



## Comics and Contagion: A Critical Reading of Priya's *Mask* and 1918 Spanish Flu Comic Strips

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### Abstract

From panel structuring to speech bubbles, from characterization to closure, comics and cartoons invite reader participation, or reader interpretation to convey an idea, thought or story. The dramatic effect of comics, cartoons, and other graphic narratives, consequently, demand reader's engagement in unequivocal terms. The on-going Covid pandemic has changed the socio-cultural and economic trajectory of our world culture. Many creative and critical artists have responded in myriad ways to the epidemic and its contingencies. The current research paper seeks to read Priya's *Mask*, which is a testament to the courage of women healthcare workers and intends to educate people about the virus. The conjunction of graphic, medicine and our culture in the comic strip makes it an interesting read. The paper seeks to read Priya's work in conjunction with vintage comic strips from 1918 problematizing the Spanish Flu to underscore the cultural overlapping when it comes to critically situating the pandemic in creative terms as well as educating the public.

**Keywords:** Pandemic, comic strips, Spanish Flu, Plague, Covid

The epidemic of influenza [of 1889–90], which caused the death but a few years ago of five thousand persons in Paris alone, made very little impression on the popular imagination. The reason was that this veritable hecatomb was not embodied in any visible image, but was only learnt from statistical information furnished weekly.

– Gustave Le Bon, 37

You will not fear the terror of night, nor the arrow that flies by day, nor the pestilence that stalks in the darkness, nor the plague that destroys at midday. A thousand may fall at your side, ten thousand at your right hand, but it will not come

near you. You will only observe with your eyes and see the punishment of the wicked. If you say, “The Lord is my refuge,” and you make the Most High your dwelling, no harm will overtake you; no disaster will come near your tent. For he will command his angels concerning you

– Psalm 91, Verses 5-11, King James Version

## Introduction

The paper seeks to direct the reader’s attention to the idea that right from the ‘cough of Perinthus’ in 412 BC to the ongoing Covid pandemic, diseases, especially infectious diseases, have occupied a great cultural importance. A disease ultimately is a “social phenomenon as much as it is a biological one; it cannot be separated from its historical, geographical and cultural context,” (Spinney 5) and “[a]t the root of every pandemic is an encounter between a disease-causing microorganism and a human being,” (ibid). Further an infectious disease on human population functions as an act of “symbolic castration” (Deleuze and Guattari 268) destroying the atoms of human growth, “overcoding” (ibid) the attributes of progress with a retrograde pull. For example, “[t]he plague years were not only times of death and suffering but also of intellectual disorientation. Bubonic plague undermined the foundations of the contemporary understandings of disease, leaving people bewildered and frightened,” (Snowden 8). It seems that the loss of lives immanent to a pandemic place the human being in a field of contradictory forces of depression/annihilation or survival. From public health strategies to the development of the germ theory, from the idea of contagion to the development and usage of vaccination and *magic bullets*, discovering masks as an effective survival strategy against influenza to the practice of sanitation, the socio-cultural, scientific, economic progress that a pandemic unleashes is astounding.

Keeping the aforementioned ideas in mind, the paper seeks to focus on the global historiography from the vantage point of infectious diseases in general and two diseases that is, Spanish flu and Covid-19, in particular to underscore questions of human

vulnerability, social fortifications and contests in the face of diseases. To record this history, the paper will be studying two graphic cultural artifacts from two different times: American Comic strips on Spanish Flu and Priya's *Mask* problematizing Covid times. Operating in a hermetically sealed culture of infectious diseases, the endeavour is to understand, deconstruct, contest them through mass awareness in graphic mode among other efforts. Snowden's observation is very relevant here: "Epidemic diseases are not random events that afflict societies... To study them is to understand that society's structure, its standard of living, and its political priority," (7). Talking about the Spanish flu, the African historian Terence Ranger has pointed out that, "such a condensed event requires a different storytelling approach. A linear approach would not do; what is needed is something closer to the way that women in South Africa discuss an important event in the life of a community by describing it and "circling around it" (Spinney 9) and "constantly returning to it widening it out and bringing into its past memories and future anticipations," (Ranger qtd. in Spinney 9). Considering major diseases, infectious or otherwise, are "important event[s] in the life of a community" (Spinney 9), a study of the Spanish Flu and Covid-19 would only be comprehensive if their antecedents and their representations (literary, graphic, etc.) are considered when discoursing on them.

