

Pandemic and the Life Cycles in Jack London's *The Scarlet Plague*

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الوباء ودورات الحياة في رواية "الطاعون القرمزي" لجاك لندن
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الكلية التربوية المفتوحة

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Abstract

This paper examines the social causes of epidemics and its consequences which lead to form new life cycles. Epidemics, in addition to other factors, including natural disasters and wars are one of the factors that would cause a sudden and rapid decline in population numbers. The theme of epidemics and their role in the decline of human numbers in addition to other topics such as the injustice use of natural resources and exploitation of the lower classes, are the most important themes that London discusses in his novel *The Scarlet Plague*. The opinions and ideas of some researchers and theorists are adopted like Turchin and Nefedov's theory, "Secular Cycles" for analyzing the socio-economic aspects of London's addressed novel. The study follows the social and political causes of the spread of these epidemics, which, due to the spread of such epidemics, have led to the elimination of humanity and all the features of urbanization on the one hand, and the social caste system on the other hand, the side that man has always sought to preserve. To clarify and discuss the social and political reasons that led to the emergence of these epidemics, the study adopts the socio-economic framework. The study concluded that the insistence of the dominant classes on the unfair exploitation of natural resources and the working classes led to a shrinking of healthy environments for humans, which led to an increase in population density in small areas, which helped the spread of epidemics randomly and rapidly. Besides, Natural forces, including epidemics, have the ability to displace all unjust man-made systems and establish a new life cycle.

Keywords: Pandemic, Secular cycles, natural resources, population decline, mankind elimination

يتناول هذا البحث الأسباب الاجتماعية للأوبئة وعواقبها التي تؤدي إلى تكوين دورات حياة جديدة. تعتبر الأوبئة، بالإضافة إلى العوامل الأخرى، بما في ذلك الكوارث الطبيعية والحروب، من العوامل التي من شأنها أن تسبب انخفاضاً مفاجئاً وسريعاً في أعداد السكان. ويعد موضوع الأوبئة ودورها في تراجع أعداد البشر بالإضافة إلى موضوعات أخرى مثل الاستخدام غير العادل للموارد الطبيعية واستغلال الطبقات الدنيا، من أهم المواضيع التي يناقشها لندن في روايته الطاعون القرمزي. وقد تم اعتماد آراء وأفكار بعض الباحثين والمنظرين مثل نظرية تورنشين ونيفيدوف "الدورات العلمانية" في تحليل الجوانب الاجتماعية والاقتصادية لرواية لندن "الطاعون القرمزي". وتتابع الدراسة الأسباب الاجتماعية والسياسية لانتشار هذه الأوبئة، والتي أدى انتشارها إلى القضاء على الإنسانية وكل معالم العمران من جهة، والنظام الطبقي الاجتماعي من جهة أخرى، الجانب الذي سعى الإنسان دائماً إلى الحفاظ عليه. ولتوضيح ومناقشة الأسباب الاجتماعية والسياسية التي أدت إلى ظهور هذه الأوبئة، اعتمدت الدراسة الإطار الاجتماعي الاقتصادي. وخلصت الدراسة إلى أن إصرار الطبقات المهيمنة على الاستغلال غير العادل للموارد الطبيعية والطبقات العاملة أدى إلى تقلص البيئات الصحية للإنسان، مما أدى إلى زيادة الكثافة السكانية في مناطق صغيرة، مما ساعد على انتشار الأوبئة بشكل عشوائي. وبسرعة. علاوة على ذلك، فإن القوى الطبيعية، بما في ذلك الأوبئة، لديها القدرة على إزاحة جميع الأنظمة الظالمة التي صنعها الإنسان وإقامة دورة حياة جديدة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الوباء، الدورات العلمانية، الموارد الطبيعية، انخفاض السكان، القضاء على البشرية

The Research Problem

The continuous oppression of the lower classes and the lack of a suitable healthy environment lead to the emergence of epidemics that in turn displace those oppressive regimes and re-establish a new life cycle.

The Significance of the Study

The importance of the present study lies in clarifying the economic and social aspects that lead to the emergence of epidemics, in addition to shedding light on the other side of epidemics in terms of its role in contributing to reshaping the life cycle again and destroying the social caste systems.

The Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study is to clarify the relationship between epidemics and the restoration of the life cycle by forcing survivors to discard their class origins and to form relationships based on equality between them.

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The Research Questions

The study is set to answer the following questions:

What is the relationship between upper-class policies towards the lower classes and the spread of epidemics ?

How can epidemics destroy modern systems and rebuild a new life cycle according to London's point of view?

Methodology

This study is a descriptive and analytical one, which is employing a document analysis as a tool to analyze the upper-class social practices of the American society in the modern age which led to the spread of epidemics among the lower classes by using the target novel *The Scarlet Plague* by Jack London. Turchin and Nefedov's theory, "Secular Cycles" and opinions of some researchers will be basically used to analyse the target aspects.

Discussion

The Social Structure and its Role in the eEmergence of Epidemics

A just and balanced social structure, based on equality among all components of society, has its role in creating a suitable and healthy environment for its members. Otherwise, a society based on unfair classes, which is based on the exploitation of the working classes to obtain material benefits, plays a role in creating a polluted environment that helps spread diseases and epidemics among its members. Such polluted environments could spread among industrialized and agricultural countries based on the superior and subordinate system, which during different periods of history are subject to the spread of lethal and rapid epidemics among their simple and low-income residents. London in *the Scarlet Plague* refers to the role that the upper classes played, through the exploitation of mankind and the misuse of natural resources, in providing the appropriate climate for diseases.

London also mentions in *The Scarlet Plague* which speaks of a terrifying and rapidly spreading epidemic that afflicted humans, leaving only an old man named Smith and three of his grandchildren, in addition to

some individuals who settled here and there and did not shed light on them, the situations and circumstances that a person is going through during his plague and the struggle of healthy individuals to survive and the conditions that led to the spread of that epidemic. While recounting the social and economic situation before the epidemic to his grandchildren, Smith says "Our food-getters were called freemen. 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" (12). Smith's saying has two dimensions, economic and social. As for social, society was divided into two classes, the upper class, or the dominant class that controlled everything, and the lower class or working class that Smith called slaves. As for the economic aspect, society was divided into a rich and wealthy class who lives in luxurious places, and poor class that barely has a livelihood and lives in poor and miserable places.

Concerning the way the ruling class deals with the working class, Smith addressing his three grandchildren and says, "Did I not tell you that we of the ruling class owned all the land, all the forest, everything? 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). This class-based treatment has dangerous repercussions on the poor class and widens the gap between classes. Concerning the consequences of this unfair treatment and the expansion of the ruling classes on the lands of the working class, Turchin and Nefedov write:

In rural areas overpopulation means that no food reserves are available in case of crop failure. Accordingly, years of poor harvest that would hardly be noticed in better times now result in significant mortality and, at worst, in catastrophic famines. Chronic undernourishment creates conditions conducive to the spread of epidemics. (7)

This unfair treatment is a good opportunity for the spread of epidemics, especially after the poor population has accumulated in large numbers and a small area with miserable health and living conditions.

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Rougier, Jonathan, et al (2018). refer to the relation between poor conditions and the spreading pandemics saying that, "Poor people are most at risk health-wise, with limited access to poor housing, social protection, affordable health care, paid sick leave and safety nets" (24). This unhealthy convergence not only led to the spread of epidemics, but also helped spread new diseases. Regarding to the overpopulation in limited places

and its negative role in spreading diseases and epidemics, Smith says:

As men increased and lived closely together in great cities and civilizations, new diseases arose, new kinds of germs entered their bodies. Thus were countless millions and billions of human beings killed. And the more thickly men packed together, the more terrible were the new diseases that came to be. (14)

Concerning the relationship between urbanization and spreading epidemics Andrew Dobson and Robin

Carper (1996) write:

The importation of slaves from highly endemic areas of Africa fueled epidemics that spread in waves across the continents, ravaging both the indigenous and colonist populations. In North America, the spread the birth and survival rates of human populations. These and similar data sets suggest that disease epidemics were a common consequence of increasing urbanization.

