

Report



The theme-image for the series is a representation of the 'Plague Doctor' in the period 14th-17th centuries in Europe, complete with the Personal Protection of Equipment of that time.

A podcast series organized by the Department of English and coordinated by Professor Anna Kurian and Professor Pramod K Nayar.

The coordinators thank Prof. Vasuki Belavadi, Department of Communication, and Dr. Sanjay Sharma, Director, Computer Centre, UoH, for enabling us to do this.

About the Series

Taking into account the role of and need for literature and narratives in representing and making sense of disease, medicine and experiences of illness in the age of the coronavirus, the department of English has been airing the podcast series "Literature and Disease" over the last few months. The talks examine the treatment of disease and illness across a range of literature, from Shakespeare to present-day graphic narratives, giving us various *ways of seeing dis/ease*, building on the situatedness of the corporeal body in a socio-cultural and political environment and arriving at the porousness of corporeal, social and national borders.

Episode 1

July 12, 2020

Poe, Disease & Lockdowns

by Nandana Dutta, Director, Institute of North East India Studies and Professor,
Department of English, Gauhati University

Nandana Dutta flagged off the series with her examination of “the aesthetics of closure” in Poe’s works, by studying the diseases of the period, Poe’s encounter with these diseases and the representations of these across his works. The abundance of ailments and disease affects such as fear, terror and flushed looks in Poe’s works demands a deeper enquiry of disease as more than merely a thematic concern or the writer’s fascination with the subject, and as an organizing principle of writing itself, an idea that was present even in Poe’s popular *Principles of Composition*. It is with this argument that Dutta approaches the treatment of epidemics in Poe, represented through enclosure, circumscription and quarantine, keywords of any epidemic experience. Disease becomes a setting for creative writing and a strategy for literary organization.

Widespread epidemics such as Yellow Fever, Cholera, Diphtheria, Small Pox in the late 18th and early 19th century gave rise to two general theories of disease: the miasmatic and the contagion theories, that deemed the layout of the city, with its cramped houses, open sewage systems, changes in the environment, and the influx of foreigners and immigrants, as sites of disease. Drawing from letters and journal entries in *The Poe Log*, Dutta then points to Poe’s anguish over the death of a close friend due to cholera, and how his tryst with the illness left him frail and melancholic as well, especially since he was unable to prevent his wife Virginia’s exposure to pulmonary disease in their cramped house. His works are fraught with references to basements, dungeons, isolated castles, sundry rooms and other enclosed and claustrophobic spaces. Dutta then traces, through works such as *The Shadow*, *King Pest*, *The Masque of the Red Death*, *Sphinx*, *The Purloined Letter* and *The Mystery of Marie Roget*, the development of a direct mention of disease as a site or location for complex characters, to works that illustrate disease effects such as fear of proximity and infection. Gradually, quarantined spaces become the site of the plots of his detective novels and closed-room crimes. Dutta ends by stating that for Poe, quarantine images were an enabling literary form to show social class divides that prevailed in the literary spheres of the time as well.

Episode 2

August 4, 2020

Cultural Narratives of Epidemic: Ananthamurthy’s *Samskara*

by Dilip Das, Professor, Department of Cultural Studies, EFL University, Hyderabad

Dilip Das first lays the ground for how an epidemic can be presented and read via indigenous cultural frames before examining UR Ananthamurthy’s Kannada novel *Samskara*, providing an alternative to western readings of the epidemic. Disease narratives are

generally of two kinds: the biomedical, which are supposedly objective, and cultural, which are subjective and a response to biomedical narratives. These two broad categories also draw a distinction between curing (of the body) and healing (of the mind). Cultural responses to the import of diseases often meander between these distinctions, incorporating both, and coming to rest on epidemics as a sign of disorder.

