Recollecting Facts and Fiction: Revisiting Covid-19 Pandemic in Time Present and Past

*Rana Vaghela

Research Scholar, Department of English, Gujarat Vidyapith Ahmedabad

Abstract

The arrival of Covid-19 revised memories of past. The forsaken past suddenly came back to sight like mummies in Egyptian horror films. If we minutely observe scenario during on-going epidemic or pandemic, we would definitely acquaint ourselves with wide nature of disease and its impact on social structure. The sudden outburst destroys age old functioning and questions established norms. It is quite exciting to revisit lives during pandemic and examine them from multiple angels. It always surprises us with abrupt beginning and wide affecting manner which results in high death rates and panic scenario. Life during Covid-19 shared similar experience whiles the state of exception. The present paper seeks to revisit pandemic stricken society and examine it from various glances. It also shares some literary responses and theoretical approaches to understand epidemic in far better ways. Literary responses provide us records of different epidemic and pandemic happenings and bottom-level public behaviour while theoretical approaches map critical practices which provides deeper understanding of governing body.

Keywords: *Epidemic, pandemic, horror, exception, outburst*

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Introduction

It has been several months we have been dealing with newly emerged disease Covid-19. Corona-viruses are a large family of viruses, seven of them infect humans but three among them have devastating impacts such as SARS, MERS and now COVID-19. Covid-19 is a new strain of corona virus which was not found earlier in humans. Basically, it is a contagious disease which spreads through sneezing, coughing, human touch and physical proximity. It emerged in late December 2019 in Wuhan, a town in China, and within few weeks spread across the world. The World Health Organization on March 11, 2020 put Covid-19 under the category of global pandemic. Globally, as of 5:11pm CEST, 23 July 2021, there have been 192,284,207 confirmed cases and 4,136,518 death due to Covid-19, according to WHO Coronavirus (Covid-19) Dashboard. Almost in the beginning of 2020 it spread across the world and became the cause of worry for all governments. At the initial phase of the pandemic government imposed various restrictions to control spreading. In March 2020 government ordered all educational institutions to be closed. All students were sent home and continued academic activities virtually. But it was not sufficient, gradually public meetings and mass gatherings were prohibited. Only certain

numbers of people were allowed to gather, public and private transportation were ordered to carry half number of passengers than its capacity. But these all could not stop the infection, as a result government laid curfew for certain hours. Everybody was strictly informed to not step out of the door.

As the virus affected large number of population, government laid various restrictions against the large gatherings and used special force to control all sorts of meetings and public movements. Under the state of emergency people lost their freedom. Those labourers who were working far away from their native places were stuck where they were. Nobody was allowed to travel from one place to another. Many families divided and separated from one's own. Government declared certain portion of cities as the containment area. Thousands of people lost their job and business and succumbed to debt. Private institution and small businesses economically went down. The only business of sensitization was at its full bloom. In June the first wave gradually started declining, fresh cases were falling down daily. Small businesses and other institutions reopened with certain limitations and Covid appropriate behaviour. Those who returned home had to go through the period of quarantine. Everything seemed to be normal during last two months of 2020. Mass gatherings were still prohibited. The only field which could organize large gatherings was politics. They held public meetings for upcoming elections. Till the end of the 2020 all sector reopened. It was in the beginning of the February 2021 second wave hit the world. Case went on increasing again. As soon as government completed election process, it passed an order to shut up all field. Death rate went high in such a way that people had to wait for many hours at cremation. Hospitals had no sufficient bed for patients as a result they were dying on the roads while waiting for their turn. In the beginning of April 2021 second wave reached its pick and afterwards cases started falling down again. Experts have predicted that if we are not following certain precautions, will be experiencing third wave till October 2021 which will be more virulent than prior both waves. According to them, the only cure of not having third wave is to vaccinate all. Till June 2021 fresh cases had been falling down but in July 2021 it was increasing again.

The year 2020 totally changed people's way of living. Before this pandemic nobody had given such importance to their health which we are taking care of nowadays. People met mutually at any time without trying to know from which portion of city the visitor arrives. No one might have thought that their neighbour would become threat on their lives. People were moving freely and easily wherever they felt like going without having thought of being infected by others. People would have not even imagined that they will have to keep "social distancing" from others. Sanitization, vaccination, applying mask, period of quarantine all these were far beyond their common life. People may have not seen every face covered by mask. Nobody had thought that their freedom would be taken away. But after December 2019 life got changed. Suddenly people started paying too much attention to health. Medication and health care system became an inseparable part of daily life. People started doubting every person who comes outside the home. For the sake of health people are ready to sacrifice their freedom, neighbours, social life etc. Now we are living in such a world where we need to ask authority to perform any sort of social activity. We are not free to do what we were free to do before the pandemic. Before 2019 we might have not thought about the pain of losing our fundamental rights. Nowadays we are not allowed to gather anywhere. Of course government have allowed now to gather people but not exceeding to certain number of people. For instant, now government permitted people to perform marriage ceremony on certain conditions, and that is the invited people must not be more than hundred which created dilemma to organizer that whom to be invited and whom to not invite. Performer has to classified relatives who are more important than important.

