

Envisioning a Postpandemic Utopia: A Prospective Blueprint through Literature

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Abstract

This paper argues that the study of the pandemic is already or going to be an important part of literary studies. Throughout history, the world has experienced various plagues and pandemics. Pandemics have undoubtedly had a significant impact on the social, cultural, and economic domains, resulting in significant changes in human life. Writers and poets from all around the world have responded to the pandemics by mapping the events that they have experienced and commenting on their perilous circumstances. Many seminal books have been published about the devastating effects of plagues and pandemics, which can sometimes wipe out half of a country or a city. COVID-19, a deadly virus supposedly coming from Wuhan, China, is wreaking havoc on the modern world. Every day, the virus kills thousands of people, infects millions, and puts the entire planet at risk. Contemporary writers and poets are also producing amazing fiction and poetry in response to the crisis and in search of methods to heal and survive. The paper examines how humans survive pandemics, seek ways to cure themselves, and what it means to study literature during a pandemic, drawing on significant works created on the effects of pandemics in different periods of history. The paper also briefly examines and remarks on how modern writers and poets are confronting and recording their experiences in the current world of corona in their art.

Keywords: Covid-19, literature, viruses, negative emotion

Introduction

Disease, like all other human experiences, has been depicted in art and fiction for millennia. Because disease entails both bodily and mental misery, it is likely to pierce the artist's sensibility more deeply than other aspects of existence. After all, living is best experienced at its peak of pleasure or its peak of suffering, which can be overlapping realms of sensation, as the romantic idea of love as an illness exemplifies. In real life, though, influenza is as prevalent as love, but this is not the case in fiction. 'Flu does not appear to have gripped the creative imagination in any way. Even so, it's not as bad as rheumatism. It would appear that in literature there is an order of attraction where illness is concerned. Writers have been ready to seize them since Sophocles and Shakespeare to

Dickens and Gide. Tuberculosis had a morbid glamour of its own in the nineteenth century, nourished perhaps by a combination of those romantic values of languorous beauty and intense living that Sartre has suggested were the psychological counterparts of that other type of conspicuous consumption practiced by the wealthy of the time, as in Dumas's *La Dame aux camélias*. Tuberculosis and blindness are becoming less common thanks to improved hygiene, preventive medicine, and surgical techniques. They have been replaced as the sickness that plagues the modern psyche by cancer and drug addiction.

For sickness to leave such an indelible impression on a society's cultural imagination as tuberculosis did, it must be widespread and

terrible, as powerful an enemy of contemporary man as monsters were for ancient heroes. Bubonic plague is the most severe and terrifying disease Europe has ever seen. "It's the cruelest of all the crimes." "Everything flies under the same name as this disease," said the author of an article in Diderot's *Encyclopedie*. The plague is associated with a sense of awe that separates it from other epidemic diseases, like cholera, smallpox, and typhus fever.

Covid-19 heralds the return of a long-forgotten foe. Nothing has killed more people throughout history than disease-causing viruses, germs, and parasites. Natural calamities such as earthquakes and volcanoes are excluded. There will be no war even close. The philosophy of pandemic is a philosophy for all people. It reflects not only the human significance of pestilence and plague, or the rise of modern viruses like Covid-19 that show the transition across species, but also themes of individual/community – self-interest and collective responsibility, the sacrifice of first-contact health workers, and all of those who provide a level of care in a neoliberal age less bound by duty or ethos of service and more by market values. Virus and philosophy of pandemic are frequently understood as ethics of self-isolation and the human consequences of social isolation, as well as its community implications. A philosophy like this might also be thought of as a form of caring ethics.

