'The pilgrims had become prisoners': Reading the Quasi carceral Spaces in Pandemic Fiction

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Abstract

Space is not a static, passive receptor or an empty pre-existing container. It is produced, modified, fashioned and reshaped now and then. Disease is also a spatial phenomenon. Thepaper attempts a reading of social changes occurring in the wake of the Kongoli pandemic, as presented in Lawrence Wright's The End of October (2020), with the help of SlavojZizek's contemplations on the COVID-19 pandemic. Itattempts to address the role of media and the government in creating panic among the people who are already primed for anxiety. By analysing the rampant conspiracy theories and blame games taking roots during pandemic times, the paper shows how ingrained social prejudices tend to resurface with appalling consequences every time human beings confront an outbreak. The paper attempts to read spaces of quarantine as carceral spaces as the government imposes punitive measures and surveillance upon the infected people.Spaces of quarantine and shutdowns can be considered as quasi-carceral spaces and a critique of such spaces enables us to imagine the way pandemics construct new spatial geographies.A reading of quarantine centres in terms of carceral spatiality reveals that these medically engineered spaces carry the potential to augment the experience of the carceral whenever disciplinary measures are imposed upon the people.

Keywords: pandemic, conspiracy theories, quarantine, carceral, space

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Introduction

Diseases seem to bequeath a surprising creative imagination to the writers from the medieval period to the contemporary twenty first century.In therecent past, the COVID-19 pandemic and its impacts have shaped public sensibility, and people have become increasingly concerned about their survival. Pandemics, like any other human experiences, have also found their way into literature and other forms of art and culture. It has turned into an interesting subject matter for artistic exploration. From the probable causes and consequences of disease outbreaks to the resilience with which people confront such turbulent times, literature has recorded the dark history of pandemics and its many facets.Some of them include Katherine Anne Porter's *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* (1939), Albert Camus' *The Plague* (1947), Michael Crichton's *The Andromeda Strain* (1969), Stephen King's *The Stand* (1978), Gabriel GarcíaMárquez's *Love in the Time of Cholera* (1985), José Saramago's *Blindness* (1995), Ping Shepherd's *The Book of M* (2018) and Mike Chen's *A Beginning at the End* (2020).

The selected novel bears contemporariness in its handling of the pandemic situation. In Lawrence Wright's *The End of October,* one comes across a world where an unprecedented pandemic gets ignited from a refugee camp in Indonesia. The camp was meant to be a site of detention for persecuting homosexuals, of which majority have been contracted with HIV/AIDS. A contagion takes root in the human population and sweeps across the world. The protagonist of the novel, Dr. Henry Parsons, a microbiologist working under World Health Organization in UK who "understood the clever mechanisms of contagion" happens to get infected by the Kongoli virus through his visit to the camp on collecting a sample (Wright, 2020, p.53). The narrative switches to a thriller tone when Dr. Parsons realises that his driver Bambang Idris who accompanied him to the camp, contaminated with the virus, has went on a Hajj pilgrimage. Consequently, we witness a scenario of quarantining three million pilgrims in Mecca, on hajj. While Dr. Parsons is on duty tackling the pandemic in Saudi Arabia, his wife Jill Parsons (a school teacher) undergoes a tough time dealing with

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their two children Helen and Teddy. The novel covers a whole range of trajectory beginning from naming the virus as 'Kongoli' to the conspiracy theories associated with the source of the virus to the discovery of a vaccine.

The spread of the pandemic triggers a vast pandemic of ideological viruses - fake news, conspiracy theories, explosion of racism - that otherwise lie dormant in our societies (Zizek, 2020a). A more constructive ideological virus that spreads and infests human beings is, "the virus of thinking of an alternate society, a society beyond nation-state, a society that actualizes itself in the forms of global solidarity and cooperation" (Zizek, 2020a, p.41). The pandemic, as observed by Zizek (2020a), serves as a clarion call that society can no more function as it used to, demanding a radical change and that human beings need a catastrophe to rethink the fundamental elements of the society. However, one cannot miss the irony that the very pandemic which promotes solidarity at a global level also expresses itself in the form of strict protocols such as to isolating oneself and avoiding close contacts with others at the level of everyday lives. This is evident from the ways in which our elementary interactions with people, objects and even our bodies get modified and reshaped. The commands on how to cope with the viral outbreaks will abound:

. . avoid touching things which may be (invisibly) dirty, do not touch hooks, do not sit on public toilets or on benches in public places, avoid embracing each other or shaking hands . . . and be especially careful about how you control your own body and your spontaneous gestures: do not touch your nose or rub your eyes - in short, do not play with yourself. (Zizek, 2020a, p.43)

On discerning our reactions to catastrophes, Zizek brings to our attention the famous schema proposed by Elizabeth Kübler- Ross. The five stages of how a society confronts any catastrophic loss include: *denial*, *anger*, *bargaining*, *depression* and *acceptance*(Zizek, 2020a). There arises a need for acceptance and reconciliation with the

sub-layer of life, the undead, stupidly repetitive, pre-sexual life of viruses, which has always been there and which will always be with us as a dark shadow, posing a threat to our very survival, exploding when we least expect it" (Zizek, 2020a, p.52).

Though Zizek (2020a) raises questions about globalisation and the capitalist market on analyzing the social conditions which made the pandemic possible, he insists on resisting the notion of a pandemic as "something that has deeper meaning: cruel but just punishment of humanity for the ruthless exploitation of other forms of life on earth" (14). The difficult thing to accept is that human beings are just one among the larger order of things (14).

As Zizek goes on explicating the society's condition during pandemic, he lays emphasis on the role of media and the government in creating panic among the people who are already primed for anxiety. The news, particularly fake news, that are in circulation during such outbreaks trigger panic leading to excessive fear of running out of essentials. Such episodes can be noticed in the novel *The End Of October* when Jill, Dr. Parsons' wife, breaks down as she was going crazy trying to protect the children at home. While Dr. Parsons is trapped in Saudi Arabia, Jill finds it hard to manage her profession and her children. Everyday communication in this family has been reduced to occasional calls on FaceTime. Jill observes that pandemics, unlike natural disasters, erode any sense of solidarity. She recounts her childhood experiences when North Carolina was hit by a hurricane, and the city of Wilmington transforming into a "well-organized humanitarian machine" (Wright, 2020, p. 239). On the contrary, a coldness has crept around the hearts of people during viral outbreaks. In the wake of the Kongoli pandemic, panic arose among the public. She was worried that her pantry was almost empty, and she was desperate to buy groceries before everything shuts down. She encounters a frenetic mob in the food store – women in yoga clothes scurrying through the aisles, businessmen pushing several carts and others looting away goods.

Disease is different and people hoarded food. Jill feels that it was a "daily battle trying to assemble money or find groceries" (Wright, 2020, p. 238). She had to even trade her string of pearls for a sack of tomatoes and a pound of rigatoni. Staying away from each other, people

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hesitated to attend common social rituals. Besides, the suspension of truth and the breakdown of trust opened the door to terror tearing the society apart. In one of her morning walks around Lullwater Park, Jill chanced upon people in a tremulous state between living and dying, and felt herself in a zombie movie (Wright, 2020). Perhaps, one could witness the society taking hold of an "animal indifference to anything except survival" (Wright, 2020, p.443).

Pandemic outbreaks often show a tendency to single out an individualor a community as a common enemy which turns out the dreadful than the disease itself (Acharya, 2020). The story of human beings and pathogens reveals a problematic evolutionary union. Aiming toward an uneasy truce, both people and pathogens work towards a biological coexistence (Acharya, 2020). A common survival that develops out of an outbreak lies in stark contrast to its social effects. Diseases are blind to social categorizations, and viruses do not differentiate victims by race, gender, class or religion (Acharya, 2020). Nevertheless, on tracing the history of pandemics, there are enough shreds of evidence to show that ingrained social prejudices tend to resurface with appalling consequences every time human beings confront an outbreak.

