



Article Type: Research Article

Article Ref. No.: 20113000433PF

<https://doi.org/10.37948/ensemble-2021-sp1-a012>



PANDEMIC AND LITERATURE: A STUDY ON KAKKANADAN'S VASOORI

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Abstract:

The current pandemic situation has completely altered our lives. In this context, it is imperative to look back at the history of human civilization to see how the ancient faced such situations. Works dealing with the horrors of plague have been written in various regional literature across India, the famous being Rabindranath Tagore's *Puraton Bhrutto*, Ahmed Ali's *Twilight in Delhi* and U.R Anandamoorthy's *Samskara*. The article focuses on a Malayalam novel, *Vasoori*, written by Kakkanadan (1968) which revolves around the lives of common village folk caught in the jaws of smallpox. The novel focuses on the lived in experience of a community forced to face the disease almost every year. It is enlightening to go through the novel in the current Covid-19 pandemic as it concentrates on the first human reaction to pandemics – fear. By using the motif of smallpox, *Vasoori* pushes the reader to reflect on the ancestral fear of humans to infectious diseases and how it completely shatters the body's internal perceptions. Thus reading *Vasoori* in the current pandemic situation is one way of understanding how the human race dealt with a disease for which there seemed no solution in sight.

Article History: Submitted on 30 Nov 2020 | Accepted on 9 February 2021 | Published online on 11 April 2021

Keywords: Disease, Regional literature, Fear, Uncertainty, Lived in experience, Social and moral degeneration

The current pandemic situation has completely altered our lives and brought it to a standstill. A new world of masks, quarantine, sanitizers and social distancing has now become the reality. In this context, it has become imperative to look back at the history of human civilization, to see how the ancient faced such situations. For a common man the best way to understand this is by looking at literature which offers an emotional landscape that no other documents can provide and this emotional understanding increases if one were to look at regional literature. Many works dealing with the horrors of plague have been written in various regional literature across India, the famous being Rabindranath Tagore's *Puraton Bhrutto*, Ahmed Ali's *Twilight in Delhi* and U.R Anandamoorthy's *Samskara*, among many. The article focuses on a Malayalam novel, *Vasoori*, written by Kakkanadan, which revolves around the lives of common village folk caught in the jaws of smallpox.

Kakkanadan's *Vasoori* is one of the finest examples of a smallpox pandemic novel written in Malayalam. Published in 1968, the novel deals with the outbreak of smallpox that grips a small village in Kerala. *Vasoori* is important in the sense that it talks about the lived in

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experience of a community that had to face the disease almost every year. Thus it is enlightening to go through *Vasoori* in the current Covid-19 pandemic as it concentrates on the first human reaction to pandemics – fear.

The history of human civilization is often marked by the sudden outburst of plagues and pandemics that have brought life to a standstill. The ancient world saw in pandemics the hand of the supernatural and believed that it was a result of an offense committed against the divinities. In *Oedipus Rex* by Sophocles, Ares, the God of War, is blamed for the plague that is ravaging the city. Stories from the *Old Testaments* in *The Bible* abound in punishments being meted out to the Israelites by God in the form of plagues. With the passage of time, human beings understood the real culprits behind such pandemics. They found methods to control and prevent the spreading. Yet, the initial reaction to such pandemics remains the same. It poses a threat that is uncharacteristic of other diseases in that it creates a sense of fear, anxiety and mass hysteria. Somehow, pandemics seem to have the power to test the efficiency of authorities and to bring out the social and moral shortcomings of the human world.

By using the motif of smallpox, Kakkanadan's novel pushes the reader to reflect on the ancestral fear of humans to infectious diseases. Moreover, he focuses on how the fear of the unknown affects a person psychologically. The very space in which you have lived happily till now becomes your enemy. Death seems to be following you. In the beginning, the author portrays smallpox as a superhuman figure who is the very embodiment of death. She seemed to be everywhere. The village was in her clutches. The author brings out the depth of smallpox's reach by describing how the disease changed the very face of the village. People lost their near and dear ones. Relationships changed. Humans lost their kindness and sense of morality. While villages are often seen in terms of paradise and innocence, the disease or rather the fear brought out the hidden demons in them. Thus from the very first pages, Kakkanadan describes the mood of fear which later develops into hysteria as the novel progresses. When faced with this, it is to religion that people most often turn to for a solution.

