

“Numbing of the Heart”: Negotiating with Humanity in the Wake of the Pandemic in Jack London’s *The Scarlet Plague*

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Abstract

As the world progresses in its fight against COVID-19, the human civilization finds itself fighting against more than just a mere pathogen. Besides being an unprecedented health emergency, the pandemic has caused breakdowns in many other fronts as well. One of the very alarming issues is the incidents of inhumanity, callousness and deliberate cruelty by people towards their fellow-sufferers, which may incite far-reaching complications in the human society. In the worst case scenario, civilization could go either way- to become more united than ever or to fall to pieces with the extinction of human values- depending on our response in the wake of the pandemic. Plague and pestilence have ever been a popular topic in literature. Here, I take the case of Jack London's *The Scarlet Plague* for a study of the reversion to cruelty of all humans in the face of the plague and also what are the exceptions that have been admitted by the author to suggest how the retention of the ideals of human bonding and empathy can help us stand a chance in the hour of doom. This short novel has particular relevance to the present scenario for its temporal resemblances to the present outbreak, for London's preoccupation with naturalism in his fantasy and for his reliance on the latest scientific discoveries in virology and other modern technologies. The novel is also full of tropes that suggest that the germs of destruction are borne by the sociological framework and the ideologies that go into the foundation of the society.

Keywords: COVID-19, *Scarlet Plague*, Inhumanity, Civilization, Society.

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It has now been almost half a year of anguish and anxiety since the WHO declared the COVID-19 a pandemic in March this year. Changing tracks from the animal kingdom, the virus has affected nearly one-third of the world's human population till date (Worldometer). Besides being an unprecedented medical and pathological challenge, the pandemic has posited many formidable challenges for humanity at large. Maintaining human rights and values like- charity, sanity, empathy and solidarity amongst us- values upon which our human society and civilization rest- is the greatest challenge to combat, as a principal social impact of the pandemic (WHO). According to an article in Al Jazeera:

This ordeal has the potential to bring us closer to one another or turn us into further strangers in an increasingly estranged world. The choices we will make now will shape not just the geopolitical system and the economy, but also the state of our humanity in the decades to come (Kalin).

As a measure to prevent transmission, countries have been put under lockdown for months. People are reeling under unemployment as they are struggling to make both ends meet. Within two months, the pandemic had stranded half of the world's workforce on the edge (Temko). With all the sources of income closed, thousands of laborers braved the perils of transmission and took to migrating to their homelands in order to survive in the face of inevitable death by starvation (Slater et al.). Some perished on the way while many carried the disease to distant corners of the land. The crisis has caused a major threat in human rights also, especially, for those with disability, those who are homeless, refugees, migrants, prisoners as well as the women. The United Nations' Secretary-General has emphasized:

We must come to the aid of the ultra-vulnerable-- millions upon millions of people who are least able to protect themselves. This is a matter of basic human solidarity. It is also crucial for combating the virus (DISD).

There has been a spike in the cases of domestic violence against women and children in the pandemic period, which highlights the effect of the pandemic on mental well-being also

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(Sabpaitoon). Some have already lost their lives after being attacked on suspicion of being COVID Positive. Even the medical and healthcare professionals have often been subjected to harassment and social stigma by the very society that they are fighting for (Sharma). Amidst the many faces of the pandemic, it has turned out to be a pandemic of abuse and one of misleading information and conspiracy theories also (Awasthi). There have been very few strategies to keep the spread of the infodemic in check. Various conspiracy theories (often as a guided response) during the covid-19 pandemic have proved to be detrimental to the essence of humanity worldwide. Prejudices and superstitions have been formed and practiced by many, causing damage to physical and mental health. The social implications of the crisis may be far more enduring than the pathogen itself. It is causing more damage to the spirit of solidarity as some groups are practicing social exclusion in the name of social distancing. Pope Francis has also reiterated the message of Christian faith, "we can only get out of this situation together as a whole humanity" (Esteves). In times when statistics and historical precedents are pouring in like torrents from all sides, it is the literature that has the potential to take us beyond statistics to show the more particular effects of the crisis on our lives: "If history illustrates the effect of pandemics on the whole communities, then literature gives us a more intimate view" (Stovall). The sales of Plague fiction like- *The Journal of the Plague Year* by Daniel Defoe, *The Plague* by Albert Camus, *Last Man* by Mary Shelley, *Earth Abides* by George Stewart, *The Stand* by Stephen King, *The Masque of the Red Death* by Edgar Allan Poe, *Love in Times of Cholera* Gabriel Garcia Marquez and *Severance* by Ling Ma has topped the sales charts in the recent months. Talking of Albert Camus' *The Plague*, Professor Alice Kaplan of Yale University comments: "Almost as though this novel were a vaccine...not just a novel...that can help us think about what we're experiencing but something that can help heal us" (Kaplan). Jack London's *The Scarlet Plague*, in particular, has found new heights of currency in the wake of COVID-19. This short novel has found relevance to the present scenario for its temporal resemblances to the present outbreak, for London's naturalistic approach in his fantasy and for his scientific outlook towards dealing with the plague. The novel is replete with such themes as deliberate inhumanity and cruelty towards fellow-suffers, towards older generations, of falling apart of human society and