Das considers how these discrepancies play out in *Samskara*, set during the Bubonic plague that quickly spreads in a brahmin village in Karnataka, influenced by the writer's childhood experience of watching only the lower caste people die during a plague. Das reads the differing responses of the brahmins in the *agrahara* and the Dalits who live on the margins of the village as a blurring of biomedical, socio-cultural and religious responses to disease. While for the brahmins, the plague is a result of collective pollution and attributed to their reluctance to bury a member of their community who has repudiated all their rules, the Dalits view it as a demonic intervention that only a shaman can exorcize. The disease is thus seen as cosmological disorder and transgression of caste norms which can only be remedied by performing rituals and restoring order. Das places this in the context of the cultural imaginary of disease in India: disease Goddess worship has ranged from Hindus worshipping goddess Sitala and Mariamma for small Pox, and Hindus and Muslims worshipping Oladevi and Olabibi to end Cholera, to the worshipping of Corona Devi in UP today.

Das ends by drawing attention to Robert Esposito's analogy of immunity and community as sharing the root word *munos*: an obligation that ensures communal bonds. Epidemic, as illustrated through *Samskara*, sees the convergence of community, that brings people together, and its negation in immunity, that isolates people who threaten it.

Episode 3

August 17, 2020

Illness as Defamiliarization: A Reading of Virginia Woolf's "On Being Ill"

by Avishek Parui, Assistant Professor, Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, IIT Madras

Avishek Parui reads Virginia Woolf's essay "On Being Ill" as a work that establishes illness as a representational category by foregrounding how illness defamiliarizes reality through the production of strangeness. He begins by reading Woolf's essay as a debunking of the myth that the mind is more important than the body, and hence as engaging with the poststructuralist idea of the self as a phenomenon and a seamless, endless activity.

He presents the idea that the experience of illness serves as an interruption to the normative ontological idea of the self, and that the embodied nature of cognition, as he reads Woolf, requires a better description of the bodily quality of the self. Parui then reads these ideas of the embodied self in Woolf's essays through recent critical theory, arguing that Woolf anticipates current research on neuroscience, as seen in pioneering works on the embodied nature of cognition by Antonio Damasio. Illness changes cognition and the process of cognition, and one of the many examples of this in Woolf's essay is the experience of decelerated reality, that is, the slowing down of time, when one is ill. Another

example of altered cognition is the perception of space, and Woolf's various metaphors, such as illness as "undiscovered country", anticipate Deleuze's ideas of territorialization and deterritorialization.

Parui asserts that the organizing principle of language, which is phallogocentric and requires closure, does not provide for the narration of an illness that is anti-closure and open ended. Woolf decries ideas of rationality and reason that appear to her mere fantasies with the body being the only reality. The incompatibility of the structured and orderly English language and the mutable and messy body requires a vocabulary that does not water down but instead accentuates the body's visceral nature. This vocabulary, as Parui argues, is achieved through a literature of disease that defamiliarizes reality.

Episode 4

August 30, 2020

Disease and the Great American Novels: Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* and Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*

**by Brian Yothers, Frances Spatz Leighton Endowed Distinguished Professor and Chair,
Department of English, University of Texas, El Paso, USA**

Uncle Tom's Cabin (1852) and *Moby Dick* (1851) are often regarded by literary critics as the two most important novels America has produced. In his talk, Brian Yothers examines how the pandemics of the 19th century influenced the conception and composition of these novels.

