



Lethal Narratives and the Breakdown of Human/Nonhuman Spheres: What Viruses Tell and What We Imagine

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Abstract

Narratives on viruses have become an effective way as storied matter that forces us to redefine what human is with its nonhuman proximity and trans-corporeal bonds. Displaying how human beings are enmeshed in volatile planetary processes, narrative agency of the viruses ignites certain speculations for the redefinition of humanity. However, in lieu of comprehending the material stories carried by various viruses that changed the courses of various civilizations to large extents, humans imagine themselves fighting these viruses, as part of their existential meanings, through their intellect which they perceive their divine boon. This brings forth a vicious circle since it requires the segregation of human and nonhuman. Such scenarios as humanity triumphing against a lethal natural force and/or a virus attacking what is uniquely human in every sense just consolidates anthropocentrism, which is the core reason for these environmental catastrophes and imbalances out of which new viruses emerge. This ecophobic imagination, mainly resulting from the fear of losing precious agency against an unknown and unlimited natural force, can be tracked in different literary works. The main aim of this paper is, thus, to highlight the narrative agency of viruses within the theoretical framework of posthumanisms, and to further shed light on how we perceive viruses in some literary works.

Keywords: virus, posthumanism, Covid-19 outbreak, viral stories, plague narratives

The Plague. – ‘Where?’ – ‘Every where – we must fly – all fly – but whither? No man can tell – there is no refuge on earth, it comes on us like a thousand pack of wolves – we must all fly – where shall you go? Where can any of us go? (Mary Shelley, *The Last Man*, p. 193)

A plague is a formidable enemy, and is armed with terrors that every man is not sufficiently fortified to resist or prepared to stand the shock against. (Daniel Defoe, *The Journal of the Plague Year*, p. 199)

In the special issue on COVID-19 emergency on *Bifrost online*, various scholars of environmental humanities responded to this outbreak, and electronically signed an open letter warning humanity in the light of the viral story beneath COVID-19 outbreak. Initiated by Greta Gaard, this open letter underscores the novel ways humans should behave responding to the novel coronavirus, and its environmental, social, and economic consequences. By doing so, this open letter effectively coordinates COVID-19 with a potential virus that “carries the message of our interbeing – across bodies, species, continents” (“An Environmental Humanities”). Granting the cogency of this statement, COVID-19 outbreak not only challenges the discursively assigned role to humans as the only subjects and agents but also questions long-established human and nonhuman divide. Revealing the trans-corporeal bond between all bodies – be they human or nonhuman – codes carried and uploaded by the viruses to the host’s cell tell a posthuman story that invites a critical revision of the Human. This story carried by the codes is mingled into our story, creating a multi-story as it changes us and we change it. This change awakens a challenge to the superior position of the human and of human exceptionalism, hence questioning the ontological and epistemological categorisations of human and nonhuman beings.

The stories of the viruses have long been penetrated into the literary arena. Even in the ancient times, plagues captured people’s narrative imaginations. An example of ancient imagination of the plague exists in a Sumero-Babylonian epic entitled *Atra-hasis* (18th c. B.C.E.). Angered by increasing human population and consequent sonic disturbances, Sumerian Gods punish people in various ways including plague. Many other literary works – such as *Iliad* (8th c. B.C.E.) by Homer, *Journal of the Plague Year* (1722) by Daniel Defoe, *The Last Man* (1826) by Mary Shelley, *The Plague* (1947) by Albert Camus, *The Stand* (1978) by Stephen King, *The Eyes of Darkness* (1981) by Dean Koontz, and *The Year of the Flood* (2009) by Margaret Atwood – deal with similar imaginations of lethal narratives coming with a virus outbreak.¹ What we can see here is that human beings imagine the end of humanity because of a natural agent – viral becomings in this case – and how “intellectual” human beings can triumph against these nonhuman forces to sustain their cultural superiority. This separation between the civilised human and the wild nature openly segregates human and nonhuman, and denies the co-occurrence of material and discursive formations. Such segregation further worsens these lethal scenarios as anthropocentric practices only disregard and disrespect the chaotic harmony of the co-evolution of human and nonhuman. Simon Estok aptly label such lethal scenarios as marketing ecophobia.² According to Estok, these scenarios foster “a sign of our intelligence and wisdom that we narrativize our visions of apocalypse and that we entertain ourselves with stories of our own vulnerability before forces which we perceive as profoundly – indeed, lethally – violent toward our very existence” (“Terror” 91). These stories are dangerous because they reflect upon the grand dichotomy between Nature and Culture representing the fact that civilized ways seem to disappear with the lethal virus outbreaks and Nature projects a return to Simplicity and Harmony with the death of Culture and Civilisation.

