

Body and Mind: A Feminist Reading of The Pull of the Stars

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Abstract

Diseases are fundamentally a human trait. Pandemics, on the other hand, create more intense experiences than world wars. They then become part of the emotional history. Most of the plagues that have ravaged the world have given rise to a variety of expressions and plagues have also found a special place in novel literature. The novel *The Pull of the Stars* by renowned Irish-Canadian author Emma Donoghue stands out among recently released pandemic literature. The novel takes place in a 1918 maternity unit in Dublin, a city devastated by the Great Famine, World War I, and the 1916 Irish Rebellion. This paper is a feminist reading of the novel *The Pull of the Stars*. And further it explores the impact of pandemic on the marginalized body.

Keywords: Historic novel, pandemic, psychology.

Introduction

Pandemics, from the bubonic plague to the Covid-19, have resulted in more than just public health crises. Epidemics have caused enormous shifts in every facet of life, including science, history, culture, politics, economy, and governance. Literary works, paintings, and films that reflect the life and times of the pandemic have enriched the literary arts, and such creative works have come to be known as pandemic literature and pandemic painting. The most well-known pieces of pandemic literature are Gabriel García Márquez's *Love in the Time of Cholera*, which explored love in the setting of cholera, and Albert Camus' *Plague*, which represented the Nazi conquest of France. The novel *The Pull of the Stars* by renowned Irish-Canadian author Emma Donoghue stands out among recently released pandemic literature. World War I, the 1919 flu, and the Irish War of Independence play a part in the book's backdrop. By delving deeply into the horrors and miseries of the past, Donoghue foresaw the horrors and miseries of the present, such as the claustrophobia of confined days, deserted cafes and schools, and the pervasiveness of masks, which are quaintly described as "bluntly pointed... like the beaks of unfamiliar birds."

The story takes place in a small maternity unit and revolves around a doctor, a volunteer assistant, a midwife, and a small number of patients who are too little to fit in the room. Pregnant women in the last stages of labor or shortly after gave birth were most susceptible to contracting the flu, which might have disastrous consequences and disrupt deliveries. It resulted in stillbirths, early deliveries, and other problems. This plot has an intriguing intersection of two distinct health risks. Also, it opens up two distinct narratives. People who have the flu typically get quite sick before either getting better or passing away. The plot of *Birth*, on the other hand, is extremely different and moves at a different speed. The

author pulls those together in the narrative. Since the book takes place in World War I, we have read several books about soldiers fighting in the trenches. The activities of women throughout that time are the main subject of this book. The whole discussion of women's experiences during the war had been concentrated around a labor unit staffed primarily by women and packed with patients. The tale focuses a lot on poverty as well as gender. The author targets Irish culture and the healthcare system when choosing Dublin.

The narrative begins in the morning of October 31, 1918, and takes place over the course of three days. The three main characters in the book are Dr. Lynn, a new physician at the hospital who is believed of taking part in anti-British protests in Ireland, Bridie Sweeney, a young woman who comes to help Julia, and Julia Power, a nurse working in a Dublin hospital where the major events take place. The country was going through a lot of political upheavals at the time the novel is set, making it a fascinating time and place to be set in. However, one group of people who contracted the flu in a terrible way and suffered greatly was pregnant women and women who were in the latter stages of their pregnancies. A few weeks after giving birth, these women also contracted the great flu, or Spanish flu as the author called it. The compact tiny quarantine ward for laboring women can be paralleled to the trenches, which were places of terrible claustrophobia, stress, and danger but also of great companionship and solidarity. However, the book also features various kinds of women who are oppressed and disadvantaged by other factors in life. These ladies include Honor White, who is expecting her second child from a prior relationship and passes away after giving birth, and Ita Noonan, one of the pregnant women who die along with her unborn fetus. Of these three made-up individuals, only Dr. Kathleen Lynn is a real one. The paper examines the feminist perspective of the novel during the pandemic period and it further investigates the psychological state of expectant mothers during the Spanish influenza pandemic in the backdrop of World War I.

The Marginalized “Body”

The nurse who narrates *The Pull of the Stars* is a woman who must be involved in the pivotal moments in the lives of strangers. She is endowed with both skill and tenderness, and her disturbing combination of femininity and professionalism is characteristic of the era. Because of the war and widespread infection, a city hospital's maternity fever unit is severely understaffed. Julia is caring for pregnant patients who have the severe flu, going above and beyond what is required of her because no one else is available. Building the fictitious framework of a narrative against the backdrop of an epidemic might directly result from a call for solidarity. Donoghue uses the environment to draw attention to the challenges that women encounter. Due to their circumstances, women have taken up residence in this confined, patriarchal space—the hospital room—in a patriarchal institution “This room were an antechamber of hell.” (Donoghue 81). But in spite of its limitations, this torment drives women to use all of their effort and power in order to show off their physical prowess. In this way, Donoghue illustrates how women may endure anything for the purpose of being themselves by placing them in the framework of a strong narrative. Donoghue uses a variety of techniques to illustrate the notion of women's otherness in order to highlight how women are subject to many forces that are increasingly used as a way of liberation. It's interesting to see that Donoghue emphasizes how the feminine body is Othered and how this Otherness is strengthened by the pressure that is applied to it.

