

“Because Survival is Insufficient”: Pandemic Narratives in the 21st Century

*Yasmine Ahmed Sweed**

While the outbreak of COVID-19 virus has been a paradigm-shifting experience that has divided people’s lives into ‘before’ and ‘after’ pandemics, with their deep socioeconomic, cultural and health impact, have always been a constant component of human experience. Michele Augusto Riva, Marta Benedetti and Giancarlo Cesana maintain that:

In the ancient world, plague and pestilence were rather frequent calamities, and ordinary people were likely to have witnessed or heard vivid and scary reports about their terrible ravages. When plague spread, no medicine could help, and no one could stop it from striking; the only way to escape was to avoid contact with infected persons and contaminated objects. (2014, 1753)

Different artistic responses to pandemics across history have always helped people make sense of contagion, explore its consequences and take individual and collective positions. Riva, Benedetti and Cesana add that the motif of the plague is a “consistent and well-spread topos” that forms a long literary tradition that invites “the reader to reflect on the ancestral fear of humans toward infectious diseases” (2014, 1753). Priscilla Wald attributes the rising popularity of pandemic narratives in the 21st century to their ability to combine ancestral fears of disease and contemporary social concerns. Wald’s definition adds a new dimension to our understanding of the genre as it invites readers to view pandemic literature as an archive of contemporary concerns of any given historical period. She maintains that:

these narratives are critiques of socioeconomic inequities and titillating tales of apocalyptic struggles with primordial earth

* Assistant Professor at the Faculty of Languages, October University for Modern Sciences and Arts, Egypt.
Cairo Studies in English 2021(2): 189-205. <https://cse.journals.ekb.eg/>
DOI: 10.21608/cse.2022.45581.1067

demons, hard-headed analyses of environmental exhaustion and hopeful stories of timeless renewal. As they simultaneously fore-cast the imminent destruction and affirm the enduring foundations of community, they offer myths for the contemporary moment. (2008, 10)

Wald's conceptualization of pandemic literature is important because it imbues the analysis of the genre with social, political and cultural significance that goes beyond its immediate medical and psychological implications. She adds that the genre can stigmatize or mitigate certain individuals, groups, countries, lifestyles and behaviors (2008, 3). In this sense, the pandemic narrative becomes mutually influenced by, and greatly influences, its moment of production.

This paper explores the configuration of pandemics in *Such Is This World@sars.com* (2011) by Chinese writer Hu Fayun and *Station Eleven* (2014) by Canadian American author Emily St. John Mandel, with the purpose of examining the paradigm shifting effect of disease on people's ideas, beliefs, value systems, social structures, as well as political and religious entities. The researcher chose these texts because the literature that arose as a response to previous pandemics reverberates into the present and speaks to the current moment in deep and insightful ways, helping people make sense of the challenges of COVID-19. Building on Wald's ideas in her book *Contagious: Cultures, Carriers, and the Outbreak Narrative*, the paper attempts to position the texts as a response to and a repository of contemporary fears about globalization, state hegemony and surveillance, in addition to the people's increasing reliance on technology, and community identity. Pandemic literature holds up a mirror to the readers' deepest and most pressing concerns about the present moment, and examines diverse possible responses to those fears. It shows them that the boundaries that people use to structure society are fragile and unstable.

The paper argues that while pandemic literature as a genre might initially seem as relevant only to its particular moment of production and consumption, as it addresses specific kinds of medical fears, a deeper look reveals that it has boundary crossing capabilities as it reflects multifaceted, wider reaching human concerns. Accordingly, one can argue that pandemic literature can be viewed as a repository of both archetypal, primordial concerns about human survival and extinction, as well as time-specific and culture-bound fears. The paper argues that in addition to their delineation of tangible medical threats, these texts allow their authors and readers to think about unsettling questions about the human condition and what it means to be human even amid the anticipation of extinction

and which human traits are deemed as worthy of protection, continuity and/or sacrifice.

Since the 21st century pandemic narratives, developed so far, are part of a long and well-established literary tradition, a brief tracing of past literary responses to pandemics can inform our understanding of how different societies perceive and respond to pandemics, as well as the changes and continuities of the genre across times and cultures. Jo N. Hays highlights the various and sometimes conflicting etiological interpretations of pandemics, which result in different responses to the calamity: “Epidemic diseases have been variously ascribed to divine will, environmental corruption, contagion, malign spirits, individuals or groups (sometimes stigmatized as scapegoats), organisms external to the body, and spontaneous internal malfunctions” (2007, 34). In the old times, the intense fear of pandemics was mainly fueled by a firm belief in the supernatural origin of the disease. A causal relation between pandemics and sins is clearly reflected in both classical and biblical narratives, which, in the words of Rowan Williams, had “a strongly defined template for reading plague as a matter of divine agency, normally punishment; and for seeing the possibilities of healing or averting disease as bound in with identifying where responsibility primarily lies, so that the innocent and the guilty can be properly distinguished” (2017, 200).