The advent of coronavirus sickness in 2020 has been a highlight of the year (COVID-19). This illness has spread to several countries, paralyzed the lives of many people who have been compelled to restrict themselves at home. The first cases of COVID-19 in India were reported on 30 January 2020 in three towns of Kerala, among three Indian medical students who had returned from Wuhan, the epicenter of the pandemic. There's also the ethics of social distancing and self-isolation. Lockdowns were announced in Kerala on 23 March, and in the rest of the country on 25 March. The lockdown restricted people from stepping out of their homes. All transport services—road, air, and rail—were suspended, with exceptions for transportation of essential goods, fire, police, and emergency services. Educational

institutions, industrial establishments, and hospitality services were also suspended. Food delivery services were banned by several state governments despite the central government's approval. Thousands of people emigrated out of major Indian cities, as they became jobless after the lockdown. After various lockdown measures and social distancing had been announced, the epidemiological profile of at-risk groups concerning Covid-19, with a clear disproportional probability affecting the 70+ age group and especially men who suffer from compromised respiratory diseases. Hundreds of thousands of migrant workers are desperately trying to return home to their own country.

Major Research Work Reviewed

Several studies have been conducted to analyze and hypothesize about the emotional, cognitive, and behavioral responses to epidemics among the public], in particular, to provide policymakers and emergency responders with information about public perception and behavior in the aftermath of biological disasters, such as a deadly epidemic.

Michele Augusto Riva in his 2014 article "Pandemic Fear and literature: Observations from Jack London's *The Scarlet Plague*" conveys to the readers that pandemics can bring forth deeply rooted fears and modify human behavior greatly. The American novelist London used the plague topos to criticize contemporary social structure: the destruction that follows the plague is both to be welcomed and despised. Indeed, the pandemic breaks the class barriers, but it also leads to the ruin of civilization. According to London's socialist values, only human brotherhood enables society to survive.

Shannon Rutherford and Cordia Chu in their 2017 published article "The Pandemic and its impacts" point out that the Pandemic has a long history, but the term "pandemic" is still not been defined by many medical texts. There have been many significant pandemics recorded in human history, and the pandemic-related crises have caused enormous negative impacts on health, economies, and even national security in the world. This article will explore the literature for the concept and history of pandemics;

summarises the key features of pandemics, and discusses the negative impacts on health, economic, social, and global security of pandemics and disease outbreaks.

Ann H Kelly's 2019 published book *The Anthropology of Epidemics* approaches epidemics as total social phenomena: processes and events which encompass and exercise a transformational impact on social life whilst at the same time functioning as catalysts of shifts and ruptures as regards human/non-human relations. Bearing a particular mark on subject areas and questions which have recently come to shape developments in anthropological thinking, the volume brings epidemics to the forefront of anthropological debate, as an exemplary arena for social scientific study and analysis.

Joshua S. Loomis's 2018 published *Epidemics* comprehensively reviews the ten most influential epidemics in history, going beyond morbid accounts of symptoms and statistics to tell the often-forgotten stories of what made these epidemics so calamitous. The book discusses epidemic disease as a major driving force in shaping our world; brings epidemic diseases out of the background of historical narratives and demonstrates how they have had an immensely important role in deciding wars, toppling empires, sparking major leaps in technology, and even changing the human genome; integrates science with history, sociology, religion, and other disciplines to provide the reader with a unique perspective not found in most other accounts of epidemic disease; shares fascinating insights such as how an epidemic of yellow fever helped to double the size of the United States and why tuberculosis was once considered a disease of the intellectual elite.

Paula Treichler in *How To Have Theory in an Epidemic* observes that an "epidemic is cultural and linguistic as well as biological and biomedical ...[we need] a careful examination of language and culture to think carefully about ideas during a crisis, to use our intelligence and critical faculties to consider theoretical problems, develop policy and develop long-term social goals." Theory is "intelligence," she

proposes, that helps us interpret the world. The Humanities should keep at interpreting the world, even in a pandemic, for "the world is a fine place and worth fighting for," as Ernest Hemingway put it: and the fight is not along biomedical lines alone, but for visualizing differential suffering, iniquities, and indifference that are not just pathogenically determined.

