

REVIVING HUMANITY DURING PANDEMIC IN INDIA

Editors

Shreya Chakrabarty

T. Sathyakala

Sunil K. Mishra



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UPANAYAN PUBLICATIONS
Delhi (India)

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First Edition 2021

ISBN: 978-81-949267-1-9

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Published by

UPANAYAN PUBLICATIONS

(an imprint of Upanayan Foundation)

772, Street No 6, B Block, Baba Colony,

Burari, Delhi, 110084 (INDIA)

Contact: +91- 7827665077

E-mail: upanayanpublications@gmail.com

authorspublication@gmail.com

Typesetting by :

G. R. Sharma

Printed by

Thomson Press India Ltd.

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Story of Resurrection: A Reading of Jack London's *The Scarlet Plague* in time of Covid-19 Pandemic

Dr. Samit Kumar Ma...

The function of literature is not merely to entertain, but also to educate and instruct. This does not necessarily mean that entertainment value in literature is less important than the value of instruction. In fact, in literature the entertainment value is as important as the instructive value. Literature, it is true, is written with a fundamental objective to amuse and entertain the readers, as it uses fictional or imaginative materials. But mere entertainment or amusement cannot be the sole objective of serious literature. Underneath the purpose of entertainment lies a writer's serious intention to reform the drawbacks of his society. A writer is essentially a product of his own society, and the socio-cultural conventions inevitably go into the making of a writer and his mental world. Hence, a writer cannot remain indifferent to his obligations towards society. This socio-cultural consciousness therefore constitutes a hallmark of a writer's greatness. The observations made by the Roman poet and critic, Horace (65-8 BC) seem to be highly relevant in this context. While estimating the value of poetry in his *Ars Poetica* or *The Art of Poetry* (19 BC), Horace argued that the function of poetry is to offer both delight and instruct, which means that a poet, while he is fully aware of the artistic necessities of a work of art, must also be equally concerned with the realistic elements which function for the amelioration of human life. A writer can never remain wholly oblivious of his surroundings, and the function of literature can never be purely aesthetic, but didactic, instructive, and utilitarian.

The didactic, instructive, and utilitarian functions of literature make evident that a literary work has its crucial function in the uplift of human life. Unlike a scientist or a historian, a literary writer enjoys absolute autonomy in his created work, where he can employ both the imaginative and realistic resources in order to produce the optimum effect. A literary work has its multiple functions to serve, particularly during pandemic

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The greatest function of a literary work during a pandemic is to help to revive humanity from the emotional turmoil, psychological disturbances, and traumatic experiences. By offering an outlet for the pent-up negative and harmful emotions, a literary work can help people to achieve emotional tranquillity, psychological stability and spiritual calmness, which are necessary for the healthy mental and physical state, and for the survival of the people. There are also many fictional works, particularly the plague narratives and pandemic narratives, which help humanity to survive the odds created by a disease or a calamity by offering new insights in their struggle for existence. A literary work therefore can offer survival strategies to humanity during a catastrophe. Moreover, a literary work is a repository of scientific information and popular wisdom, so a judicious use of the knowledge and information preserved in the work can help humanity to find a solution during a crisis. Apart from these practical necessities of a literary work, the value of a literary work to provide delight, joy, and aesthetic pleasure can never be underestimated. These are some of the reasons why there has been a resurgence in the reading of literature, particularly the pandemic narratives, during the Covid-19 pandemic.

The Covid-19 pandemic has thrown global humanity into an unprecedented crisis. Till now, more than thirty lacs of people have died due to the corona virus infection, and the number is increasing by leaps and bounds at every moment. Globally, the number of infected people has crossed seventeen crores. Deaths are now mere numbers. With incredible speed, the virus has reached almost every nook and corner of the globe, forcing people to live amidst an unprecedented situation of universal panic, sorrow, helplessness, and trauma. In India, the health infrastructure had crumbled, with crisis of oxygen and other life-supporting systems in the hospitals, rampant growth of black marketing with medicines and other essential medical items. With the funeral pyres burning constantly on the crematorium and the dead bodies floating on the river, the situation is nightmarish. As a consequence of the Covid-19 pandemic, the medical service of the people suffering from other kinds of chronic ailments had been disrupted. However, pandemic has exposed that individual health is as important as the community health.