Various theorists have used different tools to interpret epidemic such as the process of undifferentiation, sacrificial elements and scapegoating (Rene Girard), divine and demonic interpretation of disease (Frank M. Snowden) and most importantly biopower and biopolitics (Michael Foucault) and state of exception (Giorgio Agamben). These theoretical tools give us new insight to examine societal upheavals during epidemics. If we analyze today's condition according to these theoretical tools, we will get to know that the governing structure of today is same as it was before hundred years. For example before 20th century people were not given right to citizen such as right to privacy, right to life, right to liberty and right to freedom. In 20th century government started giving these rights to people but a sudden outburst of Covid-19 collapsed everything. Due to a virus our normal laws have been suspended and situational laws have been implemented which curtailed and withdrawn major rights of citizens by declaring the state of exception.

If we trace the history of various epidemics we would find that life during epidemic goes through similar experiences. Public behavior and socio-political movement remain mostly same in the time of epidemic. Literature shows us how different writers have represented life during various epidemics as a process of undifferentiation. All life is turned into death which is the supreme undifferentiation. The sudden outbreak of epidemic destroys the very structure of society, people try to escape by running away from highly populated areas to countryside with a view to save their life, death rate goes very high which results in shortage of cremation grounds, insufficient burial grounds to bury dead, people forsake not only dead bodies but their own relatives, shortage in the field of medication and hospitals, emergence of robbery and other ill activities, constant threat of unsound people, social upheaval- people goes through all these similarities during epidemics. If we examine any literary text dealing with the theme of epidemic, we would get such undifferentiation of public life during epidemic. For instance, if we read Defoe's *Journal of the Plague Year* and Camus' *The Plague* we will have the entire picture of society during epidemic. In *Journal* and *The Plague* we see how people vacate city as soon as plague bursts in society. Suddenly Death rate increases and people do not get enough medical facilities. Defoe deeply portrayed the incidents how people forsake infected family members to die and run away from them without performing their last rites. Our situation is not different nowadays. The outbreak of Covid-19 made us go through the same process. People are not willing to welcome those who come from outside, as we all know that this infection spreads through physical proximity, people tries to keep distance from even neighbors so far as possible. The second wave has shown us the insufficient hospitals and cremation grounds. Countries put prohibition on non-residents for visitation. Before 2019 people were migrating towards cities and after 2019 people have been shifting from cities to countries. Thus, we can relate our condition with those who had had epidemic in past times.

Different people interpret epidemics in different ways. People make their defence by putting someone ahead in catastrophe. Rene Girard's concept of sacrificial element and scapegoating helps us to understand epidemic far better way. Sacrifice harbors two other elements with it: purity and pollution. Purity and pollution are significantly related with social virtues and vices, goods and evils, moral and immoral which lie in human behavior. In order to purge and rejuvenate society someone has to sacrifice life. In different catastrophes society either found out virtuous men who could save the society willingly by sacrificing life or made someone responsible for catastrophe and forcefully made him pay for it. Thus, death is taken as, whether in singular or in vast number, purifier which is destroyer of all social injustice and brings some reform. The term 'killing' nakedly shows the brutal violence which society has never accepted because killing or making harm to other is against ethicsbut the term 'sacrifice' is positive in nature which legitimizes violence, it is almost like we are not doing injustice to dying one but it is for the sake of people's wellbeing. This is how we find scapegoat not only during epidemics but in normal life.

We all are familiar with the saga of Dadhichi in Hinduism who sacrifices his life so the Devas could make the weapon called "vajra" from his bones to defeat Asura. Dadhichi is made scapegoat with legitimization of violence. If we remove the label sacrifice, the sentence would be like Devas, the representative of virtues, are taking the life of Dadhichi. Like Asura epidemic is also considered as an enemy of society which takes life of numerous people. Like Devas, in various epidemics people found their scapegoats. What happens during epidemic is that government considers every individual spreader of contagion, as a result applies restriction on them. In the end of March 2020, Indian media and many in the government made Muslim gathering at Nizamuddin Markhaj an scapegoat for the spread of the virus. It was a clear case of turning minority community into a villain in the eyes of the majority. People have to willingly or unwillingly sacrifice their freedom as well as infected relatives. Those who get infection become scapegoat of system. Defoe, in his Journal, and Camus in The Plague nicely depicted how sacrificial elements work during epidemic. People of London and Oran have to end up their nearness with family members who got infection.

