**LOUISA MAY ALCOTT'S LITTLE WOMEN:
HUMANISING DISEASE AND DECAY****Dr. Charul Jain****Abstract**

Whenever a disease is widespread like an epidemic or pandemic its apocalyptic nature fails to escape the creative imagination of literary writers. Beginning from Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*, *A Journal of the Plague Year* by Daniel Defoe and Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* are some of the precursors of the literary fiction in English which captures apocalyptic events and their impact on the society. A pandemic affects not only elders but also children, not only rich but also poor, not only upper class but also the workers. A lot of literature focuses on the affliction of the first and their response to the pandemic. In addition to the epidemics like cholera and plague which recurred from time to time and afflicted a large section of the population, there was the pandemic scarlet fever which rarely made the adult population suffer as it primarily struck the children aged between five and fifteen. The number of works which focus on scarlet fever are few and one of the prominent ones which this paper intends to look at is by an American novelist. Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* (1868-69) captures influences that shape the lives of four sisters, Meg, Jo, Beth and Amy March from childhood into womanhood. One such influence, scarlet fever which is said to have spread across Europe and America during the 19th and early 20th century victimising and causing death of several infants and young children affect the March family too. The paper attempts to capture the pandemic and tries to humanise disease and decay and its impact on the lives of the March sisters.

Keywords: pandemic, children's literature, *Little Women*, Louisa May Alcott, apocalyptic novel, disease, struggle and humanity

"Considering how common illness is, how tremendous the spiritual change that it brings, how astonishing, when the lights of health go down, the undiscovered countries that are then disclosed..." Virginia Woolf

1. Introduction

Disease and its response have captured the attention of litterateurs since centuries. And it naturally is so, considering the fact that literature is a reflection of the society. Whenever a disease is widespread like an epidemic or pandemic its

apocalyptic nature fails to escape the creative imagination of literary writers. Beginning from Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* (1387-1400), which deals with a group of travellers who are trying to escape the choleric epidemic spread in their regions and captures the moral as well as physical decay of the populace, we have quite a few works which are set in the pandemic backdrop. *A Journal of the Plague Year* by Daniel Defoe (1659–1731), is a journalistic writing having detailed narrative of events, anecdotes, and statistics regarding the Great Plague of London of 1665. Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* (1826) was one of the first futuristic apocalyptic novels, telling a tale of a few persons who appear to be immune from plague and avoid contact with others.

Edgar Allan Poe, the American poet and novelist wrote *The Masque of the Red Death* (1842), an allegorical short story regarding the metaphorical element of the topos during a plague (Augusto Riva, 1). In *The Scarlet Plague* (1912), Jack London a US writer investigated many traditional issues of the literary topos of plague, ranging from a reflection on morality and justice to the contagion and clinical features of the disease.

We also have the much talked about work by Giovanni Baccaccio, *The Decameron* written in Italian centuries ago, by Albert Camus *The Plague* (1947) written in French, and by Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *Love in the Time of Cholera* (1985) in Spanish are are few of such numerous works written in different languages of the world which capture poignantly the effects these epidemics have had on the society. They also become a chronicle of the times in which the epidemics have spread. Through these works we become aware of the historical apocalyptic events which impact the society.

The epidemics like cholera and plague recurred from time to time and afflicted a large section of the population. A pandemic affects not only adults but also children, not only rich but also poor, not only upper class but also the workers. A lot of literature focuses on the affliction of the former and their response to the pandemic. But there is a disease which targets only the children. The pandemic scarlet fever rarely made the adult population suffer as it primarily afflicted the children. The epidemic was widespread and recurrent and also finds mention in the literature like other pandemics, cholera and plague. This paper attempts to explore the children's novel, *Little Women* which is set during the pandemic scarlet fever's break out in country side of America.

Written by the American author Louisa May Alcott's (1832–1888) *Little Women* is set during the American civil war of 1860 to 1865. The first volume of *Little Women* was published in 1868 and the second in 1869. It deals with the lives of the four March sisters—Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy, all aged between 10 and 16—and details their passage from childhood to womanhood where several influences shape their lives and characters. One such influence was a pandemic, scarlet fever. Beth contracts this disease during her visit to a friend's place. Jo tends to Beth diligently, whereas Amy is sent to live with her aunt to prevent her from catching the infection. Beth recovers but not fully and slowly dies after prolonged illness and suffering. The paper attempts to capture the pandemic and tries to humanise disease and decay

and its impact on the lives of the March sisters. It captures the agony of Beth, the care and devotion of Jo and the response of all these four children of the March family towards the pandemic. The paper argues that it is helpful if children read such texts as it prepares them to face apocalyptic events in their lives or when they see it around them.

A brief overview about scarlet fever: Scarlet fever is a disease resulting from a streptococcus infection. A sore throat, fever, headaches, swollen lymph nodes, and a characteristic red rash are the signs and symptoms of the disease. It is highly infectious as it transmits from human-to-human by fluids from the mouth and nose. When an infected individual coughs or sneezes, the bacteria become airborne in droplets of water and can be inhaled reports Kress. The bacteria that lands on surfaces like, drinking glasses, doorknobs, handles infect people who touch these surfaces and then touch their own nose or mouth, strikingly similar ways of infection as we are observing during the Covid outbreak. According to Johnson (2014) if someone touches an individual with a streptococcal skin infection, there is a risk of becoming infected. People who share towels, clothes, or bed linen with an infected person are also at a great risk.