Objectives of the Proposed study

Many pandemics with distinct biological characteristics have occurred throughout history, including plague, tuberculosis, malaria, smallpox, cholera, influenza, HIV/AIDS, and SARS. Governments respond to pandemics by establishing quarantine, isolation, travel restrictions, and other measures of social control, and they pay greater attention to public health during these times than ever before. The final theme of the literature of pandemic, born from the awareness that this world is not ours alone, is that we can't avert our eyes from the truth, no matter how cankered and ugly it may be in the interim. Something can be both true and senseless. (1) economic insecurity and poverty-related stress, (2) quarantines and social isolation, (3) disaster and conflict-related unrest and instability, (4) exposure to exploitative relationships due to changing demographics, (5) reduced health service availability and access to first responders, (6) inability of women to temporarily escape abusive partners, (7) virus-specific sources of violence, (8) exposure to violence and coercion in response efforts, and (9) violence perpetrated against health care workers. Finally, this pandemic lasts a few months and then dissolves, or if we quickly find a way to treat almost everyone infected, or if we can produce a vaccine, and (importantly) if we can learn from this and protect ourselves as much as possible from future pandemics, society, and therefore, literature may be able to smooth over the rough patch.

Innovation of Proposed Research

The most virulent pandemic in human history is the Black Death of the 14th century which lasted till as late as the early 18th century, recurring at sporadic intervals. COVID-19 promises to alter

us all in strange ways. It's a paradigm-shifting event that divides lives and cultures into a before and after. We will emerge changed, though how those changes will manifest is far from certain. The sensory details of this outbreak—the masks, the faces of doctors and nurses creased with worry and fatigue, the closure signs, the antiseptic smells, the empty streets, the stacks of coffins—will weave their way into our minds and bodies, triggering us back to this moment years in the future. One's reality doesn't simply shift in a pandemic; it becomes radically uncertain—indeed, uncertainty is the reality. The unpredictability of the COVID-19 virus and all we don't know about it means we have no idea where we are in the story or even what story we are in.

The philosophy and literature of pandemics

The philosophical significance of pestilence and plague in human society, its religious interpretation as God's wrath and spiritual punishment, its symbolic representation and political 'emergency' use (Agamben's 'State of Exception'), all clarify the meaning of human being, self-isolation, suspicion of the other, and whether there is indeed meaning outside human communities. The twentieth-century contagion novels' gave rise to the post-apocalyptic book and its place in modern literature. St Sebastian, the patron saint of plague victims, died in 288 and exemplified a selfless sacrifice that was a prominent motif in Renaissance art and has since reappeared in the modern period.

Plague and pestilence were fairly common tragedies in the ancient world, and ordinary people were likely to have observed or heard vivid and terrifying accounts of their dreadful ravages (5). No medicine could help, and no one could stop the plague from spreading; the only way to avoid infection was to avoid contact with infected people and contaminated objects (6). The widespread fear was reinforced by a belief in the supernatural origins of pandemics, which were frequently thought to be caused by transgressions against gods. The epidemic was considered as one of God's judgments for crimes in the Bible (e.g., Exodus 9:14, Numbers 11:33, 1 Samuel 4:8, Psalms 89:23, Isaiah 9:13), therefore the terrifying account of its spread was interpreted

as a warning to the Israelites to act decently. This link between plague and sin may also be seen in Greek literary works like Homer's *Iliad* and Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* (429 BCE). In contrast, the Greek historian Thucydides (c. 460–395 BCE) and the Latin poet Lucretius (c. 99–55 BCE) refuted a supernatural origin of the disease in their *Histories of the Peloponnesian War* and *De Rerum Natura*, respectively, and focused their descriptions on the public's uncontrollable fear of contagion. According to these authors, the epidemic did not discriminate between good and bad but instead resulted in the abolition of all social conventions as well as an increase in selfishness and avarice.

There are literature and philosophy of viruses, of the plague, the epidemic, and the pandemic. Later medieval writings, such as Giovanni Boccaccio's (1313–1375) *The Decameron* and Geoffrey Chaucer's (1343–1400) *The Canterbury Tales*, emphasized human behaviour: fear of infection increased vices like avarice, greed, and corruption, which paradoxically led to infection and thus both moral and physical death. Human reactions to the epidemic are also key themes in historical works like Daniel Defoe's (1659–1731) *A Journal of the Plague Year*, a long, detailed account of events, anecdotes, and statistics surrounding the Great Plague of London of 1665. Similarly, Italian novelist Alessandro Manzoni (1785–1873) wrote *The Betrothed and History of the Column of Infamy*, both of which were exceptional accounts of the epidemic that hit Milan about 1630.

