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**Exploring Human Connections in Rajinder Singh Bedi's "Quarantine"**

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**Abstract**

The present paper discusses Rajinder Singh Bedi's short story "Quarantine" (1940), written on the subject of the plague epidemic. The story revolves around the events describing life during the plague outbreak and the quarantine centre established by the government to prevent the spread of the epidemic. In the story, patients admitted to the quarantine centre felt isolated. The condition of the other patients in the quarantine centre and the rising daily death toll weakened patients' fighting spirit against the disease. This is the reason people feared quarantine more than the plague, as it was causing more deaths than the disease itself. Through this story, Bedi highlights fear of isolation, loss of human dignity and the role of empathy during epidemic crises. The present paper attempts to analyse how fear of isolation and loss of human dignity haunts humanity during the time of epidemic outbreaks with reference to the story "Quarantine". It further attempts to discuss how human beings' longing for human warmth and solace is only possible through having an empathetic attitude towards the afflicted individuals at the time of crisis.

**Keywords:** Epidemic, Isolation, Fear, Pain, Empathy, Dignity

The word 'epidemic' leaves a harrowing impression on the human mind. The moment one hears this word, a host of gruesome, agonizing, and heartrending scenes flash before one's eye. Newspaper reports and official data regarding the epidemics and pandemics focus on the disease's origin, the number of people infected or recovered, the death toll, mortality rate, and measures for prevention or control. Official figures highlight the severity of the dreadful diseases and showcase the government efforts to rescue the public from it. However, these statistics fail to reveal the anguish inflicted upon the individual's mind by the disease. Literature effectively records physical as well as mental trauma caused by the disease. Literature, in the hand of the writer, becomes a tool to depict the crumbled spirit of

the afflicted individual. It “takes us beyond statistics of deaths, devastations, and degrees of spread – to show its impact on the lives of families, friends and neighbours of the infected and dying” (Priyanka 298). It depicts person’s loneliness, fear, and suffering as well as longing for human warmth. Writers across the world have made epidemics and pandemics subject of their literary works. Indian writers like Rabindranath Tagore, Phanishwar Nath Renu, Munshi Premchand, ‘Master’ Bhagwandas, Rajinder Singh Bedi, Pandey Bechan Sharma ‘Ugra’, Suryakant Tripathi Nirala, Harishankar Parsai, Fakir Mohan Senapati, George Varghese Kakkanadan, U.R. Ananthamurthy, among others, have written on this subject. Discussing the contribution of Indian writers on this subject, Saurav Kumar Rai in his article “Pandemics Through Indian literary Lens” writes: “These writers have put a human face to global disease outbreaks by offering a glimpse into the lives of ordinary people, and the socio-cultural context of these cataclysmic events” (Rai).

The present paper discusses Rajinder Singh Bedi’s short story “Quarantine” (1940), written on the subject of the plague epidemic. This short story written in Urdu was included in Bedi’s first collection of short stories *Daana O Daam*. The term ‘quarantine’ evokes the horrific experience of the COVID -19 pandemic. However, this story is about a quarantine centre set up to prevent the spread of the plague epidemic. This story “presents a detailed and exclusive description of the life affected by plague and also of quarantine as the title of the story also indicates” (Hussain). Quarantine proved to be even more terrifying to the public than the disease itself. The story is set amid the plague ridden days of British India. The story narrates wider social and psychological consequences of the epidemic on society. Epidemic causes not only physical wounds but also social and psychological ones. It creates hierarchy in the society and left affected people to live in the fear of isolation. It strips human beings of their dignity and they are treated as ‘other’. The events of the story are unfolded through the viewpoint of Dr. Bakshi, who is a doctor witnessing the events. He “is appointed to oversee the quarantine to prevent the spread of the epidemic in his city” (Qadeer 27). Apart from Dr. Bakshi, William Bhagu, “a recent convert to Christianity” (Bedi 89) who is a sanitation worker, is the other character in the story.

The story begins with the description of havoc the epidemic has created in the life of the people. To restrict the expansion of this contagious disease, quarantine was imposed by the government. People feared quarantine more than the plague, as it was causing more deaths than the disease itself. It is evident from these lines: “The Plague was dreadful, but the quarantine was no less frightening. People were not as harassed by the plague as by the need to quarantine themselves” (87). People should fear disease rather than its preventive measure, but ironically, people feared the preventive measure rather than the disease in the

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case of the plague. The health department was making people aware about the plague through posters. The poster circulated by the department targeted the fear of quarantine in the heart of the people. It is visible from the message of the poster: “The message initially said, ‘No rodent, No Plague,’ but later expanded to include, ‘No Rodent, No Plague, No Quarantine’” (87). The reason being its dreadful impact was evident not only on patient’s physical health but also on their mental and social well-being. Patients felt isolated in the quarantine centre. There was no chance of survival once one was sent to the quarantine centre.