It is interesting to note that in certain parts of India, there is a strong belief of seeing the affliction of smallpox and chickenpox and its spread as a result of the Devi's anger. The cure lies in appeasing the goddess of her anger. Thus the disease, as well as the cure, is the goddess. The characters of Channar and Mathai Mappilla are examples of the simple village folk for whom any disease is a curse. Mathai Mappilla being a Christian staunchly believes that smallpox is spread by Satan's minions. He recalls a story of how Mother Mary was able to stop the minions from spreading the disease in Changanacherry, another town in Kerala. Mathai Mappilla strongly believes that it was the intervention of Mother Mary that put an end to the spreading of smallpox. For Channar, a Hindu, the disease can be stopped only by offering prayers to the Goddess. When he finally contracts the disease, his family resorts to the religious methods of puja to appease the Goddess and to seek her help to cleanse the family of the disease.

In the midst of all this religious talking, Gopala Pillai and Krishnankutty stand out as the voices of reason. An educated person and an avid reader of Western novels, Gopala Pillai tries to make the people understand the need to seek proper medication and to stand together. He is appalled by how the patients are treated. The patient is moved to a shack built at the very end of the plot of the house. None of the family is allowed to see him/her. Only the Vaidyan (the doctor) and his assistant are allowed entry to the shack. The fact that this was the reality in Kerala can be gleaned from the newspaper article *Kuzhiyarum Theerthallo Parukutty* written by Muralee Thummarukudy (2016), the Chief of Disaster Risk Reduction in the UN Environment Programme. It brings out the true picture of how smallpox patients were treated in Kerala during the 1940's. He mentions an incident that happened in his family. The patients who lived

in the shacks were visited by the Karanavar (the head of the family) and a servant each week. The Karanavar went to give food, whereas it was the duty of the servant to find out how many were dead. The dead were buried and the last rites were denied for them. A woman named Parukutty was thought dead, but en route to the burial area, she called out to the Karanavar that she was alive. The Karanavar, who was her uncle, replied that since the grave has already been dug, it matters not whether she is alive or not. His reply points to the fact that those who contracted smallpox died in the end. There was no hope for them. So if Parukutty is alive today, she will be dead by the next week. Fortunately, the servant felt sorry for her and took her back to the shack. Thummarukudy (2016) states that she lived a healthy life later and thanked the servant for saving her life by providing food for him.

What comes out clearly from this real-life incident and those mentioned is the novel is the fear of the community. When Luko Mappilla's wife falls victim to the disease, it is the cries of the hungry children that fill the house. No one goes near the house where a member has the disease. The family of Channar is forced to leave him alone and move to another house for fear of catching the disease. People are afraid to see the bodies of the victims as they fear that they might contract the disease. The only person who seems to be following Gopala Pillai's reasoning is Krishnankutty. While the educated in the society tries to distance themselves from the victims, the uneducated Krishnankutty is the only person to show sympathy to the victims and their family. Considered as an outcaste, he is seen as amoral by the whole society. But with the spreading of smallpox, his real nature is revealed. Thus the author uses the trope of smallpox or rather the fear to bring out the real nature of the people in the community. It is this same fear that brings about the loss of all social conventions and a rise in selfishness and avarice.

In some notable works like Boccaccio's *The Decameron* and Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* there is a description of how fear of contracting the disease leads to an increase in the moral degeneration. In *Vasoori*, the author brings this out clearly through the characters of Channar, Mathai Mappilla and Elikutty. With the spread of the disease, uncertainty has become the new reality and this new reality makes you look at life from a different perspective. The fact that the seeds of smallpox is all around you and can take your life at any moment makes the people think more about their dreams and pleasures hitherto hidden away in the recesses of their mind. Their base nature comes out in such despairing circumstances. Channar and Mathai Mappilla decide to enjoy their life in all the way possible before smallpox claims their lives. They are least bothered about cheating their wives as who knows what will happen to them the next day. Elikutty, the wife of Mathai Mappilla, also falls victim to this thought. Her illicit relationship with Thomachan, her own son-in-law, is a result of the fear of death. Though she tries to restrain herself, finally she gives in to her hidden pleasure. The immediacy of death makes Elikutty think more about bodily pleasures that she had never experienced before. But when she falls victim to smallpox, she believes that it is the result of her wrong-doing. After the death of Channar and Elikutty, Mathai Mappilla becomes insane.