America in the 19th century was awash with infectious diseases, of which Cholera, Tuberculosis, Malaria and Syphilis were a few. One drastic consequence of these diseases was the extreme spike in mortality and the death of children, a theme often found in the work of the poets of the time, such as "Death of an Infant" by Lydia Sygourney. Brian Yothers traces how the ghost of disease repeatedly reshaped Stowe's life. "Harriet" was the name of an elder sibling who died shortly after she was born, Stowe's mother succumbed to tuberculosis when Stowe was a child, and Stowe lost her own son to Cholera when the epidemic raged across America in the 1850s. Yothers reads these personal tragedies as being pivotal to the composition of several key scenes in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. The death of a child and its effect on the bereaved parent is seen forming the intersection of child loss and anti-slave morality in the scene where the senator's wife, having lost her child, is moved by an enslaved woman's devotion to her child. In the moving death scene of Eva St Clare, often called the moral centre of the novel, Stowe manages to draw two important 19th century character types – "the stricken child" and "the capable nurse". As Yother explains, Stowe bestows on women a faculty to "maintain emotional balance and competence in the midst of uncertainty and pain", drawing from her own experience of dealing with sudden death due to disease.

Melville's life was also influenced by death due to disease: first of his father due to pneumonia when Melville was only 12, and in later life, the sudden death of his brother due to an unidentified illness. The influence of disease can be seen at several points in *Moby Dick*. Ishmael reflects on the precarity of life and how death can always lurk and be held in the midst of life in the chapter "The Line"; disease and quarantine more directly affect the sequence when the *Pequod* meets the *Jeroboam*, afflicted with a malignant epidemic of the body and the mind. Besides these instances, *Moby Dick* is primarily the journey of the "crazy" Ahab, referring to mental disease as well. Yothers ends his talk by describing the final segment of the novel in which the *Rachel*, whose captain has also lost a child, has come looking for the *Pequod*, evoking the shared themes of lost parents and lost children, the inevitability of loss and the suddenness of death that are found across the works of Stowe and Melville .

Episode 5

September 16, 2020

Narrating Disease and Illness

by Neeraja Sundaram, Assistant Professor, School of Arts and Sciences, Azim Premji University, Bengaluru

Neeraja Sundaram's talk explores different narrative voices, modes of narratives and cultural responses to these. Owing to the plethora of illness narratives from various sources, narration, as Sundaram describes it, is seen as the meaning and understanding that arises from putting ideas together in particular ways for different ends. These different ways could include data narratives, narratives that encompass a thick description of the disease through lived experience, physician narratives, state sponsored narratives etc. Keeping these various kinds of narratives in mind, Sundaram focuses on formal elements that help in our understanding of the ill person.

She traces a typology of ill characters as seen via a multitude of narratives: examples are the 'heroic' medical care worker in non-fictional testimonials, the 'super-spreader' in fictional narratives of biodisaster, or the 'model citizen' in state sponsored health narratives. These types shape our perceptions of normalcy, health and the origin of disease. The work of these narratives and the value we draw from them also depends on their mode, which forms the next segment of the talk. For instance, Atul Gawande's physician memoir draws a distinction between medical education and learning, and does not narrate only the work of physicians but also the affective nuances that accompany the profession. The most common mode, that is the patient and caregiver memoir, contains insights into specific experiences such as diagnosis and its reception, and the patient's "emotional labour". Drawing from Marisa Acocella Marchetto's memoir *Cancer Vixen* and Leah Hayes' *Not Funny Ha-Ha*, Sundaram explains how women narrators ask different questions that arise from their

location in society and revolve around structural inequalities, as seen in narratives about mastectomies and abortions.

In the final segment of the talk, Sundaram describes the role of the reader in listening to these voices narrating illness. For example, popular reviews show how physician memoirs reimagine the social function of doctors. The incorporation of these narratives into medical school curricula to inculcate empathy in the reader contributes to yet another typology, showing us the model way to respond to an illness narrative.

Episode 6

September 28, 2020

Shakespeare and Contagion

by Peter Remien, Associate Professor, Department of English, Lewis-Clark State College, Idaho, USA

In his talk, Peter Remien examines the treatment of plagues in Shakespeare's plays before arguing, drawing from recent work in the area by Darryl Chalk and Mary Floyd-Wilson (2019), that disease in Shakespeare's time was perceived as a result of environmental changes, situating the human body as changing along with a mutable environment.

