



Research Paper

## The Pangs of Suffering: Theme of Nostalgia, Plague and Survival in Jack London's *The Scarlet Plague*

Mridu Sharma

PhD Research Scholar

Department of English, University of Jammu

**Abstract:** *Plague has been a recurrent phenomenon in real life and repeated theme in literature, as literature has always been a reflection and tool to society. The Scarlet Plague (1912) is a novel by Jack London set up in a futuristic post apocalyptic world of 2073 in which he presents the protagonist - James Howard Smith, addressed as 'Granser', and his grandsons as the very few survivors of the Scarlet Plague that hit the world in 2013. In the novel, the Granser is portrayed as a dissatisfied old man who, despite having survived the plague, constantly yearns for the past. The present paper seeks to analyse and study the leitmotifs of suffering and survival, the memory of gruesome horrors of the plague and nostalgia and yearning for the past or pre-plague times as experienced by Granser in the novel, with special emphasis on environmental degradation and the deterioration of human values and fall of civilisation in such horrific situation. The paper also attempts to analyse and highlight the prophetic nature of literature, lessons for such situations, the value of literature with its universal appeal, particularly with respect to the selected novel.*

**KEY WORDS:** *Plague, Civilization, Nostalgia, Suffering, Survival.*

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Humanity has always been struck by plagues since the time immemorial – Plague of Athens (430 BC), The Antonine Plague (161-180 AD), The Justinian Plague (6<sup>th</sup> Century AD) Plague of Cyprian (250-271 AD), The Black Death (1346-1353), American Plagues (16<sup>th</sup> Century), Great Plague of London (1665-1666), Russian Plague 1770-1772, Flu Pandemic (1889-1890), Spanish Flu (1918-1920), H1N1 Swine Flu Pandemic (2009-10), Ebola Epidemic (2014-16) and the recent COVID 19 in the present times are some of the major plagues that have afflicted humanity on a large scale and have, consequently, altered the course of human civilization. There must be multiple factors causing these plagues but man's exploitation of nature remains a consistent reason for such natural epidemics. Man has always excessively exploited the environment and natural resources in the name of development and have thought of themselves as the centre of the ecosystem and the creation and whenever man-nature equilibrium has become lop-sided due to unscrupulous treatment of flora and fauna by mankind, pandemics have occurred to remind man to maintain the ecological balance in order to survive. In order to survive these ecological imbalances and plagues, the realization that man is only a part of environment is extremely crucial. Frank M. Snowden aptly writes in the preface of his book *Epidemic and Society: From Black Death to the Present*: "Epidemics afflict societies through specific vulnerabilities people have created by the relationship with their environment, other species and each other. Microbes that ignite pandemics are those whose evolution has adapted them to fill the ecological niches that we have prepared"(ix).

The novel *The Scarlet Plague* (1912) falls under the genre of post apocalyptic literature and the plot deals with a situation where in the plague has already affected the world in 2013 and its survivors recount it in the present year, that is, 2073- the year in which the novel is set. It revolves around James Howard Smith, who was a Professor of English in before the Scarlet Death occurred in 2012. Though on the surface, it seems just a simple novel that deals with a plague known as scarlet plague yet it is multi-layered and has numerous nuances woven into it such as environmental degradation, demographic changes due to plague, the critique of capitalism, anthropocentrism, fall of civilization, yearning for the past and nostalgia for the pre plague times, and so on. Since, it deals with so many diverse and relevant issues and themes, therefore it is the novel that is way ahead of its times and is relatable and popular in all times especially the present scenario where the contemporary world is hit by COVID 19 pandemic.

The protagonist of the novel: 'Granser' narrates to his grand children the story of his life before plague, the outbreak of plague in 2013 and the situation he was in and how he survived a horrendous plague called the Scarlet Plague. Therefore, plague and survival remain two major pillars of the text while his nostalgia and yearning for "the good old days" keeps interrupting and adding to his narration intermittently. Although he is narrating in the present yet he fondly remembers past when he was a Professor of English in the pre plague times. He recourses to fond memories of the past in order to escape the harsh realities of the present, where he sees that the way of the world post the scarlet plague is diametrically contrary to his values that form an important part of his existence and that his grandsons are living as primeval hunters and ruthless savages – all because of the Scarlet Plague.

