

Contagion and Human Behavior: Examining “12 Monkeys and Contagion through the Pandemic”

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Abstract

A pandemic always teaches the value of life on earth. It also brings the real or primordial nature of humanity to the forefront. In this paper, I will examine the attitude of humans towards the virus, infected humans, and towards other humans in general. While examining these attitudes of humans I will move from specific to general. In order to support my ideas, I will discuss two films i.e. *12 Monkeys* and *Contagion* in particular. Disability studies will be used as a theory to support my arguments. Everyone in this world has experienced disability directly or indirectly. At present, the ongoing Corona virus pandemic has changed our perception regarding the meaning of our life. We are all vulnerable in this world and we can become the reason for making somebody vulnerable. The problem is that to whom we consider disable. Is it based on appearance or moral outlook? How shall we respond or how shall we deal with such a situation? Humanities closely observe world affairs. It predicts futuristic scenarios based on facts. It raises essential questions for the sake of humanity. Now an infected person is considered untouchable. It's extremely sad to experience such an awful feeling. But in our society untouchability based on caste and disease is a common thing. A virus helps everyone to experience what Dalit humans had once experienced. Now strangers and our relatives are equally suspicious. Separation and inclusion both are associated with the infection. Social hierarchy has changed. Everyone is now untouchable.

Keywords- *Pandemic, Disability, Untouchability, Isolation, Vulnerable*

1. INTRODUCTION

All living beings on earth should be treated with honor and unbiased. Human beings have more responsibility as morally uplifted beings. They are responsible for the well being of other living and nonliving beings. The existence of life on this earth is grounded on supportive grounds. The survival instinct of life forms is a primal feeling. Disease, wounds, or negative thoughts all pass with time. All through human history to fight with the disease we pray, offer sacrifice, and find treatments for it. A disease is caused by a virus or living organisms. Anything life-threatening is unwelcomed and we search for solutions to eliminate it. A virus might be seen as a grotesque element that corrupts the divine order of life form. When a human form changes we treat that body as grotesque. As long as the virus remains in a human body he or she is treated as part grotesque.

It's pathetic to think that Society or a group of privileged people decide what is good and evil what should be included and excluded. But in a pandemic situation when a virus takes control over the life of humanity nothing exists more important than the existence of life itself. In Odisha, different local Newspapers print news about the cruel behavior of humans towards their fellow humans who were infected by this Corona virus. Hindustan Times, Bhubaneswar on 2nd

July 2020 published news regarding the stigma of Corona Virus Pandemic. A man in Ganjam district was suffering from cough and fever for 10 days and he died on his way to Covid-19 hospital. When they returned to their village the villagers did not allow them to enter into the village suspecting that he might have died of Covid-19. In many villages, patients are forced to live outside their village due to the infection. When this virus enters our body we become less human and more grotesque. Family members also rejected their closed ones suffering from this disease. This is one side of human behavior but the other side is that there are people who stand with their closed ones though they were infected by this virus.

So the real nature of humans is unpredictable or it would be unethical to categorize all humans one. In the film *Contagion*, people took advantage of the pandemic by looting and committing violence. People stay isolated but a doctor sacrificed her life to figure out the virus. A scientist put her life at risk to create a vaccine. The film *12 Monkeys* didn't show the virus to the audience but the desperation of the future humans to find the virus before mutation is similar the way now we are looking for a vaccine.

2. DISABILITY

Disability studies looked at the attitude of human history that subverted disabled people as non-human. P.K. Nayar writes, "...disability studies propose that the human subject, even the 'able' human subject, comes into existence only in relation with other non-human 'actors' and objects." (108). In Disability Studies, the body is considered as a realm to theorizing the concept. Illness stories of disabled persons give us both sociological and psychological problems faced by individuals. These narratives are not personal tragedies but serve as a window to look at Disability studies as a broad area. A highly contagious disease brings disgrace to an individual. For Sociologist Goffman a "stigmatized individual is either too aggressive or too shamefaced" (18). In zombie films, we find infected people as evil, aggressive, and secluded. In *12 Monkeys* we find humans as more evil and aggressive than the virus. This virus was deliberately released to destroy humanity. Canadian poet Irving Layton finds nothing but mendacity, madness, and meanness in humanity. Different countries implement strong rules and a huge fine to stop the socialization of people. So morally corrupt individuals with craziness are evil or infected people are eviler than them. During a Pandemic, there is a restriction on the body. We restrict ourselves and sometimes our body is restricted by external forces.