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the extinction of civilization etc. What London predicted in this novel, in a post-apocalyptic fashion, is unfortunately finding resemblance in the present scenario. As Matthews comments:

The Scarlet Plague explains aspects of human behavior in times of plague that have become all too familiar recently-- from the enormous value of isolating yourself to the mass madness at grocery stores. But London's larger message was even more prescient: In pandemics, don't be distracted by saving buildings or jobs; prioritize saving as many humans as possible (Matthews).

Perhaps by taking cues from it, we can find a viable answer to our problems and thereby respond to the crisis in a more prudent and rational way; so that we can fight together instead of fight one another in the course of eradicating the plague:

Literature has a vital role to play in framing our responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. It is worth turning to some of these texts to better understand our reactions and how we might mitigate racism, xenophobia and ableism-discrimination against anyone with disabilities- in the narratives that surround the spread of this Corona Virus (Haith).

In *The Scarlet Plague*, we find the story of a bunch of Santa Rosans in the year 2073 where an old man of 87 and three youngsters, clad in goat-skins, are seen fending for themselves in the wilderness. The readers are quick to realize that it is the post-apocalyptic world where the natural forces and wild animals reign supreme. The worn-out traces of an advanced civilization are evident around every corner. It is only the old man Granser that bears witness to the glorious history of the past. We find him trying to impart knowledge about many things long gone, to his incredulous and impatient grandsons Hare-Lip, Edwin and Hoo-Hoo, who belong to different tribes. But while trying to enlighten them about their past, even a little rambling draws vehement snubbing from the boys which really hurts Granser: "the old man was already maundering about disrespect for elders and the reversion to cruelty of all humans that fall from high culture to primitive conditions" (London). Not only in its cruelty towards elderly folk but in its barbarism

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towards women also and possessing them merely as a tool for re-populating the world, has also been laid bare through the way the Chauffeur abuses, tortures and finally kills Vesta-- "...and her (Vesta) the Chauffeur beat and made his slave"(London). Granser also lays bare his apprehension that: "I firmly believe that he killed Vesta in a fit of drunken cruelty though he always maintained that she fell into the lake and was drowned"(London). The overall response of human civilization in the wake of the Scarlet plague in the novel exudes only of the degenerating condition of human values. In the absence of the finer qualities of humanitarianism, bestiality had taken over the entire civilization. Even the classical philosophers acknowledged this tendency of mankind: "According to these authors (Thucydides and Lucretius) plague did not discriminate between the good and the evil but brought about the loss of all social conventions and a rise in selfishness and avarice" (Riva et al.). Starting from blaming other nations for hushing up news of the outbreak, people ended up prowling on the streets in order to vandalize and kill at will. In a reflective mood, Granser testifies that the seeds of the humanitarian crisis were sown by none other than us:

Our food-getters were called Freeman. This was a joke. We, of the ruling classes owned all the land, all the machines, everything. These food-getters were our slaves. We took almost all the food they got and left them little so that they might eat and work and get us more food...The more food there were, the more people there were (London).

