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## **Reincarnating Spatial Concepts in Pandemic Literature: Earlier Outbreaks Adjacent with Covid-19**

**Ivana Chowdhury**

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### **Abstract**

Generalising the literature emerging from the pandemic periods, back from black death to the ongoing novel coronavirus (Covid-19) in human, social, political, and ethical dimensions, will help human generations understand the panic, horrors, and enormous devastation of this contagious disease especially in human, social, political, and ethical dimensions. As a pandemic novel written in the time of social media we consume, literature focuses on the fact that how much separated we are based on things like our interests and media we consume. How has the pandemic changed our understanding of the pathogenesis of the disease and the science of illness? We are always worried and scared of the unknown- the unplumbed factors for all our scientific surveillance. There is a lot more than we would like to admit that we don't understand. But with that comes the idea that society survives after chaos, but fiction can ask what to look out for, and in some cases, can seem downright prophetic in hindsight. All writers create a space of illusion that exposes a real space but it is always reversed because it could be messy or ill-constructed or it can be jumbled up. But there is always hope, it is in literature's ability to show us that we have always survived, learned and adapted. Life after a pandemic not only exists, it creates the new normal. Here we will see how every outbreak from the very past to till now fuels us to open a window widely as an opportunity to gain knowledge for making our next steps better in a convalescent way.

**Keywords:** Outbreak, Spatial Concept, Knowledge, Heterotopia, Psychology.

Illness is the night-side of life, a more onerous citizenship.

Everyone who is born holds dual citizenship, in the kingdom of the well and in the kingdom of the sick. (Sontag, 1978, p.1)

Modern epidemiology was hardly a twinkle in our scientific eye until the mid-19th century; so we give it our best guess: magic, angry gods, too much phlegm in the system and not enough of the yellow bile, Original Sin, or an evil stinky cloud. To quote Sontag again, "Feelings about evil are projected onto a disease. And the disease (so enriched with meanings) is projected onto the world" (Sontag, 1978, p.58). The black death, which started in the mid-14th century and wiped out almost from 30 % to 60% of Europe's population, makes its way into a lot of medieval literature. In the scheme of human history, pandemics are nothing new, and in fiction they have been the inspiration for and stuff of nightmares for just as long. Pandemic literature provides us a convex lens to focus and bring out the real horror of pandemic experienced by people; specially its aftermath the sociological, physical and psychological impacts that the people witnessed during pandemic. The duty of any writer of the time is to exhibit or to reflect the society in a mirror of truth. Life may be a game but none of us are master players, coining the example that even stone-hearted, black-marketers, stockers are forced to think that world is not theirs. A cold virus can have more power than an army does. Coining the example: no army could make a global lockdown, a curfew or martial law but a pandemic virus like Covid19 can. Quotes born out of pandemic change the fate of nations or the world; for example, "when 'i' is replaced with 'we' even

illness becomes wellness” (Malcolm X, 2013), so that is the willingness or togetherness of the people of the world fighting against viruses and the pandemics. Wealth, power and prestige can mean little when a pandemic spreads their wings. Pandemic plays no favorites. Rich, poor, young and old, priest and peasant, all fall victim to this horrible power; it can easily wipe out a huge population of an entire town or village in a matter of days. Pandemic is something which is associated with science and rationality; so this is intended to bring these various disciplines together into a space in which we live today. There is always a pivotal connection between pandemic and sin, for example the very first instance between pandemic like plague and sin can be seen in Homer’s *Iliad* and Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex* where we see the helplessness and fear of the people when confronted with a pandemic like plague that affected that people of Greece and Athens. It was during the trojan war, at the time it was believed that the pandemic was sent by Greek God Apollo in anger for having abducted Chryseis (daughter of Apollo’s priest Chryses). So, this becomes the context in which we see early human experiences of pandemic that go back to the time before Christ. In the Bible also we have references to the plague, at that time it was criticized as a severe punishment given by God in response to committing sins of human beings. So it was believed that there was a supernatural element that was associated with the pandemic. But fear is something that controls the human being of that period and today as well. Though pandemics, described as the worldwide spread of a new disease (by WHO 2010) remind us that “the world is not ours”; literature shows us that it is a part of our civilization; it contains various aspects of life and more importantly it makes life possible. Here we will see how literary writings encourage us to enlighten hope in crisis period.

