of a just and merciful God. In fact, this has led writers and philosophers to a fundamental question as to why the good and the virtuous suffer. Albert Camus’s *Le Peste* published in 1947 and translated as *The Plague* philosophizes over the agonizing death of an innocent child that is difficult to accept along with a belief in the presence of a benevolent God. For the priest, Father Paneloux, it is something only to be accepted, not understood. But Dr. Rieux finds himself unable to accept such a reality of life. “Until my dying day, I shall refuse to love a scheme of things in which children are put to torture” (196).

To rationalize the death of the good and innocent as well as that of the sinners, the proposition expanded to believe that a degenerate society was being purged and cleansed of the evil through disease and death. In *The Plague*, the disease seems an embodiment of all that lay rotting in the inner space – physical and mental. “It was as if the earth on which our houses stood were being purged of its secreted humors; thrusting up to the surface the abscesses and pus-clots that had been forming in its entrails” (Camus and Buss 16). Pandemic literature became an allegory to criticise evils in society. This was an idea of expiation and atonement of individual sin through collective suffering.

In “What the Great Pandemic Novels Teach Us”, Orhan Pamuk says that throughout human and literary history what makes pandemics alike is not mere commonality of germs and viruses but that our initial responses are always the same. One of the reactions that seems to emerge out of the collective unconscious is denial, as Pamuk notes during his research for his book on the plague, “Nights of Plague”. He quotes an example from Daniel Defoe’s *A Journal of the Plague Year* (1722), which details the sequence of events of the Great Plague of London of 1665. Defoe’s book is laden with anecdotes and statistics, and it is a matter of debate whether it is to be regarded as fiction or history. The account begins in 1644 in September, with news of the

disease coming in from the neighbouring Holland. As the winter sets in, it creeps closer home and finally engulfs the city. There is a wilful denial in accepting the fact of the large number of causalities of the disease. Pamuk says, “In the early pages of *A Journal of the Plague Year*, the single most illuminating work of literature ever written on contagion and human behaviour, Daniel Defoe reports that in 1664, local authorities in some neighborhoods of London tried to make the number of plague deaths appear lower than it was by registering other, invented diseases as the recorded cause of death.”

This denial has serious repercussions as initially the state fails to act promptly to handle the emerging crisis. Adequate measures taken at the right time would contain the epidemic better. Even professional opinions of the medical fraternity are not heeded; it is either because the state does not wish to unleash panic in society or due to inadequate administrative support as in Camus’s *The Plague*. The fictional town of Oran is ravaged by the plague but the initial attempts of the doctor, Rieux to alert the authorities are not taken seriously, leading to aggravation of the problem. Only some ineffectual measures are enforced casually. Moreover, since the state accords seriousness to the pandemic only belatedly, steps taken to arrest its proliferation are performed, and perceived to be, draconian and excessive. The trope of the spread of the epidemic because of the state’s negligence is something that many popular movies have tried to explore. Experiments gone wrong or government agencies failing to contain the spread of a virus is a common theme and explored in famous movies like *Outbreak* (1995), *Flu* (2013), and *Contagion* (2011).

It is not just the State that tries to play down the enormity of the problem; the people themselves remain largely oblivious to the danger as most of them believe that the disease would not touch them personally. It seems something that is abstract, distant, and therefore manageable. There is a belief that modern medicine would soon be able to control the disease – certainly before it was going to affect one. Probably the first writer to use the trope of plague in a novel was the Italian writer, Alessandro Manzoni, who wrote *I Promessi Sposi* (*The Betrothed*) in 1827 about the Milan plague around 1628-30. He shows how the populace rejected the idea of plague and opposed the advice of two leading doctors. Naked, plague-marked corpses of an entire family had to be paraded in public before the people accepted the truth. We are also told that ironically, a religious procession to avert the outbreak aided in spreading it.

