

Making Sense of Apocalyptic Pandemic through Literary Work

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Abstract. The paper aims to investigate the effect of literary works on mental health. Various studies shows that literature can contribute to cope and understand mental health. In facing covid 19, people tried to comprehend the situation by searching the related narration on Spanish flu and other pandemic. Pandemic is like absurd situation that abruptly change the world in terms of economic, employment, education, etc. The study uses textual analysis method that obtain data through observation of various primary and secondary textual data. Drawing on the theory of cognitive affective narrative, the study shows that casualty may be experienced by the body and then affect mental health. Family who lost its member may find it difficult to move on since there is no time to mourn and see the love one for the last time. Literary works has performative and expressive element that help people to understand catastrophic situation and recover form painful experienced for losing the one they loved. It leads to the optimism towards the better future.

1. Introduction

In the apocalyptic era people tend to feel surreal and confused. Mass outbreak disease created fear and anxiety. Covid 19 is still haunting people and the fear to face new strains constantly discourage people to move forward in the new habits try to cope the situation and make it part of our everyday life. Pandemic indeed has a tremendous effect to the survivor and its effect make a significant chance to the people. Literature has power to contribute to understand and ameliorate mental issued and trauma faced by people. Literature has performative and expressive element that help people to keep their sane to the catastrophic situation. However, the question is how literature present and represent pandemic. To what extend it affect people?

The research on catastrophic situation, trauma, and literary work has been developed in explaining the effect of war and other mass violence. Poole [1] examined the representation of traumatic experienced in testimonial narrative. Trauma has haunting effects which makes the narrative presented in fragmentation in terms of its temporal, narrative subject, structure and indentitary. Poole argues that testimonial narrator is also an active participant in historicizing their traumatic experienced. Gibbons [2] examined immigration narration that affected by the United States' war in Asia. Drawing on several literary works, she argues that catastrophe has change and transform everything. It affected not only the inflicted people but across generations also. Narrative on traumatic event can become testimony on the enduring overwhelming impact of casualty. Traumatic experienced caused by wars has become center of attention; however, few that relate literary work to the pandemic until the recent covid- 19 pandemic.

A comprehensive analysis on the relation of pandemic and literature has been explored by Outka [3]. Her research is closely related to the present situation since it examines the intertwined between deadly influenza Pandemic 1918-1919 and interwar literature. The representation of influenza pandemic is obscured compare to war. He argued that western is prone to discuss the trauma of war than pandemic. The history of deadly influenza pandemic 1918-1919 shows that it killed approximately 50-100 million people. In Britain and the united stated the number exceed than the victims of world war I and World War II [3]. However, its present is deemphasized by war casualties. The virus is omnipresent danger but it cannot be seen compare to the war which can be visibly recognized. Outka pointed out that illness is difficult to describe and found that the representation of illness emphasized on the paradoxical situation, silences, fragment, and hidden bodies [3]

This research uses interdisciplinary approach encompassed from psychology, literature, to capture the multidimensional reading experiences in expressing and creating literary work to make sense the absurd situation. Pandemic has a tremendous effect on mental health however, it seems to be overlooked. Literary work can serve as an archive towards the unexplained and confusing experienced and it can also become a way to cope with the difficult situation.

2. Method

This research is used cognitive narrative theory that focuses on ethical aspects of literary work in presenting and representing trauma. The method used is textual analysis. This method aims to dissect literary archive in digital platform Wattpad.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. *Looking back to the future: Covid 19 pandemic*

The subtitle seems to be paradox. Looking back related to the past event, but it refers to the future. Pandemic indeed has changed the way we see the future. The fear to contagious virus affects both physical and psychological. The threat to face a new virus strain, second, third or even the chances to have other kinds of deadly virus hinder people to move forward. Covid 19 is lethal and some believed it is airborne. It drove a paranoia and helplessness. The future seems uncertain and bleak. Thus, future is no longer thought as moving forward, it can be moving backward to unimaginable condition.

A new normal seems a faraway distant yet we live in it. All sectors such as, factory, tourism, university, culinary are trying to cope the situation by whatever means they have. The pandemic changes the way people interact with others object around us and even our bodies [4]. Touching other people hand, public toilet, door knob, or even our own nose must be avoided.

People should be within certain distance to keep safe. Other people, public object and even our own hand are like a threat to the health. Object from outside house must be sterilized before become part of the house. This is included the body that is exposed to the public domain.

Although some people are unaffected by the virus threat, some others choose to stay home and avoid other people. However, staying at home also make people tired. The feeling of burnout by inactivity which lead to the domestic violence and the higher divorce rate.

Rumours and fake news added worsen the situation. Some triggered the paranoia towards the virus. Others fake news led to the conspiracy theory which believed the virus does not exist. Zizek [4] explained the five stages in facing traumatic outbreak adapted from five stages of reaction when facing terminal illness from Elizabeth Kubler Ross. First denial stage. In this stage, people tend to deny the happening of outbreak and considered it as fake. Second stage is anger towards the inefficient state and lack of immediate respond and prevention from the authority. The next step is bargaining. In this step, people think that it is happening but considered that the damage can be lesser. When the hope is failed, then it will lead to depression. The last stage is acceptance. However, in the case of covid- 19 Zizek argued that acceptance is the reconciliation to human understanding of the sublayer of life and virus will be always present among us and continuously become threat.