Therefore, the positioning of the narrator in pandemic literature is very important, specially the narrative voice who speak and about whom it is, it maybe the author or the characters, the psychological space of narrative and narrated; the time frame binding to culture and social rooting, and definitely the amalgamation of reality and fantasy all are subsequent in an isometric perspective of pandemic correspondence. If we go back to the mid 14th century, the instance of pandemic brings a discussion on the Black Death (1347-1352); a terrible catastrophe fell upon Asia, Europe, the Middle East and North Africa that changed the course of history. This black death or ‘bubonic plague’ was an outbreak of disease that killed one third of the European population. Then we had the Smallpox pandemic during 1870 to 1874 and also Cholera around 1871 to 1924. Thereafter we have the Russian flu or ‘Asiatic flu’ of 1889-1890. Another most fatal pandemic that came forth was Spanish Flu that outburst in between 1918 to 1919; France, China and Britain were also considered as the possible birthplaces of the virus, as was the United States, where the first case was found at a military base in Kansas on March 11, 1918. Sometimes news spread by the newspapers created misconceptions and rumours that led to falsification among people during that time, for example the illness of king Alfonso X111 in Spain. Then we had the H3N2 pandemic in 1968, it was caused by an influenza A (H3N2) virus. Then came HIV/AIDS in 1981, it has its roots in Kinshasa around 1920 and it started cross mutation from fishes and chimpanzees to humans. Another most important instance of pandemics is SARS during 2002 to 2004 (severe acute respiratory syndrome on 16th November 2002), an outbreak of this pandemic began in China Guangdong province, bordering Hong Kong. There is a unique way that early authors and thinkers tied disease to issues of morality and self. For example, Giovanni Boccaccio’s *Decameron* (1353), a descriptive anthology of tales in which Boccaccio narrates a story of ten people who flee from plague-ridden Florence to the countryside. In order to pass the time the party takes turns telling stories over each night during their self-quarantine. Here we find even during the black death, there were long stretches of boredom during social distancing. The stories of the listeners (and Boccaccio’s readers) are the ways through which the writers reconstruct the ghettoisation of their normal existence. The Pardoner’s Tale from Geoffrey Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales* written in 14th century conflates the treacherous, violent behaviour of three villains attempting to kill Death in the middle of the plague, to the sinful behaviour thought to bring plague on. Byron Lee Grigsby said about

Chaucer and his contemporaries: “Lacking any knowledge of vector-borne diseases, people of the Middle Ages were left to conclude that the plague was a consequence of simple behaviour. The job of the medical, theological, and literary community was to interpret the meaning of the plague, the causes of God’s anger and man’s sin”. (Grigsby, 2003, p.123). Another writer who caught between this genre was Daniel Defoe in his famous journal which is called *A Journal of the Plague Year* (1772). Here we find a detailed account of events with anecdotes during the great plague of London (1665). Over fifty years later (1772), Daniel Defoe exhibited historical documents for a realistic approach to the dangerous demonic outbreak plague’s impacts on the human life. Defoe presented the story as he was the eyewitness, an active participant of the events happening at that time. In 1665 when the plague

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outburst he was in his childhood and the book was published under a pseudonym initialized as H.F. It is an assumption that this initial H.F. refers to Defoe's uncle, Henry Foe, who used to live in the Whitechapel district of East London. There were no such mediums that could deliver or help people communicate with each other at that time to spread the news. It reminds us one of Defoe's quotes where he talks about the struggle of whole family compelled to be quarantined due to the spread of an infected family member: "...it was generally in such Houses that we heard the most dismal Shrieks and Outcries of the poor People terrified, and even frightened to Death, by the Sight of the Condition of their dearest Relations, and by the Terror of being imprisoned as they were" (Defoe, 1722, p.35). Finally, Defoe ends as:

A dreadful plague in London was

In the year sixty-five,

Which swept an hundred thousand souls

Away; yet I am alive! (Defoe, 1722, p.147)

So, the narrator here places himself in a time frame that is 50 years back from the time that he wrote the particular journal and then talks about specific places. Now when we come to Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* (1826), kind of apocalyptic fiction, we find a portrayal of the future world that had been wrecked by plague. So, there we have a past word being brought to the narration. It is a story of Lionel Verney, he himself was the storyteller, as the title goes it was about the last man. She envisions a futuristic Britain where one last man survives; it is more about man animal living and cohabiting together. So the novel was written in 1826 and the novel is placed at the end of the 21st century even beyond our times. So, at the end we can analyse that in *The Last Man* he is not the last man. There arise the chances of hope. Edgar Allan Poe's *Masque of the Red Death* (1842) featured the indolent, greedy Prince Prospero and his entourage's unsuccessful attempt to escape from the dangerous plague. It talks about how human beings respond to plague that is the main question and that has been answered by Allan Poe in this book. As York University professor Brett Zimmerman writes: "Prospero and his guest employee art and the carnal pleasures to forget death and disease...[but] on some deep level they recognise the futility, the vanity, of their hedonistic and aesthetic atoms to forget disease, darkness, decay, and death" (Zimmerman, 2009, p.49). By Edgar Allan Poe's lifetime in the mid 19th century, however, science began to fill in the gaps concerning disease that had previously been speculation; germ theory and pasteurization. But in order for there to be a story, first the disease has to spread, and again as we have regrettably learned in our current situation, misinformation can become a PLAGUE of its own.

One surprising thing is that Ernest Hemingway, Fitzgerald and other well known writers live during the period around 1910 but they did not talk about the plague; they did not talk about what had affected the American society and it was Jack London who was to talk to us about the prominent things that had faded ever in history particularly with reference to what writers have to say from America. Jack London is a writer who was not very well known apart from his stories like *The Call of the Wild* and *White Fang*. What is interesting here is the assumption today during this covid-19 that we suspect that perhaps there is a biological warfare that has been launched from China. Then *The Scarlet Plague* written by Jack London in 1912 became one of the first post-apocalyptic fictions in modern literature. London writes of the terror of a disease that science could not cope up with. With no clear incubation period, and death coming from within 15 minutes to 2 hours of the first symptoms, news of this spread is censored in the papers to avoid panic- much like it was during an outbreak of bubonic plague in San Francisco's Chinatown in the early 1900s. In London's book, economic grade and the herds of people fleeing cities in terror, further spreading the disease, is the doom of civilization. Failed government response, or sometimes even government- engineered pandemics, became a popular concept in pandemic literature during the 20th century. The novel is set in 2073, so many years forward from even the time that we are living and a narrative here is Granser, who is called James Harvard Smith. Granser is the grandfather of a group of children narrating to them the history of the plague in 2013 and grandson relives his past history as a projection of 2030. So here we find the time scales and also the social spaces are really appreciative and consistent. So here we find a character as grandfather who talks about a

plague in 2013 to his grandchildren in 2073 in a novel that is published in 1912 which talks about the Scarlet plague; so we have so many different time scales of interaction of human experience being expressed. It frightened the people by “the astonishing quickness with which this germ destroyed human beings, and [by] the fact that it inevitably killed any human body it entered. ... from the moment of the first signs of it, a man would be dead in an hour. Some lasted for several hours. many died within ten or fifteen minutes of the appearance of the first signs.” (London, 1912, p.3). Therefore, as a matter of fact civilization fell apart after the plague. Connie Willis writes the book “Doomsday book” in 1992, sets the time of the novel in 2050 and goes back to the society of the 1300s.