The Last Man (1826), written by English novelist Mary Shelley (1797–1851), was one of the first apocalyptic books, depicting a future world destroyed by an epidemic, with just a few people appearing to be immune and avoiding touch with others. The concept of vaccination in this book reveals that the author, most known for his novel *Frankenstein*, had a thorough awareness of current theories concerning the nature of infection at the time. Edgar Allan Poe (1809–1849), an American poet and novelist, released *The Masque of the Red Death* in 1842, a short narrative that was unique in the literary tradition of the plague since it focused solely on the metaphorical part of the topos. The author meditates on the inevitability of death through

the personification of the epidemic, portrayed by a strange individual dressed as a Red Death victim; the issue is not that people die from the plague, but that humans are haunted by death.

The Plague, by Albert Camus, is a classic existential philosophical novel. In a world without meaning, Camus believes that the disease presents a moral chance for individuals to find themselves in a struggle of sacrifice to work for the greater good: 'What is true of all the world's horrors is also true of pestilence.' It aids guys in rising above themselves.' 'Empathy is a precondition for a healthy environment, and empathy demands community,' I said about Camus' *The Plague* (Peters, 2020).

Margaret Atwood's *Madd Addam* trilogy, Dan Brown's *Inferno*, Louise Welsh's *Plague Times* trilogy, Terry Hayes' bestselling thriller *I Am Pilgrim*, and the TV series *Utopia* – stories about pandemics (whether already raging or on the verge of erupting) are currently aplenty, drawing on past outbreaks while also seeming to uncannily anticipate fears of the ebola virus. While such stories might be formulaic or sensationalist, the issue of infectious diseases has long piqued the interest of renowned authors.

Infectious themes dominated horror fiction from Babylonian and Hebrew texts to certain "pivotal texts" of Victorian horror fiction and the advent of horror cinema, according to Jeffrey S. Sartin (2019). Michele Augusto Riva, Marta Benedetti, and Giancarlo Cesana (2014) examine Jack London's 1912 novel *The Scarlet Plague* as "one of the first examples of a post-apocalyptic fiction novel in modern literature," reflecting on the nature of pandemic fear and literature. London's early novel in this modern style, they note, draws on "humans' ancestral fear of infectious diseases." They describe the calamity of pestilence and plague in the ancient world, where pandemics were thought to be triggered by gods' offenses.

Candace Chen, a millennial, first-generation American, and office drone bumbling her way towards adulthood is the protagonist of Ling Ma's 2018 pandemic zombie dystopian novel *Severance* (blurb). Emily St. John Mandel's novel *Station Eleven*, published in 2014, is about a viral pandemic (the Georgia Flu) that has blasted "like a neutron bomb over

the surface of the globe," wiping out practically the entire global population. *The Traveling Symphony* is a traveling roadshow that entertains the last of America's tiny towns.

The zombie dystopian themes that have grabbed postmodern novels, movies, television, and popular media are founded on the post-apocalyptic novel, which concentrates on contagion and the epidemic in modern literature. Zombies have a long and illustrious literary and film history steeped in mythology. The term "zombie" is derived from Haitian French and Haitian folklore, and it refers to a dead body that has been reanimated by sorcery. It's become popular in popular culture, with 'zombie culture' appearing in horror and fantasy films. The term "zombie" was first used in English by a poet in a Brazilian history book in 1819. Frankenstein by Mary Shelley and Victor Halperin's early film starring Bela Lugosi, 'White Zombie,' are literary forerunners that draw on European zombie tradition. A new adaptation is based on George A. Romero's 'Night of the Living Dead,' which was inspired by Richard Matheson's novel 'I am Legend,' which was published in 1954. In 1982, Michael Jackson's music video 'Thriller' shattered all box office records. The undead zombie metaphor alludes to pandemics and infection, as well as consumerism, public health, and politics. Zombism manifests itself in both public indoctrinations through social media conspiracies and youth indoctrination through the school system, especially when students are forced to regurgitate facts.

