

EXISTENTIALISM REGAINING ITS PERTINENCE IN THE PANDEMIC AFFLICTED SOCIETY? A STUDY OF THE COVID-19 SCENARIO ON THE GROUNDS OF THE NIGERIAN MOVIE-93DAYS

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Abstract

In the present scenario, within the walls of the pandemic afflicted society, the issues concerning existential anguish, angst and absurdity of human life occupy prior positions as they have serious impacts on one's psyche as well as one's desire to live. Literature and Cinema cast the main focus on replicating human thoughts and experiences in terms of time and space, foregrounding the dilemmas concerning human existence. Subsiding the once celebrated "happily ever after" themes, the contemporary World Cinema embodies a group of eminent film makers who represent the harsh realities of human life as such. The movies dealing with the honest portrayals of pandemics are the best examples. This paper titled "Existentialism regaining its pertinence in the Pandemic afflicted Society? A Study of the COVID-19 Scenario on the grounds of the Nigerian movie- 93Days", is an attempt to analyse how pandemics affect societies of all times, casting the main focus on the present COVID-19 scenario and the 2016 Nigerian movie 93Days (which is an honest portrayal of the 2014 Ebola virus outbreak in Nigeria), on the grounds of Existentialism and the absurdity of human life.

Keywords: *Pandemic, Cinema, Existentialism, Absurdity, Society.*

Literature the mirror of the society, which reflects human life as well as the social scenario in its entirety, often foregrounds the concealed human aspirations, unseen tears and unheard agonies of the humankind. Cinema, the most popular among the contemporary media, does the same function, but in the form of visual narrative. The Contemporary World Cinema stands apart with its exciting levels of realism in which the characters depicted represent everyman, the space and time encompass a universal significance. The super-hero themes and the fanciful utopian stories of the movies have slowly given way to the lifelike realistic portrayals of human lives with a strong motive to be the true representations of human life.

Many eminent film makers have so far shown courage to take up dark grim social realities such as wars, pandemics, natural calamities and so on as the central themes of their movies. The movies which deal with the unpleasant truths and horrors of pandemics are of high relevance in the present scenario where the entire world is struck by the wretched pandemic COVID-19. The plight of the all-time victorious humanity before a microscopic disease spreading organism foregrounds the meaninglessness of human existence and the absurdity of human life.

The 2016 Nigerian movie *93Days* directed by Steve Gukas, is a document on the outbreak of Ebola virus in Nigeria in 2014. The movie is centered on the sincere attempts of the Nigerian medical team comprising of Dr Adadevoh Ameyo, Dr Benjamin Ohiaeri and so on to conquer the Ebola virus attack which was first reported in Lagos, Nigeria's densely populated commercial centre, amidst the under-developed health care facilities of Lagos. Though the deadly virus lasted only for ninety three days after the first case (Patrick Sawyer, a Liberian Government worker) was reported at the First Consultants Hospital Lagos, it was much and more enough to shatter the socio-political, cultural, economical and the very foundations of West Africa, especially the city of Lagos with almost twenty one millions of residents.

“One day something happens, something that changes the way you look at the world, changes the way you see the world, changes your life forever”. The statement made at the very beginning of the movie throws light on the fact how absurd human life is and forces the spectators to question the meaning of human existence in this absurd world. The religions which humanity fight for, culture, the so called unique feature of a community, political parties, fast paced metropolitan cities, etc. were made helpless monuments by a microscopic virus and there lies the meaninglessness of the post-modern hectic life of humans.

“Existentialism is chiefly a twentieth century philosophical movement embracing diverse doctrines but centering on analysis of individual existence in an unfathomable universe and the plight of the individual who must assume ultimate responsibility for acts of free will without any certain knowledge of what is right or wrong or good or bad” (merriamwebster.com).

The present scenario, horrified with the outbreak of the deadly COVID-19 pandemic goes hand-in-hand with the tenets of Existentialism such as anxiety (a sense of anguish), absurdity, sense of nothingness (the void), alienation, theme of death and so on. The anxiety which is all prevalent in the minds of today's world population is a result of the super spread of the virus which kindles the fear of the loss of the lives of people. The film captures at its best the anxiety and stress faced by people especially medical staffs while dealing with the pandemic. The visuals from the isolation ward shoots up fear even in the spectators' minds as those visuals truly represent the anxiety suffered by the patients inside the wards who are destined to witness the death of the patients nearby their beds. The instance where Dr Ada Igonoh who got admitted in the hospital witnesses the death of an old woman who was her

co-being there, represents today's terrific situations in the hospital. The silent cries of the patients in the night intensify the agonies of the time. At times, even the medical staffs seem to be terrified and fearful to go on with their professional duty. It seems to be like the themes of anxiety or the sense of anguish put forward by Kierkegaard, is taking its practical form in the present scenario, where life seems to be meaningless, and causing an extreme of despair.

