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Unveiling The Nexus Between Pandemic and Trauma in Lawrence Wright's Novel *The End of October*

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Abstract

In the modern world, people are confronted with various pandemic outbreaks that have a significant impact on their lives. These events often result in personal stories of fear and loss, which can have a considerable effect on mental health and are shaped by broader societal trauma. Literature about pandemics offers valuable insights into human behavior and societal structures, while also providing comfort and lessons in resilience and community. Understanding pandemics involves studying disease patterns in populations (epidemiology) and concepts such as transmission, containment, mitigation, and herd immunity. People experience trauma on both personal and societal levels during a pandemic, resulting in psychological and emotional struggles, including fear, loss, isolation, and the disruption of daily lives. The connection between trauma and pandemics has a long history, as seen in events like the Black Death in the 14th century, the 1918 Spanish Flu, and the HIV/AIDS pandemic, which caused psychological trauma for certain individuals. This paper aims to explore the relationship between pandemics and trauma by analyzing the origins of trauma, its consequences, the psychological and emotional responses of people during crises, and the coping mechanisms. The analysis will be done through the novel "The End of October" by Lawrence Wright, focusing on how individual suffering and societal responses mutually influence each other, providing a deep understanding of personal and societal responses. The paper sheds light on the impacts on pandemics and trauma influencing the lives of people, Scientists and government authorities.

Keywords: Pandemics and Trauma, Psychological and Emotional Responses, Origin of Trauma, Fear and Death.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has generated renewed interest in the genre, leading to the creation of new stories and a reevaluation of classic works. Throughout history, pandemics have posed recurring challenges, involving outbreaks of infectious diseases that spread across large regions, multiple continents, or globally. Natural catastrophes and man-made tragedies are bound in human history. It's possible that humans only consider the past and shape our coping strategies in light of recent diseases and pandemic outbreaks.

Examining the ways in which previous pandemic experiences influence the current ones is crucial. Throughout history, pandemics have brought recurring challenges and have involved outbreaks of infectious diseases that spread across large regions, multiple continents, or globally. In contrast, trauma can be described as highly disturbing or distressing events that exceed an individual's capacity to cope, resulting in lasting mental and emotional wounds. It can stem from a wide range of experiences, including accidents, natural disasters, physical or sexual assault, or prolonged abuse, war, and terrorism. Through literary narratives, we can gain an intimate look at the internal turmoil and resilience required to navigate such crises. Lawrence Wright is an American author, journalist, and screenwriter, known for his extensive work in non-fiction, including his Pulitzer Prize-winning book *The Looming Tower: Al-Qaeda*. His fictional novel *The End of October* is a notable work that explores a pandemic scenario. Wright's career spans journalism, documentary filmmaking, and playwriting, making him a versatile and influential figure in contemporary literature. *The End of October* is a gripping medical thriller that explores the catastrophic impact of a global pandemic caused by a virulent new virus. The novel follows Dr. Henry Parsons, an epidemiologist at the Centers for Disease Control, as he navigates the political and social chaos ensuing from the outbreak. This novel depicts the trauma of a pandemic and its impact on the protagonist, his family, scientists, government officers, and normal people. By breaking down the novel into four main principles, we can analyze the impact and coping mechanisms of trauma during pandemics- Identification and claiming of trauma, Attribution of responsibility, Institutional arenas and Identity revision.

Identification and Claiming of Trauma

A pandemic is identified as a traumatic event by an epidemiologist, Henry Parsons who looks into an enigmatic outbreak at an Indonesian camp for refugees. According to this novel, the Kongoli flu is the most severe and contagious illness that affects the entire world. It generates intense dread, which leads to strange behaviors such as fear, and anxiety that leads to death. For example, In Giovanni Boccaccio's work *The Decameron*, he discussed a pandemic scenario in which he dealt with the deadliest infectious disease, the black plague, which kills a large number of people and spreads quickly. Boccaccio also depicted the origin of the trauma that people in a pandemic situation exhibit. He claims that the pandemic has been a traumatic incident which influenced fear, loss of lives, isolation and death among the people. In the novel *The End of October*, Dr. Henry Parsons with his driver Bambang Ibdris identified the unknown virus in a Kongoli camp, filled with HIV patients and three dead doctors affected by the virus. He found the three doctors' dead bodies who had also mistaken the virus as influenza, lying blue, with dirty sputum and blood leaking from their noses. He noticed a lengthy unsent email, addressed to Luc Barre, chief of MSF in Paris with a note of help.