The *Iliad* is one of the first major literary texts to depict a guilty agency punished by divine intervention in the form of a deadly plague (Williams 2017, 196). Right from the beginning, we have a grim picture of a disease that ravishes the Greek army as the god Apollo is unleashing the plague to avenge the abduction of the daughter of one of his priests: “That god was Apollo, son of Zeus and Leto. Angry with Agamemnon, he cast plague down onto the troops—deadly infectious evil. For Agamemnon had dishonoured the god's priest, Chryses” (2006, 20). The text illustrates that the disease and the resulting devastation, suffering and death are directly attributed to divine intervention as a punishment for human follies, which can only be remedied by calling for an assembly, publically identifying the culprit, negotiating the punishment with the deities and offering penance: “He won't remove this wretched plague from the Danaans, until we hand back bright-eyed Chryseis, give her to her beloved father” (2006,11).

Similarly, in Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, the plague is used as a tool that allows the readers to reflect on the complex relation between the sins of the ruler, the welfare of his people and divine justice. It starts with a horrendous common crisis that befalls the city as a result of a guilty agency and fervent insistent prayers for the gods to save people's lives. Oedipus, the king of Thebes, consults the Delphic Oracle, which clarifies that the unavenged murder of King Laius is

the cause of this evil plague, and maintains that healing is only possible if the murderer is identified and cast out to appease the gods: “Banish the man, or pay back blood with blood. Murder sets the plague-storm on the city” (1984, 12). Thus, it becomes clear that the plague is the physical manifestation of human sins and can go away only if the sinner is identified and punished.

An equally moralized world view that is governed by divine intervention is depicted in the biblical narrative of the Exodus, where the ten plagues of Egypt were a punishment for the relentless refusal of Pharaoh to allow the Israelites to leave Egypt: “This is what the LORD says: About midnight I will go throughout Egypt. Every firstborn son in Egypt will die, from the firstborn son of Pharaoh, who sits on the throne, to the firstborn of the slave girl, who is at her hand mill, and all the firstborn of the cattle as well. There will be loud wailing throughout Egypt” (2010, 31). Again, the complex relation between the actions of the monarch and the welfare of his kingdom informs people’s perception of and response to epidemics.

The perception of pandemics as an embodiment of God’s wrath carried on in the Middle Ages in Europe, which was ravaged by the Black Death that killed millions of people in the period 1347-1352. However, unlike many biblical and classical narratives, which singled out a particular agency or action that incurred divine punishment, a primary guilt or clearly defined offender could not be identified which led to the rise of shared acts of penance. Joshua J. Mark explains that in order to appease God and atone for humanity’s sins, processions of flagellants would publically whip themselves in cities and villages, but these actions were deemed ineffective and were denounced by the Pope (2020). Mark further maintains that “the perceived failure of religion to stop, or at least alleviate, the suffering and death of the plague turned many away from the medieval Church to seek answers elsewhere; an impulse which would eventually give rise to the humanistic worldview of the Renaissance” (2020).

One of the texts that offer an accurate description of the outbreak of the Bubonic plague in Italy was Giovanni Boccaccio’s *The Decameron* (1349-1353), which is a collection of stories narrated by ten young men and women, who flee the plague-infested Florence and take refuge in a secluded villa in the countryside. In the introduction, Boccaccio accurately describes how people reacted to the horrific catastrophe that led to a staggering death toll in Florence. The text sheds light on the different responses to the pandemic, which were affected by the financial status and social class of the people. The rich managed to either isolate themselves at home, where they enjoyed quality provisions and music, or desert Florence altogether, finding retreat in countryside villas. On the other hand, the poor “forlorn of physicians’ care or servants’ tendance, perished

day and night alike, not as men, but rather as beasts” (2003, 18). In addition to highlighting the disparities between the wealthy and the poor, the text criticizes certain qualities such as greed, avarice, corruption, and the lack of empathy.