The pangs and threats posed by the pandemic force the world's population to curse themselves for being thrown into this era to live. In the work *Pensees*, Blaise Pascal, one of the forerunners of Existentialism, exemplifies:

When I consider the short duration of my life, swallowed up in the eternity before and after, the little space I fill and even can see, engulfed in the infinite immensity of space of which I am ignorant and which knows me not, I am frightened and being astonished at being here rather than there; why now rather than then. Who has put me here? By whose order and direction have this place and time be allotted to me?'. (27)

The pandemics alienate humans not only from this external world but also from their own selves. The worst sense of alienation occurs when the patients get alienated or avoided by their own family members and the most loved ones and this results in the loss of faith in hope and spirituality, as they fail to find any purpose for their lives amidst the loneliness. The post-modern humanity, once accustomed only to the busy loud screams of business markets, hectic rush of vehicles in metropolitan cities, etc. when suddenly get suddenly get locked down within the walls of a building under the system of being quarantined, there are high chances to develop the sense of alienation. This instance takes shape in the movie in a scene of emotional outbreak from the part of Patrick Sawyer, the first person to be detected of Ebola virus attack in Nigeria. He is the representative of a post-modern human, who is always in a chase after the ups and downs of the share-markets and in the movie though his physical state deteriorates to the core, he shouts out his mind in a need to go back to the usual chores of the business world, abandoning his poor health conditions, which is totally an absurd situation. The densely populated city of Lagos in the movie (with a population of almost twenty one millions), which is the hub of air travel in West Africa where international flights to and from various nations pass through every single day, represents the entire world of the present scenario which is in a deadly rush to be rescued from the clutches of the pandemic. The strategies of social distancing, thermal scanning and so on in the film are clear cut representations of today's social life.

The era depicted in the movie as well as in the current reality is struck with dark notes of pessimism. M.H.Abrams in his *A Glossary of Literary Terms* remarks:

After the 1940s, however, there was a widespread tendency, especially prominent in the existential philosophy of men of letters such as Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, to view a human being as an isolated existent who is cast into an alien universe; to conceive the human world as possessing no inherent truth, value, or

meaning; and to represent human nothingness whence it came toward the nothingness where it must end- as an existence which is both anguished and absurd".(1)

The next aspect of existentialism, the sense of nothingness or void is what that is all prevalent in this world. Though medical staffs and physicians successfully provide medical assistance, they often fail to discover ways to cure the existential angst and despair suffered by the patients as a result of the strict isolating strategies adopted by the authorities. Religions, philosophies, political theories, money markets, etc. fail to save the face of human existence from the deadly pandemic. This signifies the lack of meaning of such social institutions and the nothingness created out of human life. Humans are stripped off and are shut in the abyss of darkness, living the life of fearful agony.

Albert Camus in his *The Myth of Sisyphus* exemplifies:

In a universe that is suddenly deprived of illusions and of light, man feels a stranger. He is an irremediable exile, because he is deprived of memories of a lost homeland as much as he lacks the hope of a promised land to come. This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, truly constitutes the feeling of absurdity.(18)

These words signify the absurd condition of today's pandemic world at its best. Dr Adadevoh the lady doctor in the movie who had given out her maximum possible efforts to save her nation, but was still engulfed by the deadly virus, is the representative of the helpless humanity in the current world. In the movie she is given the image of a warrior who fights till her last breath for her nation and represents the health workers and the entire medical team of this world who strive their level best to create a meaning of this chaotic, meaningless and hopeless world.

Another important character in the movie that kindles the ray of hope amidst the dark realities of the time is Dr David, who is the source of inspiration for the patients within the isolation ward to beat the virus. He says: "What's inside this ward is not important. What's important is what's inside you. Pick a bed and start fighting. The sooner you start, the sooner you'll win". These words serve as the source of inspiration and hope for Dr Ada Igonoh to overcome the emotional traumas within the dark alienated isolation wards and to beat the virus and come back to normal life. The sad plight of humans are visualised with the highly traumatizing scenes from the isolation ward and they are clear-cut representations of the present dreadful situations inside the hospitals. Eugene Ionesco remarks; "People drowning in meaninglessness can only be grotesque; their sufferings can only appear tragic by derision" (qtd in Abrams 2015, p.2).

The current world conditions have made the world still and the social, economic and political institutions such as religion, caste, culture, business, political parties, etc. mere helpless monuments before the pandemic. The religious as well as the cultural responsibilities of the scenario which once triggered several communal riots, had currently muted themselves in a rush after the rescue of human lives. The cultural fests, religious rituals and so on have

come to an abrupt end, religious centres have closed, the world has become still amidst the loud screams of the pandemic.

