



A CRITICAL STUDY OF DISASTER AS REFLECTED IN LITERATURE

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ABSTRACT

This paper tries to relate disaster and literature. The authors have tried to classify the different types of disasters and study disaster as reflected in literature from the time of Homer. One types of disaster in particular, Shipwreck has been taken for analysis. The authors have tried to co-relate man, culture and disaster, the role of disaster in literature, the impact on individual and society and adaptation of human beings post disaster through selected literary works.

Key words: Literature, Disaster, Culture, Shipwreck, Society.

INTRODUCTION

The world had been recreated from a prolonged disaster-ice age into a new hub for evolution. This disaster led to new forms of life, creating a paradise for many species, however a death sentence for many pre – ice age beings. The world has seen many disasters. At the beginning disasters were only nature bound, with the evolution of human kind and technology, disaster had taken on a new facet-man made disasters. The natural disasters tended to be the fury of nature, visited upon its inhabitants in the form of earthquakes, floods, volcanoes, landslides, droughts etc. Man's contribution to upset the balance of nature has magnified these natural disasters to an unimaginable level. Mankind has also coined new disasters like war, fire, accidents, shipwrecks, nuclear explosions, electric accident etc. leading to terrible casualties. In the name of technological developments and innovations, society's contribution to the natural imbalance is drastically increasing day by day. The following definition of disaster clearly encompasses the complete meaning of disaster.

A disaster is a sudden, calamitous event that seriously disrupts the functioning of a community or society and causes human, material, and economic or environmental losses

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that exceed the community's or society's ability to cope using its own resources. Though often caused by nature, disasters can have human origins. IFRC

In this paper the researchers have tried to co relate disaster and literature, the role of disaster in literature, the impact on individual and society, the outcome and changes and adaptation of human beings post disaster through selected literary works. To narrow the field of research the researchers have chosen disasters at sea especially storms and shipwreck for study. Popular literary sources from Homer's 'Odyssey', Shakespeare's 'The Tempest', 'Merchant of Venice', 'The Winter's Tale' and few other works have been compared and studied. The researchers have also taken upon the task to study the movie 'Titanic' based on the most famous of shipwreck for further comparison of portrayal of disaster on individual and family.

Shipwrecks had always fascinated human kind like no other disaster. The reason might be that unlike other disasters like volcanic eruptions, Flood, earthquake, Avalanche or Fire, the chances of survival is more. There is a scope for displacement- movement of the characters from the known to the unknown, from the native to the alien, caught in the terrible arms of the sea, life on the whims of the waves, a monstrous sea that will destroy a huge ship but may spare the life of a mere man. The tremendous power of the ocean is pitted against the will to survive. A man shipwrecked is unsure of his fate, the suspended life hanging in balance. The pendulum of emotions between hope and despair leads to relief in rescue or death.

In Homer's 'Odyssey' the main character, Odysseus faces disaster or near disaster six times at sea. This Greek epic poem written in the 1200s is one of the oldest literary works. The many shipwrecks faced by Odysseus also known as Ulysses in Roman myths leads to new adventures. The hero starts his journey back to Ithaca, his home with twelve ships but is the only survivor half way through the journey. Initially the twelve ships are driven off course by storms near the land of Cicones. Then they face a near disaster when they escape from the Sirens who cause sailors to steer towards rock, where they crash against the rock and sink. Later they are prevented from leaving the island of Thrinacia by a Storm. Finally the crew suffers a shipwreck and only Odysseus survives. This continuous string of disaster shows the futility of life in the face of disasters. With sea fare being the only major and quick way of transport for long distance, the probability of disasters and loss of life was accepted as truth.

William Shakespeare in his play 'The Tempest' uses storm as a world changer. In the beginning Prospero, the rightful Duke of Milan living in a remote island with his

daughter conjures up a storm –a tempest to shipwreck his traitorous brother Antonio, his accomplice in the treachery King Alonso of Naples and the brother and the son of the king along with few others. The following lines from ‘The Tempest’ show that disaster knows no difference between the powerful and weak, the king and the commoner.

Boatswain: When the sea is. Hence! What cares these roarers for the name of king?
To cabin: silence! trouble us not.

Gonzalo: Good, yet remember whom thou hast aboard.

Boatswain: None that I more love than myself. You are a counsellor; if you can command these elements to silence, and work the peace of the present, we will not hand a rope more; use your authority: if you cannot, give thanks you have lived so long, and make yourself ready in your cabin for the mischance of the hour, if it so hap. Cheerly, good hearts! Out of our way, I say. -Act I Scene I, The Tempest.

The passengers are marooned in separate group each assuming that the others are dead. Shakespeare uses this separation to show three different plots. The shipwreck has brought about the inner and true character to the forefront. The characters removed from their known world respond to the alien world in the way best known to them. A good man finds love; a fool plots a foolish plan and the evil plot evil deeds.

