



SOCIAL IMPLICATIONS OF PANDEMICS THEN AND NOW THROUGH THE EYES OF AUTHORS

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ABSTRACT The present study attempts to focus light on some notable works of literature from present day and past which quite efficiently brought forth then societies and their struggle against the pandemics. Out of the three literatures, the first one is a fiction, the second one a narrative fiction and the last one is a real life anecdote. These literatures are significant in providing useful information and insight about pandemics of different times and their mitigation with respect to the challenges of Covid-19.

KEYWORDS : Pandemic, Shutdown, Ignorance, Literature

1. INTRODUCTION

The two-year long mayhem of Covid-19 has raised myriad questions in the minds of common people as well as scientists, medical practitioners and policy makers all around the globe. While new medications, vaccines and repetitive lockdown and quarantine processes are being put forth every day, a curious question also lurks in many minds – how were societies doing during the previous pandemics through the centuries and what measures were taken by them to avert their grasp. The present study attempts to find the answers to these questions through the eyes of renowned authors.

Objectives of the study

1. To study how societies were during the previous pandemics.
2. To study what the societies were doing to control the havoc of the different pandemics.
3. To study how the authors have depicted contemporary societies during the pandemics down the centuries.

Delimitations

The mandatory home-confinement during the pandemic played a crucial role in limiting the movement and consequently the physical access to libraries and books. The online resources like books, journals and research articles came of help to continue this study.

2. METHODOLOGY

Historical and bibliographical and research methods have been adopted for this study. Books, research papers, web journals have been referred to complete this study.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The present study discusses three notable works of literature, both fiction and non-fiction, from present day and past. These are – “*The Decameron*” by Giovanni Boccaccio (1351), “*A Journal of the Plague Year*” by Daniel Defoe (1722) and “*And the Band Played On: Politics, People, and the AIDS*” by Randy Shilts (1987). The former depicts society during the dreading Black Death in Europe, the second during the infamous London Plague and the last one of present day during AIDS. Whether fiction or non-fiction, these notable literatures have successfully highlighted contemporary societies and their take on the pandemics.

1. The stories woven around different themes in *The Decameron* point to the versatility of the author who managed to portray then human society in a very vivid manner, something not very frequent in the mediaeval ages, since renaissance was still far away.

Findings: The researcher found that during that period,

- Bringing together women and men (where women outnumbered men) together in a Brigata suggests the importance and respect that Boccaccio wanted to express for women, something rarely witnessed in those times.
- Boccaccio was way ahead of his time. Mocking at or ridiculing the

Catholic Church and depicting its corruption is surely an endeavour brave enough, more so in those trying times of pestilence, when lack of access to modern scientific knowledge and medical facilities often forced citizens to resort to the much powerful Church for magic cures, sorcery or certain other ritualistic practices. The first, second and fourth stories on the first night are examples.

- There are stories where Boccaccio focussed on tricks of men and women and to gain against the deception. The stories told on the fourth, seventh and eighth nights shed light on the darkest aspects of human psyche with lust, greed, vengeance, misfortune and treacheries taking turns.

“To have compassion for those who suffer is a human quality which everyone should possess, especially those who have required comfort themselves in the past and have managed to find it in others.”

- **Magic cures** –The book depicts how people were gradually losing faith in the face of helpless surrender to the ghastly Black Death and were turning towards magic cure formula in absence of proper medicines.

“And the plague gathered strength as it was transmitted from the sick to the healthy through normal intercourse, just as fire catches on to any dry or greasy object placed too close to it.”

Major Outcomes:

a) Respect for women – Mediaeval age rarely had the fertile ground to sow the seeds of respect for women. But in *The Decameron*, Boccaccio has not only shown to construct the Brigata with women outnumbering men, but has also made them the theme-setter and controller of the nights just as he did with men.

b) Ridicule for church - Mediaeval age was largely dependent on the church for their everyday life's decisions. Amidst such orthodoxy, mocking at and pointing at the church's corruption was surely a brave act risking accusation of blasphemy.

c) Sorcery – Lack of access to proper knowledge and education during the infamous Black Death, people were resorting to sorcerers to cure them of the illness or rather the bad omen or god's wrath.

2. Critiques have been divided between if Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year* can be called an eye-witness journal or a fictional novel. Since the book is written in the form of a first person narrative depicting stories and its non linear branching, some were in the opinion of regarding it a novel.

Findings: It can be found that,

- The horrid realities and the repetitive, deviating and incongruous presentation of facts seem too incoherent to be far-fetched or planned as is usually expected from a novel.

