

Human Responses to Pandemics Then and Now: A Comparative Study of Giovanni Boccaccio's the Decameron and Emile St. John Mandel's Station Eleven

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ABSTRACT

This research work makes a comparative study of Giovanni Boccaccio's *The Decameron* (1353) and Emile St. John Mandel's *Station Eleven* (2014) to investigate how they project human responses to pandemics over a time difference of almost seven centuries. The first fictional work belongs to the fourteenth century whereas the second to the twenty-first. The main aim of this study is to critically observe the differences, if any, in human responses to pandemics. Analyzing the texts, drawing on the critical ideas of Frank M. Snowden as a theoretical perspective and collecting data from scholarly publications, the study concludes that there are differences in the outward responses to pandemics but similarities in the basic motive. Human beings liked to flee away from the infected place due to the fear of insecurity there. The methods taken up to minimize the negative impacts of pandemics vary then and now. In the fourteenth century, human beings were religiously guided whereas in the twenty first, they are guided by science and technology. Similarly, in the representation of both pandemics, the role of art is valued greatly. Based on the qualitative research design, this research work obtains data from the library study and uses textual analysis method for data analysis in relation to the research problems. This research is valuable for the general public and the health researchers for developing protective measures in the context of the sudden outbreak of pandemics.

1. INTRODUCTION

Human world has suffered different contagious diseases throughout history. Some diseases have lasted for a short time whereas others for a long time. The longest pandemic that is infamously known as Black Death in human history lasted for five hundred years. Normally, a disease affects an individual but when it certainly becomes contagious and affects a large number of

people, it becomes an epidemic. If the scale of the epidemic crosses the border of the country and reaches an international level, it becomes pandemic. Roser (2024) in *Britannica* defines pandemic in an elaborate way. He points:

Pandemic, outbreak of infectious disease that occurs over a wide geographical area and that is of high prevalence, generally affecting a

significant proportion of the world's population, usually over the course of several months. Pandemics arise from epidemics, which are outbreaks of disease confined to one part of the world, such as a single country" (Pandemic, para 1).

Therefore, a pandemic is a medical condition that is caused by a contagious disease affecting a large number of people crossing the geographical boundaries. Similarly, *Dictionary of Epidemiology* (2008) defines it as, "An epidemic occurring on a scale that crosses international boundaries, usually affecting people on a worldwide scale" (p. 179). Epidemic's contagious effect is experienced worldwide. The recent Covid-19 is a strong example of the pandemic the modern world has faced.

This research explores the responses of people toward pandemics as represented in two works: Boccaccio's *The Decameron* (1353) and Mandel's *Station Eleven* (2014). These two fictional works have the time difference of more than seven hundred years. This selection enables the researcher to do the comparative exploration of people's reactions towards pandemic in different eras of human history. This research work critically observes the responses of people as represented in these fictional works to identify whether these responses are similar or different in different times. The study follows qualitative research design using textual analysis methods and is based on the library study. It uses the theoretical ideas of Frank M. Snowden in relation to public responses to pandemics and collects data from different books and journals. Selection of the two fictional works belonging to two different ages, have certain limitations but they can be taken as representative fictional works to study human responses to pandemic. This research is helpful for general people to face the pandemic with the knowledge of proper response to face it. At the same time, it is especially beneficial to those who are studying about the proper way of facing the pandemic that might appear in future.

1.1 LITERATURE REVIEW

The novel *Station Eleven* by Mandel has attracted the attention of numerous critics initiating multiple interpretations. Gilbert (2014) discusses the success of the novel in evoking both terror and empathy in a dialectical way. She praises, "Mandel displays the impressive skill of evoking both terror and empathy which I credit to her background as mystery author" (p. 1). In the novel, many of the events and situations generate both terror and empathy. Critics praise this skill of Mandel to be able to arouse both emotions. Similarly, Hunter (2014) praises the novel for its advocacy of the value of art in times of crisis. The continuity of the performance by the artist helps greatly to decrease the pain and sufferings caused by Georgia Flu. Stressing the value of art, she mentions, "In *Station Eleven* the plague reveals a world that still, despite its collapse, holds on to the importance of art" (p. 2). Hunter's basic concern is to show the value of art in critical situations.