The 18th and 19th centuries witnessed a clear development in literary responses to pandemics and diseases. The increasing dominance of science, the rise of the medical discourse, the prevalence of many contagious diseases such as yellow fever, small-pox and typhus and the newly gained knowledge about modes of disease transmission challenged people’s religious perception about pandemics and triggered fears about human extinction. Anne McWhir explains that these fears resulted in the spawning of a trend of apocalyptic narratives that reflected both fear of contagion, as well as, fear of the racial and cultural other that was viewed as a possible epidemiological threat (2002, 23). Not only did these texts reflect contemporary domestic and foreign political and socio-cultural fears about Britain’s position as a world power and the health of its population as a marker of the strength of the nation as a whole, but they also helped in propagating the metaphorical discourse of disease. This is evident in Mary Shelley’s apocalyptic novel *The Last Man* (1826), which depicts the gradual extermination of the human race in a future world in the late 21st century as a result of a plague that originates in the East. McWhir maintains that Mary Shelley “draws on the common metaphorical meaning of plague: any system, idea, or influence considered to be morally or intellectually dangerous” (2002, 24). Through depicting the annihilation of humanity by a pandemic, *The Last Man* employs a discourse of disease that pervaded the political writing of the Romantic period.

The tendency to explore the implications of the metaphorical use of plagues continued in 20th century pandemic narratives. Rowan Williams maintains that modern pandemic literature has a tendency to use the “language and imagery of plague to make sense not so much of literal pestilence as of crisis in the moral world itself, both political and individual” (2003, 201). This is evident in Albert Camus’s *The Plague* (1947) which, in addition to depicting the archetypal fear of death, uses the motif of the plague to question the infection of social and political will. The plague, in this sense, becomes a metaphor for religious and political totalitarianism, which are equally deadly. The text, according to Williams, seems to be giving the readers “a deceptively simple choice: are you on the side of the plague or not? Is your will ultimately a will for death or life?” (2003, 205). One can argue that social and political inaction towards oppression becomes equivalent to passivity towards pandemics and the result would be the death of humanity at large.

Similar to older artistic responses to pandemics, both *Such Is This World@sars.com* and *Station Eleven* use pandemics as a tool to examine various contemporary fears. *Such Is This World@sars.com*, according to Brian Bernards, is one of the most important works of contemporary Chinese literature that address the diverse social and political repercussions of the outbreak of SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome) in China in 2003 (2011). Ian Johnson maintains that unlike many contemporary Chinese works that resort to “ornate magic realism” to tackle sensitive political and social issues, the novel adopts a more realistic and grounded aesthetics (2016). Belinda Kong adds that the novel “offers a rich representational range of the totalitarian alongside the ordinary, combining an explicit censure of the communist government’s history of repression with an equal emphasis on the continuities of daily life amid an epidemic” (2018, 144).

The novel, which is set in an unnamed “City X” and takes place over one year, follows the life of Ru Yan, a middle aged, widowed botanist during the 2003 outbreak of SARS in China. Before going to France to study architecture, Ru Yan’s only son gives her a dog, which she names after her son, and a computer with a high-speed Internet connection, introducing her into the world of technology, chat forums, instant messaging and emails. Her online community widens when she joins the Empty Nest, a forum for parents whose children study abroad, where she discovers her passion for words by writing online essays that draw the admiration of many readers including that of Liang Jinsheng, the recently widowed city mayor who starts to court her.

The outbreak of SARS forces Ru Yan’s off-line and online worlds to collide and it is through this collision that her political consciousness and activism are awakened as she starts to gain a deeper understanding of state power and its mechanisms of surveillance and dominance. She first learns about the epidemic when she calls her family in southern China and her mother informs her about the outbreak of an incurable, deadly disease there, “You get it, you die” (2011, 178). She also learns that her brother-in-law in Guangzhou has been infected with this mysterious disease. She becomes increasingly frustrated with and critical of the lack of official news and the tight restrictions the Chinese authorities are imposing on the circulation of information on the emerging epidemic. Angry at the fact that unofficial private phone calls become the main source of information, she writes an essay, which eventually goes viral, to warn her online forum friends. Her first encounter with internet censorship and China’s Great Firewall takes place when she realizes, to her surprise, that her post has been removed and is replaced with a “SERVER ERROR” message (2011, 181). This realistic depiction and critique of state surveillance and

ensorship ironically foreshadows the novel's tumultuous publication history. Brian Bernards explains that the novel was published online in 2005 (Chinese text), only to disappear several weeks later after the shutdown of its hosting website. Along the years, an abridged edition was released by a Chinese publisher; an uncensored version was made available by a Hong Kong publisher and an English translation of the author's full manuscript was finally out in 2011(2011).

Shedding her political naiveté, Ru Yan now realizes that “what she thought was a little salon hosted by herself there was actually an old crone concealed and peering at everything from behind a curtain” (2011, 181-82). As the disease spreads across the country, Ru Yan decides to use the Internet to speak truth to power and criticize the government's censoring of information at the initial outbreak and the implementation of brutal and abusive diagnostic and quarantine measures to curb the disease. Through depicting the overwhelming chaos and confusion triggered by fear of the virus and fear of a government cover-up, the writer uses the motif of the plague and the discourse of disease to engage with contemporary political and social concerns that reach far beyond the medical ones. In this sense, one can argue that Fayun's novel is both a pandemic narrative and a historical record that documents the growing influence of the Internet in China as a tool to bypass restrictions on dissemination of information imposed on state- controlled media outlets.