Recovering from illness demands medical treatment along with patients’ will power to recover from their physical and mental trauma. The willpower gets strengthened by the love, affection and company of one’s family, friends and relatives. Quarantine shut the door of love, affection and feelings of togetherness. People preferred to die in their home rather than try their luck to survive in the quarantine centre. Dr. Bakshi exposes the reality of quarantine centre: “I saw many patients losing their will to fight the disease because they were separated from their loved ones. Many died because they saw others dying around them. Sometimes, some people whose condition otherwise was not serious died because they were breathing the same virus-infected air” (88). Fear of quarantine forced families to hide symptoms of disease to save their loved one from being forcefully separated and moved to the quarantine centre. This resulted in the increase in deaths caused by plague as individuals’ resistance to quarantine heightened the risk of spreading infection.

The epidemic also served as an instrument of dehumanization, reducing human beings to mere bodies. It stripped individuals of their dignity while alive; people were living isolated in the quarantine centre and also after death, as patients did not get human treatment in the disposal of bodies after death. Disposal of dead bodies exposed the harsh reality of plague management by the colonial government. The narrator describes:

Hundreds of dead bodies were dragged like carcasses of dogs into mounds of fire. There were no customary religious services. The bodies were set on fire after the liberal splashing of petrol. At the time of sunset, flames rising from the burning stacks of dead bodies merged with the sunset’s redness, making the survivors think that the whole world was on fire. (88)

Patients were admitted in the quarantine centre beyond its limits, making it a place akin to hell for them. The centre was supposed to be a refuge, but it turned into a place of suffering. The horror of the time can be experienced from these lines of the narrator:

Although the thought of hell during this time of endless dread, agony and anguish was a source of comfort.... there were lamentations of mothers, woes of sisters, bereavement of spouses and heartbreaking brooding of the kids which created a highly despondent environment. During these days, when even healthy people were depressed, one could imagine the despondence of those who were sick. (93-94)

This was a tough time even for doctors, as doctors were afraid of getting infected. Dr. Bakshi, working in the quarantine centre followed all the safety measures, yet a slight disturbance in his health forced him to think: “O hell! I, too, will become a victim of this terrible disease. Plague – and then quarantine!” (89). While treating the patient in the quarantine centre, a conflict between duty and fear was always going on in Dr. Bakshi’s mind. His fear forced him to avoid close contact with the patients. The thought of running away from the quarantine centre was always haunting him.

At the time, when doctors are shown in the grip of quarantine fear, Bedi presents William Bhagu as the emblem of empathy. As a sanitation worker, his job was to maintain cleanliness in the area, yet he served others selflessly. He “ran errands for folks who feared the disease and were confined to their homes” (89). He had little medical knowledge about the disease, yet he guided people about different methods of protection so that people could save themselves from being victims of the disease. He touched, embraced, and consoled the patient fearlessly. Inspired by his selfless service, Dr. Bakshi decided to treat more patients, yet he avoided close contact with the patients, and that task for Dr. Bakshi was accomplished by Bhagu without any complain. Bhagu grieved for patients’ pain and suffering. He offered his deep sympathy and companionship to the isolated patients who were feeling dejected during their treatment in the quarantine centre. The narrator comments: “He felt everyone’s pain and was the only one who mourned. He prayed to Jesus to alleviate people’s suffering, presenting himself as the one who was responsible for all sins and moral lapses of men” (92).

Bhagu even paid the price for his service to humanity, as his wife got infected and died eventually. Dr. Bakshi rebuked him for bringing infection to his home. Even his wife’s death could not stop him from visiting the quarantine centre and serving people. Dr. Bakshi was surprised to see Bhagu in the quarantine centre just a day after his wife’s death. He even risked his life in saving a person from flames. An unconscious person was thrown into the pile of dead bodies, thinking to be dead. When dead bodies were set on fire, that man gained consciousness. Bhagu jumped into the fire to save that man and burnt himself.

But Bhagu's effort could not save that person. His death made him lament: "Do you know why that patient died? Which disease killed him? It wasn't a plague. It was qonteen. Yes, qonteen, qonteen!" (93). Bhagu's remarks highlight how human warmth, love and compassion are essential along with medical treatment while treating the victims of dreadful diseases. As time passed, cases of plague declined in the city. Dr. Bakshi was rewarded for his service during the epidemic, while Bhagu was neglected. Bedi through the characters of William Bhagu and Dr. Bakshi presents two different approaches toward the disease. He contrasts Bhagu's empathetic attitude with Dr. Bakshi's professional approach to the disease. "Bhagu's commitment to his profession and his sense of responsibility towards society inspires doctor Bakshi. However, the doctor also acknowledges repeatedly that he could never manage to replicate the courage, commitment and empathy that Bhagu has and continues to maintain distance from patients" (Kumar).

The story compels us to think epidemic situation not only as a medical crisis but also as a loss to humanity. The need at the time of such crisis is to respect human dignity and having empathetic attitude towards the patients. The character of Willaim Bhagu emerges as a source of hope amid the time of crisis. Bedi through the character of Willaim Bhagu, a sanitation worker who belongs to the marginalised section of society, presents such an exemplary instance of humanity that the other main character of the story Dr. Bakshi, who is honoured for his contribution, finds his own efforts insignificant in comparison. The honours and awards he has received begin to feel like a burden to him. The story "delves into fear, faith, duty and dignity" (Sharma 168). It effectively presents the physical, mental and social impact of the epidemic.

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