
The Black Death and Its Impact on The Condition of Women in The Medieval Age

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Abstract

This paper tries to analyze the cause and impact of the Black Death Plague on the condition of women in Medieval England. The epidemic led to a vast extinction of the population in England as, it gulped down the lives of so many people, including the male peasants. Due to the drastic shortage of male task forces in industries, the women stepped out of their respective shells and worked. Before the plague, women were not allowed to work outside their homes; they served their husbands and did not earn. After the plague occurred, there was a sudden change in the lives of women, they worked in factories to feed their families as they lost their husbands in the plague. Post-Plague, this time led to the revival and rebirth of women. They mastered many skills and had a unique period. The paper tries to analyze the post-plague period when women found new opportunities and became independent amidst poverty, solitude, and misery. It also dwells into looking at their mental condition, health, and their struggle in finding their own self in the existential crisis during the post-pandemic phase.

Keywords: Black Death, Plague, Women, Post-plague condition

The Black Death/ Plague

Black Death was rampant which engulfed almost more than half of the population of Medieval England during the years 1347 to 1351. It reoccurred in consecutive years. Having been a glandular plague that initially occurred in Western Eurasia and North Africa, the clinical reports suggested that it was caused by the bacterium 'Yersinia Pestis' (a non-motile bacterium). It infected humans via an oriental rat flea (a parasite that feeds on an infected rodent).

A plague has three forms pneumonic, septicemic, and bubonic. The Yersinia Pestis bacteria caused the bubonic form of the Plague. But it also caused septicemia or pneumonic plague because it spread from one person to the other through aerosols. The condition of England worsened during the outbreak of the deadly pandemic. Most natives who witnessed its existence began to believe in the maxim-

Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow you may die. - 1 Corinthians 15:32

The above maxim suggests that the commoners believed, if a person has come to life, then he or she must live it happily. The reason behind this was the rising graph of dead bodies, people suspected that they may die at any time.

The major outbreak of the plague is said to be from 1348 to the year 1350. It is also said that the outbreak of the plague initially occurred in China and it reached England through the silk road, reaching Crimea in the year 1346. The plague flared up at regular intervals in 1361-62, 1369, 1379-83, 1389-93, and so on. There were no proper census records, and due to this reason, proper estimation of lives lost during the plague could not be done. According to historians, earlier the population figure was 7 million, after the plague took place, it fell to just 4 million. The plague was very life-threatening, people of Medieval England called it the "Great Pestilence" or the "Great Plague". However, the writers of the age called it the "Great Mortality" due to the large number of deaths that occurred during the outbreak. The plague created such a situation that De Witte says,

On average, it killed between 30 to 50 percent of affected populations.

But we know that there were some areas where mortality was even higher. So, there would have been villages that were completely wiped out. - De Witte

The compound term Black Death gets two words 'Black' and the other one is 'Death'. The word 'black' refers to the 'frightful and unhappy waves that spread in England' whereas some people think, black is the colour that bacteria cause on the body of a deceased person (the body gets blackened due to the subepidermal hemorrhages). The other word is death, which simply means 'dying out of the deadly bacteria.'

The most common symptom associated with the lethal plague was the appearance of buboes (gavocciolo) in the groin, the neck, and the armpit area, which secrete pus and blood. Some writers like Boccaccio describe the symptoms as follows.

He says-

The appearance of swellings in the groin or armpit, some of which were egg-shaped whilst others were roughly the size of the common apple. - Boccaccio

However, some writers like Ziegler tend to say, "the bubo which appeared upon the body of the deceased person, if that discharges then it would be possible that the person will get recovered if not then he/she might die." Other symptoms were acute fever and blood in vomits. Because of these severe symptoms, many people died in more or less two to seven days.

The plague reappeared because of poor hygiene and lack of sanitation. The availability of tap water was very less and if one needed it then he/she had to walk miles to get a single bucket. It is clear that in such a condition no one was able to take a bath. Just washing face and hands in the morning was done majorly, soaps could not be used even. Due to no proper cleanliness, other bacteria and fliers also affected the patients. Even the area in which food was prepared and stored was much more prone to diseases. Skin diseases were also very much

common. The streets were full of live animals and humans, fleas flying around, due to which chances of spread of bacteria were much easier.

Condition of Women Before the Plague

Before the plague, women in Medieval England were not considered an important part of society. Society was based on patriarchal norms and didn't allow many opportunities for them. They did not have any right over marriage and to attaining property. The women were believed to be secondary and had to abide by men. It can be seen in St. Augustine's lines-

Women were the source of great misery and that lust for women led to the enslavement of men.

- St. Augustine

The condition of society was such that, before marriage, the women were dependent upon their fathers and after marriage, they were owed by their husbands. They were not even allowed to write their own will, as legal authority was only in the hands of their husbands. Even if the woman was an adult, she required a male guardian. They were servants of their husbands who worked in homes and looked after children. The society was governed according to men and women were subjugated.