Ru Yan's internet activism helps her develop a small circle of similar minded friends who support her. Her several discussions about people's right to access information with her friends Damo, an anti-establishment blogger, and Wei, a respected, courageous mentor who has suffered decades of state persecution, help the novel become a site of resistance and an outlet where dissident voices are heard. When she becomes a victim to government surveillance and cyber bullying, Damo tells her: “Herein lies the Internet's strong suit, but also its Achilles' heel, for anything taken beyond normal limits can have unintended consequences. This is an endemic problem in countries that restrict open discussion” (2011, 169). Damo's words are very important because they highlight the Internet's double-edged nature as both a tool for government oppression and a tool for resistance. Moreover, they highlight the overlapping between the epidemics of disease and information as the novel criticizes the government's faulty premise that unwanted ideas are like dangerous diseases that should be eliminated to maintain the status quo. The novel compares the state's brutal lock down measures to control the spread of the disease to the imposition of the “Great Firewall” to control the spread of unauthorized “viral” information and dissident ideas online.

The novel is not only concerned with the state's draconic measures regarding internet activists like Ru Yan, but it also offers a more comprehensive view of freedom of speech in general through the character of Wei, who is viewed by the authorities as a threat because of his prominent role as an intellectual mentor to a group of independent thinkers. He voices one of the novel's most scathing criticism of state hegemony:

I curse the environment that consumes a human being, devours him right down to the bones. China doesn't lack for experts in political thought. Her scholars don't lack for brains. It's just that some have been smothered, others have been intimidated, and still others have freely made themselves accomplices. If you want to talk about tragedies, this is the greatest tragedy that can befall a people. (2011, 302)

As a result of being seen as a source of infection that spreads revolutionary ideologies, Wei falls prey to political scheming and dies in a horrific manner by being deliberately misdiagnosed as a SARS patient. He is then forcibly quarantined in an isolation ward, where he contracts the disease and is left to die alone. The deletion of Ru Yan's online post, in which she condemns the government's handling of the epidemic, and the elimination of Wei, under the pretext that he is infected, expose how the government uses the pandemic as a justification for the imposition of surveillance and the crushing of resistance.

Ru Yan's and Wei's experiences with totalitarian power amid the outbreak of a pandemic echo Foucault's ideas that a plague, whether real or imaginary, has overlapping medical and political repercussions and is never devoid of a dream of power (1991, 198). Under the pretext of containing a threatening infectious disease, power is exercised in a continuous hegemonic manner upon society as a whole to create the "utopia of the perfectly governed city" (1991, 198). The writer's depiction of his country mirrors Foucault's plague model, in which he imagines a plague-stricken city as follows:

enclosed, segmented space, observed at every point, in which the individuals are inserted in a fixed place, in which the slightest movements are supervised [...] in which power is exercised without division, according to a continuous hierarchical figure, in which each individual is constantly located, examined and distributed among the living beings, the sick and the dead – all this constitutes a compact model of the disciplinary mechanism. (1991, 197)

While the hegemonic power maintains that the purpose of these harsh disciplinary measures and surveillance techniques is to control the spreading of the virus, one can argue that this partitioned, enclosed space facilitates the disruption of any threatening communication, the assessment of everyone's activities and the possible punishment in case of unaccepted behavior. That is why, Foucault maintains that "rulers dreamt of the state of plague" (1991, 199).

The novel illustrates power dynamics amid pandemics by exposing the irony of exempting government officials who are charged with enforcing these strict measures from following them. The personal plotline, which follows the romantic relation between Ru Yan and Liang, encapsulates indirect sociopolitical commentary. For example, when SARS hits Ru Yan's city and strict measures on freedom of movement and animal ownership and consumption are imposed on all the residents, Liang, who is in charge of epidemic management, treats her to a banquet of rare delicacies at an upscale, exclusive restaurant owned by a descendant of imperial chefs on Valentine's Day. The incident highlights the extra privileges that are given to officials to dine freely amid bans on animal consumption. In another incident, Fayun highlights the unrestricted mobility of top officials like Liang versus the forced imprisonment of dissidents like Wei by showing how Liang freely breaks quarantine measures to visit Ru Yan whenever he pleases.