The instance of plague outbreak was projected as a conspiracy by people who practiced traditional medicine in Medieval Europe. These people were branded as 'witches' and were persecuted (Acharya, 2020). Though pathogens had little regard for social preference, pandemics continued to reflect deep-rooted social prejudices by pinning on to race, social class, gender etc. This serves to amplify hate and reinforce preconceived notions. Mary Mallon, a middle-aged, poor and illiterate Irish woman, was stigmatized by society labelling her as a 'super spreader' of typhoid. She was demonized and infamously branded "Typhoid Mary". Having spent more than a quarter of her life in quarantine, Mary Mallon was disgraced and her name came to considered synonymous with the disease (Acharya, 2020). Stigma developed in the churn of an epidemic has horrifying consequences and a long

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afterlife. Such a blistering instance can be found inthe select novel*The End of October.* As Dr. Parsons observes,

Diseases have a history of stirring up conspiracies. Jews were held responsible for the Black Plague in the fourteenth century, and they were massacred in hundreds of European cities, including two thousand Jews burned alive in Strasbourg, France, on Valentine's Day, 1349. (Wright, 2020, p.62)

While tracking down Patient Zero – the first person who brought infection into a community, he also knew that the "identification of the first victims of the disease – gay Muslims with HIV- was likely to create a pandemic of its own – one of hysteria" (Wright, 2020, p. 62).

As the Kongoli virus finds its new destination in the city of Mecca through Bambang Idris, Prince Majid remarks that illness was always present during hajj. He adds that though people bring various diseases from across the planet, "this disease came from Muslims and now it infests our most holy place. We are the victims, but the world will blame us for this" (Wright, 2020, p.136). Gradually, the Kongoli proved more contagious and "crept into Philadelphia seeding itself across the city with little notice" (Wright, 2020, p.170). Unfortunately, thousands of churchgoers were exposed to infected parishioners on Easter Sunday. As the city suffered the heavy blow of the pandemic, there was an alarming rise in homicides and hate crimes against the Muslim community in the northern part of the city.

By now the origin of the disease – in an Indonesian detention camp for Muslim homosexuals – was well known, and the conspiracists were inflaming fears that Kongoli was a plot. According to one theory, Muslims created the disease to destroy Christian civilization. Another theory posited that Muslims were being targeted for elimination by neo-Nazi scientists. A third theory postulated a worldwide war against homosexuals. (Wright, 2020, p. 171)

Such fantasies and blame games were fueled by internet rumour-mongers and amplified through social media. On tracing the trails of such rumours, it can be seen that a lack of proper knowledge about the spread of the contagion is what allows such conspiracy theories

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to flourish. The government tries hard to control panic but the absence of reliable information leaves people wondering about what happens around and who to believe (Wright, 2020, p.157). The mayor of Philadelphia, Shirley Jackson, instinctively knew how to communicate with the public. Being nakedly candid, she describes how illness had ravaged the death industry and encourages the people to remain calm, comfort the needy by reaching out to them and more importantly, ignore the rumours that crop up during such times of tribulation. In the novel, Mayor Jackson sets an example by inspiring Philadelphians to tend to the homeless and to brave the pandemic challenge by volunteering in hospitals.

The pandemic has the capacity to "justify and legitimize measures of control and regulation of the people", measures that were until then unthinkable (Zizek, 2020a, p. 73). As Dr. Parsons discovers that Bambang is dead during his hajj, he concludes that the world is going to experience a major pandemic as he knew that the pilgrims might be exposed to the Kongoli virus through Bambang (Wright, 2020). The crown prince imposes a lockdown and "an international quarantine was imposed on Saudi Arabia. The airlines ceased services and borders were closed. Oil tankers turned around and abandoned the Saudi ports. Millions of pilgrims were stuck in the country" (Wright, 2020, p.165). A total shutdown is imposed which Zizek(2020a) notes as a "totalitarian's wildest aspiration come true" (p.73). Such well-grounded enforcement of the quarantine can be understood using Foucault's concept of power and how his concerns with surveillance interrelate with concerns about society as a whole in the realm of public health (Elden, 2003).

Carceral Spatiality in *The End of October*

In the wake of pandemics, quarantine and social distancing norms have become the predominant forms of everyday life in a society (Knoblauch &Löw, 2020). The term 'quarantine' takes its origin from the Italian word *quarantena* that refers to a period of forty days of isolation (Gourlay, 2020). Quarantine was a "specific form public health within the broader culture of chronic institutional care for social, medical and moral concerns which developed in medieval and early modern Europe" (Bashford, 2016, as cited inGourlay, 2020,

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p.792). The term indicates the "spatial separation of people from each other in order to protect them from infection", thereby becoming a "social spatial phenomenon" (Knoblauch &Löw, 2020, p.222). The pandemic crisis emphasizes a general spatial pattern that can be observed as the reconfiguration of the space (Knoblauch &Löw, 2020). This reconfiguration arises from the tensions between two spatial logics – one standing for the quarantine places, containment zones denoting territorial closure whereas on the other hand, an uncontained spread of the contagion on a global scale (Knoblauch &Löw, 2020).

