

Disease as the Metaphoric Mastermind in Hollinghurst's *The Line of Beauty* and Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*

Dikshanshi

Research Scholar

Dept. of English

BMU, Rohtak

dikshanshimalik@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

The emergence of Pandemic fiction as a genre after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has provided a new outlook to literature. The works that explore disease as a means of 'mass- murder' turns out to be a recurring theme in new writings. At the same time, works are being explored from the lens of pandemics and epidemics that direct the plotline while working in the background. This gives the readers and critics an opportunity to revisit literary works, particularly focusing their attention on the theme of 'disease' and 'death.' Running as a metaphor, as Susan Sontag would define it, disease runs as a trope of nineteenth and twentieth-century novels. Booker Prize winners Alan Hollinghurst and Margaret Atwood have dealt with disease in their own way. This paper is going to discuss Hollinghurst's *The Line of Beauty* in light of the outbreak of AIDS impacting the emotional, social and psychological makeup of the characters and Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* as a pandemic-struck post-apocalyptic work.

KEYWORDS

Pandemic fiction; COVID-19; Disease; Epidemic; Post-Apocalyptic; Plague.

The disease lies as a disguised machinery in novels not always meant not to be revealed as the ultimate factor of directing the plotline. Though we have an abundance of texts that deal with disease as a working mechanism in the development of characters, this side has remained less explored as compared to other genres. Disease and its working mechanism came into play when the illness was accepted in reading. The majority of writing is either war-oriented or directed at social phenomena (either acceptance of or escape from reality) of a particular age. But disease and its overpowering outcomes have been discussed less

expressively. Hidden under factors of other prominent problems, writers presented their awareness of this less-examined genre in fiction. Virginia Woolf, in *On Being Ill* (1926), discusses the lack of disease-specific vocabulary and therefore the literature featuring diseases. An attempt to carry out a full-fledged plot based on the outbreak of a disease can be seen in Albert Camus' *The Plague* (1947) which portrays a picture of social life amidst the plague. Modern literature shows more variations in dealing with a genre which is more recently popularized by the outbreak of COVID-19 as the Pandemic Fiction.

AIDS is one of the most socially

forbidden topics in medical history. However, literature has witnessed a rise in its discussion through characters that resonate with real survivors holding real experiences of discrimination and disgust from society. One example is the Booker Prize winner *The Line of Beauty* (2004) which focuses on the dilemma of the protagonist played at the hands of AIDS- the brute force behind fear and eventual separation of two lovers.

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. 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. (Sontag 3)

Susan Sontag in *Illness as Metaphor* (1978) begins the book by describing life as a state of dilemma hanging between health and illness. As argued by Sontag, everybody tends to incline towards the healthy side- a general human tendency, but does it always seem fair to choose selfish means for health? It raises questions of many kinds. Is it even fair to call oneself greedy when he or she chooses to put health over anything else? Does it board well for the ill to get separated from their loved ones when they are already fighting for their lives? Is it fair to call one self-centred in such conditions? Nick stands as the idol of doubt among these questions. Apart from the sexual intricacies that form a major part of the book, *The Line of Beauty* has other machinery working in the background - AIDS. Time and memory are intertwined in the novel and so is an illness. The psychological upheaval established in the novel as a ghostly entity lurks as a threat to Nick and the people surrounding him.

AIDS is also dealt with in association with the taboo that existed

along with it. Aids- shaming if I may say so has been a terrifying issue along with the actual problems attached to the disease. Myth and reality that AIDS has held for the last few decades can be observed in Hollinghurst's work. The density of illness as the threat to beauty knits the web between a flawless future and a regretful past. The gap of three years is the traumatic storm of emotions that Nick has kept inside while escaping the fact of his reasons for breakup with Leo. However, it is brought to light later in the novel that Leo's illness has made Nick initiate the break-up which becomes the subject of the title of the novel.

The astounding image of curves defines not only the line of beauty that Nick admires but also the line of fate that he chose over his past relationship. Nick's delusion of getting away from illness is his insecurity towards a damaged body- an image he fears he would be stuck in if he continues his relationship with Leo after being diagnosed with AIDS.

