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Virus and Visible Reality: Biopolitics, Crime, and Disability in Peter May's *Lockdown*

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Abstract

This paper examines Peter May's crime novel *Lockdown* (2020) to explain how a bioengineered virus cripples London and results in a crime, the denouement of which reveals a nefarious, capitalist purpose that is a stark reflection of the world we live in. The plan to use an artificially engineered virus as a bioweapon to profit wreaks havoc in London, resulting in several deaths, fear, panic, civil disorder, a spike in crime, and a string of anarchy throughout the city. By examining Michel Foucault's concept of biopower and Giorgio Agamben and Slavoj Žižek's perspectives on the ethics and politics of the virus, the paper aims to demonstrate how a virus transforms London into the centre of a global pandemic, compelling the officials to implement a lockdown. The paper also discusses how *Lockdown* (2020) can be viewed as a hard-boiled crime narrative due to the urban setting of London, the sensational and violent crime, the true-to-life description of events, and the male protagonist's visible dominance. Additionally, the paper endeavours to depict how the disabilities of certain characters are inextricably linked to the frozen state of the city under lockdown.

Keywords: Lockdown, Pandemic, Quarantine, Crime, Biopolitics, Virus.

Coronavirus and Crime: Contextualising Peter May's *Lockdown*

While countries worldwide are battling the coronavirus crisis, a few people and organisations seek their benefit during adversity. Criminal organisations and corrupt government officials frequently seek innovative methods to retain their illegitimate wealth and power. Simultaneously, entrenched

malfeasance, along with crime and violence, makes countering the mounting menace even more challenging for governments. The Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime group (2020) states in their report that

the locking down of public movement and the sealing of borders have had an immediate impact on some criminal activities, [and there] are already emerging of criminal groups who have exploited confusion and uncertainty to take advantage of new demand for illicit goods and services. Criminal opportunism will emerge further as the crisis unfolds. (GITOC, 2020, p. 2).

Scottish novelist Peter May's *Lockdown* (2020), a crime thriller about an inadvertent exposure to a pandemic exacerbated by an H5N1 bird flu virus, draws parallels between the COVID-19 Virus and his portrayal of the H5N1 bird flu virus, with the inclusion of the crimes committed during these outbreaks of the virus. Peter May (2020) explains in the 'Foreword' to his novel that he wrote this story back in 2005, but the UK publishers rejected it as they were unable to envision a hypothetical situation where a virus might put the entire city of London on lockdown. In 2020, as the world began to battle the lethal COVID-19, May understood that what he envisaged fifteen years ago had become a reality, and he resubmitted his novel to the publishers. As a result, the novel was released in April 2020 and provided its readers with an engrossing narrative about a murder and the civil unrest that ensues when the city of London is quarantined. May states in his 'Foreword' to *Lockdown*: "A new coronavirus, Covid-19, is ravaging the world, and society as we know it is rapidly disintegrating. Even with its mortality rate being just a fraction of bird flu, politicians have to fight to control the chaos and panic that Covid-19 is spreading worldwide. The parallels with *Lockdown* are terrifying" (2020, p. 12). The novel delves into the nuanced complexity of a pandemic and a city on lockdown, capturing the interest of general readers who may see parallels between the narrative and their own lived realities. The upheavals in the narrative exhibit an alarming resemblance to the COVID-19 epidemic, and the biopolitics and crime surrounding the flu virus in the novel become possibilities worth pondering for readers in these circumstances.

The novel depicts a pandemic caused by an H5N1 bird flu virus that has been artificially mutated into a common human flu virus in a laboratory. May's narrative is not entirely fictitious, and to make it as realistic as possible, he develops his story using the British and US pandemic preparedness documents from 2002. In his interview with CNN, he states: "At the time I wrote the book, scientists were predicting that bird flu was going to be the next major world pandemic. It was a very, very scary thing and it was a real possibility, so I put a lot of research into it and came up with the idea, what if this pandemic began in London? What could happen if a city like that was completely locked down?" (Elassar, 2020, n.p). Keeping this story as our topic of discussion, this paper studies *Lockdown* (2020) to show how the bioengineered virus is associated with biopolitics in London, where the citizens are "disciplined" by the state. The purpose of this study is to demonstrate how *Lockdown*, as a crime novel, confronts contemporary socio-political and economic issues. Once infected with the virus, the body becomes the site of social and political construction. The state instantly seizes control of the vulnerable bodies and strives to capitalise on the viral body. The social order or government regulations exert control over these bodies and compel them to perform in particular ways. However, the power structure seeks to ensure the domination of socially oppressed bodies. In May's *Lockdown* (2020), Choy's disability and

Chinese heritage marginalise her, allowing the dominant class to socially and politically mould her body to their preferences and needs. Her body becomes a site of crime, resulting in the outbreak of a pandemic that disrupts economic and political control in London. The politics of Choy's disabled body operates differently, framing disability as the determining factor for the alleged requirement of the state's dominance over other bodies. Choy's corporeal deficiency, the paper argues, renders her a victim of a heinous crime and the source of a pandemic that ultimately results in the disability of city life in London. Choy's body as an instrument of economic production proceeds to become an important determinant of crime and disruption of daily activities in the city.

By taking into consideration this politics of the body, the paper shows how the virus leads to a crime, the murder of Choy, who spreads the virus in London, and this results in a complete lockdown in the city to stop the spread of the virus that has already led to the loss of hundreds of lives. Apart from showing violence, civil unrest, and other crimes that continue to percolate, the paper also shows how the disabilities of Choy and Amy are linked with the cause and effect of the lockdown in London.