The thoughtless increase in population increased social and economic stratification which meant rising amounts of social injustice, deprivation, poverty, hunger and hatred. Critics agree that:

...Granser's confession also exposes the pattern that the most advanced civilizations have always had and probably always will have an underclass of relative barbarians ("they") and an underclass of more talented and affluent leaders ("us") that exploits and misuses fellow human beings from the underclass (Berkove).

It was in the dark alleys that the virus of capitalist and consumerist societies was born and the plague was another form of the outrage to avenge their perpetual deprivation, through an

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upsetting all moral and legal codes. And in that chaos they destroyed themselves also- just as after killing the host, the virus itself loses all means of its sustenance. Granser philosophically observes:

In the midst of our civilization, down in our slums and labor-ghettos we had bred a race of barbarians, of savages; and now in the time of our calamity, they turned upon us like the wild beast they were and destroyed us. And they destroyed themselves as well (London).

But the evil was not confined in the neglected sections of the society only. Lack of humanity was quick to grab hold of the most civilized also. In his first encounter with the plague, Granser remembers, everyone left the classroom and the campus was deserted immediately, as nobody, at all, bothered about extending any help towards those in danger. Suspicion and disbelief so violently takes roots in the heart that it stops all flow of empathy towards those in plight. In doubtful situations, people respond by socially excluding those they hold in suspicion. The degrading human values kept pace with the spread of the swift-footed germ.

Usually, they had convulsions at the time of the appearance of the rash... if one lived through them; he became perfectly quiet, and only did him feel or numbness swiftly creeping up his body from the feet. The heels became numb first, then the legs and hips and when the numbness reached as high as his heart he died...their minds always remained cool and calm up to the moment their hearts numbed and stopped (London).

The manifestation of the disease, metaphorically, indicates the death of feelings and sensibilities attributed to the human heart. Their reason remained calm even as they swiftly turned cold-hearted. Following death, the body would decompose rapidly which is an explicit suggestion of the regression of constructs of civility. In fact, human civilization fell to pieces, flew about and melted away...the plague of inhumanity spread so rapidly. As the more responsible persons realized, the solution lay in killing the germ but not the body i.e. destroying the evils of the society without destroying the society itself. In their desperate bid to survive,

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people began to kill without discrimination. In their final attempt to survive, people started migrating to the country in masses: "Thursday night the panic outrushes for the country began...people... pouring out of the cities by millions, madly over the country, in vain attempt to escape ubiquitous death" (London).

People were mercilessly shooting down those, suspected to have been exposed to the virus. Stores were being vandalized and looted at will. People were hungry, afraid, desperate, panicked and unable to retain their reason. Granser had come across many who were in need of help, many whom he could have helped: "I did not go to the Grocery man's assistance. The time for such acts had already passed. Civilization was crumbling, and it was each for him"(London). Because of this statement, London may very well be regarded by critics as an advocate of the social Darwinian notion of "the survival of the fittest" which leaves no scope for compassion among fellow beings. Darwin's influence on London cannot be exaggerated:

Among the many intellectual influences on Jack London none is so central and profound as that of Darwin...Scholars agree unanimously that Darwin was a major influence on London, most particularly as regards the idea of evolution (Berkove).

But it is also true that from his preoccupation with Anglo Saxon superiority, London had to ultimately revert:

in the apocalyptic short novel *The Scarlet Plague* (1912)...London reverses himself again on social Darwinism and racism when he returns to his interest in the meaning of atavism in the novella's contemplation of the near extinction of the human race by a fast acting and untreatable plague... as Granser tells them the story of how the Scarlet plague destroyed society and civilization, he confesses to what amounts to a lethal indictment against social Darwinism (Berkove).

In the face of an impending danger the so-called human qualities are the first to give in and human society and civilization that we built for ten thousand years was the first to tumble

