

The World's Tsunami: Covid-19 and the Relief Aid of Literature

*Heba Sharobeem**

Introduction

Humanities and Pandemics

Covid-19, Coronavirus, epidemic or pandemic are new terms that have been thrust upon our lives for almost a year now, especially since March 11, 2020, when the World Health Organization (WHO) declared Covid-19 a pandemic. Consequently, for the first time in modern history (I refer mainly to the twentieth and twenty-first centuries) almost the whole world went through a lockdown. Interestingly on the same day in 2011, the world woke up to the terrible Japan earthquake of magnitude 9.0 which “spawned a series of highly destructive tsunami waves” (Pletcher 2021, n. pag.). This natural disaster not only caused the death of thousands of people, but also “instigated a major nuclear accident at a power station along the coast” of Honshu, Japan’s main island (Pletcher 2021, n. pag.). Similar deadly consequences befell us with the eruption of the Covid-19 earthquake and tsunami- like pandemic, which hit not only a certain region, but almost the whole world. Until the time of writing this paper, it led to the death of 2,887,247 people. According to the statistics of April 7, 2021: “Coronavirus Cases were as follows: Infected: 133,060,565, Deaths: 2,887,247, Recovered: 107,313,090” (Worldometers 2021, n. pag.). Prior to our twenty-first- century pandemic, we heard of diseases such as the Black Death, the Spanish Flu, Ebola Virus Disease (EVD) and others, but (with the exception of the Spanish Flu) their effect or areas of infection were relatively limited.

Not only has the Corona pandemic introduced new terms to our everyday language, but it has also triggered a great deal of debate regarding its nature and origin. What is Covid-19? A natural virus or a man- made one? A reality or an imaginary scarecrow? Who is behind it? How effective/ ineffective is the vaccine? Whether we find answers to these questions or not, the fact remains that short as its life span is, the Corona pandemic has crept slowly into our lives and left its strong imprint on our characters, feelings, behaviour, thoughts,

* Professor of Modern British and American Literature, Faculty of Education, Alexandria University. She is currently a member of the Egyptian Senate. *Cairo Studies in English* – 2021(2): 72-100. <https://cse.journals.ekb.eg/>
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dreams or rather nightmares. We are even praised for keeping social distance and for having no more human interaction! Most importantly, it has made us document and speak of many things in our world as pre and post the pandemic. Many even think that, to quote the great British-Japanese writer Kazuo Ishiguro, “there's no turning back the clock now” to our world and everyday life prior to Covid -19 (Ishiguro 1989, 239).

Until the moment of writing this paper, while people still have questions about the virus, its treatment protocol and the vaccine, *literature*, as a remedy, has been noted to have a successful and healing impact. In a world that has grown to be more dependent on technology, different academic institutes round the world have started to underrate the importance of humanities in general and literature, in particular, and many colleges started to decrease the number of literature courses, offering instead English language classes. However, in dealing with this unprecedented lockdown, literature has been a form of escapism or a refuge, teaching us how to deal with this pandemic through reading about imaginary pestilences or actual ones that happened in the past. Many publishing houses and literary magazines in Europe and the US commented on the surge of literary book sales since the outbreak of Covid -19; we read such titles by the BBC, *The Guardian* and World Economic Forum: “Book sales surge as readers seek escapism and education,” “Research finds reading books has surged in lockdown,” “Coronavirus escapism: book sales surge during lockdown.” (BBC 2020; Flood 2020; Charlton 2020) By the end of April 2020, it was noted that “In the UK, fiction sales climbed by a third” (Charlton 2020). Sales of plague novels like *The Plague* by the French novelist, Albert Camus and *Love in the Time of Cholera* by the Colombian novelist Gabriel García Márquez surged during lockdown. In an article dating back to March 2020, under the title of “Albert Camus novel *The Plague* leads surge of pestilence fiction,” the British publisher of the novel, Penguin Classics, “says it is struggling to keep up with orders, ‘we’ve gone from shipping quantities in the low hundreds every month to the mid thousands’” (Willsher 2020, n. pag.). As an example, the article mentions that in February 2019, 226 copies of *The Plague* were sold in the UK, but in March 2021, the number rose to “2,156 copies [...] including 1,504 in one week alone” (Willsher 2020, n. pag.).¹

In the Arab world, the situation is not the same because of different conditions, some of which have to do with the low percentage of readers in general due to certain elements such as “a high percentage of illiteracy [and] weakness of educational attainment” (Hanafy 2007, n. pag.). Another reason is the lack of studies and surveys regarding the reading habits or popular books during the pandemic. However, Bachar Chebaro, Secretary General of the Arab

Publishers Association, noted in a webinar held in July 2020 that book sales went down due to the closure of bookstores and the cancellation of regional and international book fairs; yet there has been a 30-35% surge of digital book sales. (Chebaro and Borghino 2020)

The renewed appeal of pandemic books in different parts of the world shows how literature has unified the peoples across the globe stressing the feelings they share, rather than what they differ and clash about. The unifying power and effect of literature is well described in the following quotation by Abhik Roy from an article published in the Statesman in September 2020:

As we are confined within the four walls of our homes under lockdown in the wake of Covid-19, literature helps break the barriers, connecting us across different historical periods and time zones with others who have experienced similar tragedies. More importantly, literature shows us that we have a lot in common with others who are from distant lands and different times, encouraging us to appreciate the fact that we are not the only ones who are dealing with the worldwide devastation wrought by the pandemic. (Roy 2020, n. pag.)

Epidemiological arts (including film and drama) in general and literature in particular have also interestingly predicted our current situation and portrayed the behaviour of people in such circumstances. Many literary works in world literature have imagined the outbreak of a deadly pandemic that could destroy almost all the human race, and even depicted a post-apocalyptic world. Others chronicled actual pestilences that took place in various parts of the world at different periods of time. In the aftermath of Covid-19, the internet was flooded with articles showing the role of pestilence in texts that go back to as early as Homer's *Iliad* and Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* until our modern time. "Such stories about pandemics have ... offered much in the way of catharsis, ways of processing strong emotion, and political commentary on how human beings respond to public health crises. Literature has a vital role to play in framing our responses to the COVID-19" (Haith 2020). In a Zoom webinar held in June 2020, the Lebanese writer Elias Khoury noted:

Literature changes, anticipates and enriches history. We have been going through a lot of history, drama and hardships lately. Human catastrophes were dealt with as a metaphor of life, but at this moment reality and its metaphor are mingling together...[Hence] it is now

time for literature to find a new approach, which is not using the metaphor of hardships to understand life, but to understand the catastrophe itself to understand the fragility of humanity. (Koury 2020)

Together with literature, other fields of humanities anticipated the panic-stricken and fear dominated world, created by Coronavirus. In his *Culture of Fear*, Frank Furedi, Professor of Sociology, makes it clear that when he first published his book in 1997, “I was mainly concerned with the way that society encouraged a panic-like reaction in relation to health, the environment, technology, new products and personal security” (Furedi 2002, xiv). He feared that “the most damaging consequence of this process is the way in which risk aversion influences interpersonal behaviour. When *the act of shaking hands becomes associated with the expectation of contracting an infection*, concerns about health become inextricably associated with human contact and a gesture of recognition. [...] [and] gradually a climate has been created where human relationships [...] are increasingly interpreted from the prism of risk taking” (xiv italics mine). Unfortunately, many of Furedi’s concerns have come true and the domain of personal relations has become subjected to the culture of risk and fear.

