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Email : [editor@expressionjournal.com](mailto:editor@expressionjournal.com)

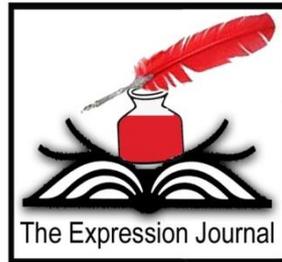
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## **PAST PANDEMICS: LESSONS AND INSIGHTS**

**Dr. Sunita Goyal**

**Associate Professor, Department of English  
Govt. College, Barotiwala  
Himachal Pradesh, India**

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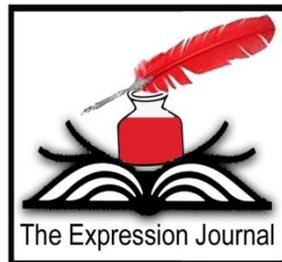
### **Abstract**

Pandemics like corona virus challenge us not only physically, socially, emotionally, psychologically but also ideologically. At such times, the history and literature in particular, offer important insights about how people tackled with such situations in the past and help us as a resource as well as an inspiration to cope up with these difficult times. Whereas history makes us learn from the past experiences of people who have undergone these difficult times, the literature not only provides us deepest and insightful record of events during pandemics but also helps us to come to terms with reality and places it in the context of history. In this paper I have taken some references from famous works like *The Decameron* by Giovanni Boccaccio, *A Journal of Plague Year* by Daniel Defoe, *The Betrothed* by Alessandro Manzoni and *The Plague* by Albert Camus, written in different centuries which depict society's response to an epidemic through the centuries. These historical literary examples can help us face these situations in a better way and show us how we should live through such crises.

### **Keywords**

Pandemic, literature, history, experience, deaths, people, society, past.

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## PAST PANDEMICS: LESSONS AND INSIGHTS

**Dr. Sunita Goyal**

**Associate Professor, Department of English  
Govt. College, Barotiwala  
Himachal Pradesh, India**



During a major biological crisis like the corona virus pandemic, all our economic, social and political achievements and challenges suddenly take a back seat and we are face to face with the sheer physical fact of disease, contagion and death. During such unprecedented times we have been challenged to the core—physically, socially, emotionally, psychologically and most important ideologically.

In such a situation, how can humanities - the study of what it means to be human - help us survive such distressing conditions? At all such times, history and literature in particular, offer important insight into how people have dealt with the trauma of pandemics in the past and how we can make sense of a world, which is in many ways beyond our control. If history illustrates the effect of pandemic on whole communities, then literature gives us a more intimate view.

Literature takes us beyond statistics of global deaths and degree of spread to show how the crisis has affected the lives of those infected, as well as their friends, families and neighbours. We notice a sharp increase in the popularity of literary works dealing with plagues, epidemics and other forms of biological crisis. These literary works may help as a resource as well as an inspiration to cope up with these difficult days. Giovanni Boccaccio's *The Decameron* (1335), Daniel Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year* (1722), Edgar Allen Poe's short story "The Masque of the Red Death" (1842), Katherine Anne Porter's *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* (1939), Ahmed Ali's *Twilight in Delhi* (1940), Albert Camus's *The Plague* (1947), Micheal Crichton's *The Andromeda Strain* (1961), Philip Roth's *Nemesis* (2010), Orhan Pamuk's *Night of the Plague* are a few literary works which portray the existential crisis of the human spirit and the medical, psychological, political and social attempts to combat a pandemic.

The year 2020 has been marked by the emergence of corona virus disease 2019 (COVID-19). When the news of an epidemic began to spread in a Chinese city in early 2020, no one had anticipated the scope of the epidemic for the entire world in a very short period. No one knew that in no time, it would take the whole world in its strong grip and paralyse, to a greater or lesser extent, the life in many countries, causing millions of deaths and infections. For these reasons, the scientific community is on the alert by conducting studies on the virus,

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and the diseases it produces, the situation it creates, the population it attacks, from different perspectives, including the systematic review of the literature, such as the one presented in this paper.

As we were confined within the four walls of our homes under lockdown in the wake of Covid-19, literature helped us break the barriers, connected us across different historical periods and time zones with others who have experienced similar tragedies. More importantly, literature shows us that we have a lot in common with those people and encourages us to realise the fact that we are not the only ones who are dealing with the worldwide devastation caused by the pandemic. As reported by Kathryn Van Arendonk.

The fictional version lets us feel some small piece of what the real version could feel like. And then because it's a story, it gives viewers the comfort of turning that fear into an arc. Epidemics have a long – standing history in literature. It is interesting to know if society's response to the epidemic has changed over time, and what literature can teach about the society's reaction to an epidemic. For this purpose I have taken some references from famous works like *The Decameron* (ca. 1349-1353) by Giovanni Boccaccio, *A Journal of the Plague Year* by Daniel Defoe, *The Betrothed* (1827) by Alessandro Manzoni, and *The Plague* (1947) by Albert Camus, written in different centuries which depict society's response to an epidemic through the centuries.