The paper therefore initiates its discussion on the bubonic plague (Justinian plague and the Black Death) because "Plague is nearly everyone's candidate as the worst-case scenario of epidemic disease. The word 'Plague' is virtually synonymous with terror. It was an extraordinarily rapid and excruciating killer, whose symptoms were dehumanizing," (Snowden 8). Representing the "worst imaginable catastrophe" and setting the "standard by which other epidemics would be judged" (Snowden 28), Bubonic plague has long been "the inescapable reference point in any discussion of infectious diseases and their impact on society," (ibid). In fact, the point that cholera in the nineteenth century and the Spanish flu, AIDS and the latest

Covid-19 pandemic are considered by some scholars and historians to be “the return of the plague” and seen as unequivocal examples of “History Repeating Itself” (<https://www.ias.edu/ideas/chaniotis-ancient-plagues-Covid>) testifies to the fact that the Plague has for us been the “metonym for societal calamities in general” (Snowden 28) and infectious diseases in particular. Also, the fact that we did not invent the plague, but merely provided it a “territoriality” and thereby enabled it to slash and tear and castrate the human ego is greatly significant as well. Thus, for us the plague is the locus of human failure and the ultimate example of human vulnerability that defies economic, political, and cultural cartographies and wreaks havoc universally. Among the most axiomatic aspects of the Plague is its “extraordinary virulence” (Snowden 28).

Anti-plague measures of public health involved the use of “sanitary cordons...lazarettos and quarantine” (Snowden 30). In later centuries, these measures provided health authorities a mandate that could be implemented in times of epidemic crisis. Note, for example, the following illustration of a plague doctor during the middle-ages.



**Figure 1: A Plague Doctor  
Rome, circa 1656**

The costume of a wide-brimmed hat (See figure 1), “the mask with protruding beak extending from the nose[which] could carry aromatic herbs” (Snowden 61) a stick to maintain social distancing, and leather gown made of waxed fabric were certain sanitary measures for self-defense believed to obviate danger of contagion. A comparison of *Dr. Beak* with the widely popular

image of a Covid-19 health care worker (See below figure 2) in

a PPE suit, mask and face shield vindicates the idea that the healthcare measures popular in the Middle Ages have qualitatively inspired the safety measures popular during the Spanish Flu and the current Covid crisis.



**Figure 2: Curing Covid in 2020; Image**  
**Courtesy:**<https://www.npr.org/2021/05/21/998540049/new-doctors-in-india-are-starting-off-seeing-the-worst-its-taking-a-toll>



**Figure 3: Plague, 1898, Arnold Böcklin. Tempera on Wood.**  
**Eco, Umberto. *On Ugliness*. Rizzoli, 2007.**

If that be the case, then the rich genre of cultural artifacts including sermons and religious pamphlets, artwork and literary

pieces like Boccaccio's *Decameron*, Alessandro Manzoni's *The Betrothed* and *The Column of Infamy*, works by Defoe and Camus among others, the iconography of European painting and sculpture [see fig 3] together document a social history of the plague and transgenerational trauma experienced by people of later years who responded to the plague in creative and critical ways.