In addition to sociology, another field of humanities; literary criticism, is of pressing importance at the moment. The stories, theories and speculations by scientists, politicians and others regarding the origin and production of Coronavirus bring forth such issues as the conspiracy theory, the power structure and New World Order. The same applies to the ongoing debate regarding the vaccine, the competition among the great tycoons, Russia, China, the UK, and the US, as well as the role of the major pharmaceutical companies and corporations. All these issues pertain to literary criticism, especially the fields of Post-Colonialism, New Historicism, Cultural Studies, and others. Moreover, the fact that many of the so called, debatably, first world and developed countries were caught unprepared by the pandemic and failed to deal with it properly, unlike many of, again, the debatably called third world and developing countries, deconstructs many of the stereotypes of and binary opposition between rich/poor, superior/inferior, civilised/uncivilised nations and peoples. We watched and read about the devastating situation in some areas like Lombardy in Italy and New York City where hospitals received up to almost ten times more patients than usual. In the meantime, they suffered from shortage of medical equipment and supplies as well as PPE (personal protective equipment), leading to a high mortality rate among patients and medical staff members. Thus, this pandemic and its aftermath, especially when its grip on the world is loosened

(hopefully in the coming few months of 2021), could possibly conjure new topics and fields of study in literary criticism that can help us better understand the pandemic and its repercussions from a humane point of view. In addition, the tragic effect of the disease on our life (psychologically, socially and economically) as well as the unexpected and lonely deaths of many of our loved ones will find their way in trauma studies, a genre that has been growing stronger since it started in the 1990s. Once more I believe that in the future this field will offer us a great number of studies on the traumatic experiences of our Covid-stricken world, and possibly suggest ways of healing the scars it has created.

The Therapeutic Effect of Literature

This paper focuses on the therapeutic effect of literature and its role as a crisis-relief -aid through examining four texts of different genres; two of which chronicle the occurrence of an actual pestilence, Cholera, in Egypt and the catastrophes it brought about, and the other two imagine the outbreak of a deadly pandemic. In one novel it brings about the extinction of almost the whole human race and takes the world back to prehistoric time, and in the second it is man-made, and the novel ends with a warning of a global epidemic looming large on the horizon. All four texts appeal to our Covid-19 situation and prove the lasting power and impact of literature, regardless of time and place. The reader can identify with the characters' tragedies and relate to their feelings of loss, insecurity, fear and anxiety as well as their attempts to survive. We wonder with them about the absurdity of life, death and fate, and pose existential questions about them. The nature of human beings is exposed during these tough times and the reader comes face to face with the beastly as well as the humane sides of people. The first two texts, written in Arabic, are *Al-Ayyām* or *The Days* (originally published in 1929), the autobiography of the Egyptian writer and thinker Taha Hussein (1889-1973), and the second is "Cholera" (1947), a poem by the modernist Iraqi poet Nazek al-Malaika (1923-2003). The third text is *The Scarlet Plague* (1912), a post-apocalyptic novel written by the American novelist, journalist and activist Jack London (1876-1916). The last one is *About Birds We Talk* (2010), a novel by the Egyptian author, translator and professor of tropical diseases Ahmed Khaled Towfik (1962-2018), often regarded as the first Arab author to write fantasy, horror and science fiction.

The four works do not simply show the epidemic as it destroys human lives, but also depict feelings of panic and anxiety as the most dominant feelings, once more relating the settings and time of these texts to our twenty-first-century-pandemic world. In his *Culture of Fear*, Frank Furedi notes that in Western societies,

despite an unprecedented level of personal security, fear has become an expanding part of our life. Western societies are increasingly dominated by a culture of fear. The defining feature of this culture is the belief that humanity is confronted by powerful destructive forces that threaten our everyday existence. The line that used to delineate reality from science fiction has become increasingly blurred. [...] Some scientists have warned that a *global influenza is around the corner*. We are continually warned that, for the human race, 'time is running out' unless we do something about global warming. (Fureli 2002 vii-viii italics mine)

Fureli's remark, though centring mainly on western societies and coming after the 9/11 attack, hits the nail on the head in discussing an inherent fear, that of death and the destruction of the human race and its world. Diseases, pestilences, epidemics, whatever name we give them, bring this feeling to the fore, which the four discussed texts examine in different ways.

Taha Hussein's *The Days*

The Days was originally written in three parts, over different periods of time: the first part came out in 1929, chronicling Taha Hussein's childhood, the second in 1932, focusing on his life as *A Student at the Azhar* (the subtitle of the English translation) and the last one in 1967 *Mudhakkirāt* or memoirs, translated in English as *A Passage to France*. As evident from the titles, the three parts document his journey from his village in Upper Egypt, as a young child who lost his eyesight due to a disease and medical negligence, to Cairo where, as a young man, he joined Al-Azhar seminary, then the newly open Cairo University, and finally to France where he obtained a second doctorate at the Sorbonne and met the love of his life Suzanne Bresseau who would be his wife and life companion until his death, in October 1973, two weeks before his eighty fourth birthday. The part examined by this paper is Part One where, in Chapter 18, Hussein records the tragic events that befell his family, starting with the death of his little sister, at the age of four, from an unknown disease, followed by his older brother, at the age of eighteen, from Cholera. Two other family-member losses happened in-between.

However, the most important part of the chapter describes the outbreak of Cholera, in his village, and all over Egypt, showing how it led to the death of his intelligent, tender-hearted and good-looking brother. Hussein, or the lad as he refers to himself, notes: "At length came a terrible day, the like of which the

family had never known, and which stamped its life with a perpetual grief. It turned the hair of both parents white and caused the mother to wear black till the end of her days, and to lose all taste for pleasure” (Hussein 1997, 74). She would never laugh or smile even during a feast, and tears would be her companion: “This day was the 21st of August of the year 1902. [...] An epidemic of cholera descended upon Egypt and attacked the population like wildfire. It destroyed towns and villages, and wiped out whole families” (Hussein 1997, 74). This and other images of the epidemic and its tragic outcomes, gloomy and depressing as they are, are reminiscent of the Coronavirus pandemic situation despite the century and more separating the two periods of time. The novel portrays a similar lockdown, coloured by fear, anxiety, isolation of the sick and fearful speculation of who of the loved ones will be hit by this scary disease:

The village schools and town schools were closed and doctors and envoys of the Public Health Department were scattered throughout the land with their instruments and tents in which to isolate the sick. Souls were filled with anxiety and hearts with fears. Every family talked about what had befallen the other and waited for their own share of disaster. The lad’s mother was in a perpetual state of anxiety, asking herself a thousand times a day on which of her sons or daughters the calamity would fall. (Hussein 1997, 74)

Unfortunately, the mother’s fears came true when cholera/death chose the best of her children, described by Hussein as “the most intelligent, the most tender-hearted, the best natured, the most dutiful and considerate to his father and mother and the most companionable to his brothers and sisters” (74-75). It picked him at the prime of his life when he was at the threshold of a promising career, as he had just obtained the Baccalaureate and had been accepted for the School of Medicine in Cairo. Ironically, he contracted the disease when he volunteered to accompany the doctor of his town in his rounds, believing that this would be the best practice and preparation for his future profession. The disease ravished his body mercilessly and quickly. Having lost his eyesight, the young narrator, described his brother’s last hours through his other senses, mainly that of hearing. We read: “At midnight the whole house was quiet, and the occupants and animals alike were deep in slumber. Suddenly a strange cry rang through the still air and woke everybody up” (75). It comes from his older brother who is trying to vomit quietly, but his parents and siblings “heard the retching and were alarmed by it” (76). This was a clear sign that “the plague had found its way into the house” and picked its victim (76). The ensuing events are

heart rendering and so is the reaction of both parents. The father, though calm and serene, his voice revealed “that his heart was broken,” while the mother is “terror-stricken” (76). The following morning was painfully described as “such a morning as they had never known the like. A dark, silent morning in which there was something alarming and terrifying” (76-77).