The next tenet of existentialism, the theme of death is all prevalent in the movie as well as in the present world. People waiting for their death, so as to escape from the worst traumas of the pandemic and the people who hope for a safe return to their normal lives symbolise the contrasting groups of humanity in a pandemic afflicted society. Anyhow the theme of death is what that is foregrounded. In addition to such devastating aspects of death in the movie, the scene in which all the belongings, clothes and the properties of the dead patients are burnt to ash so as to prevent the spreading of disease strikes the minds of the spectators with the horrifying conditions of the present. The belongings and properties for which the humanity had fought for throughout their entire lives have become absolutely meaningless in the laps of death.

Rather than the impacts on the health and social fields, the pandemic have shook the very foundations of the mental as well as intellectual states of humanity. Man the social being, when distanced from his fellow beings has high chances to develop depression as well as severe mental agony as an after-effect of this isolation. This mental agony and angst have contributed much to the hike in suicide tendencies especially among the youngsters. The existential queries among the youngsters now a days remain unanswered, the entire life seems to be absurd and a sense of dilemma arises regarding the purpose of human existence and an awful experience prevails throughout.

The educational sector in the world had also undergone drastic changes as in all the fields. The nationwide closure of the educational institutions has impacts on about sixty percentage of the world's student population. As per the UNESCO report, the closure of schools and universities as a part of the COVID-19 pandemic was implemented nationwide in almost 165 nations. The past student-teacher relationship and the conventional teaching methods have given to the mechanical online system where all the systems are internet based.

Education as a workplace and research as a labour practice are also being transformed. We are simultaneously experiencing a rapid transition in processes central to knowledge production- including office hours, lab convenings, graduate school seminars and professional conferences- now taking place virtually. Without the benefit (or luxury) of strategy or fine-tuning or near term assessment, the cycles and rituals of research and education- including examinations, commencement, peer-review and the pace of and audience for scholarly publications- are being extensively reimagined. (items.ssrc.org)

The lockdown across the whole world, a strategy to ensure social distancing, has devastated the world economy. The share markets have undergone a sudden fall, the screaming business markets have ceased to be what they were in the past and the entire world anticipates severe famine in the future as a result of the fall in production, creating a wider drift between the rich and the poor. This finally results in a group of people who don't even understand the meaning of their existence and purpose of their lives. A large portion of the

nation's economy is to be spent for the curing of the pandemic. For example, the Ebola outbreak in West Africa in 2014 has shattered the economic foundation of the country. A cost of USD 6 billion was spent. As per the studies of The Global Health Risk Framework for the Future (GHRF) Commission, every year it costs almost USD 60 billion (direct cost) for beating the pandemic outbreak. The direct as well as the indirect costs result in a fall in the GDP.

Identity crisis and the despair associated with the same is one of the worst among the psychological threats during the pandemic era. The closure of religious centres have added to the traumatic psyche of the population, as many among them especially the staunch believers of religion have lost their pillars (religion and spirituality) to rely on. The pandemic outbreak was an unexpected crisis which shattered the lives of millions with regard to their education, business, etc. The loss of hope as a result of the complete shattering of dreams and proposals results in the loss of identity and man starts developing a sense of wonder regarding one's own space in this universe, in this grief-stricken world. Kierkegaard in his *WorksofLove* remarks: "When the God forsaken worldliness of earthly life shuts itself in complacency, ...lest we suffocate worldliness"(246).

The tough, traumatic situations of the present make the world population, the staunch opponents of rationalism and positivism as the existentialists are. Existentialism supports the fact that human decisions are mostly made on the basis of subjective emotions rather than reason, as humans are struck in the world of anxiety, despair and thereby the threats of identity crisis. In the movie, as well as in the current world, one could see living specimens who had completely lost belief in rationality and intellectual brilliance.

Since 1851, the threat of epidemic spread from particular diseases has been a critical concern for nations and the international community. The International Sanitary Conferences, which began in 1851, aimed to prevent the spread of infectious disease without disrupting trade and traffic. From the late 19th century through World War II, the ISC oversaw the international response to the spread of three diseases – plague, cholera, yellow fever- until those responsibilities were transferred to what we now know as the World Health Organisation. (hub.jhu.edu)

One of the worst outcomes of pandemics in the social structure is the widening inequality among various classes of the society. The already existing gaps have got widened as majority of the population have lost their jobs. Thus unemployment and poverty have strongly taken prior position in the Indian soil.

The impact of COVID-19 pandemic in religion is highly remarkable. The widespread of the virus created a clash within the brains of the population regarding the relevance of religion and science, a dilemma which made them think upon which among these, humanity should rely on for a hopeful future. The wide variety of classes of humanity, who were once under the taglines of various religions, after the outbreak of the pandemic have come under a

single roof with a solitary aim of beating the virus. The movie also portrays humanity as a single group rather than portraying the same as a group differentiated on the grounds of gender, race, class, religion, etc.