Pandemic has also affected the education sector adversely. Although the virtual education method has come forward with an alternative mode of education, the huge economic disparity in India between the rich and the poor deprives the marginalised section of the fundamental right to education, which will inevitably affect the country's progress and sustainable growth. The prolonged hours of involvement with the virtual mode of learning and the lack of opportunity for the lively communication

with the peers will not only have their negative impacts on physical and psychological health but also on the process of socialization of young learners in the most formative periods of their lives.

With the countless number of people losing their sources of livelihood, the pandemic has come to affect the economic growth of both the developed and the developing countries, which will have far-reaching negative consequences on the sustainable global progress. However, what is most shocking is that pandemic, which is but a global crisis, instead of strengthening the friendly cooperation and mutual reliability among the nations, had exposed the ruptures in the international relations. The developed nations are prone to exploit the situation of pandemic for their petty commercial benefits, revealing the ugly politics at the international sphere. Moreover, pandemic has revealed the ugly lust for power of the political leaders, which gives rise to nationalism, sectarianism and all types of petty national and political interests. Pandemic has thus an all pervasive impacts: personal, psychological, economic, national, and international. It is believed that the impact of pandemic is more pervasive than war or natural calamity the impacts of which are limited to specific nations or regions. There is a revival of interest in plague narratives or pandemic narratives during Covid-19 pandemic, obviously for the reasons that these literary texts may offer new insights or survival strategies to cope up with the present form of global pandemic. This is one of the reasons why Jack London's *The Scarlet Plague* (1915) has received a renewed interest in recent years. The novel is a splendid fictional work that depicts "the near extinction of the human race by a fast-acting and untreatable plague" (Berkove 251). Representation of plague, however, in literary texts as a form of terrible disease capable of imparting terrible effect on mankind is not something new. From classical antiquity to Chaucer, and even in many modern fictions, plague has been portrayed as a dominant theme, terrible in form and destructive in effect. The novel may be interpreted as a highly relevant text for the present scenario, with its potentials to offer some insights and valuable suggestions for the survival of mankind during crisis.

The novel 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 a post-apocalyptic fiction that anticipates the post-plague scenario in 2073, sixty years after the terrible plague has affected the major cities in America, killing millions of people. The narrator, originally Prof. James Howard Smith, who was a professor of literature in the pre-plague period, but in the novel named "Granser", narrates the events that originally took place in 2013 to his three grandsons - Hoo-Hoo, Hare-lip,

and Edwin. The events that Granser describes is that of a dystopian reality: countless dead bodies lying scattered everywhere, people running helter and skelter in panic, conflagration, plundering, lawlessness, drunkenness, and murdering with automated rifles. Although people desperately made their efforts for survival, they failed as the plague spread with remarkable rapidity because of its contagious nature. Doctors, scientists, and researchers were clueless about fighting the disease, and many bacteriologists died with infection while conducting research on the germ in their laboratories. Fellowship and trust among people were lost and the lives of the people turned nightmarish with the loss of their dear and near ones. The situation presented is that of an apocalypse, the biblical doomsday, with the destruction of civilization and possible extinction of mankind.

Despite its presentation of a bleak scenario, the novel is not wholly pessimistic, rather it comes to advocate that survival is not only necessary but inevitable. Indeed, Jack London's *The Scarlet Plague* can be interpreted as a splendid story of survival, a story of revival, or resurrection from the jaw of death and total annihilation. In the Bible, resurrection refers to the re-birth of Christ and this happens to be the central doctrine in Christianity. The Biblical concept of resurrection has subsequently been used in literary and cultural texts, symbolizing the infinite potentials of humans. Although the term "resurrection" cannot be applied in its literal sense in the analysis of this novel, but the allegorical implication of the term "resurrection" can fairly be applied in the analysis of the novel. In the novel, Granser did not die, but he was very close to death as he came in contact with the infected persons for a few occasions. He was surrounded with the infected persons, and it is only a stroke of luck that he was not affected with the germ of the plague. Hence, Granser's survival can be interpreted as "resurrection" or a revival. Recapitulating that, Granser says:

In the morning I was alone in the world. Canfield and Parsons, my last companions, were dead of the plague. Of the four hundred that sought shelter in the Chemistry Building, and of the forty-seven that began the march, I alone remained--I and the Shetland pony. Why this should be so there is no explaining. I did not catch the plague, that is all. I was immune. I was merely the one lucky man in a million--just as every survivor was one in a million, or, rather, in several millions, for the proportion was at least that. (London 40)