Living with a deadly virus: Biopolitics in Peter May's *Lockdown*

Peter May's *Lockdown* (2020) raises concerns about viral modernity and the catastrophe it brings with it.¹ With the evolution of information science, it is now possible to manufacture a virus in a laboratory, which could have powerful implications for the environment. Viral diseases such as bird flu or even COVID-19 are "at the same time biological (they arrive from nature, and affect human bodies), social and cultural (they illicit socially and culturally constructed responses) and digital (Covid-19 research is enabled and powered by digital technology)" (Peters et al., 2020, p. 7). In the early days of COVID-19, conspiracy theories were doing the rounds about how the coronavirus was stolen from a laboratory in Canada and then mutated in a state-owned Wuhan virology laboratory in China, and how the pandemic was the consequence of a leak in that laboratory. Additionally, "the impact [of COVID-19] is exaggerated to allow greater social control by governments (leading to resistance) or downplayed to benefit others [leading to low trust in authorities]" (Lilleker et al., 2021, p. 8). Although there is no scientific evidence to support those claims, and the rumours died on their own, the very possibility of such an occurrence becomes the source of fear. In May's novel *Lockdown* (2020), a virus bioengineered in the laboratory of the pharmaceutical company Stein-Francks results in a pandemic in London. The virus is used as biopower by Stein-Francks, owned by Dr Roger Blume, to achieve the expected results from the social order. Biopower is a general strategy to exert power through the politics of the human body, and it uses scientific apparatus to achieve the desired goal. Foucault particularly uses the phrase 'biopower' to apply to public health practises as well as other control mechanisms, and he uses the term to refer to "an explosion of numerous and diverse techniques for achieving the subjugations of bodies and the control of populations" (Foucault 1990, 140). Using power on the body to achieve desired goals was another consequence of the birth of capitalism in the eighteenth century: "The body came to be understood as an instrument of economic production, of labour-power, and so became a subject of significant political interest" (Horton. 2020, p. 1983). In *Lockdown* (2020), Stein-Francks uses exactly this model of biopower to manufacture a pandemic and deliberately

devises an economic and political problem to earn money by selling an already produced vaccine called FluKill.

Biopower exerts control over large groups of individuals through “an anatomo-politics of the human body” and “biopolitics of the population” (Sfetcu, 2005, p. 2) via socially sanctioned institutions. Biopolitics is a term that refers to the control of a governed region’s life and population. Foucault further says: “After the anatomo-politics of the human body established in the course of the eighteenth century, we have, at the end of that century, the emergence of something that is no longer an anatomo-politics of the human body, but what I would call a “biopolitics” of the human species” (Foucault, 2009, 378). By using biopolitics to regulate and affect millions of biological lives, Blume in May’s *Lockdown* (2020) becomes an instigator of bioterrorism. His influence on public health gives him a political-medical grip over an entire population, and he combines medicine and public health into a capitalist agenda. He admits in the conclusion that when the first cases of bird flu have been reported, it is expected that the virus will change into a human flu virus and cause a pandemic. As a result, the World Health Organization declared FluKill as the appropriate drug for such a pandemic. Blume receives billions of dollars in Western orders and starts to develop a new production site in France (May, 2020, p. 272). But when people start killing millions of the infected birds, the threat fades away. When FluKill was no longer required, “governments all over the world suddenly decided that they had other priorities for the money they had earmarked for FluKill. Orders were cancelled. Others never materialised. Stein-Francks was all but finished” (May, 2020, p. 273). As a result, Blume decides to manufacture a pandemic using a bioengineered virus in order to generate demand for the vaccine, and it appears that the fundamental mechanism of neoliberal capitalism functions as a barrier to any intervention against this lethal virus. Consumer capitalism becomes the identifying factor here, and the values of the lives of the people are ignored. This manufacturing of the virus and the deliberate outbreak of it bears a close resemblance to Steve Niles’s graphic novel *28 Days Later: The Aftermath*, (2007), the continuation of an earlier film, *28 Days Later*. Like May’s *Lockdown* (2020), this novel also deals with the outbreak of the Rage Virus in the city of London. In Niles’s novel, the virus is manufactured as a bioweapon by two scientists, which results in a massive outbreak in the city. Similar to Blume’s miscalculations in *Lockdown*, Niles’s novel records a similar instance where the researchers find out that “there were a few random genetic holdovers in the Ebola genomes [they] isolated that reacted unexpectedly when added to the inhibitor” (Niles, 2017, p. 18).

Out of their capitalist greed, Blume and his company artificially created a version of the H5N1 bird flu virus that is supposed to transmit easily between people. To put his plan into action, Blume proceeds to buy a ten-year-old Chinese girl named Choy from the international marketplace and adopts her under the fake name of Mr. Walter Smith. He then injects her with the bioengineered virus and sends her on a school excursion at Sprint Water Outdoor Centre, where she passes on the virus unwittingly to many people (May, 2020, p. 267). This decision of Stein-Francks’ authorities to spread the virus through kids is mainly because “kids are walking time bombs. They have no idea they have it, but they’re passing it on to everyone they meet – when they talk, cough, sneeze” (May, 2020, p. 267). They further disclose the fact that the incubation period is typically between one and three days, and the average person will infect one out of every four people. Children are capable of more, and in enclosed communities, they spread the infection like wildfire. Within months, the virus starts to infect the entire city of London, which is in desperate need of a vaccine. Blume’s audacious idea to create a massive market for vaccines

succeeds, and he becomes a grim executor of a biopolitical strategy where the virus becomes the source of 'bioterrorism,' which means "the threat or use of a biological agent (or toxin) against humans, animals, or plants by individuals or groups motivated by political, religious, ecological, or other ideological objectives" (Morse & Meyer, 2017, p. 1). SA Morse and RF Meyer state in their study "Viruses as Bioweapons" that the ideal biological warfare agent should meet the following criteria:

availability; ease of production; stability after production; a susceptible population (human or animal); absence of specific treatment; ability to incapacitate or kill the host; appropriate particle size in aerosols so that the virus can be carried long distances by prevailing winds and inhaled deeply into the lungs of unsuspecting victims; ability to be disseminated via food or water; and, the availability of a vaccine to protect certain groups. (Morse & Meyer, 2017, p. 3).

