

PANDEMICS: FROM LITERATURE TO RELIGION

Dr.Jeyashree G.

Vice Principal/Associate Professor
Dr.Ambedkar College of Commerce and Economics
Mumbai

Abstract:

Literature is one of the sources that lucidly reveal the pulse of the contemporary society. The year 2020 is one of the remarkable periods owing to the pandemic Corona Virus that shook the entire world and engulfed the lives of people with fear and anxiety. This paper is an attempt to focus on pandemic literature pertaining to contextualization of language and religion as people seek solace in prayers and by perusing religious scriptures. The paper also explores Albert Camus' novel *The Plague* to illumine the fact that the present situation of pandemic that grips the people in fear is not a new phenomenon to this world. In fact it is something that had been already accosted by the society in the past. This paper detours the literary works pertaining to epidemics and pandemics to evince the impact it had on the society. The paper also focuses on language and affirms the fact that words are one of the most powerful tools which have a greater influence on the psyche of the humans. Contextualizing of language and literature complementing the contemporary society is the main motif of the study. The paper also affirms the fact that the tenets of religions play a significant role that brings hope to the people.

Key words: literature, society, contemporary, anxiety, language.

Pandemic Literature and society:

The events and happenings in a society make a history. Epidemics and pandemics are the most deadly foes that people confront intermittently in the society. The experience that drives home the fact human race is under the control of the omnipotent Nature. While Scientists assert that the universe is canopied under the influence of science nevertheless nature demonstrates its potentiality through natural calamities and deadly disease which poses a great challenge to the scientists. Language always complements the contemporary environment. While contextualizing language, certain terms create a larger impact on the human psyche accentuating the seriousness of the situation.

The dreadful pandemics Corona Virus has gripped the entire world with fear as the disease has devoured the lives of the millions of people. Every country in the world is

affected by this dreadful disease. The experience is an eye opener propelling people out of their comfort zone. Circulation of emotionally loaded terms in the society creates panic among the people and hence they frantically search for a solution to alleviate the pain and suffering. While Bio Technology companies are engaged in producing vaccines to protect the people from infection, nevertheless the mental health of the people should also be taken care of. People tackle this crisis in engaging themselves in various activities. People interested in literature read pandemic literature to learn how the world had tackled such crisis in the past.

The trajectories of human behavior can be construed while perusing pandemic literature of the past that illumines the lives and mind set of the people during epidemics and pestilences and compare the situations of the past and the present.

Since the pandemic Corona Virus attack in 2019, The World Health Organization has coined the term *Covid 19* for Corona Virus disease. Experts from various fields publish their research papers to update the knowledge of the people. But people are bombarded with various terminologies which create panic and anxiety. They start sharing their feelings and emotions through articles being published in journals and newspapers.

Los Angeles Times has published an article in March 23, 2020 that describes the predicament of people during Covid 19, penned by Stephen Metcalf titled *Albert Camus' 'The Plague and our own Great Reset,'*

“We are living in the eerie, low-pressure Vacuum before the storm. A friend emails from the Bay Area to say she’s baked her first loaf of bread; another writes from Australia to say that this epidemic will be, “a giant mirror held up to everyone” and that he is reading Mary Shelley’s “The Last Man”.

Shelley Walis in her article in *The Hindu* effuses her emotions, “In this period of isolation, one turns to literature and art to come to terms with reality and place in the context of history.....I look out of my window and see flowers blooming and the changing shades of green on trees. Yet this tranquil radiance invites dark thoughts as scenes of pandemic recorded in literature-bodies piled sky high waiting for burial, cries of pain searing through the London smog-crowd the mind.”

Different writers express their woes pertaining to Corona Virus through their articles. Literature mirrors a society. The nightmarish experience is being shared by the writers across the globe. An uncomfortable tranquil is set in the society accelerating the anxiety of the people and various terminologies that circulate among the people do add to the apprehension of the people. Language is a boon to humans. Nothing could be expressed so effectively than words replete with emotions. The significance of words is more pronounced pertaining to pragmatics. The words which had been sounded archaic and empty have become the centripetal force drawing the attention of all the people. Pestilences and

epidemics do recur intermittently and the evolution of language and its presentation do change complementing the contemporary environment. However, words are just embellishments as the basic human psychology remains same.

Albert Camus's novel *The Plague* published in 1948 vividly portrays the pain and sufferings of the people during pestilences,

“Everybody knows...pestilences have a way of recurring in the world; yet somehow we find it hard to believe in ones that crash down on our head from a blue sky. There have been as many plagues as wars in history; yet always plagues and wars take people equally by surprise”

The recurrence of pandemics is witnessed by the people in the past and the present. Significance of language could be experienced that create havoc among the people. The plague spreads in the city of Oran and the people are gripped with the feelings of *exile* and *imprisonment*. *Isolation* is the term that plagues the people. The term plague has become a connotation that refers to a disastrous evil or calamity.

Exile and *imprisonment* permeate the scenario of the novel. Exile is the term that refers to a punishment of banishing someone away from the familiar environment but to avoid the *plague* people are imprisoned in their own home. Imprisonment is forced on people to stay isolated to protect from the epidemic. Solitude is bliss, an enjoyable experience when writers wish to engage in something but isolation is a punishment as it is forced. William Wordsworth duly registers his blissful solitude in his poem Doffodils, “I wandered lonely as a cloud”, and then his eyes capture the beautiful daffodils. *Isolation* is being separated from the family, friends and the loved ones.

The novel *The Plague* depicts Raymond Rambert's futile efforts to rejoin his wife in Paris lucidly portrays the suffering of the people who could not meet their loved ones during isolation. Later he decides to stay in the city to tend to the sick people. The emotions and the feelings of people transcend time and age.