**Figure 4: The Dance of Death (1493) by Michael Wolgemut, from the Nuremberg Chronicle of Hartmann Schedel**



**Figure 5: The final dance of death in *The Seventh Seal* (Det sjunde inseglet) (Ingmar Bergman, 1957)**

Even as late as 1957, Bergman's *The Seventh Seal* that problematizes a contingent apocalypse from the vantage point of the plague and that the last scene where we see a performance of the *Danse Macabre* [See fig 4 and fig 5] a reprise of the *Dance of Death* produced as *Memento Mori* in the Middle Ages essentially suggest the unbound flow of an epidemic. Judging from here, it would not be wrong to say that the plague is far from over. As such, if we contend that the social impact of the plague was immense and insurmountable and the history of the plague was drafted and continue to be drafted by popular cultural artifacts, religious and health practices, then studying cartoons, comic strips and graphic narratives as cultural quotients creating "an other memory" (Deleuze and Guattari 144), a socio-historical memory, of a disease and adding to the collective memory of facts and fiction, data and testimony would seem not only plausible but pertinent. Here we may get back to the words of Terence Ranger of encircling around a historical incident and coming back it with new commentary. Therefore, the task of the paper is to invest in a collective historiography of global pandemic through a study of two selected cases of disease: the Spanish Flu and Covid 19. The paper will mainly focus on how the graphic narratives problematize the events respectively, suggest preventive measures for public awareness and constitute in themselves historical artifacts that encircle a pandemic as cultural artifacts, and initiate discourse.

### **Spanish Flu Cartoons**

Terence Ranger, whose critical point of view inspires the work, says in the influential work *The Spanish Influenza Pandemic of 1918-19* (2003) that "[t]he brevity of the influenza pandemic of 1918 posed great problems to doctors at the time... It posed great problems to historians ever since," (Foreword, xx-xxi). Indeed, the paucity of material, historical and cultural, problematizing the "greatest massacre of the twentieth century... [that killed] one in three people on earth or 500 million human beings. Between the first case recorded on 4<sup>th</sup> March 1918 and the last sometime in March 1920, it killed 50 to 100 million people, or

between 2.5 and 5 per cent ...surpass[ing] [the death count in] The First World War (17 million dead), the Second World War (60 million dead) and possibly both put together,” (Spinney 4). Considering that the Spanish Flu was the “greatest tidal wave of death, since the Black Death, perhaps in the whole of human history,” (Spinney 4) its historical obviation counts as a “collective forgetting”. This is especially challenging since we are functioning in a triangulated set up wherein its three vertices—the Plague as the ultimate antecedent of infectious disease, the Spanish Flu as its deadly successor and Covid 19 as its contemporary descendent – simultaneously determine the value of a global pandemic as we know it today. To counter the historical elision of the Spanish Flu and situate it as a central point of discussion is not imperative but also essential.

“A vast majority of people who caught the Spanish Flu experienced nothing more than the symptoms of ordinary flu — sore throat, headache, fever,” (Spinney 47) nevertheless, by August 1918, it transmogrified into something extraordinarily “sinister” (ibid). Public health strategies at the time as were, the populace at large was largely unprepared for the onset of pandemic. The situation did not make any sense to them. The irony is evident in the way the public handled the case of the world-famous pugilist Bat Nelson who contracted the flu in 1918. A highly reproduced poem from the era underscores the irony of the situation that a man of Herculean might could also fall victim to something as a flu was unthinkable to them.

They tried to rend your slats in twain.

Bat Nelson:

You never showed a sign of pain,

Bat Nelson.

A hundred men have walloped you,

And still you smiled, as brave men do.

And then you fell for Spanish flu,

Bat Nelson.

A fever burns upon your brow,

Bat Nelson.

And you are up against it now,

Bat Nelson.

And all the pals you staked of old.

When you were young and strong and bold,

Are distant now and mighty cold,

Bat Nelson.

(Source: "Another View Bat for Old Bat Nelson,"

*Washington Herald*, October 16, 1918)

Although the readers' chortled at the expense of Bal Nelson, they could not but accept the seriousness of the situation. The contingency of a disease that could affect one and all underscored the latent vulnerability of humans in the face of supramundane wrath. Indeed, the unpreparedness of the populace was a point of deep concern and newspapers, comic strips, songs and witty one-liners like "What we would like, too, is the unconditional surrender of the Spanish influenza germ", (*Syracuse Herald*, October 26, 1918, p. 8) elevated it as a major point of public concern.