An example of such representations can be seen in *The Last Man* (1826) by Mary Shelley, lamenting the loss of civilized ways to the simplicity of Nature:

A sense of degradation came over me. Did God create man, merely in the end to become dead earth in the midst of healthful vegetating nature? Was he of no more

¹ There are of course various others and examples can be multiplied.

² As Simon Estok defines, ecophobia is “a phobia that has largely derived from modernity’s *irrational* fear of nature and hence has created an antagonism between humans and their environments” (*The Ecophobia*, 1).

account to his Maker, than a field of corn blighted in the ear? Were our proud dreams thus to fade? Our name was written 'a little lower than the angels;' and, behold, we were no better than ephemera. We had called ourselves the 'paragon of animals', and, lo! We were a 'quintessence of dust'. (p. 318)

This representation of the plague leaving only one last English man behind paves the path for a new definition of humanity, fragile against the geologic time. Attending to this new definition, it is right here the narrator, Verney, comes to a Shakespearean realisation of the limits of humans. Inspired by Hamlet, Verney re-members his essential earthy formations, and commemorates his half-dust part. Witnessing the dissolved and decaying bodies and uninhabited cities in every corner he visits, Verney shares similar comprehension with Hamlet: "The deepness of geologic time, where the human body joins directly with the particulate matter of the planet itself and where he, Ophelia, Yorick, and all of us, as slowly fossilizing matter, will spend long ages of decay" (Mitchell, p. 128). Similarly, Verney, his friend Adrian, his sister Perdita, his beloved wife Idris, his children, his niece, and every human being will spend times of suffering, death and decay on account of a worldwide plague hitting all humane ways of life. This acknowledgement of mortality, animality and materiality of the human body demands courage because it means the dethronement of rational humans from their privileged status, which took centuries to establish. Understanding transcorporeality in this way, Verney falls into disappointment:

Will the earth still keep her place among the planets; will she still journey with unmarked regularity round the sun; will the seasons change, the trees adorn themselves with leaves, and flowers shed their fragrance, in solitude? Will the mountains remain unmoved, and streams still keep a downward course towards the vast abyss; will the tides rise and fall, and the winds fan universal nature; will beasts pasture, birds fly, and fishes swim, when man, the lord, possessor, perceiver, and recorder of all these things, has passed away, as though he had never been? (p. 329-330)

Similar lethal narratives put other-than-human beings and habitats associated with viruses in tandem with "a realm that is impure, unclean and disorderly to a murky, disavowed world that threatens propriety and identity" (Hughes, p. 405). However, seeing the immense influence of the current COVID-19 outbreak may invite us to re-think our relations with the environment, the planet, and the other-than-humans by seeking a re-visitation of the agency of humans arising not "from a subject status, but rather emerges from its intra-actions in a web of relations in which bodies and environments are co-constituted" (Alaimo, p. 154). Attending to this co-constitution, it can be assumed that our body is full of viral stories. Our body is full of viruses, and they are indeed what makes us human. This invokes, in Timothy Morton's term, a feeling of *strange strangeness*. In this feeling, we feel disturbed by the comprehension of the fact that the other becomes us, and this feels strangely familiar: "Our encounter with other beings – and with our being as other – is *strange strangeness*" (Morton, p. 275). This uncanny feeling of encountering ourselves as the other is undesirable because it "threatens to dissolve the subject by dissolving the border" (Young, p. 144). Likewise, viruses reveal our fear of being the Other, hence becoming the target object of our *strange strangeness*. Sarah Kaplan, William Wan and Joel Achenbach point to the familiar strangeness of the viruses as follow: "With no cellular machinery of their own, they become intertwined with ours. Their proteins are our proteins. Their weaknesses are our weaknesses. Most drugs that would hurt them would hurt us, too" ("The Coronavirus"). So, how can we set a boundary and define what is human and what is nonhuman now?

