

Blood to Ink: A Study of Pain and Loss in select Pandemic Literature

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Abstract:

Every time humanity became bogged in the mud of hard times, literature has always been "A Ray of Hope" for them. Every good and bad event finds a place in black and white, and literature, which is referred to as the "Mirror of the Society," reflects the subtlest human reactions. Man has a habit of recording everything that holds certain values in society. Most of the time, Man creates accounts of its valor in writing to find an indelible place in the pages of history. However, during this journey of Man, he also suffered some disastrous times, which are printed in his memory like scars. This paper aims to shed light on the major literature written on these harsh times of Pandemics and Epidemics. The literature written about the difficulties faced by man in these tough times and reviving back to normalcy gives a new hope and courage to humanity to survive in the toughest of times. In this paper an effort has been done to trace the literature based on sufferings and survival of man in various pandemics that have hit the face of earth.

Keywords: Hradtimes, literature, ray of hope, pandemic, epidemic, humanity.

Throughout history, periodic outbreaks of infectious illnesses have had a significant and long-lasting impact on society. With their impacts frequently extending for centuries, those events had a significant impact on the economic, political, and social facets of human civilization. The scientific community was compelled to establish the concepts of epidemiology, prevention, vaccination, and antibiotic therapies as a result of epidemic outbreaks, which have helped define some of the fundamental foundations of contemporary medicine. The global spread of any disease is known as a pandemic. Earlier plagues took form of epidemic and pandemic. A dangerous and sometimes fatal bacterial illness results in the plague. The illness, sometimes known as the "black plague," is brought on by the *Yersinia Pestis* bacterial strain. This bacterium is present in animals all over the world and is often spread to people via fleas. In places with poor sanitation, excessive human density, and a strong rodent population, the danger

of plague is greatest. Millions of people in Europe perished throughout the Middle Ages as a result of the plague. Bubonic, Septicemic, and pneumonic plagues are the three primary kinds of plagues. Fleas that have previously eaten on diseased rodents including mice, rats, rabbits, squirrels, chipmunks, and prairie dogs are typically the source of plague infection in humans. Additionally, it may spread via direct contact with contaminated person or animal. The plague is the only word that can serve as a suitable starting point for our quick tour through the history of pandemics. The term "plague," which derives from the Doric Greek word *plaga* (strike, blow), is a polyseme that is used to refer to a specific, highly contagious febrile disease brought on by *Yersinia pestis* as well as a more general term for any epidemic disease with a high mortality rate or, more broadly, as a metaphor for any sudden outbreak of a disastrous evil or affliction. Any illness can be referred to by this phrase in Greek; *plaga* and *pestis* are its Latin equivalents. The bubonic plague had spectacular and horrifying signs and symptoms. One of the several artists that lived during the time of the plague, Boccaccio, characterised it as follows:

It originally revealed itself in both men and women by the development of specific tumours in the groin or armpits, some of which became as big as an ordinary apple, others as big as an egg...The deadly *gavocciolo* quickly spread from the two aforementioned areas of the body in an indiscriminate manner, and as a result, the disease's appearance began to change. In many cases, black or livid spots would appear on the arm, thigh, or other area of the body, sometimes sparsely or frequently, depending on the case. (Boccaccio 256)

The Black Death, a worldwide epidemic of the bubonic plague between the years of 1346 and 1353, is one of the most well-known pandemics in human history. Between 30 and 60 percent of the population of Europe perished from the *Yersinia pestis* bacteria in the middle of the fourteenth century, specialists believe the epidemic originated in Central Asia decades before this mass destruction took place. The first cholera epidemic, which started in Russia in 1817 and resulted in 1 million deaths, was spread to British soldiers, who then spread it to India and subsequently the rest of the world.

Another significant pandemic is thought to have occurred in Russia in 1889. Before travelling west to Europe, across the Atlantic Ocean to North America, and subsequently Africa, it most likely began in Siberia and Kazakhstan. Many lives became victim of this deadly flu. In a study conducted in 1920 it was found that about 360,000 individuals had perished from the Russian flu by the end of 1890. The virus that

causes AIDS HIV most likely evolved from a chimpanzee virus that was transmitted to humans in West Africa. By the late 20th century, the virus had spread throughout the world, and HIV/AIDS was announced as a pandemic. Since the illness's discovery, an estimated 35 million individuals have passed away from it.

T. S. Eliot says, "The work of Literature is to turn blood into ink". Literature has been a serving spoon for humanity since the times of human existence, various forms and techniques were used by our forefathers to preserve and document the major events and happenings of the society. They also recorded tales of bravery of Men who overcame all the hazards put forward by nature. It is said War is fight of man with another man, but Pandemic is a fight of man with nature.