He expounded the ogee to an appreciative friend, who was briefly the Duchess, and then Catherine, and then a different lover from Wani. The double curve was Hogarth's 'line of beauty', the snakelike flicker of an instinct, of two compulsions held in one unfolding movement. He ran his hand down Wani's back. He didn't think Hogarth had illustrated this best example of it, the dip and swell - he had chosen harps and branches, bones rather than flesh. Really it was time for a new Analysis of Beauty. (Hollinghurst 133)

There is more than a sexual edge to the novel. The urge to fight the choice between right and beautiful turns to surface the inner turmoil of Nick. Despite knowing the deadly nature of the disease that gripped Leo till death, Nick was more inclined towards keeping himself out of the dangers. This raises many questions regarding Nick as a character. First, has Nick been selfish in choosing the line of

beauty over the line of fate linked with Leo? Wani, however, could not keep him from meeting the fate that he dreaded the most. The distortion that AIDS would have caused in the definition of beauty which Nick was stuck with eventually came out as his worst nightmare. Even Wani could not help him escape the illness. While the subject of AIDS was biasedly attached to homosexuality, Nick was concerned with his beauty staying intact. Both his relationships with Leo and with Wani made him see things fading away.

The denouement of the novel happened long before Leo actually died. Nick's decision to leave Leo has been the worst-case scenario more depreciating than his death. Illness has been presented as the psychological evil of Nick's mind that raises questions of existence in a world created by illusionary beauty.

Nick had a moment of selfless but intensely curious immersion in his beauty. The forceful chin with its slight saving roundness, the deep-set eyes with their confounding softness, the cheekbones and the long nose, the little ears and springy curls, the cruel charming curve of his lips, made everything else in the house seem stale, over-artful, or beside the point. (62)

The conversation between Catherine and Nick is the ultimate realization made as effortlessly as possible by Hollinghurst about the definition of beauty which Nick was avoiding so terribly that Leo is not mentioned in the novel for a decent number of pages.

And what about little thing? Leo? He wasn't beautiful exactly, I wouldn't have thought. You were crazy about him.' She looked at him interestedly to see if she'd gone too far. Nick said solemnly but feebly, 'Well, he was beautiful to me.' 'Exacdy!' said Catherine. People are lovely because we love them, not the other way round.' (232)

The irony of this realization lies in the fact that it comes from Catherine. She is often portrayed as someone going through breakdowns and therefore a hint of depression is directed at her. Despite that, her character seems like the most practical of all. The underestimation of this character fades with her open support for those affected by AIDS instead of going on with the orthodox fear that her family has held throughout the book.

Doubt is a characteristic of pandemic fiction. It might develop from the uncertainty of others' health or an in-built fear of one's own. The book somewhere in between the lines links health with beauty. It is not an upfront approach yet the idea can be deduced.

'Well, I knew he wanted to. That was about the time he... I'm not sure what happened. We stopped seeing each other.' He couldn't say the usual accusing phrase he dumped me, it was petty and nearly meaningless in the face of his death. 'I think I thought he was seeing someone else.' Though this itself wasn't the whole truth: it was the painful story he'd told himself at the time, to screen a glimpse he'd had of a much worse story, that Leo was ill. (265)

The scenario that Nick created in order to calm his moral tensions. When given a significant story to satisfy his values, his mind would approve of leaving behind his past with Leo. It is a peculiar feature of illness that it develops a threat which surfaces not only the fatally depressing thoughts of the ill but of the people around him as well. Nick's decision, whether for his own good or not, haunts him deeper than he has accepted in the book. That's why Nick's distant behaviour could not be justified even through his own fantasy to dismiss the reality of Leo's illness.

Where Hollinghurst was focusing his vision on internal delusions produced by illness, Margaret Atwood created a

masterpiece that deals with the consequences of illness. Margaret Atwood's sensational post-apocalyptic work nominated for Booker Prize *Oryx and Crake* (2003) presents a devastating picture of the aftereffects of scientific advancement. The setting of the novel, a pandemic-struck world that has wiped humanity, is a vision that is going to revisit a culture of post-pandemic reverberations. The way the disease is dealt with in the novel is evident in the minuteness of its explanation. As Jimmy's mother describes, "A disease, she said, was invisible, because it was so small. It could fly through the air or hide in the water..."(16) The dread of the disease is often associated with the hygiene habits which generally get ignored in the light of not acknowledging disease seriously. Atwood also explored the religious aspect of illness and its metaphoric meaning of punishment:

The little girls laughed about the germs, because they didn't believe in them; but they believed about the disease, because they'd seen that happen. Spirits caused it, everyone knew that. Spirits and bad luck. Jack had not said the right prayers. (Atwood 117)

Punishment has been a major theme in early writings like Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* where plague has been regarded as the anger of Gods upon humanity. A similar modernist version of this ideology has been presented by Atwood.