Caracciolo (2018) argues that the novel presents both worlds: pre- and post-apocalyptic to generate longing for the pre-apocalyptic world. He highlights the use of negative strategies by the author: "The narrator's insistence in the monochromatic landscape is the main route through which negation operates in the novel: while *Station Eleven* focuses on the denial of objects, technologies, and practices of the pre-world" (p. 231). Showing the absence of the technological advancements of the pre-apocalyptic world in the post-apocalyptic world, the writer creates a longing for that world. Moreover, De Cristofaro (2018) discusses the challenge that the novel poses to apocalyptic tradition, western modernity and its metanarratives. He states, "*Station Eleven* self-reflexively emphasizes this difference between traditional and contemporary apocalyptic imagination" (p. 4). De Cristofaro's focus is to depict how contemporary post-apocalyptic fiction like this novel are different from theological tradition. Recent post-apocalyptic fiction is more contemporary problem oriented. Bellamy

(2021) reads the novel as an energy apocalypse and shows how in the absence of energy the world becomes static. The focus point of Bellamy is the critical life that the energy crisis leads. He asserts, “*Station Eleven* is a novel useful for thinking about the energy crisis precisely because it takes other stories as its less focus: the exploration of abandoned homes, the litany of lost experience, and the people who make a home out of the airport” (p. 90). Even normal human activities become impossible in the absence of fuel. The movement of life is paralyzed by the energy crisis.

The fourteenth century fictional work *The Decameron* has attracted the attention of many critics and TV serial makers. Even at present, different writers have shed light on the multiple aspects of the work in relation to the serials made based on it. In *The New York Times* Poinewozik (2024) comments: “In the 14th-century work by Giovanni Boccaccio, a precursor to Chaucer’s “*Canterbury Tales*,” 10 young people flee to a rural estate from disease-ridden Florence, entertaining one another by telling stories both dramatic and raunchy” (p. 3). It is valued as the precursor to Chaucer, who is regarded as the father of English poetry. Therefore, it can be claimed that it germinated modern fiction.

In *The Gurdian*, Mangan (2024) relating the original story and the modern serial states, “The series retains only Giovanni B’s framing device; 10 characters fleeing plague-ridden Florence and taking refuge in a countryside villa” (p. 1). The framing of the fictional work is the base of the modern TV serial. Moreover, Wikipedia analyses it as the mockery over religious practices. It presents, “The catholic church, priests, and religious belief become the satirical source of comedy throughout. This was part of a wider historical trend in the aftermath of the Black Death which saw widespread discontent with the church” (*Decameron*, 2024). Its religious aspect and the mockery upon different religious rituals are highlighted linking them with pandemic.

The literature review presented above clarifies that both the novels have

attracted the attention of critics and are interpreted from multiple perspectives. To the best of our knowledge, no critic has attempted to see the diverse human responses to the pandemics. Moreover, this research work focuses on the comparative exploration of human responses to pandemic in different stages of history as represented in these two works. This is the research gap identified and this research work tries to bridge it.

2. METHODS AND MATERIALS

This research was based on qualitative research design. It used data from both primary and secondary sources. Library study was the base of its data collection. Different academic publications were consulted to receive data as per the research problem and objectives. The theoretical ideas of Frank M. Snowden in relation to public responses to plague were the critical perspectives to interpret the primary texts.

2.1 THEORETICAL MODALITY

By nature, humans show a quick response to any incident. First responses to pandemic were spontaneous and unorganized. Then in the second stage, the organized responses formed as public health strategies. Snowden (2019) observes two ways of pandemic origin. The first one is natural spreading, where the virus transfers to the human body at a certain place naturally. Then it spreads throughout the world. Second is the artificial that is the human implanted. In war or in certain event of enmity, one side spreads such artificially made viruses to the site of the opponents. Snowden sees the ever-present danger of bioterrorism. He states, “There is the ever-present danger of a man-made epidemic of plague through an act of bioterror” (p. 58). This risk of artificial pandemic is equally dangerous.

Snowden divides spontaneous responses into four categories: flight and cleansing, self-defense, ritual cleansing and violence and piety and plague cults. He finds the most common and the universal response is to flee from the infected place. He points,

“The first and the most universal of all reactions were to flee” (p. 59). The most precious thing for a human being is his/her life. That is why whenever an individual gets information about the spreading of any contagious disease and finds the situation out of control, he/she prefers to move away from the place. Similarly, some people believe that the disease is because of the impurity and use of water for cleansing. Sometimes they fire cannon with the idea that gunpowder would purify the air. The second response as self-defense is the outcome of the thought that the cause of the disease is poisoned atmosphere. That is why people attempt to use the self-defense strategy using different available measures. Snowden further elaborates, “It was therefore wise to carry a vial of aromatic and herbs around one's neck or a small bottle of vinegar to sniff periodically” (p. 62). Either through the medically proved measure or through the traditional measure people attempt to protect personally.

