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Pandemic and Brain Chaos: A Journey into the Shifting Perceptions of Reader

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Abstract:

Pandemic and epidemic had been always a persistent element in our history. What makes pandemics similar across geographic locations and time is not the presence of germs and viruses but that the human response follows the same pattern. As we were confined within the four walls of our houses during lockdown, literature helped us to break the barrier, connecting us across different historical periods. In the project the researcher has elucidated the influence of pandemics upon literature and has also tried to reinterpret certain earlier works in the light of covid pandemic. The characteristic features which were considered to be the specific traits of Romantic period were actually the aftermath effects of tuberculosis which outbreak during that time. The Romantic imagery of tuberculosis was popular during that time and it can be found in the works of Keats and Shelley. Shelley's poem Ode to the West Wind can be read in quite different way by connecting it to the present pestilence. It is during great havoc we realize the absurdity of life. Every pestilence has the power to stimulate absurdism. The Metamorphosis by Franz

Kafka is a perfect example for absurdist fiction. We could find the same alienation and estrangement felt by the covid patients in the protagonist of the novella, Gregor Samsa. Gregor Samsa wakes up in the morning to find himself transformed into a huge insect which was not anticipated by him in the previous night, just like how the covid patients succumb to covid now a days. The project also discusses about a well-known poem by Wilfred Owen, Mental Cases. The front-line workers are compared to the soldiers who participate in the war. Like the soldiers, the mental state of frontline workers gets devastated. A new perspective is conferred to the poem Mental Cases. Reading perspectives change after the arrival of the fatal disease, thereby a massive change occurred in pedagogy as well. That paradigm shift in the reading perception is being discussed in the project.

Keywords: Pandemic, epidemic, lockdown, literature, paradigm.

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“Illness is the night side of life more onerous citizenship. Everyone who is born holds dual citizenship, in the kingdom of the well and the kingdom of the sick. Although we all prefer to use only the good passport, sooner or later each of us is obliged, at least for a spell, to identify ourselves as citizens of that other place.” (20, Sontag)

Sontag says that everyone is born with dual citizenship. Either one will be born into the kingdom of wellness or the kingdom of the sick. No matter to which ever kingdom one is born they will be, later in their life, forced to emigrate to the other kingdom. Pandemic and epidemic have been always persistent elements in the history. Though they occur at irregular intervals of time, every pandemic outbreak has an immense influence on human psychology and also influences the literature composed during that time. As all are confined within the four walls of their houses during the lockdown, literature helps to break the barrier, connecting us across different historical periods.

Intensive thought on many literary genres, trends etc. has led to a conclusion that they were slightly affected by the pandemic outbreak that occurred during that time. Certain characteristic features which were considered to be the specific traits of the romantic era were the aftermath effects of tuberculosis. Shelley’s Ode to the

West Wind can be read in a quite different way by connecting to the present scenario. Another fact is that it is during great havoc people realize the absurdity of life. Every pestilence has the power to stimulate absurdism. While reading, the all-time greatest absurdist fiction, *Metamorphosis* in the light of the covid pandemic, one can easily relate it to their present condition. The research paper also confers a different meaning to Wilfred Owen’s war poem *Mental Cases* by correlating the experiences of soldiers on the battlefield and those frontline workers who wage war against the Coronavirus.

Romanticism was an artistic, literary, and intellectual movement that originated in Europe towards the end of the eighteenth century. In the eighteenth century in Western Europe, tuberculosis had become epidemic with a mortality rate as high as nine hundred deaths per one lakh inhabitants per year, more elevated among young people. For this reason, tuberculosis was also called the robber of youth. Tuberculosis affects almost all parts of the body. Tuberculosis did become the subject of literature and opera and tuberculous Romantic poet occupied a peculiar place for a time in nineteenth-century European culture. The Romantic imagery of consumption that was popular during the Romantic Era is closely associated with the poets of that time, particularly the life and works of John Keats.