Finally Prospero, the overseer of all reveals the other plots to all. Prospero plays the role of God, stopping evil deeds and encouraging the noble hearts. Shakespeare has clearly shown that people do not react in the same manner to disasters. Here everyone is given an opportunity to rectify past mistakes. The Tempest was written in the year 1610-11. It is believed that the shipwreck was based on the real life shipwreck of the Sea Venture on the island of Bermuda eye witnessed by William Strachey and Sylvester Jordain. William Strachey’s ‘A True Repertory of the Wrack and Redemption of Sir Thomas Gates, Knight’ narrated the wreck of ‘The Sea Venture’ which occurred in 1609 while sailing to Virginia. Though Strachey’s work was not published till 1625, the report was dated 15th July, 1609. Critics agree that Shakespeare might have read the original manuscript before it was published. Based on the similarities in verbal, plot and theme many critics agree that this was one of the primary sources for The Tempest. E K. Chambers declares that Strachey’s text was the “main authority” for the Tempest.

Another play of Shakespeare which uses shipwreck as a cause for dramatic change in events is ‘The Merchant of Venice’. Here the noble hearted business man of Venice unable to lend money to his friend Bassanio since his ships are at sea, agrees to be the

guarantor for the loan taken from the money lender Shylock. Shylock lends the money on the condition that if Bassanio does not pay the money in time Shylock may take a pound of Antonio's flesh.

Yet his means are in supposition: he hath an argosy bound to Tripolis, another to the Indies; I understand moreover, upon the Rialto, he hath a third at Mexico, a fourth for England, and other ventures he hath, squandered abroad. But ships are but boards, sailors but men: there be land-rats and water-rats, water-thieves and land-thieves, I mean pirates, and then there is the peril of waters, winds and rocks. Scene III, *The Merchant of Venice*

After some time Antonio's ships are reported lost at sea. The loss of ships brings on a dramatic change in the status of the merchant. A man who was wealthy suddenly becomes unable to pay his debts.

One event changes the whole future and makes him vulnerable. The disasters at sea not only claimed the lives of men and affected their families but also affected many companies which were dependent on sea trade routes. Many companies faced bankruptcy and families became desolate.

There are many other literary figures who have touched upon the theme of disasters at sea especially shipwrecks. Some of them had personally experienced the helplessness and despair of being caught in a shipwreck or lost family members to this disaster. There are even incidents where the writers themselves had lost their life in disasters at sea or water. The author of 'The Shipwreck' William Falconer drowned at sea and P. B. Shelly who had touched upon the this theme in many of his works also died in water. Another writer Margret Fuller, a critic and Journalist died along with her family in a storm.

Novelist Joseph Conrad was involved in rescuing an endangered ship. This incident influenced his personal life and reflection of this can be seen in many of his novels. William Wordsworth was touched by a tragedy at sea when he lost his brother John, captain of a merchant vessel, who perished along with his ship in 1805. Due to this tragedy Wordsworth stopped his work on 'The Prelude' for three months. The wreck of the *Deutschland* by Gerard Manley Hopkins is based on an actual shipwreck. Thoreau's 'Cape Cod' embarks on the theme of shipwreck and gives a real terrible picture of the true loss of human beings than historical records. This is because the author based his writings after personally visiting the sites of aftermaths of shipwrecks. Thoreau visited Cape Cod in October, 1849 and witnessed the mass burial of shipwrecked victims.

I saw many marble feet and matted heads as the cloths were raised, and one livid, swollen and mangled body of a drowned girl, - who probably had intended to go out to service in some American family, - to which Some rags still adhered, with a string, half concealed by the flesh, about its swollen neck; the coiled-up wreck of a human hulk, gashed by rocks or fishes, so that the bone and muscle were exposed but quite bloodless, - merely red and white, - with wide- open and staring eyes, yet lusterless, dead-lights; or like cabin windows of a stranded vessel, filled with sand - 'Cape Cod' Henry David Thoreau.

Finally the Authors would like to analyse the impact of the most popular shipwreck of the last century- The RMS Titanic. The tragic wreck of this ship on its maiden voyage gained popularity due to many firsts associated with it. It was the largest ship afloat of the time, carried some of the richest people of its time, many master piece collections and had the most advanced technology of the age. On 15th, April when she hit the iceberg she was carrying more than 1500 passengers. The collision caused the death of more than 1500 making it the deadliest commercial peacetime maritime disaster. Many questions were raised on the regulatory and operational failure of the ship. The major outcome of this was the SOLAS- International Convention for the Safety of Life at Sea which till date governs maritime safety. This disaster has given birth to many literature, books, novels, songs, films etc. The Book 'A Night to Remember' was later made into a film in the same name. 'Saved from the Titanic' was released just 29 days after the disaster. James Cameron's Titanic revived the disaster of Titanic. Morgan Robertson's 'Futility echoes the disaster of Titanic.

Literature has always strived to reflect life as it is or as it should be. It is an imitation of life and a casual look at the disasters referred to or pondered upon in literature shows that disasters are historically and literally a part of human life. Some disasters like wars can be avoided whereas natural disasters or incidents cannot be stopped. However some disasters can be learnt from as in the case of Titanic which led to new safety regulations. With the determination that each disaster teaches us to avoid mistakes and save human life, literature can also be viewed as a guide in helping man kind to deal with disaster in a realistic and rational manner. A messenger to warn us about impending disaster and nature's revenge if we do not stop abusing the wealth of the earth.

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