“We are in a hot zone like you've never seen before! Already in one week, we have dozens of infections in this pesthole. I sent you samples through the locals. Did you receive them? What are we dealing with here, we have no idea! The lethality is extreme. We need equipment! We need pathologists! We cannot fight this, just three of us. Luc, I am frightened” (27).

On investigating the collection of blood and sputum samples, he claims that this illness causes a pandemic that spreads quickly throughout the planet, resulting in widespread fear and destruction and bringing trauma to the entire world's population. He sensed the evolution of fear and dread pandemic arising from the Kongoli camp and imagined the trauma that the whole society undergoes within a short period. He questioned the origin of the virus and its impacts that the world undergoes,

“We didn't know what we are dealing with. We still don't! You tell me, what is this, some kind of plague? It's influenza, but an unknown type,... Three labs are already testing the antibodies of survivors in Indonesia to see if they match any known strains. (124).

According to Jeffrey C. Alexander, a well-known sociologist in his book *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*, the ascription of trauma – claim making – to an event is a process that involves human agency informed by systems of meaning. Whereas these claims are made by reflexive social agents and conveyed to other members of the collectivity, and also to enlarged collectivities in the wider society. Alexander calls these actual groups of agents “carrier groups”. Henry, his colleagues and his friends were regarded as carrier groups for successfully battling the traumatic events that occurred during the journey of unveiling the virus. Henry and his colleagues Marco and Catherine and the healthcare superintendent Barlett sacrificed their time and belonging in identifying the vaccine, where Henry got the support system of Prince Majid in Mecca to control the pilgrims in returning to their homeland which could prevent the spread of disease. Henry also got quarantined among the pilgrims to watch the situation of Mecca and identify the root cause for getting the medicine. Amidst controlling the disease, personal losses occurred when the prince’s sister who wished to offer her prayers for the first time at the Hajj pilgrimage in the quarantine also died because of the virus spread. While battling the virus and death, Henry also loses his Wife Jill, because of the virus and his children undergo harassment, hunger, robbery and loneliness which induces the collective memory.

“Her mother’s mouth was open. She was blue like a porcelain lamp on her bedside table. There was a trail of blood all over the sheets and in little dried rivulets from her eyes and ears and nose. This is what God did to my mother like it had been kept in the freezer” (307).

Attribution of Responsibility

This concept describes how people or the protagonist of a novel can attribute their trauma to social influences, allowing them to identify the source of their suffering and take responsibility for it. In this novel, due to their irresponsible assessment of the virus and incorrect diagnosis of it as a typical flu, the Indonesian government and Health Minister Annisa were held accountable for the pandemic outbreak. She forbids Dr. Henry from taking samples from the HIV-positive refugee camp without informing him of the disease’s potential repercussions due to disagreements with the WHO and Henry resulted in the spread of disease across the country, leading to quarantines, fatalities, and anxiety over the source and vaccination.

Nigel D. Rossiter published a paper titled *Trauma - the forgotten pandemic?* (2021), investigates the different kinds of trauma that lead to global annual death from trauma particularly the spread of contagious diseases including COVID-19, plague and Spanish flu. This study illustrates the fact that a greater number of individuals suffer from trauma-related injuries when compared to other medical conditions which demonstrates that trauma has a deep impact and attribution on the prevalence of wounds in every population and worldwide wellbeing. The data shows that approximately six million people die every year because of trauma and infectious diseases including COVID-19, Tuberculosis, malaria and HIV/AIDS. Henry Parson, the main character, lost his wife Jill to the Kongoli virus, which causes misery for the whole family. Losing loved ones is extremely painful and can lead to emotional instability, as demonstrated in this novel by Henry Parsons, who experiences this trauma after learning that his wife Jill died from a pandemic and that their children are extremely painful after losing their mother. Therefore, the greatest trauma caused by a pandemic is the loss of life and taking responsibility for it. Not only Henry but his daughter Helen also suffers trauma because of sexual harassment during the pandemic.