He is shown as longing and pining for the past as any survivor of a traumatic experience would experience similar nostalgia for the good old days. As Thomas Dodman, aptly, writes about nostalgia in his book, *What Nostalgia Was: War, Empire and the Time of a Deadly Emotion* : "The disposition to desire that which we no longer have (or have never really had) maybe a universal and transhistorical trait" (2).

The title of the novel might suggest that 'the scarlet plague' is the central theme of the novel but it is the impact of this plague on its survivor and the protagonist James Howard Smith and his recollection of it that forms the heart of the novel. Thus, nostalgia forms an important part of Granser's being. The word nostalgia comes from the Greek word 'nostos' meaning "return home" and 'algia' meaning pain and longing. Hence, the word nostalgia literally means longing for home. The character of Granser likes to live in past and he longs for the pre plague times. In the initial few pages of the novel, his yearning for the past becomes evident as his grandson Edwin and he encounter a bear on their way to Cliff House and he says:

Who'd have thought I'd live to see the time when a man would be afraid of his life on the way to the Cliff House? When I was a boy, Edwin, men and women and little babies used to come out here from San Francisco by tens of thousands on a nice day. And there weren't any bears then. No, sir. They used to pay money to look at them in cages, they were that rare. (London 3)

Granser, further, elaborates on how on the appearance of a scarlet rash a person would suffer convulsions and numbness would first engulf the person's feet, then legs and slowly reach his heart and would cause the person to die. After the appearance of the scarlet rash a person would die within fifteen minutes or would survive for only as long as three hours. His description of the deterioration of one's health after being exposed to the plague is horrific and awful. The protagonist- James Howard Smith recounts and highlights the reaction of the people towards the outbreak of plague:

It looked serious, but we in California, like everywhere else, were not alarmed. 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. But the trouble was the astonishing quickness with which this germ destroyed human beings, and the fact that it inevitably killed any human body it entered. No one ever recovered. (London 51)

The scarlet death in the novel is depicted as spreading like wild fire and there are prowlers everywhere prowling wildly in this wild fire. It appears to be the end of the world where one has to fight not just the scarlet plague but also the bestiality and violence of prowlers, destruction caused by fire and the loss of communication with the rest of the world. It shows panic stricken people in the midst of fires and violence and plague rushing in order to save themselves and their loved ones. This resonates with what M A Riva, et. al have also highlighted in their research article titled "Pandemic Fear and Literature: Observations from Jack London's The Scarlet Plague" published in a journal called *Emerging Infectious Diseases* –

The end of the world: this is how the pandemic was perceived. Not only did the people fear their own death but they also had the terrible feeling of being at the end of the world: the cities were being destroyed by fire; the people were fleeing away in hysteria. This immense panic grew even more, frightening and unprecedented because of the stop in communication with the rest of the world, a hopeless sign of death.

It is, hence, rightly remarked by Damir Huremovic in his book *Psychiatry of Pandemics: A Mental Health Response to Infection Outbreak*: "One of the greatest catastrophes ever, if not the greatest one in the entire history of mankind, was an outbreak of a pandemic. In a long succession throughout history, pandemic outbreaks have decimated societies, determined outcomes of wars, wiped out entire population" (7).

While he narrates all these incidents, he remembers his past constantly and his character is the most poignant part of the novel because he is a character who has lived before the scarlet plague, during the plague and has luckily been able to live beyond the aftermath with his grandchildren. Since, his grand children are born after the plague, they are hunters and primitive people and therefore, the contrast between the thought process of children and that of Granser is very conspicuous. They don't understand his vocabulary as he often talks like an English professor in fluent phrases which are beyond the understanding of grandchildren. They also mock him and ridicule him because of their lack of values and education. On one such incident, they give him hot, boiled mussels and told him that they were crabs and as he, delightfully, took a morsel; his mouth got burnt and they all laughed at him. His reaction to this is that tears come out of his eyes as he says: "When I was a boy, we did not laugh at our elders; we respected them" (London 6).

In the novel, Granser also recounts how there were numerous people on the beach at San Francisco before the Scarlet plague but in the present he and his grandsons are the only survivors who are living like primitive beings in a desolate country. He yearns for the past and tells them that before the Scarlet Death there were four million people in San Francisco but now after that there are less than forty survivors all around the world. These incidents among numerous others show that the protagonist as a survivor of the plague is always nostalgic and lost in reverie and it echoes Thomas Dodman's words as he says in the introduction of his book *What Nostalgia Was: War, Empire and the Time of a Deadly Emotion* : "Today psychologists assure us that nostalgia is a "positive emotion", more sweet than bitter, which soothes the self from existential pangs by solidifying and augmenting identity" (5).

