

Critical Preparedness, Response and Negotiations of Literature Towards Pandemics Like Covid 19

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Abstract

This article explores the pandemic's positive consequences, which include altering daily life and influencing the media's perspective of the globe. Throughout history, endemic and pandemics have compelled a range of industries to forge challenging survival strategies. Additionally, the global history has been recorded in its pages with a special mention as a socio-cultural change. No historian will ever be able to assess how severe lockdowns were without Shakespeare stating the delay in Romeo and Juliet's letters, therefore this justification cannot be disputed. The objective of this paper is to recognise the efforts of novelists, playwrights, and dramatists who have created outstanding works and ground-breaking innovations for other writers who are emerging. These literary works not only allowed them to interact with others but also assisted them in processing their personal experiences during pandemics like Covid 19. The study gives close attention to the evolution of digital technology throughout the pandemic storm.

Keywords: *Pandemic theatre, Great plague, Apocalyptic literature, Dystopia & Utopia, Digital media*

1. Introduction

Amid order to thrive in the harsh reality of ever-changing human impulses, the art of theatre has faced numerous hurdles throughout history. The persistent threats of numerous pandemics (Covid-19, the Spanish flu) or unforgettable endemics (Malaria or Cholera) further disrupt these human tendencies of always wanting to survive. According to Schwetz (2020), pandemics frighten us in part because they materialize other, less concrete anxieties about globalization, cultural change, and community identity. These pandemics and endemics have aided human civilization in its never-ending quest for survival. Literary and theatrical arts have aided civilizations in remembering the harsh facts of the past while also instilling hope for a brighter future that is always within grasp.

Once the only means of communication, theatre and drama have survived for a long time. Their literary and social accomplishments are incalculable. Theatre's origins and traditions reflect changing cultural upbringings. Survival in a complex genre isn't easy. It requires work. Before trying to understand the media's subtleties, it's important to understand it as a whole. Romans used shows to relive history. They were held in open places to showcase important events for future generations. These performances' platforms alter over time. From being performed on open-ended stages, it slowly occupied large closed constructions comparable to panopticon prisons, allowing theatre performers and the viewing audience to continually be under each other's surveillance. The setups keep evolving to satisfy the needs of the ever-changing viewing public.

The performing space spoken does not appear to be easily available for the artists to use without any hassles. The hurdles might be natural or unnatural, and they can take many odd shapes. Storms, floods, famines, epidemics, pandemics, and other natural disasters might be the shape they take too. The first three can be over in a matter of weeks or months, while epidemics and pandemics can linger much longer. They can become a significant challenge, requiring a mammoth effort to deal with the aftermath. Unnatural challenges can plainly reveal their nature, allowing performers to address them with minimal effort. Nature's challenge is time. There is a record that due to health issues and civic turbulence, theatres throughout the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods were frequently closed. "The present pandemic is incomparable and only can be compared to 16th century and 17th century plagues and then a really big outbreak in 1665 and 1666," says Claire Cochrane, professor of theatrical studies at the University of Worcester (From Pandemics to Puritans, 2020). "It was the time when public theatres were closed to protect the public," she continues.

2. Review of Literature

Barbara S. Lawrence (1984) says historical perspective differs from history and aims to refine the past's perception. He also says social academics may make erroneous conclusions if they ignore history.

Michele Augusto Riva (2014) inspired by Jack London's work, *The Scarlet Plague* (1912), evaluates the book to examine media coverage of pandemics and also that it can bring up deep-seated fears and change human behaviour.

Mukulika Dattagupta (2020) states that many books came into existence only because of pandemics. She formulates that literature especially books like Giovanni Boccaccio's

Decameron have captured the experience of disaster caused by the diseases in the form of stories.

Javier Cachon (2020) claims that covid 19 containment tactics have damaged global mental health. Jerald Saganathan(2020) asserts that literature while narrating about the pandemics has applauded the human response that is charged spirit of resilience and rejuvenation that stood against the onslaught of death and disease.

Betty Sianturi (2020) contends that reading about pandemics in literature can show how individuals throughout time and location responded. The writer also thinks that dramatising pandemics will remind people of their mortality.

CL Hovanec (2009) says writers revisited unpleasant memories in heart-breaking works. This also means fictions have become memoirs, say John O'Hara, William Maxwell, and Katherine Anne Porter, who used literary imagination.

Rashmi Lee George (2020) says artists and writers have confronted fatal pestilences via art and writing viewing death as a regular part of life.

