

Commentary and/or Catharsis: Literary Responses to Unprecedented Challenges

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Abstract

The shift in narrativization - as a result of the pandemic and epidemic-outbreaks over the ages - compels one to re-examine those as humanitarian crises and also the writers' pre-occupation with such themes as illness, madness, suffering, absurdity, catastrophe and existential crisis. Their representation in literature dwells not only on cultural configurations and the discourse of disease (i.e. the relationship between literature and medicine and how do we 'read' disease?) but also on fear, denial, memory and the biomedical paradigm. Within such literature, there seems to be an increasing interest in feelings of senselessness, distrust, and the dwindling meaningful connections in a world that is growing - and falling apart - exponentially. The question, therefore, is how do the characteristic tools of the humanities - viz. historical reflection, critical inquiry and attention to feeling and justice - help us make sense of what we are experiencing. And, what can encountering an epidemic (and its global correlate, the pandemic) in fiction afford us? The chapter will probe these questions through a detailed analysis of Emily St. John Mandel's *Station Eleven* (2014) and Ling Ma's satirical science fiction entitled *Severance* (2018), both of which are set against the backdrop of devastating biomedical disasters, viz. a fictional swine flu pandemic and the Shen Fever, respectively.

Keywords: Biopolitical regime; Collective-memory; Globalisation; Late-stage capitalism; Pandemic; Post-apocalyptic literature.

Pandemics, epidemics and outbreaks have ravaged human civilization for centuries, yet the twenty-first century experiences these biomedical-apocalypses with its unprecedented challenges. Some of the most prolific art and literature have borne out of these plagued times, having stripped the society of its pretences and laying bare the warts that could no longer be brushed under the carpet. It afforded a much-needed reflection for the

society to examine its follies. Human-resilience, art and memory have pulled the human-race out of these catastrophic times in the past. With human-contact being likened to a contagion, the collective consciousness became stronger. In spite of the sense of dread, madness, suffering and absurdity, the ties within the community became stronger with longing desperation for connection and hope. Interestingly, over the ages, there has been a shift in this narrativization of pandemic and epidemic-outbreaks. No longer are these narratives centred around a sense of community and hope. On the contrary, there seems to be an increasing interest in feelings of senselessness, distrust, and dwindling meaningful connections. The shift can mainly be attributed to the unique situation of the twenty-first century: globalisation and late-stage capitalism. Globalization becomes a crucial aspect to consider in the discourse around human relationships and pandemics. Rather than acting as a unifying force to create a feeling of unity, it surprisingly seems to be adding to the growing sense of absurdity and loss of meaning. At a time when the world is growing smaller, human connection is diminishing. An apocalyptic future, in a world that is growing - and falling apart - exponentially, has gained popularity not only in philosophy but also within popular fiction.

Severance by Ling Ma (2018) is an audacious satirical commentary on the society, with the backdrop of the devastating Shen-Fever pandemic. Those who fall prey to the Shen-Fever follow mindless routines repeatedly, until they die of exhaustion. The ominous tale opens with the orphaned Candace Chen, who is working an unfulfilling job. Candace drifts through New York feeling alienated within the throngs of people that surround her. The New York City is seen as the epitome of global cosmopolitan. Collapse of one part of the world quickly results in a collapse of another part, miles away. But, with the growing sense of connectivity, there is also an underlying sense of alienation, and a disregard of the human-condition, itself. Soon Candace's alienated-self is reflected through deserted surroundings of the abandoned streets of New York. She joins a group of survivors who are the last ones to make their way to 'the Facility'. The group is led by the domineering Bob, who turns to religious extremism in the disastrous times. 'The Facility' turns out to be an abandoned mall, a site most characteristic of capitalism. The novel ferociously, yet humorously comments on the consumerist society, through symbolism and satire.

In Emily St. John Mandel's *Station Eleven* (2014), a fictional swine flu pandemic - the 'Georgian flu' - leads to a complete societal collapse. The novel is mostly concerned with post-apocalyptic struggle for survival, and does not spare the readers from the terror and misery of humanity by offering

the comfort of a hopeful future. Its opening shocks the readers with the death of a celebrated stage actor collapsing in the middle of a play. The novel then moves back and forth into time following the members of the acting troupe in the opening scene, and their struggle to preserve the art-form of story-telling. Museums, comic-books and dramas are frequently employed throughout the narrative, emphasising their role in human-survival. It focuses on society's dependence on art and story-telling for preserving collective-memory and sanity of the civilization. It also offers commentary on religion as crutch to tide over catastrophic circumstances. Most of all, it is a critique on how little technology plays a part in dire times, yet it continues to dictate our lives in the most elementary way; a commentary on society's misplaced priorities.

