

Colonial ‘Othering’ in Pandemic Movies: Pandemic as a Metaphor for Colonialism as Represented in the Movie *Contagion*

Anjitha. S

M.A English Language and Literature

Mar Ivanios College

Trivandrum, Kerala, India

anjithasajeev1997@gmail.com

Abstract

A pandemic is a high prevalence outbreak of infectious disease that occurs over a wide geographical area. In the scheme of human history, pandemics are nothing new. Apocalyptic outbreaks of diseases have been a recurring motif in literature since time immemorial. Pandemic literature helps us contextualise the reality of such outbreaks and mirrors our fears about the disease and societal collapse.

Pandemic movies fall under the genre of dystopian fiction. The reflection of a restructured post-pandemic society through literary narratives reveals the social importance of literature or art at the time of crisis. Most of the pandemic narratives could be analysed from a post-colonial perspective as the genre reflects the concept of ‘self’ and the ‘other’ through the image of pandemic disease. Both novels and movies of this genre often describe the neglect, incompetence and selfishness of those in power. These narratives are often centered on Western countries neglecting the effects of pandemic on Eastern countries, which are often positioned as the source of these transnational contagions.

Pandemic movies have immediate cultural significance in the contemporary scenario of the outbreak of COVID-19. This paper seeks to analyse the phenomenon of pandemic in

general and the pandemic movie *Contagion* in particular, through a post-colonial lens and to trace various imperial discourses such as the concept of ‘othering’ in these movies. The colonial discourses in these movies such as the dichotomy of binary oppositions are also analysed.

Keywords: Pandemic Narratives, Concept of ‘self’ and the ‘other’, Dichotomy of Binary Oppositions, Hegemony, Colonization, COVID 19 Outbreak.

Contagion came out in the year 2011 and is directed by Steven Soderbergh, produced by Participant Media, Imagination Abu Dhabi and Double Feature Films and distributed by Warner Bros. Pictures. The movie gives a realistic picture of a pandemic and throws light in the societal and human behaviour at the time of crisis. Analysing the movie in a post-colonial angle and relating the fictional viral outbreak to the process of colonisation, gives a different outlook to the movie. The movie regained its popularity with the contemporary scenario of COVID-19 outbreak. The virus in the movie, could be considered an alien species and the movie is about an invasion from inner space. The deadly disease in the movie is modelled off a combination of influenza and a virus called Nipah, which causes inflammation of the brain and respiratory disease.

The story begins with Beth Emhoff (Gwyneth Paltrow) who is on her way home from a business trip to Hong Kong. During her layover in Chicago, she uses the time to hook up with a former love before heading home to Minneapolis, and her husband. Two days later, she experiences a seizure and is hospitalised by her husband Mitch, but she dies of unknown causes. After the death of his stepson Clark due to a similar seizure, Mitch is isolated, but later he is found to have immunity to that particular unknown disease. He goes home to his teenaged daughter, Jory, who is also unaffected by the disease.

Dr Ellis Cheever from the Center for Disease control thinks that the disease is a bioweapon released at the time of Thanks-giving when people spend time together the most and this weaponized disease turns out to be a threat that has the potential to destroy the entire

human race. Since Beth has been identified as the carrier, Dr Eric Mears who works for the Epidemic Intelligence Service is sent by Dr Cheever to talk to Mitch. Later Dr Mears is also infected and because of this Chicago is also put under quarantine.

The movie gives us an insight into how contact-tracing is done by epidemiologists to identify those who have had possible contact with virus-infected individuals. While in China, Beth visited many crowded places like casinos, restaurants, etc where she might have come into contact with a large number of people. So, tracing her contacts is the primary step taken by the epidemiologist to control the disease spread. Dr. Orantes and her Chinese colleague Sun Feng (Chin Han) reviews the security footage of Beth in the casino to trace her contacts, pausing at key moments when Beth could have either contracted or transmitted the virus. This scene provides a picture to the viewers how such a disease could spread and also emphasises the importance of containing the disease to reduce the death toll.

Dr Ally discovers that the virus, named MEV-1 has a mixture of genetic material from viruses that typically infect pigs and bats. Dr Ian Sussman, a research scientist at the university of California, deliberately defies the instruction to destroy all of the sample cells so that he could make use of the samples to grow the virus and come up with a cure. This was a breakthrough and he started working on a vaccine. It is also determined that the virus spreads by contact with inanimate objects.

