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The Emergence of Pandemics is Age Old: A Critical Study on Molly Caldwell's *The American Plague: The Untold Story of Yellow-Fever, The Epidemic that Shaped Our History*

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Abstract

Crosby's *The American Plague* highlights the reality of Memphis in the year 1878. It depicts the sufferings of the people of Memphis, as the whole city has affected by the epidemic Yellow fever in the late 19th century. Similar to the situation of Covid 19 in the present, Memphis is quarantined from the rest of the country. The city has become the city of corpses. Crosby too portrays the funeral done at the time of plague. The number of death reported in the city has frightened the people. Throughout the book, Crosby brings the pathetic condition of the city that has transformed into a city of corpses due to yellow fever as today in most of countries the cities transform into the places of corpses due to the present pandemic covid19. While the readers go through literature and history of the past, it can be identified that pandemic is not new, the world has been continuously involved in the encounter of pandemics.

Key words: Memphis, epidemic, pathetic yellow fever, corpses

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As winter is the dark period in the history of seasons, so the pandemic remains one of the dark chapters in the history of mankind. The world has faced so many challenges in the bygone years such as influenza, plague, the great depression, the yellow fever, the disease caused by Ebola virus and the world has defeated them one by one. Now, the present pandemic, Corona virus disease 2019 (Covid19) still remains as the last one in the history of pandemics. Yet, there exists no hope that in future, mankind will be liable to be cursed with another series of pandemic.

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Viruses play an integral role in creating a pandemic. They infiltrate every aspect of the fast-moving world, seething in seawater, drifting through the atmosphere, and lurking in the soil. Generally considered non-living matters, these pathogens can only replicate with the help of a host, and they are capable of hijacking organisms from every branch of the tree of life—including a multitude of human cells. Yet, most of the time, our species manages to live in this virus-filled world relatively free of illness. The reason has less to do with the human body's resilience to disease than the biological quirks of viruses themselves. But, some newly emerging mutating viruses pose some harm to humankind by expressing their attacking ability, thus contributing a fresh viral disease to the world.

It is quite natural that pandemics strike the world once in every hundred years and one of such harshly stricken pandemic, the yellow fever is portrayed in the literary non fiction, *The American Plague: The Untold Story* of by Molly Caldwell *Yellow Fever, The Epidemic That Shaped Our History* Crosby, who is an American journalist and author born in Texas. The work deliberately portrays the situation of pandemics along with the quarantine practiced in those days that has certain similarities with the present day pandemics.

Crosby depicts the ground reality of Memphis that has severely ravaged by the "Yellow Fever of 1878". As the title of Crosby's book suggests, it has become an epidemic, that shaped the history of Tennessee, by ruining more than half of the population of Memphis. It explains the dreadful suffering of the people by describing how "the families prepared their own for burial". Crosby offers a forceful narrative of the disease's ravages that has given to the city and the service that has rendered by the two sisters who has returned to the quarantined city for a vacation.

Being affected by the yellow fever, Memphis city has quarantined from the rest of the country. It is reported that after six months of the grand Mardi Gras celebration, Memphis has become "a city of corpses". Its sweet scent of blossoms are replaced by the awful smell of death. Street are filled with disinfectants which are completely desolated and loaded with wagons that are packed with coffins – both empty and full ones. Except the wagons, everything halted its way to the streets of Memphis. The drug store, grocery shops, vegetable carts and milk wagon are not within the people's reach. Banks have opened only for one hour a day. Witnessing the horrible condition of the colony that is now "left to burn", a journalist wrote, "A stranger in Memphis might believe he was in hell".

When the city officials have demanded help from the President Rutherford.B. Hayes, he has denied it by suspecting that the 'panic-stricken people' have

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The Emergence of Pandemics is Age Old: A Critical Study on Molly Caldwell's *The American Plague: The Untold Story of Yellow-Fever, The Epidemic that Shaped Our History* exaggerated the condition of epidemic out of fear. But, the condition of the city has become worse each day. Even the lime spread in the streets could not cover the smell of death. Sister Constance and Sister Thecla have stepped into the city only to encounter the dreadful situation of Court Square, the headquarters for the Memphis Board of health. As they walked forward, they have seen different cardboards in various dimensions in front of the houses as the yellow cardboards denote that the house is with the diseased humans and the black denotes that someone is deceased in the house.