The French philosopher, Jean Luc-Nancy, in his provocative work, *The Creation of the World, or Globalisation* (2002), famously analysed the process of globalisation not as the creation of the world, but as the decay of the world. As the world draws closer with connectivity through techno-science, Nancy points out that it is also leading to a growing sense of uncertainty. Even though the world has become smaller, the identity of the world has never been more ambiguous and muddled to man. It is the first time in history that the world is not lead by any concrete faith or values. Rather than moving towards an inclusive, homogenous future of humanity, there seems to be an ever growing divide. Globalisation has led to unprecedented increase in injustices, which are politico-moral, socio-economical and ideological in nature. A predominantly Western endeavour, it has led to a profound sense of existentialism and nihilism. The cause for this senselessness is that globalisation has reached everywhere; it is now everywhere and anywhere. There is nothing more to be discovered, yet more to be globalised. The senselessness also stems from the increasing reliance towards technology, and diminishing reliance on God. Absence of God reflects an absence of an external point of reference, which ultimately leads to the questioning of the existence of this world.

According to Nancy, the world does not need any reason or justification, it simply exists. Despite the nature of the world, the capitalist society tries to relate our existence to enjoyment, or profit. It is the cycle of infinite accumulation, reproduction, excesses and exploitation that leads to the alienation of man. Soon, what was considered the motive of existence, that is enjoyment, becomes the motive of its obliteration. Man is no longer empathetic towards the human-condition, as it chases after the ultimate good: profit. Globalisation, hence, fosters alienation over connection, and growth ultimately leads to a sense of displacement rather than closeness.

Increased technological prevalence has caused humanity to be inundated with information, invariably leading to increased anxiety. An imaginary apocalypse permits people to construct scenarios where they can fight a distinct enemy, rather than stand up to abstract evils. Essentially, we yearn for simpler times. We crave for a post-apocalyptic scenario, in order to exist without post-modern constraints. Anne Washburn concurs that our fundamental inclinations are revealed through post-apocalyptic literature. Nevertheless, she suspects that it is not merely our desire for simplicity (Nataraj, "Survival," 12). She, in fact, contends that it is due to our craving for adventure which remains lacking in modern world. Disastrous situations only remain interesting until we haven't been forced to live them yet, or as long as they remain unpredictable. Human beings are not constrained through reality; they are capable enough to imagine the absurdist stories, and satisfy their desire to explore and wander (ibid).

At the same time, theorists such as Nirmala Nataraj and Brian McDonald tend to lean towards the idea that we already live in a post-apocalyptic world, and post-apocalyptic literature is simply a mirror to our reality. Such literature, in that sense, helps to unpack the trauma of catastrophic contemporary times. Nataraj expresses in "After Armageddon: Apocalyptic Fiction through the Ages" that "depictions of the end of the world are usually just as dependent on destabilizing actual events as they are on fantastical ones" (29). By the same token, contemporary depictions of apocalypse and the repercussions are firmly planted in fiction as they may be in fact. In the same vein, McDonald in "The Final Word on Entertainment: Mimetic and Monstrous Art in 'The Hunger Games'" adopts Aristotle's theory of artistic mimesis. Based on this theory, he contends that literature tends to hyperbolize the vices of the society. Literature becomes the channel through which reader and writes sublimate their reality into fiction.

Mandel's *Station Eleven* begins twenty years post the Collapse, when majority of the world's population had been wiped out through a mutation of the swine flu virus, called the Georgian Flu. In the wake of a world reeling under the ecological disaster, Mandel focuses on the role of art in the preservation of human bond through the continuum of space and time. Especially through the comics by Miranda called *Doctor Eleven* in the novel, the readers truly realize the potential of art to sustain and bring together humanity in the most hopeless of circumstances. Miranda too employs the comics as a way of wish fulfilment, as well as a coping mechanism by exaggerating her current reality. But the resonance of the comics moves beyond Miranda and her personal experiences. Even when years later Kirsten reads the same narrative written during an immensely unlike time, the power of literature is able to transcend all boundaries and brings

her a similar comfort: "I stood looking over my damaged home and tried to forget the sweetness of life on Earth" (105). The lines evoke ache and emptiness of homelessness or loss, all the same. Both Miranda and Kirsten seek refuge for completely unrelated dilemmas in life, yet the emotions evoked through the comics appeal to their human condition.