The whole scene is reminiscent of the current Covid-19 situation; with people watching, in pain, their loved ones wither away, and wondering at the absurdity of death choosing the best and the young and impatient of stealing their souls without proper goodbyes. In this autobiography, we know that the brother knew very well his fate and his only desire was to see his elderly uncle and older brother. However, “How cruel is Fate!” for the uncle arrived an hour after his death when his body is being taken away for burial. As for the scene of his death, it is one of the most moving in the whole text: “What a terrible hour it was, that third hour of Thursday the 21st of August 1902! The doctor left the room. [...] the young man was at his last gasp. [...] [He] was writhing on the bed. He stood up, then threw himself down, then sat up” (77). He remained in this restless situation until he finally threw himself on the bed and could not move anymore; he “just uttered groans which occasionally died down, and the sounds gradually died away” (77). In the meantime, our narrator or “our lad [...] sat alone in a corner of the room, silent, downcast, bewildered, with grief simply tearing at his heart. [...] The lad will forget all else before he forgets the last groan which the young man [his dying brother] uttered, a thin, weak, long-drawn-out groan. Then he was silent” (77). He records his mother’s reaction in the same compact, strong and heart-breaking way: “Hardly had she stood up before she fell down, or would have done, had not the two men [their neighbours] supported her. Then she pulled herself together and went out of the room with downcast eyes. [...] and then she poured forth from her bosom a cry that the lad never recalls without his heart being rent by it” (78).

The lad, who was always forgotten, remembers being dragged out of the corner where he was sitting and then thrown down somewhere among people. This traumatic situation would leave its imprint on his life for a long time. He recalls “From that day deep grief settled on the household and all appearance of pleasure or rejoicing, no matter what the occasion, had to be avoided by all both old and young” (78). From that day on, the parents do not cease to remember their son at meals while shedding tears, and every now and then they would visit his grave though, in the past, they used to criticise those who visited the dead. As for the lad, his “outlook on life was completely changed” (78). He would go to great lengths to perform many religious duties (alms-giving, fasting, earnest praying, recitation of the Quran, and others) to take away some of his dead

brother's sins; for he had neglected the performance of these duties. For example, he would "pray the five daily prayers twice every day, once for himself and once for his brother," and the same with fasting. Following this tragic incident, he used to "spend the dark hours of a whole night, either thinking about his brother or reciting Surat-al- Ikhlas (The Chapter of Sincerity) thousands of times, all of which he would dedicate to his brother" (Hussein 1997, 79). He would also start to write poetry reflecting his deep pain and grief at the loss of his brother (79). Besides, he admits experiencing "terrifying dreams, the illness of his brother being depicted for him every night" (79). The passing away of his brother seems to be one of the experiences that would leave its lasting imprint on his character and life. He recalls going through these feelings for years until he joined Al-Azhar, and even after "the youth became a man" and throughout his various life stages, "he remains as he was as regards his loyalty to this brother. He remembers him and sees him in his dreams once a week at the very least" (79- 80).

Nazek Al-Malaik's "Cholera"

If Hussein's *Days* recalls a personal epidemic experience that took place in 1902, "Cholera," by Nazek Al-Maliaka, a pioneer of the free verse movement in Arabic poetry, reflects on the same disease from afar; and the year is 1947. It is one of her well-known and notable works and was hailed by critics at the time as a revolutionary poem that breaks away from the traditional rhyming form of Arabic poetry. The poem is evoked by the sad news of the epidemic that erupted once more in Egypt and swept across the country. On hearing of the disease's rising death toll in Egypt, Al-Malaika was deeply moved and put pen to paper. She felt sorry for the death of many, some of whom, the poem shows, were buried without proper mourning or funerals. The poem is not a chronicle of the disease, but rather of its devastating effect as it describes the painful and sad procession of the horse carriages, carrying the dead to their burial places. In her autobiography, she speaks of the poem's creation: "Within one hour I had finished the poem and ran down to my sister Ihssan's house. I told her I had written a poem that was very strange in form and that it would cause controversy. As soon as Ihssan read the poem she became very supportive. But my mother received it coldly and asked me, 'What kind of rhyme is this? It lacks musicality'" (qtd in Stevens 2007/2008). Her father's reaction was similar to her mother's; he was critical of the poem, mocked it and predicted its failure. However, she believed in her work, stating simply, "[s]ay whatever you wish to say. I am confident that my poem will change the map of Arab poetry" (qtd in Stevens 2007/2008). And it did.

She starts the poem at “the stillness of the night” while listening “to the echoing wails/ rising above the silence in the dark” (Al-Maliaka 2015, lines 1-3).² The poem has plenty of images of overflowing grief, pain bursting like fire in people’s hearts, and sorrow in their houses. The poet employs onomatopoeia, reflecting the sounds of grief, mourning, wailing as well as the footsteps of the passers-by and the mourning processions. Grief is everywhere; even the River Nile is extremely sad due to what death has done. The poem’s refrain is “death death death” (lines 12, 26, 38, 51) which brings to mind the famous quotation from Daniel Defoe’s *A Journal of the Plague Year*: “A woman gave three frightful screeches, and then cried, ‘Oh! death, death, death!’” but the street was still empty “For people had no curiosity now in any case.” (Defoe 1876, 107) The rest of Al-Maliaka’s poem portrays the cruelty of Cholera. She loses count of the number of the dead, “ten, twenty, no [...] countless” (2015, lines 16, 17) and gives a pessimistic image of hopelessness with “no tomorrow” (line 20). Cholera is depicted as “the vengeance of death” (line 30), as an envious and crazy monster rising from a long sleep to devour the people with its claws, and to make the children orphans. It came down to the valley which was once filled with joy and laughter to leave behind grief, silence and pain. It did not spare the life of the muezzin or the Sheikh of the mosque, which makes her wonder who will eulogize and pray over the dead. Ironically and painfully, the dawn, which suggests hope and new beginnings, is the time where the death processions take place. She ends the poem in a tone of sympathy: “O Egypt, my heart is torn by the ravages of death” (line 51).

Interestingly, though living in Iraq at the time of this catastrophe, Al-Malaika succeeds in vividly reflecting the heart-breaking and depressing atmosphere of Cholera and the hovering presence of the ghost of death. Written with very few punctuation marks, one breathlessly reads the poem, at one grip, as if sharing in drinking the cup of death. The poem is compact, and sums up, in relatively few lines what can be told in pages, hence creating a strong impact on the reader. Its power also lies in its timelessness; the grim image painted by Al-Maliaka echoes, conjures and evokes the tragic scenes we saw, especially at the beginning of the outbreak of the Coronavirus pandemic, in Italy, where the death toll was the highest in Europe. We saw the coffins, the tens of people buried hurriedly or cremated without proper funerals; we watched and heard the grief of those who lost their loved ones without proper goodbyes. Hence, such texts bond humanity, especially in times of disaster, regardless of time and place. They also manage to address one’s hidden fear of death, diseases and the extinction of the human race.