In reality, the current world around us was shaped by the threatening pandemics of the past. If one examines the history, the deadly pandemics such as the Black Death between 1347 and 1351, has shattered the continents of Asia, Europe and North Africa. Half of the population of Europe was wiped out and it took a century for its recovery. This pandemic crisis resulted in several socio-cultural changes in Europe where the labour shortage resulted in the end of serfdom and created a group of peasants who demanded their rights and freedom. The global pandemic flu (1918-1919), was also one of the worst pandemics which shattered the foundations of the society of the time. The post-pandemic literary works of the time were social documents, which clearly portrayed the horrors of the pandemics. Rather than taking into consideration the number of deaths associated with the pandemics, Literature casts its main focus on how the pandemic affects the mental state of a person, the psychological aspects with regard to this and the strained human relationships which are one of the outcomes of the pandemics.

Boccaccio's *The Decameron* (1351), which deals with the tales, told by the refugees during the time of the Black Death, *The Plague* (1947) by Albert Camus, a novel which deals with the plague after the Second World War in the French dominated Algeria, etc. are the best examples of literary works which are focused on the agonies of the pandemic. Such literary works picture the real effects of the pandemic on the human psyche and the way these disastrous pandemics shape human life and this is well understood from the increase in demand for pandemic literature, especially pandemic novels in the COVID-19 era.

Literature regards each individual with compassion and goes deeper than what statistics or historical records can tell us. Literature may not explain away or fight off things such as pandemics, even as modern science sometimes can't, but it does become a source of consolation, a way of sharing our common humanist concerns and in its own way, provides the deepest and most insightful record of the events. (m.timesofindia.com)

The social impact of the pandemic is something that grabs the attention of the entire world where schools, markets and all the social entertaining platforms and public spheres were closed. The ban in the travel, cancellation of the international flights and even the small family visits being controlled by the military check points shoot up the level of despair and thus population mobility becomes a key factor. The closure of educational institutions and public places are the first non-medical interferences from the part of the authorities to beat this pandemic.

The impact of the pandemic over the global security is another important devastating threat. Pandemics are always as hazardous as the biological wars of the era. The restrictions imposed on the citizens by the government and the authorities and all the adverse impacts of

the pandemic when summed up result in civil unrest, armed conflicts, violation of democracy, etc. The violent scenes in the media, in which the ordinary citizens get brutally beaten up by the police officers for breaking the curfew rules have become common now a days.

COVID-19 promises to alter us all in strange ways. It's a paradigm shifting event that divides lives and cultures into a before and after. We will emerge changed, though how those changes will manifest is far from certain. The sensory details of this outbreak- the masks, the faces of doctors and nurses creased with worry and fatigue, the closure signs, the antiseptic smells, the empty streets, the stacks of coffins- will weave their way into our minds and bodies, triggering us back to this moment years in the future. (theparisreview.org)

The optimistic thoughts have given way to an uncertainty and this uncertainty is today's reality.

The pandemics recorded in the human history are clear-cut examples of the fact that pandemics pose not only medical threats but also socio-political, economical and cultural threats. The economic impact destabilises the economy of a nation and it costs years of hard work from the part of the government and the authorities for a proper recovery which always seems to be hardly possible as it remains an economic burden for a long time. The social practices also take years for a return to the normal past. A deadly pandemic with the true potential for high mortality rates and morbidity thus devastates the entire world, striking the entire population with the notes of anxiety and depression.

CONCLUSION

The pandemics recorded in the human history till the date, had posed devastating threats all over the world. The term "pandemic" though has a long history, is not still completely defined by any of the health practitioners or the medical texts as the dimension of pandemics are in a change with the passage of time. The wide geographic extension, high rate of mortality, disease movement, etc. are the most threatening features of the pandemic, which in turn cast the shadow of existential angst and despair within the human psyche. This paper titled "Existentialism regaining its pertinence in the Pandemic afflicted society? A Study of the COVID-19 Scenario on the grounds of the Nigerian movie *93Days*", has tried to analyse how the philosophy of existentialism has got pertinence in the present scenario which is struck by the pangs of COVID-19, on the grounds of the 2016 Nigerian movie *93Days*, which is an honest document on the 2014 Ebola virus outbreak in West Africa. The paper also casts its focus on the ways in which the pandemic has affected the socio-political, cultural, educational and economical sectors of the world. The film portrays at its best the emotional traumas, despair and the existential angst associated with the pandemic. The film when juxtaposed with the present traumatic scenario, results in a clear-cut representation of the way

in which the existential tenets take its practical form in the present-day reality, the reality of uncertainty.

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