

SOCIO-ECONOMIC DISORDER IN THE OUTBREAK NARRATIVE

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ABSTRACT

This essay examines the socio-economic disorder in the society arising from attacks by epidemic diseases in selected stories whose subject matter is epidemic, plague or contagion as outbreak narratives from the continents of Africa, Britain and America with a view to highlighting the socio-economic effects of the dreaded epidemic on the human race. The essay deploys Chinua Achebe's "The Sacrificial Egg," Thomas Hardy's "A Changed Man, and Edgar Allan Poe's "The Masque of the Red Death." The New Formalism approach to literary criticism lends itself to use in this essay as this theory emphasizes the handling of the social life of a people by the artist in his or her artistic reflections. This paper, therefore, through a textual analysis, carries out a qualitative criticism of the selected short stories as its method of research and finds that the writers adroitly and masterfully depict societies and characters that suffer social dislocations through mass death, painful separation, isolation, failed emotional relationships, economic down-turns and financial losses.

Keywords: Plague Edgar Allan Poe Chinua Achebe Thomas Hardy Outbreak narratives 'The Masque of the Red Death' 'A Changed Man'

Introduction

The history of the world is replete with the affliction of mankind by epidemics that are caused by viruses. From time to time, these invisible enemies invade the earth and cause untold pain, hardship, torment, sorrow, separation from loved ones, a general bleakness, and death, often leading to psychological and economic depression in the world. *The Oxford Concise Medical Dictionary* defines epidemic as "a sudden outbreak of infectious disease that spreads rapidly through the population, affecting a large proportion of people. The commonest epidemics today are of influenza." (233)

The destructive power of an epidemic, therefore, lies in its unexpected outbreak and rapid spread among people. Its unfriendly nature enables it to wreak havoc on large populations, leaving in its tail large scale pain, sorrow and death. The effects of plagues on the society can be very destabilizing. As diseases, plagues attack human beings while bringing to bear, unsavory, debilitating and destabilizing consequences. During epidemics, the world is shrunk into one's immediate environment, often quarantined in some lonely house or other habitation that exudes the sickening feeling of isolation and contempt arising from outright over-familiarity with the environment. Epidemics drive humans into refuge in their homes, in a fight against contacting the disease either through humans or the air. The psychological feeling of imprisonment and the sudden change in life-style often impinge on the human psyche, with strong feelings of mental torture and its own sickening consequences aside the fear of contacting the disease itself and the possibility of death.

Documented history shows that the ten deadliest epidemics the world has witnessed as summarized from iabsouthafrica24.com include: 1. The Third Cholera Pandemic (1852-1860) which was an outbreak of cholera. It is reported to be the biggest cholera outbreak in history. The pandemic killed about 23000 (twenty- three thousand people in Great Britain alone. 2. The Asian Flu Pandemic (1957) was an outbreak of avian influenza which cost the world about two million lives. 3. Typhus fever in World War 1 (1945) was a disease spread by lice. The disease accounted for three million deaths in Russia alone, during the war. 4. The Cocolitzli epidemic (1576) was a disease caused by a collection of pests. It took millions of lives in New Spain which is the present-day Mexico. 5. Plague of Justinian (541-542) affected the Eastern Roman Empire, specifically Constantinople and some port cities along the Mediterranean Sea. It killed an estimated 25 million people, accounting for almost thirteen per cent of the world's population. 6. The Antonine Plague (165-180 AD), known as the plague of Galen, it was caused by smallpox or measles. It killed almost 2000 deaths per day in Rome. The total number of lives claimed by the plague was about 5 million. 7. The Third Plague Pandemic (1855), also referred to as the Modern Plague was a bubonic plague pandemic that started in the Yunnan province in China. In about 20 years it spread to Hong Kong and other port cities around the world, spread by rats and fleas. It killed ten million people. 8. The Black Death (1334) or The Great Plague originated in China and spread all along trade routes to Constantinople and Europe, where it claimed nearly 60% of the European population and completely wiped out many towns. 9. The Great Flu Epidemic (1918) is recorded as the most devastating epidemic in history. With a death toll of somewhere between 20 million and 40 million, this disease killed more people than World War I. 10. The HIV/Aids global pandemic (1960s – present) is widely believed to have originated from the Democratic Republic of Congo as a disease spread from chimpanzees to humans. It has grown into a pandemic with over 65 million infections and 25 million deaths.

