
Stephen Gill's Short Story '*Mask*' in the Phase of COVID-19

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ABSTRACT

The present paper will try to examine the literature in the phase of COVID-19 with special reference to Stephen Gills short story *Mask*. Also try to show the relationship between literature and epidemic. An epidemic novel corona virus disease originated from Wuhan, China in late December 2019. The corona virus spreads through droplets and now by the air too. Within a month's World Health Origination declared corona virus as 'Pandemic'. In few months virus captured more than half of the world. Numbers of lives was destroyed and countries are facing lots of troubles, economy loss and more harm to human kind. From ancient time humans and society have faced many epidemics, and literature depicts it beautifully in many forms like: novels, short stories, articles and poems etc. The two major epidemics are taken as example in this paper: - 'The Plague' by Albert Camus and 'Puratan Bhritiya' (The old manservant) by Rabindranath Tagore. These two literary pieces shows the impact, troubles, problems, and condition of an epidemic 'Plague and Small pox' in that era. In the

phase of COVID-19 Pandemic Stephen Gills short story 'Mask' shows us the curiosity, anxiety, and fear faced by the people of the present world. This short story is about Canadian and his experience in the phase of COVID-19. Prof. Gill beautifully portrayed whole story how persons are facing problems and their situation as this virus is very new to each and every one of us. Stephen Gill got worldwide popularity for dealing with profound ideas, liberal thoughts, spirited beliefs, his perceptible values and his overpowering expression into literary creations, he proclaims to the whole world the message of peace.

Introduction

Epidemic is a disease or infection which affects or spreads large number of people at less time. There are number of epidemics faced several times by the world or a particular country. Epidemic has been very artistically and beautifully portrayed in literature and literature has become the part of our daily life. Literature is very important piece of the society, it reflect the same as the society is facing at their present scenario. Literature has already suggested same epidemic and steps to prevent it yet human being fail to learn historical lesson from the historicity of literature. Literature is considered to be fictional, while it is more factual, that's why, Aristotle said, "Literature is deeper and far real then the facts of history and truth of philosophy". The relation between epidemic and literature is as old as the relation between the human and society. That's why it is said "Literature is the mirror of society".

"Corona virus disease is an infectious disease caused by newly discovered corona virus".(WHO) This virus seen in China Wuhan was it spread so quickly and caused so much harm to the human as well as the environment. The outbreak of COVID-19 has suddenly forced people all around the world to imagine about the epidemic like plague, smallpox, influenza, and cholera in ancient time and how people had survived, what a mental state would be in such critical time. Humans are the only one species on the earth that articulate language and maid intellectual but one foremost essence humans must have sensibility, lack of sensibility during epidemic turns human helpless. Here it means once affection to other emphasis on the other and when it comes to the matter of poor, low wagers all in all in needy people it means a lot. From times have a caused epidemic has touched many authors to the one or the other way, the impact serious upon them. Epidemic brings number of deaths, destroyed family and ruins

social life with its arrival. Troubling of such diseases has forced many literary minds, burst out the pain and distress harboring allow human to fight against such unwelcomed guest.

An epidemic is such a subject that has been repeatedly used in various literary works within the different time frames. Such literature has dynamic role to play in generating our reactions to COVID-19 pandemic too. Many prominent authors have contributed to portrayed the narration of such furiously condition that human kind have faced. We can observe the development of such theme of epidemic and pandemic. The poisonous enemy of humans has emerged in literature from ancient time itself. Apart from Stephen Gill's *Mask* also Rabindranath Tagore's *Puratan Bhritya*, Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *Love in the time of Cholera*, Albert Camus's *The Plague*, Munshi Premchand's *Eidgaha*. Such literary works are admired by huge readers because of its authenticity of plots, themes, and narration. The various group of society especially associations of medical fields, doctors, researchers and medical learners so much interested in reading such books gaining various knowledge as well as we can recollected them in the presiding time. Human races have faced so many dangerous diseases and epidemics. In various literary works we may find many things and elements such as actual and imaginary descriptions, linkages with history, representations of contemporary times, suggestion for society, noble ideas, creativity and many more things that give us wide understanding of epidemic and literature.

Puratan Bhritya (The old Manservant): Rabindranath Tagore

Rabindranath Tagore was born to Devenranath Tagore and Sarada Devi in Calcutta, India in 1861. He was not sent to school. Instead, he was educated at home. At the age of 8, Rabindranath Tagore started writing poems on Bengali language. He continued writing plays and poems. Rabindranath knew his art was meant for something much more. In 1910, he published *Geetanjali*, a collection of 157 poems. It became extremely popular and Tagore became first Indian to win Nobel Prize in Literature. His songs are adopted as National Anthems of India and Bangladesh. *Puratan Bhritya* a long narrative poem written by Rabindranath Tagore in Bengali. The poem is translated in English (*The old Manservant*) by Monish R. Chatterjee in 2019.