Oryx and Crake majorly forms a story of human greed where disease works as a weapon for profit. The creation and use of disease for the global success of medicine industries for the sake of making money cover much part of the background of the book. Crake's opinion clarifies how scientific advancement is working more for their own monetary benefit rather than the benefit of humans. Inventing diseases to invent their solutions has led to the massive disaster of complete annihilation of the human species and the birth of a new

one. Crake addresses this problem in the book while discussing business with Jimmy:

"So, you'd need more sick people. Or else – and it might be the same thing – more diseases. New and different ones. Right?" "Stands to reason," said Jimmy after a moment. It did, too. "But don't they keep discovering new diseases?" "Not discovering," said Crake. "They're creating them." ... "The best diseases, from a business point of view," said Crake, "would be those that cause lingering illnesses. Ideally – that is, for maximum profit – the patient should either get well or die just before all of his or her money runs out. It's a fine calculation." (Atwood 177-178)

Atwood's work stands as a landmark in Pandemic fiction creating an imaginary world with a realist view. The consequential era that the book portrays stands as an example of where humanity might go specifically in a time where the issue of greed has raised socio-economic problems. The tendency of human minds to work for the benefit of humanity is manured with greed giving rise to the plant of destruction. Atwood's aim at criticizing the unfulfilling demands of humanity directed at their own convenience and advantage.

Illness in fiction, as discussed by two Booker Prize winners, is the image of one of the many circumstances that affect humans socially, economically and psychologically. It becomes more of a matter of significance when readers establish striking similarities between the stories with their own experiences. The issue that revolves around such works is one of detachment. One cannot avoid the recurring theme of death and the fear around its occurrence. As Jane Elizabeth Fischer in *Envisioning Disease, Gender and War* (2012) mentions Nietzsche's famous

aphorism "What doesn't kill you makes you stronger" here might be amended to read "What does kill you makes you all the more bound to denial." (18) The sense of destruction of one's own existence is what forces humans to go against their choice. Sometimes ignorance of this sense leads them to their own destruction. Both of these issues have been discussed in the paper for the purpose of analysing the pros and cons of a catastrophe. The disease works as a puppeteer, a deciding tool of fate in both books where Hollinghurst's Nick chooses to remain beautiful and Atwood's Jimmy bears the consequences of human greed. These books stand as an input for moral conscience that must be instilled into humans. Jennifer Cooke in her *Legacies of Plague in Literature, Theory and Film* (2009) recalls plague in literary imagination and as a critique of perceiving the metaphorical assumptions linked with plague. He argues that

plague is frequently accompanied by the powerful 'body metaphor', which renders a state, nation, or people the 'body' that can be labelled 'sick' or 'healthy', thus

making it, with plague alongside, a convenient vector for political and social rhetoric. (2)

This book provides validation to the arguments that both Hollinghurst and Atwood mean to elaborate on. The attributes given to disease are negative and weak. The direction that any narrative would take in the context of diseases is always challenging. The materialism that is parallel to the mean and avarice nature of man is discussed by Margaret Healy in *Fictions of Disease in Early Modern England: Bodies, Plagues and Politics* (2001) where she mentions,

Here, as in the sermon literature, pestilence, synonymous with Death, is a particularly good leveler of the proud rich with the poor and the indirect political message is always that charitable actions towards the poor are profitable. (57)

The current pandemic COVID-19 gives the best experience of revisiting these texts especially when their stories resonate more profoundly than ever in the contemporary state of emergency experienced through the lockdown.