(120)

The ruling class did not pay attention to the risks of pressure on the working class. Their numbers increased and their ethnic differences increased in return for their shrinking living space. An increase in the number of the working class means an increase in the imports of the ruling class and at the same time an increase in the possibility of epidemics. Instead of the state seeking to dry up the sources of the epidemic, their greed pushed them to neglect the lower classes and provide suitable environments for the spread of the epidemic. With regard to controlling a specific epidemic and preventing its spread and recurrence Thomas Rivers writes, "The best way for a country to prevent the entrance and spread of diseases is to have a civilization and a standard of living that provide poor ecological conditions for infectious agents, their vectors and reservoirs" (93). The upper class worked on the contrary, confining wealth and a well-off life to

the upper class only, and depriving the lower classes of that, making them vulnerable to the spread of epidemics and diseases due to their poor living conditions.

Although London's *The Scarlet Plague* talks about an epidemic sweeping in the modern age, and it is assumed that health services have developed over the past century, the spread of epidemics and diseases did not decreased among the working class, in addition to the above-mentioned reasons, there are other, more complex reasons related to the abuse of the working class to increase profits of the ruling class. Concerning the exploitation of the working class and its role in the spread of disease, Evan Stark (1977) writes:

The developments also created the new epidemics of chronic stress. Despite the mystification of social etiology by medicine, the identity of the disease process with more general means of social reproduction indicates that illness is now "endopolic," the product not of nature but of historically specific political and economic decisions and processes. (681)

This state of stress, due to the depletion of the energies of the working class, was transferred by the causes of the spread of the epidemic from environmental and health factors to personal and economic causes.

The Social and Economic Consequences of the Spread of the Epidemic

Usually, there are dire consequences associated with natural disasters, such as loss of shelter, severe shortage of food resources, and insecurity, especially in societies that are built on strict caste system and individuals' incomes vary widely. Concerning the consequences that may accompany natural disasters Philip and Righarts (2008) write, "We find that natural disasters significantly increase the risk of violent civil conflict, both in the short and medium term, specifically in low- and middle-income countries that have intermediate to high levels of inequality, mixed political regimes, and sluggish economic growth" (195). The attacks and conflicts that accompanied the spread of the epidemic, according to what was mentioned in the *The Scarlet Plague*, between the poor class and the rich and dominant class supports what was mentioned above. Concerning one of the reasons that pushed people to behave violently through the spreading of

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epidemics, Smith says "All railroads and vessels carrying food and such things into the great city had ceased runnings and mobs of the hungry poor were pillaging the stores and warehouses" (19).

In addition to the lack of food sources, people may be tempted to act violently in crises when the state loses its authority and the lower class resort to revenge and seize the property of the ruling class. Regarding the reasons behind people's acting violently Philip and Righarts write, "Crucially, natural disasters can also weaken state capacity and legitimacy, creating opportunities for the disgruntled to engage in violent resistance" (162). On the motives for revenge and violence, Smith says, "Even as I looked on from a distance, I saw one of the robbers break the windows of the adjoining store, a place where shoes were sold, and deliberately set fire to it" (23). The burning of private and public property and the indiscriminate killing of innocent people does not stem from hunger and the need for food, but rather from a motive of revenge against the rich and the upper class.

Because of the growing resentment of the working class towards the ruling class over inequality, they took the chaos that accompanied the spread of the epidemic as an opportunity to avenge the oppression of the ruling class. Concerning the relationship of the politics of the ruling class and its role in the revolt of the working class Huntington (1968) writes, "Those who command the income, however, usually also command the government. Hence social mobilization turns the traditional economic inequality into a stimulus to rebellion" (57). The appropriation of everything, even the governmental decision by the ruling class, made them deal with the working class as slaves and strip them of all their rights. Regarding the unfair treatment of the ruling class, Smith (the main character in *The Scarlet Plague*) says "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" (23).

