



RESEARCH ARTICLE

The saga of Pandemics through the Literary Lens

Nandini C Sen^{1*)}, Abhay Chawla²

Published online: 10 November 2023

Abstract: Disease, illness and death have been a human being's constant companion right from the dawn of civilization and Pandemics are a part of this fatal manifestation which has been witnessed century upon century, successfully wreaking havoc upon the unsuspecting mankind. A pandemic (from Greek - pan, meaning "all" and demos meaning "people") is an epidemic of an infectious disease that has spread across a large region, spreading through continents and killing with impunity as it spreads. Throughout human history, there have been a number of pandemics of diseases such as smallpox and tuberculosis. The most fatal pandemic in recorded history was the Black Death (also known as The Plague), which killed an estimated 75–200 million people in the 14th century. Other notable pandemics include the 1918 pandemic, the Spanish influenza (Spanish flu). The current pandemics include Covid19 and HIV AIDS. The history of pandemic has been recorded meticulously by playwrights, novelists and poets from time immemorial – the documentation is detailed and, on some occasions, laboured. The message conveyed is very clear – the pandemic is brutal, it spares no one and the only way to remain safe is through isolation and timely medical intervention. This Paper seeks to examine the philosophical ramifications of pandemics examined through the literary lens.

Keywords: Pandemic literature, Covid19 pandemic, Spanish Flu, epidemic literature

INTRODUCTION

Disease, illness and death have been a human being's constant companion right from the dawn of civilization. Pandemics have plagued the world from time immemorial. A pandemic (from Greek 'pan', "all" and demos, "people") is an epidemic of an infectious disease that has spread across a large region, for instance multiple continents or worldwide, affecting a substantial number of people. Throughout human history, there have been a number of pandemics of diseases such as smallpox and tuberculosis. The most fatal pandemic in recorded history was the Black Death (also known as The Plague), which killed an estimated 75–200 million people in the 14th century. Other notable pandemics include the 1918 pandemic, the Spanish influenza (Spanish flu). The current pandemics include Covid19 and HIV AIDS.

Etymology

In ancient Greece the word pandemic meant "relating to all people" – it could be music or Philosophy which related to the masses. The word did not have a medical

connotation. In *Iliad* the word "loimos" has been used. It is as late as the 19th Century when the words pandemic and epidemic acquired their scientific meanings signifying disease and destruction. By the 1870s and 1880s the word gained currency and a sort of notoriety and at the time of the 1918 flu, it had become a regular household term.

In the late 19th century, the definition of pandemic, with its now familiar connotations of 'sudden' and 'geographically widespread', came into focus. Two diseases above all are thought to have sharpened the distinction: cholera and influenza. Acute and highly contagious, they swept the globe in repeated waves, carried on expanding transportation networks. The emerging paradigm of germ theory made it easier to conceive of diseases as phenomena caused by specific, mobile agents. European imperialism gave birth to the fields of 'medical geography' and 'tropical medicine', allowing diseases to be imagined in planetary terms. (Harper 2020)

Literature being a mimesis of life, has sought to record and sensitize people about the pandemic. From as early as the plague during the Peloponnesian war to the Spanish flu, there are depictions in theatre, novels and poetry. It is impossible to cite each and every mention of the plague and pestilence in literature therefore some seminal texts have been chosen for discussion.

The myriad representations of plague and pestilence have a few things in common namely a plea for coexistence and humanity, trust in humanitarian sciences and technologies, skepticism towards the rulers and big pharma and the belief in human resilience in the face of all odds. This Paper chooses to study significant literary pieces from the

^{1*)} Bharati College, University of Delhi, Dada Santram Marg, C-4, Janakpuri, New Delhi – 110058

² GGSIP University, Sector - 16C, Dwarka, New Delhi – 110078

*) *corresponding author*

Nandini C Sen

Email: nandini.c.sen@gmail.com

unknown plague which ravaged Greece during the Peloponnesian war which finds mention in the works of the famous historian Thucydides, the Great Plague of London (1665-66) and the dreaded Spanish flu also known as the 1918 Influenza pandemic which lasted from 1918 to 1920. It was one of the deadliest pandemics in world history killing more people than the two world wars put together. In the aftermath of the dreaded Covid 19, as the world tries to recover and rejuvenate, it becomes imperative to look at the literature around us which sensitized and cautioned the humankind about the perils of epidemics and pandemics. The solutions have been personal, medical, social and humanitarian asking the human beings to look beyond themselves, develop a scientific temperament and soldier on till the virulence of the virus dissipates. The stress has been on a social and cultural revival based on the brutal brush with death leading to an affirmation and celebration of life.

