

## Epidemic, Migration and Literature: Tropes, Traces, and Topographies

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Shakespeare's *Macbeth* is my favourite work of literature, to teach. Perhaps because I had a great teacher, or perhaps because in every attempt to teach, I have discovered something I had overlooked before—the images, emotions and the turns of phrases bring out something unique, at times overlooked—with every reiteration. After a hiatus of five years, I went back to teaching it this semester—in the online mode. This was also the time when webinars were exploding around us—people were scrambling to be online, and also to respond to what we considered to be an unprecedented event within our lifetimes. Not surprisingly, English literature departments were quick to host webinars on literature and epidemics, which concentrated largely on the Anglophone literature.

One of the questions which mainstream English literature departments scrambled to answer was, did Shakespeare not write about the Plague? After all his most productive years were lived in the shadow of the bubonic plague—also an economically devastating time that would have kept the playhouses, where he was a writer and part owner, shut most of the time. But Shakespeare writes about the Plague, only in undertones, and in most cases metaphorically—which is why I began talking about *Macbeth*. Performed for the first time in 1606, this is how Macbeth's countrymen describe the condition of Scotland under Macbeth's rule:

Alas, poor country,  
... It cannot  
Be called our mother, but our grave, ...;  
Where sighs and groans and shrieks that rend the air  
Are made, not marked; where violent sorrow seems  
A modern ecstasy. The dead man's knell  
Is there scarce asked for who, and good men's lives  
Expire before the flowers in their caps,  
Dying or ere they sicken.

The country's condition, as a result of human action—is explained through metaphors of disease. This is not new, and in fact, every time we speak of (and we did a lot, in the last year), Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War*, and its descriptions of the Plague of Athens—we forget his contemporary, Sophocles, and his play *Oedipus Rex*. Sophocles turns the metaphorical plague into a literal one—the citizens of Thebes are suffering, and the descriptions of their suffering is much like the plague—children die even before they are born, and as do animals and birds, the disease is a pestilence. The King of Thebes, Oedipus Tyrannous, Oedipus Rex, sends his brother-in-law Creon as an emissary to the Oracle at Delphi, to find out the reason. The Oracle claims that an alien, a migrant is the reason behind this Plague. Oedipus promises terrible curses upon this migrant, only to realise towards the end of the play that it is he himself that he had cursed.

Boccaccio's *Decameron*, composed probably between 1348 and 1353, is a frame story comprising hundred tales told by wealthy young men and women, while they were sheltering in a villa just outside Florence to escape the Black Death. But in this, Plague is absent except as configuring the context in which these tales are told.

However, and this is my contention in this proposal—the direct correlation between epidemics and literature reduce, gradually, with the rise of the realist mode as the dominant form of storytelling—in the Western hemisphere, while in Bengal, the realist mode is shaped and created by the great epidemic novels.

Some instances to make my point clearer: Daniel Defoe's *Journal of the Plague Year* is perhaps the only full-length account of the year 1665, the Great Plague of London, but published in 1722. Defoe was only 5-year-old when the Great Plague happened, and this is believed to have been based on his uncle Henry Foe's journals. The eye witness accounts of the Great Plague vary from Samuel Pepys' journals and John Dryden's long poem, *Annus Mirabilis*—in which Dryden only comments on the year of wonder that saved London from greater calamities—despite a plague and a fire killing one third of its population.

This brings me back to my questions about plague and Shakespeare. Shakespeare wrote during the time of repeated plague outbreaks, in 1582, 1592, 1603, 1606, 1608-09. But in his works Plague occurs as a reference—and increasingly, we will witness, in England and in much of the anglophone world the trend continues. Important literary genres of the time do not directly treat the epidemic they are living through, epidemics occur as reference points—as metaphors and other figures of speech. Defoe, not surprisingly, is writing after many years of the Great Plague. Something similar can be seen in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, in the case of the Cholera and influenza epidemics. Although not Anglophone in nature, Camus's *The Plague* does tackle an epidemic front and centre, but the historical reality of its composition was the influenza epidemic, not the Plague. Katharine Ann Porter's *Pale Horse Pale Rider*, a semi-autobiographical narrative about the time the author suffered from influenza, while working as a reporter, is published twenty years afterwards, but is a notable exception.