Literature is an attempt to make us realize that this is not something that has come out of nowhere but it is something that has been a part of our living experience. The last novel where we find the instances is the Canadian writer Margaret Atwood’s *Oryx and Crake* (2003). It is a kind of apocalyptic fiction, set in a near-future New England after the outbreak of an apocalyptic plague with large parts told in flashbacks that take place before the outbreak. There is Snowman who appears as last true human. Though he is not alone here, there are genetically modified humans that somehow survived the plague called crakers which are first described as naked children of every skin color that are also resistant to UV radiation. Here we see how the concept of humanity became a debatable question through the survival flashback stories of Snowman. In Stephen King’s *The Stand*, a flu-like respiratory virus kills over 90% of the people on earth and the survivors have to live out a God-vs-devil chess game. As bad as King’s pandemic is, it is made much worse by incompetent and war-focused governance. Then came *Outbreak* (1987) by Robin Cook, which was a bestseller in the late 1980s, which echoed the public sphere of germ warfare and the inability of the government to stop the plague. *Illuminae* by Amie Kaufman and Jay Kristoff presents the intrinsic horrible plague where all people became infected and were trapped in closed quarters. When the ships seem to turn on its own people to rescue them the people closed it as they were very much terrified by the gruesomeness of the infection. Unfortunately, we find at last that the plague spreads and demolish the population through the ships.

But pandemic can also be a good opportunity to explore what it means to be human, and what crisis does to our humanity. French novelist Albert Camus (the great ‘moralist of the absurd’) who used the pandemic as a vehicle to explore the “we live in a society” experience in his novel *The Plague* (1947), in which he uses plague as a symbol to talk about war, occupation and oppression. The setting of the novel is in the town of Oran, it is a large French port of the Algerian coast, a chronicle narrated by a person who has seen it, heard from others and gathered data begins with a description of the town, sets it in geographical space beside hills with its back to the sea, in time scales of different seasons, different from each other, then we find in psychological space of inhabitants, who are numbed to emotions and passions except to make money, in a social space that rotates round work and set pastimes, no relationship that are binding or warm. So, the town was described as treeless, glamourless, soulless, and finally it ends by seeming restful and after a while in April 16 Dr Rieux sees the first dead rat on his way up to his apartment. The discomfiture leads to query anxiety, to alarm an uncontrolled fear. Albert Camus later refers to his own experiences during the occupation of world war second when he was in German: “I want to express by means of the plague the stifling air from which we all suffered and the atmosphere of threat and exile in which we all lived” (Camus, 1965, 53). In *I Am Legend* by Richard Matheson in 1954 a pandemic not only wipes out most of the world’s population but the ones that are left are now vampires; the changed people are horrifying, and they are all that is left. But the book ends with the protagonist’s realisation that the people he had taken for monsters actually had a society of their own, and saw him as the horrible monster that hunted them while they slept. Again in *Station Eleven* (2014) by Emily Saint John Mendel a flu wipes out most of the population and the survivors split into cults and travelling Shakespeare companies. To quote Professor Grigsby on the subject of plague in the middle ages:

eventually the plague becomes so common that people begin to deal with it as a normal part of the human experience... the disease, consequently, becomes part of normal experience. If one lives long enough, he or she will experience plague, either directly or indirectly. (Grigsby, 2003, p.125)

And of course no discussion on pandemic literature would be complete without talking about zombies and other creatures that turn the sick into monsters. “Zombies”, like all undead monsters, can represent a whole slew of things. From the dangers of science to Haitian slavery, fears of globalisation to commentaries on political parties. They are kind of like a catch-all for everything we are afraid of. A zombie outbreak or pandemic is even something CDC (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention)