Michel Foucault, in his *The Birth of the Clinic*, posits three forms of spatialisation. The primary and secondary forms encompass the location of a disease in a family and in the body (Foucault, 1963, as cited in Elden, 2020). This is proposed after examining the taxonomy of the disease. The tertiary spatialisation is "all the gestures by which, in a given society, a disease is circumscribed, medically invested, isolated, divided up into closed, privileged regions or distributed throughout cure centres, arranged in the most favourable way" (Foucault, 1963, as cited in Elden, 2020, p. 240-241). The tertiary spatialisation leads to the condition of isolation and control.

Foucault, in his *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of Prison*, explicates how disciplinary techniques prevail outside prisons and spread throughout society. In the final chapter of the book titled "The Carceral", Foucault formulates the concept of "carceral system" which operates beyond prisons, drawing on disciplinary control (Moranet al.,2017). The "carceral" is a late 16th century word derived from Latin *carceralis* whose origin can be traced back to *carcer*, the name of the ancient state prison of Rome (Moranet al., 2017,p.2). The 'carceral' turn implies a deployment of a new spectrum of strategies of social control and coercion (Moranet al., 2017, p.1). This turn is not only epitomised by the rise of legal, state-sanctioned confinement of offenders but also by the use of semi-sanctioned forms of confinement for refugees and asylum seekers (Moranet al., 2017). Techniques of surveillance and control fostered the carceral 'fix' to function beyond traditional carceral places such as prisons, and might extend to any experience of confinement such as the self-isolation and quarantine

during pandemics. Spaces of quarantine and shutdowns can be considered as quasi-carceral spaces and a critique of such spaces enables us to challenge the way pandemics construct new spatial geographies.

In *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of Prison,* Foucault places disciplinary power in contrast to sovereign power. He employs disciplinary power as a tool to delineate modalities of power concerned with population, namely biopolitics, security and governmentality. The focus of governmental measures is not on the "people claiming rights, nor on a democratic civil or open society; it lies on the population, which must be protected, informed, treated medically, and policed" (Knoblauch&Löw, 2020, p. 223). The measures imposed or the 'disciplinary diagrams' demand stringent spatial partitioning, constant surveillance, thorough inspection and order (Elden, 2003). The disciplinary space is divided into many bodies implied to separate: "Particular places were defined to correspond . . . to the need to supervise, to break dangerous communication" (Foucault, 1975, as cited in Kakoliris, 2020). Such a manner of handling the pandemic is not merely "a massive binary division between one set of people and another, it is rather one that involves multiple separations, individualising distributions, an organization in depth of surveillance and control, an intensification and ramification of power" (Foucault, 1963, as cited in Elden, 2003, p.243).

Foucault's influential work has been one of the harbingers of carceral geography. The carceral includes punitive actions and restrictions imposed upon the life of people. The practice of confinement, detention, incarceration or quarantine is an expression of power and remains a political exercise (Armstrong&Jefferson, 2017, p.241). Those institutions which wield disciplinary power can be together put under carceral archipelago (Moranet al., 2017). Moreover, the carceral is characterized by three conditions which are not envisaged as *qualifying* conditions but as considerations which bear on the nature of carcerality (Moran et al., 2017, p.12). The three carceral conditions include detriment, intention and spatiality (Moranet al., 2017).

Detriment refers to the lived experience of people in carceral conditions, intention refers to an outside agent intending it that need not always necessarily be legal and which executes the carceral (Moran et al., 2017). It is through the third condition, spatiality, that the carceral is achieved (Moran et al., 2017). Spatiality is discerned as a "geographical truism" and implicates that the carceral will always "relate to some kind of space: this could be a detention centre, a half-way house, a domestic home, a former prison converted into a hotel, an operational prison, a school, the street, the body, in other words, any space, at any scale" (Moran et al., 2017, p.14). Carceral spatiality can emerge in various forms such as through restricting mobility such as during lockdowns or through actual walls like those in quarantine places or containment zones. On situating the carceral outside conventional carceral places such as prisons, spaces of quarantine can also be seen synonymous with carceral spaces.