WORKS CITED

- Atwood, Margaret. *Oryx and Crake: A Novel*. Virago, 2013.
- Camus, Albert. *The Plague*. Translated by Stuart Gilbert, Vintage Books, 1972.
- Cooke, Jennifer. *Legacies of Plague in Literature, Theory and Film*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.
- Cunningham, Michael. "Surviving AIDS, but at What Cost?" *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 25 June 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/25/books/review/rebecca-makkai-great-believers.html>.
- Defoe, Daniel. *A Journal of the Plague Year*. New York: Longman English Classics, 1896.
- Fisher, Jane Elizabeth. *Envisioning Disease, Gender, and War: Women's Narratives of the 1918 Influenza Pandemic*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2012.
- Healy, M. *Fictions of Disease in Early Modern England: Bodies, Plagues and Politics*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.
- Hollinghurst, Alan. *The Line of Beauty*. United Kingdom, Pan Macmillan, 2014.
- Jordison, Sam. "Defoe's Plague Year was written in 1722 but speaks clearly to our time." *The Guardian*, 5 May 2020, www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2020/may/05/defoe-a-journal-of-the-plague-year-1722-our-time.
- Kleinman, Arthur. *The Illness Narratives: Suffering, Healing, and the Human Condition*.

- Basic Books, 1988.
- Last, John M, editor. *A Dictionary of Epidemiology*. 4th edition. Oxford University Press, 2001.
- Makkai, Rebecca. *The Great Believers*. Viking, 2019.
- McMillen, Christian W. *Pandemics: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford University Press, 2016.
- Nashe, Thomas, and Patricia Posluszny. *Thomas Nashe's "Summer's Last Will and Testament": A Critical Modern-Spelling Edition*. Peter Lang, 1989.
- Oliphant, Margaret, and Merryn Williams. *A Beleaguered City and Other Stories*. Oxford University Press, 1988.
- Parker, Robert. *Miasma: Pollution and Purification in Early Greek Religion*. Clarendon Press, 2010.
- Poe, Edgar Allan. *The Works of Edgar Allan Poe*. Introduction by Richard Henry Stoddard, A.C. Armstrong and son, 1884.
- Porter, Katherine Ann. *The Collected Stories of Katherine Ann Porter*. HBJ, 1979.
- Outka, Elizabeth. "How Pandemics Seep into Literature." *The Paris Review*, 25 Apr. 2020, <https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2020/04/08/how-pandemics-seep-into-literature/>.
- Outka, Elizabeth. *Viral Modernism: The Influenza Pandemic and Interwar Literature*. Columbia University Press, 2020. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/10.7312/outk18574.
- Sontag, Susan. *Illness as Metaphor*. Penguin Books, 2002.
- Sorkin, Amy Davidson. "The Fever Room: Epidemics and Social Distancing in "Bleak House" and "Jane Eyre". *The New Yorker*, 20 March 2020, www.newyorker.com/news/daily-comment/the-fever-room-epidemics-and-social-distancing-in-bleak-house-and-jane-eyre.
- Vázquez-Espinosa, E, et al. "The Spanish Flu and the Fiction Literature." *Revista Espanola De Quimioterapia : Publicacion Oficial De La Sociedad Espanola De Quimioterapia*, Sociedad Española De Quimioterapia, Oct. 2020, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7528412/>.
- Walia, Shelley. "Chronicles of Death Foretold: What Literature Tells Us about Pandemics." *The Hindu*, The Hindu, 13 June 2020, <https://www.thehindu.com/books/chronicles-of-death-foretold-what-literature-tells-us-about-pandemics/article31810961.ece>.
- Wenzl, Roy. "How Diseases Spread: Ways People Have Tried to Explain Pandemics Through History." *History*, 8 April 2020, www.history.com/news/how-infectious-diseases-spread-myth-superstition-theories/.
- Woolf, Virginia, and Leonard Woolf. *The Moment, and Other Essays*. Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1948.

Author's Bio-note

Dikshanshi is a Research Scholar pursuing Ph.D. in English from Baba Mastnath University, Asthal Bohar, Rohtak, Haryana. Her research work majorly covers the study of pandemic in English literature and the presentation of socio-economic as well as psychological conditions that run through the plot of selected works of fiction. She has graduated with a gold medal and holds a Master's Degree in English from the Department of English and Foreign Languages, MDU, Rohtak, Haryana. She has completed her M.Phil. in English from Om Sterling Global University, Hisar, Haryana. She has also done

certificate courses in Spanish as well as German.