

Literature in a post COVID-19 world

Battle with the virus will eventually be won but the face of literary endeavour will likely change forever

NADIA ANWAR

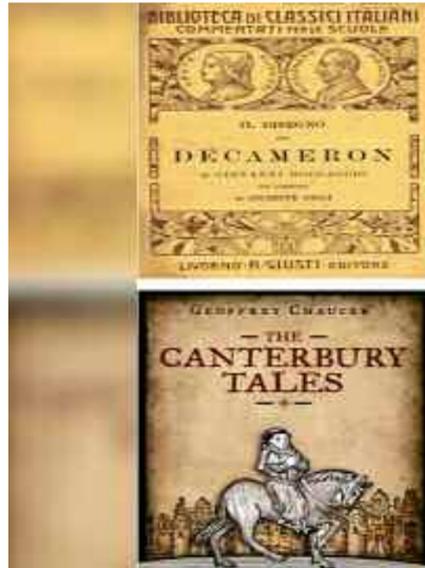
These are unprecedented times. We have been challenged to the core – physically, socially, psychologically, and more importantly, ideologically – by what now appears to be another take on Conrad’s eternal call to humanity – ‘the horror, the horror.’ It is during such times that human potential for creativity finds fertile ground to take root and flourish.

How will the pandemic impact literature? The very question is based on confusion, assumptions, and precariously slippery hope. A brief look at the history of literature that emerged out of natural or man-made crises reveals a trend depicting the commonality of experiences and specificity of its impact. The human endeavour to survive through the challenges and come out successful and have the grit to resume the journey is perhaps what defines or informs existence in this world.

The extensive accounts of pandemics in literature, especially whenever they are necessitated by circumstantial realities, reflect the human capacity to document history in creative moulds to make it digestible to the consumers. The account of Egyptian plague in the Book of Exodus, mention of the devastating plague which inspired Sophocles to reify Oedipus’s kingly traits, and Thucydides’s description of the plague that struck Athens and claimed Emperor Marcus Aurelius’s life are some of the earliest attempts to capture the essential nodes of history along with the human urge to stamp an aesthetic mark on the written oeuvre of that age. Whether the paradigm shift comes in the form of pathological reasons such as leprosy, influenza, smallpox, malaria, the Black Death, cholera, Spanish flu, SARS, MERS, and Ebola or through events of phenomenal significance such as World Wars, apartheid, Great Depression, 9/11, and mass migrations – historical and political happenings have influenced literature of their times, leaving an indelible mark on the literature written during the supposedly ‘normal’ circumstances.

Boccaccio’s Decameron, Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales, Defoe’s A Journal of Plague Year, Camus’s The Plague and in the most recent times, Dean Koontz’s chillingly real prediction of a pandemic at a Chinese city called Yuhuan in his 1981 novel, The Eyes of Darkness and Atwood’s The Year of the Flood (2009), to name a few, are all based on and inspired by epidemic and pandemic outbreaks and their repercussions. What does this pandemic literature have in common? These works all project, to a lesser or greater degree, that ominous, fatalistic, and fear-inducing tone that depicts and amplifies the effects of isolation and loneliness, loss of normalcy, the threat to survival along with an emphasis on having a will to survive at the darkest moments of history and retain a hope for a better future. The parameters of assessing the nature of pan-

demics, however, evolved with the passage of time. During the initial phases of history, human beings associated an enigmatic occurrence, an event or a sudden pestilence to the wrath of gods and goddesses, to magic and superstition, and to the evil conduct of people. As human beings advanced in sciences and became more rational, these attributions to the supernatural gradually matured into fictional literary works. The historicity of the pestilence became an emotional and aesthetic projection of pent up emotions. Literature, indeed, is a human reaction to certain events, occurrences, upheavals and revolutions. It is after times of real crisis that writers recollect and memorialise communal and individual struggles.



Covid-19 has directly impacted the private lives and working situations of many writers. The socio-economic instability will be reflected in their writings. The threat to economic sustainability will become the criteria of evaluating their aesthetic output. This may, in turn, give prominence to fictionalised autobiographical chronicles based in real-time settings. Fight for survival is pre-

dicted to take the front seat in terms of the thematic thrust of post Covid-19 writings. Juxtaposing fear, threat, darkness, and death with freedom, peace, and life, the theme of survival will probably resurface again but this time with a clear message that if we lose to our mean ways now, civilisation as we know it will be threatened. The dire need to bridge the socio-economic divide and communal existence will likely be felt by the writers and demonstrated.