Jack London's *The Scarlet Plague*

These fearful feelings are no better represented than in Jack London's post-apocalyptic novel, *The Scarlet Plague* in which he imagines the outbreak of a pestilence that hits the US and the world in 2013, that is a hundred years ahead of his time, since the novel was published in 1912. On seeing a coin dating back to 2012, the main protagonist, an 87-year-old man named Granser, mentions that this pestilence occurred sixty years ago: "It was in the summer of 2013 that the Plague came," (London 1912, 16) which makes the year of the novel 2073. The whole text is a recollection of the old days, narrated by Granser to his grandchildren. He speaks of himself as "the last man who was alive in the days of the plague and who knows the wonders of that far-off time" (38). He was then known as James Howard Smith, Professor of English Literature at the University of California, Berkeley.

From the beginning, the novel portrays a desolate and ravaged world of which the forest is the dominant landmark; remnants of human civilization are only visible in the remains of a railway. The whole setting is evocative of prehistoric time and the man hunter: "We, who mastered the planet – its earth, and sea, and sky – and who were as very gods, now live in primitive savagery along the water courses of this California country. [...] we fell from high culture to primitive conditions. [...] the world fell apart, absolutely, irretrievably. Ten thousand years of culture and civilization passed in the twinkling of an eye, 'lapsed like foam'" (London 1912, 10, 21). This is evident in Granser's hands which, before the pestilence, were soft, "because [...] [he] did no work with them, and [...] [his] body was clean all over and dressed in the softest garments" (12). However, at the time of the novel, he has turned into a dirty old man who has not seen soap for the last 60 years of his life and is dressed in goat skin like his twelve-year-old- grandson, Edwin who is carrying on his back a "quiverful of arrows," a bow and a hunting knife hanging from a sheath. Like the prehistoric man, the boy's senses of sight and hearing are acute to help him adjust to their wildlife. Our protagonist does not even refer to the few human beings left as families, but as tribes, "I am Granser, a tired old man. I belong to the tribe of Santa Rosans. I married into that tribe. My sons and daughters married into the Chauffeurs, the Sacramentos, and the Palo-Altos" (14).

His 2073 home is set in Cliff House near San Francisco, a place where, in the old days, people used to go for a nice outing, but now it is primeval wilderness. They raise goats, keep a 'wolfish-looking dog,' and can easily hear the sound of the nearby sea lions. We understand that even the animals' features, attitude and temperament have changed after the plague; they have become more savage, and the tamed ones, such as dogs, started attacking each other until they ended up

being ‘wolfish looking.’ Granser, and his grandchildren sit on the sand and eat directly from the coals. For two generations, their food has been limited to whatever they hunt or fish. Their primitive life is not only evident in their clothes and lifestyle, but also in their language. Granser’s is different from that of Edwin and the rest of his grandchildren, Hoo Hoo and Harelip (notice their names). “They spoke in monosyllables and short jerky sentences that was more a gibberish than a language” (9). They received no education and hence know nothing about their grandfather’s previous profession or any of the scientific terms he uses while narrating the story of the epidemic. Their play is savage, extracting teeth from the skeletons they found buried, and bursting into loud laughter when their grandfather burnt his mouth with hot muscles; hence described as “true savages, possessing only the cruel humor of the savage” (5).

As in the case of *The Days*, by Taha Hussein, the reader learns how the catastrophe of the plague befell the US, sweeping across the country and almost depopulating it. For, in 2013, San Francisco populated 4 million people; yet after the pestilence, it ended up with forty. This “strange disease [...] had broken out in New York,” then they heard of it in Chicago and London which “had been secretly fighting the plague for two weeks and censoring the news despatches – that is, not permitting the word to go forth to the rest of the world that London had the plague” (London 1912, 16). This lack of transparency is, to some extent, similar to the beginning of our Covid-19 situation; the early news began to surf in December 2019, but no one knew exactly what was happening. Then speculations started and people were wondering whether it was an epidemic or pandemic until everyone was finally pushed into a lockdown in March, 2020 when almost the whole world was hit by the disease.

Hence, similar to the plague in London’s novel, we were all taken by surprise, an unhappy one. In the novel, we see the people, like us, leading a normal life until this unknown infection struck them. When they first heard about it, they could not realize the magnitude of its effect. Besides, they had, according to Granser, great trust in science. Alas, it did not help them: “It looked serious, but we in California, like everywhere else, were not alarmed. We were sure that the bacteriologists would find a way to overcome this new germ, just as they had overcome other germs in the past. But the trouble was the astonishing quickness with which this germ destroyed human beings, and the fact that it inevitably killed any human body it entered” (London 1912, 16). Similarly, in our twenty-first century world (the same time period of London’s novel), we believed in our scientific and technological advancement, so we never thought that this unseen virus that could be simply killed by washing our hands, would be such a life threat and turn our world upside down.

London's novel also shows us that pestilences are not new to the human race, and he gives a quick survey of the diseases that hit different parts of the world such as the Black Plague that swept across Europe many times, the bubonic plague, the sleeping sickness in Africa, Pellagra, Asian Flu and the hookworm. Through Granser, he mentions that humans are constantly threatened by a new deadly virus, and as they grow in number and start to live "closely together in great cities and civilizations, new diseases arose, new kinds of germs entered their bodies" (1912, 14). This is his justification for the death of "countless millions and billions of human beings" and for the uncontrollable pestilence which he imagined in the 2013 setting of his novel. It is so deadly that once its first signs appear on someone, he or she "would be dead in an hour. Some lasted for several hours. Many died within ten or fifteen minutes" (16) Through Granser, he gives a graphic and scary description of how "the Scarlet Death slew" (22) and explains how it spread everywhere:

Then came the scarlet rash, spreading like wildfire over the face and body. Most persons never noticed the increase in heat and heart-beat, and the first they knew was when the scarlet rash came out. Usually, they had convulsions at the time of the appearance of the rash. But these convulsions did not last long and were not very severe. [...] The heels became numb first, then the legs, and hips, and when the numbness reached as high as his heart he died. They did not rave or sleep. Their minds always remained cool and calm up to the moment their heart numbed and stopped. And another strange thing was the rapidity of decomposition. No sooner was a person dead than the body seemed to fall to pieces, to fly apart, to melt away even as you looked at it. That was one of the reasons the plague spread so rapidly. All the billions of germs in a corpse were so immediately released. (London 1912, 17)

Like the lad in *The Days*, London's protagonist watches helplessly his brother dying, in two hours. Such a scene brings to mind the pain and trauma of those seeing their loved ones consumed by Covid-19 and feeling desperate for their inability to help them. Prior to that, Granser witnessed the death of one of the early victims who was his student, a beautiful, healthy and wealthy young woman. Apart from these two incidents and unlike Hussein's autobiography which focuses on a personal experience, London's novel imagines a general bleak picture of a disease that almost brings about the end of the world. In the two texts, the illness spreads like wildfire and ravishes people's bodies

mercilessly and quickly. Besides, similar to Al-Malaika's poem where "Everywhere lies a corpse, mourned," Granser describes how in three days, people were dying "like flies;" and their un-mourned corpses lay everywhere (London 1912, 18). He gives us a scary post-apocalyptic scene:

The sights in the streets were terrible. One stumbled on bodies everywhere. Some were not yet dead. And even as you looked, you saw men sink down with the death fastened upon them. There were numerous fires burning in Berkeley, while Oakland and San Francisco were apparently being swept by vast conflagrations. The smoke of the burning filled the heavens, so that the midday was as a gloomy twilight.[...] Truly, my grandsons, it was like the last days of the end of the world. [...] A man and a woman lay back dead in the seats, and on the pavement near it were two more women and a child. Strange and terrible sights there were on every hand. People slipped by silently, furtively, like ghosts – white-faced women carrying infants in their arms; fathers leading children by the hand; singly, and in couples, and in families – all fleeing out of the city of death. Some carried supplies of food, others blankets and valuables, and there were many who carried nothing. (22)

Other scenes of terror and bloodshed remain vivid in his memory for sixty years. So like the lad in Hussein's *The Days*, who is always haunted by the traumatic experience of his brother's untimely death, Granser never forgets the second night of the plague calamity: "I can never forget it. [...] I watched the passing of all man's glorious works. So terrible were the local conflagrations that all the sky was lighted up. [...] San Francisco spouted smoke and fire from a score of vast conflagrations that were like so many active volcanoes" (London 1912, 25). More painful was his realization that his old world was falling apart forever; this is evident when he expresses his feelings while going through the empty and deserted halls of the university, feeling dead:

I looked upon myself as already dead. It was not that, but a feeling of awful depression that impressed me. Everything had stopped. It was like the end of the world to me – my world. I had been born within sight and sound of the university. It had been my predestined career. My father had been a professor there before me, and his father before him. For a century and a half had this university, like a splendid machine, been running steadily on. And now, in an instant,

it had stopped. It was like seeing the sacred flame die down on some thrice-sacred altar. I was shocked, unutterably shocked. (London 1912, 19)

Granser's feelings speak for those of thousands, if not millions, of people whose worlds crumbled down after Covid -19. Similar stories spread through various means; articles, blogs, webinars and others. Big cities like New York, Paris and Birmingham turned into ghost cities, during the lockdown, becoming lifeless and deserted.

Reading this particular passage, I was personally moved; for London voiced the same feelings I experienced when one day I went to my work institution during the lockdown. Unlike his protagonist, I do not have family generations working in my college, but I have been teaching there for twenty-eight years and never imagined that there would come a day when it would be so deserted, and most importantly that I would feel insecure out of fear of contagion.

London does not only imagine a catastrophe and its traumatic aftermath, but also takes it as a springboard to tackle certain themes, to reveal the fragility of our humanity, expose its good and bad sides as well as give a social and political critique of his capitalist society. An important theme is the inevitability of death. The sudden outbreak of the pestilence was followed by what he calls "the panic outrush for the country," which ironically led to the wide spread of the disease. Speaking of the city exodus, he remarks that the first to flee were the rich, "in their private motor-cars and dirigibles," or "airships" (London 1912, 20). They thought that they would be immune from the plague, but some carried it to such far places as Hawaii (yet, it was already there), and others despite all security measures failed to protect themselves and their families. A clear example is evident in the story of a wealthy woman, Vesta, whose husband, John Van Warden, a billionaire, built and secured a vast summer palace, surrounded by a park of a thousand acres. With the outbreak of the plague, Van Warden sent her there:

Armed guards patrolled the boundaries of the park, and nothing entered in the way of provisions or even mail matter that was not first fumigated. And yet did the plague enter, killing the guards at their posts, the servants at their tasks, sweeping away the whole army of retainers—or, at least, all of them who did not flee to die elsewhere. So it was that Vesta found herself the sole living person in the palace that had become a charnel house. (33)

This brings to mind Edgar Allen Poe's gothic short story "The Masque of the Red Death," where an unnamed country is hit by a pestilence (similar to London's plague) that almost depopulates it. Its ruler, ironically called Prince Prospero, instead of helping his people, runs for his life with the elite to his well-guarded castle only to be invaded by death that consumes them all. This is also what happened to those who avoided Granser when they learned that he had witnessed the first death of the plague; ironically they were smitten by the pestilence and he was the only one to survive his family and friends. The theme of the inevitability of death or, to quote the last sentence in Poe's story, "Decay and the Red Death held illimitable dominion over all" has strongly thrust itself upon us with the outbreak of the Corona pandemic which did not spare the life of the rich and the poor, the powerful and the weak, the high and the low (Poe 2020, n. pag.). In fact, at the beginning of the outbreak of Covid -19, the situation was even worse in many advanced and rich countries where the disease hit a great number of the privileged such as prime ministers, ministers, princes, businessmen, movie stars and others.

London's imagined plague was also his means of bringing us face to face with the ugly side of our human nature. This was painfully exposed in "the great mass of the population," who left the city "on foot, [...] themselves starving and pillaging the farmers and all the towns and villages on the way" (London 1912, 20). Besides, those remaining in the city, estimated to be "several hundred thousand [...] had gone mad from fear and drink," and "...mobs of the hungry poor were pillaging the stores and warehouses. Murder and robbery and drunkenness were everywhere" (20). Thus, "the panic outrush for the country" was accompanied by chaos, looting, killing and an unbelievable loss of self-control aggravated by the death of the mayor and a huge number of policemen and the subsequent absence of law, making this part of the text the most terrifying. Through this horrible depiction of people losing their humanity and killing for the sake of killing, London, an activist and ardent believer in Socialism, presents a critique of the capitalist system and its ensuing social injustice evident in the difference between what we can regard as the Bourgeoisie and the proletariat. He refers to the latter as "our food-getters" who were ironically "called freemen," but he admits:

This was a joke. We of the ruling classes owned all the land, all the machines, everything. These food-getters were our slaves. We took almost all the food they got, and left them a little so that they might eat, and work, and get us more food. [...] Any food-getter who would not get food for us, him we punished or compelled to starve to death.

And very few did that. They preferred to get food for us, and make clothes for us. [...] (12)

His primitive grandsons are shocked at this abuse, and one of them, Hare-Lip, makes it clear that if he ever goes into the forest to get food for himself, he will kill whoever tries to take it away from him.

