

THE PANDEMIC SYNDROME: DEPRESSION AND ANXIETY IN MARGARET LAURENCE'S THE DIVINERS AND A JEST OF GOD**Mrs. G. Premila Evangeline, Dr. R. Jeya Sundararaj**

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Abstract

This article advances the idea that an investigation of the impact of the pandemic is very much part and parcel of literary studies. Of recent times, the world has been a witness to COVID-19. When Margaret Laurence was writing her fiction, the impact of the infantile paralysis which ironically affected the adults too, left its impression on her writings. The novels namely *The Diviners* and *A Jest of God*, map out the precarious stigmatic experience of the characters. Even after they have grown up, the response to the pandemic is largely felt over the pages of the novel. The paper further explores how humans, inspite of their survival, carry the pandemic syndrome seeking ways to get rid of the stigma. The article briefly focusses on how Margaret Laurence encounters the pandemic impact on the characters as she records the experience in both the novels.

Keywords: Epidemic, Poliomyelitis, Scoliosis, Vaccine.

Canada had been wrought by epidemics ever since the arrival of European explorers. The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary defines epidemic as "a large number of cases of a particular disease happening at the same time in a particular community" (P.421). The cause of the outbreak was attributed to unhealthy conditions of immigrant ships. An epidemic outbreak almost coincided with the arrival of foreigners. The Aborigines were worst affected by these epidemics, either intentionally or unintentionally. An unintentional spread happened when Jacques Cartier arrived in the winter of 1535. The heavily populated Iroquoian community was hit hard by smallpox and the population of the tribe considerably decreased. An intentional spread occurred in 1763 as an act of retaliation to the resistance movement rule by an Odawa chief against British rule. Infected blankets from a smallpox hospital were given to the tribal people to weed them out.

Epidemics that struck Canada in the nineteenth century are etched in the social history of the nation. Laurence goes a step further in presenting the loss, grief and pain associated with the pestilence. Canada was swept by repeated waves of influenza, poliomyelitis and pneumonia during the last century. The highly disastrous attacks are those that attacked indigenous people with the arrival of Europeans. Epidemics claimed many lives. Death of one or more family members simultaneously or consecutively was a common event. Many grave stones in the

Neepawa cemetery too have epitaphs that hint this death toll. Pneumonia and polio swept away a considerable faction of the population. In *The Diviners*, Morag's parents die of "polio", "Infantile paralysis that was what they called polio, then". (*The Diviners*.P.15). Morag's parents are kept in isolation and the child is not allowed to visit them. "I will just go upstairs for a minute and see my mother and father" says Morag. Mrs. Pearl from the neighbourhood has come to help. She prevents Morag from visiting her parents, simply to contain infection.

"No, honey," Mrs. Pearl says, "You are not to go upstairs. There's a good girl. Doctor MacLeod will be along in a little while, and he wouldn't want to go bothering your floks when they are feeling kind of poorly, now, would he? (*The Diviners*.P.12)

Morag was not explained of the critical situation that prevailed in the household. She was too young to delineated the state of affairs. All that could be inferred was that her mother died first and her father next,

From upstairs, there is a sound. Crying. Crying? Yes crying. Not like people, though Like something else. She does not know what kiy-oos. She knows only that it is her father's voice. This is no sound of her mother's voice, no sound at all. (*The Diviners*.P.13)

Another heart wrenching element of this epidemic death is denial of formal funeral. Morag was not informed of their death nor did she witness their last rites. Morag has not seen her parents being carried away. Mrs. Pearl informs her that her parents have gone "to a happier land," (*The Diviners*.13). Little Morag understands that they are dead. "Next day, Morag goes upstairs and looks in all the bedrooms, carefully, but everybody has gone. Vanished. She has not seen them being taken away" (*The Diviners*.P.14). Margaret Laurence had a very same experience when her mother died. Margaret's mother died of acute kidney infection. She was aged just four at that time. Little Margaret was not informed about the death. Once while playing outside, it was the playmate who revealed the shocking news. The writer's childhood loss becomes a prologue to her writings.

In *A Jest of God*, Nick and his twin brother Steve, both get an attack of polio. Polio claimed the life of its victims or else left them crippled. Nick's brother Steve succumbed while Nick survived with a curved spine. "Nick's spine was slightly twisted. They both had the plague. But Steve was the one who died" (*A Jest of God*.P.188), Rachel finds out his disfigured spine and Nick explains.

'Your spine isn't quite straight. The bones jut, right here. Did you know?

'Yes, I knew. It's from- I had polio, as a kid.'

'And you got better. That's unusual, for then'. I don't know why I say this-only out of gratitude.

'You weren't crippled' (P.147)

Curved spine in polio survivors is clinically called Polio scoliosis. It is a post-polio syndrome. Most polio survivors have some degree of scoliosis. Tilted waist, raised hip, protruded shoulders and prominent ribs are signs of scoliosis. It can be corrected either by surgery or bracing. Nick's scoliosis is of mild type. "Not so anyone would notice" he says (P.147). He needs neither surgery nor bracing. Laurence didn't stop with the presentation of the horror of epidemics in her novels, even the degree of devastation left on the survivors is given as a footnote.

When polio first hit the nation, no one knew that the disease was contagious. Polio or poliomyelitis is crippling and fatal disease. It is caused by a deadly virus and is highly contagious. It affects the victim's brain and spinal cord, causing paralysis. Death occurs when the polio virus affects the respiratory muscles. Preventive measures or course of treatment was not available. Two vaccines were developed- Salk vaccine in 1955 and Sabins vaccine in 1961. Salk vaccine was injectable and was administered as a three-course shot. Sabins vaccine was given orally. Later a nasal spray was released for public use. Laurence never mentions the name of this medicine. It may be inferred that this is the SIPV- Sabin Inactivated Polio Vaccine. This spray was meant to block polio virus from entering the body. On a trial basis, this was administered to Toronto children. This fact is presented through Morag, Stacey and Rachel. Mrs. Pearl administers this medicine to Morag. "Every morning and evening she sprays Morag's throat with a sticky yellow stuff. Saying it is good medicine which Dr. MacLeod has given" (The Diviners.P.13). Mrs. May Cameron too gives it to her daughters. Rachel says,

My mother would bring out the syringe bottle with the squeeze - bulb top and the dark-yellow liquid within, and would command Stacey and me to spray our throats. And we would spray-piff! piff!-a magic portion against fate, death, hell, damnation, putrefaction (A Jest of God.P.188).

Polio was at its peak during 1953. The provincial government took remedial steps to contain the spread. Lockdown, new preventive medicine and high death toll are clearly spoken by Rachel in A Jest of God,

I remember all at once that Steven Kazlik died of polio. There used to be epidemics, scares of a month or so, and kids kept out of school because of the thing that threatened like the medieval plague... we never worried about ourselves. We were young enough to believe ourselves immortal. When we heard that someone we knew had died, we would feel queasy for a little, while, then put it from mind or pretend the person had never been (P.188).

By listing out the authentic, documented incidents that happened in Canada, Laurence's novels give a bewildering visual treat to the readers. People and place that make the story, through fictional, turn out to be non-fictional thereby making her novels an archival footage.

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