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Another notable romantic poet is Percy Bysshe Shelley. Some of his poems were composed against the backdrop of tuberculosis. Part of the Victorian legend of tuberculosis was that it supposedly stimulated a mental activity that increased creative output. This seemed to make sense, in as much as so many writers and musicians of the era suffered from a chronic respiratory infection. In his work *The Power of Plagues*, Irwin Sherman displays “an eminent gallery of victims of tuberculosis” that includes a remarkable sample of the most productive luminaries in the history of literature and art. Shelley has written a plethora of poems with varied themes and one among them is *Ode to the West Wind*, which while re-reading in the light of pandemic gives the readers another spectrum of meaning which wasn’t anticipated during its composition.

Ode to the West Wind is an ode, written by Percy Bysshe Shelley in 1819 in Cascine wood near Florence, Italy. The poem was written when tuberculosis was haunting every citizen.

Therefore, while reading the poem in the light of Covid-19 readers find it easier to connect with their present situation. In the following paragraphs, the researcher has attempted to deconstruct the poem by Shelley in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic.

One can assume the west wind to be Covid-19 whose unseen presence creates fear in the mind of the denizens. Just like the wild wind, the intensity of the virus that sweeps across continents varies from time to time. The leaves mentioned in the poem can be a reference to human lives. Like leaves that cling to the branches, the human body clings so mildly to its soul. A savage west wind like pandemic can take away lives ruthlessly. The fallen leaves are referred to as pestilence-stricken multitudes, which is a direct reference to the present situation where thousands meet with their demise at a faster pace. The sudden hike in the death toll has left the cemetery with no place left for burial. The viral infection carries the humans directly to their graves in the same way how the wind carries leaves to their dark wintry bed. The speaker says that the winged seeds lie still until the blue sister that is the spring wind blows her trumpet. The blue sister can be, in the present context, considered as the new Covid vaccine which imparts life to millions. Spring also represents new beginnings and progress.

Later the poet describes the west wind as the preserver of everything. Though the covid pandemic affected the human species as a whole it is a boon to nature. The lockdown period gave enough and more time for nature to get rejuvenated as there occurred no pollution and

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deforestation. Nature was able to regain its greenery. Whereas when it comes to human beings, before the arrival of this situation, they were swamped with their life with no time left to connect with their loved ones. But when they were forced to remain at home, they got more time to rejoice and spend time with their family. People utilized social media to showcase their obscure talents. The wind is regarded as the preserver because it also scattered seeds all over which will come to life in spring. In this way, the pandemic, just like west wind acted as a preserver too and not only as a destroyer. The speaker then explains that the storm approaching is the impending doom of the dying year. The west wind is portrayed as the bringer of death like the coronavirus.

To begin the third canto the speaker describes the wind as having woken up the Mediterranean Sea from a whole summer. In this situation, one can assume the sea to be a human being. Every human can be compared to that of a sea with greater depth and with mysteries within it. The pandemic has turned the human mind into a turbulent one. The appearance of the wild wind frightened the sea and it trembled at the very sight. Human beings until the arrival of the pestilence were in a somnambulant state but when the pandemic struck them, they realized the actualities of life and regretted their lack of gratitude. It is sometimes the absence or denial of

something that will make people understand the importance of it. Just like the calm sea human beings were leading a very monotonous and serene life.

In canto five the speaker finally brings attention to himself. He imagines that he was a dead leaf which the wind might carry away or a cloud which the wind might blow. Now all too are apprehensive like that of a leaf. Just like the wind sweeps away the dead leaves of the autumn, the speaker calls for the wind to sweep him away. The commotion outside creates lots of hullabaloo in the mind of people which make them depressed and anxious. Many mentally weak people wish to get swept away by death. Later the poet says that time has put him in shackles and diminished his pride as he was once proud, fast, and unruly. With the arrival of covid-19, the haughty multitude understood the impermanence of everything in the world. Thereby just like the poet-speaker everyone's pride too got vanished. The realization of the absurdity of life makes one attain self-realization at the earliest. Here the speaker begs the wind to make him be at its mercy. In the last stanza when he says, 'the trumpet of prophecy' he is specifically referring to the end of the world. The alarming increase in covid cases can be considered as the trumpet of prophecy. 'If winter comes, can spring be far behind? The concluding part of the poem pours hope into the mind of the

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infected multitude. Covid pandemic has turned out to be a globetrotting infection but yet every individual envisions a new beginning after the end of this pestilence.