With the inexplicable break out of a highly infectious illness that turns individuals into the living dead, the idea of the zombie heightens a cultural dread of loss. (The Covid-19 virus is said to be able to live for up to 72 hours on hard surfaces.) Some argue that these apocalyptic fictional narratives offer a way to process the trauma of ethical frameworks collapsing as a result of globalization, as well as to deal with the seemingly endless appetite for human violence demonstrated in a multipolar world with the rise of multiple forms of terrorism and depicted in all forms of media. These plays are mostly about ourselves, and they symbolize our ethical endeavor to confront deep-seated anxieties of death and extinction. Henry Giroux (2011) seized on the popularity of

zombies in popular culture in *Zombie Politics & Culture in the Age of Casino Capitalism*, exploring the relevance of the metaphor they provide for examining the political and pedagogical conditions that have produced a growing culture of sadism, cruelty, disability, and death in America.

The apocalyptic tradition is deeply rooted in Judaic and Christian narratives as a source of revelatory literature that is oriented toward the 'end times' (Derrida, 1982; Derrida et al., 1984). This genre and tradition have reasserted itself as a form of thinking strongly relevant to framing thought concerning philosophy and education in the 'end times' – an Anthropocentric era threatened by ecological, nuclear, and biological extinction (Peters, 2011). Andrea Barrett's novella *Ship Fever* is a powerful look at the mechanisms of an epidemic – not just on a medical level (Barrett's education and interest in science and the history of science are foregrounded in the narrative), but also on a moral, social, economic, and political level. Indeed, the novel, presented from three separate perspectives, reveals how the outbreak and quarantine bring underlying societal difficulties and attitudes to the surface – a scenario we are seeing again with the Covid-19 pandemic.

Love in the Time of Cholera (El Amor en los tiempos del cólera) was written in 1985 by the acclaimed Colombian novelist and journalist Gabriel García Márquez (1927–2014), an acknowledged master of the Spanish language. The story is set in the late 1800s in the Colombian walled city of Cartagena, and it revolves around Florentino Ariza, who falls in love at first sight with Fermina Daza, who marries her father's choice, Dr. Juvenal Urbino. When the doctor passes away, Florentino restarts his courtship of Fermina. The title of Márquez's book is based on this systematic ambiguity – cholera as disease and as love. Lovesickness is a disease similar to cholera that causes bodily symptoms and repercussions. Márquez is sometimes referred to as a magical realist, a term that refers to a literary style that adds to and alters realism by incorporating fantastic and fantasy elements such as fables, mythology, and allegory, typically with supernatural aspects portrayed in a deadpan manner. Cholera as an illness and as a passion has certain connections,

but they aren't identical replicas. Symptoms of cholera include severe diarrhea, vomiting, and cramping, as well as dehydration, septic shock, and death in as little as a few hours for 20% of those who get the bug. There is, however, a fever, high temperatures, and delirium. Delirium is a condition that produces mental and emotional disarray. It can make it difficult to think, remember, or sleep at times. These secondary symptoms can be compared to the feeling of being in love. Cartagena survived the ravages of the first cholera pandemic, which spread from the Ganges Delta, in the late nineteenth century (1817). The second pandemic, which hit Latin America in 1833, and the 1991-93 outbreak, which killed over 10,000 people in the region, is considered to have been caused by tainted shellfish and poor water quality.

Plague Ki Churail, also known as The Plague Witch (1902), Qudrat Ullah Shahab's *Plague in Jammu* (n/a), and Rajinder Singh Bedi's *Quarantine* (1939) are all regarded as twentieth-century Urdu classics in the realist literature genre. The horrors of the epidemic as it swept across the South Asian subcontinent, claiming countless lives, are chronicled in all three short pieces. The three stories are linked by the fact that they are all told by a male protagonist recalling a tragedy involving a female victim, bringing thematic and critical problems about oppressed gendered portrayals.