The poem old manservant reveals how an epidemic plays a crucial role as a leveler between the classes and yet it is viewed that over's a marginalized they are not given a worth credit of what they deserve. Rabindranath Tagore has written many such work were he talked about the people who are vulnerable and over looked. The poem reflects the pain full story of a life of Keshta (an old servant) he



dies in taking care of his master and after his death, he was valued by his master. The narrator is Bengali Zamindar who seems to be Tagore himself. Keshta was disliked by all in the house as he was believed not good for nothing. They wanted to get rid of him but it was not possible as he was the oldest servant of the house. The time original poem was written an epidemic called smallpox spread all over the country. The disease originated in ancient times and killed over 300 million people in twentieth century. Narrator Zamindar had to take Keshta forcefully with him to the holy journey to Vrindavan with here he caught up with small pox. Gradually his all other pilgrim companions resulted him the light of human restlessness symbolic here. Tagore has faced three dangerous epidemics during his life time when he was adolescence Plague and Cholera outbreak in the country and in the 1904 small pox causes the havoc.

“Pours water in my mouth, asks if I felt better, feels my temple for fever-
Standing vigil, with nary a wink, while not a grain of rice crossed his lips, ever.
And time and again assured he, “Master, mark my words, have no fear-
You will get well, return back home, and once again see the mistress dear.”(Chatterjee)

A helpless master who became alone in a farm land, calls out his servant unbearable pain, Keshta, please come to me, realizing his duty toward his master continuously stayed with him measured his temperature in the last himself succumbs to smallpox and foolish old servant succeeds in saving his owners life at the cost of his own life. Keshta dead symbolizes light to helplessness migrant in India with the outbreak of COVID-19. Narrator description of Keshta at the end of his life is heart breaking thorough days and night vigilant by old man servant by my bed the narrator says pours water in my mouth asked it the feel better. He was disliked but his life proves a blessing for his master. His master who too harsh towards him but became mournful with his death towards end Keshta proved himself to be faithful. “Not long after, my pilgrimage over, I was back at my homestead, verdant- No longer with me, my perennial companion, and my faithful old manservant.”(Chatterjee)

The Plague: Albert Camus

The Plague is a novel written by Albert Camus. It was written in French the titled as (La Peste). It was published in 1947. Albert Camus is a great writer of 20th century. He was a French philosopher, journalist and great author.



The Plague tells the story of the French Algerian city of Oran. There are so many facts and similarities portrayed in ‘The Plague’ by Albert Camus on the context of COVID-19. Interpretation of ‘The Plague’ has display inconsiderable salient uniformity with the real situation of ongoing corona pandemic. The situations, the predicaments of character and the vital choices they have to make in the given circumstances are surprisingly similar to our time. Some of the arguments regarding the relevance of the facts and similarities in the novel ‘The Plague’ with the situation in which we are living for last four months. The first part of the novel deals with increase in the death of rats in the city. There is no action taken even after this news and in this context. Camus expresses his concern: “But in Oran, the extreme climate, the amount of business going on, the insignificant of the surroundings, the speed with which night falls and the quality of pleasure, all demand good health. A sick person is very lonely here”. (Camus 12).

The main character of the novel ‘The Plague’ Dr. Bernard Rieux knew about the emerging epidemic plague and he tried to awaken the government of Oran. And similarly Dr. Li Wenliang of Wuhan knew about the emerging respiratory virus. In this era of internet he presented his view on internet. We were foreshadowed about the situation but we never think about anything and move with thought ‘Will be given as it falls.’ In the novel ‘The Plague’ Dr. Rieux requested government to take steps but they kept on discussion about it and were worried about economy of the country. They preferred to wait and watch. Same happened in this era, the Dr. who shared about the virus on the internet was blamed and arrested for spreading fake news and china tried to suppress this news. In ‘The Plague’ the government of Oran was not ready to take any steps. The main aim of the society and government was to earn money. Economics was priority than human life livelihood is far more important than human life. Plague took 10 months to get normal but corona is yet present. The condition of the people of Oran during the epidemic: “Finally, in these extremes of loneliness, no one could hope for help from the neighbor and everyone remained alone with his anxieties.”(Camus 54)

Mask: Stephen Gill

Stephen Gill is Indo-Canadian poet, novelist, literary critic and essayist. Prof. Gill focuses primarily on peace, because he believes that peace leads to personal, national and international health. He firmly believes that peace is legitimate child of peaceful means. He also believes that Divine Omnipresent is peace and love in Christian and Hindu thoughts and this belief often manifests in his writing. The short

story 'Mask' reflects back on the initial phase of the COVID-19 pandemic. The story is being titled as 'Mask' as the narrator understands the gravity of the situation based on the mask getting off from the market. The story also discussed about the current situation way back home in India and Pakistan through a telephonic conversation. The part of the world is completely unaware about the risk of the situation.