Alan Krumwiede considered the virus a government conspiracy. He posts a lot of videos and in one he states that he has cured himself of the virus using homeopathic medicine. He cites the “forsythia” tree as the main curative plant. People break into pharmacies violently demanding the forsythia extract that he has been using, thereby creating a situation of panic. Later, it is found that Krumwiede faked his illness as he wanted to boost the sales of the forsythia extract. Thus, he fooled the people and this exposes the money-minded attitude of

people even at the time of a crisis and the ill-nature of the capitalist society. Krumwiede is then arrested and charged with securities fraud and conspiracy.

Dr Cheever informs his family and friends to move out of Chicago as it is going to be quarantined and one of his colleagues hears his telephone conversation with his partner and he is placed under investigation. This again shows the misuse of power by people in the higher sections of privilege and even in the time of an epidemic, their priority is the safety of their family. It is evident from this that only the dominant class benefits and are safe even during a time of crisis. Hextail, meanwhile, is confident that she has developed a vaccine and is anxious to test it. She vaccinates herself and then visits her father who is infected with the virus. She does not contract MEV-1 and so the vaccine is announced a success.

World Health Authority epidemiologist Dr Leonora Orantes finds that Beth was Patient Zero - the first person with MEV-1. Dr Orantes is kidnapped whilst in Hong Kong, her kidnap orchestrated by a Chinese official named Sun Feng, who wants to use her as a trade for the vaccine for his village. Vaccines are provided and Orantes is released but later it is revealed that those vaccines are nothing but placebos.

At the end of the movie, the cause of the virus is revealed. It is shown that a bulldozer on a construction site knocked a tree down, disturbing the bats living in it. One bat flew over a pigsty and dropped a piece of banana. One of the pigs in the sty consumed it, and when the pigs were slaughtered, the new virus infects a local chef who then shook hands with Beth when they meet at a local casino. This is how she became Patient Zero.

In the movie, the fictional pandemic can be identified as a metaphor for colonisation. As a result of the fictional pandemic as shown in the movie, people were forced to self-isolate themselves and maintain social distancing. This condition is the same as the condition of exile from a literal homeland associated with colonisation. Thus, the invasion of a virus to the human community made forceful changes to human lifestyle. The viral outbreak had a serious effect

on normal life, controlling people, which could be equated to the colonial motif. Before the outbreak, people had the freedom to move wherever they wish to, but after the outbreak, movements were restricted. As shown in the movie, many cities were locked and people were forced to stay home. In the colonial era, people were under the control of the colonizers and they were forced to obey the rules imposed on them. In *Contagion*; the virus can be considered the colonizer and the humans as the colonized. Thus, humans are shown as controlled by the invading species or viruses in the movie.

Many outbreak movies focus on how society goes out of control and violence affects the harmony of an existing social order. The movie also showcases the violence associated with the pandemic. This could be related to the violence and rebelling attitude of the colonized against the colonial or imperial rule. The scene in which people break into the shops and grab groceries and people attacking each other shows how scary the situation is. The disruption of an existing social order would naturally affect the mental harmony of the people and they would act violently. The same thing happened when the colonizers arrived and dominated the colonized. The people were affected by the controlling nature of the new rule which restricted their freedom in their homeland and they were forced to obey the foreigners. Here, the virus as the colonizer is responsible for the violent acts of the colonized, that is, the human beings. There are also examples in the film of how lawlessness can descend when there is some kind of dramatic change to the way in which we live our everyday lives. For example, in *Chicago*, when quarantine is imposed, there is violence and also looting.

Mass panic and violence are the key themes of the movie and it realistically depicts the situation of an outbreak like this on a global scale. As shown in the movie, the transmission of the virus is not from person to person. Instead, the transmission occurs by touching the contaminated surface previously touched by the infected person. This makes the disease more terrifying. Other than the scientists and medical workers who are working to control the spread

of the virus, all other characters are shown as panicked and clueless, striving to escape death. One of the main examples of this is the rush to purchase forsythia when it is said to be a cure for the virus. The mass attack by people to grab as much forsythia as they can and the speed with which the product is sold out clearly shows how the common man reacts in the time of a global crisis. This mass panic is another prominent element of colonisation as well in which people are panicked by the sudden change in their social environment.