Literary work is considered as an archive of history and show a devastating effect of traumatic experience. Although, the representation of pandemic is fewer than war, the history shows that in Influenza Pandemic in 1918-1919, for about 50 to 100 million people were killed [3]. Worldometer shows that there are 509,274,275 corona virus cases and more than 6 million deaths worldwide [6]. The number signify the devastating effect of corona virus that cannot taken for granted.

3.2. *Literary representation of Pandemic*

Traumatic experience in facing pandemic which added by the uncertain situation are incoherent to be understood. Traumatic experience can cause a disruption in memory, which shows from their incoherent and unchronological narrative. The symptoms caused by human defence mechanism. It is a tool to protects from emotional pain. Forgetting has been one of human defence mechanism to deny the painful experienced. The memory of pain “become fragmented, silenced, yet obsessively remembered” [3]. Traumatic experience cannot be put into a word. The painful experience is articulated into a scream or incoherent language. Thus, to tell the experienced is nonsensical which resulted in the fragmented and disjoint narrative.

On the other hand, some others use silence as language to their trauma. Silence is one of a way in expressing unarticulated language. The overwhelming experience that cannot be expressed make the survivor suffering. The painful memory may act out in bodily sensation against they will. The wound is in their mind not their body but it can affect the bodies.

Trauma is unassimilated in the consciousness. It is intertwined between knowing and not knowing. The painful experienced is not readily to be accessed but it is obscured in the unconsciousness and return to haunt its victims. [4] The presentation of unrepresented related to the working of trauma. Literary pandemic uses flashback, disjoint element, intrusive memory return which divorced from the initial event. The representation must deal with the delirium, cultural silencing, and the microscopic danger that is intangible to be seen but omnipresent threat.

Outka [3] argued that representing illness is difficult, the pain and body sensation is personal and microscopic compare to war. She added that Woolf, Eliot, and Yeats presenting the pandemic experience but also seems obscure in a larger culture. The representation shows the way people treated pandemic as something that present everywhere but marginalized to the politic or economic situation. The similar issues occurred in covid-19 pandemic. The health issued were positioned against economic which make it difficult to choose since both were important.

In the contemporary era, people can easily write and produce their own writing without ever have to worried on publisher or even the literariness of their writing. Wattpad is one of the platforms that giving the opportunity for everyone to write.

Based on the search engine, there are 7900 stories on covid 19 and 9800 stories on Pandemic. A large number of stories shows that people narrating their experience in facing the pandemic. PotatoesMased is one of writer about covid 19. The story presented the situation while being locked down by 15 years old Mexican American girls who lives in California. All of the stories are about everyday activities and trivial matters. The story is more like a journal than novels. The narrator described sadness and tiredness to be at home every day and to be separated from friends. Meanwhile, the situation of the house is inconvenience either since her sister must be working from their room which means she cannot use the room in working hours. The experienced of being locked down is one of many themes occurred in Wattpad. The story also showed the painful experienced in losing her aunt because of covid 19.

“Everything and anything is going over your head. Maybe you’re angry, that the virus took away someone close to you. They could’ve lived longer if it weren’t for the virus. Perhaps your sad, that you never got to say any last words. Maybe you’re not feeling anything at all. You feel as if forgetting about it will make you feel better” [7].

The narrator tone seems unemotional, she even wondering her own reaction when losing a family. Her aunt is not close enough to her but her mom was really affected. From the incident, she learned the

painful feeling of losing someone. The most painful one in the pandemic is not to have a chance to say last words to a person that dear to us.

Literary work here serves as an archive of history. The journal written by PotatoesMased is a testimony that present a micro history that can be used to understand personal situation of pandemic. Dori and Laub argues that “literature becomes a witness, and perhaps the only witness, to the crisis within history which precisely cannot be articulated” [8].

3.3. Coping with Covid 19 traumatic experience

Writing is considered as a way to heal traumatic experienced. By writing the survivor can express their feeling and articulate their experienced. As mentioned earlier, trauma is too overwhelming to be accepted by reason. Caruth [4] argues that survival itself is problematic. The survivor may not harm physically but they are greatly inflicted psychologically. Some might experience survivor guilt and wondering why they survive. Freudian theory ‘death drive’ explained the struggles of world war survivor’s attempt to suicide.

The painful experience tends to be pushed it into the unconsciousness and not assimilated in the working memory. However, it can haunt later on. Caruth [4] highlighted the importance of remembering as the way to forget. It means that survivor must try to remember the traumatic experienced. One of the ways to remember is writing. Writing gives the opportunity for the survivor to express their feeling which might be pushed into the unconsciousness.

On the other hand, their writing can be a testimony which showed us an actual life. Writing is like “the act of bearing witness” [8]. Witnessing is composed form subjective perspective which describes pieces of memories which might not capture the whole event. To testify means to promise to give an actual knowledge which based on the truth. Writing is a performative function of literature that telling the truth based on people experienced. It is truth that is written although the story itself is made up.

4. Conclusion

Literature considered as way to heal mental illness caused by covid-19 pandemic. The confusion and absurd situation is hard to be accepted by the reason. Social distance, quarantine, illness, losing the love one, economic difficulties along with pandemic triggered the mental disruption. Literary work can be served as mental healing and as a tool to understand the absurd situation.

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