

## **Pandemic Narrative, Cultural Fears and Stephen King's Novel *The Stand***

**Tatheer Assim Faiq**

**Mustansyiriyah University Baghdad, Iraq**

### **Abstract**

*Human course of history shows how politics, geography borders, race and gender conflicts, all have changed in the background of a new global pandemic situation. This is also a fictional image depicted in Stephen king's *The Stand* when the biological weapon becomes a pandemic that wipes out most of the world's population. Stephen king connects his fictional realm to our own contemporary cultural fears that may threaten human race. *The Stand* is a post- apocalyptic novel shows a dark image of the world facing the super flue. This paper offers a new reading of Stephen King's fictional super flue and reconstructing the human situation in which this fictional world has found certain foreshadowing in our postmodern political reality and certain reflections on the various paths in which humanity survives. Between fictional and real threads of pandemic stories we hope that our human consciousness enables us to cope with growing fears and concepts of uncertainty during pandemic times.*

**Keywords:** *Pandemic, cultural fears, Stephen king, horror, fiction*

Pandemic narrative has ground the world normal life as well as its conflicts and a spiral of reactivity. At the same time peoples of the world have gained control of what they want to stand against the tragic effects of the fatal Covid 19 pandemics and to face it with bravery and breaking old normal life patterns to establish new ones. This real humanity stands have prevented the prophecy of Stephen King's world end. This paper reconstructs the blurring layers between fiction and reality. This paper offers a new reading of Stephen King's fictional super flue in his novel *The Stand* and recreating the human situation according to our postmodern political reality in which this fictional world has found certain foreshadowing in

our own global struggle against Covid 19 pandemics to shed lights on any possible ways in which humanity survives. Between fictional and real threads of epidemic stories human consciousness enables us to cope with growing fears and concepts of uncertainty and social insecurity during epidemic times.

With a nanosecond of computer error in USA Defence Department laboratory, the world ends in King's novel *The Stand*. And starts a world stripped of its institutions and emptied of 99 percent of its people. Survivals should choose sides in a new global battle of belonging or being the outcast. Peace and freedom are the main theme of King's epidemic story. In this story United States government research is the source of the super flu virus developed as the fatal weapon. Ironically the virus in the secret research unit was released accidentally by an escaping soldier who infects hundreds of people before he dies tragically. The agony is shifting from the virus that is called Blue Virus and its nickname as Captain Trips to the tragic fact that the government is the instrument of destruction. Here Stephen King connects his fictional realm to our own contemporary social fears that defines the course of the history of the human race.

*The Stand* is a post-apocalyptic novel published in 1978. It shows a dark image of the world facing the super flue. But the novel defies classification it is a horror story as well as science fiction and a political allegory alluding to our contemporary times. King changed the setting of the novel from 1980 to 1990 when he published it in a second 1990 version. He added new beginning and new ending along with 150,000 words. It is a story of horror in the way of our current mindscape a horror that makes us as Douglas Winter has observed: "in the tale of horror, we can breach our foremost taboos, allow ourselves to lose control, experience the same emotions—terror, revulsion, helplessness—that besiege us daily" (Witner, 1984, p.4)

Despite its central unreality, the horror story is credible and it influences readers as such stories reflect people's real fears and unconscious social concerns. At the same time horror stories is an escape unlike escapist horror fiction that enables readers to get away from the real world. King's stories take place in the obviously real world.

The frightening events are not manipulated by supernatural beings but by the world's biological weaponry. Survivors pick up the pieces of what is left in humanity to find new futuristic image of the world. Stephen King writes in his Preface to his complete version of his novel *The Stand* that his story is the "long dark tale of Christianity" (King, 1978, p.xii). It is a tale of another end of the world tale but it specifically the end of America as an emblem

of what the human strife for power to dominate the whole universe. This has a lot to do what human race believes to be the utter goodness or evil. This everlasting battle continues and reaches its epic in epidemic times. Most critics admit that fictional horror doesn't represent the maximum amount of horror found in elements of the real world. In King's fictional epidemic horror the integration between what is real or imaginary is very much on every page. He takes ordinary American setting in particular small towns in Maine with ordinary American people as his characters. The horror begins and ends with these ordinary people not with a supernatural monster or ghosts. He shows the world as it is in epidemic times. Just like our lockdown life in our Coronavirus world can be threatened by ordinary people, Kings horror represents our dark psyche in such times. According to Trim Underwood : "King feels that horror reaffirms people's "self-image and our good feelings about [them] selves" because it allows them to peek at the monster and walk away thinking, "Hey, I'm not so bad. I am all right. A lot better than I thought" (Underwood& Miller, 1988, p.9).

Stu Redman is taken to disease laboratory in Maine where government sciences use him as a guinea pig to discover what has given him immunity. He flees the laboratory and meets Glen Bateman, a sociology professor. Among survivors of the country are Nick Andros rural Oklahoma and Larry Underwood, a rock singer travelling to New York. They meet and the drama of taking stands to face the virus begins.