In the interest of contributing to the posthuman story of COVID-19, Katherine Hayles in “Novel Corona: Posthuman Virus” notes that the story this virus carries is how it “screams at jet-engine volume that we are interdependent not only with each other but also with the entire ecology of the earth” (“Novel”). Long ignored by people, this narrative agency of the plagues revealed itself in various outbreaks including The Plague of Athens (430 B.C.E.), The Antonine Plague (190), The Plague of Justinian (541-750), the Black Death (1346), Cholera Pandemic (1816), The Spanish Flu (1918-1920), and very recently COVID-19 (2019) emergency. Our age, differently, opens up a new path towards the categorisations of the new image of the Human independent from other cultural factors. As regards, Hayles offers a new conceptualization of comprehending our volatile relationships with planetary and environmental processes. Hayles collects these categorizations under three headings as firstly “humans as species-in-common” “emphasizing the commonalities that all humans share with one another, notwithstanding all the ethnic, racial, geopolitical and other differences that exist between us;” secondly “species-in-biosymbiosis” “recognizing the ways in which different species interpenetrate;” and thirdly “species-in-cybersymbiosis” acknowledging “the ways in which artificial agents, especially artificial intelligences, are actively collaborating with humans to shape our shared world” (“Novel”). COVID-19 outbreak has indeed proved all these three categorizations by showing how we depend on each other and each species to sustain our social, economic, and ecological lives. This outbreak has further demonstrated how we can get used to cyber-life in an endeavour to sustain the “normal” lifestyles we had before this virus outbreak. Changing every form of cultural practices such as education, praying, working, and our perception of time (with a shift to the digital time), COVID-19 outbreak announced a new standard of posthuman life by making us all physically distanced but digitally connected.

Denying the story the plagues, viruses, and pandemics radiate creates an anthropocentric dilemma since we are inclined to fear and blame this viral story when uncontrolled or unrestrained within human practices. These lethal agencies actually stem from anthropocentric drives to tame wild nature. As the ecologist Carl Safina similarly highlights, “it is not about Nature, it is about the unnatural ways we have treated wild animals and wild nature” (“COVID-19”). On similar grounds, Fiona Armstrong, Anthony Capan, and Ro McFarlane call current COVID-19 emergency as “a crisis of our own making” because of the anthropocentric denial of human embeddedness in “planetary consciousness” (“Coronavirus”). That is to say, the extent of the mortality of a zoonotic disease is generally determined in consequence of human-based practices. Among these practices are leisure hunting³, other-than-human habitat loss through human practices, animal trade and trafficking – whose influence we all witnessed in the current COVID-19 outbreak –, shifting climate zones as a result of human-induced climate change, urbanisation, and consequently deforestation (Safina, “COVID-19”).

The core of these practices is actually overpopulation, which was also the main cause for casting a tragic plague by divine authorities on people in the ancient epic, *Atra-hasis*:

[Enlil heard] the noise

[And addressed] the great gods,

‘The noise of mankind [has become too intense for me],

³ At this point I should underline that hunting is related to the whole matter of exertion of anthropocentric power and control over other-than-human habitats. To put it somewhat differently, it is not related to leisure at all; it is rather central to an ethics of control.

[With their uproar] I am deprived of sleep.

...] let there be plague. (p. 67)

In this epic, recorded on cuneiform clay tablets, people disregard divine disturbance and do not stop multiplying. Similarly, in our times, people ignore several signs of environmental degradation for the sake of continuing their harmful, and most of the times capitalist, practices.