In most instances, when the cases begin to multiply rapidly, the State is constrained to enforce quarantine. In an article titled “The Plague writers who predicted today”, Jane Ciabattari quotes Defoe’s *A Journal* which records that by July, “all public feasting, and particularly by the companies of this city, and dinners at taverns, ale-houses, and other places of common entertainment, be forborne till further order and allowance....”. Similarly, in *The Plague*, people are not allowed to leave Oran, nor can residents return home if they were visiting outside. The abrupt halt to physical movement naturally inconveniences people and is resented by them. It is likely to be perceived as coercive, even if necessary, and people try to bend the rules that leads to rapid spread of the disease. The state is left with no option but to ensure the quarantine forcibly, which is further seen as a violation of one’s fundamental right to freedom of movement. Ed Simon says in “On Pandemic and Literature” that Defoe is critical of the use of troops by the state to enforce quarantine on stricken cities on this ground. He turns his attention to the root cause of the problem and suggests how better public sanitation could prevent such outbreaks.

A strict quarantine disrupts not just social life, but economic activity as well. Soon, the supply of essential items and food stuff is disrupted, heightening social and economic insecurity.

Defoe is critical of the people who don't do much to help themselves. Nothing "was more fatal to the inhabitants of this city than the supine negligence of the people themselves, who, during the long notice or warning they had of the visitation, made no provision for it by laying in store of provisions, or of other necessaries, by which they might have lived retired and within their own houses" (Simon). He is appreciative of the few who behaved prudently and with sufficient caution.

In pandemic literature, quarantine fosters a sense of being in exile and is seen as an ultimate symbol of a human being's imprisonment in the world, doomed to mortality. The fear of infection makes one remain wrapped in a cocoon that accentuates the sense of alienation. A painting, "Self-Portrait with the Spanish Flu" painted in 1919 by Edvard Munch, shows him sitting in a chair, wrapped in a gown and blanket. His bed in the background is messy and indicates the "un-wellness" of the entire situation. The undefined features may hint at the daunting opacity of the future. Man is faced with a realization of his ultimate loneliness – a specific characteristic of epidemics because infected individuals are isolated.

For some people, fleeing the affected city or town seems to be a viable option. They think that they can escape the disease or quarantine by running away to a pristine land somewhere else. In "On Pandemic and Literature", Ed Simon says that one of the earliest accounts of a deadly pandemic in fiction – the Black Death in the fourteenth century in Italy – is given by Giovanni Boccaccio in *The Decameron*, published in 1353. *The Decameron* tells of a group of young men and women – three and seven respectively who quarantine themselves in a Tuscan villa outside Florence and pass time by telling stories. There are ten stories for a period of ten days; a total of a hundred stories that range from being funny, tragic, to bawdy. The young women and men self-exiled within cloistered walls feel, "Every person born into this world has a natural right to sustain, preserve and defend their own life, so that storytelling becomes its own palliative to drown out the howling of those dying on the other side of the ivy-covered stone walls." Pandemic films, too, often depict populations deserting the city in search of places that are untainted by the virus.

This may be seen as a symptom of the self-centredness of an individual, focussed only on individual safety. The collective good is often ignored in the race to protect one's own self, leading to the collapse of social and ethical values. As Riva says in "Pandemic Fear and Literature: Observations from Jack London's *The Scarlet Plague*," for several writers, the amorality that epidemics engendered in society were the real concern.

Most of those who choose to sequester themselves willingly are usually from the influential class who can insulate themselves for indefinite periods in order to escape the scourge. They remain largely oblivious to the plight of the hapless public. Edgar Allan Poe's short story "The Mask of the Red Death: A Fantasy" (The Masque of the Red Death) published in 1842 reveals how, indifferent to the plight of the countless common folk, a privileged nobleman, Prince Prospero takes refuge in a walled abbey with a thousand of his nobles to escape the Red Death. They seal themselves in with sufficient rations to last them a long time while a terrible plague ravages the country outside. Customary revelry continues for these fortunate few; almost as an extended vacation. To cater to the entertainment of his guests, the Prince arranges a grand masked ball at which an inscrutable figure in a red mask proves to be a personification of death that ultimately claims all of them. The story is commonly regarded as an allegory on the inevitability of death, suggesting that all attempts to stave it off are futile.