3. Significance of the study

The significant aim here is to show how writers in various era had used literature as a tool to give scenic description of the pandemics. The pestilence the pandemics provided them has been converted into tales providing insights about its effects using the denial, loss, pain and much more as themes and plots. When in merriment they produced Utopian literature and during pestilence dystopic fictions. Best examples are Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* (1826) and Peter May's *Lockdown* (2020). Shelley Walia in her article states that pestilences tend to bring out the best and the worst in us and literature keeps a tally of them (Walia,2020). It is believed that all historians bring to their works their historical perspectives and literature provides that information with an added essence called imaginations.

4. Theoretical Background

The theory employed for the analysis is historical perspective since the study is based on the pandemics and endemics that ruled the people and affected their lives. Literature has been a source for centuries revealing or telling the tales of sufferings the people endured. They recorded them in the form of stories, novels, plays and fictions. Barbara S Lawrence (1984) views that historical perspective helps the researchers to anchor the research findings to their individual and social origins. Some pioneers termed the historical approach as documentary approach since the study was based on the documents, records and historical sources that are available providing the happenings and ideas of the past. The study here is to interpret and forecast the works of writers in the perspective that they portrayed or recorded information in plays and fictions.

5. Methodology

The methodology incorporated for this article is historical methodology through textual analysis. The background of each literary work is analysed to connect the history with writers idea behind the plot that might have originated due his experience, loss or pain during his time of history. According to theorists the historical methodology studies accidents and incidents or

events of the past years and historical perspective is to study a subject in light of its earliest phases and subsequent evolution hence helping to sharpen one's notion of the past. "The historical perspective provided by the age, cohort, and period methodology, combined with a concern for defining meaningful units of time, can help generate new research questions as well as look at old questions in new ways" according to Barabara (1984).

6. Discussion and Analysis

6.1. Shakespeare and Pandemics

In a Western theatrical and dramatical literature or plays, one can never omit Shakespeare's contributions. He is known for his variety of sonnets, plays and poems. Even though seen as a famous writer, he was also a performer. The only evidence though found to prove that he was the actor was from his first biographer, Nicholas Rowe (1948), who referred to a role of Shakespeare in Hamlet as "the ghost in his own Hamlet and the top of his performance" (Rowe, 1948 p.6). He was facing several challenges in the form of men as well as nature. He was not loved by the fellow writers of his period. The best example was a reference seen in Robert Greene's *Groatsworth of Wit*, "upstart crow beautified with our feathers," "Tygers hart wrapt in a Players hyde" (Jowett, J. 1997). Though he criticized that Shakespeare is the jack of all trades in those lines, in his reference to one of his scenes in *Henry VI, Part3*, he appreciates it as Shake-Scene, meaning characteristically which can be only seen in Shakespeare's work. These references now also serve as proof that Shakespeare was writing and acting from 1591. The critics say that right from childhood, he has faced epidemics and also his siblings died of some epidemics, and he was the only child who survived for his parents. The first published work in 1593, which is a long narrative poem written by him, namely, *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece*, were believed to have been written during the six-month lockdown from June 1592-93, during the outbreak of plague in London. It was later staged and appreciated as well. Shakespeare never rested amid his time's lockdowns. He invented 'Cue Scripting' and 'Cue Acting.' Shakespearean players got their lines during performances, and occasionally characters don't know the narrative until they perform. Which became a cue script and cue acting. Someone whispered some actors' lines onstage. This enabled him to perform without breaks or rehearsals. But the plague affected the minds of this writer, that the critics have an opinion that each of his tragedies were said to have been influenced by it. One best example by critics that in *Romeo Juliet*, Friar Lawrence and Friar John talk about the undelivered letter from Juliet to Romeo in Act 5, Scene 2, "...So fearful were they of infection.... (lines 14-17)" meaning they were delayed as they were locked up in an inn feared to be infected and hence delayed to reach in time. In the same *Romeo and Juliet*, Mercutio's words, "A plague on both your houses", is also one phrase showing plague's terrifying results in his plays.

In *Macbeth*, act 4, scene 3, "The dead man's knell is there scarce asked for who, and goodthey even fall sick," meaning death became an everyday phenomenon and they die soon before they know they are sick and in *King Lear*, Lear's right-hand man Kent yells, "A plague upon your epileptic visage!" and Lear criticizes his daughter Goneril 'a plague,' in act 3, scene 4, "a plague sore, an embossed carbuncle in my/corrupted blood." Shakespeare's *Cymbeline* is said to have been a warning note for the selfishness and avarice of people in the world and also a lot of medicinal elements where the heroine of the play 'Imogen' faces a lot of difficulties but ends with a happy ending. Critics mean that in a way these works helped the