The near future may also witness the rise of conspiracy literature which will depict fictionalised versions of how globalists might have selectively infected people they wanted to wipe out or control through tiny chips installed into their bodies. These conspiracies

Earth, the human virus. Covid-19 is has already been called the nature’s vaccine against the human virus. On a more positive note, ecological concerns in literature will become more intense and prominent, a clarion call for writers to produce more literature related to healing of our planet dealing with issues like overpopulation, climate change, economic disparity, poverty and universal health care solutions.

One may also see a decline of science fiction in post Covid-19 literature. The Pandemic has raised a serious question about the utility and efficacy of the technology. We may be able to explore the farthest corners of the universe, but have we been able to find a cure to this tiny organism? Have we conquered our impending fate? This helplessness will change the perspective about human indomitability and advancement, even challenge the ideals of power. Whereas soldiers, tycoons, and warriors took centre stage in literature during pre-pandemic days, doctors, nurses, and paramedic staff will find an awe-inspiring and inspirational position in the post-pandemic literature.

Escapism may produce a tendency in some writers to completely reject any literature related to the pandemic and adopt a utopian perspective to life. Such a tendency may further foreground romance narratives, becoming sensationally potent by backgrounding pandemic settings. A category possibly labelled as ‘masked romance’ could change the very nature of physical intimacy in relationships leading towards virtual emotional alliances. Quarantine and self-isolation could thus loosen the hold of realism, making the imagination more fertile and palpable. The more confined the corporeal existence, the greater chances there will be for imaginative flights. This will not be without the risk of literature losing its social worth.

The constant fear of getting infected and the stigma around the disease will substantially affect trauma studies. Torn between safety and survival, benefits and ills of proximity, value and harms of freedom, and personal space and socialising, writings will diversify psychological issues. It is likely that we shall see the mushrooming of cheap commercial literature using pandemic themes to create adventures and excursions based on impossible missions – a way to regain, project, or sustain power. Another point of view pertains to the growth of religious and spiritual themes that writers may weave around the ideas of evil, curse, punishment, redemption, and salvation. The potential writers adopting this line of thought will approach the pandemic through the lens of piety and mystic maturity, encouraging the consumers to self-explore and be one with themselves. How are we going to emerge of this situation? Such questions have become routine thoughts. At the back of our minds we are perhaps all reliving our lives. ‘When the hurlyburly’s done/ When the battle lost and won.’ The battle with the virus will be won but the face of literary endeavours will change forever, perhaps exhibiting more spontaneity, origi-

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will pave the way for, perhaps, bigger geopolitical breaks and global malaise against certain powerful nations or countries. With growing competition, the literature of propaganda, bigotry and racism will penetrate into the fabric of aesthetic endeavours.

The desire to produce the literature of ‘realisation’ will prompt some writers to take an inward journey and find the answers to nature’s response to the deadliest virus on the planet

An enduring legacy

Alexander Lee’s biography is a great foray into the magnificent life and times of Machiavelli – the father of modern political philosophy

MOHAMMAD FAROOQ

Niccolò Machiavelli, the father of modern political philosophy and author of the notorious The Prince remains a divisive figure. His ingenuity has never been doubted, though his works still stir controversy and debate. A new biography on Machiavelli written by Alexander Lee aims to provide details about the man himself, what he stood for and how his career took shape, the trials and tribulations he endured to prove his dedication to Florence.

Deconstructing the notoriety and infamy that has plagued Machiavelli for over five centuries, the author goes into the origins of his family, its illustrious part in serving the state of Florence in notable positions in the 14th and 15th centuries and how with the rise of Medici their star began to wane. The initial chapters provide a detailed background into the family life of a young Machiavelli, how his father, a lawyer by profession, was not as rich, illustrious, and influential as his counterparts despite being a part of the nobility.

Despite his father’s financial constraints, Machiavelli received the best humanist education of the ancients and was instructed in the vagaries of art and literature that flourished in Florence during the height of the Renaissance. His family life was content, but his father’s constraints and his failure to practice his profession instilled a determination in Machiavelli since his teenage years to make something of his life. His initial years remain shrouded in mystery, he did not make a mark or left a permanent imprint during that time.

However, with the death of Lorenzo de Medici in 1492 began the rise of Savonarola, the Dominican Friar who electrified the citizens of Florence to give up a life of luxury and sin and return to the founding teachings of the Christ. As Lorenzo’s son Piero the ‘Unfortunate’ failed to consolidate the Medici rule, the dynasty fell apart after the citizens of Florence rebelled against them leading to their immediate downfall.

