

## LITERATURE, PANDEMIC AND GLOBALIZATION

RavindraKumar,  
Dept. of English,  
CCS University, Meerut

Change is a universal phenomenon; it is a rule of nature. We change the world and the world changes us, we change the words and the words change us. Anything that does not change becomes dead. This change can be understood through three waves. There was a time when life was community centered, village centered and family centered. Life was rural and settled and feudalism was the accepted norm of life. This was the time of the agrarian revolution categorized as the first wave. Then started the phase of the industrial revolution that opened gates to urbanization and capitalism. Life, during this phase, became urban and migrative and mechanical. The institutions like office came into existence. The group of powerful people transplanted and imposed their ideas on others on the name of universalization. Then the world witnessed the phase of the informative or microchip revolution. It brought the highly developed technological tools like robots and computers into entity. Due to the electric revolution, the home became the office. Men and women got equal opportunities and, interestingly, women grasped these opportunities with both hands. Today, women are leading from the front in all the fields of politics, science, business and defense. Life became global and globalization was projected as an antidote to all problems across the globe. But the question is- can this globalization be really a solution to all problems? Or it has become a fatal source of problems and evils we all are facing today?

It's true that globalization has brought the world under one umbrella where distance is not a matter of concern at all. Today you can sail to any corner of the world in less than one circle of the Sun; you can talk to your friends and relatives face to face even though the distance is more than fifteen thousand miles. In fact, the globalized world has given miraculous and fecund gifts of technology to the mankind where things seem to be coated with colorful layers of beauty. Unfortunately, this beauty, like all things in the world is short lived. Right now this

globalization seems to be a harbinger of a deadly disease in the form of an invisible virus i.e. the Covid-19 to the world. History repeats itself in various mysterious and unfathomable forms; like civilization, it is cyclical. Pandemic also repeats itself in its disguised forms- sometimes in the form of the Black Death, sometimes in the form of the Plague and now it is showing its killing tooth and claw in the form of the Covid-19. It hit the entire Europe in the form of the Black Death from 1347 to 1353. It was the most devastating pandemic recorded in human history resulting in the death of around two hundred million people. Then England faced the Great Plague of London sending around one million people to their last destination.

And now the horrible threat of the deadly Corona virus looms large on the bruised bosom of the mankind across the world. The infection has embraced more than two hundred nations, infecting more than twenty million people and sending more than one million people to their dim dwelling place across the globe. Eminent doctors, researchers, scientists and thinkers are doing their best to check the spread of this incurable virus. But right now the virus seems to be unstoppable as if it has decided to annihilate the world that is already huffing and puffing with its hands on its knees. The very institute where I am employed seems to be a desolate bunch of buildings gripped in fear. The whole campus and its all Departments that used to remain overcrowded are locked completely. The sounds of students, teachers and student leaders have been replaced by the howling of dogs as the entire campus has become a shelter place to them. Adding fear to this, their howling, as words go, reminds me of a kind of ill-omen approaching some dreadful calamity in the near future. The evenings and the mornings on the campus look pleasant, beautiful and unpolluted but the absolute absence of human souls on its roads fills my bosom with a strange fear. It seems to be a kingdom of killing tranquility where desolation is the new monarch. People are rarely seen on the roads, and if by chance they are visible, they maintain a fair distance following the rules of social distancing, nay avoiding the shadow of death. Perhaps untouchability has entered a new phase of democracy where everyone seems to be an untouchable. Even the air, the vital and essential source of survival, seems to have a coating of venom. No meetings, no greetings, no touching, embracing or contacting- these have become common instructions to all irrespective of caste, creed, religion and age. The very atmosphere of almost all the Indian homes narrates the same story of physical isolation and mental depression where each soul is occupied with doomsurfing and doomscrolling. Is it

the wrath of Zeus who is conspiring against his own children for some grave fault done on their part?

Since I am a student of literature, I very strongly feel that literary authors are gifted with esemplastic imagination and they, directly or indirectly, state something which becomes relevant in all the ages. Literature teaches us lessons in different ways. Artists have been the very thinkers and philosophers thinking ahead of their time and, interestingly, what they have stated seems to be true at the present time. So many statements of different authors are floating today before my eyes. Thomas Kempis, the German author of *The Imitation of Christ*, was absolutely apt when he said, "Man proposes, God disposes." Means, we can make any plans we want, but it is God that decides their success or failure. Shakespeare has also stated the same idea using different words: "There is a divinity that shapes our ends, rough hew them how will." That's why we must be ready to face the worst situations because even a few dozen hours can change the course of life. This time China's Wuhan has affected the entire cosmos. Let us have a look at what Gloucester said in Shakespeare's *King Lear*,

As flies to wanton boys are we to th' gods,

They kill us for their sport.

The abject cruelty and senseless brutality culminated in the lines mentioned above can well be paralleled to the deadly attack of the invisible, winged ministers of the Corona Virus. An agnostic like me can find an excuse to negate the omnipotence of God and his so called benevolence. I may even go to the extent of calling Him a sadist who is killing mankind for his entertainment. The lesson I would like to grasp and suggest others to receive is that this world is like a stage where we are helpless spectators only. We are merely puppets whose threads are in the hands of an invisible power that makes us dance in a way it wants. As common people and spectators in this world, we can learn from the consequences of the everyday Oedipuses and Creons. What Shakespeare's Macbeth utters in one of his speeches seems to be a fitting truth at the present time of this pandemic:

Life's but a walking shadow,

It is a tale

Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury

Signifying nothing.

Of course, life is only a shadow that keeps changing. In the morning(the youth) it is behind us, and in the evening(the old age) it appears in front of our body. But in the present circumstances, this shadow can envelop any of us any time. It is around all of us in a disguised form.