Simon de Beauvoir's views on the pregnant body and, by extension, parenthood, parallel Donoghue's objectified feminine body portrayal. She thinks that because of their mothering roles, women are seen as "others". Motherhood is conditioned in them to be the center of their existence and the achievement of their destiny. But Donoghue turns this specific Otherness into a source of group unity and, thus, a collective potential energy. In the novel there one male order says that

By embracing the pregnant body, the author celebrates the feminine body throughout the book, highlighting its relevance. She expresses her opposition to notions that a woman's body is only a mechanical device, which a woman has no control over her own body, and that being a woman is a clear indication of illness. She illustrates the complex relationship between feminism and women using the body of a pregnant woman. In order to demonstrate how women give birth, bleed, vomit, breastfeed, and die, Donoghue delves into extensive physiological details. The direct emphasis on these particulars underscores the labor, suffering, and tenacity of women as well as how their bodies' functions so frequently determine the course of their lives. In these situations, the pregnant body presents fresh possibilities and paths toward well-being; this is reflected in the female body's hidden strength: —These mothers are often stronger than they look."

The narrative has a character. Mary, a 17-year-old woman who is eight months pregnant, knows not much about her reproductive system she believes her unborn child will come out of her navel. The author criticizes Irish culture for failing to teach women about their own bodies, sex, and sexuality via this. In order to free women from the patriarchal cultural heritage of ignorance, Julia's persona is symbolically portrayed as a feminist instrument.

Pull of the Stars has numerous hints about social tendencies that are discovered in contemporary epidemiology. It is believed that epidemics impact all facets of society equally. 'Pandemics affect the rich and the Poor, the Kings and the Emperors, the Pharaohs and the prophets', it has been observed. On a personal level, epidemics can harm every individual. However, when viewed as a whole, it is evident that many epidemics disproportionately affect the poor, who are destined to live in detrimental circumstances. Poverty is the primary cause of many diseases among individuals who are vulnerable to them. They are more prone to illness because to their poverty, malnourishment, and difficult living circumstances. The process of impoverishment affects a vast society due to factors such as sickness-induced unemployment. Donoghue addresses one kind of institutional discrimination against women by alluding to the "blood tax" that males pay during times of war. Since women do not pay the blood tax, one of the male characters in the book, Groyne, opposes women's voting rights.

In *The Pull of the Stars*, Donoghue addresses the female salary disparity. —In Dublin Nurses were notoriously underpaid, but my brother and I managed to rent a small house, mostly thanks to Tim's military pension.(Donoghue6). Donoghue discusses Julia's unpaid work. Even though Julia works, she is unable to pay the rent on their apartment; nonetheless, her brother is able to.

In the book, Dr. Lynn shows up as both a noteworthy illustration of an autonomous woman and a real-life example of sisterhood. She is one of the female characters in the narrative who helps Julia become an independent woman. In addition, Dr. Lynn serves as the main example of a political

personality in the book. She denounces the degrading conditions that surround and oppress women's standing. Julia's political opinions are a result of Lynn's actions. Even though Julia doesn't have time for politics, she understands that a pandemic makes society's shortcomings more apparent and makes women more conscious of other things of the world they wish to change

The novel also unfolds the psychology of women at maternity through the character of Delia Garret, Eileen Devine, Ita Noonan. Mrs. Devine died after going into a coma. Ita Noonan was a lady lost in a daze. Despite being a fearless individual, Delia Garrett suffered from psychological effects from her miscarriage. Delia Garrett searches for her daughter's face as soon as she becomes aware. Sadly, though, the infant passed away. As Julia was saying this, she said in a raspy voice, "What happened to my daughter?" She didn't even mind the person coming to comfort her or offer prayers after the tragedy. But Delia Garrett was so frustrated that she would not talk to anyone. Pregnancy will cause psychological changes, including regular mood swings, worry, and fatigue. In this book, Delia Garrett has experienced several forms of psychotherapy as a result of the death of her kid. Mothers who have stillbirths are often left feeling depressed and anxious. The losses had an impact on Delia Garrett's mental health. She was in great distress.

Conclusion

Emma Donoghue shows how resilient women can be in difficult situations and how they possess a strength that might allow them to bear more pain than one would think humanly possible. The pregnant body, the rooms, and the hospital are all barriers to the existential non-being of women. Donoghue, however, challenges these barriers to serve as helpful instruments for a greater level of mutual compassion and empathy among women. The book reveals the political conflicts concealed beneath well-known public characters and events and creatively recreates the lives of common people who have been lost to the ages.

References

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