The Travelling Symphony within the novel, in fact, proves the fact that it is the bonding over shared trauma that brings together human civilization, by exclusively performing Shakespearean plays in a post-Collapse world. Dieter comments, "Shakespeare... lived in a plague-ridden society with no electricity and so [does] the Traveling Symphony" (288). The Symphony doesn't feel the need to provide any commentary the sixteenth-century play, as they feel there is nothing they feel that Shakespeare hasn't portrayed in his play already. It is the relatability that connects the audience to the playwright due to similar experiences. Mandel through the work tries to deliver the over-arching theme that our modern times so closely resemble a catastrophe that the readers are enabled to find much needed comfort, and tools to cope with their reality within post-apocalyptic narratives. Mandel builds the Georgian flu as a mutated form of the swine flu, taking inspiration from the 2009 swine flu pandemic. The suggestion here is what could have happened had the swine flu virus spread much more rapidly and aggressively. To support this argument, Nataraj argues that "actual destabilizing events" form the foundation of catastrophes in literature (29).

In contrast, the novel also presents how apocalyptic fiction can become a source of wish fulfilment. With a complete power-grid failure, all technology is wiped out from the post-modern world, which is heavily depended on technology for its existence. Ironically, Charles, although successful in his career as a corporate coach, notices that he is merely a "sleepwalker in the world of "iPhone zombies" and "corporate ghosts" (160-63). Surrounded by high-functioning corporate officials, it dawns on Clark that along with them he might have reached the heights of corporate ladder, yet they remain deeply unfulfilled. After reeling from the immense shock of the Collapse, Clark finds himself renewed and finally has a fresh perspective towards life. He feels grateful for small miracles he had always taken for granted such as air travel. It is this realization that puts him in touch with himself again, and he begins to curate for the Museum of Civilization (249). The characters not only turn to art in the unprecedented times as source of comfort, but also to reunite their expression of rebellion. Kirsten's tattoos engraved on her body serve as a mode of memory-keeping that keeps her connected to her roots, reminding her of the reason for a rebellion. In instances of extreme distress, art also provides humans

a source for inspiration and keeps them connected. Thus, the notion of memory-keeping and sustaining a collective-memory become political during apocalyptic times.

In *Severance* by Ling Ma, the Shen Fever slowly enters the public consciousness. Candace recollects it being “in the news through the summer...like a West Nile thing” during an office-wide meeting (19). Only to know that it is not the West Nile virus; they are informed that Shen Fever is fungal not viral, and it travels through aerial spores rather than human contact or mosquitoes. The fungus initially spreads through Shenzhen, also known for its rapid economic growth and being the first Chinese Special Economic Zone. As the pandemic gradually begins to spread internationally, the U.S. Congress passes a travel ban to prohibit travel from Asian countries.

The western world seems afraid not essentially of the Asian bodies, but of the chance of acquiring a part of Asianness. While the disease is racially indiscriminate, nevertheless, the precarity attached with race is only intensified with terror and revulsion associated with a disease. An inherently compulsive anxiety builds around bodies and where they have geographically been. This forces individuals to carefully govern their movement and interaction; for example, Candace rushes to instinctively wash her face when sneezed upon by her colleague, Ashley. In an already fear-laden environment such as a pandemic, it becomes easier to channel the build-up of frustration and vitriol onto certain bodies that come to be associated with the origin of a disease. Race becomes an easy and tangible signifier of a disease that is nearly impossible to locate, that is, in the air. Conveniently, a frustrated population subverts an invisible air-borne virus on tangible racialized bodies. Hence, in more ways than one, the novel calls attention to the *social* body (Foucault 66). A biopolitical state is suitably created as the illness traffics through risk, suffering, and illness. This also creates a perfect scenario for the government to exercise its power to “make live” and “let die” when the masses become dependent on them for survival (Foucault 73).

However, the most incisive and piercing critique of *Severance* is brought out when the globalised labour trade is intermingled with a racialized panic of the disease. The Fever especially begins to multiply within “factory conditions of manufacturing areas . . . where spores fed off the highly specific mixture of chemicals” (210). Undoubtedly, transnational capitalism becomes the reason behind the catastrophe. Asian bodies are put at stake to deliver the cheapest manufacturing rates to the Western counterpart, the USA. Not only is it commentary against exploitative practices of racialized globalisation, but it also comment on the infectious, itinerant

quality of productivity within late-stage capitalism.