The main theme of José Saramago's novel *Blindness* is the uncertainty and dread induced by a lack of knowledge about a new spreading sickness (1995). An epidemic sweeps the metropolis in the story as well, threatening to blind everyone. The government decides to stop the sickness from spreading by isolating those who have been exposed to it. The latter is taken to a mental institution where they are closely monitored. The new 'blind' patients, on the other hand, have a horrific experience in the hospital. They have no choice but to rely on the help and guidance of a female character who shares their plight and fights against the fragmented and dislocated world in which they find themselves. They are subjected to forced confinement, maltreatment, malnutrition, and violence by other inmates, and they have no other option but to rely on the help and guidance of a female

character who shares their plight and fights against the fragmented and dislocated world in which they find themselves. The doctor's wife in Saramago's story finds enough strength to serve the blind people at the hospital and save her community from corruption, much like the healthcare workers in our 'new' life. Her fortitude and ability to respond to the hospital inmates' plight despite all difficulties make her a heroine to be admired.

Beat the Devil: A Covid Monologue (2020) by David Hare is a short drama based on the playwright's early March infection with the Covid-19 virus. Hare, a politically conscious dramatist writing for the modern British stage, talks about his experience with the disease in the context of the British government's failures to deal with the pandemic and take the required measures. Hare's description of how he has grappled with the virus, which will premiere at the Bridge Theatre in London in August 2020, is a quick response to the social and political situation in Britain addressing the epidemic. The play is built around a monologue spoken by a single actor (in the original production, the renowned Ralph Fiennes) in the style of storytelling, and it presents a firsthand account of the disease's takeover of the body. Despite this, it becomes a political parody of British politicians' incompetence in the face of a medical crisis.

Zadie Smith, Elif Shafak, Arundhati Roy, and Uzma Aslam Khan, a quartet of women of colour writers, wrote seminal works in the second half of 2020. Their writings, books, and stories deal with the global Sars-Cov-2 pandemic and our turbulent times, at least in part. *Intimations* is a collection of six pieces by Zadie Smith concerning 2020, in which she argues that the racism, social inequality, and lack of civil rights that Black Lives Matter campaigns are fighting are like a virus: hidden, spreading, and difficult to recover from. *How to Stay Sane in an Age of Division*, by Elif Shafak, focuses on mental (bad) health in a "post-pandemic society" (2020: n.p.) and the importance of listening to the other. Meanwhile, Arundhati Roy describes fascist and fake news as "growing like an epidemic and blossoming in the popular imagination like a brain-deadening tumour" in her book *Azadi: Freedom, Fascism*.

Finally, the story 'Now Pray: Notes on a Separation' considers the many forms of lockdown that immigrants have been subjected to for years, as well as how this year's shelter in place orders has complicated things even more.

Smith, Roy, Shafak, and Khan write to protect families from the maladies of racism, Hindutva, anti-immigrant bigotry, religious/ideological obscurantism, mental illness, and coercion. The four authors explore their tale universes, literature, art, and language politics, all while defending increasingly threatened commons around the world, despite their differences in method and tone. They do this through intimating solutions rather than launching full-frontal attacks, as the title of Smith's book and Roy's sixth chapter, 'Intimations of an Ending,' suggests. These three novels, as well as the extended short tale, are the first true works of 'postcolonial literature' in what appears to be a flood of new work in the coming years. Tabish Khair's forthcoming novel *Macrobia* is the first decolonial fiction, in which the Danish-Indian author imagines the postcolonial world 10 years after the coronavirus outbreak, in 2030.

Conclusion

The threat of contagion elicits two opposing negative emotions: one, a carefree extreme individualist attitude that believes the lockdown can be ignored and that it opens up all kinds of opportunities by breaking isolation; and the other, a deep fear of an impending and painful death that stigmatizes silences and shames those who are afflicted. Both are a breach of the bare minimum of solidarity required to protect the people. It also fosters a sense of community by rallying citizens in the fight against the invisible virus, which is shown in scientific terms, and encouraging people to 'be kind, stay home, and wash your hands: Together, we can halt the spread'.

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