It has disturbing echoes in our present times, where the fortunate few (when compared to the wretched hordes) had the luxury to recuperate from the tensions of daily life and ponder over

deep philosophical questions while millions grappled with disease, starvation, and migration. So, one could conjecture about the idea of Nature avenging the over-exploitation she has been subjected to, and the early days of lockdown seemed like a healthy rebooting of the planet. Lack of human activity reduced the pollution levels, the air was clean, distant mountains became visible on the horizon, and social media was abuzz with the idea of healing instead of ailing as the fortunate found it easy to ensconce themselves in their homes, armed with not just necessities but luxuries to last out the lockdown period. The number of casualties was low so it didn't seem intimidating.

However, as the body count begins to surge, panic spreads equally contagiously, making one starkly aware of one's mortality. This panic leads to hysterical stigmatisation of the afflicted ones, and they are shunned due to the fear of contagion rather than aided to overcome the ordeal. It makes one pathologize the place along with the people. Often individuals, and even communities, are perceived as the perpetrators of the plague and vilified. Orhan Pamuk points to this tendency that recurs with distressing regularity. Rumours and misinformation are rampant at this stage of the virus and lead to utter confusion in society. Ed Simon quotes Manzoni who is interested in crowd psychology and describes how mere suspicion led some hysterical people to hunt the suspected. Newspapers and pamphlets (and mass media and social media in present times) bombard consumers with unverified, sensationalized snippets of news and views. Contesting claims of cures, quacks, chemists collide with each other and only serve to heighten anxiety instead of alleviating it. Ed Simon mentions Defoe's *A Journal* that records the narrator watching anti-pestilential pills sold by quacks, money being put in pots of vinegar, throngs at church despite risk of contagion.

These ideas are manifested in several genres of film like post-apocalyptic movies, survival movies, zombie movies and pandemic movies which have seen a rise in recent times. People's self-centeredness, will to survive, and also the capability to dehumanize themselves have been highlighted to present different facets of the human psyche. The recurring impulse of the characters in such movies is the willingness to bend and break rules and laws, some for completely selfless reasons, some to spare themselves the loss of loved ones and many others for personal gain.

One significant aspect that books and films on pandemics share is that they all present an apocalyptic vision. It seems that the end of the world is at hand, largely due to man-made ills (a throwback on the motif of divine retribution). There is an unmistakable impression that only the pure and virtuous shall emerge from this, though perhaps not wholly unscathed. However, the truth that seems to emerge is that the world does not come to an end. It is only an individual's fear of one's own world crashing down. The apocalypse may be seen as a magnification of an individual perception of a sense of alienation and exile. It envelops the reader/ viewer in the circle of almost palpable fear that is as contagious as the virus. An interesting fact is that the feeling of the end being nigh sometimes led to people indulging in reckless revelry. Ed Simon notes that in 1816, John Wilson published a verse drama *The City of the Plague*, a macabre melodrama set in London that shows an almost carnival spirit of desperate enjoyment that overcame certain sections of the population during plague epidemics; and this, in fact, was a phenomenon noted by several contemporary witnesses. At times, panic led people to behave in irrational ways and, ironically, event to take their own lives to prevent contagion.