This fever is said to have spread across Europe and America during the 19th and early 20th century victimising and causing death of several infants and young children. It most commonly affected children between five and fifteen years of age as reported by several health related encyclopaedia. The disease had a high mortality rate of 15 to 25% in those days. In the worst cases, all children of a family were killed in a matter of a week or two through the contagion, according to Smith (2011). Helen Keller and Thomas Alva Edison were two of the famous personalities who were victims of scarlet fever and had life debilitating effect of this disease contracted it in their childhood.

Scarlet fever has featured in many famous works of literature, especially children's literature, which is not surprising given its widespread frequency and high mortality in past centuries. It makes a brief but significant appearance in Mary Shelley's famous novel *Frankenstein*. Another well-known portrayal of scarlet fever occurs in *The Velveteen Rabbit*, a popular British children's book written in 1922 by Margery Winifred Williams Bianco. It is in Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* and its sequels that perhaps the most well-known depiction of scarlet fever in literature occurs.

2. Apocalypse imminent

When Mr. March falls sick while fighting at the front during the American civil war and his wife, Marmee, as the daughters fondly call her is called away to look after him, the four daughters along with Hannah the housekeeper look after the home. Beth keeps up with her chores and does many of her sisters' as well. She goes to see the Hummels, the poor immigrant neighbours every day, but when the baby gets sick, she asks Meg or Jo to go instead, to try to help. Beth senses the

impending death but is unable to pin point it though she hints at taking steps to ease the situation.

"I have been every day, but the baby is sick, and I don't know what to do for it. ... But it gets sicker and sicker, and I think you or Hannah ought to go" (Alcott, 1868, p. 149).

When nobody goes, Beth decides to go herself, despite feeling tired and achy. She returns home that evening, and tries to find more information about scarlet fever. The Hummel baby had died in her arms while the mother had gone to fetch the doctor, and then the doctor sent Beth home to take belladonna to prevent getting sick from the scarlet fever that the children there had. This incident shows how families, including children play an important role in becoming aware of the disease, its symptoms and its spread. But more importantly it foretells and projects the course that the novel is likely to take. Beth has been infected; and faces an apocalyptic situation in her life. She has witnessed death at close quarters at the mere age of 12 and now this very sequence is going to be played out in her own life. The shadow of the apocalypse has started falling on the March family.

Beth verifies that Jo and Meg had scarlet fever when they were babies but not Amy, "Don't let Amy come. She never had it, and I should hate to give it to her. Can't you and Meg have it over again?" asked Beth, anxiously (Alcott, 1868, p. 150). All the three sisters try to nurse Beth but only Jo is allowed to stay and Amy is sent to Aunt March's to prevent her from contracting the ailment. The discussion testifies to the fact that scarlet fever was quite widespread and the incident of many households getting impacted by it was plenty.

We further see here the developing alertness and sensitivity of the young girls towards the disease and its infectiousness. We find that when both the parents are away the young girls display a great sense of maturity and responsibility, particularly Beth. She seems to have realised the contagiousness of the disease and expresses concern not for herself but her sisters, older and younger. We here see the cautious march of the March family towards the impending danger and turn of events.

3. Encountering Apocalypse

Beth did have the fever, and was much sicker than anyone had anticipated. Beth's condition is described with the onset of the fever. Beth patiently and uncomplainingly bore her pain. But as her condition turned grave "... during the fever fits she began to talk in a hoarse, broken voice... she did not know the familiar faces around her, but addressed them by wrong names..." (Alcott, 1868, p. 154).

The narrative captures poignantly the symptoms of the disease through the depiction of Beth's condition. In addition to fever, the disease brings hoarseness in the throat, pain, rashes and also brings on, at times, cramps and fits.

The girls knew nothing about illness, and under the guidance of the doctor, Mr. Laurence and Hannah they nursed Beth. The two girls, Meg and Jo find it very distressing to see Beth's condition. The whole house was shrouded in darkness of

anguish, loneliness and despair. Though the sisters kept about their work but they dreaded and waited, "while the shadow of death hovered over the once happy home" (Alcott, 1868, p. 155).

Even in her condition Beth is conscious of the contagiousness of the disease and controls herself from meeting even her pets and family. Her condition kept worsening "But soon even these intervals of consciousness ended, and she lay hour after hour, tossing to and fro, with incoherent words on her lips, or sank into a heavy sleep which brought her no refreshment" (Alcott, 1868, p. 156).

It was a trial for both Meg and Jo to manage the household with the invalid Beth who seems to be slipping every day. "She doesn't know us... She doesn't look like my Beth, and there's nobody to help us bear it. Mother and father both gone, and God seems so far away I can't find Him" (Alcott, 1868, p. 163).

