



Original Article

Prescience of Pandemics in Literature with Special Reference to Mary Shelley, Jack London and Margaret Atwood

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Abstract:

*Literature holds a mirror and has the capacity to capture the society with utter reality. One such occurrence is COVID-19 pandemic. In the times of catastrophic situations like epidemic and pandemic, writers observe and reflect them in their works. There are many works in literature that deal with epidemics and pandemics across the globe. The aim of the present paper is to study three literary texts that foretell about the pandemics in the late twenty first century. These texts include *The Last Man* (1826) by Mary Shelley, *The Scarlet Plague* (1912) by Jack London and *Oryx and Crake* (2003) by Margaret Atwood.*

Keywords: *The Last Man, The Scarlet Plague, Oryx and Crake.*

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Introduction:

The Last Man (1826) by Mary Shelley, *The Scarlet Plague* (1912) by Jack London and *Oryx and Crake* (2003) by Margaret Atwood are prescient novels. These novels inform about the pandemics in

the late twenty first century. These pandemics occur not as a natural disaster but a humanmade catastrophe. Mary Shelley in *The Last Man* finds pandemic war driven. *The Scarlet Plague* by Jack London presents capitalism as the main reason for



pandemic. Margaret Atwood in *Oryx and Crake* sees pandemic as a result of corrupt scientific practices in present times. These novels perceive that pandemics in future will be due to human interventions. They bring to notice the possibility of complete annihilation of humans through these deadly pandemics.

Literature Review:

The literary texts that deal with epidemics and pandemics in English literature include *The Iliad* by Homer, *The Decameron* (1353) by Giovanni Boccaccio, *The Canterbury Tales* (1400) by Geoffrey Chaucer, *A Journal of the Plague Year* (1722) by Daniel Defoe, *The Last Man* (1826) by Mary Shelley and Jack London's *The Scarlet Plague* (1912). In postmodern literature, *The Plague* (1947) by Albert Camus, *Love in the Time of Cholera* (1985) by Gabriel García Márquez's, *Blindness* (1995) by Jose Saramago, *Oryx and Crake* (2003) by Margaret Atwood, *Nemesis* (2010) by Philip Roth, *Station Eleven* (2014) by Emily St. John and *The End of October* (2020) by Lawrence Wright are some quintessential examples of texts dealing with epidemics and pandemics.

Objectives:

1. To know the idea of pandemics in the twenty first century as presented in the selected novels.
2. To find out the representation of the pandemics in the twenty first century in the selected novels.

Methodology:

This qualitative research is based on primary sources of the data that include *The Last Man* (1826) by Mary Shelley, *The Scarlet Plague* (1912) by Jack London and *Oryx and Crake* (2003) by Margaret Atwood. Along with these primary sources of data

various research papers and articles have been used as the secondary sources of the data.

Discussion and Findings:

1) *The Last Man* (1826) by Mary Shelley:

The Last Man is the third novel by Mary Shelley. The novel is set in the years 2073-2100. The story deals with events like global plague, the Turkey and Greece war, the end of the monarchy in England, climate change and the role of a fake prophet in the twenty first century. The first half of the novel details the life of major characters. The second half deals with a global plague in the last phase of the twenty first century. The novel is prescient because Mary Shelley is “the author of ‘prophetic fiction’” (Spark, Introduction). The novel foresees the end of humans except one Last Man, Lionel Verney. This extinction is the result of a global plague in the late twenty first century due to war. Booker and Thomas find the novel, “The first postapocalyptic science fiction tale” (53). Shelley’s contribution to pandemic literature is remarkable as she perceives pandemic an outcome of “human contaminations of their wider social environments” (Hunt, Introduction). The possibility of human extinction predicted by Shelley is based on reason and not on divine agency like earlier texts. She makes a point that if some pandemic happens in the future that ends human civilisation from earth then it will not be the result of some divine agency but a human fault.

The Last Man criticises the 19th century social and political system through a plague pandemic which brings the world on the verge of extinction. Plague is a natural calamity but it turns disastrous due to human interferences in the novel. A Greece and Turkey war in Constantinople in 2092 has caused the plague to spread globally. The global plague is a postwar catastrophe. A seasonal plague of Constantinople has turned into a pandemic as the Greek army enters Constantinople. The



communication sent by Karazza to Lord Raymond gives an account of the conflict between Turkey and Greece. It states “Take it, Christian dogs! take the palaces, the gardens, the mosques, the abode of our fathers— take plague with them; pestilence is the enemy we fly; if she be your friend, hug her to your bosoms. The curse of Allah is on Stamboul, share ye her fate” (Shelley, “Last Man” 157). Shelley gives a hint about international politics in future through Greece-Turkey war and consequent global plague. *The Last Man* validates how unresolved conflict can lead to greater problems to the extent of extinction of human species. Mellor claims that the novel is “the deepest level anti-political” (164). Shelley has raised concern about the political conflicts at domestic and international level and their aftermath in the form of global plague as the plague in the novel is war-driven. A periodic plague in Constantinople spreads worldwide because of armed conflicts at domestic and international level. The Greece-Turkey war has turned the seasonal epidemic into a pandemic.

