

New Aspects and Trends in

LITERATURE

Texts And Contexts



Ms. S POORNIMA

New Aspects and Trends in Literature: Texts and Contexts

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15.
**Disease, Death, and Dystopia:
Contextualising Jack London's *The
Scarlet Plague* in the Contemporary
Covid-19 Pandemic**

Dr. Samit Kumar Maiti

Representation of disease, particularly infectious, has been a recurring motif in the Western literary tradition. The literary writers had always been fascinated by the symbolic potentials of a disease, its power of destruction of human lives, and its ability to function as an agent of fear and horror. Jack London's *The Scarlet Plague* revisits that dominant theme of representation of disease in a literary work. Originally published in 1915, the novel is a brilliant specimen of post-apocalyptic dystopian fiction that makes an imaginative representation of the devastating effects of a disease, the 'scarlet plague', which brings mankind on the verge of almost total annihilation. A futuristic novel, *The Scarlet Plague* narrates the action that took place in 2013 and recapitulated by one of the survivors, 'Granser', in 2073, sixty years after the occurrence of the actual

event. The novel is brilliant in its representation of several forms of disease, particularly plague, from a scientific perspective. The novel is surcharged with an atmosphere of fear and terror as it narrates the terrible impact of the 'scarlet plague', which wipes out almost the whole of mankind from the face of the earth, leaving just a few survivors miraculously. The descriptions of endless number of dead bodies of plague victim on the American roads; the atmosphere of panic caused by the highly infectious and untreatable disease of plague; the conflagrations all around the cities; the total breakdown of civic systems, legal systems and the anarchic situation that ensued as a result of the sudden outbreak of the 'scarlet plague' help to produce the impression of a dystopian reality. However, there has been a resurgence of critical reception of *The Scarlet Plague* during the Covid-19 pandemic. The situations narrated in the novel have their striking similarities in the contemporary situation of global pandemic engendered by corona virus, a deadly infectious disease. The novel has received a renewed interest because of its ability to offer some insights to counter the challenges posed by an unprecedentedly awkward events which push mankind on the brink of utter misery, anarchy, mortality, and global catastrophe. But, at the same time, the novel also upholds that survival is not just necessary but inevitable.

Representation of disease in literature is as old as man's earliest attempts for literary compositions. Diseases, particularly infection, have their special appeal to the imaginative writers who are fascinated by the idea of portraying a world ravaged by the devastating effects of diseases on mankind. Jack London's *The Scarlet Plague* is a brilliant fictional representation of the terrible impact of plague that brings mankind to the brink of total destruction, subverting the social, economic, and cultural orders. London's *The Scarlet Plague* is based on Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* (1826), which is "an apocalyptic vision of earth's depopulation through plague" (Snyder 435). The novel is also a

“contemplation of the near extinction of the human race by a fast-acting and untreatable plague” (Berkove 251). London makes an excellent use of the raw materials of science fiction to comment upon the interrelations between disease, death, and dystopian reality. The objective of the paper is to make a reassessment of the novel by situating it in the contemporary context of global COVID-19 pandemic, so that it may provide some valuable insights and effective strategies to fight successfully the pandemic for the survival of mankind.

Jack London's *The Scarlet Plague* is one of the earliest novels to examine the nature of a disease in a scientific manner. In the novel, Granser is seen to explain the word “germ”, which is responsible for a number of diseases: “You know what sickness is. We called it a disease. Very many of the diseases came from what we called germs... A germ is a very small thing... It is so small that you cannot see it” (London15). He then describes how different scientific instruments like microscope and ultramicroscope were used in the detection of the germs. Invention of these powerful scientific instruments made the detection of germs easy, as Granser recapitulates, “Our best ultramicroscopes could make a germ look forty thousand times larger” (15). The distinction between medical science and literature blurs in Granser's following analysis: “We called germs microorganisms. When a few million, or a billion, of them were in a man, in all the blood of a man, he was sick. These germs were a disease” (16). The cause of a disease is scientifically analyzed in the following passage:

A man did not notice at first when only a few of these germs got into his body. But each germ broke in half and became two germs, and they kept doing this very rapidly so that in a short time there were many millions of them in the body. Then the man was sick. He had a disease, and the disease was named after the kind of a germ that was in him. It might be measles, it might be influenza, it

might be yellow fever; it might be any of thousands and thousands of kinds of diseases. (16)

What makes London's *The Scarlet Plague* an interesting study is his authentic description of the scientific names of various germs that cause disease in human body: "The microorganic world was an invisible world, a world we could not see, and we knew very little about it. Yet we did know something. There was the *bacillus anthracis*; there was the *micrococcus*; there was the *Bacterium termo*, and the *Bacterium lactis*" (16). In this novel, London speaks about a number of diseases which have their origin in germs: measles, influenza, yellow fever, leprosy, tuberculosis, bubonic plague. These diseases had adversely affected mankind since the middle ages. But, London specifically focuses on the description of the devastating effects of plague on humans causing epidemic and shattering the orders of civilized world. The 'scarlet plague', which broke out in America in 2013, was a deadly infectious disease with its ability to kill humans in astonishing quickness. The peculiar nature of the plague provokes a sense of fear in London's description of the disease:

The heart began to beat faster and the heat of the body to increase. Then came the scarlet rash, spreading like wildfire over the face and body. Most persons never noticed the increase in heat and heart-beat, and the first they knew was when the scarlet rash came out. Usually, they had convulsions at the time of the appearance of the rash. But these convulsions did not last long and were not very severe. If one lived through them, he became perfectly quiet, and only did he feel a numbness swiftly creeping up his body from the feet. The heels became numb first, then the legs, and hips, and when the numbness reached as high as his heart he died. They did not rave or sleep. Their minds always remained cool and calm up to the moment their heart numbed and stopped. And another strange thing was the rapidity of

decomposition. No sooner was a person dead than the body seemed to fall to pieces, to fly apart, to melt away even as you looked at it. That was one of the reasons the plague spread so rapidly. All the billions of germs in a corpse were so immediately released. (21)

Such a terrific disease was difficult to control, as the scientists died in the laboratories even when they studied the germ of the plague. Now, this has its striking similarity with the present COVID-19 pandemic, when many doctors, researchers, and scientists died while they were engaged in fighting against the virus. However, with the advancement of modern medical science in twenty first century, the relationship between disease and germs has been well established. But by the time London produced the novel, more than a century ago, there was a very few attempts for the scientific explanations in literary works.

Despite the advancement of science in the modern period, man has not been able to conquer disease, and “the micro-organic world remained a mystery to the end” (17). This observation of London brings out the invincibility of disease and helplessness of mankind before the germs and diseases. From time immemorial, man had been confronted with different kinds of diseases which had severely affected and killed human lives. Although the scientists had been able to invent medicines to control the disease and kill the germs, new forms of disease and germs had originated to further complicate mankind’s situation. The mutability of germs and the ability of a disease to reappear as a more potent form of threat to human survival makes mankind highly vulnerable and really helpless. In the conflict between man and disease, the disease has always proved to be superior power. Jack London’s *The Scarlet Plague* foregrounds this tragic predicament of mankind in an allegorical manner.

London’s novel represents a dystopian reality: Granser and his grandsons wandering in the forest infested with cruel animals; children are illiterate and they lead a savage life; the

language the children use is not sophisticated to express the finer emotions and sensibilities. The 'scarlet plague' killed millions of people and there was a chaotic situations in San Francisco, New York, Chicago and the other cities of America. The dead bodies of the people were lying scattered on the roads and houses. People behaved insanely and there was rampant plundering and killing as there was the total breakdown of the legal system. People used their automatic rifles to maintain their isolation with the miscreants. The situation narrated is that of an anarchy, barbarity, and horror, as Granser describes:

Drunkenness was rife, and often we heard them singing ribald songs or insanely shouting. While the world crashed to ruin about them and all the air was filled with the smoke of its burning, these low creatures gave rein to their bestiality and fought and drank and died. And after all, what did it matter? Everybody died anyway, the good and the bad, the efficient and the weaklings, those that loved to live and those that scorned to live. They passed. Everything passed. (34)

Plague-affected people died like fiends, domestic animals behaved like wild animals, people behaved in the most reckless manner. Even the post-Apocalyptic world that is depicted is that of a dystopian reality, as the three grandsons of Granser, Hoo-Hoo, Hare-lip and Edwin, were leading a savage life in the forests. Watching the barbaric customs of three grandsons, Granser remarks: "You are true savages. Already has begun the custom of wearing human teeth. In another generation you will be perforating your noses and ears and wearing ornaments of bone and shell. I know" (19). London reverses the notions of "progress" and "development". For him, development and progress do not mean the unmitigated satisfaction of human greed and lust; they must be in conformity with the law of nature. So what was considered as "progress" or "development" was nothing but deterioration or degeneration. Granser's remark

become prophetic: "The human race is doomed to sink back farther and farther into the primitive night ere again it begins its bloody climb upward to civilization" (19).

The Scarlet Plague is a sophisticated version of plague fiction with its critique of modern civilization and customs. London was a staunch advocate of socialism that upholds the principles of equality for the establishment of an ideal society. In an interview London remarked: "I have always advocated destructive theory of socialism because you must tear down before you can build up. That is why I have always assailed the existing order of things so savagely..." (Ruh et al. 70). The society that existed before the outbreak of the 'scarlet plague' was based on discriminations, inequality and oppression. The farmers who produced foods were deprived of the right to own the land, as the ruling class owned everything. The ruling class lived in opulence and luxury, although they never actually participated in the cultivation process. Such a gross culture of discrepancy was never conducive to the growth of a civilised society. Hence, when the plague spread out, there was a total reversal of the existing order. The so-called lower sections of the society began to dominate once the injunctions of the civilised society collapsed. Richard Fenn is right when he remarks "an apocalyptic vision...seeks to exorcise the complexities of the social order..." (109). Plague, in this post-Apocalyptic fiction, acts like a beneficial force to destabilise the instances of social inequalities and injustices. Clayton Carlyle Tarr justly remarks: "Plague fiction invariably exposes the chaos of social breakdowns to reveal that the economic and ideological barriers that society constructs are easily conquered by indiscriminate and capricious forces" (142).