*The Scarlet plague* also stresses the fact that how there is no humanity in a plague like situation and the civilization is still crumbling and each man is for himself. It calls for the survival of the fittest and at such serious situations all humans turn brutal because it's the battle between surviving and succumbing to the plague. Granser also narrates many such instances where his heart pained that he could not help but in a destructive, anarchist, and violent pandemic like the Scarlet Death, the only way to survive was to think of oneself only. One such instance in the text is when he sees a known grocery store keeper in danger of the prowlers but instead of lending help, he finds it crucial to save himself. Granser narrates: "Even as I looked on from a distance, I saw one of the robbers break the windows of the adjoining store, a place where shoes were sold, and deliberately set fire to it. I did not go to the groceryman's assistance. The time for such acts had already passed. Civilization was crumbling, and it was each for himself" (London 68-69).

The grave situation of plague, as elucidated by the novelist and narrated by the protagonist is a result of unnatural human activities like, anthropocentric activities, environmental degradation, rapid urbanization, demographic changes like rise in population, industrialization and division of society into elite class and working class etc. Capitalism and the excess of human activities on national and global level is what Jack London thinks to be the root cause of all the destruction and the death of humanity in such severe circumstances as he makes Granser his mouthpiece as he goes on to say:

In the midst of our civilization, down in our slums and labour 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. They inflamed themselves with strong drink and committed a thousand atrocities, quarrelling and killing one another in general madness. (London 71)

Anthropocentrism has been one of the prominent themes of the text *The Scarlet Plague* as one can see that right from the onset of the scarlet plague to even after it has taken place and Granser is recalling it to his grandsons, highlighting that animal and plant life merely supplemented human existence. Human beings are shown at the centre of the world not only in plague rather even after that the animals like other non human species are at the periphery or margins. This is reflected by the fact that his grandson Edwin amongst many others, wears a garment of bearskin and a pig tail as an ornament. -"Tucked coquettishly, over one ear was a freshly severed tail of a pig" (London 11).

The failure of human beings to learn from the past apocalypses and plagues is one of the major factors that Jack London implicitly hints through Granser's narration in his novel as the causing agent of the Scarlet Plague and most probably this lack of learning lessons from past might have led to the current COVID 19 pandemic which has afflicted the entire world. This echoes Frank M. Snowden's Preface of his book *Epidemics and Society: From the Black Death to Present*, "Unfortunately, along with outbreaks, a recurring pattern of societal amnesia has prevailed. Each microbial challenge has been followed by a period of frenetic activity, internationally and nationally, but has concluded with a lapse into forgetfulness" (x-xi).

Plagues, epidemics, flu, pandemics have always hit the societies and civilizations have crumbled and recovered but have not introspected as to how human interaction with environment can be balanced in order to avoid such situations, and such introspections have always been promoted by literature, and because of this orientation, especially in times like COVID 19 pandemic, literature has great lessons to offer to keep humans human. This is what Granser says in the concluding lines of the novel:

Nothing can stop it--the same old story over and over. Man will increase, and men will fight. The gunpowder will enable men to kill millions of men, and in this way only, by fire and blood, will a new civilization, in some remote day, be evolved. And of what profit will it be? Just as the old civilization passed, so will the new. It may take fifty thousand years to build, but it will pass. All things pass. Only remain cosmic force and matter, ever in flux, ever acting and reacting and realizing the eternal types--the priest, the soldier, and the king. Out of the mouths of babes comes the wisdom of all the ages. Some will fight, some will rule, some will pray; and all the rest will toil and suffer sore while on their bleeding carcasses is reared again, and yet again,. (London 120-121)

It can be rightly said that the key here is not to permanently forget but to remember the lessons learned out of lived pandemic, plagues and epidemics and maintaining healthy man-environment equilibrium so as to sustainably live in harmony with the creation. The novel *The Scarlet Plague* has a lot of lessons to offer to humanity and it is an excellent rendition of post apocalyptic times that not only sheds light on what a post

apocalyptic world looks like but also on the multifarious factors and causes such as anthropocentrism, capitalism, over- population, unscrupulousness of human beings towards each other as well as towards natural resources, etc. that led humanity to the plague in its first place. The decline in health, humanity and civilization shown in the novel during and after the Scarlet Plague is also remarkable in its delineation and thus, the novel has innumerable lessons for posterity.

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