- It is replete with facts, statistics, official data and charts of the infected, dead, the seasonal ups and downs in the infection and their statistical analysis.
- The anguished accounts of how the agonised patients threw themselves in the grave-pits, how the fathers struggled to keep their families together and tried to meet the ends, how the corpse-collecting carts used to shout out “*bring out your dead*” with spine-chilling bells at night, how the people got mad and ran on the streets, how the exasperated citizens lost faith in God and Church and started taking help of quacks, sorcerers and fortune-tellers, rumours became truth, how the desperate desolates were resorting to looting and robbing others are sometimes punctuated with accounts of redemption, compassion and kindness.

“Once ‘free’ in the streets, what then? Fear and panic could destroy the city as much as plague itself. Many of the doctors fled, along with the rich and powerful; quacks preyed on the poor with their neverfail miracle drugs. Churches and conventicles and synagogues were empty. Neighbours informed against each other. People lied to each other – and to themselves.”

- There are descriptions of how the commerce and trade had faced a setback since most of the traders had evacuated London during that time. The detailed account of how the government officials planned for and attempted to implement “home shut down” and ordered against any mass-congregation (much like home-quarantine nowadays) to check the spread of infection, points to the similarity of treatment measures to ward off a pandemic across centuries.

Such home shutdowns according to the author, would hardly be effective in checking the infection as the rich was out of this restriction and the poor consequently duped the officials and fled. The picture has changed a little.

***“A dreadful plague in London was
In the year sixty-five,
Which swept an hundred thousand souls
way; yet I alive!”***

Major Outcomes:

a) Home shut down – Just as the lockdown in present times, the government officials during the Great Plague of London had ordered for home shut down to help contain the spread of the disease.

b) Corpse-collecting cart – Without the provision for proper burial amidst the massive casualty during the Great Plague of London, carts were deployed by the local authorities to collect corpses from the shut houses where sometimes even all the family members were found dead and then those were arranged for mass burial.

3. HIV (Human Immunodeficiency Virus) had entered the United States during early 1980's and AIDS was associated with the gay community and thus both were stigmatised as Shilts portrayed in his *And the Band Played On*. Consequently, all the public institutions that were responsible to address the issue such as the government, the doctors and the political communities, remained aloof and indifferent in the mode of “*denialism*”. Accordingly Shilts commented that AIDS was allowed to happen.

San Francisco Chronicle veteran Shilts begins his investigative journal in 1977, when a Danish doctor, Grethe Rask, working in Kinshasa (capital of Zaire, now Democratic Republic of Congo) was reported to be the first white to contact and succumb to AIDS. Rapid population growth, use of unsterilized syringes and hub of sex trade, Kinshasa had been bubbling with HIV that burst out offering the world its last pandemic of twentieth century.

Findings: The researcher has found that,

- There are two chief issues regarding AIDS that often makes it a silent epidemic. One, because it kills slowly and invisibly and two, because of its sexual innuendo. Unlike plague or small pox, the victim of AIDS does not die a quick and graphically painful death, it takes months or often years. And since among other reasons of contacting this disease, unprotected physical intimacy is one, most people want to shun even discussing about it, including the government officials.

“How very American, he thought, to look at a disease as homosexual

or heterosexual, as if viruses had the intelligence to choose between different inclinations of human behaviour.”

- Here too we can see the occurrence of zoonotic transmission where the originally Simian (chimpanzee-related) Immunodeficiency Virus had hopped into humans perhaps through bush meat.
- It gradually spread across many countries and infected almost 75 million people by 1980's.

“Insanity triumphed because sane people were silent.”

- In the United States, it was largely associated with the gay community due to the general ignorance of its epidemiology and aetiology. Shilts, being a journalist and a victim himself, carried on extensive research on AIDS, tried to call attention of the government, medical sector and media to the burning problem of the sufferers, most of who were gay and were thus already looked down upon.

“Any good reporter could have done this story, but I think the reason I did it, and no one else did, is because I am gay. It was happening to people I cared about and loved.”

Major Outcomes:

a) Silent epidemic – Because AIDS does not have visible, conspicuous symptoms and since it is transmitted sexually, society and government usually keep silent about this disease, making it to become silent epidemic.

b) Invisible killer – Unlike other most diseases, AIDS does not cause visible suffering of the patient. The gradual weakening of immune system and progressive loss of vigour makes it an invisible killer.

c) Zoonotic transmission – Diseases that originate in often wild animals and are transmitted from them to human.

4. CONCLUSION

The pandemonium of two years have brought human race face to face with many queries. Inquisitiveness about previous societies and their actions and practices to mitigate the pandemics is one of them. The present study has attempted to shed some light on the same through the eyes of renowned authors of present and past. Their remains more to explore.

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