In *Lockdown*, Blume makes his bioengineered version of the H5N1 virus from the already available bird flu virus. He uses Choy as a carrier to infect a susceptible population within months, and then, once she has served her purpose, Blume mercilessly kills her. Dr. Castelli reveals that:

This time they made a bigger killing than they expected. Millions of people are going to die because somehow, somewhere along the way, they screwed up. And Choy would have been the living proof of it. Destroy her, you destroy the evidence. (May, 2020, p. 268).

Stein-Francks' did not expect the virus to become the source of a pandemic, and when it did, they were left with no other option than to kill Choy. Since no remedy is available, the virus becomes an ideal biological warfare agent. Blume thinks that he can use his already manufactured vaccine, FluKill, once the market demands it, but in the meantime, the virus has mutated again and FluKill no longer works as the appropriate vaccine for the virus. Blume fails to imagine that the mutated form of the H5N1 virus would not fall within the compass of the vaccine he has already produced. The way viruses transform and mutate is very difficult to comprehend, and is not always according to the rules. It often points out the fact that viruses do not function in compliance with the already-laid out scientific laws and principles. Blume fails to understand that "viruses are not the elementary form of life out of which more complex developed; they are purely parasitic, they replicate themselves through infecting more developed organisms" (Žižek, 2020a, 79). A similar instance could be cited in Laurie Garrett's *The Coming Plague: Newly Emerging Diseases in a World out of Balance* (1994), where she talks about cancer-causing retroviruses that have "evolved mechanisms for getting around, for picking up new genes, for making mutations. And carrying out evolutionary changes" (p. 312). Garrett refers to the social and environmental changes that force viruses to adapt and evolve in order to survive. In that case, it becomes difficult for virologists, researchers, and ordinary people to recognise the potential threat of the viruses, and it delays the process of manufacturing a vaccine.

Blume and his colleagues are seen contriving to create an atmosphere of panic in May's *Lockdown* (2020), thus precipitating a true state of exception, with severe restrictions on mobility and the disruption of everyday work life in the city of London. While the state of exception constitutes a "point of imbalance between public law and political fact" (Saint-Bonnet, 2001, p. 28), Agamben asserts that "[by] excluding bare life from and capturing it within the political order,

the state of exception actually constituted, in its very separateness, the hidden foundation on which the entire political system rested” (Agamben, 1995, p. 9). In May’s *Lockdown* (2020), a bioengineered virus kills millions of people in London, and the resulting chaos and panic become part and parcel of the greater capitalist intentions. The intentional spread of the virus and the extreme attempt to sell the maximum number of vaccines demonstrate how the political and judicial systems in London are manipulated and compromised. This essentially depicts how, in the city of London, “the immediately biopolitical significance of the state of exception as the original structure in which law encompasses living beings by means of its own suspension” (Agamben, 2005, p. 3) emerges during the pandemic. Once the virus that was spread by Choy infects other children, their families also become affected. Weeks pass before it is detected that the outbreak has spiralled out of control. To prevent further spread of the virus, a lockdown is implemented in London, restricting some of the city’s residents. Blume and others make London the epicentre of the virus, and the imposed lockdown brings to mind Agamben’s concept of “bare life,” which refers to how citizens are stripped of all power when panic strikes a country. Agamben states: “The first thing that the wave of panic that has paralysed the country obviously shows is that our society no longer believes in anything but bare life. Bare life and the danger of losing it is not something that unites people, but blinds and separates them” (Agamben, 2020b, n.p). In May’s *Lockdown* (2020), the government urges citizens to restrict themselves to their respective homes to contain the transmission of the virus. This unavoidable lockdown and panic create isolation among citizens, who begin to keep their distance from one another, perceiving each other as potential sources of contamination.

Furthermore, this motivates the residents of London to guard the entrances of their own houses and compounds. For enforcing the lockdown in their neighbourhoods, the residents take it upon themselves to protect their properties and prevent the transmission of the disease. People in London are “disposed to sacrifice practically everything - the normal conditions of life, social relationships, work, even friendships, affections, and religious and political convictions - to the danger of getting sick” (Agamben, 2020b, n.p). For instance, in the novel, the neighbourhood of the Isle of Dogs can be seen as the only part of London without a single case of the flu. As a result, the residents of the Isle of Dogs come together to guard the area against the rest of London and it seems that: “Locals have decided at this point to protect themselves and classify themselves by going behind fences and walls. They shielded themselves with a collective effort to leave behind them traces of themselves” (El Maarouf et al., 2021, p.74). The prolonged state of emergency in London, as seen in May’s *Lockdown* (2020), emphasises the reality that people lose their certain liberties and develop feelings of fear and insecurity during the lockdown. This circumstance parallels Agamben’s depiction of the plight of Italians during the initial days of COVID-19:

People have been so habituated to live in conditions of perennial crisis and perennial emergency that they don’t seem to notice that their life has been reduced to a purely biological condition and has not only every social and political dimension, but also human and affective. (Agamben, 2020b, n.p)