430-420BC

The earliest recorded pandemic in the history of mankind occurred during the [Peloponnesian War](#). The disease is said to have passed through Libya, Ethiopia and Egypt, crossing the Athenian walls and leaving a wake of terror as it killed people indiscriminately. According to Littman, "The plague affected a majority of the inhabitants of the overcrowded city-state and claimed lives of more than 25% of the population" (Littman 2009).

The cause of the Athenian plague of 430 B.C. has not been clearly determined, but many diseases, including bubonic plague, have been ruled out as possibilities. Sophocles' famous Theban tragedy as translated by Knox (1994) discusses the plague as King Oedipus is seen to be grappling with the surge of the epidemic which was killing animals and frightening his subjects. In the ancient times, plague and pestilence was seen as the wrath of God who wreaked vengeance on his people if something went amiss. In this case, it was seen as a question of moral depravity which supposedly unleashed the plague. King Oedipus had accidentally murdered his father and married his mother begetting children through this union. Though he was hailed as a great and wise ruler, it was the quirk of fate and the heavy hand of destiny that did him in.

Oedipus' s tragedy was of his own doing – his desire for the truth which led to the unravelling of the gruesome murder wherein the hunter became the hunted. In the last act of the play when the blind Oedipus stands alone on the stage, tears of blood streaming down his eyes, the Chorus (representative of the Theban citizens) cries out in deep agony, shocked at the enormity of the crime and pity for the poor man who had stood tall, had dared to defy destiny but had fallen due to the inexorable hand of fate.

The plague ran riot of the place killing many in its wake. The Athenians overwhelmed by the sickness turned to God and the King for deliverance. The Sophoclean drama starts with the onset of the plague as men and cattle continue to die, the Chorus representing the citizens of Thebes rush to King Oedipus seeking help. The devastating plague that dominates Thebes is presented to the audience through the dialogue between Oedipus and the Priest (lines 1–67). The king has already taken some action to deal with the illness by sending his brother-in-law, Creon, to the oracle at Delphi to ask for the cause and the cure. (lines 68–72). The oracle announces that the plague is a result of religious pollution and that the god Apollo requests that the people of Thebes exile the previously unknown "miasma" (a word of Greek origin with a sense of moral noxious pollution) away from

the town (lines 96–98) Oedipus asks the citizens to stop praying and focus on finding the cure (lines 142–146)

Oedipus: "What means this reek of incense everywhere,
And everywhere laments and litanies?"

Priest: "A blight is on our harvest in the ear,
A blight upon the grazing flocks and herds,
A blight on wives in travail; and withal
Armed with his blazing torch the God of Plague
Hath swooped upon our city emptying
The house of Cadmus, and the murky realm
Of Pluto is full fed with groans and tears."
(Sophocles 89)

The medical researchers have validated Thucydides' account of the plague and have ratified Sophocles' description of his times (Kousoulis et al. 2012). Thus, the Sophoclean description is probably the earliest in the pandemic narrative. Faced with the disease caused by *Brucella Abortus* (something known to contemporary science), the citizens of Thebes are rendered helpless against the disease. They turn to God for help and are told that the disease has emanated from a sickness of the mind which has manifested in the physical wreckage. The death of cattle due to an onset of the flu is a fairly recurrent event in the history of mankind. Thucydides, the historian provides a detailed account of ten chapters of the plague years in the mammoth eight volume work detailing and chronicling his life and times. Thucydides writes about his lived experiences as well as what he saw happening around him chronicling both the medical as well as the social and moral aspects of the times. However, since he belonged to the aristocracy, his writing chronicled the fears of people of his class. He does not speak for the commoners.