Just like the spread of the disease, moral degeneration also spreads. Even Gopala Pillai falls victim to it. When Gopala Pillai's daughter Radha and aunt Bhageerathamma fall ill, Krishnankutty brings in Janaki to take care of them. Though a village prostitute, she is considered as a daughter by Gopala Pillai. She takes care of the family as her own. But a moment's slip makes Gopala Pillai approach Janaki in a sexual manner. For a split second, he considers her only as a prostitute. Though he regains himself quickly and asks for forgiveness, it is quite clear that fear and uncertainty of life have affected him as well.

The uncertainty also brings out the social shortcomings of society. Instead of standing together and taking measures to control the spread of smallpox, the major parties use this situation to boost their own image. Gopala Pillai and other elders of the village are approached by both the groups to attend their meetings. While the party in power says that they have taken every measure to help the community, the opposition mainly led by the young points to the shortcomings of those measures. Thus the common people continue their suffering with no help from either side. Also, this uncertainty brings out the true nature of human beings. The novel begins with a description of Rajagopalan Nair, who is seen as the epitome of perfection by the village community. People respect him as he is a member of a prominent family as well as a teacher in the local government school. But behind this façade of honour lies a cunning man who only cares about himself. He visits Janaki to satisfy his pleasure, but she refuses him because she sees him for who he truly is. Rajagopalan Nair completely alienates himself from Gopala Pillai's family when he hears the news of Radha getting smallpox. He has no qualms in forgetting the love that he once confessed he had for Radha. On the other hand, Krishnankutty considered by all as a good for nothing fellow, transforms into a saviour for all. He extends a helping hand to all in need. His very presence soothes those in pain and extends a bit of hope to those alienated by their loved ones. Though he falls ill and dies in the end, people's attitude to him undergoes a sea change. In such circumstances, it is not education that matters but how humane you can be.

Virginia Woolf (1930) in "On Being Ill" talks about the great wars which the body wages by itself in the solitude of the bedroom against the assault of fever. She points that often this fight goes unrecorded. For the victims, in the midst of acute illness, the world both narrows and broadens into the body's suffering. This experience is hidden in part because of the isolation that such diseases often produce. True to the lived-in experience of the victims, the novel, *Vasoori*, captures the way in which a virus may shatter the body's internal perceptions, the way fear of death, pain and fever turn reality into delirium. On hearing the news of smallpox spread, it is to their own body that the villagers first turn their attention to. Radha feels the pain that surges through her body and thinks about her wasted youth and beauty. With the rise of pain, she reaches a stage of delirium in which her future seems to be sealed. She believes that the marks left by smallpox will mar her life forever. Left alone in a room, all hope oozes out of her. It is the words of Krishnankutty that brings a new life to her. It is her suffering that opens her eyes to the real nature of those around her. She understands that her one true love was always Krishnankutty and not Rajagopalan Nair. Channar's pathetic condition is also portrayed vividly. The boils spread even to his insides thus making it impossible to even drink water. Here too it is the pain combined with the feeling of alienation that tortures Channar the most. Again it is the presence of Krishnankutty that brings to him a feeling of being taken care of.

Thus reading *Vasoori* in the current pandemic situation is one way of understanding how the human race dealt with a disease for which there seemed no solution in sight. It is the clear picture of the lived-in experience of a community that lived in the shadows of death and uncertainty and where fear ruled their lives. Such stories from regional literature reflect and transmit through words the deepest and most insightful record of the events that once ravaged different parts of the world. Though published years back, *Vasoori* presents the same concern that we face today. The question of social distancing and quarantine and how it affects the human mind all raises its head in different ways in this novel. It took a bit more time to finally find a vaccine for smallpox, but by that time, many lost their lives and many who lived were marred by the disease both physically and mentally. Thus such stories of discovery, reaction, conflict, illness and resolution provide a way to understand how humans reacted to pandemics through centuries.

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