Londoners in May’s *Lockdown* (2020) close off all the entry points, and guards are posted to keep check that only those related to essential services can enter the neighbourhood. May (2020) narrates: “All that human endeavour, inspiration and wickedness, genius and evil, brought to this sad end. People cowering in their homes, frightened to walk the streets, reduced to a life of fear

and loathing by a single, deadly organism” (May, 2020, p. 267). The novel echoes the harsh reality of the lockdown imposed during the COVID-19 pandemic, where fear of the virus has been used by others to dominate certain social organisations and behaviour. The lockdown guidelines vary not only from country to country, but also according to the social status of individuals. May's *Lockdown* provides a lens through which the readers can evaluate the political conceptualisations of fear and the mechanisations of certain authoritarian practises during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Agamben's (2005) concept of state of exception immediately connects the lockdown in London in May's narrative with the Foucauldian concept of the surveillance of space. Due to the absence of a proper cure, people have been isolated in London, and the procedure of separating out the sick people to prevent the further spread of the virus is initiated. A similar process of exclusion can be witnessed during the leprosy outbreak and bacterial infections where the dominant class constructs structures to exclude those who have been affected, and even after the spread of the disease has been controlled, the structures remain intact to carry out further exclusion. Foucault argues that the structures are kept intact because the “game of exclusion would be played again, often in these same places, in an oddly similar fashion two or three centuries later” (2006, p. 6). This panopticon form of control arising from political strategies is represented in Peter May's *Lockdown* (2020). People are no longer rejected but are assigned specific places for close observations in London, and here, by assigning individual disciplinary structures, the process of surveillance can work smoothly.

In May's *Lockdown* (2020), the frightening memory of the outbreak of the virus and the pandemonium connected with it results in an unavoidable lockdown that can be seen as a system of heavy surveillance and discipline in which state control (in)directly impacts citizens' physical reality in London. The heavily guarded streets, checkpoints, and the Dome where the infected patients are kept allude to Foucault's description of the confinement. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault presents his renowned concept of panopticism by outlining disciplinary mechanisms developed in the late 17th century to regulate plaques: “If it is true that the leper gave rise to rituals of exclusion, which to a certain extent provided the model for and general form of the great Confinement, then the plague gave rise to disciplinary projects” (Foucault, 1995, p. 197). The gaze of inspection ensures the absolute obedience of the people and this allows the authorities to closely monitor the movements of each citizen and constantly locate and examine their intentions in the city. In *Lockdown*, the pandemic makes London a restricted and divided space “in which the individuals are inserted in a fixed place, in which the slightest movements are supervised, in which all events are recorded, in which an uninterrupted work of writing links the centre and periphery, in which power is exercised without division” (Foucault, 1995, p. 197). The quarantine of Londoners in May's *Lockdown* indicates the establishment of a regimented society around a comprehensive set of techniques and mechanisms for monitoring, controlling and rectifying the aberrant in the public space. The gates of different neighbourhoods are closed and Lukas van den Berge views this kind of situation as a full lockdown where

the gates of the city are closed and people are confined in their own houses, with the doors of each house being barred from the outside [...]. The streets and other public spaces are occupied by a well-ordered militia of syndics and sentinels serving as the population's meticulous guards and inspectors. (Berge, 2020, p. 3).

With the growing contagion, citizens do not resist the lockdown and willingly succumb; they remain inside their houses, following the state's lockdown regulations. However, the surveillance is not for everyone, and those with considerable economic and political power can choose to skip the surveillance. As it is seen when the licence plate of Blume's BMW is scanned, it is given an automatic free pass: "Their cameras fed his number into the computer in seconds and they waved him [Pinkie] on. VIP. No contact required. Everyone was happy" (May, 2020, p. 178-179). In May's novel, the unprecedented lockdown influences social behaviour and criminals create new opportunities to commit crimes. Pinkie and Blume use the deserted streets to their own advantage. Pinkie disposes off Choy's body, breaks into the houses of different people, and commits murder without any hindrance. The lockdown makes it easier for him to go unnoticed and provides him the space to continue his criminal activities.

The City is under threat: crime in Peter May's *Lockdown*

In crime fiction, the genre of 'true crime' raises relevant concerns about real events. True crime narratives attempt to explain deviant actions that contemporary society has difficulty understanding. In this case, the deviant figure is based on a social obsession to which the readers can easily relate. Peter May does it perfectly by presenting to us a scenario that is ongoing throughout the world. The economics of crime states that a crime is committed with the intention of obtaining some monetary or consumption benefits. Committing a crime is a deliberate choice for people who expect a return from it. The central crime in *Lockdown* is the murder of Choy, and the discovery of her bones at a construction site in Archbishop's Park initiates a chain of events. After injecting Choy with the virus, as Blume expected, the flu becomes out of control and it spreads throughout London, taking the form of a deadly pandemic. Choy, on the other hand, recovers from the flu and becomes living proof of Blume's creation of the raging pandemic. Blume needs to get rid of Choy to keep Dr. Sara Castelli, the Health Protection Agency's investigator, from discovering that she was at the epicentre of the pandemic. Dr. Castelli realises that and states:

We know that Choy was at the epicentre of the pandemic, and if we'd been able to compare her virus with the one used to produce the Stein-Francks vaccine, we'd have known straight away where it came from. As good as a fingerprint. Don't you see? That's why they had to get rid of her. (May, 2020, pp. 268-269).

Blume kills Choy, strips the flesh from her bones, and hires another criminal named Ronald Kazinski to dispose of the bones. However, Kazinski does not do a good job, and soon the bag containing the bones is discovered by the workers at a construction site.