I cannot justify this article without mentioning two classic books *The Plague* and *Year of Wonders*. First, let us talk about *The Plague* by Albert Camus. The novel gives an existential insight into the world and that is human beings, as mortals, live under an inexplicable, irrational, completely absurd death sentence. The book is a classic example of existentialism propounded by the Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard who states that we exist first and then we spend our entire life in creating a meaning of life out of our existence. It further states that life has no meaning and that's why it should be lived only for the sake of living and nothing else; the truth of life is that it is suffering. In *The Plague*, Camus uses the effects and consequences of the epidemic to examine human nature and the human condition in the face of its own mortality. The book is set in the city of Oran in French Algeria. It begins with Dr. Bernard Rieux who finds several dead and dying rats on his way to home. Soon he declares that a plague has descended on Oran. After initial hesitation, the authorities of Oran take action and consequently the city is locked down and the whole city is quarantined. The sense of being cut off from others weighs heavily on everyone in Oran. Shortage of medicines and medical facilities adds more salt on the already wounded Oranians. A priest, Father Pameloux, preaches that plague is a punishment from God and his sermons draw larger crowds as panicked citizens seek solace. The city grows violent, people try to escape and finally martial law is imposed. Dead bodies are buried without ceremony and emotions focusing on getting the dead bodies into the ground as soon as possible. Things become horrific as hospitals and cemeteries are overcrowded. And finally the bad phase comes to an end as the disease begins to decline. The city gates are opened and Oran finds the long awaited opportunity to celebrate. The novel ends announcing that battle against plague has been won but there is a possibility that the epidemic may reappear in Oran or some other town. Most of the events of Oran can be paralleled to the present situations across the world. But my concern is to focus on the moral of the book. Dr. Rieux presents an objective view of the events without trying to make himself look good. We can learn from Dr. Rieux who served the suffering Oranians without presenting himself a hero. This is quite contrary to the people at the present time who want popularity while making charity. Even charity is on sale today. The nub of the book lies in the final statement of Dr. Rieux who ends

the story with the belief that he witnessed more good than bad from the people of Oran while dealing with the plague. “In fact there is more good in humans than bad”, says Dr. Rieux. I do agree with the Dr. as good people still exist even in this mundane world of fret and fever. And that’s why the mankind is still alive.

*Years of Wonder: A Novel of the Plague* by Geraldine Brooks is another classical book based on the theme of pandemic. It is inspired by the true story of an isolated village in England, Eyam in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The book is set in a village Eyam, known as the plague village as the entire village is in the grip of pandemic. The plague spreads through the shipment of clothes from London received by George who is a tailor in Eyam. Again we find countless dead bodies in Eyam, again so many helping hands and the bright face of humanity we witness. But the best example of decency has been set by the villagers of Eyam and they set an example before the world. All the villagers quarantined themselves to prevent the spread of the disease to the rest of the country. This is something rare and we, the so called modernized denizens of this highly globalized world, need to learn this sense of decency from the villagers of Eyam. Had they wanted, they would have easily fled from the village to save themselves and their family members. But they didn’t do so; instead they preferred to confine themselves within their homes to wait for death that was imminent. Can we really follow the footsteps of these villagers? Can we also demonstrate this decency? I think we must for the sake of humanity.

Whether democracy is followed adequately even in the most democratic nations of the world or not is a matter to ponder over. But in the kingdom of death, democracy is absolutely just. Death is the greatest democratizer and that’s why it lays its icy hand on all irrespective of any caste, class, religion or status. It is not that the world is witnessing a deluge of dead bodies for the very first time in its history. Relevant record reveals that every year around twenty billion people across the world are infected with Malaria out of which approximately four millions die. The Tuberculosis Bacteria infects one billion people out of which around 1.5 millions die across the globe. And the number of people killed by impure water is more than the number of people killed by Malaria, Tuberculosis and AIDS combining together. The fact to be noted here is that the diseases like Tuberculosis and Malaria devoured the lower strata of all societies of the world, which is not a case with the Covid-19. If I am not wrong, this Corona virus has embraced prosperous people more than the labor class. This may be one of the reasons why the world media is giving larger than life coverage to it.

Coming back to globalization again, I would like to say that it has both sides-sunny as well as seamy. It has gifted to the mankind unique creativity almost in all the fields. Most importantly, it has brought unreachable things to the reach of common people and has made life easier to them. But at the same time it has given to the world the most devastating threat in the form of the Corona Virus. But to blame globalization for it will be a bit harsh and unjustified too. It is up to we people how to use the globalized world for the safety and welfare of the mankind. At the first instance it seems to be a fault of the Chinese government that kept misinforming the world for around two months. Even today China seems to be reluctant to share authentic information on it. Had China acted promptly and honestly in sharing the disease with the world, the situation would not have been as critical as it is today.

But as I have mentioned earlier, we need to learn some lessons from this situation. Let us put our jealousies and antipathies aside to fight it out; let us not utter even a single word that can contaminate the idea of peace and brotherhood, let us not be a victim of infodemic. Survival is the only war we can afford right now, let us all sacrifice the idea of hostility for the sake of a better future for our children. Let us replace the hatred of our bosoms with the very idea of love as it is the only emotion that can sustain the world. Love is the keelson of creation; let us keep it alive. I would like to conclude it with some lines of Arnold's "Dover Beach" presenting the very epitome of love:

Ah, love, let us be true

To one another! For the world, which seems

To lie before us like a land of dreams,

So various, so beautiful, so new,

Hath really neither joy, nor love nor light,

Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;

And we are here as on a darkling plain

Swept with confused armies of struggle and flight,

Where ignorant armies clash by night...