Hence, London in *The Scarlet Plague* lays the blame of this savagery on the sharp discrepancy between the rich, who had an affluent life and their “[f]ood [...] was abundant,” and the hungry poor living in ghettos and slums: “In the midst of our civilization, down in our slums and labor-ghettos, we had bred a race of barbarians, of savages; and now, in the time of our calamity, they turned upon us like the wild beasts they were and destroyed us. And they destroyed themselves as well. [...] these low creatures gave rein to their bestiality and fought and drank and died” (London 1912, 23 &25). Thus, their reaction was representative of the violent revenge of the Proletariat. Another example of this revenge is evident in the story of Vesta, the arrogant aristocrat who ended up marrying the Chauffeur who humiliated and abused her in many ways and finally killed her. Interestingly, London’s critique still applies to our world today and explains, for example, the surge in violent crimes in the US after the loosening of the Corona lockdown, especially in areas inhabited by the unprivileged African Americans. In an article published in October 2020, entitled, “Crime rose unevenly when stay-at-home orders lifted: The racial disparity is the widest in years” we learn from “A Washington Post analysis of 27 cities” in the US that:

In majority-Black neighborhoods, the rate of violence remained relatively steady while stay-at-home orders were in effect, but rose dramatically after orders were lifted, peaking at 133 crimes per 100,000 residents in July, the highest level in the past three years. [...] The crimes analyzed include homicide, sexual assault and rape, robbery, aggravated assault, arson, burglary, theft, auto theft and thefts from vehicles. (Harden 2020)

In that sense, London’s plague text succeeds in predicting the raging anger and frustration of the less privileged, which can explode when the time comes. Moreover, through these violent scenes humanity is exposed at its best and worst. We see, unfortunately, a few acts of heroism in comparison with the evil that reigns after the plague. This is best expressed by Kim Willsher in his remark on Camus’ *Plague*: “There are acts of heroism and acts of shame; there are those who think only of themselves, and those who are engaged for the greater good.

The human condition is absurd and precarious” (Willsher 2020, n. pag.). The acts of nobility are carried out by some of Granser’s acquaintances, friends, colleagues or students, who formed a group that sought shelter in the university chemistry building. One member immediately withdraws once he starts to feel the plague killing him. When his wife tries to follow him, they take her away and he asks her to stay away. In another instant, a man insists on staying with his dying wife, “soothing her last moments” (London 1912, 24). Moreover, two men volunteered to leave their shelter and remove the corpses falling near the building, which meant self - sacrifice; for, having performed the task, they were not permitted to enter the building:

They bade good-bye to us and went forth. They were heroes. They gave up their lives that four hundred others might live. After they had performed their work, they stood for a moment, at a distance, looking at us wistfully. Then they waved their hands in farewell and went away slowly across the campus toward the burning city. It was no time for weak-kneed, sentimental policies. It was heartrending to send away the sick or isolate them; yet no time for emotion. (26)

Other heroic figures are the scientists who literary and metaphorically killed themselves in an attempt to find a “serum” or what is now called vaccine. He speaks in detail about their sacrifice which reminds the reader of the medical staff’s efforts during the Covid 19 pandemic, who are now referred to as the white army: “They were killed in their laboratories even as they studied the germ of the Scarlet Death. They were heroes. As fast as they perished, others stepped forth and took their places. It was in London that they first isolated it. The news was telegraphed everywhere. Trask was the name of the man who succeeded in this, but within thirty hours he was dead” (London 1912, 17). What befell America was repeated in Europe, and the last thing they heard of Europe was from Berlin where a bacteriologist named Hoffmeyer had discovered the serum for the plague. However, the discovery was too late; otherwise, explorers from Europe would have come looking for any survivors in America. Hence, Granser believes that “at the best, some several score may have survived the Scarlet Death on that whole continent” (20). There were other unknown heroes such as the wireless operator: “He was a hero, that man who staid by his post—an obscure newspaperman, most likely” (20).

However, most of the events of the novel depict an uncontrolled feeling of fear accompanied by an unexpected meanness and bestiality carried out by different sects of the society. Granser confesses that the plague made him think

of his own safety alone. For example, a man comes to his doorsteps, but realizing he has the plague, he left him dying for half an hour while hearing his groans. In addition, he admits not helping a grocery man when attacked by looters: “The time for such acts had already passed. Civilization was crumbling, and it was each for himself” (23). Similarly he watched a poet whose work he admired being robbed and shot to death; yet did not run to his help. When he tried to help the wife, a pistol was directed at him so he ran away. “From somewhere in that murk came a woman's voice calling shrilly for help. But I did not go to her. A man's heart turned to iron amid such scenes, and one heard all too many appeals for help” (23). He gives other examples of people who, not only ignored the pleas and cries of the dying like him, but also chose to be extremely selfish. A striking example was one of the professors who took shelter with him at the university; though wounded, he stole the only car they had with the provisions and ran away with his sister and mother only to be found dead a few days later.

Through these examples, London reveals the hidden primitive instinct for survival, making people do, whatever it takes, to live. He also criticizes the modern human of the early twentieth and twenty- first century, who, despite the technological advances, he/she created, still carries within a beastly creature waiting to be released. His critique can be applied to our time and brings to mind people's fear of the Covid pandemic, making some refuse even to bury the dead or to come near an infected person or family. Through such incidents and attitudes as well as the unexplained death of many good people versus the survival of evil ones, London, through his mouthpiece Granser, poses existential questions about life, death and poetic justice. For example, when seeing people killing and getting killed, he remarks: “And after all, what did it matter? Everybody died anyway, the good and the bad, the efficient and the weaklings, those that loved to live and those that scorned to live. They passed. Everything passed” (London 1912, 23, 25).

Another example is clear in one of the few survivors, the Chauffeur, a mean person in the true sense of the word. Our protagonist wonders why “a brute is saved while billions who are much better are killed. Why did he live?” (33) The absurdity of death is more exposed in the murder of the innocent, good hearted Dombey, a young undergraduate who accompanied him in a mission to get a car from a professor's house. If the lad in *The Days* questions the untimely death of his most intelligent and considerate brother at the prime of his age, Granser, too, is astounded at the killing of this young man by, what he calls, a “miscreant [...] [who] was very drunk [...] [and] was altogether the most nauseating specimen of degradation and filth I had ever encountered” (London 1912, 27). Granser's first instinct was to shoot this man, but he did not, an act which he kept regretting

until the time of telling the story to his grandsons. The man “suddenly drew a pistol and shot Dombey through the head. The next instant I shot him. But it was too late. Dombey expired without a groan, immediately. I doubt if he even knew what had happened to him” (27-28). Once more Granser’s questions echo similar questions related to the Corona pandemic sweeping across the world. People started wondering why God would allow such a disaster to happen; they began to question poetic justice: why death chooses the best and the young, why one should work and toil when one could lose it all in a twinkle of an eye, and other unanswered questions.

Granser ends his story of the plague with a prediction of the rising of another civilization that will go through the same phases of the previous one; abuse the majority of people until it crumbles down: “The gunpowder will come. Nothing can stop it – the same old story over and over. Man will increase, and men will fight. The gunpowder will enable men to kill millions of men, and in this way only, by fire and blood, will a new civilization, in some remote day, be evolved. [...] Just as the old civilization passed, so will the new” (40). In this new civilization, we will still have what he classifies as “the eternal types – the priest, the soldier, and the king,” referring to the spiritual, military and ruling/ executive powers practised by the privileged (40). But “the rest will toil and suffer sore while on their bleeding carcasses is reared again, and yet again, without end, the amazing beauty and surpassing wonder of the civilized state” (40). He even expects the coming generation to repeat the story of colonization and possibly invade other nations as the Europeans did to the Native Americans: “we may expect our descendants to start across the Sierras, oozing slowly along, generation by generation, over the great continent to the colonization of the East – a new Aryan drift around the world” (38).