"To have compassion for those who suffer is a human quality which everyone should possess"<sup>2</sup>. Thus begins Giovanni Boccaccio's *The Decameron* written against the backdrop of the black death of 1348. It is an interesting opening, made particularly poignant by the implication that compassion, though a necessary human quality, is not something all humans possess.

Compassion is linked to empathy, and empathy is central to literature. How can you relate to a work of literature, let alone the voices of characters in it, unless you empathise with others?

The Italian writer and poet Giovanni Boccaccio in his novel, *The Decameron*, provided an extraordinary description of the social effects of the plague also known as the "Black Death" which spread throughout Italy and Mediterranean Europe during the 14<sup>th</sup> century. This is a novel containing 100 tales told by seven young women and three young men who took refuge in a secluded villa outside Florence to escape the "Black Death". The writer considered it as a divine punishment. The poet described the measures taken to counteract that epidemic. The city was purged of many impurities, sick persons' entry was restricted and directions were given for preservation of health.

*Decameron* also highlights two phenomena associated with the epidemics: the fear of contagion, and the stigmatisation of those who were infected. "Townsmen avoided townsmen and that well nigh no neighbour took thought unto others. This tribulation had stricken such terror to the hearts of all."<sup>3</sup>

In each case, the pandemic story is some iteration of helplessness. People have always responded to epidemics by spreading rumours and false information called "infodemia" and portraying the disease as foreign and brought in with malicious intent.

Orhan Pamuk also finds an overabundance of similarities between the current corona virus pandemic and the historical outbreaks of plague and cholera. He says, "Throughout human and literary history what makes pandemic alike is not mere commonality of germs and viruses but that our initial responses were always the same".<sup>4</sup> According to Pamuk, the initial response to the outbreak of pandemic has always been denial. The governments have always

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been late to respond and try to deny the existence of the outbreak. Daniel Defoe also reports that in 1664, local authorities in some areas of London tried to make the number of plague deaths appear lower and recorded other diseases as the cause of death.

Defoe's book *A Journal of the Plague Year* (1722) also shows that besides people's rage against political indifference there also lies an anger against fate, against a divine will and against the established religious intuitions which do not know how to cope with such situations.

Defoe and Manzoni wrote about people keeping their distance when they met each other on the streets during the plagues, but they asked each other about the news and stories from their neighbourhoods to get a broader view of the situation and find means to escape death. The people's rage and political discontent depended on the intensity of suffering people underwent.

During the plague people lived in a world without newspapers, radio, T.V or internet. The illiterate majority relied on their imagination to guess the danger, its severity and the extent of its damage and gave birth to unfounded rumours and accusations. During corona virus outbreak also we find the social media pouring all sorts of news about Covid-19 and risked initiating a "social psychosis."

Covid -19 brought out many interesting aspects of society's response to a pandemic. The main difficulty is the natural fear that people have of the unknown and invisible enemy, especially if they don't have an understanding of microbiology and immunology. Attempts to halt the virus transmission, by restrictive measures, have had a major impact on people's lives. Defoe tells us that in London all infected individuals were forced to be locked in their homes with their families, even if their family members were not sick. Defoe acknowledges that the lockdown "had very great inconveniences in it, and the some that were very tragical but it was authorised 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 putting it in execution must be put to the account of the public benefit."<sup>5</sup> Defoe's book emphasises that the most prevalent way the contagion spread was via asymptomatic individuals who "had been a walking destroyer" how he had turned those that he would have hazarded his life to save, and had been breathing death unto them, even perhaps in his tender kissing and embracing of his own children."<sup>6</sup> The relationship between Defoe's novel and what we are experiencing today is so strikingly clear that it seems strange to remember that what Defoe was describing, was a pandemic that occurred 350 years ago.

In the 1827 novel, *The Betrothed*, perhaps the most realistic novel ever written about an outbreak of plague, the Italian writer Alessandro Manzoni describes people's rage at the political response to the 1630 plague in Milan. Manzoni portrays how due to lack of quick decision about imposing and enforcement of restrictions, the plague spread rapidly. The governor of Milan ignored the threat posed by the disease.

Manzoni's novel is set in Lombardia (Italy) in 1628 during the Spanish rule (however it is a veiled attack on the Austrian Empire which controlled the region at the time the novel was written). Based on historical sources, Manzoni provided an extraordinary and detailed description of people's different reaction to the epidemic: "the initial indifference and negation of the danger that favoured the spread of plague. They heard with a smile of incredulity and contempt any who hazarded a word on the danger, or who even mentioned plague"<sup>7</sup> and, afterwards, a kind of "wickedness" and "insanity" leading the people with a fear of infection and stigmatising infected people.