physicians think about medicines to cure pandemics like poisons administered by the queen to test the cure for diseases in the play. James Shapiro, a professor and author of Columbia University, says, “His move toward writing tragedy at this time is a kind of response to the tragedy that he was experiencing in these years” (Shapiro, J. S. 2016). There is a note by critics that the continuous lockdown led to the powerful drama style where he wrote intimate scenes and beautiful plays like *The Winter’s Tale*. James Shapiro, in his paper to *The Guardian*, states, *The Winter's Tale's* extraordinary scene in which the statue of the seemingly dead Hermione comes to life may stand out as the most memorable example of the powerful drama that fully exploited the atmosphere of the candlelit Blackfriars due to a plague outbreak that may have come close to killing Shakespeare. (Shapiro, J. S. 2016).

Through all these phrases, it is evident that Shakespeare composed more outstanding pieces while being mentally affected by the natural tragedy, proving that nothing can stop talent. Columbia University professor and author James Shapiro says, “Shakespeare stayed in the city because he understood his job as an artist was to help people come out of difficult periods when the theatres reopened” (Shapiro, J. S. 2016).

6.2. Elizabethan and Jacobean era and pandemics

Ben Jonson, who lived in the 17th century, was also experiencing the after-effects of the plague and so used it as a comparison to something terrific in his work, *The Silent Woman*, “Well, sir gallant, were you struck with the plague this minute.” He wrote *The Alchemist* to depict the plague in the city of London, which he planned to stage but unfortunately only staged in Oxford after a lockdown. Thomas Dekker, an Elizabethan playwright and pamphleteer of the 1590s, was notable among Ben Jonson and Sir Thomas More’s time, who was writing and producing plays as a theatre playwright. During the Bubonic plague in 1603, his career flourished as a pamphlet writer, *The Wonderful Yere* was the first. Later, *News From Gravesend* and *The Meeting of Gallants at an Ordinary* were the two plague pamphlets that became famous. *The Seven Deadly Sins of London* (1606) is another plague pamphlet. Thomas Middleton was one more playwright who emerged during the plague, and scholars believe that he even became a notable and most excellent writer only after the lockdown of theatres as it gave some writers ample time to think and write. The period made him turn towards prose works, but after the plague, he became popular as he started producing a number of plays for several companies in several genres. *The City Comedy* and *Revenge Tragedy* were notable among them. His period was the one where the concept of ‘immediate re-entrance’ as theatrical directions and ‘interim’ by Middleton, namely the Johnsonian ‘interlude’ were first used. Lukas Erne, a writer of The University of Geneva, calls him “Our Other Shakespeare” owing to his number of beautiful works though lesser in number when compared to Shakespeare’s. After the death of Shakespeare in the 1660s, one of his famous writers and actor Thomas Jordan introduced the woman actor ‘Margaret Hughes’ on stage, as ‘Desdemona’ in the rework of *Othello* as ‘The Moor of Venice.’ The introduction was done with a special note written by him named, “A Prologue to introduce the first Woman that came to act on the Stage, in the Tragedy called the Moor of Venice”, which was delivered at a theatre in Vere Street, December 8th, 1660: “I came, unknown to any of the rest, To tell the news; I saw the lady drest: The woman plays to-day; mistake me not, No man in gown, or page in petticoat; A woman to my knowledge, yet I can't, If I should die, make affidavit on't....”

In Samuel Pepys Diary there is an entry that on January 3rd, 1661 he watched Killigrew's King's Company staging a play *The Beggars' Bush*, "The first time that ever I saw Women come upon the stage" (Pepys, S., & Parker, W. L. 1932) which is one more evidence of the appearance of women on stage. It is also believed that the need for the introduction of women in the puritanism period was having a number of reasons. One thing stated by scholars is that the introduction of female characters was done to look after the financial problems of families that were affected by either the plague or war of the period. Another study says that many fled away and started working in different fields during lockdowns during plagues and hence adequacy was at stake for theatres which eventually resulted in need of women to act in minor characters on stage. Historians recorded that, Charles II, was the first king then who ordered that women should act in women's roles.

A Journal of the Plague Year (1659–1731) and *The Great Plague of London 1665* by Daniel Defoe were famous, for it remains a proof for the historians in the upcoming eras about the plague. *The Diary of Samuel Pepys* was also a new genre of writing that emerged during the same period. Thomas Lodge in 1603 wrote "Treatise of the Plague." He is described as a 'playwright turned into doctor.' He has beautifully rendered the effects of plague in it and also tries to warn people and also showing them ways to avoid the infections.