A Pandemic not only cripples a government or people but it also inflicts the morality of the people. The film *Contagion* demonstrates Mitch Emhoff as a common man played by Matt Damon. As an individual, he has to stay isolated but should not forget human values. It's not only the infected humans who are disabled but the whole system that governs nation and states are disabled. The film *12 Monkeys* offers no conclusion of a Pandemic rather it questions humans understanding and intentions. Brad Pitt's character is insane but argues the correct things. Once, germs were treated as 'insane ideas' but actually they existed.

3. HUMANS DURING A PANDEMIC

We find our routine life as normal and its deviation is intolerable for us. A pandemic situation puts a break on everything we regard as essential for us. Everything we have planned remains uncertain for us. The uniqueness of humanity is invaded by a virus. Everyone assumes at the beginning of a Pandemic that the virus will never come to them. But it is inevitable as human beings are the host of this virus. Many writers have written about the mass extinction of humanity but with hope for a new start. Octavia Butler is one of the writers to tell stories about a futuristic dystopian world. Her novel *Clay's Ark* deals with a virus that alters humans DNA and makes its

hosts helpless to spread the contamination. At present we live with the Corona virus and we also hope for a new start in the future. In a pandemic people become selfish. It's in our genes to become selfish. In the film *contagion*, the doctor told his wife to evacuate the city for her safety. It was unethical to reveal such secrets but the doctor did it. During a pandemic, humans should show compassion towards each other. During this Corona virus pandemic period, we find so many pictures and videos of people helping the needy and feed hungry animals. People help once but we see it millions of times. It's a good effort but how long or to what extent humans can show compassion during a pandemic situation.

An infected person always thinks about his or her family but never about the persons might they have infected. This is our selfish attitude. The film *12 Monkeys* shows that after pandemic humans no more walk on earth due to the virus but animals walk of earth freely. Once the caged is now free and the master of the cage lives underground. Thus a pandemic changes everything including hierarchy order. Octavia Butler considers change as the most dominant force on earth close to God.

4. INVISIBLE VIRUS AND THE LOOMING FEAR

Bollywood film *Ankho Dekhi* is about a human being who only believes what he sees. For such humans, a virus may not exist. In the film *12 Monkeys* the protagonist James Cole makes us aware of the existence of the virus. People in the past before the pandemic never wanted to believe James. In this context, a person who visualizes the future or wants to make people aware of the coming disaster is considered as a mad man. In India, people hardly consider mental illness as a disease. We categorize them as mad and crazy people not fit for this society.

When everybody gets infected irrespective of caste, religion, and social status it's somehow natural to endure the pain for all. A virus treats everyone equally. Humans want to be different, different from the common human being. An infection makes us different from the uninfected mass. But nobody wants to be different in this context. The virus mentioned in the film *Contagion* is quite similar to Corona virus in its symptoms. People find it hard to believe that a virus is capable of taking somebody's life within a short span of time. We can't console anybody with our touch. With our masks, we appear similar and alien. Everything in this world either beautiful or simple, all appear as the carrier of the virus. In *Contagion* a father does not allow his daughter to touch her boyfriend till the boy receives the vaccine. The emotional breakdown is also common during a pandemic. We fear as we find ourselves vulnerable outside our home. Human cooperation and tolerance are essential during this period.