However, the novel also depicts the hierarchical structure of power by depicting the factors that inform the decisions of representatives of state power like Liang. In his critique of the totalitarian disciplinary nature of the state of plague, Fayun offers a glimpse into the hierarchy of power involved in the daily operations of the city and the various pressures that public officials face to develop urban centers while attempting to curb the disease. Fayun employs the character of Liang to expose the self-centered nature of public officials. He maintains that fear over one's political career and self-interests in case of a slight failure is highly responsible for the violent and draconic quarantine measures that officials impose on Ru Yan's city:

This year was going to be a make-or-break year for our city [...] with several big negotiations for investment, a batch of important construction projects, a business expo with global reach, a science & technology conference, even the tourist season [...] it looks like they've all gone up in smoke. [...] As you should know, it's an unwritten rule in official circles that when something goes wrong, the person most nearly responsible will be singled out and made an

example of. S.O.P. [...] This is the cheapest and least disruptive solution. (2011, 354)

Liang's words highlight the strict power hierarchy that does not tolerate any lapse and foreshadow the repercussions of the political on the personal. Although his feelings towards Ru Yan are depicted as being sincere, he takes a voluntary, pragmatic decision to break ties with her because of her internet activism and her attempt to speak truth to power. Liang's success at controlling the disease in the city bolsters his position in the party ranks and his relation with an activist can be an impediment to his career. The novel maintains that the failure in their relationship is the result of the intrinsic difference between Ru Yan, who "seeks the overarching values in life, its ultimate meaning," and Liang, who is "unable to detach [...] from worldly fame and power" (2011, 435). Ru Yan deals with her heartache gracefully and maintains her normal life routine and at the end of novel, she decides to "begin life anew and live one's days well" (2011, 443).

In spite of the fact that the ending of the novel might seem ordinary with no tremendous change in the life of the protagonist, Ru Yan is far from being a powerless victim of a panoptic state and a failed affair. She remains true to herself, a courageous and moral citizen and a loving mother that has self-respect, integrity and dignity. At the end of the novel, she gets rid of Liang's clothes not by throwing them in the bin, but by recycling them and giving them to the poor. This minor step helps her move forward while showing a small civic gesture to the needy. The text illustrates how she was able to survive from post-epidemic traumatic stress, surveillance, cyber bullying and romantic disappointment by showing resilience and courage in the face of adversity. Belinda Kong maintains that rather than depicting the following:

heroic acts of resistance or bold declarations of a transformed future, the narrative's quiet conclusion recasts the terms of ongoing life in contemporary China from [...] state repression and grassroots protest, toward an ethos of everyday endurance. [...] These acts have no large-scale or long-term sociopolitical impact, but neither do they represent forms of quietism or futility. (2018, 153)

Hence, one can argue that the novel emphasizes the value of survival and returning to ordinary life after an extraordinary crisis. In this sense, not being worn out by politics or disease is actually a special kind of victory and a survival mechanism. Although the novel ends on an understated note as opposed to louder scenes of dissidence in earlier chapters, the readers value Ru Yan's agency and

her ability to reaffirm her identity as an ethical and responsible citizen. The epidemic in this text helps her develop her voice, political awareness and inner strength. Although the text does not depict a completely transformed society, Fayun's post-crisis setting is far from being a post-apocalyptic one and the novel renews readers' appreciation of the values of survival and resilience in the face of adversity.

Unlike *Such Is This World@sars.come*, which offers a realistic depiction of contemporary China amid the rise of the SARS epidemic, *Station Eleven* (2014) by Canadian American novelist Emily St. John Mandel depicts a post-apocalyptic, depopulated world that is struck by the highly contagious Georgia Flu. Mandel's text has a more complicated narrative structure than that of Fayun's novel because it depicts three time frames: the outbreak of the pandemic and the immediate aftermath, life twenty years after the disaster and glimpses of life before the pandemic. The disparity between the pre apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic worlds helps the novel examine contemporary anxieties regarding man's ambivalent relationship with technology, the meaning of life and the value of art and memory even in the most desperate circumstances. In an interview, Mandel said that the main premise for writing the book was exploring what people would miss and would like to save in case of the occurrence of an apocalyptic event ("The Agenda" 2015). The novel explores the possibility and inevitability of artistic expression in a post-collapse world. The post-apocalyptic time frame, which dominates the majority of the novel, depicts the life of the Travelling Symphony, a nomadic group of musicians and actors who wander through scattered outposts in North America to perform Shakespearean plays for the survivors. It follows their journey to the Museum of Civilization, which exhibits important items from the pre-apocalyptic world that are no longer in use except as nostalgic reminders of the lost modern world. One can argue that by exploring "the human capacity to create and to pursue meaning via art, story and shared community" (Tate 2017, 133), the novel offers an unusually hopeful and optimistic vision of an otherwise bleak world.