Thus, the world has a history of the torment of plagues as well as a stack of literary portrayals captured in the various genres of literature which can safely be termed 'outbreak narratives,' a term recently coined by Priscilla Wald. In reviewing Wad's book entitled *Contagions, Cultures, Carriers and the Outbreak Narrative*, Bill Albertini says that Wald's book on outbreak narratives identifies the scope, style and function of disease narratives. Albertini writes thus:

The outbreak narrative, a paradigmatic story arrives in scientific, journalistic and fictional incarnations and follows a formulaic plot that begins with the identification of an emerging infection...such narratives generate knowledge about infectious disease and powerfully shape responses to epidemics; thus, they have profound material consequences for people all over the globe.

Outbreak narratives in the short story are a rarity. They appear to be written only after major outbreaks as artistic documentation of the sad experiences of the disorderly times occasioned by contagion. As the excerpt above posits, outbreak stories, though written across different time lines possess a similar plot structure. They introduce the outbreak of the disease, show how humans battle with it and end with mankind's futile attempt to eradicate it. All three stories under examination bear strong attestation to Wad's claim of their being formulaic. Albertini states further that the narratives possess a utilitarian value as they assemble knowledge from the experience which can be harnessed by mankind to fight contagions. Wald posits that "the outbreak narrative is ...always evolving. Stories of disease emergence in all their incarnations are so powerful because they are as dynamic as the populations and the communities that they

affect (28). This is a true assessment of the disease narrative as the short stories being examined strongly demonstrate.

Our present enterprise is to examine the socio-economic dislocation of male and female characters and the society during epidemics as portrayed in the outbreak narratives of Edgar Allan Poe's "The Masque of the Red Death" (1642), Thomas Hardy's "A Changed Man" (1913) and Chinua Achebe's "The Sacrificial Egg" (1971)—all short story narratives—that cover both the 18th and 19th century.

The considered best critical frame-work for this study is the new formalism which incorporates the study of aesthetics in literature with its relevance to the historical, political and social-cultural aspects of society. According to M. H. Abrams, "the new formalism proposed a positive program and undertaking to connect the formal aspects of literature to the historical, political and worldly concerns in opposition to which the formalist movement had earlier defined itself." (141)

The short story remains 'the prose of neglect,' in the words of Helen Chukwuma, as critics shy away from paying scholarly attention to it. It therefore, suffers a dearth of critical comments as such comments on the epidemic short story are quite scarce and near unavailable. However, Tony Afejuku and Adekunle Mamudu examine disease in Achebe's short stories and posit that in "The Sacrificial Egg," Achebe shows the devastating effect of disease on social relationships caused by the dreaded 'kitikpa,' (smallpox) Achebe highlights disease as one of the many confrontations faced by man as he pursues his goal on earth." (120). In a review by Lori Garrett-Hatfield on Poe's "The Masque of the Red Death," we read that "Edgar Allan Poe lived very close to death. His parents both died before he was two years old. His brother died young. His wife died after languishing with tuberculosis throughout their 10-year marriage. It is no wonder that Poe was fascinated with death, and used death as a prominent symbol throughout his career." The critic takes fascination to Poe's interest in the use of colours, arguing that "Poe's most prolific use of color in the story is his use of both red, which to him symbolized terror, horror, an ending of life; and black, which symbolized death and destruction. The final room, the red and black room, faces west, which represents the setting sun.

Badura posits that "most critical attention paid to Thomas Hardy's fiction has understandably focused on the novels, which remain fascinating examples of traditional realist technique employed for non-traditional social critique." He says further, in his review of "*Thomas Hardy's Short Stories: New Perspectives*, that Hardy uses a narrative style called metalepsis, where the author addresses the reader directly as a means of promoting the use of irony in his story and bonding with the reader.

From the fore-going statements, scooped from the scanty critical comments on the short stories, it is obvious that despite the high scores of these narratives, they have been left without critical examination.

This essay, therefore, examines the socio-Economic dislocation of society by death, pain and economic loss during epidemics in Poe's "The Masque of the Red Death," Hardy's "A Changed Man" and Achebe's "The Sacrificial Egg."