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Lockdown, and quarantine of the infected people's offspring and contacts at home or in the "quarantine stations (lazaretto) were successful initially but afterwards the fear of quarantine in the "lazaretto "and the danger's negation led the people to hiding and not reporting who were sick. It led to the spread of disease. We can correlate the same thing during Covid-19 when people tried to escape quarantine and did not disclose their disease. The work that comes most readily to mind is, of course, Camus's *The Plague*. Like the French army marching into Algeria, the plague descended on the Algerian town of Oran in 1849 following French colonisation, where one "never hear(s) the beat of the wings or the rustle of leaves." The plague "rules out any future, cancels journeys, silences the exchange of views." Although people "fancied themselves free", the novel tells us "no one will ever be free so long as there are pestilences."<sup>8</sup>

The plague is not merely an allegory; it is also the tail of a devastating natural calamity. Dr. Bernard Rieux decides to stay back in Oran to tend to the sick, accepting a life of "exile and imprisonment" that is the inherent fallout of every pandemic. Camus writes at the beginning of the novel that "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."<sup>9</sup> The characters are doctors, holiday makers and fugitives. It shows the plague's effects on them. There have been as many plagues as wars in history, yet always plagues and wars take people equally by surprise. When an epidemic occurs, people live with the hope of waking up from this nightmare. "No longer were there individual destinies; only a collective destiny, made of plague and emotions shared by all." <sup>10</sup>

The main measures to counteract the plague's contagion was a quarantine which induce an ache of separation from those one loves, it suddenly became a feeling which all shared alike and together with fear—the greatest affliction of the long period of exile that lay ahead [...] they came to know the incorrigible sorrow of all prisoners and exiles, which is to live in company with a memory that serves no purpose. <sup>11</sup>

A further aspect commonly described in all these literary works is indifferent attitude of a part of population towards preventive measures; Many continued hoping that the epidemic would soon die out and they... felt under no obligation to make any change in their habits [...] while a good many people adapted themselves to confinement and [...] there were others who rebelled and whose one idea now was to break loose from the prison house. <sup>12</sup> Camus also emphasises the pivotal role of the physicians during pandemics. The words of Dr. Rieux depict the state of mind of doctors in front of an unknown enemy, and their moral duty towards the people: I have no idea what's awaiting me, or what will happen when this all ends. For the moment I know this: there are sick people and they need curing. <sup>13</sup>

Camus compels us to think about our responsibilities to the people around us. He brings out the conflict between our pursuit of individual happiness and moral obligation to our fellow beings. The novel gives a message that although pandemics have a way of disturbing our lives, they teach us to live in the present moment. Nothing else really matters when our very day to day survival is at stake.

When we know that the whole world is sharing our anxieties by wearing masks and social distancing, self quarantine is a reminder that we are not alone. It provides us a sense of solidarity. According to Pamuk, however what we are living can be different from the epidemics of the past: if the fear of death makes us feel lonely, recognizing that we are living the same situation, we can get out of this loneliness, embracing solidarity, mutual understanding.

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“for a better world to emerge after this pandemic, we must embrace and nourish the feelings of humility and solidarity engendered by the current moment.” 14

When we consider the changes, both short and long term that the corona virus may bring for us, we should remember that the world we know today was shaped by the pandemics of the past. What can literature teach us about the effect of these deadly manifestations on humanity, and how they shape what it means to be human?

Literature provides us the deepest and insightful record of events during pandemics and tries to provide consolation in times of need. Someone has rightly said, “Literature regards each individual with compassion and goes deeper than what statistics or historical records can tell us. Literature may not explain away or fight off things such as pandemics, even as modern Science sometimes can't, but it does become a source of consolation, a way of sharing our common humanist concerns, and, in its own way, provides the deepest and most insightful record of the events.”

In this period of isolation, one turns to literature and art to come to terms with reality, and place it in the context of history. This worldwide pandemic is certainly not the first, nor will it be the last.

It is obvious that the profusion of pandemic writing is not simply the index of a world fighting a virus. Perhaps it will come after the event. Literature takes time. That is the difference between computing and contemplation. Perhaps significant literature will come from those who walked miles to reach 'home', or lost jobs. Perhaps it will come when we, the relatively safe, begin to meet the millions who could not retract their heads, like we did, into the carapace of a lock down.

The study of all these literary works brings forth some common recurring patterns during pandemics and epidemics. Literature clearly depicts that epidemic's spread is preceded and favoured by a phase of negation and under estimation of the problem. Quarantine and social distancing are still the most appropriate methods to control the spread of the virus. Infodemia and negligent attitude of people also accompany the disease, resulting in chaos and fear among the masses; but besides these negative factors we have dedicated medical staff, aware people and social organisations who work wholeheartedly, work day and night to find curative treatment, provide vaccine and support people emotionally and psychologically to overcome such situations.

This history clearly denotes that the responses to an unknown disease have not changed over time, but historical literary examples can help us face these situations in a better way. Such works show how we will live through this crisis and ultimately build a brighter tomorrow.

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