What ties the strands and characters in the different time frames is the character of Arthur Leander, an actor who dies of a heart attack at the beginning of the novel while performing *King Lear* in front of the audience. Most of the other characters are associated with him. Kirsten, who in the present is a member of the Travelling Symphony, witnessed Arthur's death while she was performing with him the night he died. Clark, who is responsible for the Museum of Civilization, was his best friend. Jeevan, who works as a paramedic in the post-collapse world, was a paparazzi who used to write about Arthur and was the one who tried to save him by performing first aid when he collapsed on stage. The

enigmatic character of the Prophet, who is a leader of an armed fanatic religious cult, turns out to be Arthur's son from his second wife Elizabeth.

Similar to Fayun's text, *Station Eleven* depicts the chaos, confusion and fear that are triggered by the sudden onset of a deadly virus, "a flu that exploded like a neutron bomb over the surface of the earth" (2014, 37). The devastating consequences of the virus are depicted mainly through the perspectives of Clark and Jeevan. Clark managed to avoid exposure to the disease since his flight to the heavily affected Toronto was redirected to Severn City Airport, a place that was not exposed to the virus and consequently became a permanent residence for Clark and the other stranded passengers. Jeevan, on the other hand, is warned early on by a friend about the highly contagious disease, so he manages to stock up on food and other supplies and retreat to his brother's apartment in a skyscraper in Toronto, where he witnesses the horrific repercussions of the pandemic, "Toronto was falling silent. Every morning was deeper, the perpetual hum of the city fading away" (2014, 177). As a typical post-apocalyptic narrative, the virus is depicted as a catastrophic event with global repercussions, "countries began to go dark, city by city – no news out of Moscow, then no news out of Beijing, then Sydney, London, Paris, etc." (2014, 177).

After describing the collapse of society, Mandel starts exploring the nature and the culture of the world after an event with such magnitude. In an interview, she said that she is interested in writing about the modern world and how people take all the trappings of civilization like electricity, internet, phones and planes for granted to the point that people might start unseeing them. An interesting way of writing about our modern world is to think about its absence ("The Agenda" 2015). Unlike Fayun who uses the pandemic as a tool to promote a more urgent political agenda, Mandel employs it as a tool to make the modern world disappear so that she can start asking unsettling questions about what people would miss the most, what they would long for and what they would attempt to recreate. An interesting passage that illustrates this radical shift is one that describes the disintegration of the media and the Internet, signaling the loss of global connectivity and societal breakdown:

The local news became more and more local, stations dropping away one by one, until finally the last channel on air showed only a single shot in a newsroom, station employees taking turns standing before the camera and disseminating whatever information they had, and then one night Jeevan opened his eyes at two a.m. and the newsroom was empty. Everyone had left it. [...] A day later, someone finally

switched off the camera on the empty newsroom, or the camera died on its own. The day after that, the Internet blinked out. (2014, 177)

Mandel reflects on human beings' increasing dependence on technology by showing the sharp contrast between the two worlds. Consequently, the characters and the readers become acutely aware of what is lost. Early in the novel, both Jeevan and Clark try to come to terms with the fact that their lives have completely changed and that a pandemic with this magnitude would create a before-and-after dichotomy. However, unlike many apocalyptic texts that are apprehensive of humans' increasing reliance on technology and address the multitude of problems that it entails such as global warming, environmental destruction and global inequality, Mandel's novel exhibits an ambivalent attitude towards technology.

The text depicts characters who experience a great fascination with and a sense of nostalgia for the modern world with all of its technological trappings, but at the same time, they attempt to find beauty and magic in their new reality where the "light pollution had come to an end" (2014, 251), and where there are no borders that divide first world and third world countries (2014, 31). The nostalgia for the modern world is nowhere more visible than in chapter six which consists only of an incomplete list of the things that the survivors miss. The list which illustrates the ways in which the world has changed account for much of the text's impact:

No more diving into pools of chlorinated water lit green from below. No more ball games played out under floodlights. No more porch lights with moths fluttering on summer nights. No more trains running under the surface of cities on the dazzling power of the electric third rail. No more cities. No more films. [...] No more screens shining in the half-light as people raise their phones above the crowd to take photographs of concert stages. No more concert stages lit by candy-coloured halogens, no more electronica, punk, electric guitars. [...] No more flight. [...] No more airplanes. [...] No more spacecraft rising from Cape Canaveral [...] burning paths through the atmosphere into space. (2014, 31–32)