Death

What comes to mind at the mention of any epidemic is death. Epidemics are heavily dreaded because they leave a long and endless toll of deceased persons in their trail. All the stories under the present examination portray a helpless population that falls inescapably into the crushing arms of an epidemic. From Poe's "The Masque of the Red Death," through

Hardy's "A Changed Man" to Achebe's "The Sacrificial Egg," the disease through its death-agent is on a ravaging spree through open fields to closed chambers. It is on a hunting expedition and humans fall freely in its wake, swelling the number of the dead. This invisible enemy that cannot be confronted by the efforts of man is, therefore, unstoppable. Poe's opening paragraph in "The Masque of the Red Death," introduces the reader to the devastating effects of the Red Death epidemic on the population. It is symbolized with blood. Poe presents this death agent thus:

The "Red Death" had long devastated the country. No pestilence had ever been so fatal, or so hideous. Blood was its avatar and its seal—the redness and the horror of blood. There were sharp pains, and sudden dizziness, and then, profuse bleeding at the pores, with dissolution. The scarlet stains upon the body and especially upon the face of the victim, were the pest ban which shut him out from the aid and from the sympathy of his fellow-men. And the whole seizure, progress and termination of the disease, were the incidents of half an hour. (268)

In the excerpt above, Poe introduces the epidemic, its method of attack and the time required to terminate the life of its victim. The epidemic attacks the victim who would then bleed through the pores while feeling dizzy and in pains. The stains on the body of the victim often prevented others from offering any help and in thirty minutes, the patient was sure to die. Clearly, there was death everywhere in Prospero's land.

Poe shows the inescapability from the epidemic. Prince Prospero attempts to escape from the boredom of quarantine of the rampaging epidemic when he invites a thousand friends and selected persons, all healthy, as he thinks, in his land to a special party. He orders workmen to secure the venue by welding bits of iron to the doors to shut out the epidemic while they would have their fun. Unfortunately, the death-bringing red masque, the symbol of the epidemic finds its way into the ball. In portraying the epidemic as an all-powerful bringer of death, Poe writes thus:

And... the Red Death. He had come like a thief in the night. And one by one dropped the revelers---the blood bedewed halls of their revel, and died each in the despairing posture of his fall. And the life of the ebony clock went out with that of the last of the gay. And the flames of the tripods expired. And darkness and Decay and the Red Death held illimitable dominion over all. (273)

An attempt to flee from death in the hands of the ravaging epidemic worsens the situation for the mask-wearing Prospero and his band of revellers. The well secured structure was also fenced in with walls and iron gates to ward off any intruder, including the red mask. But at midnight, the red mask, a personification of the epidemic, stole its way into the well secured hall that had no exit, and there, made even easier, began to feast on all who were in the hall. The epidemic spread faster, increasing the death toll.

Hardy portrays death as a common feature in times of epidemics, using Casterbridge as his setting. He presents a settled Casterbridge with a peaceful and lively social life before taking the reader to a turn in the affairs of the town following an outbreak of cholera. Everything changes for the people and beyond the pain, sorrow and isolation, death visits the town and everyone is at the risk of dying. Mr. Maumbry, a clergyman who submits himself as a volunteer to help fight the scourge puts up a good fight, burning the clothes of the deceased, only for him to end up as one of the dead having contacted the disease too. Hardy portrays the helpless situation thus:

There's the clothes o' they that died this afternoon, sir. But that might bide till to-morrow, for you must be tired...Maumbry paused for a moment to wipe his face, and resumed his homely drudgery amid this squalid and reeking scene, pressing down and stirring the contents of the copper with what looked like an

old rolling-pin. The steam therefrom, laden with death, travelled in a low trail across the meadow. (20)

Despite the burning of the clothes of the dead, a means to slowing down the further spread of the disease, the last line in the fore going paragraph shows the irony of the entire situation. It reveals that the contagion is in fact, being spread farther than it may have reached on its own. The steam from the burning clothes is ‘death-laden,’ travelling across the land to farther distances, spreading the death farther. Hardy demonstrates that death is everywhere when he writes thus: ‘Just now, Casterbridge was so deeply occupied with its own sad affairs—a daily burying of the dead and destruction of contaminated clothes and bedding (16). Death, resulting from the slaying avarice of the epidemic was a daily occurrence in Casterbridge.

Achebe portrays the magnitude of socio dislocation occasioned by death because of an epidemic in a community. All the characters live in fear in the midst of death. It is a daily routine for the government van to evacuate dead bodies from the community. Death is everywhere and it is discussed only in hushed tones. Achebe presents the state of fear when he writes thus:

You never know whom you might meet on the streets. That family has got it. She lowered her voice even more and pointed surreptitiously at the house across the road whose doorway was barred with a yellow palm frond. He has decorated one of them already and the rest were moved away today in a big government lorry. (45)

Social relationships in this community are seriously dislocated and life is no longer what it used to be. The inhabitants are living with death and no one is certain of the next day.