Hannah the maid and Laurie the neighbour are a means of constant support. We notice that though a friend, Laurie is sincerely trying to help the sisters in all possible ways during these struggles. He too is a teenager but this disease has made him sensitive and also responsible. He offers to spend time with Beth and also send food over to extend his help.

Beth keeps slipping away "It was a piteous sight, the once rosy face so changed and vacant, the once busy hands so weak and wasted, the once smiling lips quite dumb, and the once pretty, well-kept hair scattered rough and tangled on the pillow. All day she lay so, only rousing now and then to mutter, "Water!" with lips so parched they could hardly shape the word." (Alcott, 1868, p. 159). Jo and Meg could do nothing but watch, hope and pray. "If God spares Beth, I never will complain again," Meg promises earnestly. "If god spares Beth, I'll try to love and serve Him all my life," returned Jo. (Alcott, 1868, p. 160). Eventually, as Beth deteriorates Mrs March had to be called back.

The tragedy heightens further that night and even after it was past two, Jo kept wondering how dreary the world looked with a diseased sister who is so much in agony and is slipping away gradually. Then she turns and sees Meg kneeling before their mother's chair. Dreadfully a thought crossed Jo's mind "Beth is dead, and Meg is afraid to tell me" (Alcott, 1868, p. 160). The apocalypse that was prognosed with the death of Hummel child has finally arrived, the novel suggests her.

At this moment, rather the fever actually wanes as if in answer to the prayers of the sisters "The fever's turned, she's sleepin' nat'ral, her skin's damp, and she breathes easy. Praise be given! Oh, my goodness me!" cried Hannah. Beth seems peaceful after a really long time. The two sisters nursing Beth finally rejoiced at the news and as they had no other way to express their joy, they held each other close long. (Alcott, 1868, p. 160). We see the girls become responsible, caring and sacrificing their pleasures for their younger sister Beth. All of the girls have been influenced for the better by Beth's illness, with Meg working cheerfully, Amy giving away her possessions, and Jo tenderly caring for her sister.

We also find that the housemaid, Hannah is equally distressed and becomes a mother like figure for the household. She guides the sisters, supports them as well

as nurses Beth. The disease affects not only the family but all those who are associated with the family. True to its spirit any apocalyptic even affects not one but several within the range. And we find here that Beth, her teenage sisters and their acquaintances all are under the shadows of doom.

4. Apocalypse countered

On the next Christmas morning, Beth seems to be recovering from her illness. She is still weak and frail but is struggling to get back to her normal life when the part I of the novel ends. The second part of the novel opens with happy news of the recovery of their father and the family expects the return of the father soon after Marmee, Mrs. March comes home. Jo is now able to return to her writing and Beth, who has become permanently weak due to the scarlet fever, and is forever struggling to get well.

A little later Marmee notices that something is troubling Beth, for she has been quite sad, and asks Jo to find out Beth's secret. Jo discovers that Beth keeps silently suffering due to her pains frequently. When Jo returns from New York, she notices a change in Beth, realizes that Beth is dying. Beth explains that she was sad as she had lost hope of living. She though, wishes to enjoy peacefully their remaining time together. When the sisters return from their outing, the parents observe the change in Beth, and silently understand the truth. At home, everyone does their best to make Beth's remaining time happy. Jo sleeps on a couch in the room to be always near.

The disease wearied Beth and she was so enervated by the ill health that it was an effort for her to even lift the needle to do her favourite work, embroidery. And she had to leave the art forever. "Talking wearied her, faces troubled her, pain claimed her for its own, and her tranquil spirit was sorrowfully perturbed by the ills that vexed her feeble flesh." (Alcott, 1868, p. 165) It takes another seven years and most of the book for the fever to kill her, but kill her at last it does.

The depiction of scarlet fever, its symptoms and signs, the severity of the disease have all been addressed in the novel. How this apocalyptic event impacts the life of the March family and all those associated with them has been poignantly captured.

It is quite necessary that such diseases are depicted through literary works as it helps in preparing children to respond appropriately to the disease around them. There are different ways in which different children encounter disease in their lives. For some children, a family member will be affected; and for others, they themselves are the ones whom the disease hits. Through reading books, children are able to better understand the events going on around them. When children read such books, they can relate to characters in the book and empathise with their sufferings. They are then able to interpret and understand their lives better taking help from the instances in the fictional world they visited in these books. They can relate to disease, its impact and effects on the patient as well as the surroundings. Reading such works prepare them to face life's situations appropriately.

5. Conclusion

Epidemics or pandemics like scarlet fever or Covid that we are presently struggling with impact adversely the entire segment of population. Amidst several noteworthy literary works that depict the impact of diseases on the society, Alcott's *Little Women* is remarkable as it create a niche for itself being a novel that is for the children, focussing the apocalyptic events that mar the life of young children. Through the March family it portrays the severity as well as the impact of an epidemic on children and their responses especially of the little women towards it. The episodes that lead to this apocalyptic event, the struggles of all the members of the family as well as their friends and caretakers to endure it and accept it and its aftermath have all been strikingly captured in this novel.

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