The anger of those individuals who belong to the lower classes increased, after seeing the ruling classes flee the country using sophisticated transportation means. Because the lower class did not have such means, they were left to grapple with pestilence and hunger on their own. As for those who could not escape from

the ruling class, they have allocated for themselves fortified and safe places equipped with all the necessities of life. Even in times of epidemic and the collapse of all regimes, the ruling class did not abandon their class tendency and treat members of the lower class as intruders and enemies. Regarding the individuals who were selected to be in the fortified chemistry lab, Smith says "On the edge of the campus I came upon a party of university folk who were going in the direction of the Chemistry Building. They were all family men, and their families were with them, including the nurses and the servants" (24). Although classism was one of the causes of the spread of the epidemic, it became one of the reasons for the extermination of the working class by abandoning them and leaving them to struggle with the epidemic and its consequences on their own. With regard to the disparate impact of the epidemic on the rich and the poor groups Richard Evans writes, "Unlike natural disasters like earthquakes or floods, epidemic diseases were often influenced in their spread and impact by social and political factors and affect different groups of people - men and women, adults and children, rich and poor, town- and country-dwellers - in different ways and to different degrees" (124).

This growing hatred of the working class has translated into operations of looting, burning of buildings and killing in response to their exploitation by the ruling class and the monopolization of wealth only for them. Regarding the brutal revolt of the working class against the upper class, Smith mentions, "It was the most absolute, wanton act. Just as we were opposite him, he 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" (28). Concerning the relationship between rebellion and the spread of epidemics Richard

Evans writes:

Epidemic diseases opened up the possibility, the likelihood even, of widely varying responses by different groups in society, and of strongly diverging theories of where the blame for their arrival and spread in the community lay. This, in turn, meant that they were likely to bring out latent social tensions and to lead to conflict, violence and even, ultimately, revolt and revolution. (124)

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The difference in the interpretation of the sources of the epidemic between classes of society and the unfair distribution of income led a large part of the working class to behave in this brutal and irresponsible way.

The Other Side of the Epidemic

Despite all the negatives and the horrors that the epidemic has caused, including sudden death, the displacement of millions of people, and the lack of food and drink sources, the epidemic has another side. Despite all the fortifications and modern means that the ruling class possesses, it has not been able to bypass the epidemic and eliminate them as it has eliminated the poor people. As if the epidemic has a just side, it has spread among all, of all affiliations and classes equally. In terms of infecting everyone without exception by the epidemic, Smith says, "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" (25).

As for those who only survived, the epidemic forced them to forget their backgrounds and social affiliations, in order to integrate into a new cycle of life in which everyone is equal without differences. Concerning the disappearance of class and slavery systems and the return of man to his origin without differences and limitations Smith says:

"The fleeting systems lapse like foam,' and so lapsed our glorious, colossal civilization. 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. You, Hare-Lip, are of the Chauffeurs. You, Edwin, are of the Sacramentos. And you, Hoo-Hoo, are of the Palo-Altos. (14)

One of the potentially positive aspects of the epidemic, that London wanted to shed light on, it enabled the surviving men and women to bypass social limitations and restrictions that did not favour marriage from the lower classes.

Conclusion

The continuous pursuit of the upper class and the wealthy to exploit all available resources, whether human or natural, has dangerous future effects on human life and other resources. The study concludes that the insistence of the upper class in London's *The Scarlet Plague* on preserving the hierarchical order of the social system led to neglecting the health and environmental aspects of the lower class. This neglect of the healthy environment, especially with the high population density, provides a suitable environment for the spread of epidemics and diseases, starting from the lower classes and then all classes of society due to the communication between those classes. The collapse of security and order due to the repercussions of the epidemic provided a good opportunity for the lower class to take their revenge from the ruling or upper-class due to the continuous oppression and repression of them. The study finds that the riots and looting that accompany natural disasters and crises, which London refers to, are caused by injustice and persecution against the lower class due to the unfairness of the ruling authority, especially since the upper class is the same who controls the state's decisions and policies.

Nature also proved that no matter how well humans are armed with modern means and equipment, it is subject to disappearance within a few minutes. All man-made laws that the upper class, especially in *The Scarlet Plague*, was keen to implement and enact from the exploitation and oppression of the other classes could collapse in front of the innate law of nature that treats everyone equally, whether for good or for evil. The study also concludes that the epidemic has another side away from the destructive aspects, which is the

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dismantling of social differences and the accompanying injustice and persecution of the lower classes. The epidemic forced survivors to forget their affiliations and origins to begin a new life cycle based on equality by marrying servants to their masters.

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