With Savonarola tightening his grip on power, Florence a bastion of Renaissance in Italy fell into decadence as all art and the education of the ancients were shunned on the orders of the Dominican friar. This created tensions between the nobility, which broke into rival factions; one supporting Savonarola and the others against him which included those who called for the return of the Medici family which was mostly persecuted or exiled. As Savonarola’s reign became oppressive and stifling, the opposition to it kept rising and the tensions rose to a fever pitch before the Dominican friar was burnt at the stake for confessing, under duress, that his prophecies were a sham. After Savonarola’s spectacular fall from grace, Florence rose out of its ashes as a republic loosely founded on the Venetian model.

At this juncture, Machiavelli made his entry into the Florentine government and got appointed in the chancellery courtesy his connections and friendships with the right people in the bureaucracy at that time. Adamant to prove his worth, Machiavelli was eager to learn, grow and adapt to the changing circumstances. Initially, Machiavelli struggled to settle into his job, which involved a lot of bureaucratic work but with time he began to settle in and cement his place despite facing stiff opposition from those who considered him a novice. Determined to prove his detractors and critics wrong, Machiavelli’s career in the Florentine government was one of trials and tribulations, in which he was called in countless times to serve as an ambassador to kings across Europe. At that time, Italy was a melting pot with Florence’s loyalty tested to the

limit. A punitive campaign it was leading against Pisa became a costly war of attrition.

As warfare waged across Italy in different capacities, Machiavelli was called upon to serve Florentine interests and to ink agreements with kings, dukes and mercenaries to their advantage. Many of these missions undertaken by Machiavelli were tiring and thankless, with no major financial benefits. He mostly remained short of money while he served Florence both at home and overseas.

During all those years in the chancellery, Machiavelli’s dedication to the republic never wavered. However, due to the financial hardships, his relationship with his wife, who loved him dearly, suffered a lot. In many of these ambassadorial ventures, he met and came across many eminent personalities including popes, but no one impressed him more than Cesare Borgia, on which his famous work The Prince was based. His passion to serve Florence never swerved, he undertook a complex task of forming a citizen militia in which he played a key role in enrolling recruits and hired renowned mercenaries to train them. Machiavelli was actively involved in the founding of this citizen militia which played a key role in the fall of Pisa in 1508 after having exacted a heavy toll on the Florentine exchequer for fourteen years.

With the death of Pope Julius II, the Catholic church elected Giovanni de Medici as Pope Leo X in 1513. This eventually changed the fortunes of the Florentine republic founded after the fall of Savonarola. Intermine conflicts and warring factions, some in favour of the return of the Medici family and others dedicated to the republican rule, undermined Florence. With tensions rising and Leo X threatening to unleash his army on Florence to overthrow the republican rule, the gonfalonier, Tommaso Soderini, who had been elected for life in 1502, was forced to abdicate and was exiled.

With the overthrow of Soderini, Machiavelli lost one of his staunchest, closest allies and supporters. On the return of Medici to Florence, he was accused of being involved in a plot against them, imprisoned and tortured before being set free due to a lack of evidence. With the formation of a new government in Florence, Machiavelli found himself out of favour. Moreover, he was banished from Florence to his estate nearby. Machiavelli, now jobless, succumbed to depression. To curry favour with Medici, he wrote The Prince which was dedicated to Pope Leo X, a stratagem to restore his fortunes. The last years of Machiavelli’s life were spent in solitude. He diverted all his energies to writing books, plays inspired by the works of writers from ancient Rome. Driven away from the chancellery and the diplomatic life that had formed the heart of Machiavelli’s career, he wrote treatises and offered advice to Medici on how to rule. He even wrote a history of Florence till the death of Lorenzo the Magnificent commissioned on the directives of Giuliano de’ Medici, later Pope Clement VII. Much like to his father Bernardo, Machiavelli, sick and worn out, died a failure in worldly terms but unlike him, his works left a legacy that continues to reverberate till today. Machiavelli’s legacy continues to endure in modern-day political life and Alexander Lee’s biography provides a great foray into the magnificent life and times of the father of modern political philosophy.

Machiavelli: His Life and Times
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Capacity to suffer

SARAH SIKANDAR

“I am not worthy of sitting next to her,”

Colson Whitehead, now the winner of two Pulitzers for fiction, said in a live webinar last week. He was talking about Tony Morrison. When the host asked him if he still thought he wasn’t worthy, he just shook his head, with the humility and credence of his protagonists.