2) *The Scarlet Plague* (1912) by Jack London:

The Scarlet Plague by Jack London is a representative of pandemic literature like Mary Shelley’s novel *The Last Man*. *The Scarlet Plague* provides an understanding of epidemics and pandemics in future (Snyder 435). The setting of the novel is in 2073 in the United States. It is sixty years after a deadly pandemic of the Scarlet Death. This pandemic has depopulated the entire globe in 2013 except for a few survivors. Hay argues that the novel is significant in American literature as it introduces post catastrophe themes for future writers (357). James Howard Smith is the narrator. He recounts his life before and in aftermath of the Scarlet Death as he lived in the times of the Scarlet Death. Granser narrates the story of the fall of human civilisation to his grandson. His grandsons are living like savages. They often struggle to

understand a world before the Scarlet Death as it is very different from their present world after the pandemic of the Scarlet Death.

The Scarlet Plague also provides a picture of a world on the verge of extinction due to a global plague (Berkove 251). In the novel, people look at the Scarlet Death as the end of civilisation. They were terrified of their own death as well as the end of the world. Joe Mathews confirms this regarding our experience of COVID-19. He maintains, “This old little novel retains considerable power as a warning about the vulnerability of our state and civilisation” (Mathews). Granser too pronounces, “Truly, my grandsons, it was like the last days of the end of the world” (Jack London, “The Scarlet” 29). In *The Scarlet Plague*, London mentions that social injustices like capitalism are the real causes of the end of civilisation on earth. As a socialist, he thinks that capitalism is responsible for pandemics and consequent fall of civilisation. He criticises capitalism as the primary source of the pandemic. According to London, capitalism is responsible for overpopulation. It is responsible for overcrowding in cities which causes plague and other diseases. London has criticised capitalism severely:

Long and long and long ago, when there were only a few men in the world, there were few diseases. But as men increased and lived closely together in great cities and civilizations, new diseases arose, new kinds of germs entered their bodies. Thus were countless millions and billions of human beings killed. And the more thickly men packed together, the more terrible were the new diseases that came to be. (Jack London, “The Scarlet” 20)

During the pandemic many barbarians attack people violently. They attack innocent victims just like the scarlet plague in the novel. He finds capitalism at fault for this also. London says, “In the



midst of our civilization, down in our slums and labor-ghettos, we had bred a race of barbarians, of savages; and now, in the time of our calamity, they turned upon us like the wild beasts they were and destroyed us. And they destroyed themselves as well” (Jack London, “The Scarlet” 30).

3) *Oryx and Crake* (2003) by Margaret Atwood:

Oryx and Crake (2003) is the eleventh novel by Margaret Atwood. It is the first novel in the trilogy of *MaddAddam*. The novel is set in the post-catastrophe future where a deadly plague has ruined human civilisation. Though the novel is often categorised as science fiction, Atwood chooses to call it as speculative fiction. According to her, “Science fiction has monsters and spaceships; speculative fiction could really happen” (Potts). The plague pandemic happens due to corrupt experiments of genetic engineering and commercialisation of technology. The message of the novel is clear that science and technology without ethics and morals can be destructive enough to end human civilisation. The novel is a satire against humankind. Macpherson believes that the novel is based on present day scientific practices that are devoid of bioethics (81). The novel begins with a lonely survivor of plague pandemic named Snowman. He is the narrator and the protagonist of the novel. He gives information of the world before and after the pandemic. The title of the novel is related to the theme of extinction of humans as it refers to the names of extinct species in a game called Extinctathon. Atwood has given a picture of a global plague in a future world which is advanced in biotechnology and genetic engineering. Atwood “rehearses possible futures on the basis of historical and contemporary evidence” (Howells 162). Atwood’s powerful imagination has turned scientific data into speculative fiction.

Crake, a disillusioned genographer spreads the global plague. He does it through a pill called

BlyssPlus and then through the Paradise project of Crakers in the RejoovenEsense which is a corporate compound. Crake has grown a virus called JUVE in his lab. He spread it internationally through the BlyssPlus pills that “would also act as a sure-fire one-time-does-it-all-birth-control pill, for male and female alike, thus automatically lowering the population level” (Atwood, 347). However, the pill contains the harmful viral strain that causes mass extinction through plague pandemic. Then he repopulates the earth with genetically engineered beings called Crakers in Paradise. This environmental vision is nothing but ecological havoc and bioterrorism which has made the whole world its victim.

Conclusion:

A study of above mentioned novels demonstrates that these novels are prescient as they provide an understanding of pandemics in the late twenty first century. The authors in the selected novels have made it clear that along with natural epidemics and pandemics, there could be epidemics and pandemics by human interventions. They predict the possibilities of humanmade pandemic in future. These pandemics will make the civilisation fall and they will cause the extinction of humans on earth. The pandemics in near future could be war driven or it could happen because of capitalist society or it could be the result of some bioweapon.

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