Third response as ritual cleansing and violence was seen in early days of historical pandemics. This response is associated with sin and divine punishment. That is why the people close the locality for the outsiders and try to find some culprits who are responsible for the sin. In this regard, Snowden explains, “For those who held such a view, the plague (pandemic) could be halted only by finding and punishing culprits” (p. 64). Such acts of searching culprits and punishing might lead to violence. The last or the fourth response is related to piety and plague cults. This response is based on the idea of calming the angry divinity by penance and self-abasement. It can be performed by the outdoor procession to holy shrine amidst rogations and confessions.

These four major responses are based on people's experiences during the great pandemics of the plague. They are the useful perspectives to analyze the responses of people to pandemics as represented in the two primary texts.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This is the main part of this research work. It presents the result and discussion in two sub-topics. The first part presents the human responses to pandemic as represented in the fourteenth century fictional work Boccaccio's *The Decameron* and the second part presents the responses of modern people as depicted in Mandel's *Station Eleven*. The discussion section is associated with the statement of the problem of the research.

3.1 HUMAN RESPONSES TO PANDEMIC IN BOCCACCIO'S THE DECAMERON

Boccaccio's *The Decameron* depicts different responses of people when they face a pandemic in the form of plague that kills thousands of people of Florence. This crisis of plague brings terror in their life. Normal way of life is violated. In such a situation, the responses of people come in four different ways. After they realize the danger of the disease and the possibility of their death instantly, they try to separate themselves from those diseased and live in seclusion. Some of them live with utmost discipline and avoid all luxury, just limiting themselves to certain types of music. Others discard all previously established rules and regulations and enjoy drinking, singing and doing the works that they like with the thought of enjoying the time in the mouth of death. The third category of people put themselves neither in total restriction nor in total freedom. They live with a certain degree of freedom sufficient to satisfy their appetites with certain care to be safe. The last groups of people prefer to fly away from the place to protect their lives. They desert their houses, leave their all relatives, and go into voluntary exile to the countryside. People's last way of responding to the plague is dominant in this fictional work.

In Boccaccio's *The Decameron* as Florence is caught by plague and people find death out of their control, they try to avoid it in different ways. The situation is so worse that everyone suffers but in comparison to rich people, the middle class and poor people suffer much. People die like animals without any ritual and counting. To

escape from this horrible situation, where they can do nothing except watching people die, they take the method of flight: "In terms of community response to the outbreak of plague, the first and most universal of all reactions was to flee" (Snowden, 2019, p. 59). People know that the disease is transmitted by air, and escaping to the countryside can only save them. In such a critical situation to fly away leaving homes and relatives is not easy but they do it since their individual life counts more. So, they become ready to leave everything. To quote from *The Decameron*:

In the horror therefore, brother was forsaken by brother, nephew by uncle, brother by sister, and often time husband by wife; nay, what is more, and scarcely to be believed, fathers and mothers were found to abandon their own children untended, unvisited, to their fate, as if they had been strangers. (p. 8)

The horror of death dismantles the concept that certain ties in life are stronger than one's own life. Human relationships prove to be weaker. Ultimate result is to flee away from their community and relatives.

The Decameron itself is structured under the response of flight for escaping from the crisis. In the text, the plan of seven women and three men is to fly away from their community. They become ready to leave everything, even their family members to escape from the influence of disease and save their lives. With their conclusion of not being able to save sick people from the disease, they select the hardest option that is to fly away. Pampinea, the leading woman expresses her conviction about their helplessness as: "None of us has recourse of any means to avert that which we just feared" (p. 16). Actually, their inability to do anything and certainty that the longer they remained in their community the more corpses they had to witness compels them to fly to a hilly place for escaping. Among all other types of responses, the escape from the infected place is the most common response. This

response is dominant in the case of *The Decameron* and it is the base of its fictional setting.

It is not possible to find any quick medical solution for pandemics. That is why people feel their own life at risk in their stay at the affected place. In such a situation, all other attachments become weaker. Material attachment and human bonding fail to stop a person to his place. For a certain time, they live secluded life within the locality but ultimately, they leave the place to go to certain secured place which is normally in seclusion. In their seclusion, storytelling as a form of art helps them to overcome the terror of the pandemic. In *the Decameron* the team in the leadership of Pampinea leaves infected Florence not willingly but in compulsion.

3.2 HUMAN RESPONSES TO PANDEMIC IN MANDEL'S STATION ELEVEN

Mandel's *Station Eleven* presents the devastation caused by a deadly pandemic that kills the majority of the human population. The destructive pandemic caused by the Georgia Flu is vast and terrible. The flu spreads so fast that the whole world suffers in a short time. Its spreading is comparable with the explosion of the neutron bomb: "There was the flu that exploded like a neutron bomb over the surface of the earth and the shock of the collapse that followed, the first unspeakable years when everyone was travelling, everyone caught on that there was no place they could walk" (p. 37). The highly contagious disease affects the world rapidly and leads to the collapse of all human systems. It collapses the government, economic and social structures, and the complete human network. At the same time, it affects the availability of the basic services such as electricity, water and communication.