Gender stereotyping according to their status was a very common practice during the Medieval Age. The women had limited access to society, they had very few choices regarding their life and their education. They were not allowed to work or start their trade or any other type of business of their own. Whereas, if one talks about women belonging to noble families, they enjoyed better rights and had better privileges.

Post-Plague Era as the 'Golden Age' for Women

Post-plague Era created opportunities for women in England. It was a time when they recovered themselves, both physically and mentally. Due to the spread of the bubonic plague, many men died and the demand for labor increased rapidly. The land was available but manpower was not. This was the time when the women peasants got golden opportunities that they could never have before. They got a better quality of life.

It should also be noted that although they got a chance to empower themselves better than before, they had to work even harder. Earlier, they just had to look after their homes, but now they had to work in fields to perform work beyond merely doing housework. When women got work, they flew away from villages towards towns and cities. However, these women found limited job prospects like spinning, weaving cloths, and victualling, and some worked as a servant. Whereas some of them also worked in bars. They continuously worked until they were supplanted by the male-dominated beer industry in the 15th century.

Post-plague, this time was a renaissance for the women, their age got revived. They were able to create their own identity in society. The aftereffects of the Black Death plague were far-disastrous. The situation in England worsened after the drastic plague, but, for women, it was a "Golden Age."

Caroline Barron asserts in her article The 'Golden Age' of Women in Medieval London (1989), "It was because the plague swallowed almost half of England's population, and due to this, women got a chance to come to the front line and access rights which they were deprived of. Once not even allowed to do things that they wished for and then one good day handing them

over with liberties, led to their growth and they succeeded.” Post-Plague, the physical health of women also improved.

One of the famous bioarcheologist, named, Sharon De Witte, University of South Carolina, stated that after the plague medieval women got physically stronger. Witte investigated approximately 800 skeletons of those who died due to plague in London. She took cognizance of the bodies to find out her objectives - Stress, Sex, and Plague. The major research topic of her investigation was to know the level of psychological stress that was present in the people living in England at that time. She examined skeletons from different centuries– from the 11th and 12th centuries, from the first half of the 13th century, and from the mid-14th till the 16th century. From her investigation, she successfully calculated the age-at-death from the bones of the skeletons, changes in the canine teeth, and also the changes in the shin bones that occurred. She found that the survivorship of people was very less before the arrival of the pandemic black death whereas she also noticed, that in the post-pandemic phase, the survivorship of people increased, mainly females who had longer and healthy life in the post-pandemic phase. She states-

the post-black death demographic change might represent a ‘harvesting’ effect; that is, an increase in mortality among people with compromised health- De Witte

She states that after the plague, the health conditions of women became much better as compared to before it. It was because they were free, and were not stressed as much before the plague. Next, she talks about ‘Shin Bone Health.’ She found in her investigation that the shin bone health as many people died during the plague, so it led to a shortage of workers. Witte says-

If nutrition status or disease burden improved following the black death in London, this might have resulted in the earlier average age at menarche in the post-epidemic

population and thus earlier cessation of growth in females. -De Witte

Investigations proved that the girls got better nutritional diets. It can be noted that as their nutritional level and food requirements were fulfilled after the plague, they were healthier than earlier. The after-effects of the plague were very positive for them. The income levels of the post-pandemic era got improved it can be seen in the following quote

The black death caused urban real wages to rise by as much as 100 percent in the decades after 1350 and they remained above their earlier levels until late in the sixteenth century not only in western Europe and the western half of the Mediterranean. Even a cursory look at real wage series makes clear that modern economic growth and the Black Death are the two events that lead to the most significant changes in wages and incomes during the last millennium.

- Pamuk

Their condition got so much improved that Caroline Barron hails this age as the “Golden Age for them.” There are many instances through which it can be stated that their condition flourished. Married women and widows, who earlier were not considered an important part of society, after the plague, they were able to find their own identities. Earlier, they didn't get any rights over the landed property of their husbands, and post-plague, they could obtain the rights. Many widows were stepping out to support their families. As Kelly says,

Additionally, many widows took over family shops or businesses- and, not uncommonly, ran them better than their dead husbands.

Y. pestis (black death germ) turns out to have been something of a feminist. - John Kelly

Barron provides an example of Mathilda De Mymys. Mymys was a woman whose husband named; John died during the outbreak of the pandemic. John while dying left all the tenements to his wife, the guardianship of their daughter, Isabella. While he was alive, he and his wife would run a business, they made religious images as well as paintings. After her husband's death, she wanted to get apprenticed under the Monk of Bermondsey. Through Mathilda, Barron has tried to show that after the arrival of the plague, the females became wealthier than males, and females had the right to claim their own will. Mymys also became an early beneficiary of the period by exercising relative economic power.