Crosby then moves to compare the funeral of normal death to the funeral done at the time of plague. She vividly captures the picture of death under normal circumstances in a way that formal announcements have made to inform the death of the family member, his coffin is draped with fresh flowers and is carried by pallbearers to the place of burial. But, during the epidemic, the corpses are placed in a pine box with a mixture of tar and acid before closing its lid. A wagon is pulled by six horses with an undertaker come to announce "Bring out your dead !" only to provide coffins to the lifeless corpses and to carry them for the burial.

The people in the country are witnessing a daily roll call of death and were believed that, the disease is caused by the poisonous miasma which is emanated from Gayoso Bayou. The poor immigrants who have moved into Memphis and have settled around the river Happy Hallow have also become a prey to the 'grim destroyer'. Around the city, there is Memphis Courthouse, Calvary Church, Grace Church, a synagogue, city hall and a prison. Of all these places, the fewest cases of yellow fever is reported in the prison. The people in the country are in the midst of death and desolation as the nineteenth-century medicines have no knowledge or tools to cope with such a horrific invasion of the disease.

Sister Constance and Sister Thecla, who are the survivors of the 1873 epidemic, made their way to the infected district with a fair goal of extending their hands to the diseased. They have reached Alabama street, where the St. Mary's Cathedral is situated. Sister Constance's qualities are well seen from the words of the author as Crosby goes to describe Constance as , "a woman of exquisite grace, tenderness, and loveliness of character, very highly educated, and one might have adorned her the most brilliant social circle."

Constance, after observing the difficulty of the people, made a meeting with the dean Rev. George C Harris only has to decide how they face the 'greatest task' of helping those people who are affected by yellow fever. Though the severity of the disease ravages many lives, the negligence of the ill also leads to death as many people have

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died simply from starvation and dehydration. The healthy people are never permitted to offer their help to the diseased as the disease is contagious. But, the sisters in St. Mary's Church bravely step forward to provide the barest necessities for the people. The St. Mary's Community has also set up a sort of makeshift hospital and an orphanage mainly for the children who are left behind when their parents died.

The number of death reported in the country is so frightening. The undertakers are burying people in mass graves because they are not able to keep up with the number of corpses that have come for burial each day. Being contracted with yellow fever, the condition of the Memphis City is seriously terrible in such a way that, in some families, the children are left unattended in the same bed beside their dead parents. Some of the bodies are unknowingly unburied for three, four days and produce hard smells in the locality. The situation of the hospitals is scarier. Patients died so quickly that thirty new corpses are piled up in the dead house before the undertaker returned once from the Elmwood cemetery. On one such burial, a knock is heard inside the coffin before it is lowered, and a patient thought to be dead has called out from inside. The city is terribly shaken by yellow fever.

A young girl named Grace who is the daughter of the superintendent in a cottage at Elmwood has told the bell each time when a body is buried and she even has maintained a list of the people's names whose bodies are buried in the Elmwood cemetery. It is in the month of September, the bell is continuously tolled as the Yellow fever took away a massive number of victims. As the number of victims have increased day by day, Constance has gone in search of more nurses and some beef tea for the ill. While she goes, she saw "a spectacular sun" setting over the Mississippi. It seems that nature is giving hope to her with its scenic beauty even at such desolate and hopeless times. Her astonishment is seen from her thoughts as, "How strange, she thought, that one could still find anything beautiful at all." Throughout the work, Crosby portrays the pathetic condition of the Memphis City, which is transformed into 'a city of corpses' due to Yellow Fever. The use of heart-wrenching metaphors and imageries clearly brings out the impact of yellow fever the city has faced.

Further, in Wolfe's classic 1929 novel "Look Homeward, Angel" that has depicted another pandemic named influenza, the son of a gravestone cutter is haunted by his dead brother's ghost and says, "O lost, and by the wind grieved, ghost, come back again."

Surely, gravestones can speak about people who once walked the earth, of their joys and hopes and hardships, reminds that they are no different than we who still live. Gravestone

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inscriptions also reveal the demography and epidemiology of earlier ages, the person, place, and time of life and death. Planted in clusters around the globe exactly a century ago, such gravestones still speak poignantly about the deadliest event in human history, the Influenza of 1918-1919.

The world has been continuously involved in encountering a pandemic. As the world is standing in the brim of the present pandemic, it is necessary that the humanity should possess the will power to defeat and subdue the overcoming challenges to humanity as an American author Zig Ziglar says, "When obstacles arise, change your direction to reach your goal, not the decision to get there." It is such an attitude that is needed in every single person to overcome the pandemic both physically and mentally. All together with hope the world can withstand the pandemic.

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