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used as a way to teach people about emergency preparedness. One of the most famous literary interpretations of a zombie plague is Max Brooks' *World War Z* (2013), a recorded 'oral history' of the survivors of the undead pandemic. Brooks says that he uses zombies as a substitute for real-world plagues. He wrote *World War Z* and *The Zombie Survival Guide* (2003) as a way to explore what would happen to the majority of the population if such a tender meet occurred, saying that it "most people would die from what the military calls second- or third-effects... for every person who dies from a zombie bite, how many people would die from sickness or infection?". *The Walking Dead* (2010) comic series is an example of how large -scale pandemics affect communities on a more micro level. Tensions arise not only because they are trying to survive flesh-eating monsters, but because race, gender, religion, sex and politics still effect day to day life. When it is revealed that every living human is infected with the Zombie virus, the social dynamics become even more pronounced. Zombies pop up in parody literature, like in romance novels *Warm Bodies* (2010) of Isaac Marion. It is not all depressing mass destruction all the time. But the genre is not just about what the disease does to people- in some occasions, disease itself can be a character. In the *Expanse* series, the protomolecule, what looks initially to be nothing more than a horrible infectious agent, might sort of also be kind of a hivemind. And ultimately radically alters the trajectory of human civilization. And in Orson Scott Card's *Ender* series, there is a virus called the Descolaba which is not only integral to life on its home planet, it is also deadly if it gets off world- which is complicated further by the discovery that it might actually kind of be sentient. Interesting to note that in these examples the disease doesn't think or act like a human- it operates on its own logic, and on its own ends. The same could be said for diseases in the real world; they are not an invisible enemy to fight, they are not an antagonist to go to war with. Living through a pandemic is scary and stressful- it would be a discursive to ask all to not honour those feelings. John Scalzi's *Lock In* (2014) series is an example of books that are not about the experience of pandemic itself, but it deals with locked-in syndrome, the world that arises after the dust has settled- how society has adapted to this and now includes the entire class of people who only with this disability that resulted from the pandemic. According to *World War Z* author Max Brooks: "when I was thinking up an origin story for my fictional pandemic... I needed an authoritarian regime with strong control over the press. Smothering public awareness would give my plague time to spread, first among the local population, then into other nations. By the time the rest of the world figured out what was going on, it would be too late" (Brooks, 2006, p.5).

Now if we talk about the spatial concepts. Then there has to be the references of the six principles of heterotopias that Michel Foucault has talked about in the preface to *Order of Things, Preface from An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (1994). The six principles are heterotopia of crisis and deviation; heterotopia of emplacement and displacement; heterotopia of juxtaposition; heterotopia of time; heterotopia of opening and closing; heterotopia of illusion and compensation. Heterotopia is a sort of simultaneously mythic and real disputation of the space in which we live. How can we talk about a pandemic without being critical? They are very much different as we know from the Utopias and Dystopias that we are familiar with; the utopia is always a better world or ideal world and dystopias are always a gruesome but the in-between space- the discursive contradictory space- world within world, the 'other' space is what we call the Heterotopia. They are always deviant from the norms like prison (that is a contained space), and retirement homes that are also seen as Davians from the old people who go and find the space for themselves and the way they live the cultural space that they generate and they occupy is very different. If we talk about the panoptic condition that Foucault discussed then we should bring in discussion that there is a Panoptic condition, here what happens is we are controlled and we are disciplined like we are given some protocols, rules and regulations that we should wear masks; we should sanitize and maintain social distances; so, these are all power constructions that control us. And here comes another point i.e. the cemetery in the context of the west as Foucault believes that the cemeteries are very close to human habitation then the time comes when they were moved out into the outskirts because they almost infringed upon human life so there is always the spatial contestation that goes on when we are talking about pandemics.

Now the question comes how does this pandemic affect humans. How it affects the knowledge space that can be ideological space or a mental space or even social space; it can even be a mathematical space of proportions, it can be a physical and geographical space and it can also be a non-knowledge