Goodness and evil are personified in two main characters. The first is Abigail Freemantle, a black hundred years old woman who is considered the good virtuous prophet manifesting God's will. She is followed by fans who found her in her old cabin in a Nebraska cornfield. The second is an evil incarnation, Randall Flagg which is called often throughout the novel timeline as a "dark man". He is followed by citizens who believe him to be the leader of a new born America in Las Vegas. Flagg controls the masses with his cunning and deception about the civilization slavery and his technological powers that have the power of destruction and creation. He shows his supernatural powers in transforming himself into animal shapes and controls minds.

Randall Flagg is an anti-Christ resembles a creation of contemporary fear, especially the fear that satanic extraordinary power lies behind the evil that we see on visual media or read about in fairy tales or even newspapers. With the event of Lee Harvey Oswald's assassination of President John F. Kennedy many people can find an explanation only in the agency of some superhuman evil. Flagg is presented as a source of such evil. He walks the land like powerful

forces of darkness prevails all over the state. His action in commanding Lloyd Henreid to fall down and worship him is showing his rise as the technological god for people who blindly follow him. Later in Las Vegas, where he sets up his new America as a political state and his own kingdom, Flagg gains full control over the weak at pandemic times. At this point, he seems too strong to be defeated under any circumstances, but he is gradually weakened by his own evil.

The good hearted characters: Redman, Bateman, Underwood, and Ralph Brentner embark on a long difficult journey on foot to Las Vegas, where they plan to combat Flagg. Redman breaks his leg in the desert and the other three are eventually picked up by police cars under Flagg's authority. In a stressed meeting with Bateman, Flagg forces Henreid to shoot and kill the sociologist. Despite his superiority in numbers and weapons, Flagg has begun to fear the power of goodness. He stages a sensational public trial, accusing Underwood and Brentner who are kept captive in steel cages, of political state betrayal. The crowd starts to protest, but Flagg silences them with a display of supernatural wickedness, burning a protester down with a fireball. At this very stage Elbert, who had been sent by Flagg to find an atomic bomb, returns with it. The bomb's radioactivity frightens Flagg. He becomes hysterical with fear, for the fireball he had launched has grown in the sky and assumed the shape of a great blue-fire hand—the hand of God—headed for the bomb. He disappears.

Back in the Free Zone established by Freemantle and her followers the social faults of pre-super flue America seem to be reappearing: creeping red tape bureaucracy, and authoritarianism. King's setting remains a vision of the Apocalypse. Society and the state are the real destructive super flu virus. The 108 years old Freemantle was a guitarist and a singer with large inheritance of land and money but she lost all for the state in tax payments. Lary Underwood was a Hollywood celebrity, a musician who gave the world the best music but only finds himself behind bars and no one of his friends or fans who attended his lavish parties ever cared about him, When the super flue strikes he endures the horror of seeing New York streets filled with dead bodies. It is a world where musical harmony is lost and ceases to become the global language of the devastated universe. Human race are trapped in epidemic turmoil by their own faults. The political forces that created the super flue and the atomic bomb will create these destructive weapons again.

The novel shifts from an apocalyptic end of the world set-up to an epic fantasy about good and evil to our real dilemma expressed in postmodern rhetoric. Our postmodern wars are

defined by technology and how to react to the forces using such technology while shaping new social patterns of inclusion and exclusion. Readers end up feeling as confused as the characters in the novel facing diverse unknown enemies. They have to take stands in order to survive. The horror becomes a Morality horror in futuristic territories where finance and technology dominates the world in epidemic eras. The super flue defies our own existence. Also technological advancement prevails in horror scientific fiction. Fred Botting points out that: "The future only presents a dark, unknown space from which horrors are visited" (Botting, 1996). Accordingly many archetypes like diseases or atomic bombs emerge to strike a nerve in every reader as well as making a morality question apart from the conventional morality. How to stay within the bounds of safety created by the social and political systems is the main issue. Government become the "Big Brother" having hands on all aspects of life. Stephen King uses the insecure American society in the nuclear age. The government developed super flu virus becomes the fatal destroyer communal enemy. Characters are free to explore their choices within criteria of morality and faith.

King is offering a fearful journey of the mind that lies within the cannon of Modern literature that is typically bound to intellectualism. What is ordinary and elite is problematic to America and modern readers.

According to Paul Johnson, one of George Orwell's axioms was that "the poor 'the ordinary people,' had a stronger sense of what he called 'common decency,' a greater attachment to simply virtues like honesty, loyalty, and truthfulness, then the highly educated" (Johnson, 1988, p.309). A distrust of the educated elite has been very common in American popular culture. King addresses in his novel the need to discuss morality for humanity to take a stand in the way of preventing the destruction of our whole world as he writes in *The Stand*:

Sometimes the book gives you answers, but not always, and I didn't want to leave the readers who had followed me through hundreds of pages with nothing but some empty platitude I didn't believe myself. There is no moral to *The Stand*, no "we'd better learn we'll probably destroy the whole demand planet next time"- but if the theme stands out clearly enough, those discussing it may offer their own morals and conclusions. Nothing wrong with that; such discussions are one of the great pleasures of the reading life. (king, 1978, p. 9)

King focuses on the value of his horror story to open new intellectual discussions on the modern dogma of morality in a compromise to many long established moral values.

