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CULTURE AND CIVILIZATION

REVIEW: INTERNATIONAL SYMPOSIUM ON
REPRESENTATIONS OF PANDEMIC IN LITERATURE

Tanıtım: Pandeminin Edebiyattaki Temsilleri Üzerine Uluslararası
Sempozyum

Florentina Gümüş*

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The first case of infection with the COVID-19 virus in Turkey has been reported in March 2020. One year later, the time was ripe for the academia to approach the pandemic from different perspectives; in response, the *International Symposium on Representations of Pandemic in Literature* was held under the auspices of Atatürk University, Department of English Language and Literature on 26-27 March. This virtual event offered the opportunity for scholars from numerous countries, namely Turkey, the United Kingdom, the United Arab Emirates, Algeria, Germany, Israel, India, Lithuania, South Korea, Denmark, Romania, Pakistan, Bangladesh, the United States of America, Spain and Mexico to tackle the impact of pandemics on literature throughout the ages. In September 2021, the *Book of Abstracts and Proceedings* of the symposium was published in electronic format (Vangölü and Aygan 2021).

Perhaps it is not a coincidence that March 27, the second day of the conference, is also the World Theatre Day since the relation between theatre and pandemics has a long history dating back to ancient times. In a paper investigating the link between the two, Ristani argues that it “*goes as far back as Sophocles’ Oedipus Rex*” (2020: 1), a play created under the influence of the devastating Athenian plague from 430 BCE. Moreover, Artaud famously compares the theatre with the plague in the sense that “*the theatre, like the plague, is a delirium and is communicative*” (1958: 27). However, the call for papers was addressed to scholars working on all literary genres, and there was an equilibrium in the distribution of papers discussing short stories, novellas, novels, poems and those having as starting point dramatic texts and theatrical performances.

The two keynote speeches delivered at the beginning of the event focused mainly on prose. Professor Mukadder Erkan’s paper entitled “Lost in the Pandemotopia or...?: Witnessing through Literature” investigated the reflection of epidemics from the earliest examples of literature in the Western world to the 21st century. In a harmonious and complementing way, Professor Claire Chambers discussed stories resulting from the current

* PhD Candidate, Department of English Language and Literature, Atatürk University, Erzurum, Turkey, fbadea13@yahoo.com, ORCID: 0000-0002-3327-0221

pandemic in what she calls “decoronial writing”, a term which also informed the title of her speech. The first paper of the symposium was presented by the Head of the Committee, Associate Professor Yeliz Biber Vangözü. The analysis of David Hare’s play *Beat the Devil: A Covid Monologue*, written in response to his personal experience with the virus, focused on the connection drawn by the playwright between the personal and the public aspects of the disease, the devil being a monster with many heads.

One of the major pressures during a conference is usually not related to the quality of the papers to be presented, since the organising committee deals with this issue during the peer-review process of selecting the suitable abstracts, but to the level of involvement of the participants. The discussion part following each session can be at times an interval of embarrassment and silence or it can be thought-provoking, challenging and even an opportunity to clarify some ideas which the time limitation for the oral presentations may not allow to be touched upon. Fortunately, the symposium on the representations of pandemic in literature abounded in such discussions and the participants have been highly engaged in critical and ethical debates regarding individual literary works, but also wider questions related to society, politics and ethics.

The papers presented in the symposium were not limited to literature in English, but included literary works from other languages as well, such as Turkish, Urdu, Czech and Japanese. It also featured an algorithmic visual installation honouring the medical practice. This work of art can be better understood in relation to a paper discussing how museums and scholars select what constitutes as literary or artistic representations of past and present pandemics. Many presentations and the debates following them underlined the level of responsibility not only of various institutions, but also of each individual, of the communities and the need for compassion, empathy and taking care of one another. Sadly, moments of crisis as this bring to the light the deeply rooted gender and social inequalities, the fear of the other, a disbelief in governments as well as science and a general sense of absurdity. Furthermore, even if the source of pandemics can indeed be directly attributed to animals, a profound understanding of life itself would show that human activities are interrelated with the environment. As Artaud brilliantly points out in his comparison of the theatre with the plague: “*It releases conflicts, disengages powers, liberates possibilities, and if these possibilities and these powers are dark, it is the fault not of the plague nor of the theatre, but of life*” (1958: 31). The ‘fault of life’ ought to be understood as an impetus towards actual positive change and not as a sense of predetermination, of powerlessness.

One question asked at the beginning and right before the end of the conference was whether human beings actually draw any lessons from the extraordinary conditions created by pandemics, if they learn from these events which reappear from time to time for thousands of years. Even if the participants in the symposium chose to focus on the bright side in the way people deal today with the pandemic, there was an underlying hesitation grounded on the fact that history seems to repeat itself; however, steps towards change are being taken and literature and literary scholarship play a significant role in understanding the past and creating the foundation for a better future. Perhaps the most important issue explored during the symposium was ‘is literature capable of any positive effect in times of pandemics and in difficult times in general?’. Writing and reading literature can indeed provide pleasure, comfort, but this is not its solely function and precisely for this reason literary criticism is no longer a ‘pure’ discipline; more often than not it requires an interdisciplinary approach, an

intersection of disciplines such as sociology, philosophy, cultural studies, politics, gender studies and psychology.

Initiatives such as the *International Symposium on Representations of Pandemic in Literature*, have the potential to engage scholars and students from all over the world in productive discussions about literature and its interconnectivity with pressing social issues such as the still current pandemic. Soon after the world understood the seriousness of the new virus, there have been many academic meetings around the world about pandemics. Since the majority of countries imposed various levels of restrictions, these meeting had to be held on virtual platforms which provide the possibility for the meetings to be recorded. This is an unprecedented opportunity and it would be beneficial for scholars, students and not only if there were a platform where these recordings could be uploaded, with the necessary permissions, for social science departments to bring together the existing debates and generate new horizon-expanding ones.

References

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