Throughout the novel, many other crimes are committed besides the murder of Choy. A large part of those crimes is the consequence of the lockdown imposed on the city. May states that the lockdown becomes "a signal for others to emerge under cover of darkness to embark on a rampage of looting and vandalism" and "it [is] not a time anyone [wants] to be out on the streets" (May, 2020, p. 123). With limited social interactions during the lockdown in London, mass unemployment results in a decline in public finances. Furthermore, being isolated at home, citizens become wary and distrustful of others. This anxiety gives rise to prejudice and hatred, which develops into physical violence and criminal activities in the city. Lydia Cheung and Philip Gunby note in their study on crime and lockdown during pandemics that restrictions on travel and other

outdoor activities, along with fears of contracting the virus, result in the majority of individuals spending significant amounts of time at home in their little family circles. As a result, the majority of commercial space remains vacant, and as Lydia Cheung and Philip Gunby state, in this situation:

The result [is] changes in the opportunities and potential for different types of property crime and crimes against people. Furthermore, the probability of being caught committing some forms of crimes by the police could also have changed if police [are] focused on enforcing the social distancing, travel, and activity restrictions, than enforcing some types of criminal behaviour. (2021, p. 1)

May expresses his concern about this aspect in his novel *Lockdown*, and because the majority of commercial spaces in London are empty, the lockdown creates the possibility for various sorts of property crime and crimes against individuals. When the police force focuses all their energy and power on tracing the victims of the flu, guarding the borders, and making sure that the lockdown is in effect, the probability of getting caught in criminal acts becomes very less. Burglaries, arson of offices at Flaxman Court, and stealing of items from shops in Bridle Lane, Great Pulteney Street, and Peter Street are such instances of criminal activity in London. Even the empty showroom of Lamborghini was not spared: “the showroom windows were smashed; the floor space beyond, which had once been graced by some of the most expensive cars in the world, was empty and exposed to the element” (May, 2020, p. 158). Residential burglaries are also thriving during the lockdown. Since no police resources are available to monitor residential movements, getting into others’ property becomes a cakewalk. In such cases, the residents of the houses have to take it upon themselves to protect their property, and it is evident in the conviction with which Mr. Le Saux, the neighbour of the Smiths’, stands on guard at his window with a shotgun. In addition to these crimes in the novel, there is even the trafficking of dead bodies carried out by Kazinski, who works at the crematorium. He supplies body parts from the crematorium to the sculptor, Jonathan Flight, who uses those parts to make his sculptures: “Taking human body parts and manipulating them to his own twisted design. Disinfected, preserved, plasticised, painted” (May, 2020, p. 168). Furthermore, an instance of cybercrime is seen when Blume carries on a conversation with Amy, pretending to be her mentor, Dr. Samantha Looker. Amy is a forensic odontologist who helps the police identify the victim. During the course of the investigation, Amy exchanges vital information about her findings with her mentor. To get ahead of the police, Blume hires Pinkie to murder Samantha in her apartment, hacks the messaging software and carries on the conversation with Amy, pretending to be Samantha.

Lockdown adheres to the likeliness of other ‘true crime’ narratives by representing the police in the hard-boiled tradition.² The crucial elements of a hard-boiled crime narrative are vividly presented in this novel- the urban setting of London, the sensational and violent crime, a plain style of language, a true-to-life depiction of events, the procedural side of the police investigation, and the obvious dominance of the male protagonist. MacNeil takes it upon himself to safeguard the city and attempts to restore order in pandemic-stricken London. He realises that “if he hadn’t found the little girl’s killer by then, he was pretty sure no one else would. So, there was no time for red tape. This investigation had become something of an obsession” (May, 2020, p. 149). The third-person narrative helps in making the police figure central to the structure, ideology, and successful portrayal of him as a hero. John Scaggs writes in *Crime Fiction*: “The procedural, significantly, while it directly interrogates the social order, also has the capacity to

finally affect it is noticeable, if not meaningful, ways” (2005, p. 97). He adds that the plots are often linked to the personal crises of the officer in charge, and that is what makes it ideal for the officer to take the responsibility of solving the crime on himself. At the same time, in *Lockdown*, the procedural investigation of the murder of Choy interrogates capitalist society and its mechanisms, while at the same time it brings down the system by putting an end to Blume’s operations. MacNeil is the lone operator throughout the narrative, and, with the help of Dr. Castelli and Amy, he seeks to find out the root of the epidemic, identify Choy’s assassin, and bring Blume and Pinkie to justice. At many points in the novel, like going to confront Flight or searching the property of the Smiths’ where Choy is killed, MacNeil does not inform the police department and carries on with the investigation all by himself. He is portrayed as a tragic figure, who mourns the death of his son Sean because of the flu, feels devastated after the end of his relationship with his ex-wife Martha, and becomes helpless in protecting his girlfriend Amy. These tragic incidents make MacNeil more determined in his pursuit of the criminal: “Sean had still been alive then, and MacNeil had had a reason to put one foot in front of the other. He knew now that he wanted to find this little girl’s killer more than anything else on earth” (May, 2020, p. 93). Further, the hard-boiled narrative offers a reversal of the role between the pursuer and the pursued. It is MacNeil who is pursued most of the time by Pinkie, and it is again the police who needs saving, not once, but twice- also by the criminal Pinkie.