The list depicts the loss of comforts and amenities of the 21st century and how this might feel for the survivors and although the text depicts modern world luxuries, humans' fear of reverting to a more primitive state as a result of a pandemic is a recurrent ancestral trope in pandemic literature. One can argue that

this archetypal fear triggers a nostalgia for technology and a desire to document the past, which is manifest in the creation of the Museum of Civilization at the Severn City airport, where Clark has preserved a huge number of the pre-collapse artifacts, which have no practical use in a post-apocalyptic setting, but serve as a reminder of what human beings are capable of and can recreate. The list of preserved artifacts includes random items such as:

cell phones with their delicate buttons, iPads, Tyler's Nintendo console, a selection of laptops. There were a number of impractical shoes, stilettos mostly, beautiful and strange. There were three car engines in a row, cleaned and polished, a motorcycle composed mostly of gleaming chrome. Traders brought things for Clark sometimes, objects of no real value that they knew he would like: magazines and newspapers, a stamp collection, coins. There were the passports or the driver's licenses or sometimes the credit cards of people who had lived at the airport and then died. Clark kept impeccable records. (2014, 258)

This list is very significant because it symbolizes the desire to rebuild the modern world and make sense of the new reality through cherishing the past and incorporating it in the present. It also raises questions about the absolute randomness of what survives and what does not from a given historical period. This attempt to rebuild the modern world culminates with Clark and Kirsten on top of the airport towers watching "pinpricks of light arranged into a grid. There, plainly visible on the side of a hill some miles distant: a town, or a village, whose streets were lit up with electricity" (2014, 311). Although the novel is about a pandemic that annihilates most of Earth's population, it ends on an optimistic note as it depicts humanity's rudimentary yet serious attempt to reconstruct electricity, which stirs hope that the survivors might be able to gradually regain what they have lost. Similar to Fayun's text, Mandel's work emphasizes the importance of not giving up or being worn out by extraordinary crisis. Both texts promote hope, endurance and courage in the face of adversity.

In addition to raising questions about humanity's complicated relationship with technology, the novel raises questions regarding the human need for artistic expression and the therapeutic role of art during disasters of a great magnitude. The novel eloquently voices this human need for artistic response by maintaining that "survival is insufficient," which is the underlying philosophy and slogan of the travelling company that keeps roaming several scattered settlements to perform Shakespearean plays for the survivors. In Mandel's novel, art becomes

a means of adding meaning to the lives of the survivors who refuse to reduce their existence to basic survival. The actors' and musicians' ability "to cast a spell" on their spectators who "spent all their time engaged in the tasks of survival" and to distract them from lives that "were work-worn and difficult" (2014, 151) is what motivates them to exert the effort of moving through scattered towns instead of merely settling down and to continue what "seemed a difficult and dangerous way to survive and hardly worth it" (2014, 119). The therapeutic effect of art enables both players and audience to find unparalleled beauty and make their existence bearable, "They may have lost almost everything, almost everyone, but there is still such beauty. Twilight in the altered world, a performance of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in a parking lot in the mysteriously named town of St. Deborah by the Water, Lake Michigan shining a half mile away" (2014, 57).

The fact that Shakespeare's world was deeply affected by the outbreak of the Bubonic plague strikes eerie parallels to the apocalyptic present and the fact that art survived and helped people survive during Shakespeare's time attests to the enduring power of art and that mere survival is insufficient. In an interview, Mandel commented on the choice of Shakespeare explaining that she believes that in case of an apocalypse, people would want to enjoy what was best in life ("The Agenda" 2015) and in her point of view, Shakespeare is what the audience would want, "They'd performed more modern plays sometimes in the first few years, but what was startling, what no one would have anticipated, was that audiences seemed to prefer Shakespeare to their other theatrical offerings" (2014, 38). Philip Smith maintains that the choice of the plays is significant as the novel begins with the death of Arthur while performing *King Lear*, a tragedy which ushers the pandemic. Twenty years after the catastrophe, the troupe performs *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, which indicates the possibility of rebirth and which symbolically reminds the readers that the "world was softening" (2016, 133). Thus, the novel ends on a positive note as it encourages readers not to be worn out by the disaster and depicts a potential of renewal and rebirth.

In conclusion, the paper argues that while pandemic literature might initially seem as only addressing archetypal fears of disease and extinction, a deeper look reveals that it can be viewed as an archive of a wide range of time and culture specific fears. *Such Is This World@sars.come* and *Station Eleven* can be seen as a response to current fears about globalization, increased reliance on technology, freedom of speech and state surveillance. Moreover, they can be viewed as important historical records that document their moment of production as they stitch contemporary social, political and aesthetic concerns into the fabric of the pandemic narrative. In both texts, dealing with a pandemic is a life changing

experience that has political, social and cultural implications. In Fayun's text, the pandemic helps Ru Yan find a voice and enhance her political awareness, which consequently triggers her internet activism and attempt to speak truth to power. In *Station Eleven*, it forces several characters to confront their fears, re-examine the meaning of their lives and discover the values and things that are worth protection. Both texts examine their characters' complicated relationship with technology, but Fayun's novel has a more immediate political agenda than that of Mandel. *Such Is This World* uses the 2003 SARS to criticize Internet censorship and state surveillance, whereas, *Station Eleven* uses the pandemic to examine what people would miss and attempt to save in case of the occurrence of an apocalyptic event.