6.3. 19th and 20th century playwrights and pandemics

The writers of the 1900s were also experiencing pandemics but they used confinement as a period for bringing new genres in writing. The past century playwrights came out with new techniques but were afraid even to speak of the diseases that played an undesirable havoc in their life. The later century changed this into some skeptic subject. Fintan Walsh says, "contagion is both real and metaphorical and is powerful tool for the playwright." He says that like the Elizabethan period where a woman acting on stage was considered a disgrace by the puritans, the religious people during various pandemics in the 19th century asked theatres to remain closed. But here they encouraged all kinds of religious gatherings. Now talking about contagions, the writers like Antonin Artaud born in 1896 used plague as a concept to tell how the theatre must affect the onlookers. In his work, *Theatre and its double*, he writes in his chapter, 'Theatre and the plague' that, "Like plague the theatre must affect our brain and Lungs" meaning every one watching in theatre must be affected mentally and so he states, "Theater must leave a scar; It must address all of our senses; penetrate through the skin." Thus, the *Theatre of Cruelty* emerged. He says that he sees the actors as an animated hieroglyph and enjoy theatre as a ceremony. *The State of Siege* by Albert Camus written in 1948 was one more play written on Plague. It portrayed the "State of Emergency" according to him. So, in a way plague has made playwrights use it as a concept to attack certain political crisis also as in Albert Camus's *The State of Siege*. In fact, in his novel, *The Plague* (1947), he has written about the effects of plague in France. "Rats died in the street; men in their homes. And newspapers are concerned only with the street" is a famous quote about existentialism from his *The Plague*. The line better depicts the plague and also proves the critics' wise saying, "diseases and politics are inseparable." So, one thing is sure the plague as pandemic has led to, *Theatre of the Absurd*, *Theatre of Cruelty*, *Realism* and *Theatre of Existentialism* which all showed how the theatre was more than an entertainment and also material wealth was short-lived.

6.4. Apocalyptic literature

The apocalyptic literature was thriving where a prophetic type of writings created sensual display and drama reached its peak. ‘It is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism’ - writes H. Bruce Franklin in an essay on Ballard. Apocalypso is an emergence of a tradition of writing about imaginative things. Authors who saw the physical effects of pandemics started imagining how it would be if a contagion brings about an end of the world. Apocalyptic writings were considered as prophetic writing in the ancient Greek period but the 19th-century playwrights and novelists used it in science context writing about Zombies. “Greek and Christian thought—both major influences on current western society—portray the world as an increasingly corrupt place but the apocalypse resets the world and removes the corruption,” says Stephen D O’Leary in his book, *Arguing the Apocalypse: A Theory of Millennial Rhetoric*. Pandemics have created a ‘Dystopia’ meaning ‘An imaginative society in which there is great suffering or injustice’ say critics. *The Last Man* by Mary Shelley (1826) is the first apocalyptic novel that was talking about the plague’s after-effects. This novel is said to be purely autobiographical as many elements she used shows us her personal loss. Her bereavement and waiting for a new beginning is purely evident in these lines in *The Last Man*: “The choice is with us; let us will it, and our habitation becomes a paradise. For the will of man is omnipotent, blunting the arrows of death, soothing the bed of disease, and wiping away the tears of agony.” (76). Next apocalyptic play one must consider worth telling is *Doctor Faustus* by Christopher Marlow (1592) and many more like them.

Later post-apocalyptic writings also emerged providing the effects of apocalypse on humans. These writings were mostly filled with macabre stories. The sci-fi novels of contemporary writers are the best examples that could be stated here in which Zombies and Robots rule humans. Both apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic works come under science fictions where former shows destruction and latter shows the aftermaths leading to the difficult process of rebuilding.

6.5. Dystopia and Utopia

The imaginary world envisioned with peace and order, making the living area ideally suitable for mankind is utopia whereas its opposite is dystopia where the world is imagined to be an embodiment of destruction and chaos. Madhusudana (2018) records that the first person to begin writing was Thomas Moore who wrote *Utopia* (1516) and it was published as a counterpart to Erasmus of Rotterdam’s *In Praise of Folly* (1509). Though not scientifically proven the writer of dystopic and utopic fictions seemed to predict future. It is also said that these writers take lot of efforts to do research on the scientific shortcomings in society and also how people exploit the natural resources and misuse them. The best example is Peter May’s *The Lockdown* (2020) about the deadly viral spread becoming a pandemic eventually leading to a worldwide quarantine. This was originally planned to be published in 2015 but delayed since the reviewers were of the opinion that it is absurdity that he presented and refused to publish.