space, what we call the practical daily life space. If we look at our own daily life today it is so different from what it had been a year back. When we talk about pandemic literature it is not only about historical details it is also about how people in different periods of history reacted to this pandemic and how imaginative writers have thought to illustrate it and to describe it and give it a new dimension and perception. Here we can borrow a quote from Michel Foucault at this point where he talks about knowledge “there is nothing prior to knowledge because knowledge is defined by a combination of the visible and that which can be articulated and is unique to each stratum or historical formulation”. So we the human beings are always in a circle of practice, our understanding controls our behavioral patterns, so thus we are confronted by an ‘indefinite multitude of spaces’ that can be geographical space, economic, demographic, sociological, ecological, political, commercial, national, global. Therefore, travel has become a casualty. What are the economic dimensions that pandemics have brought to our country, many people have gone out of jobs; how was the demographic skill really effective as the population has died. So, we find that in every mention of a pandemic there seems to be an indefinite multitude of spaces. It is not just a sickness or an illness; it is something that has in fact caught us in its claws and has made us realise that these claws penetrate every knowledge or the thinking processes of a human being. However, if we move our focus from euro-centric references to indigenous portrayals of pandemics we see some excruciating stories for example the remarkable memoir of Hindi poet Suryakant Tripathi *A Life of Misspent* (2016) that talks about the spread of influenza epidemic in early 20th century. Even in *Chaturanga* (1916) of great Indian playwright Rabindranath Tagore we come to know about a severe outbreak of plague devastating the entire village through the central character Saachis’ heart breaking story. Another writer who belongs to this genre is Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay who dealt with pandemics like malaria, plague, cholera and small pox in his heart touching stories like *Palli Samaj: The Homecoming*, *Pandit Mashai*, *Srikanta*. He portrayed the protagonists in altruistic attitude who are always willing to jump in rescuing task without any fear. Interestingly, here also we find a strong comparison of pandemics with God’s punishments as the villagers started worshipping Goddesses like ‘Manasa’, ‘Olaichandiand’, ‘Sitala’ and ‘Bonobibi’.

In such a chaotic situation like this how can reading literature help, comfort and guide us? Reading literature can help us to understand this whole situation and its effect on us, our psychology, our society and our world. Because humans have witnessed such situations many times in the past and a great deal of literature has also been written on it which is referred to as pandemic literature. The covid19 outbreak and the situation of lockdown have increased the sale of pandemic literature all over the world because people can relate their own situation with the pandemic fiction they are reading. The pandemic fiction like *The Plague* by Albert Camus is very relatable to our current situation. There are some infected people in the novel who are kept away from their family. Now when we read such a story, we get totally involved in it because the situation described in the book is not so different from ours. In our voice also there are many cities or areas which are still and many people are quarantined or isolated. Along with that we can also relate to the behaviour psychology problems and actions of the characters in a novel.

Reading and studying such literature will help us to handle our own situation. In the present scenario turning to literature will give us the strength and courage to deal with the outbreak of the spreading pandemic because literature teaches us to learn from the past so that we can avoid the cavities in the present and future. The present situation has made us morally down because when the bad time comes it is impossible to be rational. And literature actually gives us the idea of what would be done in such a crisis because similar kinds of situations are described there. That is the reason why the stories of pandemics are widely read as people want to know and understand the current situation and find some remedy to it. These pandemics have a deep connection with human beings therefore the stories related to them are more appealing to us because they represent human action and thought and indirectly, we learn that we all need to stay together and help each other through these difficult times. This literature can also help us to know our responsibility towards our family and our society. Our lifestyle has totally changed due to this pandemic but at least we can learn to be positive through literature because we now understand that we are dealing with a common disease. Literature balance is the behavioural change of the affected community, meaning the epidemics affect people psychologically so reading literature can balance our behaviours. This is not the first time when

literature has come to the world so when bending has affected the world; already in the past these have affected the people; but again, with care, cooperation and with coordination the world has overcome the distractions of it. Therefore, literature balance is a behavioral change of the effect of community. No writer can completely wipe out the human race from the face of the earth because of hope at the end. Therefore, sometimes art imitates life, and sometimes life imitates art.

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### **Bio-note**

Ivana Chowdhury is a junior research fellow of the English department in Raiganj University, and side by side she is working as an assistant teacher in a school. She has pursued her graduation and post graduation under North Bengal University. Besides being college topper and university silver medallist, she developed an immense interest in detective and crime fiction, therefore that zeal brought her in the research area of detective fiction. She is presently working on Satyajit Ray’s *Feluda*. She has also qualified for the GATE exam in her first attempt. She has published two articles in reputed international journals and one book chapter as well.

Email id- ivanachowdhury1995@gmail.com