One cannot completely re-read this poem in the light of the pandemic. Still, certain elements can be interpreted in the context of a pandemic. As Nietzsche once said, “all things are subject to interpretation. Whichever interpretation prevails at a given time is a function of power and not the truth”.

The meaning of a text is dynamic. The interesting fact about absurdist fiction is that the meanings conveyed by them never change, instead, people find it easily relatable to their lives at any point in time.

A great deal of absurdist fiction may be humorous or irrational. The absurdist humour is described as a manner of comedy that relies on non-sequiturs, violation of causality, and unpredictable juxtapositions. However, the hallmark of the genre is neither comedy nor nonsense, but rather, the study of human behaviour under circumstances that appear to be purposeless and philosophically absurd. Absurdist fiction posits little judgement about characters or their actions; that task is left to the reader. The Metamorphosis is a novella written by Franz Kafka which was first published in 1915.

While reading The Metamorphosis during the covid pandemic new interpretations can be conferred upon the text. The same alienation and estrangement felt by the covid patients can be seen in the protagonist of the novella, Gregor Samsa. Gregor Samsa wakes up one morning to find himself transformed into a huge insect which was not anticipated by him the previous night. This is the case with the patients right now, they have no idea when they are going to get affected by such a fatal malady. Just like Gregor Samsa, they too get transformed all of a sudden, which brings sudden shock to their family members. After this transformation, Gregor Samsa is isolated from other members of the family like the infected people and those with great audacity come into the forefront to extend their helping hands like Greta Samsa but too soon, they too grow weary of that person. At last Gregor Samsa dies of starvation one day due to negligence on the part of his own family. He is removed by charwoman and funeral rites were not there for him. In the present situation when there is a hike in the number of covid cases, the corpses of the covid patients are taken out to public crematoriums, with no proper last rites. The title itself is very significant in the current situation. Metamorphosis means a change of the form or nature of a thing or person into a completely different one. After the pandemic has struck the people, some transformations occurred in their ideologies

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and their physical existence as well. People gradually started realizing the absurdity of life.

Great havocs often leave people completely perplexed and also make them realize the absurdity of life. War and pestilence share a lot of similarities, the estrangement, loneliness, anxiety etc. which were the aftermath effects of world wars will also be visible after every pandemic.

For instance, consider the poem *Mental Cases* written in 1918 by Wilfred Owen. Owen captures the damage to men's minds as a result of the world war. This poem is both a powerful poem and a propaganda document. After the covid pandemic, the people too may face several psychological disorders. In this poem Owen not once talked about the physical wounds of war, he was more preoccupied with the mental scars that changed them irrevocably. The present pandemic may have a terrible effect on the mental conditions of people especially those who directly witnessed deaths. Owen uses metaphors throughout the poem. He calls the men "purgatorial shadows" of their former selves, reduced to ghostly figures. They are caught between life and death, heaven and hell, in purgatory, a place of temporary suffering. Except, as stressed by the hopelessness in the poem and the length of the stanza, nothing suggests a cure. Their suffering will continue as they relive the horrors of the

Front. It could imply they have sinned because of the killing they were made to carry out under orders; again, they are being punished because of our instruction. This imagery emphasizes their dehumanized appearance; they look dead, no longer belong in the world of the living, and are "shadows." Later, Owen describes emotional emaciation as if they are wasting away; the devastating emotional effect of the war is shown by saying it "gouged these chasms." Their "eyeballs shrink tormented" like they are afraid, cowering in the refuge of their minds where they still find no comfort. While reading this poem in the context of the covid pandemic one can substitute the soldiers with the frontline workers who are forced to witness more corpses day by day. After every apocalypse, there will occur a drastic change in the reading perception.

Readers will tend to connect the events in the literary work to their real-life situations and reinterpret them. While tracing the history of literature, one can find that several works were composed in the backdrop of pandemics and they have brought a change in the ideology of people. The ideological shift in people is rightly presented in the book *Viral Modernism: The Influenza Pandemic and Interwar Literature* by Elizabeth Outka. While Outka read *The Waste Land*, *Second Coming* and *Mrs. Dalloway* through the lens of the pandemic, this research tries to read *Ode to*

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the West Wind, Metamorphosis and Mental Cases in the light of covid pandemic. In short, a paradigm shift has occurred in the reading perception in the pandemic time.

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