Many years later, another plague journal would be written pretty much on the same lines as the Greek historian. Daniel Defoe's *Journal of the Plague Year* (1772) is an incredible treatise on the bubonic plague of London which tries to provide a comprehensive view on the dreaded plague which besieged the city.

1665: The Great Plague of London

The great Plague of London (1665-1666) was perhaps the last of the bubonic plagues to hit England killing almost 100,000 people within a span of eighteen months. The city of London was then of 448 acres surrounded by a wall to keep out brigands. The poorer parts of the city were overcrowded making quarantine and distancing absolutely impossible. The disease was feared as the causes were yet unknown and the massive death tolls caused immense dread and fear. The rich and the well heeled escaped to the countryside, a mention of which is seen in the popular comedy *The Alchemist* by Ben Jonson. Charles II along with his family and important courtiers left for the city of Salisbury. For the poor and the dispossessed there was no place to run. They could not abandon their jobs and flee the city so they died in droves; the bodies being carried by the drivers of 'dead carts'. Soon this would also stop since there were no divers left for this job. The dead bodies piled and were buried en masse in plague pits. There was also a paucity of medical practitioners. The plague doctors on job were amateurs without any formal training. There are many written official versions of the times but the two literary pieces which stand out are Samuel Pepys' s diary and Daniel Defoe' s 1772 novella *The Journal of the Plague Year*.

Samuel Pepys (1633-1703) was an English diarist and a naval officer who meticulously maintained a diary for ten

long years of his public life. The diary was not intended for public viewing so Pepys wrote in multiple codes as he talked about many personal events particularly his romantic dalliances. Pepys's diary has been referred to by the historians as a credible source for insight into the life and times of the 17th and 18th centuries. Pepys was not affected by the plague initially – unlike the poor and the deprived, he did not live in cramped spaces and could afford to self-quarantine himself. However, the events unfolding around him, particularly the shutting down of market places and the death like silence on the streets, affected him psychologically. Commenting on the sordid scenes around him Pepys writes, "But, Lord! how sad a sight it is to see the streets empty of people, and very few upon the 'Change. Jealous of every door that one sees shut up, lest it should be the plague; and about us two shops in three, if not more, generally shut up" (Latham & Mathews 2000). Pepys' diary is an excellent memoir of ten years of his life where personal dalliances in romance and money-making is recounted along with depictions of the plague and the great fire of London.

Daniel Defoe's *Journal of the Plague Year* is a treatise entirely devoted to the plague years describing the situation at length and also issuing advisories regarding how the disease needs to be contained. Defoe's treatise is an account of one man's experiences of the year 1665, in which the bubonic plague struck the city of London in what became known later as the Great Plague of London. Interestingly Defoe never experienced the plague which caused major disruption to the city of London. His is an imaginary take on the life and times of the plague designed consciously for the generations to come in case they came face to face with the pestilence. The book is told somewhat chronologically, though without sections or chapter headings, and with frequent digressions and repetitions. Daniel Defoe was only around five years old during the Great Plague that claimed nearly 100,000 lives which makes the journal an imaginative reconstruction. However, Defoe claims an original reconstruction as he credits the book with a narrator called H F who critics argue could be his uncle Henry Foe. To further engage the reader and claim veracity for the treatise, Defoe writes in the title page, "Observations or Memorials of the most remarkable occurrences, as well public as private, which happened in London during the last great visitation in 1665. Written by a CITIZEN who continued all the while in London. Never made publick before" (Defoe 1772) Even though the treatise is an obvious reconstruction and an imaginary narrative, its value addition to the pandemic literatures is unquestionable. In fact, reading Defoe during the Covid 19 period, seemed like an eerie description of everything he talked about being repeated in real time. It also made one question the human ability to forget and repeat the exact same mistakes of their ancestors.

In his realist mode of narration, Defoe cautions against the misinformation that does the round when a calamity such as this strikes, making it even more difficult to contain the outbreak. He writes, "We had no such thing as printed newspapers in those days to spread rumours and reports of things, and to improve them by the invention of men, as I have lived to see practised since" (Defoe 1772:1). He sees the lack of newspapers as a reason why Britain was not aware of what was happening in Holland and was caught unawares when the pandemic struck. Defoe's purpose for writing the novel was didactic. "I have set this particular down so fully because I know not but it may be of moment to those who come after me, if they come to be brought to the same distress" (Defoe 1772:15).