Both works emphasize the importance of art as a basic human need and its role in adding meaning to life and surviving extraordinary catastrophes. In Fayun's text, the protagonist discovers her passion for words by writing online essays that help her speak truth to power and cope with the outbreak of the pandemic and the absence of her son. Similarly, Mandel's work highlights the therapeutic role of art as it adds beauty and magic to the lives of both actors and audience. Moreover, both end on a positive note and promote resilience in the face of crisis. Fayun's novel emphasizes the value of survival and returning to ordinary life after an extraordinary catastrophe and although the novel ends on an understated note because the political issues that it tackles remain unresolved, the protagonist maintains her agency and reaffirms her identity as an ethical citizen. Mandel's text, on the other hand, maintains a more optimistic tone than that of Fayun's as it ends with humanity's attempt to rebuild the modern world and regain what it has lost. Finally, the novels can be read in the light of the current Covid-19 pandemic as both works emphasize the value of survival, hope and resilience in the face of adversity and offer various modes of coping with extraordinary crisis, which, in turn, can help readers make sense of the Covid-19 pandemic and envision new ways of dealing with the "new normal" with courage, optimism and resilience.

Works Cited

- Bernards, Brian. 2011. "Review of *Such Is This World@sars.come*, by Hu Fayun." MCLC Resource Center. <https://u.osu.edu/mclc/book-reviews/such-is-this/>.
- Boccaccio, Giovanni. 2003. *The Decameron, Volume I*. Salt Lake City: Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation. <https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/3726>

- Fayun, Hu. 2011. *Such Is This World@sars.come*. Translated by. A. E. Clark. Dobbs Ferry, NY: Ragged Banner.
- Halm, Scott, ed. 2010. *The Ignatius Catholic Study Bible*. San Francisco: Ignatius Press.
- Hays, Jo N. 2006. "Historians and Epidemics." Chapter. In *Plague and the End of Antiquity: The Pandemic of 541–750*, edited by Lester K. Little, 33–56. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Homer. 2007. *The Iliad*. Translated by and Ian Johnston. Arlington, Va: Richer Resources Publications.
- Johnson, Ian. 2016. "Inside and Outside the System: Chinese Writer Hu Fayun." *New York Review of Books* (Nov. 28).
<https://www.nybooks.com/daily/2016/11/28/china-inside-and-outside-system-hu-fayun/>
- Kong, Belinda. 2018. "Totalitarian Ordinarity: The Chinese Epidemic Novel as World Literature." *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture* 30, no. 1: 136–62. doi:10.2307/26588545.
- Mandel, Emily St. John. 2014. *Station Eleven: A Novel*. New York: Knopf.
- , 2015. From "The Agenda with Steve Paikin." Interview by Steve Paikin. TVO.org, Jun 3. Video.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TLxWgtl7VHA>.
- Mark, Joshua J. 2014. "Boccaccio on the Black Death: Text & Commentary." *Ancient History Encyclopedia*.
<https://www.ancient.eu/article/1537/boccaccio-on-the-black-death-text-commentary/>
- McWhir, Anne. 2002. "Mary Shelley's Anti-Contagionism: 'The Last Man as Fatal Narrative.'" *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal* 35: 23-38.
- Riva, Michele Augusto, Marta Benedetti and Giancarlo Cesana. 2014. "Pandemic Fear and Literature: Observations from Jack London's *The Scarlet Plague*." *Emerging Infectious Diseases* 20, no.10: 1753-7.
- Smith, Philip. 2016. "Shakespeare, Survival, and the Seeds of Civilization in Emily St. John Mandel's *Station Eleven*." *Extrapolation* 57, no. 3: 289–303.
- Sophocles, and Robert Fagles. 1984. *The Three Theban Plays: Antigone, Oedipus the King, Oedipus at Colonus*. London: Penguin Books.
- Tate, Andrew. 2017. *Apocalyptic Fiction*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Wald, Priscilla. 2008. *Contagious: Cultures, Carriers, and the Outbreak Narrative*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Williams, Rowan. 2017. "Plague as Metaphor." Chapter. In *Plagues*, edited by Jonathan L. Heeney and Sven Friedemann, 196–212. Darwin College Lectures. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.