In the movie, the effort of the scientists and medical department to control the disease from the very first moments to the final discovery of a cure or vaccine are clearly shown. We also see how different scientific organizations work together to bring about the fastest resolution. Identifying Patient Zero - or the first person who is known to have contracted the disease is shown as a milestone achieved by the epidemiologists and scientists. This then helps them to find how it is contracted and spread. The scientists in the film work on all facets of the pandemic, including vaccination and cure, all of which seem to be fraught with personal risk. The idea of vaccination and people struggling to eradicate the disease can be related to the decolonization process. The ultimate aim of a vaccine is to eradicate the virus or the viral strain from the globe which can be equated to the struggles of people to decolonize their nation.

Frantz Fanon mentions in his seminal work *The Wretched of the Earth* that “decolonisation is always a violent phenomenon” (27). Fanon lays out a convincing argument for why decolonisation and violence go hand in hand and instead dismisses non-violent resistance as the preservation of the capitalist, colonialist state (48). Elizabeth Frazer and Kimberly Hutchings in their paper *On Politics and Violence: Arendt Contra Fanon* shows Arendt Contra Fanon’s analysis of colonisation to be structuralist – he sees colonisation as a process that embeds new structures, rooted in white supremacy, into a society that will need to be replaced (95). This replaced or restructured society is very well showcased in *Contagion*.

The post-colonial aspects of the movie could be analysed from a different perspective as well. After the outbreak, the government imposes certain restrictions. But it is clearly shown that these restrictions are not the same for everyone. Those who are in power experience certain privileges even in the crisis situation of the pandemic. This concept of power difference is key to postcolonial studies. The privileged dominant groups of the society are safe and protected while the lower sections face a lot of the pressures and problems. An example of this is Dr Cheever, who is a respected scientist but who warns his family about the disease before Chicago is quarantined thereby enabling them to leave and hopefully avoid contracting the virus. At the same time, it is shown that Mitch's neighbours are attacked and killed.

Colonisers controlled the colonised by circulating various ideologies among the colonized. Hegemony, the dominance of one group over another, is often supported by legitimating norms and ideas. Postcolonial theorists applied the Gramscian concept of hegemony to unravel the dynamics of colonized societies and the aftermath of empires especially in relation to culture. Colonial hegemony is best compared to the transmission of viral disease from one person to the other. Just like the colonisers transmit their ideologies to make people believe that they are inferior to the Europeans, viral transmission happens. Thus, viral transmission becomes a metaphor for ideological transmission and the infected people become the symbol of subordinate colonized who willingly obey the colonized.

Contact tracing associated with pandemics as depicted in the movie can be connected to cartography, which is a colonial feature. When Beth is diagnosed with the unknown disease, the first step done is contact tracing and for that, Dr Orantes is sent to Hong Kong. The casino, hotel and all other places visited by Beth are traced. There is always a question of privacy in this tracing, but then, in the situation of a crisis or pandemic, this is necessary.

The film presents examples of crowd psychology and collective behaviour which can lead to mass hysteria and the loss of social order. The confusion and helplessness of common

people along with their lack of information make them believe blogs and other new media information propagated by conspiracy theorists like Krumwiede to spread disinformation and fear, which become dangerous contagions themselves. Krumwiede claims that the government is hiding things from the public which creates confusion among people. He also spreads the fake information that his herbal remedy proved to be the cure. He is later arrested for fraud and conspiracy. The mention of herbal remedy as fraud and ineffective could again be considered as a reference to the Eastern culture as Eastern countries, especially India and China, are famous for their herbal remedies in the treatment of diseases.

A pandemic is a remainder of the fact that only the people of the middle or lower economic strata are affected by the crisis. The rich will remain richer while the poor will ultimately starve and die. The darkest moments in *Contagion* are about the potential social breakdown bred by economic disparity as a result of an epidemic. The film criticises contemporary society in which people are more selfish and concerned about their own life, which is further exposed during the epidemic. Throughout the movie, Soderbergh presents collective patterns of behaviour during the epidemic, which lead to social discord.

Works Cited

Contagion. Directed by Steven Soderbergh, Warner Bros. Pictures, 2011.

Fanon, Frantz, and Jean-Paul Sartre. *The Wretched of the Earth*, François Maspero, 1977.

Frazer, Elizabeth, and Kimberly Hutchings. "On Politics and Violence: Arendt Contra Fanon." *Contemporary Political Theory*, vol. 7, no. 1, 2008, pp. 90–108., philpapers.org/rec/FRAOPA-5. Accessed 10 Mar.2022.