But when we look at undivided Bengal, and Bangla literature of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the cholera and plague epidemics seem to have shaped the way realist fiction had emerged. Three cases in point: Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay, Bibhuti Bhushan Bandyopadhyay and Tarashankar Bandyopadhyay. Bibhuti Bhushan and Tarashankar were almost contemporaries, although the latter lived two decades longer. Sarat Chandra was two decades older than them. In the major works of these authors, we see repeated shadows and influences of the cholera epidemic, one that the British were happy to designate as the Asiatic disease. Just three examples would suffice: In Tarashankar's 1939 novel *Dhatridebata*, Sankar who has just passed the matriculation examination goes back to his village to find that Dalit neighbourhoods in the village are slowly sinking to a cholera epidemic. With two medical student volunteers who come from the city for this specific purpose, Sankar carries out relief work in the village. Page after page is field with description of the poverty and misfortune of the poorest people of the village, who are also hit hardest by the epidemic. Rumours are rife across the village, the wealthy and dominant caste people leave to move to the city, and the dead have no one to cremate them. Vultures and dog circle the neighbourhood with people dead than living—and despite the best intentions people refuse to follow medical advice.

Bibhutibhushan's novel *Aranyak*, composed between 1937- 1939, is set away from the rural Bengal that Tarashankar describes—but the hamlets by the bank of the river Kushi that Satyacharan visits with Raju PNare, tell similar tales. Small thatched cottages without light or ventilation, no food, doctor or medicine, and an ever-increasing number of dead bodies piling up. In an exceptionally poignant and horrific sequence, Satyacharan and Raju try to stop a young woman from eating a plate of rice left on the windowsill. Her aged husband had just died, and the flies that were hovering over him were also the ones that were on the plate of rice. But the woman had not eaten for several days, and this plate of rice was all she had.

Saratchandra's *Srikanta* (parts 1- 4), composed between 1917-1933—has several encounters with the epidemic. Saratchandra himself had travelled to Rangoon for work as early as in 1903, and in Rangoon we find Srikanta quarantined after disembarking from the vessel, on account of Plague. He nurses Manohar Chakarabarti, only to find two dead young men in the room next door. The descriptions are of a city filled with panic, a city of employees and businessmen, running from neighbourhood to neighbourhood in search of safety.

Also in *Srikanta* there are descriptions of a small pox epidemic, the mendicant Srikanta abandoned by the same people he had nursed, after the first indications of pustules on his body. The early modern period in the history of Anglophone literature, the long 19<sup>th</sup> century, and the early twentieth century, were all marked by devastating epidemics. But by in large, epidemics are absent in them, except stray mentions (*Mrs. Dalloway*), plot points (*The Mirror Crack'd from Side to Side*) or background (*Romeo and Juliet*).

For Anglophone literature, the reason might be what Amitav Ghosh calls in *The Great Derangement*, the rise of gradualism in Western societies. Although Ghosh is writing in the context of ecological catastrophe and literature, it is by now very well established that epidemics are part of our ecological world, and the graver the risks to climate, the more frequent they get to be. Gradualism indicates that change happens in slow motion, almost imperceptibly—an attitude in geology that then became more and more prevalent in natural and eventually human sciences. Ghosh claims that in the great realist novels of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (of which Daniel Defoe's *Journal of the Plague Year* was a precursor) are a prey to this gradualism, where catastrophes occur, but only human ones—not natural. In fact, the rise of realism is connected to the overarching umbrella of gradualism. Where do the natural calamities, the infectious diseases, the

extinction of species go then? They are shunted into the realm of science fiction (think Stephen King), of horror (think Mary Shelley's *The Last Man*) and magic realism (think Gabriel Garcia Marquez, *Love in the Time of Cholera* and Jose Saramago, *Blindness*).

But in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century Bengali novels, also written in the realist fashion, epidemics are front and centre. In the proposed research project then, I hope to make two enquiries:

First, to explore the intersections of Bengali realist fiction and their engagement with epidemics, migrations and margins—their continuous evocation of the epidemic-ridden body, their exploration of solidarity and empathy, their graphic depiction of fear and loathing.

This would therefore be an exercise in mapping late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century Bengali realist fiction (novels and short stories) and their engagement with epidemics.

The second aim is then to explore the construction of the modern Bengali subject: the Satyacharan, the Srikanta and the Sankar—following a certain kind of scientific rationality, figures that are both entrenched in social relations by virtue of their empathy, but at the same time mobile and decisive due to their detachments—observers, capable of reflection. What happens when the sick and decaying body of the poor, the elderly, the infirm, comes in contact with the socially conscious able bodied, often urban and young, man?

But in most of these instances, we also encounter another category of men—the drunkard, the one consumed with opium or marijuana—they are the ones who drag the corpses to the river or set them nominally on fire, in exchange of a little bit of money to get high on. My exploration will then take into account the role of epidemics in the creation of these subjects, the disbanding and forging of communities and empathy-centred networks, the abdication of the poor and the marginalised by the state, and the emergence of a new social.