But in addition to gunpowder and murder, there will always be the threat of a new virus, causing an uncontrollable disease and destroying the human race. London imagines a scientist whom he names Soldervetzsky, and who, “as early as 1929, told the bacteriologists that they had no guaranty against some new disease, a thousand times more deadly than any they knew, arising and killing by the hundreds of millions and even by the billion. You see, *the micro-organic world remained a mystery to the end*. They knew there was such a world, and that, from time-to-time, armies of new germs emerged from it to kill men” (15 italics mine). This prediction echoes Frank Furedi’s remark in the early 21st century, that scientists “have warned us that a global influenza is around the corner” (Furedi 2002, viii). Thus, in *The Scarlet Plague*, one of the early modern post-apocalyptic novels, London “investigated many traditional issues of the literary topos of plague, ranging from a reflection on morality and justice to the

contagion and clinical features of the disease. In particular [...] [he] focused his attention on behavioral responses to a pandemic, showing the emergence of fear, irrationality, and selfishness in a previously civilized and modern society” (Riva 2014). In all of these issues, he manages to address and appeal to our Covid- 19 world.

Ahmed Khaid Towfik’s *About Birds We Talk*

If London’s text ends with the circle of civilization and anticipates another disease to put an end to the world, Ahmed Khalid Towfik’s *About Birds We Talk* discusses this issue, but lays the blame on scientists, pharmaceutical corporations as well as lay people who abuse the environment or lack awareness. According to Towfik, everyone is responsible for creating such deadly viruses. The novel, which is “narrated in the 40th issue of the “Safari Series,” discusses “a mysterious chicken-linked disease” (Abdallah 2020, n. pag.). The reader is first introduced to Alaa Abdel Azim, a young Egyptian physician who has lived for some time in South Africa, then moves to Angawanderi³ in Cameroon, located at its borders with Nigeria. He works there in a unit called, Safari, which is not a place, “as the title suggests, for hunting beasts, but for hunting diseases in the Black Continent” (Towfik 2010, 4).⁴ Safari lives on financial support from different sources as it is a non -profit organization that started in Kenya as a project initiated by an Austrian Baron in 1957. What makes this unit special is a team called H, which is made up of the best multinational scientists in different fields; Alaa joins this team later in the novel. This team of scientists, studies unknown epidemics in the field of Tropical Medicine, such as Nakalanga and Kafamugulu. The former is a real disease⁵; for the author, Towfik, was a professor of Tropical Medicine; and in the introduction, his narrator mentions that this story is “a strange mixture of medicine, metaphysics, horror, emotions and politics” (5). The text is the report of a journalist called Thomas Kindered who works in a scientific journal called *Advances*.

The novel is narrated through this report and through his interviews with some characters, such as a young Tunisian gynaecologist, Basam Bu Ghatas, who recollects the story of a strange disease that struck him. It started when he suddenly fainted while helping a woman in labour. He began to have a fever and tremble so strongly that his Egyptian friend, Alaa thought that he had been infected with Malaria or any of the common diseases in the area. The next thing was starting to be breathless, which is similar to our Corona- virus- symptoms. He even notes: “the air has indeed become so precious,” a common remark by Covid-19 patients (Towfik 2010, 23). Bu Ghatas’ condition deteriorated so rapidly that he eventually fell into what is known as “coma vigil,” and was put

on a ventilator; however, he miraculously survived his unknown disease. Prior to his sickness, he had eaten chicken; that he had bought from a Cameroonian merchant at the local market. Before buying this, he witnessed the death of a chicken whose bottom was bleeding.

A second interviewed character is Arthur Shelby, a distinguished American professor of Tropical Medicine, who examined Bu Ghatas, only to discover that he had atypical or unusual pneumonia. It was accompanied by flu-like symptoms, which made him suspect some sort of viral infection. So, he ordered that he immediately be transferred to the ICU. Unlike Jack London, who simply gives a graphic description of how the infected person deteriorates and dies, Ahmed Khaled Towfik, based on his knowledge and expertise, as a Tropical Medicine professor, gives his reader a rather detailed medical analysis and discussion of this imagined disease, relates it to other actual viruses and epidemics and mentions types of medication. Once more, this unknown virus can be compared to the Corona pandemic in that “You deal with the patient as a normal influenza case, and then, all of a sudden, he slips away from your hand in such unprecedented speed” (Towfik 2010, 28). Shelby even predicted that a certain epidemic would occur and new cases would appear. He was right; the following day, two more cases came to the hospital. In three days, there were three cases with the same flu symptoms and quick deterioration; one of them died. Team H started to link this new epidemic to SARS (severe acute respiratory syndrome)⁶ thinking that it might be another outbreak of that virus.

A common thing among all the infected cases is their link with chicken and being at the market; two patients sell chicken, and one works in a chicken farm. The team is surprised as chicken Influenza is not common in the hot weather of Africa, and they suggest that diseases related to pigs and emigrated birds mainly start in Southeast Asia. As is the case in London’s novel, there is lack of transparency. Scared to lose their business, some of the merchants deny having sick chicken. Their fear and the team’s concern about this new virus are echoed in a sentence repeated over and over in the novel, as some sort of refrain, “Be scared, be very scared” (Towfik 2010, 17, 27, 38). The locals’ fears come true; for in an attempt to contain the disease, Team H suggests the urgency of contacting the health ministry and executing the chicken in the area. Discovering a farm where many chickens died and where many workers were infected, orders were given to execute all the chickens in it and within a one-kilometer sphere. This is followed by a scene reminiscent of our Corona infected world, where many people across the globe have lost their jobs and livelihood. The farm owner says in a devastated and frustrated tone, “You have burnt my chicken, are you

here to burn me too? [...] Anyway it won't make a difference. I am destitute and will have to start afresh" (Towfik 2010, 73).

Examining samples from human patients and sick chickens revealed that the virus behind the illness was H1N1. This brings to the fore the virologists' "nightmare," which is the possible re-occurrence of the Spanish Flu of 1918, which Towfik mentions, caused the death of 30 million people, a number that exceeds the number of the victims of World War I. As an example of its deadly effect, the novel refers to the real story of the Alaskan village Brevig, which was totally wiped out by the flu. In an attempt to carry out a genetic examination of its virus, Towfik mentions the real story of extracting tissues from the body of one of the village victims; she had been buried under the ice for 60 years. Once more and similar to London and Furedi, Towfik speaks about the virologists' fear of a deadly influenza epidemic that will sweep across the world every now and then. He believes that we have had a hundred- year- truce, since the 1918 Spanish flu, but virologists believe that a new pandemic is looming on the horizon. This is due to the fact that avian influenza or bird flu viruses mutate every now and then, changing their features and symptoms, and "awaiting the moment when they can infect and attack humans" (Towfik 2010, 54).

To further explain this hypothesis, Towfik, through a notable scientist, Jeffrey Townberger, whom he refers to in a footnote as a real character giving accurate scientific explanation, gives a detailed discussion of Influenza virus mutation. Scientifically speaking, "Viruses are continuously changing as a result of genetic selection. They undergo subtle genetic changes through mutation and major genetic changes through recombination. Mutation occurs when an error is incorporated in the viral genome. Recombination occurs when coinfecting viruses exchange genetic information, creating a novel virus" (Fleischmann 1996). The novel virus in Towfik's text is hybrid, coming from both pigs and birds, and he predicts that it will originate in and spread from Asia, particularly China. His theory of this hybrid virus and its viral genetics and mutation is what makes this novel reflect and address Covid- 19 fears and speculations; for with every wave, theories appear about corona virus mutation. Townberger/Towfik suggests that birds' viruses do not tend to attack human beings, but pigs' too, which can be infected by birds' viruses. Besides, breathing the virus from the residues of the chicken, he hypothesizes the occurrence of subtle genetic changes inside the pigs, through recombination when their coinfecting viruses and the chickens' exchange genetic information, creating a novel virus that becomes ready to infect human beings. It turns out to be more deadly and dangerous, resulting in a new pestilence.