In the novel, the holy city was under the operation of a surveillance system that served to monitor symptoms leading to disease outbreaks (Wright, 2020). Carceral spatiality characterises a "technology of confinement: (intentionally) keeping-in, (detrimentally) containing those 'within'" (Moranet al., 2017, p. 14). As the quarantine was imposed, the holy city turnedinto "a kind of space that begs question about power, bio politics and sovereignty" (Turner, 2009, p.312).As he tries to explain the epidemic which had spread through Mecca, Prince Majid also embarks on controlling the pilgrims: "three million people were surrounded and held captive" (Wright, 2020, p.152). He announces, "It is our duty to prevent this thing, this terrible disease, from spreading. Remain calm. Your needs will be taken care of. Food will be supplied. Doctors and nurses will attend to the ill. We will protect you. But you must not try to leave" (Wright, 2020, p.153). Earlier people had the privilege to walk out in any direction in the city of Mecca, but after the shutdown, the National Guard surrounded the "holy city with tanks and troops and shoot any Muslim who tries to escape" (Wright, 2020, p.141).

Once the quarantine was enforced, Mecca was "surrounded by tanks and jeeps. Soldiers were stationed at roadblocks, erecting fences and unfurling curls of razor wire. The pilgrims had

become prisoners" (Wright, 2020, p.152).The mobility of the pilgrims is constantly monitored to curtail any kind of risky contacts. This is made possible through individual "spatial partitioning" (Kakoliris, 2020). The disciplinary and surveillance measures imposed during quarantine enabled a kind of carceral experience for the pilgrims. The government even makes use of GPS to locate a pilgrim and the tent number corresponding to each pilgrim. Such a strategy of partitioning can be viewed as a "strict delimitation of a given space, in which each individual has their own position, so as to exclude the possibilities of the individual's pointless move, their disappearance or the futile and dangerous interaction with others" (Foucault, 1975, as cited inKakoliris, 2020). Therefore, carceral spatiality pertains to the diverse strategies and techniques employed intentionally and spatial relationships to them experienced detrimentally (Moranet al., 2017, p.14).

The partitioned, contained space renders the break down of dangerous contacts and also enables the examination of the pilgrims' behaviour in addition to the possible authorizations in case of any misbehaviour (Kakoliris, 2020). Within such geography, everyone is "fixed in his place. And, if he moves, he does so at the risk of his life, contagion or punishment" (Foucault, 1975, as cited in Kakoliris, 2020). The three million people in the holy city were trapped and longed for life though many were exposed to the Kongoli virus. The authorities claimed that if the pilgrims managed to escape, they will be carrying the disease, giving it to their near and dear ones. The pilgrims felt like animals in a cage and lurched towards the fences to escape. The force of the crowd toppled the fences, liberating the pilgrims who raced into the desert (Wright, 2020, p.164). The infected city of Mecca becomes a place "traversed throughout with hierarchy, surveillance, observation" and "immobilized by the functions of an extensive power that bears in a distinct way over all individual bodies" (Foucault, 1975, as cited in Kakoliris, 2020).

Conclusion

As Zizek notes, medical knowledge is often decried as a means for disciplining people, treating them as helpless victims who ought to be isolated for their good (Zizek, 2020b). The

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changes taking place during the pandemic affect everything as the fundamental elements of the everyday lives of people gets disintegrated (Zizek, 2020a). The pandemic did not induce a mere shift from the communal life to distancing, but a more problematic one from "one constellation of closeness and distancing to another" (Zizek, 2020b, p.62). Zizek (2020b) notes our failure to comprehend the non-apocalyptic nature of a pandemic. What really happens when a pandemic recedes is that we become too exhausted to take pleasure in it (Zizek, 2020b). People across the world find themselves in a similar predicament: "our world is shattered and we dream not of some eccentric paradise (or hell) but of a return to normal social life without lockdowns, without masks, and the constant feat of contagion" (Zizek, 2020b, p.92-93). The spatial dynamics under lockdowns present themselves as a distinct alternative to how spatial representations prevail over everyday lives.

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