The outbreak of the pandemic is informed to the public by different medias. The news creates panic among the people. Those careful people like Jeevan begin to collect the everyday necessary materials. Different characters and their activities provide a glimpse of multiple responses

toward the pandemic caused by Georgia Flu. First response is to flee from the place of origin to certain seclusion. Snowden mentions, "The decision to flee was mediated by medical understanding of the Epidemic" (2019, p. 60). This understanding is the contagious nature of the virus and the extreme death rate. In the absence of treatment of the disease, running away becomes the only alternative. In such a situation of the pandemic, city life becomes risky in two ways: first by the extreme possibility of contagion and second the threat of robbery, fight and murder. The pandemic creates the situation of horror that threatens the whole human civilization where protection of life becomes the matter of first choice. Some people like Frank do suicide with the thought of impending terrible future. For survival, movement becomes essential.

The big human settlements suffered much earlier during the pandemic caused by the Georgia Flu. Because of the danger of the big communities, people began to respond to the pandemic with the formation of the small communities. Kristin's travelling symphony, Clark's airport community, Tyler's religious community and Jeevan's new village communities are the examples. The novel encompasses dominant activities of the travelling symphony which is in the leadership of Kristine. They travel from place to place, as they know that their movement is valuable: "Keep walking. Keep walking. Keep walking (p. 194). Their continuous movement appears as their response to the pandemic. Their basic purpose is to protect their life and provide encouragement to the surviving people.

Clark's airport community consists of people from different communities. It is small but it is like the multicultural community of the present metropolitan cities. It is formed accidentally but the pandemic creates a type of bonding among them. Mandel elucidates, "There were 320 people living in the Seven City Airport that year, one of the largest settlements Kristen had seen" (p. 306). Similarly, Tyler's religious community is formed based on the

religious motive but its performance is against the ethical consideration. Jeevan's new village community is a good alternative. Untouched by any material greed, this village community survives being near to nature. In relation to the formation of community in the time of crisis Chan and Gregoire (2013) state, "In the face of adversity strong communities that stay together thrive better according to the study published in the journal of happiness studies" (p. 7). The pandemic of Georgia Flu is also better faced by the formation of small communities.

The role of art is presented with extreme value to face the mental and physical crisis in the time of pandemic. The theatrical performance of the travelling symphony and the comic book *Dr. Eleven* are the examples that hint the value of art in critical situations. The members of the travelling symphony travel to different places facing different obstacles with the hope that their stage performance and music function as medicine to recover from the terror of the pandemic. The comic book is the means of relief to both the writer and the readers. Noyes (2020) stresses the value of art in times of trouble as: "As the world seems to shift and change around us in new and frightening ways every day, many of us seek solace in the art. From great music to television; movies and fine art can be a distraction and balm in troubled times" (p. 4). The role of art as balm is stressed here. In other words, Mandel's fictional work really shows the value of art in critical situations caused by pandemics.

The critical observation of the different responses shown by people in the novel unfolds the reality that all are under the major response of flee. Other activities are accompanied with the action of flight. In all cases, the pandemic is closely tied to a particular place, this compels people to flee from the poisoned atmosphere. However, people respond in multiple ways. Their aim is to protect their lives for which they flee away from the infected places.

4. CONCLUSION

The paper has comparatively analyzed two fictional works, Boccaccio's *The Decameron* that belongs to the fourteenth century and Mandel's *Station Eleven* that belongs to the twenty first century. It discovers that despite the vast gap of time, the first and the most common response is to flee from the infected locality. In the pandemics, the moment people realize that the situation is out of their control, they flee away from the infected place to protect themselves. In other words, they prefer to escape. For their escape, they select the secured places untouched by such disease. We don't find any difference in the essence of responding. The characters of both, *The Decameron* and *Station Eleven*, follow the same way of responding to the pandemic. These responses clarify that during a crisis of pandemic what counts most is a person's individual life. Fear of death breaks all the ties of relationship that are regarded stronger in normal life. The possibility of the deadly contagion compels them to avoid the big communities, and lead to the formation of the small communities. Moreover, the paper also finds out that both fictional works highlight that the terror created by the pandemics can be minimized accompanying different forms of art. The form of storytelling is followed in *The Decameron* and the theatrical performance; music and comic book *Dr. Eleven* are the forms of art that function to calm the terror of pandemic in *Station Eleven*. Both fictional works demonstrate the great role of art in pandemics. This work opens ample opportunities for other researchers to explore how pandemics affect human relationship, gender relationship and psychology of the sufferer.

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