Andreas Huyssen explains the reasons for a modern compromise in his *After the Great Divide*. He points out that modernist dogma has become sterile to grasp the cultural phenomenon. The borders between great art and mass culture have become increasingly blurred, and we should begin to see that process as one of opportunity to find new answers rather than nostalgic loss of quality and failure of nerve. (Huyssen,1986). King's novel is an attempt to incorporate mass cultural form in his fictional world. This is the postmodern condition in literature and the arts it revolves around the readers' changing perspectives on morality and humanity stands.

*The Stand* is a novel about change, and how people react to transitions. The Super flu virus has supported that change in epidemic times. What truly matters is the human choices. How to adapt to new lifestyles and struggles to survive are the new human stands in epidemic times. Can the new world mirror the old one is a question stated by our reading to the epidemic fictional world but also to our own real world. King suggests that humanity will remain the same beings. Some people will fight for good, others will stand by and allow evil to thrive, but there will always be the battle when humanity finds stands and choices. This is how humanity is saved. This philosophical view is what has made this novel, *The Stand*, a fan favourite novel. The idea of a government created super flu that wipes out most of the human race appeals to science fiction fans but the idea of humanity having a battle is more than an epic fantasy, there is a question for us in real life. Social and political frameworks have much to do with human nature and individual choices. According to Tony Magistrate the "rebellion portrayed in King's work is therefore different from the most popular types of deviance in contemporary America to takes the form of individual withdrawal". (Magistrate, 1988). The Free Zone community of the novel takes the form of collective escapism which alludes to the "happie" movement in 1960s and the religious cult in 1970s. King is showing us the quest for an alternative society in which humanity may survive the super flue and the political evil originated in the real political realty of America and the world. At also addresses the strife for power where Flagg combines electrical and technological wonder shows with "the pseudo- religious trappings of cult leaders gathering followers" (McAleer, Simpson, and Brandt, 2018). Such "wonder shows" enable King's fictional world to have lots of ramifications in our own postmodern world.

King is known for killing his main characters just as they stand up to political evil. Evil represented in both forms of government criminal practices or the super flu virus, is only

temporarily compacted in King's world despite human sacrifice. As Collings explains, "since evil is frequently external to characters, coming in its own time and through its own will, it cannot be destroyed; the best King's characters can hope for is a temporary victory in a single, isolated skirmish". (Collings, 1985) This Manichean view of evil provides the strength of the mind and the will. Evil is not just a turning away from good, but a vital source in and of itself just like the changeable super flu virus. Love is a key solution to overcome that evil. King's character, Jane Baker describes love as her human stand at the time of her death:

love is what moves the world, I've always thought...it is the only thing which allows men and women to stand in a world where gravity always seems to want to pull them down...bring them low...and make them crawl...we were...so much in love. (King,1978, p. 209)

Many other characters reflect that the only real reason to stand against evil at all is because of love to defend that which is beloved. This is the greatest notion of Standing up as humans in life battles.

The novel is filled with characters who do their duty because they are the only ones left to do it and carry on life building whatever evil forces have crushed. A heroic stand for heroes and heroines is exactly what needed. Despite the tragic ending of the novel, the author states how the journey to be able to take the stand in life is whatever matters. This brings the threads of whatever fictional and real in a larger canvas of humanity.

The end of the novel has Frannie and Stu watching children play is a symbol of innocence and hope. The epilogue that ends that novel—that of Flagg's return—only contributions to resolve what has tempered Stu and Frannie, and others like them. The world is a place worth saving, and they will Stand whenever they need to and generations after them will do the same. Humanity has a chance, and with that possibility, King eliminates the despair and brings a hopeful note despite the endless battle between good and evil. The fact that Flagg returns only strengthens the hope that the survivors, and readers, feel. Evil will return, and good people will be ready to take a stand against it. This ending is King's ironic twist on human nature, people can be self-destruct but there will others who are willing to stand against them. Epidemics might eradicate 90 percent of the earth population but there will always be survivors who will start building again.

There is a diverse criticism concerning *The Stand*. The novel belongs to all genres: American gothic, horror stories, science fiction and political allegory. Michael Colling's uses the word "schizophrenic" to describe the critical views on King's novel. He has pointed out that *The Stand* is an ambitious novel that goes beyond the limits of horror fiction. The ambiguity of theme is that regeneration and peace for some cannot prevail without the destruction of others. Stephen King's concept of America is a frightening panorama of madmen. As Jenifer Paquette observes "From demented madmen to rabid dogs who chew on leg bones instead of squeaky toys" and thus he is a chronicler of his nation and the American Psyche. (Paquette, 2014)

Harold Bloom argues that the popularity of Stephen King novels shows the "death of the Literate Reader in America" while many critics claim that his popularity illustrates a need within the American consciousness for gothic horror in the American landscapes. (Sanders, 2008).

But the novel actually goes beyond the American cultural and historical landscape. It reflects very much the dilemma of humanity throughout the course of history. And most importantly the novel speaks to humanity during all epidemic times. It shows humanity at its best when surviving the worst human as well as inhuman enemies.

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