The forensic pathologist is also a popular companion of the police, and Amy serves as that companion to MacNeil in both his professional and personal life. Her skills in identifying Choy’s age, constructing her face from the bones, and getting to the bottom of the flu virus contributed to a large extent to MacNeil’s investigation. But adhering to the features of hard-boiled fiction, the novel is shadowed by the males’ toughness, and their power and dominance over the females and everyone else. Although being excellent at her job, Amy requires MacNeil to save her at the end, when she is kidnapped and put in the capsule of the London Eye without her wheelchair. She becomes the one who puts MacNeil’s life and investigation in jeopardy, and is used as bait by Blume to get MacNeil to hand over all the pieces of evidence. Amy, Martha, and Dr. Castelli are strong female characters, but none can match MacNeil’s magnificence, his valour, and toughness. They are companions to MacNeil for a brief amount of time, but he marches forward all alone for the final exposition. Another characteristic of hard-boiled fiction is the representation of the city:

The urban setting of the city is central to the hard-boiled crime narrative as it had been to the nineteenth-century detectives in Britain and America, if for different reasons. For the earlier detectives the city brought wealth and poverty into close proximity and so encouraged crime; it provided the anonymity which enabled the criminal to avoid capture by the police, so creating work for the private investigator. For the later hard-boiled detective, the city retained these functions, but was also a breeding ground for corruption in the forces of law as well as criminals, the ideal location for gangsters to carry out their business. (Worthington, 2011, pp. 160-161)

Lockdown is based entirely on the city of London, and the conflicts, clashes, and exposition all revolve around the urban setting of the city. In the lines of Worthington’s description of hard-boiled fiction, Peter May provides us with a city novel with its sensational crime, the characteristic social and political tensions in a lawless world, and a sole hero-like police figure who is required to survive to save the entire city. The aftermath of the pandemic stripped law and order from the

city: “The devastation here was extraordinary. Stolen vehicles discarded and set alight. Almost every building – shops and offices – violated by looters” (May, 2020, p. 133). The wealth of the city invites criminal activity during a crisis, and the lockdown makes the city a breeding ground for all kinds of lawlessness. Lockdown and social distance regulations implemented by governments around the world to limit the spread of the COVID-19 virus have had a significant impact on how people communicate, consume, operate businesses, provide services, and discover opportunities for crime (Felson et al. 2020; Payne 2020). By showcasing these criminal activities, May wants to assert that “the current approach to the pandemic, in so far as it is guided by human dignity, does not give sufficient recognition to the question of livelihoods and other problems that lockdown. There is also the question of human security” (Delanty, 2020, pp. 3-4). *Lockdown* (2020) raises concerns about the changes in human social behaviour during the COVID-19 pandemic and how it opened up particular circumstances for opportunistic exploitation.

Being quarantined: disability and the city in Peter May's *Lockdown*

The term ‘disability’ has a multitude of interpretations in different contexts, making it difficult to define objectively. In a wider context, this term can be applied to a wide variety of human differences-including those characterised by “age, health, physical and mental abilities, and even family status - that have indeed been linked to some type of social constraint or “material deprivation” (Gleeson, 1999, p. 99). In this novel, Amy loses the functioning of her legs as a result of an accident, and she makes it clear that she will not let her disability become an impediment to living her life. However, society frequently reminds her of her condition, and in the context of social power relations, her physical infirmity serves as a symbol of her inferior status and personal misfortune. Amy's physically disabled body, portrayed as an embodiment of bodily insufficiency and transgression, becomes a repository for societal insecurities about such disturbing concerns as fragility, authority, and identity (Thomson, 2017, p. 6). Amy is constantly reminded of her vulnerability and her position as a disabled woman, regardless of how hard she tries to deny it. This becomes more evident when, during a heated argument, her best friend, Tom Bennet, a forensic expert, blurts out that he can't imagine that MacNeil would be in a relationship with a cripple like Amy. She realises that her disability is a multifaceted subjective experience that is typically formed and shaped by constraints, discrimination, and limitations in urban settings. Elyse Purcell, in his study on “Public spaces and disability”, perceives disability as a social impediment caused by the environmental stress or social practises in which a person exists or performs. He further argues that “many disabled people face marginalization and exclusion from both the [home] and public forums because the environments are not built for their needs” (Purcell, 2020, p. 106). Amy recollects this marginalisation when her brother Lee not only resents her accomplishments from her school days but also views the gifts she purchases for her parents with envy and contempt. Lee positively glistens in the aftermath of her injury, and Amy detects his joy in his soothing words and feigned concern. Seeing his “big sister chopped down to size, confined to a wheelchair”, he understands that now “he would be the one to take care of the family, buy them gifts, and take his rightful place at the head of the table next to his father” (May, 2020, p. 185). Amy finds it distressing that her brother is ignorant of her effort to live a normal life in a city that pays little attention to people with disabilities. Her icy relationship with her brother creates a schism amongst her family and forces her to “move away from the Chinese community, to the splendid isolation

of her old spice warehouse in Bermondsey” (May, 2020, p. 185). Her family visited her once and became so envious that they never came back. Gradually, Amy’s solitude has deteriorated into extreme loneliness.

Claire Edwards (2010) states that “the insights of the social model nevertheless open up an understanding of the ways in which the contemporary city serves to disable individuals through its social, political, and economic organisation” (2010, p. 219). The public space of the city can assist and empower disabled individuals by providing them with access to urban spaces and the opportunity to engage in city life. In the novel, Amy, who is ignored and isolated by her family, attempts to occupy herself by immersing herself in the city’s sociocultural and economic surroundings. Her connection to the city is through the physical environment, which includes public boulevards, private and public construction (encompassing places of entertainment, employment, civic amenities, and homes), and, of course, transportation systems (Edwards, 2020, p. 219). However, the extended lockdown in the city required to stop the rapid spread of the virus exacerbates her alienated condition, and the social isolation renders her vulnerable and susceptible to a nervous breakdown. Peter May’s *Lockdown* (2020) demonstrates how London becomes the epicentre of the virus that eventually leads the city to a motionless and frozen state. This lockdown immediately connects the novel to the current situation, in which the coronavirus pandemic continues to wreak havoc on countries worldwide, and several governments have imposed and maintained stringent restrictions and lockdowns in response to a recent rise in COVID-19 cases. Žižek says in this context:

The coronavirus epidemic confronts us with something previously thought to be the impossible: the world as we knew it has stopped turning, whole countries are in a lockdown, many of us are confined to our homes facing an uncertain future in which, even if most of us survive, economic mega-crisis is likely” (2020a, p. 85).