5. STRUGGLE OF HUMANITY FOR SURVIVAL

In the film *Contagion*, a man lost his wife and son due to the viral infection. He tried too hard to keep himself and his daughter safe. He wanted to leave the city but he could not. A pregnant woman asked for help but nobody was there. Bodies wrapped in plastic bags dumped into mass graves. Machines dig earth to burry humans. For basic needs, people fight with each other. People rob shops. Pandemic brings chaos or our actions bring both pandemic and chaos. Human beings are always evolving species on earth. Our actions can shape or destroy humanity. Matt Ridley writes, “The first life on earth was atomistic and individual. Increasingly since then, it has coagulated. It has become a team game, not a contest of loaners.” (32) In any adverse situation we need tolerance and altruism behavior for our survival.

During Pandemic cultural events and sacred rituals with gathering are prohibited. The occasions we consider the most important one in our life are passed without our presence. We

can't say our last goodbye properly. In the film, the doctors and government did not allow the infected dead bodies to bury with proper rituals. It's a time in which there is no limit of tolerance for humans. We have to endure everything. A pandemic crumbles our social and religious beliefs. Each one of us is vulnerable irrespective of professions or social hierarchy. A pandemic makes us realize that life on earth is important and nothing else. At the time of death, people realize what is important in life. A Pandemic questions humanity about what is important for us.

5.1. HUMAN ENHANCEMENT

It's a common dream of every human to become invincible. Is it possible? In the film *The Old Guard* a group of people presented as saviors. They live for ages and hard to kill nearly immortal. A scientist wants to experiment on these people to study their DNA for human enhancement. Are humans so generous to give everyone immortality? It's a human tendency to keep power and not to share it. Taking vaccination is a form of human enhancement and humans never find anything immoral in it. It is not immoral because our appearance remains the same after taking this vaccine. Humans need enhancement but at the same time, they want to keep their human form intact. We fear disability. Many people try hard to look young. They don't want to get old. Is old age a disability? The ageing process is a natural one and nobody can't escape it. Still, we find a huge industry of beauty products to stay young. We need enhancement of our body to fight with diseases. This enhancement questions whether we remain pure human or move beyond human bio values.

6. EVERYONE IS UNTOUCHABLE

Dalit untouchable people were considered Contagion. Their touch would defile the purity of true humans. This was a social evil. Now people with Corona virus infection considered highly contagious. They are carriers of the virus. And any human irrespective of caste and social status can become a carrier of the virus. Nobody wants to become a host of the virus. In the same way, nobody wants to become a Dalit. Why this concept exists? Humans fear losing power or they want to prove that privileged and unprivileged exist side by side separated by a boundary. Mulk Raj Anand's book *Untouchable* narrates how Dalit women wait near a well to have mercy of upper-class people to get water. They could not touch the well as their touch would contaminate the water. They could not come closer to the upper-class people as if their closeness would give them a disease. These attitudes of our religious men would appear as a science fiction story to our modern generation. But it existed and today also it exists. It is the present Covid-19 Pandemic that allows every one of us to experience untouchability. Now if the virus enters our body we become untouchable. After cure people also look at the person with suspicious eyes. Now as untouchable due to infection, we lose access to many essential services but in past people experienced it for many generations. How can we bring a humane social order? Without harmony among all it is impossible. It might be for a short period of time but a Pandemic, a Chaos makes everyone realize how it feels like being untouchable in this world.

7. CONCLUSION

Camus writes, "They knew now that if there is one thing one can always yearn for, and sometimes attain, it is human love." (300). During this period banality is worse than anything else. It puts a brake on everything we have planned. We ask for freedom in our lives, but as long as the virus is outside of our house we are not free. At the beginning of a Pandemic, we welcome each decision of our government but after passing of time we feel threatened and our hope vanishes. Humans and disease are not separated from each other. Diseases affect us, but we find a cure through medical intervention. Life is dear to all but in the adverse situation, we should not forget that

tolerance, cooperation, and sacrifice are ideas on which humanity is grounded. People react differently to different adverse situations. It's true that we can't expect each one of us to be like a person as we want. So we need tolerance. And we need to sacrifice some of our personal interests or benefit for the sake of humanity. As evolving species the behavior of humans will always remain a debatable topic for discussion. Literature, films predict the future, they want to show humanity many possibilities of our future world. Either digital or traditional, Humanities will always remain as a true friend and guide to show us a new world.

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