Religion remained inseparable part of human beings. We modify many things with regard to religion. Mostly religious people consider every disaster is sent by God. Whatever happens on the earth is in the hand of God. He sends drought, rain, earthquake, happiness and sadness etc. Frank M. Snowden in his work Epidemics and Society: From the Black Death to the Presentdescribes how people take epidemic from religious angle. He discusses how 'divine and demonic interpretation of disease' treats epidemic against the scientific temperament. According to divine interpretation of disease, epidemic is sent by angry God just because of disobedience and deadly sin of mankind. According to this interpretation,

those who obey God's will need not to fear, they would not get infection. Demonic view of disease believes that human faces epidemic because of the evil doers like witches and other evil spirits. Epidemic literature shows how writers from different time and place have depicted this notion in their texts. Father Panalox in The Plague believes that people are facing plague because they disobeyed God. Earlier Adam and Eve were free from worldly disease but their disobedience led them to their own destruction. The story of Pharaoh and his people shows the series of terrible plague faced by people due to their evil act.

Various critics responded epidemic as one which seizes the freedom of people. Government imposed various restrictions like containment and period of quarantine on society. How government regulates society during calamity affects public life. Today the entire world is going through the Covid-19 pandemic. We locked ourselves within four wall of the room, stopped meeting neighbors and friends, we are informed to act in certain ways outside the door, we are ordered when to go outside for shopping necessaries and when notto, government decided how many hours we can open our shop, we are permitted to meet only certain number of people together etc. In order to understand all these restrictions, pandemic and government Foucault's concept of biopower and biopolitics and Giorgio Agamben's state of exception will give us new way of thinking about power.Foucault suggests against the way of thinking about repressive power that most important kind of power in modern society doesn't repress at all. It works in a far subtler and less visible way. Biopolitics refers to the technologies, knowledge, discourses, politics and practices used to bring about the production and management of a state's human resources and biopower analyses, regulates, explains, controls and defines the human subject, its body and behavior. Foucault reads the texts of 18th century and writes that something interesting happened during the 18th century, we suddenly start to see prisons, workhouses, schools and barracks, police, military, hospitals which took hold of minds and bodies of the inhabitants and shape them according to certain discipline. Disciplinary power, according to Foucault, is designed to produce subjected and docile bodies.

What happens in pandemic is that a sudden wave comes where lots of people lost their lives. We don't have visible enemy like war. Even we don't know whether the enemy is inside or outside. Therefore, during pandemic "Epidemic Act" gives extraordinary power to state to control the enemy and protect body. As a result government imposes certain restriction on population because it considers that the enemy is not only within but now each body is enemy for the body of the state and as its body is contagious which can infect the other bodies, therefore it has to be quarantined and put behind the wall. Within the state it creates a zone of biopolitics where state allows certain kind of bodies to function and certain kinds of bodies not to function. During epidemic each body can be contagious and can infect other, as a result people have to prove whether their body is state-friendly of an enemy of the state by giving body samples. If we analyze today's scenario we will have a clear picture of governmental body and its functions. In order to save our lives from the infection of Covid-19 we have sacrificed our friends, freedom and even our social life and culture and those who resist government's decree are put behind the bar in the name of enemy of the state. But the fact is we don't know whether the laws government makes during the state of exception under the Epidemic Act will become an organizing norm for normal life after contagion. For instant, recently government formed a law under state of exception that public gathering is prohibited due to pandemic but we are not sure that in future if people protest against government and government will not apply this law to avoid public demand. If we examine any literary text dealing with the theme of epidemic, we would get the similar situation of people. For example, when plague outbreaks in London, as Journal shows, people throngs at Lord Mayor's door to get health certificate, Camus' *The Plague* also describes how people of Oran city need to have fitness proof in order to visit or vacate the city, for example, Raymond Rambert pleads Dr. Rieux to give him health certificate. Both the texts share similar condition of people.

Thus, the recent ongoing pandemic provided new gaze to our perceptions regarding society-state-disease. Examining disease from socio-political and literary-cultural sight might help us understand the functioning of society and state in better ways. The most unique characteristic of a disease, which draws attention of literary writers, is its impartiality and objectivity at some sense. It does not differentiate among rich and poor, friend and foe but affects equally to both categories. We must also examine other critical issues which are associated with modern medical practices. Is one is dealing with the politics of death, one would get how certain communities are marginalized using disease as a political tool, that is why we should examine disease from different gazes.

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