A Journal of the Plague Year aims to lay out a blueprint that future societies can follow when confronted with such dire circumstances. Defoe points out that it was the poor and the destitute who were affected by the plague and were the worst sufferers yet it is they who found it in themselves to help each other during the epidemic. "It must be confessed that though the plague was chiefly among the poor, yet were the poor the most venturous and fearless of it, and went about their employment with a sort of brutal courage; I must call it so, for it was founded neither on religion or prudence; scarce did they use any caution, but run into any business which they could get employment in, though it was the most hazardous. Such was that of tending the sick, watching houses shut up, carrying infected persons to the pest-house, and, which was still worse, carrying the dead away to their graves" (Defoe 1772:23).

Defoe and Pepys both seem to point out that even during the worst of suffering being inflicted upon them, the poor folks rallied round while the rich fled the land or engaged in unlawful money-making activities. Pepys himself boasted of having made a lot of money during the first phase of the epidemic but as it got more virulent in the second phase, he couldn't help but empathise with those affected by the malaise. Daniel Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year* is a fascinating text which takes us through the horrors London had experienced during the plague. It records the virulence of the epidemic resulting in the shutting down of public spaces, the forced quarantines and the closing down of theatres, mentioning them in detail. Defoe's realistic narration is aimed towards sensitising, cautioning and preparing the world for future pandemics.

The Spanish Flu (1918)

The Spanish Flu was a misnomer since the epidemic had spread through all of Europe and America and the conditions were harrowing. However, in order to keep the post war morale high, the newspapers reported on the spread of the epidemic in Spain, the neutral country, while keeping silent on the rest of Europe and America earning the epidemic an erroneous title of the 'Spanish Flu'. The epidemic was first discovered in America and spread like wildfire. It reached Europe with the travelling forces. The second wave saw it spreading across America, Europe, Asia and Africa killing millions of people. The young, hale and hearty succumbed to the disease and were gone in days. The trauma, fear and horror of living through the times and its aftermath has been described in several literary texts. Some texts make cursory observations like Virginia Woolf's famous *Mrs Dalloway* where the leading protagonist Clarissa Dalloway has a heart condition which she got because of the influenza. Apparently, Woolf too suffered from this condition in real life. TS Eliot's iconic "Wasteland" came in the wake of the dreaded influenza. Both Eliot and his wife had suffered from the influenza and Vivien's condition had been rather critical. The "Wasteland" explores a wounded land, wasted and decapitated. The Spanish Flu had killed over a million people, a number which was higher than the first World War. According to Riano,

A journey along The Waste Land is bleak and the ending to Eliot's analysis of society is a harsh truth that we can only hope is not prognostic. Still there are places throughout the poem, namely in "The Fire Sermon," that reveal a remedy, if not a hope, for our ailing society. By using St. Augustine's Confessions and Buddha's Fire Sermon, Eliot is reminding us that the answers to our soul's depravity are all around us, in our collective

culture – the books we read, the places we pass and inhabit, the music we listen to – but that culture can only survive if we remember it and keep it alive in our tradition. Without a collective memory, all we have are fragments to “shore against” our ruins (line 340). Memory to Eliot, then, is the salvation that we need. As memory is what saves man from depravity and loneliness, so reading the texts of time helps to keep our memory (and therefore ourselves) afloat in a sea of unknowing. There is an effect that comes from reading that taps into our sensory experience, which permits it to echo in the chambers of our memory. (Riano 2019)