Pandemic literature holds up a mirror to our profligate society and shatters its complacency. While self-interest and selfishness make people insulate themselves, they also profit by fair or foul means to amass riches at the cost of others. In Defoe's *A Journal*, the

underbelly of the city is on display – the helpless wretchedness of the poor, the despairing efforts of people to eke out a living in abnormal times, the reprehensible cravenness of some medical practitioners who abandon their duty and their patients for self-preservation, the inexcusable apathy of the rulers. Yet there are some people, including state officials, who carry out the work doggedly to prevent the city spiralling into utter chaos. Ed Simon shows how in Manzoni's text, the men called upon to clear the streets of corpses use the opportunity to make money and go to the extent of deliberately strewing infected material from their carts on the streets to spread the plague. Plague became "a livelihood, a festival, a reign for them". Similarly, in Camus's *The Plague*, a withered Cottard seems to revive and revel in the misery surrounding him as he makes money selling smuggled goods, while a journalist, Rambert, ultimately chooses to stand with public interest instead of private gain.

In Boccaccio's *The Decameron* too, the various stories serve as a medium to discuss contemporary social life and show how the epidemic leads to economic disruption, political confusion and an overall degeneration in morals. Even if it doesn't lead to entire humanity or nature rebooting itself, it does lead to self-introspection. In *The Plague*, too, the plague is not simply a disease infecting and killing people but is a symptom of what is diseased within us that causes our destruction. In her article, "A Matter of Common Decency: What Literature Can Teach Us About Epidemics", Melissa Block quotes Professor Alice Kaplan who says "[Camus is] talking about our shadow. I think he's talking about our capacity to do harm."

As contagion courses through the population and one suddenly becomes aware of one's mortality, it leads the characters as well as the readers to reassess human values; and results in a reaffirmation of a moral code. Defoe views the plague as an indictment on society that can be assuaged by a genuine repentance and reformation. He wed the idea of the moral cleansing with a practical advocacy of better hygiene and sanitation – returning to the idea of the role of the State in a crisis.

Literature and film respond by presenting a lone man (or a small group of men and women) battling insurmountable odds. This reaffirms faith and recaptures a sense of control in one's own powers that had waned as the virus had waxed. It is attractive to see a heroic individual conquering the cruellest adversity by one's wits, work and courage. Hope is held out in the presence of goodness – the end of world that will resurrect itself from a solitary seed that shall sprout and usher in a new dawn. Melissa Block says that the hero is usually an ordinary man, not carrying out any herculean task but simply doing his duty. She gives the example of Dr. Rieux, the central character of *The Plague*. He is an ordinary individual but evolves as a heroic figure in the sheer doggedness that he exhibits in dealing with an almost impossible situation. But he does not regard himself as a hero; he says that he was only doing his job.

The supporting cast is equally valuable – Rieux is ably assisted by people like Tarrou and Rambert, forging a solidarity that seems to proffer hope in calamitous times of building society afresh. The mantle of heroism also covers the humble municipal clerk, Grand, whose dreary job is to catalogue each case of disease by painstakingly recording the details on his filing cards details of each illness and death. For Defoe, too, the hero is a humble clerk who maintains the macabre mathematical data on mortality kept by parishes. Such people go about their work quietly and untiringly. Their common efforts may face insurmountable odds but the friendship and the sense of solidarity that they forge is the real gain.

The final message that pandemic literature holds is hopeful yet cautious: "What we learn at time of pestilence – that there are more things to admire in men than despise. But, you know, it's a contest.... Such joy is always imperiled" (Camus 277-278). This solidarity, this collectivism,

rather than individualism is what seems to proffer hope in calamitous times. In pandemic literature it is the shared future of humanity that is threatened by an invisible enemy; and it is only by individuals standing together to reaffirm this shared future that the enemy can be overcome. Professor Alice Kaplan who says that people were reading the book almost as a vaccine “not just as a novel that can help us think about what we’re experiencing, but something that can help heal us” (qtd. in Block) is essentially a function of society – not in a utilitarian sense but an expansive one. It observes, narrates, and creates – at times a mirror to the reality that we remain largely oblivious to, and at other times, a refraction of what should be and of what can be. The sudden insecurity assailing people is bound to affect our thinking process and our narrative of that process. Narrative stitches together a world fallen apart. It enlarges the scope of human possibility, and fills us with a desire to be more than what we are, and holds the delicious possibility of what we would like to be and can be.

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