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SURVIVAL IN TIMES OF PANDEICS: THE PROPHETIC VISION OF JACK LONDON

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ABSTRACT

Works of fiction often depict epidemics and shed light on their catastrophic effects on the life of people. In some instances, the novelists set their novels a long time after the pandemics killed millions of people. They envision post-apocalyptic worlds with people who survive these disasters and endeavor to readjust themselves to the new environments. For people living in such chaotic times, like the contemporary COVID19 pandemic, these novels become emblematic of the author's prophetic and cautionary visions. They identify with the events and the characters and their struggle to survive the ordeal. This research focuses on Jack London's post-apocalyptic novel *The Scarlet Plague* as a reflection of his prophetic vision of a 21st century pandemic that depopulated the world and almost caused the extinction of the human race.

Key word: Infection, pandemic, post-apocalyptic, prophetic, survival.

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Introduction: Post-Apocalyptic Fiction

As a literary genre, which was originally associated with religion and religious revelation, 'Apocalyptic Literature' mainly deals with cataclysm and reveals the prophetic vision of the men of letters. The concept of the 'Apocalypse' is deeply rooted in *The Old Testament* and *The Bible* in the stories that allude to the end of the world. It was mentioned in the prophesy of Jeremiah, after the Babylon Exile, of the return of the Israelites to their motherland, the Messianic Kingdom, which will be ruled by the Messianic King. In this utopian land of promise, they will enjoy an ideal and free life (Collins 1998). The main objective of this religious philosophy is to set right the evils of this world and to remind the people of the significance of the righteousness of the individuals and governments in dealing with people and other nations. In spite of the evil that pervades the world, God's will of a world inhabited by good people, who can defeat the powers of evil, will be fulfilled. Thus, those who defy God's will, whether individuals or nations, will ultimately perish, and divine justice will dominate at the end (Charlesworth 1983).

However, with time the term expanded to encompass anything that prophesizes the future of the world. In literature, it developed during the twentieth century, following the disastrous World Wars and the ensuing Cold War. A sub-genre of science fiction is Post-Apocalyptic fiction, which explores the end of civilization and of the entire world due to certain catastrophic reasons and setbacks like natural or nuclear disasters, epidemics, or supernatural phenomena like alien invasion. The authors envision the end of the world and present infernal scenes of mass destruction and chaos (Reddish 1998).

Taking place after the end of civilization, technology in post-apocalyptic stories is no longer effective in solving contemporary problems and it only serves as a reminder of an ancient time. The pre-catastrophic past is always in the background with the characters' attempt to trace the past of their ancestors and its difference from the present as a warning to the readers of the potential dangers of industrialization, nuclear experiments, mass-

destructive weaponry, and climate change. These stories focus on the characters' struggle to survive the ordeal and to maintain the human race alive (Zamora 1993). The interest in this fictional tradition increased during the Cold War era with the competition in the production of armaments and the threat of annihilation and the end of civilization. This apocalyptic tone is expressed in the form of excessive violence and the characters' sense of entrapment and helplessness, triggered by the dystopian world in which they live (Rosen 2008).

A Survivor Telling His Story

Published in 1912, *The Scarlet Plague* is Jack London's fictional account of a futuristic global pandemic that ravages the world in 2013 and decimates almost all of the population, leaving some individuals struggling in a primitive tribal community. However, the novel opens sixty years after the pandemic, exactly in 2073, in San Francisco, Californian, with the protagonist, James Howard Smith, now called Granser by his grandsons. He is one of the few who survived the pandemic. Now in his eighties, he tells his grandsons, Edwin, Hoo-Hoo, and Hare-Lip, about the scarlet plague that afflicted the state and the world. Prior to the pandemic, Smith has been an English professor at the University of California, Berkeley. He informs his grandsons how the epidemic spread rapidly and how the infected people suddenly turned red-faced and instantly died after feeling the symptoms of the disease: "the first death came on Monday morning. By Thursday they were dying like flies...everywhere—in their beds, at their work, walking along the street" (London, 79).