In a similar way, May’s *Lockdown* (2020) in a similar way depicts how daily activities have been disrupted as a result of the lockdown, and the streets are empty in London. Airports, train stations, and highways are closed, and no movements are authorised except for medical emergencies and those required to maintain law and order. When MacNeil drives through the city, he notices how the once-thriving metropolis has devolved into a ghost town, and he also expresses concern about the impoverished individuals who would suffer financial hardship as a result of this lockdown in the city. While driving around the Dome’s perimeter, MacNeil and Martha are horrified to discover unmarked black vehicles lined up to transport the corpses to authorised burial centres. Their conversation brings out the fact that “the council-run crematoriums throughout the city had been overwhelmed by numbers, and the government had set up emergency facilities to dispose of the growing backlog of bodies. There were literally thousands awaiting disposal daily, and nowhere to keep them. (May, 2020, p. 85).

This dread of infection and death compels residents of London to remain in their homes during the lockdown. Achille Mbembe, in his column “The Universal Right to Breathe”, asserts that it is one thing to be concerned about the demise of others in a faraway place, and it seems very another to unexpectedly become conscious of one’s own rottenness to be compelled to exist immediately with the prospect of death (Mbembe, 2020, n.p). Mbembe essentially talks about the problems of lockdown, ultimately having to respond to one’s life, to one’s identity. Similarly, in

Lockdown (2020), MacNeil and Martha feel sad to see how all businesses, restaurants, pubs, and offices have been closed, and the once-bustling streets are now deserted, except for the guards. May (2020) graphically depicts the city's ongoing crisis: "Nobody went to work any more. Only a handful of shops were open for a few hours a day. There was no public transport. The airports had been closed indefinitely. The economy of the capital was in free fall, and the rest of the world was ready to do anything it could to help the city contain its sickness" (May, 2020, p. 42). According to Yi-Fu Tuan, the structure of human space is largely dependent on eyesight. Other senses contribute to the expansion and enrichment of visual space. For a disabled person like Amy who can't walk properly, "sound enlarges [her] spatial awareness to include areas behind the head that cannot be seen. More importantly, sound dramatises [her] spatial experience. Soundless space feels calm and lifeless despite the visible flow of activity in it" (Tuan, 2001, p. 16). Factories, transport systems, and other types of working machinery produce sounds that can elicit spatial perceptions. Daniel Briggs, Luke Telford, and others in their study on the negative impact of lockdown on disabled and vulnerable bodies state that, "while the lockdown was an economic gift for some of the world's superrich, for others, it became a living nightmare" (Briggs et al., 2021, p. 179). They further argue that "the mental health of disabled people and vulnerable adults deteriorated significantly under lockdowns while women and vulnerable children were suddenly further exposed to neglect or abuse at home" (2021, p. 179). In the novel, as a result of the city's sustained lockdown and cessation of daily activities, Amy lacks a sharp sensitivity to spatial noises and is unable to use them and their resonances to assess London's spatial character.

May (2020) emphasises throughout the novel how the military and police force contribute to the city's lifelessness through their constant surveillance and implementation of order. May shows how the people living in London imprison themselves, evoking the Foucauldian imaginary of "confinement" in a virus-ridden city through the use of colonial-era pandemic policies: "It is a segmented, immobile, frozen space. Each individual is fixed in his place. And, if he moves, he does so at the risk of his life, contagion or punishment" (Foucault, 1995, 195). May further depicts how citizens are even compelled by the pandemic crisis to secure the doors to their own homes and complexes. They take it on themselves to maintain the lockdown in their communities, protecting their property and preventing the disease from spreading further. While the government may have imposed the lockdown on the city of London, Blume and Stein-Francks exercised enormous power throughout the pandemic, and their ulterior motive of earning more money by selling the vaccines added to the utter lifelessness of the city. Xuefei Ren argues that "lockdown, as a state-spatial instrument for infectious disease mitigation, has huge consequences on racial, gender, and class inequalities" (2020, p. 433). This racial inequality becomes prominent when Amy is confronted with racist biases at work. MacNeil instantly dismisses her uniqueness and individualism by remarking on how all Chinese people look the same. This racist attitude further marginalises the disabled Amy, relegating her to the status of the Other. Many disabled people endure discrimination and exclusion from the labour market and public space as a result of their habitats not being structured with their concerns in mind. Choy in the novel is chosen to be the carrier of the virus by Blume primarily because of her disability, a cleft palate that caused substantial disfigurement. Blume says: "In fact we bought her. In the international marketplace. It's amazing how cheaply people can be bought these days. Literally. And children with such disfigurement, well, they cost pennies" (May, 2020, p. 274). Choy's disability not only confines

her in a world where power structures and discipline make her a docile body but also isolates and imprisons her socially. Foucault, in *Discipline and Punishment* (1995), opines:

The human body was entering a machinery of power that explores it, breaks it down and rearranges it. [. . .] It defined how one may have a hold over others' bodies, not only so that they may do what one wishes, but so that they may operate as one wishes, with the techniques, the speed and the efficiency that one determines. Thus, discipline produces subjected and practiced bodies, "docile" bodies". (1995, p. 138)

Because of Choy's disability, Blume gains the opportunity to inscribe authorities on her body in an unfavourable and degrading manner, constricting, limiting, and restricting her liberty and prospects for a brighter future in the city. May (2020) explains her miserable journey in the following way: "She must have thought she had died and gone to heaven. Only to be infected by a deadly flu, and when it failed to kill her, murdered by the very people she had probably come to trust" (May, 2020, p. 274). Both Choy and Amy find themselves secluded, and it becomes extremely difficult for them to cope with the imposed lockdown in London. And like COVID 19, this H5N1 bird flu virus "seems to have brought [their] frenzied speed of modern society to a grinding halt and has literally crushed the wings of unlimited social interaction" (Banerjee & Rai, 2020, p. 526). Amy and Choy are trapped in this vicious loop of lockdown, which further isolates them within their constricted space.