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down. All the ideologies of brotherhood and codes of charity simply vanished like a bubble of air. Whether exposed or not, it could turn one into stone and then guide him to kill or be killed without any reason. From the wretched to the royal no one was immune to it. In the face of a calamity, the only law of morality seemed to be- "kill or be killed". Is it, after all, the desired outcome of a civilization that took ten thousand years to develop? Wasn't there any other alternative worth considering? Perhaps, there was; as shown by the group that took shelter in the chemistry building. They gathered up together, forming up committees for each task- for defense, for sanitization, for food etc. This proved to be a better way of crisis-management: a crisis which was more of a fight to retain sanity and compassion. "A number of committees were appointed, and we developed a very efficient organization" (London). Like members of a civilized society they conformed to obey their decided rules, even to sacrifice themselves for greater welfare. "Two men were required to go out and remove the corpses, and this meant the probable sacrifice of their own lives" (London). Except for occasional lapses from a high moral pedestal Granser, ultimately, is able to maintain his humanity and sanity long enough to become the torch-bearer for regenerating the decomposed civilization. In contrast, the symbol of hostility, brutality and bullying also survived in the form of Bill, the Chauffeur. He embodied the destructive and all-leveling power of the germ itself, which would lash out at the rich and the powerful with equal rage. He was the embodiment of the rage from below that erupted in its fury to subvert everything: "'You had your day before the plague', he said, 'but this is my day, and a damned good day it is. I wouldn't trade back to the old times for anything.' Such were his words but they were not his words" (London). In fact these were the words of the downtrodden and the deprived. The witnessing of the last aircraft falling to the ground like a plummet symbolizes the crashing of the so-called civilized social set up.

Not only did the human civilization go into extinction but also all things associated with it and all things that mankind had sought to civilize, got collapsed subsequently: "There was a veritable plague of dogs...the dog, you see, always was a social animal" (London). In the reign of animal instincts, the moral fibre of the society was turned upside down. It was a place where

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only brutes- perfect brutes- could find peace and justice. This was the postcolonial world of the Calibans where the set social worldview had been upturned and the nation- decolonized. The germs of this had long been embedded in the hypocrisy of the Prosperos. However, Glanser sometimes betrayed signs of questionable moral standard as he coveted Vesta and wished to get rid of the Chauffeur. The truth is that it is only the garb of civility under which always lurks our animal instincts. The instinct of inherent power-mongering is also evident in Glanser's emphasis on the utility of gunpowder in reestablishing the civilization:

The gunpowder will come. Nothing can stop it- the same old story over and over. Man will increase and men will fight...and in this way only, by fire and blood, will a new civilization in some remote day, be evolved (London).

But then in moments of philosophical enlightenment, the hollowness of the so-called civilizations and the futility of dreaming of one were exposed to Glanser. In a spirit of restlessness, he himself antagonized his dream of using the wisdom of ancient times stored in the books in the cave that went into the making of human societies. According to Wilhelm Reich, "Man is born equal but he does not grow equal. Man has created great teachings, yet each simple teaching has served his oppression" (Reich). Glanser had come to the point where the realization dawned upon him that civilizations, built on the might of gunpowder, will again breed germs of inhumanity and animosity at its core which again will outburst one day to raze everything to the ground.

The ending of the novel is shrouded in mystery and can attract multiple readings. The mountain-lions were getting thick and the horses were pushed to the shore, which indicated the growing predominance of bestiality, driving out traces of civilization and culture to the periphery. Sea-lions were engaged in the primordial preoccupation of fighting and love-making which seemed to be the only way that humans were most likely to adopt, under the guise of a pseudo-civilization, following the same path like goats into the same predestined world of pseudo-civilization harboring the germs of inhumanity and bestiality at its core, only for the

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history to repeat itself: "and old man and boy, skin-clad and barbaric, turned and went along the right of way into the forest in the wake of the goats" (London). In the problematic quest for finding a solution Professor Gina M. Rossetti comments:

...Glanser believes that his nostalgic backward glance will compel his grandsons to rebuild the new civilization-according to the old stratification- as an antidote to future outbreaks. However, their inability to carry forward this vision along with the problematic nature of the solution renders this return of the Saxon a failure (Rossetti).

Some critics even find a way towards salvation through the purification of the flesh:

...the postmodern techno apocalypses replicate the millennial dialectic, which ultimately equates pestilence with the disease of the flesh, the malady of desire, the contagion of life itself, and sees the only possibility of cure in a radical purification of the body (Gomel).

The solution, if any, truly lies in fighting the pandemic with physical distancing and not humanitarian distancing and laying the foundations of a more stable civilization based on solid human values and ideas, instead of false ideologies and vested interests, to avoid the further outbreak along the social fault lines, in future.

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