Smith believes that the spread of the deadly epidemic was due to the increase in the number of the people worldwide, since overpopulation facilitates the transmission of diseases:

In spite of all these diseases, and of all the new ones that continued to arise, there were more and more men in the world. This was because it was easy to get food. The easier it was to get food, the more men there were; the more men there were, the more

thickly were they packed together on the earth; and the more thickly they were packed, the more new kinds of germs became diseases. (London 65)

Smith still remembers the first casualty he witnessed as he was teaching at the university—a young woman who died shortly after she showed symptoms of the disease. He was also estranged from his family who isolated themselves, fearing that he might be infected. He also recalls how the people were terrified by

the astonishing quickness with which this germ destroyed human beings, and the fact that it inevitably killed any human body it entered....From the moment of the first signs of it, a man would be dead in an hour. Some lasted for several hours. Many died within ten or fifteen minutes of the appearance of the first signs. (London 73)

The unburied corpses intensified the situation and helped spreading the pestilence:

The bodies were lying in the streets unburied. All railroads and vessels carrying food and such things into the great city had ceased running and mobs of the hungry poor were pillaging the stores and warehouses. (London 85)

Smith recounts the horrible experience of the pandemic as doctors and scientists failed to find an effective cure or serum that could save the people, despite all their efforts. Nonetheless, the public highly trusted them and were sure that these scientists will find a way to overcome the virus: “It looked serious, but we in California, like everywhere else, were not alarmed,” the professor recalls. “We were sure that the bacteriologists would find a way to overcome this new germ, just as they had overcome other germs in the past” (London 72). Unlike other health crises in the past when “the bacteriologists fought all these sicknesses and destroyed them,” the scarlet plague in the novel is so strong that the doctors were unable to confront it (London 62). Besides, the bacteriologists were infected “in their

laboratories even as they studied the germ of the Scarlet Death....As fast as they perished, others stepped forth and took their places” (London 76).

Like the scientists who devoted all their energy to save humanity, the journalists and reporters in *The Scarlet Plague* did their best to report information about the pandemic and to refute false information in order to control public fear and ensure the people that the pandemic would come to an end and the doctors would be able to produce a vaccine. However, when the bacteriologists finally “discovered the serum for the plague,” it was too late to save mankind (London 87).

London’s criticism of modern, civilized society is obvious in his description of the behavior of people in such chaotic times:

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 beasts they were and destroyed us. And they destroyed themselves as well. (London 105)

The epidemic revealed the worst qualities of the humans as the people turned violent and aggressive. It “gave rein to their bestiality” as they “fought and drank and died” (London 111). All the people thought of was their survival. They became selfish and overlooked their familial and social bonds. In addition, they attacked and even killed each other. They began to steal from local stores. Lawlessness was common as “murder and robbery and drunkenness were everywhere” (London 85). This was because of the death of the representatives of authority: “A third of the New York police were dead. Their chief was also dead, likewise the mayor. All law and order had ceased” (London 85).

Smith was unable to understand why good people died while evil and selfish men survived as he speaks of an evil man whom he knew: “He was a violent, unjust man. Why the plague germs spared him I can never understand. It would seem, in spite of our old metaphysical notions about absolute justice, that there is no justice in the universe” (London 145).

The panic led the surviving people to seek safety in the countryside where they rush carrying the virus and infecting more people:

Thursday night the panic outrush for the country began. ...people...pouring out of the cities by millions, madly over the country, in vain attempt to escape the ubiquitous death. You see, they carried the germs with them. Even the airships of the rich, fleeing for mountain and desert fastnesses, carried the germs. (London 89)

Life in the cities almost came to an end as Smith recollects: “Everything had stopped. It was like the end of the world to me—my world...It was like seeing the sacred flame die down on some thrice-sacred altar. I was shocked, unutterably shocked” (London 82). Smith remembers his brother’s advice to socially distance himself in order to evade infection, which became his means of survival: “To all of this I agreed staying in my house and for the first time in my life attempting to cook. And the plague did not come out on me” (London 84). Following the death of his friends, Smith lived alone for few years, but unable to tolerate the loneliness he headed back to San Francisco, seeking other survivors: “Like the dog, I was a social animal and I needed my kind” (London 139).