The novel tends to employ characteristics that Asian migrant labourers have come to be associated with in traditional media, effectively working as yet another critique of racialized globalisation: “For the most part, from what we had seen...the fevered were creatures of habit, mimicking old routines and gestures they must have inhabited for years, decades” (28). It is the routines of infected bodies that becomes especially significant; the mechanic repetitive routines of a capitalised environment. The endless loops of the fevered only cease when all life is extracted out of their bodies as they perform the mechanical tasks. The Fevered bring the Marxist theory of alienation to its culmination, when all sense of autonomy effectively leaves the infected bodies, and only hollow and obedient subject are left behind to achieve maximum productivity. However, the novel does not fail to point out how the mechanised tasks are unproductive and useless altogether, as the bodies do not possess the agency to exercise their minds anymore, hence, becoming entirely disconnected from the object of their production.

Soon after joining Bob’s group of survivors, Candace finds herself conducting “stalks” in nondescript neighbourhoods. Under the guise of gathering supplies, Bob’s main motive behind these stalks is to keep the fevered under control. As vigilantes, the surviving group barge into houses armed with guns, and ready to execute any living fevered. On her first instance of finding living fevered in the Gower household, Candace is visibly shaken by the unnecessary cruelty of the ritual: “They don’t attack us or try to eat us. They don’t do anything to us. If anything, we do more harm to them.” (29) Rather than pointing out any potential threat from the fevered, Bob only argues that there is no harm in execution of the fevered. “They aren’t really alive. And one way we have of knowing this is that they don’t take a long time to die” (28). With this thought-process, the group attempts to bring some sanctity to their existence in a tremendously chaotic world. According to Bob, they must preserve the “purity” of their kind by keeping strict distinction within the humans and the fevered. His argument echoes Foucault’s description of how racism operates within biopolitical regimes (77). «Race works to fragment, to create caesuras within the biological continuum,” Foucault asserts, which helps the State to clearly identify the Othered bodies that could potentially violate the “health and/ or “purity” of the Dominant kind (77-78). Candace must then prove her loyalty towards her kind and is forced to kill one of the fevered. Emotionally exhausted by the cruelty and meaninglessness of these rituals, Candace gradually shifts her loyalties towards the fevered. Subsequently, this results in Bob’s distrust towards her, hinting

at her expulsion from the troupe. The Fever firmly establishes, as well as, problematizes racial distinctions.

In an anti-climactic reveal towards the end, Bob discloses that the 'Facility' that the surviving troupe had been thinking of as their lease of a new life, is nothing but a shopping mall - the ultimate site of capitalism: "In the end, we have come to the Facility to work." (221) Traces of neoliberalism and its muted violence can be felt by the other survivors, who must become Bob's "subjects". The entire incident is haunted by the rhetoric of disciplining often employed by a liberal democracy: "For individuals to be recognized and afforded rights *as human*, they must be registered as subjects; to be humanized is to also be subjected" (Agamben 27). Bearing the colossal loss of their entire civilization, the member of the group cannot so easily be coerced into suppression. Steady eruptions of rebellion lead to Bob's execution at the hands of Candace. Finally, the protagonist finds herself liberated from all forms, literal and symbolical, of biopolitical regime.

According to Aristotle's theory of artistic mimesis, the creators tend to exaggerate their painful reality into apocalyptic situations as a coping mechanism, as pointed out by McDonald. Nataraj also supports the theory that real-life catastrophes are what the fictional catastrophes are based on. Both the novels tend to exaggerate the globalised realities of late-stage capitalism where human beings have already turned into zombies. The novels also act as a form of escape from the anxiety-ridden complex lives of the twenty-first century. Human beings often lead meaningless yet anxiety-inducing lives. An apocalypse, under such unprecedented circumstances, almost becomes a welcome outcome when reality seems to simulate an apocalypse, already. A devastating pandemic which wipes out most of the humanity presents itself as a blank slate to lead a more simple existence. Both the narratives highlight the absence of technology in the post-apocalyptic era. This can be analysed through the lens of the theory of apocalyptic narratives acting as a source of wish-fulfilment. No part of today's globalised world, realistically, can remain untainted by technology. While one may wish to unplug every once in a while, and step away from the chaos of the modern world, the debilitating need to remain productive in the ruthless capitalist society can only be escaped by a handful. Hence the only way possible to fulfil the said fantasy would be the collapse of civilization as a whole, wherein technological structures are forced to be wiped out as a whole. The twenty-first century reader and writer begin to turn towards post-apocalyptic fiction as a form of commentary on the contemporary world, and - eventually - for a feeling of catharsis.

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