The problem of overpopulation has been the core of most of the catastrophic scenarios apart from ancient imaginations of plague. Daniel Defoe's detailed descriptions of how the process of burying, cleaning, and quarantine will be handled and of what will happen to beggars and homeless people in *The Journal of the Plague Year* (1722) also reveals the population issue at the heart of a virus outbreak. Here, at this juncture, the English economist R. T. Malthus's theory of population demands a close consideration as an impediment to understand this problem. Malthus clarifies possible catastrophic futures in case of an unchecked population, and contends that it is not possible to meet the needs of humanity as the population increases in a geometrical ratio while the food stock increases arithmetically. Malthus furthers his theory of population stating that overpopulation will bring forth social ills and wrongdoings, which, in turn, become "active and able ministers of depopulation" (Malthus, p. 42). These ministers will employ themselves as "sickly seasons, epidemics, pestilence, and plague, advance in terrific array, and sweep off their thousands and ten thousands" (Malthus, p. 42-43). This theory coordinates an environmental degradation with a social one, hence attending to Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann's note that "it is impossible to separate matters of social and environmental concern from discursive ones" (p. 463). To put it somewhat differently, environmental and material formations – a virus outbreak for instance – will inevitably affect cultural and social practices as material and discursive formations co-evolve. This co-evolution invokes Karen Barad's agential realism which she formulates on the concurrence of agencies as "an enactment, a matter of possibilities for reconfiguring entanglements" (p. 54). That is to say, there is no superiority of discursive formations over material ones since they both constitute agential realisms with their potential agencies. Framed on the basis of Iovino and Oppermann's comments and Barad's conceptualization of agential realism, virus outbreaks consolidate the co-emergence of social and environmental formations, hence igniting the posthuman story the viruses tell.

This story reveals how human actions are enmeshed with environmental catastrophes, as well. The fact that microbes becoming lethal to humanity comports with anthropocentric drives for control and power. As Sonia Shah submits, "wild animals are not especially infested with deadly pathogens, poised to infect us. In fact, most of these microbes live harmlessly in these animals' bodies" ("Think Exotic"). Attending to Shah's explanation, what makes these microbes dangerous and fatal for humans is the "unnatural" human proximity to the wild nature. Shah further elaborates on the historical context of most of the environmental catastrophes and imbalances arising from human practices claiming that the "process of transforming animal microbes into human pathogens" actually started much earlier "with the Neolithic revolution, when we first cleared wildlife habitat to make way for crops and yoked wild animals into servitude" ("Think Exotic"). This habitat clearance and expansion of cities to wildlife habitats is warranted on the rising population, which consequently brings wild animals in closer contact with people, or vice versa. It seems apt to make a differentiation here. Using the natural environment and more-than-human materials to sustain our daily lives is an ethics of necessity, not an ethics of control or power. Snakes, for example, use environmental materials for their lives. Here what is at stake is how we use the physical

environment, though. As Shah explains, “[i]t’s not only the fact of habitat destruction that ratchets up the risk of disease emergence, it’s also what we’re replacing wild habitat with” (“Think Exotic”). Therefore, the imagination of zoonotic diseases ready to devour humanity mostly arises from human-made practices.

Stephen King’s post-apocalyptic thriller novel *The Stand* (1978) epitomizes a similar scenario. Telling how a human-made virus weeps off most of the population, the novel concludes with a lesson:

Maybe if we tell him what happened, he’ll tell his own children. Warn them. Dear children, the toys are death – they’re, flashburns and radiation sickness and black, choking plague. These toys are dangerous; the devil in men’s brains guided the hands of God when they were made. Don’t play with these toys, dear children, please, not ever. Not ever again. Please... please learn the lesson. Let this empty world be your copybook. (p. 819)

Albert Camus concludes his novel *The Plague* (1947) in a similar way:

He knew what those jubilant crowds did not know but could have learned from books: that the plague bacillus never dies or disappears for good; that it can lie dormant for years and years in furniture and linen-chests; that it bides its time in bedrooms, cellars, trunks, and bookshelves; and that perhaps the day would come when, for the bane and the enlightening of men, it would rouse up its rats again and send them forth to die in a happy city. (p. 278)

As a matter of fact, such fictional treatments of virus outbreaks adopt a warning role for humanity. Tending towards obliviousness, human beings fail in taking the messages by sacrificing a universal well-being of all species and materials to short-term profits. Fictional representations of this sacrifice include biological weapons out of diseases just like in Stephen King’s novel, or in Dean Koontz’s weapon-virus “Wuhan-400” in *The Eyes of Darkness* (1981) developed in labs as “a perfect weapon” (p. 181). In real life examples, this sacrifice is of an environmental one arising out of human pride.