Pain

Epidemics cause a lot of pains to members of the afflicted community. This pain can either be physical, psychological or emotional. None of these types of pain is spared in the stories under study. Put together, pain in the epidemic short story is caused by isolation, solitude and heart break. Achebe establishes the tormenting power of the epidemic when he portrays the epidemic as a highly dreaded monster that is capable of dislocating the social relationships in the society. Achebe paints the picture of a highly dislocated epidemic-ravaged society thus:

He came in confident knowledge of the terror he held over the people. He was an evil deity and boasted of it. Lest he be offended, those he killed were not killed but decorated and no one dared weep for them. He put an end to the coming and going between neighbours and between villages. They said ‘kitikpa was in that village’ and immediately it was cut off by its neighbours. (45)

Villages became isolated from villages and social ties were disrupted. At the mention of ‘Kitikpa,’ every one falls into despair and fear of death. Personified as a roaring man-eater, the disease is believed to be some form of punishment from the gods and as such, holds all powers over the characters who must, therefore revere and dread it. People and communities, are, as a result, driven into isolation in order to avoid his deadly visit. This creates pain of isolation and separation from loved ones and a general loss of freedom of movement and socialization.

There is also the pain of separation experienced by couples—married and courting—who are caught in the web of the epidemic. This type of emotional pain is quite hurting, especially when couples are portrayed as being deep in love with their partners. Hardy, for instance, shows the pain of separation between Captain Maumbry and his wife Laura. The emotionally touching dialogue between the couple separated during the epidemic shows the emotional pain both lovers are passing through. Hardy presents the picture thus:

We will keep this wall between us, dear.” (Walls formed the field-fences here.)
“You musn’t be endangered. It won’t be for long, with God’s help. ... Thus,

somewhat formally, they talked, an insulating wind beating the wall between them like a mill-weir. (17)

Nothing can be more frustrating than this—for a couple to discuss over a wall when they have missed each other for a long time—and not be able to touch each other to express the traditional embrace of warmth. Their relationship is reduced to a formal acquaintance and the discussion is not free flowing as communication is distorted by an unceasing wind since nature, itself, lends a hand to their pain like the epidemic. Earlier, Hardy writes that ‘the spread of the epidemic was so rapid that many left the town and took lodgings in the villages and farms...so as a matter of precaution, he decided to isolate his wife somewhere away from him for a while’ (16). This is a painful action that the characters are forced to take as social relationships have been dislocated. Isolation and loneliness are conditions that depict pain and grief. Hardy presents Laura’s condition as that of a sea-farer cast ashore in an uninhabited island thus:

While she was rusticated in this place of safety, and her husband was slaving in the slums...Laura frequently sat on the shelving beach, watching each thin wave slide up to her, and hearing, without heeding, its gnaw at the pebbles in its retreat (16)

There is no one to relate with and all she can do is to sit at the beach and watch each little wave absent mindedly. This feeling of lonesomeness and her deep desire for company drives her into a relationship with the unmarried and wife-seeking Mr. Vannicock, which Hardy presents thus:

After a week of hesitation, she agreed to leave her home at Creston and meet Vannicock on the ridge hard by, and to accompany him to Bath, where he had secured lodgings for her, so that she would be only about a dozen miles from his quarters. (18)

While her husband, Captain Maumbry is working hard to stamp out the epidemic, his wife Laura begins a relationship with her new lover which, but for the death of the Captain, almost ends in marriage. The epidemic, through the pains of loneliness encourages adultery and destruction of a marriage that was, prior to its arrival, thriving firmly. She resolves to call off her marriage with the Captain and sends him a letter indicating her decision to marry her adulterous lover—Mr. Vannicock. Although the Captain never gets to read the letter before his death, the content is such that could have caused him a heart-break. Laura’s letter reads thus:

DEAR JACK—I am unable to endure this life any longer, and I have resolved to put an end to it. I told you I should run away if you persisted in being a clergy man, and now I am doing it. One cannot help one’s nature. I have resolved to throw in my lot with Mr. Vannicock, and I hope rather than expect, you will forgive me. —L.

The content surely, would have evoked pain, grief and loss for Captain Maumbry. It shows the power of the epidemic to destabilize marriages, break homes and cause pain to its victims. The death of the Captain denies her of a husband, out of the thinking that she might have reunited with him, but for his death, but his death, also deprives Laura of the desire to love Vannicock thereafter. The epidemic, through the loss of loved ones, inflicts permanent pains in both Laura and Vannicock. Hardy demonstrates this when he writes thus:

What had come between them? No living person. They had been lovers. There was now no material obstacle whatsoever to their union. But there was the insistent shadow of that unconscious one...their feelings seemed to decline from their former incandescence to a mere tepid civility... Mrs. Maumbry lived and died a widow. (24)

Due to the effect of the permanent pain inflicted on her, Laura is unable to engage any other man, and she ends up single through her remaining days in life. Unable to understand her new

coldness to him, Vannicock makes several attempts to re-woo her and makes marriage proposals to her. But as she is not forth-coming, Vannicock lets go of his intentions for her.