Whitehead’s two Pulitzers make him only the fourth author in history to have won the honour. His personal story of privilege has little to do with his characters who are outrageously removed from his life in Manhattan and Harvard. Theirs is silent suffering and consistent abuse. And he is not reluctant to face it. In his talks and interviews, his reserve energy underlines the implicit frustration with the system. His characters, on the other hand, are candid and self-assured about their attitudes. Although, they cannot cheat the system, or escape it, they refuse to accept their assigned position in it.

Whitehead’s people are in the strait-jacket of a systematic brutality, fed by a problematic ideology of race relations. Pause for a moment and look at the timing of his two books, The Underground Railroad (2017) and The Nickel Boys (2019). The first is set in a plantation in Georgia before the Civil War, and the latter in a juvenile correctional facility for young boys during Jim Crow Era in Florida. More than two centuries. One condition.

Cora, from The Underground Railroad, is a slave girl born on a cotton plantation. She has her dead grandmother’s resilience, but also her mother’s anger. She is treated like a pariah by her own people, after being abandoned by her mother Mabel, now a runaway. What Mabel leaves behind is a surly, unlovable child who, thanks to her grit, becomes a tough nut the white man can’t crack. The slave quarter, removed from the main house, becomes her only mentor with its share of secret politics. Here, she navigates to be her own woman and meets Caesar who encourages her to accompany him through the tracks of the underground railroad to their freedom. The story follows Cora’s journey from one state to another, from one version of racism to another. Some things never change.

The 2020 Pulitzer winner, The Nickel Boys, is based in a segregated Florida, at the peak of the Civil Rights movement in the early 1960s. Elwood is a young, bright black boy, raised by his grandmother who works in the hospitality industry, his childhood spent hanging out in the kitchen with coloured help. Studious and curious, Elwood, gets into a college for underprivileged coloured men. On the morning of his first class, unable to keep up on his half-broken bike, he gets a ride from a black trucker. His saviour turns out to be a fugi-



tive, sending Elwood to the correctional facility instead of his first class of the morning. What ensues is a remarkable tale of pain, humiliation, and human degradation in post-war America.

Elwood, like Cora, is resolute to escape the hellhole through proper channels. He decides to earn his freedom from Nickel Academy by fulfilling the official pre-requisites for a ‘graduation.’ His commitment to the system of rewards within the facility is thwarted, time and again, by a parallel justice system controlled mainly by those in charge, both inside and outside Nickel Academy.

Whitehead’s people don’t belong in a plantation or a prison but they aren’t welcome outside either. They’re African slaves who don’t have a home in Africa anymore. Their existence is limited to the segregated French quarters of Jim Crow Era, steering clear of the normalcy of white America. They are wronged, and like the gospels of Martin Luther King Jr, they want to undo the wrong done to them with kindness. His protagonists are the breathing reminder of Dr King’s message: ‘...we will still love you...be ye assured that we will wear you down by our capacity to suffer, and one day we will win our freedom.’ Cora and Elwood also personify Malcolm X’s frustration with an unjust society and James Baldwin’s burning questions. Whitehead is not unique. What he does is what Morrison does in Jazz; what Geraldine Brooks does in March; and what Alice Walker does in The Color Purple. In the voluminous achievements of African-American literature, he will stand out as an honest black voice in post-Trump America. His themes are not exceptional, it is his honesty in presenting excessive brutality and maddening pain. His books are not full of evil white men. But he’s not a crowd-pleaser either. It is the delusion of freedom that the black man keeps hanging on to. The white man, for his part, keeps throwing him the bait. Freedom is a myth, both for the runaway slaves and Nickel Boys and many young black boys after them. The tragic scenes of George Floyd’s death, that rolled out on our phone and TV screens make Whitehead more relevant than ever. Not to say racism was ever irrelevant, the energy and attention that recent protests have brought on the streets, is a reminder that the cancer is thriving in the society. The young Coras and Eldwoods in America demand answers from a society that tells them they’re equals but acts otherwise. Whitehead’s work is not merely about racial attitudes. It also prompts the glaring stats that show inequality in healthcare, the criminal justice system, educational institutes and professional opportunity. Whether this year’s Pulitzer putting him next to Toni Morrison and Alice Walker was a political statement or not, Colson Whitehead’s work is every bit worthy of