Nonetheless, Sars-CoV-2 “has introduced itself into such a world already, inviting us to change the cataclysmic role humans play in planetary life” (“Through the”) as Steven Hartman, Joni Adamson, Greta Gaard, and Serpil Oppermann contend. This cataclysmic role entails a material acknowledgement of human existence, which puts ontology and epistemology on par by transgressing what is uniquely human in anthropocentric perspective. *The Last Man* displays this onto-epistemological awareness through its narrator, Verney:

Nerves, pulse, brain, joint, and flesh, of such am I composed, and ye are organised by the same laws. I have something beyond this, but I will call it a defect, not an endowment, if it leads me to misery, while ye are happy. Just then, there emerged from a near corpse two goats and a little kid, by the mother’s side; they began to browse the herbage of the hill. (p. 366)

This quotation transfigures the disappointment coming in consequence of realising the enmeshment of nature and culture. This quotation also shows Verney’s strange feeling of disappointment when he realises how his Subject position is shattered as a result of a plague.

From this viewpoint, current virus outbreak can teach humanity of their interconnectedness with the material and natural bodies by showing how we co-inhabit the world with various nonhuman forces. Greta Gaard hopes that resulting in a comprehension of one’s “own

happiness and well-being [...] deeply intertwined with the health and happiness of all species” (“The Coronavirus”), COVID-19 outbreak and the planetary consciousness that came – hopefully – with the novel coronavirus may make an inversion to anthropocentric practices. Similar wishes have been uttered by many other scholars including Slavoj Žižek. Žižek, though harshly, demands a reconsideration of our problematic relationship with the nonhuman world, and states that “one could be tempted to see coronavirus as a beneficial infection that allows humanity to get rid of the old, weak and ill, like pulling out the half-rotten weed so that younger, healthier plants can prosper and thus contribute to global health” (p. 69). Though negative social impacts and traumatic deaths prevent any good sides of a deadly pandemic, Scott Slovic also calls for a post-corona attitude in our practices and in the ways we perceive the world from our lenses: “I hope we can surmount the excessive, even pathological, focus on the present as a stable ‘normal,’ and instead find a way to remember that the pre-coronavirus “normal” was not a good normal for most people in the world, or for the planet itself, nor a stable, unchanging condition” (“COVID”). Granting these scholars’ speculations on the possible outcomes of the Covid-19, Covid-19 cries an urgent change in the way we live and we perceive the world.

In the light of these arguments, the novel coronavirus has reminded us of what we have long forgotten. On the one hand it showed how some people are more vulnerable to such diseases, and how we should acknowledge that we are “humans as species-in-common” in Hayles’s term. We are on this same boat together regardless of all the differences we have created within our discursive practices. On the other hand, this virus revealed our trans-corporeal bond with other species in its lethal posthuman story ascribed onto our bodies. Receiving the codes of the viruses and actively writing a new story on them, our bodies change in consequence of various encounters with different viral stories and codes. Uploading its code and DNA to the cell of a live host, viruses change through our bodies as well. Therefore, their stories are independent from ours, and ours from them. Yet strangely enough, they are also dependent on each other, together forming a posthuman narrative. This is where *strange strangers* functions. And this is the inevitable novel dynamics of the universe we are a part of. From this perspective, can these lethal narratives signal the breakdown of human/nonhuman spheres?

To answer this question, we should first differentiate between what the stories of the viruses tell and what we imagine them to be. Are they really trying to fight against humanity, which humans can only win through their intellect? Or, do they tell the evolution of our behaviours, which result in environmental degradations and disturbances for more-than-human organisms and their habitats? We should encode this multi-species and multi-time story. At this point, instead of reducing nonhuman forces to malicious spirits and othering them from human existences, we should learn to look back on what we did, and are still doing. Acknowledging our intra-active transcorporeality with many other species, becomings, and materials may help us.

Hopefully..

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