One of the most seminal novels of the times is Katherine Anne Porter's *Pale Horse, Pale Rider: Three Short Novels* (1939) It is perhaps one of the best pieces of literary writing we have specifically on the 1918 pandemic. The title story *Pale Horse* deals with a love story between a newspaper woman Miranda Gay and her soldier lover, Adam. The story is somewhat autobiographical as Porter while reporting for Rocky Mountain News in Denver had contracted the flu and her lover, a soldier had taken care of her. Later she was to know that he had died of the flu which he probably contracted while taking care of her. Speaking of the flu and how it changed her life forever, Porter says, “It simply divided my life, cut across it like that. So that everything before that was just getting ready, and after that I was in some strange way altered” (Davis 1963). Miranda Gay, like her maker suffers from the influenza making her delirious while her lover Adam takes care of her. This was the last time he would see him because when she recovers in an alien space, she finds out that he is no more. Theirs is a tragedy of the pandemic and the War vying with each other for causing maximum destruction. Miranda and Adam's tragedy is personal yet universal, given that the world was dealing with the malaise of a pandemic and the War destroying everything in its wake. When Miranda recovers, she finds out that Adam had succumbed to the disease. Porter uses this plot in her story and creates a poignant love story of the star crossed lovers. She however, chooses to keep the tone breezy adding a comedic effect to the otherwise dark narrative proving that humour is probably the only thing that can keep one afloat during these trying times. Adam and Miranda have been dating pretending that the war and the influenza do not exist, holding on desperately to each other lest they be reminded of their mortality. The brutality of the times is brought to them in the form of a rather boring play which the duo goes to watch and which gets interrupted by a war fundraiser. Miranda's skepticism about the war and her reluctance to give in to the fear caused by the influenza is seen in a breezy dialogue between the two.

“It seems to be a plague, something out of the Middle Ages,” Miranda says to Adam, who is about to be sent back to training, about the sickness.

“Did you ever see so many funerals, ever?”

“Never did,” he replies. “Well, let's be strong minded and not have any of it. I've got four days more straight from the blue and not a blade of grass must grow under our feet.” (Porter 2011: 223)

Their pretense game continues as they breezily go out for a dance. Adam's death is reported in a matter of fact manner through a letter Miranda receives from his colleague whom Adam had instructed to keep Miranda informed if something were to happen to him. In her state of deranged mind where she is sensing Adam all around her and is not quite sure who is alive and who is not, Miranda is

being eased back into the land of the living. She's informed of the end of the War and is expected to join in the celebrations. Her body obeys the instructions but her mind refuses to budge. “Closing her eyes she would rest for a moment remembering the bliss that had repaid all the pain of the journey to reach it; opening them again she saw with a new anguish the dull world to which she had been condemned, where the light seemed filmed over with cobwebs, all the bright surfaces corroded, the sharp flames melted and formless, all objects and beings meaningless, ah dead and withered things that believed themselves alive” (Porter 2011:270).

The novella ends poignantly with Miranda being unsure of this new phase of life which she was entering where the war and the influenza was behind her but her scars were indelible. “No more war no more plague, only the dazed silence that follows the ceasing of the heavy guns; noiseless houses with shades drawn, empty streets, the dead cold light of tomorrow. Now there would be time for everything.” (Porter 2011:264)

Indian literature also had many authors writing about the Spanish Flu. Ahmed Ali (2007) in his book *Twilight in Delhi* talks extensively about the flu rampaging Delhi. He writes, “Influenza broke out in epidemic form, and from houses in the mohallah all around, heart-rending cries of lamentation and weeping began to rent the air. There was hardly any house where a death did not take place”. (p229)

He goes on to describe what happened next, “soon the graveyards became full. A new cemetery was made outside the city where people buried relations by the score. The Hindus just went to the bank of the sacred Jamuna, cremated the dead, and threw away the ashes and unburned bones in the water. Many were thrown without a shroud or cremation. They were mostly poor”.

He also commented on how nature of some business and people those businesses doing, “The grave diggers made a good living and amassed fortunes, they raised their wages from two to four and then to eight rupees. They did not bother to properly dig up the grave... They dug up the old graves for stones and supplied them at very high rates... The cloth merchants, bania these, raised the price of line-cloth which was used for winding-sheets... And the professions who washed the dead charged more. They hardly gave the dead a bath. They just laved the bodies with water, grabbed at the gold or silver rings which had not been taken off the fingers of the dead, and concealed them in inner pockets... (p230-232)