Women also became mentors during the post-pandemic phase. They also trained men in various disciplines who could earn later. Women who had limited opportunities before the plague got ample freedom to emancipate. They obtained the freedom to remain on their own terms, could run their own business, were able to rent property, they were also able to keep their viewpoints in the court and before the authorities. It was the time when they were being hired for work.

Women were recruited into the (English) work-force, partly because they could be hired more cheaply, and partly because they were often the only available source of labor. In some years women could be found doing jobs, such as harrowing, that in the past had been confined primarily to men. - Mavis E. Mate

The plague led to drastic loss of lives in England which led to an alarming situation in their lives. Even the mayor as well as the aldermen were in shock due to the shortage of manpower. They began to empower females and sought that they should start to exercise their new economic rights. Many rights were being introduced. An authority said, “The widow who is a citizen of London, who was residing with her husband at the time of his death would be made ‘free of the city’ (a citizen) but the condition underlying was that the widow should live in London and should not remarry.” The authorities empowered females that they should be the

proprietor of the business of their husbands and should run the same so that they could contribute towards civic prosperity and taxation.

Nonetheless, the post-plague era also gave a chance to girls to do apprenticeships under skilled workers or specialists. Till 1276, it was not a new phenomenon. The girls benefitted themselves significantly in two major works, the first one is silk work and the second one is embroidery; it was because of the thoughts that these works were meant to be done by females. For example, Marion de Lymese was apprenticed to Roger Oriel, the maker of rosaries. Post-plague fathers were seen saying that their daughters should be apprenticed so that they could get expertise in the trade. Robert De Ramseye gave 20 shillings to his daughter Elizabeth to allow her to do business. Earlier the women objected to their sole proprietorships, but thereafter, the law passed a decree that women could set up their trade themselves. That was the time when women took pride in declaring their independent status. These independent women began to run businesses on a larger scale. They emerged as the intelligent women who made their mark in the world of commerce and also, they won huge respect within their social milieu.

The plague changed the mindset of people to a larger extent. Black Death also affected their restricted self-consciousness. They realized their existence and they became stronger like men; they could do work as earlier men could do. Women could inherit land and property, and their perspectives toward marriage changed. Since women got much wealthier, they could make their own choices as to whom to marry or whom to propose to. This practice was not witnessed in the phase before the plague arrived as their choices were made limited during the Christian faith. Some women even did not confine themselves to marital ties and could live happily without remarrying in the post-pandemic phase. The redefinition of marriage paved the way for gender equality. There was a drastic change witnessed in their perception of their decisions.

Earlier the females were believed to be frail, but the post-pandemic phase allowed them to educate themselves. They read Bible and interpreted the concept of the Virgin Mary. Otherwise, men had brought their own narrative of Eve who they believed caused women's status to fall and that led to them being considered as the cause of all ill deeds. According to the Bible-

Men are the head of the women.- I Corinthians 11:3

Women are subordinate to men and Eve was the first sinner.- I Timothy 2:11 – 15

So, it is clear from the above passages that Eve was a sinner because she ate the forbidden fruit and asked her partner, Adam to do the same too. Here Scholar Eileen Power says-

In considering the characteristics of medieval ideas about women, it is important to know what the ideas themselves were but also what were the sources from which they spring. The expressed opinion of any age depends on the persons and the classes who happen to

articulate it; and for this reason alone, it often represents the views of a small but vocal minority. In the early Middle Ages, what passes for contemporary opinion came from two sources- the Church and the Aristocracy. - Eileen Power

However, after the plague diminished, they educated themselves and confronted the old sets of beliefs that considered women as the cause of sin. They established themselves as equally strong and they worshipped Virgin Mary.

Conclusion

The written sources prove that post-plague, women were able to make their living as men by taking over the same trade after the death of their husbands. They also did jobs as merchants, artists, and of artisans. Few women from lower sections also worked in spinning, as house helpers, or on farms.

They got their rights contrary to the lack of their existence in the previous time, when their sole job was to remain at home, to take care of their home and keep their husband happy, to procreate children. Eileen Power says,

The great majority of women lived and died wholly unrecorded as they labored in the field, the farm, and the home.- Eileen Power

In the pre-plague phase, women were deprived of all their rights and they had to obey their husbands. They could not work outside their homes. After the plague, their condition improved when the church, court, and other authoritarian services allowed them to emancipate themselves and earn in order to feed their families. In medieval times, when patriarchy had its dominance over women, the post-pandemic phase allowed them to liberate themselves. They got various opportunities like they could even do business, trade, and earned various skills too. Women proved themselves to be the rising stars of the Medieval Era of England. The post-plague era was a renaissance for the women of the Medieval England.

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