The word "epidemios," which refers to "something which circulates or propagates in a place," was first used by Homer in the western canon for the returning locals in *The Odyssey*. Hippocrates first used this term in his dissertation. Records indicate that the Black Death of 1347 killed up to 60% of the population of Europe. It obliterated entire communities and brought an end to numerous kingdoms as a result of the destruction. John Kelly's *Great Mortality* mentions the horrors of this tragedy.

The plague of the 16th century, which affected all of Europe, is another inspiration for the Italian author Boccaccio's *Decameron*. *The Disease* (1947) by Nobel Prize winner Albert Camus, is a novel about a fatal plague epidemic in the city of Oran. In her novel *The Last Man* (1826) Mary Shelley depicts a terrifying future in which a disease is about to wipe out humanity. Another terrible disease is mentioned by the master of horror Edgar Allan Poe in his tale *The Masque of the Red Death* (1842) which illustrates the certainty of Death when the plague strikes humanity. The most well-known of the Bronte sisters, Charlotte Bronte discusses the Typhus Epidemic in her masterpiece *Jane Eyre* (1847), in which approximately half of the population dies a terrible death.

As Noble Laureate Rabindranath Tagore mentions "smallpox" as a threat to the people of the contemporary period in his historical poem *Upagupta*, set in the third century B.C. in the town of Mathura, one can find information about anything and everything in the vast array of Indian literature. Pandemics that cause severe harm to the world also made their place on the canvass of Indian Literature. *Puratana Bhritya* (the old man servant) describes the smallpox as the cause of death of the titular character, who is

devoted man servant. Ahmed Ali depicts the damage brought on by the disease in the capital city of Delhi in his book *Twilight in Delhi* (1940), he writes, “Delhi turned a city of the dead” (24).

Hindi poet Suryakant Tripathi Nirala describes the agony of losing his own wife and children to the 1917 epidemic in his poem *A Life Misspent*. He claims that Ganga was loaded with the weight of corpses since morgues were overflowing with dead bodies. One such instance is also found in Phanishwar Nath Renu's heart wrenching short story *Pahalwan ki Dholak*, which describes the world being black, dismal, and horrifying. The entire terrain is covered in gloom and suffering and the nature as a whole appears to ridicule the widespread human misery. The only sounds that can be heard are vomiting and human and canine wails. “गांव की झोपड़ियों से कराहने और कै करने की आवाज, 'हरे राम! हे भगवान!' की टेर अवश्य सुनाई पड़ती थी। बच्चे भी कभी—कभी निर्बल कंठों से 'मां—मां' पुकारकर रो पड़ते थे। पर इससे रात्रि की निस्तब्धता में विशेष बाधा नहीं पड़ती थी”.

It is comparable to the COVID-19 pandemic-related situations which led the entire human race in utter pain and dismay.

In the short story *Idgah* by Prem Chand, father of Hamid died of haiza (the Cholera pandemic), and in *Doodh Ka Daam*, Prem Chand also mentions the Cholera pandemic as the cause of death of Mangal, the protagonist's father. Hindi literature is rife with accounts of plague and pandemics that have caused great harm to the entire human race. The destruction brought on by the epidemic is also depicted in the book *Plague ki Chudail* by Bhagwan Das. Additionally, it displays an instance of treating a live patient as dead. The most painful memory that Harishankar Parsai has is of the "plague" that killed his mother, he writes in his autobiographical essay *Gardish ke Din* “सबसे तीखी याद प्लेग की है”

When the world was hit by COVID- 19 pandemic, people began to look in literature for similar times that has already took place in human history, these literary pieces became a source of inspiration as they gave an undaunting message of hope and faith in man’s power of recovering from every difficult situation.

A *Journal of the Plague Year* by Daniel Defoe is *Observations or Memorials of the Most Remarkable Occurrences, Both Public and Private, which Happened in London During the Last Great Visitation in 1665* is the full title of the book. It is written by a CITIZEN who remained in London throughout the period of plague. Defoe's popularity is based on a number of his writings, including *Robinson Crusoe*, *Moll Flanders*, *A Journal of the Plague Year*, and others. This book, which had never been made public before, was released in 1722, which is the fifty-first year since this terrible catastrophe occurred. The book *A Journal of the Plague Year* is a record with significant historical value since it provides a thorough account of the lives of Londoners at this difficult time. The book contains statistical data on the fatalities and provides maps of the impacted districts. It also states that "the face of London now certainly curiously transformed, as during 18 months in 1665 and 1666, the city lost 100,000 individuals, roughly a quarter of its population." (78) The pandemic is said to have started in 1664 when contaminated commodities from Holland were imported. The book's heartbreaking comments, such as the numerous fatalities that took occurred and "the terrifying movement of the carts piled with bodies followed by chants of "bring Your dead out," are enough to inspire awe in the readers. The records stated in the book correspond to entries in Samuel Pepys' diary, and both narratives demonstrate the loss and suffering of humans. This narration of plague in London can easily be compared with the deadly outbreak of Covid 19 Pandemic.