This narrative of survival from a deadly infectious disease not only suggests the peculiar functioning of the disease, rather ensures the pragmatic function of literature. The function of literature to motivate and inspire during crisis can never be underestimated. Granser's story of

survival may prove highly inspiring and motivating during the Covid-19 pandemic, when millions of people fighting against another deadly infectious virus. With confinement in their homes and the loss of live communication with the relatives and friends, people now experience a sense of isolation and alienation, and in extreme cases, psychological and traumatic experiences. Survival from the threat of the coronavirus seems at times almost impossible as the virus changes continuously its nature with mutations causing a number of waves.

The novel is not just a fictional account of the outbreak of a disease; it has its utilitarian value as it offers some strategies for survival against an infectious disease. The novel suggests that isolation or physical distancing is an effective way to counter a contagious disease like plague. Along with physical distancing and isolation, the novel shows how migration as a survival strategy was also adopted by the people for coping up with the disease. Now this is strikingly relevant for our times. With the spread of coronavirus, the terms such as "physical distancing", "isolation", "quarantine", and "contentment zone" have acquired their global acceptance as effective strategies to restrict the spread of the coronavirus. Moreover, migration of people from the major cities in India after the announcement of nation-wide lockdown was seen as a response to contain the virus. In the novel, Granser explains that population density in the big cities of America was one of the reasons for the quick spread of the plague. Now this seems equally true for the Covid-19 pandemic. People in the big cities like New York, Paris, and Venice are more vulnerable than the people living in developing countries. In India, the people living in the big cities like Mumbai, New Delhi, Nagpur, and Kolkata are more infected with the virus than the people of rural areas, the obvious reason is population density.

London's *The Scarlet Plague* is remarkable for its scientific analysis of the function of germs in human body. In the novel, Granser explains the word "germ" to his three grandsons: "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" (15). Granser also explains how the different scientific tools were used for the detection of the germs: "Our best ultramicroscopes could make a germ look forty thousand times larger" (15). These descriptions are not fictional, but based on scientific facts, and this is what makes the novel an interesting study. The traditional distinction between science and literature fades in the following explanation of the cause of disease: "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), or even in the following explication:

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)

Germs and their functions have remained mysterious for many years, but the scientific research works successfully identified some of the germs, as Granser recapitulates: "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). London speaks about a number of diseases which have their origin in germs: measles, influenza, yellow fever, leprosy, tuberculosis, and bubonic plague, etc.

But, the novel is a fictional account of plague, which broke out in America in 2013, disrupting the social order and wiping out almost the whole humanity from the face of the earth with astonishing rapidity. Horror is one of the dominant emotions in the plague narratives, and this becomes evident in London's description of the terrific nature of 'scarlet' plague:

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)

Because of the highly infectious nature of the 'scarlet' plague, it was difficult to control it. Granser describes how the scientists while they were busy with the discovery of medicine for the plague died in the laboratories, making the situation horrific.

The Scarlet Plague offers a critique of modern civilization and its customs. London was a hard-core follower of socialism that upheld the principles of equality for the establishment of an ideal society free from discriminations and inequalities. 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). In the novel, Granser denounces the pre-plague society that was based on gross discriminations in terms of class, caste, income, and gender. London satirises the ruling class that actually owned the land and lived in luxury, depriving the working class people of their right to land and property. Although the working class people were called "freemen" they were victims of exploitation and oppression by the rich people. *Plague*, as described in the novel, exposed this latent form of unjust inequality and oppression, and proved to be a beneficial force to establish the superiority of the marginalized section, as this section encountered the effects of plague in a comparatively better way, which brings to the fore London's conviction with the theory of 'social Darwinism'. Richard Fenn is right when he says "an apocalyptic vision...seeks to exorcise the complexities of the social order..." (109). *Plague*, in this novel, 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).

London's *The Scarlet Plague* is thus not simply a fanciful account of a disease; it is rather a literary text that contains many valuable pragmatic suggestions to challenge a contagious disease. London's description of people's response to the 'scarlet' plague is authentic and realistic, as many people behaved in the same way even during the Covid-19 pandemic. A reading of the novel, particularly during the pandemic, is a highly rewarding experience, capable of producing a rare cathartic effect on the afflicted mind and a ray of hope in time of an existential crisis.

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