When the imposed lockdown makes London a state of exception, the normative ceases to exist. The pandemic uncovered a scenario that had never existed before, and it was nothing like what people had observed in recent years. This non-normative state puts an entire city in suspension, making it lifeless. Due to the pandemic, "normality [in London] has been suspended and put in a state of exception", and at the same time, Amy and Choy's plight symbolises "the fact that normality exists for disability, but not for the rest of neoliberal diversity, suggesting that disability is the state of exception that undergirds our very idea of diversity" (Davis, 2013, p. 8). While Amy's sense of isolation, caused by her impairment, is exacerbated by the city's standstill status and utter lifelessness during the lockdown, Choy's disability compels her to be sold to become the carrier of the virus that eventually results in the city's extended lockdown. By making this subtle connection between Choy and Amy's disability, May (2020) wants to assert that the city's private and public space should function as a normative ideal, establishing ideological and organisational frameworks for acknowledging and appreciating disabled people. Choy and Amy's disabled bodies seem to demonstrate the fact that "when people with disabilities have the opportunity to express their perceptions of biases in the socially constructed environment or expectations of functions needed to perform tasks, then everyone learns how to see the social environment differently" (Young, 2000, p. 117). It was only during the COVID-19 pandemic, a surge of realisation occurred with respect to the disadvantages experienced by people with disabilities due to disabling environments. When a lockdown was imposed all over the world, it was at that moment that it became apparent to the able-bodied individuals to consider the materialities of impairment. They need to understand that "where chronic loneliness emerges as a consequence of physical distancing restrictions, this will increase the likelihood of negative health outcomes (e.g., increased falls, more rapid cognitive decline) that limit a [disabled] person's capacity to live independently" (Haslam, 2020, p. 65). A full understanding of the situation of the disabled communities is far-fetched, but an attempt has begun in that direction.

Conclusion: Virus and Visible reality

Everyone reacts differently to the outbreak of COVID-19 and its consequences, and Peter May's *Lockdown* (2020) allows readers to get as near or as far away as they wish from what is really happening outside. This novel in this testing period has managed to transcend the superficiality of simply highlighting the structure of coronavirus or epidemiological facts and figures and raise some pertinent questions. By publishing *Lockdown* in April 2020, Peter May makes it possible for readers to relate to the novel instantly. The outbreak of the bird flu virus and the consequent lockdown in London have become the visible reality in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. The narrative experience of *Lockdown* (2020) blends with the reality, and it becomes considerably difficult to distinguish when the characters become part of the reality, and the bird flu pandemic in the novel becomes the COVID-19 pandemic. The novel is especially timely in light of the current state of debate over COVID-19 and its implications for human social behavior. May's novel moves away from the fictionalised viral thriller genre and into an articulation of lived experiences, owing to the virus's evolutionary patterns and uncertainties about the efficacy of the vaccines produced. The genre of crime narratives in general works towards destabilising the boundaries between the real and the imaginary. While "Covid- 19 is a worldwide test of governance and social resilience", May's novel seeks to envision a future where "it is possible to control the virus spread and gradually resume social and economic activity; thus, societies can coexist with Covid- 19" (Pieterse, 2021, pp. 1-2).

The way May represent the lockdown in the city of London, with its lawlessness, surveillance, the citizens being reduced to docile bodies, and the rising crime rate, seem to be accurate to the lockdown scenario during the COVID-19 pandemic. In an interview with *CNN* (2020), May remarks: "The everyday details of how you get through life, the way the lockdown works, people being forbidden to leave their homes. It's all scarily accurate" (Elassar, 2020, n.p). With the imposed lockdown, citizens all over the world are stripped of any power and "in a perverse vicious circle, the limitations of freedom imposed by governments are accepted in the name of a desire for safety" (Agamben, 2020a, n.p). People adhere to the guidelines of the lockdown in the fear of getting infected by COVID-19, and similar to May's novel, containment zones are erected to keep the potential contaminators from spreading the virus. Similar to *Lockdown*, during the COVID-19 lockdowns, the streets are deserted, people need certain passes to travel within cities, and the sirens of ambulances are usual occurrences. Peter May's *Lockdown* (2020) inadvertently sheds light on the uncertainties about another wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, and stresses on the fact that in the post-Covid era "a new life under viral conditions" has to be invented, and as a result, "what is fiction and what is reality will change" (Žižek, 2020b, p. 14). Written nearly fifteen years ago, this prophetic and gripping fiction explores human experiences amid a deadly virus and gives a gateway to envisioning the post-COVID world.

Notes

1. Viral modernity refers to the role viruses play in evolution and culture in the social world. This concept arises out of viral biology and information science, which lead to cultural evolution.

2. Hard-boiled detective fiction came into existence in America during the 1920s. Its main protagonist is a male investigator who is professional, tough, survives assaults and injuries, bound by a moral code and works in a protective capacity.

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