In the absence of germ theory, the ill body in the Elizabethan age was a confluence of internal bodily health and environmental forces, displaying the humeral body's porous borders. Diseases like small pox, syphilis, the bubonic plague etc. killed over half the people in the country, and this fear and anxiety surrounding plagues is well represented in Shakespeare's plays, as seen in speeches like "A plague upon you all!". These representations are often found in metaphors as part of speeches of anger and disgust, as seen in plays like *King Lear*. They are also embedded in larger sequences such as in *Romeo and Juliet*, where it is the plague that prevents Juliet's letter from reaching Romeo.

Remien arrives at his main argument in the last segment of the talk where he traces the influence of environment and climate on the porous humeral body. When Oikonomia - a nature/animal economy of balance – was perverted, it resulted in disease. This multiplicity of the contagious imagination is seen, for example, in *Julius Caesar*, when Brutus's wife Portia confronts her husband about the dank weather outside and its portending of disease and a sick mind as well. There was thus a discursive blending of health and morality. Works such as *Macbeth* ("Come, thick night!"), *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (in the conflation of the winds and revenge with Titania's conflict with Oberon) or *Henry IV* (in Prince Hal's revelation of his opinions about Falstaff to the audience) also show that personality was connected to the natural world. Shakespeare's plays thus offer a specific representation of the plague where character, morality and disease are all affected by the environment.

Episode 7

October 11, 2020

Literature, Medicine and Ageing

by Ira Raja, Assistant Professor, Department of English, University of Delhi

Ira Raja reads Anita Desai's short story, "A Devoted Son" via frames of medicine, maternity and caregiving, focusing on its subversion of the notion of care through the juxtaposition of religio-cultural traditions and western medicine.

The short story is about the son of an ageing vegetable seller, Verma, who becomes a successful doctor and in the course of looking after his ailing father, imposes severe dietary restrictions on him. Ira Raja reads the plot as describing the "control over the ageing body in the name of filial duty empowered by western medical science." Raja delineates the different approaches to illness taken by the son, who represents western biomedical practices, and the father, who seeks to embody the filial position of authority as decreed by traditional Indian norms. Biomedicine is concerned with longevity, and seeks to control the body, whereas intergenerational food relations as described by the Hindu cosmology emphasize the transactional nature of food embodied in customs like *annadaan* as an important segment of one's life.

Ira Raja contextualises the family dynamics around the transactional nature of food by drawing from anthropological research by Ravindra Khare and around Sarah Lamb's research on indebtedness in the family and the custom of providing food in later life. Urbanization and a "mimicry of international gerontology" not only dismantle the traditional family frame, as research by WJ Goode in the 1960s shows, but also leads to a fall in the status of old people and a loss of the Indian self, as Cohen later emphasizes. Raja reads the aporia of modernity in the story via these frames: the doctor son delegitimizes his sick father's right to self-determination and reveals the hegemonic power of modern knowledge systems that displace traditional Hindu texts. For the son and for biomedicine, food is material, but according to Hindu texts, with age, food should not be sensorial but nourishing. Food becomes a measure of real power within the family. Care is replaced by modern medical authority.

Raja ends by reading the story as challenging the binarism of modernization theory and its discourses and arguing that modernity and renegotiated traditional notions are not binary archetypes but "differentially hegemonic relationships".

Archive of episodes:

<http://herald.uohyd.ac.in/literature-disease-listen-to-the-first-episode-in-the-new-podcast-series/>

<http://herald.uohyd.ac.in/ananthamurthys-samskara/>

<http://herald.uohyd.ac.in/illness-as-defamiliarization-a-reading-of-virginia-woolfs-on-being-ill/>

<https://herald.uohyd.ac.in/disease-and-the-great-american-novels/>

<http://herald.uohyd.ac.in/literature-disease-narrating-disease-and-illness/>

<http://herald.uohyd.ac.in/literature-disease-shakespeare-and-contagion/>

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