The nursery jingles

“Ring-a-ring-a-rosies

A pocket full of posies

A tissue, a tissue

We all fall down...”

was written at this time primarily because carrying Posies was thought to be a defence against the fatal virus. In the chaotic aftermath of this fatal pandemic, people started to leave their homes in search of safe havens. In Ben Johnson's drama *The Alchemist*, which is set during this pandemic, the lord of the house flees to the countryside. In a similar way, the wealthy were able to relocate to safer locations while the poor were forced to endure its effects. They endured a stifling period of quarantine, the economy deteriorated, businesses failed, and individuals were left with little choice except to beg for food or steal from others to survive. We can relate to this literary example as the world suffered the pangs of Covid -19 in the same

way. The COVID-19 pandemic is the most significant global health emergency of our time; it has emerged as the most dangerous development in history, even more so than World Wars. The virus has grown unstoppable and is quickly spreading despite having no outward symptoms. The loss brought on by this virus affects all of mankind, all economic sectors are crushed as a result of the circumstances it has sparked, and the nation's spine has been fractured by the repeated lockdowns. It has caused a severe economic catastrophe; the harm caused by the Corona pandemic is far worse than the harm caused by the Great Depression. At this point, COVID-19 has infected 56 million individuals, with the first case being recorded on June 30, 2023.

Schools, universities, restaurants, malls, movie theatres, as well as historical and religious sites, were all closed as its result. Public transportation methods including buses, trains, and planes were cancelled, which had a significant impact on the nation's economy. Both large and small industries were impacted adversely. The Indian stock market saw its greatest collapse since July 2017 in March 2020. This caused the postponement of a number of important events, including the launch of GISAT-1 by the Indian Space Research Organization. The sports and entertainment industries also suffered significantly.

If we talk about pandemic in the contemporary world, the most recent example is the COVID-19 pandemic, which was announced as a human hazard by World Health Organization on March 12, 2020. Other historical instances of such pandemics include the Bird Flu, Ebola Virus, Black Death, etc. Epidemics are the fast spread of a disease throughout a certain region or regions and are often seen before the pandemics. Both the Ebola outbreak in West Africa from 2014 to 2016 and the Zika virus outbreak that started in Brazil in 2014 and spread throughout the Caribbean and Latin America were epidemics which later turned in Pandemics. According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, an Opioid Epidemic has been raging in the United States since 2017 as a result of the drugs widespread. This results in abuse and numerous fatalities. If we trace the history of Pandemics then the 1918 Spanish flu epidemic was the worst in recorded history. Between 20 million and 50 million people died as a result of the virus, which infected an estimated one-third of the world's population and had a 1% to 3% fatality rate. Although Spain was the first to record the outbreak, but the virus didn't really originate there, giving rise to the term "Spanish flu" (the Spanish people thought it started in France and called it the "French flu"). The next pandemic which took a toll on human race was, The 1957-1958 Asian flu. According to the Centres for

Disease Control and Prevention, a novel strain of the influenza A virus (H2N2) that appeared in East Asia was what started the 1957–1958 Asian flu pandemic. According to estimates, the virus killed 1.1 million people globally. A novel H3N2 virus strain that emerged in Southeast Asia was the root cause of the 1968 Hong Kong flu pandemic. The pandemic's name was given to it by the location of the first news reports about the outbreak, not by the origin of the virus. An estimated 1 million people died from the Hong Kong flu globally which was about 0.03% of the world's population.

According to Daniel Defoe's *A Journal of The Plague Year*, the lowest classes were the worst affected by the pandemic, including daily wage earners and migrant workers who were forced to leave their places of employment due to the COVID-19 lockdown. Left without a means of support, their unemployment caused them to go days without eating, and due to a lack of adequate transportation services, they were forced to walk to their hometowns, where many of them lost their lives in the exodus. Along with the deaths of corona positive patients, many doctors, medical staff, police, and other members designated as security personnel and sanitary workers also passed away too soon, leaving their families and the entire country in excruciating pain. Hospitals were overflowing with COVID-19 patients, and the elderly and pregnant women were without any medical assistance. Due to decreased production and improper delivery brought on by the nationwide lockdown, many outlying sections of the country also experienced a food crisis and a lack of other necessities. Additionally, this resulted in a surge in superstitious beliefs and false information, as well as a spike in domestic violence instances. The future of the whole human race appeared hazy. These were major examples of pandemics that have affected people throughout history, and because of the devastation they inflicted on all of mankind are still discussed in books till today. The circumstances described above are quite similar to the devastation brought on by COVID-19 in the year 2020, its presence can still be felt in many parts of the world.

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