A Neo-Barbaric World

The world in which the novel opens is a desolate wasteland after civilization has crumbled and life regresses to its prehistoric, primitive existence. London presents images of the end of the world to emphasize his pessimistic view of this post-pandemic existence:

The smoke of the burning filled the heavens, so that the midday was as a gloomy twilight, and, in the shifts of wind, sometimes the sun shone through dimly, a dull red orb....it was like the last days of the end of the world....It was exactly as if the world had ceased, been blotted out”. (London 98)

The few survived humans live like savages, making their living as hunters. They are illiterate and have no respect for education and knowledge. Their speech is rendered into simple dialect and their clothes are mere goatskins. Culture has become a matter of history and archeology.

Smith observes how “the wild wolves roam today, and the savage of progeny of our loins, with prehistoric weapons defend themselves against the fanged despoilers. Think of it! And all because of the Scarlet Death” (London 34). He further regrets this decline, saying: “The human race is doomed to sink back farther and farther into the primitive night era again” (39). He is unable to make his grandsons believe his views concerning the necessity of knowledge as they view him outdated and awkward.

The Scarlet Plague reveals the author’s views of social Darwinism and its concept of social evolution. Smith’s grandsons like the other surviving humans reflect Darwin’s belief of survival of the fittest, as he laments: “The great world which I knew in my boyhood and early manhood is gone. It has ceased to be. We, who mastered the planet—its earth, and sea, and sky...now live in primitive savagery” (London 171). This is further illustrated through the survival of animals in the aftermath of the plague. The dogs, for instance, survived and quickly adapted to the new environment:

In the last days of the world before the plague, there were many different kinds of dogs—dogs without hair and dogs with warm fur, dogs so small that they would make scarcely a mouthful for other dogs that were as large as mountain lions. Well, all the small dogs, and the weak types, were killed by their fellows. Also, the very large ones were not adapted for the wild life and bred out. As a result, the many different kinds of dogs disappeared, and there remained, running in packs, the medium-sized wolfish dogs that you know to-day. (London 135)

Similarly, Smith’s grandsons are preoccupied with their survival and existence. They are ready to use intrigue and evil means just to stay alive

and to maintain superiority over each other. One of them, Edwin, endeavors to learn from the knowledge that Smith has, especially the design of weapons to be able to control his brothers and the whole tribe. However, they do not completely believe his account of the Scarlet Plague pandemic, nor do they agree with his stories about the scientific progress of the old world. They believe in superstitions and primitive shaman treatments. This leads Smith to lament the loss of culture and the decline of science: “Ten thousand years of culture and civilization passed in the twinkling of an eye” (London 90). He struggles to keep what is left of the traditions and sciences of the old world by storing some of the books. He knows that no one is able to read them, but he still has hope that the new generation will one day realize the significance of knowledge and education as he explains to his grandsons: “In them [the books] is great wisdom...Some day men will read again” (London 175).

Conclusion

The Scarlet Plague echoes contemporary anxiety over COVID19 and reflects the author’s prophetic vision of an apocalyptic world after civilization crumbles and the human race disintegrates. It shows the effect of the pandemic on the people as it led to the demise of culture and the emergence of a neo-barbaric society. This reveals the author’s fears of future pandemics and his cautionary message to the readers of the need of social solidarity in order to evade living in a world similar to the post-apocalyptic one which the novel delineates. The novelist also foresees an active medical community that devotes all its energy to save humanity. He also envisions an effective media that could address the public and reduce the mass hysteria. Additionally, London stresses the importance of social distancing as an effective means in preventing the disease transmission.

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