Mask is the story of a Canadian he is very inquisitive when he sees face mask are highly demand and vanishing from the market. It was beginning of January when he became curious to see face mask, he did not see anyone ever wearing in his hometown Cornwall, Ontario. He searched mask in all nearby shop in couple of days but he did not have a single mask. He had seen mask before in most stores as a common item, But now it makes him more curious to know where all these masks are missing from the market. "I had seen masks before in most stores as a common item. When something disappears from stores, it becomes an item of curiosity. My curiosity was not because I was scared and wanted to buy several masks."(Gill 1). He discussed the situation of chaos in India in 1947 was created by the religious animosity between the Hindus and Muslims that led to the hoarding of food items. "There was no mask to protect citizens from the virus of religious animosity in India and Pakistan." It was the time were number of people are died just because of religion. This time mask is not the life protector of the people. After a few days he goes to a laboratory for regular blood checkup and he asked mask in the pharmacy.

"Who were those buyers who bought all the medical equipment? I asked in a serious tone.

"They looked like Chinese."

"Why did they buy them all"?"

"A good question" She tried to smile while uttering these words.

It was something abnormal. Hiding my genuine feelings, I said, "It means, you can make more money by selling more."(Gill 2)

An employee told him to purchase the mask from online site. Then he searched in whole Cornwall Canada and got news that within weeks, the whole world was being controlled by a tiny virus that was not visible from the naked eyes. He also came to know that virus captured many more countries around the world and those were well developed because they were attacked unexpectedly and this was lack of awareness about the situation. The first country was China then virus capture Italy and slowly all the Europe was captured and then east and the west and then every morning a new records are there on the television and radio how the new country overpowered by new virus called corona virus. The

virus does not know geographical boundaries, skin color, economic status, theological basis, gender and ages. It infected whole society as well as in all the community. This virus crossed all the boundaries across the world so many country requested to World Health Organization to announce the corona virus as Pandemic. “The World Health Organization was under pressure by most governments of the world to declare Corona virus as a pandemic.”(Gill 2) “I did not know the exact difference between epidemic and pandemic. I did not panic much, though the virus was causing panic among nations after nations.”(Gill 2) In addition to other measures like keeping two meters distance and washing hands frequently, some specialists recommended using masks. There were many who did not buy this recommendation. Instead of all this equipments the latest curable therapy is “Plasma Therapy” use by the government and hospitals. This is the more successful weapon against corona virus. “I did not wear a mask either, though I valued every precaution. My top precautions included physical distancing and washing hands.”(Gill 2)

After announcing corona virus as pandemic World Health Organization suggested some safety measures such as difference between person that should be of two meter to avoid the air transmission of virus, do not touch our mouth, nose and eyes again and again and before touching it we should wash our hand by soap. The virus mostly spread by the traveler from abroad, that’s why many counties have blocked their boundaries and who already came from differ places the government take them in 14 days quarantine. At the same time there are numbers of fake news also came up in social media like use of vitamin D that increase the immunity of human body, so many suggestions related to our diet like eating fish and mushroom daily will make us healthy, but eating much fish is dangerous because it contain mercury that may cause cancer. One afternoon his phone rang it was his friend Aziz.

I am Aziz. I just have returned from Pakistan.”

“Hey. How are you? You must be in quarantine as a new arrival from abroad.”

“Yes, my period of quarantine is going to be over in a couple of days.”

“Where are you put for quarantine? (Gill 3)

He came back from Pakistan and quarantine in his own house with the permission of local authorities. They had little talked about the situation of Pakistan and how China has donated the contaminated masks at Pakistan. He suggested his friend Aziz that it is better to use our own handkerchiefs instead of mask which is not fresh and pure. By the ending of their conversation the story also came at the ending point with the conclusion that handkerchiefs are better for covering our mouth and hand hygiene is equally important for our safety. “The best for me is to use my handkerchiefs for

face masks because I carry them whether there is corona virus or no corona virus. It is my habit. It is much safer though it is not a proper mask. Something is better than nothing.”(Gill 4)

Conclusion:

Stephen Gill shared through his short story ‘Mask’ that, we should not get panic from this situation. We have to follow the prescribed guidelines by World Health Organization and our presence of mind throughout this situation of COVID-19 Pandemic. As Prof. Gill described in his story we can use handkerchiefs instead of using the contaminated mask. And to get rid from this Pandemic, hand hygiene and physical distance is equally important for us. Epidemics are unknown to us and we have to changed and adjust our life according to the epidemic. The revolutionary therapy in corona virus control is ‘Plasma Therapy’. Many literary works has been written on epidemics and they gives us knowledge and information how humans have faced those epidemics.

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