Institutional Arenas

The assertions made by carrier groups are influenced by various institutional settings, including religious, scientific, and mass media platforms. When individuals experience trauma within a religious space, it can raise questions about the nature of a higher power in allowing such events to

occur, presenting a challenge to theodicy. The Torah’s story of Job, for example, asks, “Why did God allow this evil?” (Alexander, 15). Henry and his colleague as a carrier group instructed to make a quarantine rule in Mecca to prevent the spread of disease, as the driver Bambang from Kongoli also made a trip for the hajj pilgrimage in Mecca. Millions of pilgrims from other countries were affected by the virus and they were quarantined under the military troops, the situation escalated when those pilgrims tried to escape the quarantine and got shot down by the military people. The anxiety of trauma grows when a person who belongs to Iran country was shot down resulting in internal conflicts among the countries. Mecca was totally under quarantine with Henry’s instructions and the hospitals were flooded with virus-infected persons with death and suffering. This made them question the god’s concern about evil for allowing the virus to rapidly spread which increased the death rate through disease and also imposed quarantines. The President questions over the existence of god as “I do believe in evil. But could they stoop to this? Is Satan loose in the world?” (338). Henry’s yearning for answers from supernatural entities illustrates the link between God and evil. He questioned Majid’s ability to reconcile Islam and science “...and every bit as suspicious of supernatural explanations when science supplied a plausible answer” (354).

Academic conflicts, “revelations” and “revisions” happen when the trauma experience is introduced into the scientific community and governed by distinct evidence conditions. Henry and his group member Marco underwent the reality of the disease and its impact made them undergo revisions on past pandemics like the Spanish flu, the Ebola virus and the strains of the virus. The Kongoli virus was a very new unidentified strain where the evidence couldn’t be traced within a short period. Amidst the tensions between balancing the political war ongoing between the US, Russia and Iran, they were forced to develop the vaccine within a short period to control the disease. Finally, the injection vaccine was succeeded and soon implemented worldwide and Henry was attributed as a hero in defending the Kongoli virus. Not only the vaccine was identified but he also discovered the origin and traces of the virus which was spread from the dead iced mammoth preserved in the Cold side of Siberia and warned society to be prepared for future pandemic outbreaks. “According to the documentation, it was unearthed by a palaeontology expedition in 1964, from tissue extracted from a frozen mammoth found in the glacial ice.” (430).

In terms of mass media, with the help of government officers, news channels and social media created awareness among the people on the spread of the virus which also created an exaggeration. Mass media supported the situation by spreading the news about vaccine processing, death and fatalities which made people aware of the unprecedented situation and quarantine purposes. Jill, the wife of Henry was informed about the virus and its effects through a news channel. Whenever she couldn’t connect with Henry by phone, Jill would always watch the news channel hoping Henry’s health to be fine. This mass media influenced the awareness and trauma in people’s minds. Using the mass media, traumas can be effectively exaggerated, providing certain opposing interpretations with an important advantage over other terms of persuasion.

Identity Revision

The process of identity revision includes revisiting the shared past because memory is deeply connected to one’s perception of identity. Identities are formed not only by current incidents but also by recreating the collective’s history. There will likely be an instance of “calming down” after the collective identity has been completely rebuilt. In this novel, Henry follows the acceptance-based coping mechanism by accepting his wife Jill’s death. Henry revisits his family’s picnic spot, where he spent his family time and his memories with Jill and their children. This loss made him strive for healing and resilience. Where Helen wrote about the trauma that she underwent during the epidemic in a diary, passed down to future generations about the pandemic which resulted in collective history. Revisiting his collective memory of his family and the pandemic calms him down, reminding him of his dedication to safeguarding the globe from dangerous pandemics.

Conclusion

In terms of the pandemic, people do often face the reality of losing their lives and loved ones, anxiety and isolation. This reality forces us to move forward by following acceptance-based coping mechanisms to avoid post-traumatic stress disorder. This novel analyses the identification of trauma and its consequences faced by people during the pandemic. From the experiences of the main character, Henry Parsons and his family, it is clear that the pandemic tragedy affects people on a really profound level. In addition to the sorrow of losing his wife, Henry Parsons has had to overcome numerous obstacles to reconnect with his family after being placed under quarantine and having his travel privileges revoked. In the book *The End of October*, Parsons and his family's experience with the aftermath of the pandemic is examined, along with other people's battle to survive. It is also made abundantly evident how the pandemic trauma causes suffering, anxiety, and depression among the scientist people as well as the government officers.

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