Poe, like Achebe and Hardy shows the pain of restriction and the human desire to be free in relating with other members of the society. Prince Prospero forces himself into seclusion at the outbreak of the epidemic in order to escape the disease. But at some point, at the end of his tethers, he wishes to lead his normal life and he is forced to arrange a mask party with selected friends of his. To illustrate the Prince's desire for entertainment and social relationship, Poe writes thus:

The prince had provided all the appliances of pleasure. There were buffoons, there were improvisation, there were ballet dancers, there were musicians. There was beauty, there was wine. All these and security were within. Without was the "Red Death."

It was toward the close of the fifth or sixth month of his seclusion and while the pestilence raged most furiously abroad that the Prince Prospero entertained his thousand friends at a masked ball of the most unusual magnificence. (269)

Prospero's resentment of his seclusion and desire to retire from isolation results to an elaborate party held in a 'secure' hall. To him, all caution had been taken to ensure that the epidemic never finds its way into the hall. Still, the epidemic finds its way into the ball and claims the lives of within the hall.

Achebe shows the power of the epidemic to separate lovers. Julius Obi, for instance, is denied the opportunity of seeing Janet, his fiancée as "kitikpa" is currently wreaking havoc on her village. He yearns for her but cannot see her as a result of the disease. Sadly enough, he never gets to see her again as she is claimed by the disease.

Economic Loss

Commercial losses in epidemic times are shown to be huge, leading to deprivations, shortages and distortions in the socio-economic wellbeing of the people. Economic activities are generally totally grounded in the epidemic-ravaged community. Both Achebe and Hardy demonstrate this in their stories. Achebe paints a picture of desertion and painful emptiness in the regularly busy market at Umuru, known for attracting large numbers of traders from near and far places which is now but empty space, echoing and reechoing lifelessness because of the ravaging disease of "kitikpa" when he writes thus:

Julius Obi sat gazing at his typewriter. The fat Chief Clerk, his boss, was snoring at his table. Outside, the gatekeeper in his green uniform was sleeping at his post. You couldn't blame him; no customer had passed through the gate for nearly a week. There was an empty basket on the giant weighing machine. A few palm-kernels lay desolately in the dust around the machine. Only the files remained in strength...Who would have believed that the great boisterous market could ever be quenched like this? But such was the strength of kitikpa, the incarnate power of small pox. Only he could drive away all those people and leave the market to the flies. (41-43)

The epidemic has successfully driven away the traders from the market and members of the community have been dislocated and commercial activities disrupted by disease. Here Achebe paints a vivid picture of an idle society where disease prevents mankind from carrying out essential economic activities and actualizing earthly goals as one of the many confrontations faced by man in pursuit of his goals on earth. Achebe's use of flashback and a detailed descriptive approach, successfully illustrates economic dislocation in a community ravaged by the epidemic. Like Achebe, Hardy also shows the economic loss experienced in the epidemic days. From lighting up the streets with burn-fires to cleanse the air of the deadly cholera agent

to the destruction of the clothes worn by dead victims of the plague, economic losses are quite evident in the story. To show the waste society is forced to endure, Hardy writes thus:

Large burnfires were burning, in the middle of the way, with a view to purifying the air; and from the wretched tenements with which the lane was lined in those days' persons were bringing out beddings and clothing. Some was thrown into the fires, the rest placed in wheel barrows and wheeled into the moor directly in the track of the fugitives. (20)

These large burnfires are sustained by valuable consumables, which cost the society some money to acquire and, of course, the clothes of the dead that are taken for destruction have monetary values attached to them. Besides, the cost of medicine, casket, labour and other incidentals during the epidemic cast a huge strain on the public till and individual pockets.

Conclusion

This paper has examined the havoc that epidemics wreck on the society in selected relevant short stories of Edgar Allan Poe, Thomas Hardy and Chinua Achebe. With masterly strokes, these writers portray the socio-economic hardships experienced by people in their various locales that include Africa, Britain and America. These dislocating experiences range from massive death to pain and sorrow, occasioned by seclusion, loneliness and separation from loved ones. Other difficulties suffered by affected communities are economic losses and recession. The writers present their captivating renditions in lurid language that engage the reader through their use of relevant narrative devices in their outbreak narratives.

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