6.6. Coronavirus pandemic and the recent theatrical works

Presently, the pandemic situation is also threatening the livelihood of not only the theatre professionals but also as before the audience who loved watching live theatrical plays. The

theatrical plays that were scheduled for staging were canceled but thankfully the internet has allowed to showcase their talents. Presently, the concept of one-man shows has gained its favour. They are mostly “Monologues” and they were from the Shakespearean plays like *King Lear*, *Hamlet*, and so on. Some playwrights prepare for the worse like the one named Anne Washburn who is now terrified seeing the present situation and in her interview to the New York Times said: “I was thinking about a pandemic, a fantastically quick-moving, incredibly mortal, sweeping humanity off the face of the earth pandemic. This is not that.” The article on March 30, 2020, in the same paper, *Has Your Dystopian Play Come in Handy?* by Alexis Soloski has given an account of the conversation with nine different playwrights who were prepared for the post pandemic productions before.

A playwright named James McLindon has adapted to a ten-minute show online for theatre lovers. He recently streamed his play; *This Is Your Captain* in Zoom. “One of the jokes in social media streams of playwrights is that we've been social-distancing forever! It's not new to us,” says McLindon in his interview to Jill Kaufmann. Recently a marathon named “Boston Theater Marathon XXII: Special Zoom Edition” was for cast in zoom on April 2-May 17 to encourage the rendering of ten-minute plays written by playwrights. “Previous years ten hour marathons with fifty plays were performed,” says McLindon. Some websites like these, naming one, playathome.org provide funding for playwrights. In India, a programme named “Quarantine Theatre Festival” by Arvind Gaur a theatre playwright, director and the founder of Ashmitha Theatre is streamed daily by 7 pm on the internet since the Indian government's lockdown from 18th to March 30th, 2020. It is laudable that it is the world's first innovative theatre festivity happening and it helps the survival of theatre because of these great men.

6.7. Different grounds open for creative heads during covid 19

The theatrical people and their creations were seen to have gained recognition when media gave an uplift and helped in reaching a large crowd besides the theatre goers. While television made recorded videos possible for common people live audio transmissions reached through radios in the 19th century. Science and technology not only made world information handy but made the theatrical people gain their fame and recognition. While social media provided enormous benefits in interlinking people across, it helped media people expand their territories. Once YouTube and Facebook were platforms for music and chatting with people or even sneak-peekers on celebrities unlike now they have become performance platforms. When all these gave hope for performers, now during pandemic situation such social platforms have expanded much more. A critic Gowri.S, in her article in ‘The Hindu on April 30,2020’, *Drama during Covid-19: How theatre is going online*, says, “From play-readings and performances on Facebook live, to apps that access playscripts, the online space is giving theatre lovers in the city the much-needed antidote to these grim days”.

Over-the-top (OTT) platforms have virtually compromised movie theatres while discussing live streaming. OTT may have contradictory perspectives, but it's assisted new media creators. They confront constraints, but growth forecasts are higher. People working online shouldn't watch uninteresting stuff. Web series and documentaries enabled new performers, directors, and writers get recognition. Peter Dinklage, an American actor famed for 'The Game of Thrones,' can be used to illustrate. His once-ridiculed physique was forgotten by his hard effort. These innovative inventions allowed players and directors to expose their work to the public

amid the Covid crisis, which closed theatres. Critics believe these networks will help manufacturers weather future crises.

7. Conclusion

To conclude it is clearly evident that no chains, bars and walls could stop theatrical literature. It gets revival at every hindering phases it faces. History has evidence that pandemics not only teach people that avarice and selfishness lead to disaster philosophically and also that nature has a way to repay the cruel deeds man proposes to. There are a few historians who say, Shakespeare, Isaac Newton, Edward Munch, Thomas Nashe and Giovanni Boccaccio whom history praises to have risen due to quarantine. Shakespeare is said to have written *King Lear*, Edward Munch painted beautiful Self Portraits, Nashe wrote *Summers Last Will and Testament*, Isaac Newton discovered 'The Theory of Gravity' and Boccaccio wrote *Decameron* in the 13th century during plague outbreaks in their times. If the above men could achieve greatness during a period deprived of technologies and advanced scientific inventions it is likely that anything is possible now not only for theatre professionals but also for every individual in any field around the world. As Jamie Saxon (2020) opines that literature as a work of art here, storytelling and plot-construction are the tools that individuals and societies incorporate to make sense of illness and health which helped them to construct meaningful totalities from scattered events and phenomena. Dein S. (2021) states that literature as a political critique always has a widespread appeal for almost two thousand years or so. When psychoanalysts see pandemics as symbolic death that frightens more than biological deaths, literature sees it as a transition that which warns the society the consequences of misdeeds that needs cleansing to prepare for the renewal in the world.

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