People of Delhi made songs and sang them; and the leaflets containing them were sold for a pice each:
How deadly this fever is,
Everyone is dying of it.
Men become lame with it
And go out in dolis.
The hospitals are gay and bright
But sorry is men's plight (p 232)

Another Indian author Suryakant Tripathy 'Nirala' writes in his memoir *Kulli Bhat* which has been recently been translated by Satti Khanna and published by HarperCollins as *A Life Misspent*, “I travelled to the riverbank in Dalmau and waited,” Nirala wrote in his memoir, *A Life Misspent*. “The Ganga was swollen with dead bodies. At my in-laws' house, I learned that my wife had passed away.” Many other members of Nirala's family died too. There was not enough wood to cremate them. “This was the strangest time in my life,” he recalled later. “My family disappeared in the blink of an eye. All our

sharecroppers and labourers died, the four who worked for my cousin, as well as the two who worked for me. My cousin's eldest son was fifteen years old, my young daughter a year old. In whichever direction I turned, I saw darkness." These deaths were not just a coincidence of personal tragedies visited upon the poet, they were connected to the Spanish Influenza. (Spinney, 2018)

CONCLUSION

Literature is truly the mimesis of human life. It is indeed worth noting how the earliest known pandemic which played out in Greece during the Peloponnesian War was recorded by Sophocles which formed the basis for modern day medical studies. Pandemics are seen to recur and each time the human beings finds themselves unprepared for the calamity because the history of the pandemics have been forgotten. Litterateurs from Sophocles to Porter and philosophers from Nietzsche to Foucault have been writing and reminding humanity of Pandemics and plagues, of deaths and destructions, of mortality and morality and of the perils of avarice and greed. Thomas Nashe's poem "A Litany in Time of Plague" (1592) sums up the sentiment echoed by the Pandemic writers cautioning and cajoling the humankind against hubris and avarice.

"Rich men, trust not in wealth,
Gold cannot buy you health;
Physic himself must fade.
All things to end are made,
The plague full swift goes by;
I am sick, I must die.
Lord, have mercy on us." (Nashe 8-14)

Compliance with Ethical Standards

We the authors certify that this paper does not violate any copyright law and has not been submitted for publication anywhere else. We also don't have any potential conflict of interest.

REFERENCES

- Ali, A. (2007). *Twilight In Delhi*. Rupa Publications.
- Davis, B.T. (1963, Winter-Spring) *Katherine Anne Porter, The Art of Fiction No. 29*, The Paris Review. <https://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/4569/the-art-of-fiction-no-29-katherine-anne-porter>.
- Defoe, D. (1772). *A Journal of the Plague Year*. George Routledge and Sons.
- Harper, K. (2020). Pandemics: Now and Then. *History Today*, 70(7).
- Knox, B. (1994). *Oedipus the King*. Pocket Books.
- Kousoulis, A.A., Economopoulos, K. P., Poulakou-Rebelakou, E., Androutsos, G. & Tsiodras, S. (2012). The Plague of Thebes, a Historical Epidemic in Sophocles' Oedipus Rex. *Emerging Infectious Diseases*, 18(1),153-157. <http://dx.doi.org/10.3201/eid1801.AD1801>

Littman, R.J. (2009). The plague of Athens: epidemiology and paleopathology. *Mt Sinai J Med*, 76(5), 456-467.

Nashe, T. (n.d). *A Litany in Time of Plague*. Poets.org. <https://poets.org/poem/litany-time-plague>.

Latham, R.& Mathews, W. G. (2000). *The Diary of Samuel Pepys, Vol. 6*. University of California Press.

Porter, K.A. (2011). *Pale Horse, Pale Rider: The Selected Stories of Katherine Anne Porter*. Penguin Classics.

Riano, N (2019, January 14) Essays & Reflections: "Eliot's 'The Fire Sermon': Of Memory & Salvation". Theimaginativeconservative.org/2019/01/ts-eliot-fire-sermon-memory-salvation-nayeli-riano-timeless.html accessed May 11, 2023.

Spinney, L. (2018) Vital Statistics: How the Spanish flu of 1918 changed India. <https://caravanmagazine.in/history/spanish-flu-1918-changed-india> accessed May 9,2023