It is remarkable that Towfik predicts its expected location. He poses the question “And where do pigs and the chickens meet?” And his answer is only at Chinese farmers’ barns or stockyards. Thus, every “Chinese farmer hides a laboratory for dangerous biological experiments. In [these] stockyards, unique unheard of types of viruses are created. Therefore, the most deadly and worst flu is the Asian flu, which is resonant of the plague” (Towfik 2010, 60). Based on this fear, team H wonders if Cameroon’s virus is similar to the famous Hong Kong virus, which was H5N1. Their concern is augmented by the high death rate of the Cameroonian patients, out of 40, 10 die, that is 25%, and they fear that this disease could get out of control and lead to the end of the world. Similar to *The Scarlet Plague*, Towfik assumes that three quarter of the world population could die and the rest would turn, as was the case in the prehistoric time, into beasts fighting over food.

If in his depiction of an imagined plague and its aftermath, London raises the issue of social justice, Towfik, through Alaa brings up the conspiracy theory. The farm owner tells him that he had a visit from a Chinese vet with two men to vaccinate his chickens with what he thought to be vitamins to make them healthier. In his long discussion with the team members, Alaa thinks they might have been injected with a virus, which brings the possibility of a biological war (Towfik 2010, 70, 71). The conspiracy theory looms when they bring the issue of the vaccine. It is very difficult to find an effective one; as the virus mutates every now and then, which makes the anti-bodies, after some time, ineffective (77-78). Once more, as an experienced and knowledgeable Tropical Medicine specialist, Towfik elaborately explains how every virus has its own vaccine tailored for it. The discussion is reminiscent of the huge debate that is taking place, at the time of writing this paper, regarding the different Covid 19 vaccines and their effectiveness/ineffectiveness. The vaccine issue in the novel also brings up the massive pharmaceutical corporation business, being much bigger than arms trade and working across continents. A member of team H clearly shows how suspicious he is about these companies whose income exceeds that of the continent of Europe: “Someone injected the chicken. A virus that has no roots in this country suddenly appears. An enthusiastic company offers the vaccine at a very expensive price. It appears on the scene unexpectedly quickly!” (84) A Chinese doctor among the team believes that these companies like to fish in troubled water; for they do not care about people but are mainly concerned about making money “a sea of dollars is available for whoever is ready to amass it” (92).

However, by the end of the novel, it turns out that the poultry feed contains dangerous items. This brings the issue of messing with animal feed (fodder and

forage), ruining the environment, and resulting in the breed of new diseases such as Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease (CJD), or mad cow disease⁷ (Towfik 2010, 106). Out of ignorance, a cleaning man called John, who works at both Safari Unit and the infected farm, mixes medical leftovers of the lab (blood bags and lab samples) with the poultry feed, instead of burning them, thinking that he is giving them extra protein. Besides, he has broken a jar that contains human tissues with H1N1 virus, and adds them to the poultry feed, which means that he has fed the chicken with the virus. This is how the viral disease starts. However, whether it is a biological war or human negligence, Towfik, similar to London, ends his novel warning his readers that: “[t]he terrifying real epidemic is doubtlessly coming. It will start from somewhere in China or Hong Kong. [...] At that time, we can only count on the mercy of God [...] and then on microbiology and the speed of inventing a vaccine” (110).

Conclusion

By examining the four texts, it is clear that despite their diversity of genre, setting, time and background, they all address our twenty-first Covid-19 world. They appeal to our fear of contagion and death, to the threat of physical, psychological and economic losses. Moreover, they address our anxiety regarding a third world war that might be a biological one, leading to the end of the world. On the one hand, in Taha Hussain's *The Days*, the reader sympathizes with the family's and the lad's traumatic experience of losing the young talented son/brother and share the painful feelings of the mourners while watching the death procession of the Cholera victims in Nazek Al-Malaika's poem. On the other hand, Jack London's and Ahmed Khaled Towfik's imagined plague and viral diseases and the latter's theory of a possible biological war, address the reader's suspicion of Covid-19 as a manufactured virus that might mark the beginning of the apocalypse or the end of the world. Most importantly, the texts touch upon what is common in humanity, showing the best and worst in it. The human solidarity and noble actions in *The Days* -represented in the neighbours' support of the devastated family- and in *The Scarlet Plague*- through a few self-sacrificing characters- reveal the good side of humanity. Contrary to them, the violent and beastly attitude depicted in London's novel and the hinted at greed of the pharmaceutical business, in Towfik's novel brings the reader face to face with his/her dark side. All of these situations, feelings and thoughts prove the endless power and therapeutic effect of literature and how it will always remain a relieving aid in times of crisis such as the current Covid Tsunami-like situation. What the future holds for humanity will always remain a mystery; this is again what life and literature teach us every single day.

Endnotes

¹ As a professor of modern British and American literature, I was one of the presenters in a webinar organized in April 2020 by the Fulbright Commission in Egypt regarding the role of the humanities during the pandemic and the lockdown. I also presented at the international conference on Blended Learning and Online Teaching in November of the same year. In both events the presenters agreed upon the important role of humanities, particularly literature, during our Covid crisis and its success in engaging students and readers.

² The translation of the poem is partly mine as well as Husain Haddawy's, with Nathalie Handal in *The Poetry of Arab Women: A Contemporary Anthology*. Ed. Nathalie Handal. Interlink Books: New York, 2001.

³ Angawanderi seems to be a fictional city; for having searched for cities and settlements on the Cameroon-Nigeria borders, I could not find this city.

⁴ All quotations from *About Birds We Talk*, are my translation.

⁵ Nakalanga is a “disease similar to nodding syndrome [and it] was first reported in Uganda by AB Raper in 1950”. It was so called “because of the pathological dwarfism and the affected persons were incapable of procreation. It occurred among the dwellers of Mabira forest near the source of the Nile in Uganda” (Ndeezi). As for nodding syndrome, it “is a mentally and physically disabling disease that affects children, typically between the ages of 5 and 15. The disease is characterized by episodes of repetitive nodding of the head, with progression to generalized tonic-clonic seizures, mental deterioration and physical incapacity” (Ndeezi).

⁶ According to WHO, SARS or Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome is “a viral respiratory disease caused by a SARS-associated coronavirus. It was first identified at the end of February 2003 during an outbreak that emerged in China and spread to 4 other countries.” https://www.who.int/health-topics/severe-acute-respiratory-syndrome#tab=tab_1.

In his novel Towfik mentions that SARS started in the Chinese district Gwandong.

⁷ According to NHS, this is a rare and fatal disease that “causes brain damage that worsens rapidly over time.”

[https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/creutzfeldt-jakob-disease-cjd/#:~:text=Creutzfeldt%20Jakob%20disease%20\(CJD\),that %20worsens%20rapidly%20over%20time.](https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/creutzfeldt-jakob-disease-cjd/#:~:text=Creutzfeldt%20Jakob%20disease%20(CJD),that%20worsens%20rapidly%20over%20time.)

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