However, London's *The Scarlet Plague* has its contemporary relevance with the events that have emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic. London is right in his understanding of human perception about the initial outbreak of

plague as he writes: "It looked serious, but we in California, like everywhere else, were not alarmed. We were sure that the bacteriologists would find a way to overcome this newgerm, just as they had overcome other germs in the past" (London 20). This observation of London about the human attitude towards an infectious disease finds a striking similarity with the attitude of the people in our times. When the news of COVID-19 came to public notice in the early months of 2020, people did not take the news seriously and began to ignore the news with the conviction that the bacteriologists and scientists will discover a remedy quickly. This is reflective of modern people's pride in modern science and technology. As the COVID-19 virus spread across the globe and World Health Organisation (WHO) declared the situation pandemic in the month of March 2020, the helplessness of modern scientists to fight against the virus begin to be exposed, as the virus changed its forms with mutations to baffle the scientists to control the highly infectious virus. Needless to say, the callousness and indifference of people about a virus is one of the reasons for the spread of the disease.

While trying to explain the cause of the rapid spread of plague in the populous cities of America, London remarks that population density in modern American cities was one of the reasons for the quick and uncontrollable spread of the plague. He argues that in ancient times when there were very few people living in the world, there were few diseases. But as the population increased and people began to live closely together in crowded cities and big civilisations, new kinds of diseases originated, and new types of germs developed (17). The more densely people lived together, the more people came to be affected with the disease because of the contagious nature of the disease. So in London's estimation, population density was the major factor for the quick spread of the plague. Now, this is also true to COVID-19 pandemic, as the statistics of affected people reveals that the people living in metropolitan cities are more

affected than the people living in rural areas. The people living in the metropolitan cities of Paris, Venice, Madrid, New York, London, etc. are more affected than the people living in the villages of Congo, Liberia, Bhutan, Vietnam, Peru, Uruguay, etc. What is even more interesting is that the communities of Africa, Asia, and the forest-dwelling communities, Adivasis, are comparatively less affected than the urban people and rural people. This statistics only validates the fact the people living in close proximity with nature and living sparsely are leading a healthier lives than their counterparts in cities. What is even more important is that the city dwellers are more vulnerable to the disease than the villagers and forest dwellers.

Moreover, plague, like COVID-19 virus, is highly infectious and London narrates how the people maintained physical distancing to avoid the possibility of contagion. The terms such as "social distancing", "physical distancing", "isolation", and "quarantine" have attained an enormous popularity after the spread of COVID-19. The terms have become an integral part of everyday discourse. There is also the description of mass migration or "great exodus" in the novel: people left, either on the vehicles or on foot, the plague-affected cities to survive the threat of infection. This may remind us of the pictures of migration of thousands of migratory labourers returning home along the roads in India after the nation-wide lockdown was announced in March 2020. If migration was used by people a hundred years ago as a strategy to avoid infection in London's novel, the modern people, equipped with a better knowledge in science and technology, are not much different in their response to an infectious disease. This strategy of migration and isolation is therefore a time tested measure to avoid contagion which is adopted by the modern people.

Granser is the narrator who narrates to his three grandsons the tale of his lucky and miraculous survival. Apart from his structural function as the mediator of the two worlds –

the pre-plague world and the post-plague world, Granser has an important allegorical function to serve. He survives, like the Mariner in Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner", to experience cathartic experience through storytelling, through the expression of his pent-up emotional experiences of sufferings, fear, anguish, and anxiety. Granser's memory is full of pathetic and terrific experiences of watching deaths at close at hand; sufferings and depression for the loss of dear ones, relatives, colleagues, friends, etc.; omnipresent panic for being attacked by the virus; the fearful experience of huge fire at all sides. Hence, his survival and retelling of the past experience is not just accidental but a necessity. Post-Apocalyptic dystopian fictions usually do not end with the suggestion of total destruction of mankind; rather they end with the prophecy of new world order. The lucky survival of Granser and a selected few suggests that regeneration is not a necessity but inevitable. London's *The Scarlet Plague* should therefore be read not simply as a text representing the tripartite relationship among disease, death and dystopia, but necessarily as a text that provides some effective survival strategies to fight against a contagious disease, and as a text that offers a ray of hope during the period of depression, a source of delight during a period of catastrophe.

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