The pandemic Covid 19 is a deadly foe affecting millions of people around the world. The words *Quarantine* and *Locked down* reverberate in the society robbing the peace of mind of the people. While the terms *exile* and *imprisonment* are discussed widely by the critics pertaining to the novel *The Plague*, the pandemic Covid 19 is firmly anchored in the terms *Quarantine* and *Locked down*.

Quarantine is the word that circulates widely in the society. In India this word is used extensively even by the people who do not know English. Communication is an on-going process. While the terms *exile* and *imprisonment* are discussed by the critics as the thematic study of the novel *The Plague*, the writers of 21st century tend to discuss the terms

Quarantine and *Locked down* as the motif of the literary work. *Quarantine* replaces *isolation* and the *motif* replaces the *thematic* study. This lucidly reveals the evolution of language. The word quarantine is derived from the Italian words *quarantagioni* which means 40 days. The practice of *quarantine* began in 14th century when the travellers in ship who had returned from infected ports were asked to be in quarantine for 40 days. Hence people could surmise that isolating themselves from infected people is the right approach keeping emotions at bay to certain extent.

Language and life style of the people have evolved extensively yet the emotions and feelings are same. *The Plague* portrays the sufferings of the people during the epidemic runs parallel to the emotional and physical turmoil experience of the people during Covid 19. The terms *Quarantine* and *locked down* do not carry any significance during normal times but the situations give life to the words, hence pragmatics cannot be ignored as the significance of words depends on the context.

Pandemic and religion: Resorting to God and reading religious scriptures are not an uncommon practice. Some feel that pestilences and diseases are God sent to punish the evil. Under such trying situations do the people resort to religion to alleviate their fear and pain? Does the fear make people tread towards God to seek His blessings and protection?

There is always a conflict between science and religion. The study of science is based on proofs and evidences and appeals to the intelligence whereas the study of religion appeals to the feelings and emotions. Pestilences elicit the conflict between EQ (Emotional Quotient) and IQ (Intelligent Quotient) among the people. People with high IQ approach such stressful situations scientifically based on the facts and information given by the experts but do they get relief from the stress? Logical approach to all situations may not alleviate the pain of isolation while dealing with the mental health of people during pandemics or epidemics. Fear and anxiety assault the psyche of the humans during such environment. Albeit science and medicine treats the physical health of the people which is very important nevertheless the mental health cannot be ignored owing to its strong association with the physical conditions of the people.

There are references in Bible where the God speculates about the calamities that takes place in the world. Christian society always makes connections between epidemics and doomsday. Pandemics and dreadful diseases are the signs of the *Second Coming* of the Christ. Not only the pestilences but also lack of morality and shortage of food supplies add woes to the people.

Hindu scriptures affirm that decay in morality and values confirm the birth of *kaliyuga*. Human sufferings are based on their karmas. Markandeya in the Mahabharath describes the decadence of human ethics and culture in the society where people succumb to pandemics and other evils like murder, cheating and betrayal. *Kaliyuga* as per Hindu scripts

refers to the age of darkness, age of misery and quarrel depicting the sufferings of people. Lord Vishnu takes His Tenth avatar, *Kalki* as described in the *Puran*as the avatar who ends the destructive period and rejuvenates existence removing *adharma* which extinguishing all vices from the society and ushering in the Satya Yuga, while riding a white horse with a fiery sword.

Jesus Christ's *second coming* is proclaimed to alleviate the pains and sufferings of people. People seeking religious and spiritual guidance during pandemics is common. The history of the world reveals the fact how Christians dealt with plague and other pandemic that resulted in the spread of Christianity. Attending to the sick was the main duty. World Health Organization published an interim guidance on 7th April 2020 seeking help from Religious leaders, faith-based organizations and faith communities to guide people so that the mental stress could be taken care of.

All religious scriptures refer to the sufferings of the people when human ethics diminishes and pandemics are one of the punishments inflicted by God that enshrouds on humans expelling peace and happiness. Hence people turn towards God to purge their sins they have committed.

In Assam in India, a large section of people considered Corona Virus as Goddess Corona Devi who has shown her wrath on people. Hence people offer prayers to quell the anger of the Goddess. This shows the helplessness of the people approaching the problem based on their emotions. The Hindus in Tamilnadu in India worship goddess Marriaman to cure the various diseases and in Coimbatore in South India three temples had been built when the plague attacked the city, named *Plague Marriamman*.

Conclusion: Writers portray the happenings and events through their works. With the advent of pandemic Covid 19 people experience a sudden jolt that ceases all the activities. Their lives are bombarded with emotionally loaded terms that rob the peace and joy. The prefix *pan* in the term pandemic is derived from the Greek *pan* which means everything, involving all. Hence pandemic creates panic in the society. Literature highlights the feelings and emotions of the people during such crisis. *Health is wealth*; every human being's happiness depends on good health. The portrayal of the character Cottard in the Albert Camus' novel plague who in the end when the city of Oran lifts the isolation by opening the gates, fires randomly with his gun until he is arrested vividly reveals the frustration of the people. A person cannot enjoy life if he/she is sick. Hence, the characters portrayed in the novels pertaining to pandemic duly register the emotional turbulence experienced by the people. People during crisis offering prayers to God are a common practice and language is a powerful tool that creates a large impact on the society.

People find solace in reading and writing literary works and especially tend to read pandemic literature to know how the people in the past dealt with such situation. Such

reading also provide them knowledge that the situation they face is not something abnormal or unique and have always been meted out by the people in the past. They certainly come to turns with the omnipotent nature and the reality.

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