The need for public awareness of the flu being there, many "[n]ewspapers reported on the epidemic in their feature spreads" (Miller 1) and used "jokes, puns, verses, and cartoons" (Miller 1) to problematize the catastrophe, made the public conscious about its unequivocal presence and dispensed defence measures to combat it. The idea of in the narrative of the Spanish Flu is especially interesting since the flu spread by virtue of the military personnel who participated in the war, Nancy Bristow has argued, "The war and the epidemic were soon conflated into a single struggle in many Americans' minds," (Bristow 10) and popular verses like – "Smoke your pipe / Or Take a Chew / And start your *fight* / Against the *Spanish flu*" (qtd in Miler 10; emphasis mine) -- also presented the flu as an exigency requiring strategic fight. Humour which relies on incongruities seem to have positioned the Spanish Flu in popular discussion and it would not be erroneous to say that while the concerns of the war was negotiated in the front pages of world newsprint

culture, the flu was marginalized into the domain of humour and popular culture. As such, a history of the Spanish flu needs to be drafted by reading the artifacts of that culture. With this idea in mind, I now study the comic strips of the period to see how they problematized the Spanish Flu.

I begin my discussion with a humorous morsel from 1918-1919 which, along with many other popular cultural tokens of humour, was a source of consolation and anxiety: “A Jingle for Today. If pains lambast and wallop you, If you are tired and feeling blue – There’s one thing sure that must be true – You’ve got the Spanish flu,” (*The Quincy Daily*, 6). By offering readers a place for reflection, purgation, and light-heartedness, during the disquieting period of war and disease, popular literature of the time became a zone of public discourse negotiating a communal concern. Cartoonists and humourists captured many of the core concerns that readers shared in a pandemic culture. The following cartoon is illustrative.



**Figure 6. Fisher's Mutt and Jeff Comic Strip**

Bud Fisher's Mutt and Jeff comic strip tells the story of the illness and misuse of potential therapies causing extensive public mix-up. Aspirin, a known malaria treatment, and quinine, a treatment for flu, were often overprescribed by doctors without confirmed treatments during the time. In the above cartoon, Mutt asks Jeff why he has a container of quinine, and Jeff responds, “I’ve got the Spanish ‘flu,’ Mutt.” Jeff reprimands

him for not actually understanding the disease. To prove his obliviousness as to the disease in question, Mutt contests him to speak a sentence that uses the expression “influenza,” to which Jeff retorts, “I went home last night and opened the window and in flew Enza.” The punchline would have resonated with readers of that era who knew of the popular children’s tune, “I had a little bird, and its name was Enza, I opened the window and in flew Enza,” (<https://virus.stanford.edu/uda/>) a nursery rhyme sung to the melody of “Ring Around the Rosie.” (Miller 9).

Echoing Miller, we can say that indeed if we approach this “cartoon from our contemporary viewpoint, we are prompted to consider that knowledge with “influenza” as a “disease was hardly universal in the 1910s,” (Miller 9).



**Figure 7. Walter Rease Allman, “Doings of the Duffs”**

A theme commonly found in these printed texts was the anxiety caused by misconstruing the symptoms of everyday life as the Spanish flu. Walter Rease Allman's cartoon conveys a similar sentiment (figure 7). An accidentally spilled pepper causes a baby to sneeze, triggering an entire family to a sneezing fit. Their terribly relatable reaction is what makes the cartoon fun – they all panic that they have the flu.



**Figure 8. Maurice Ketten, “Can You Beat It!”**

Maurice Ketten, who created the widely popular “Can you Beat it!” comic strips that appeared in many New York papers, recognized another universal fear: catching the flu at the doctor's office. (figure 8). As a result of exposure to sick patients in the waiting room while at the doctor's office, a man in this cartoon gets sick from a cut on his finger and contracts the flu. Here, the cartoonist expertly taps into public concerns about safety in doctors' offices and hospitals, which may have prevented some people from seeking essential medical care.

Although the printed texts problematize the shared anguish engendered of the populace by the pandemic, many comic strips softened the danger and counselled readers to live without fear: “Just think of pleasant, cheerful things, forget the microbe gang; Just talk of cabbages and kings and let the flu go hang,” (“Scared,” *Ogden Standard* [Utah], March 24, 1920, p. 3). The following cartoon is especially interesting in that it treats the term “Spanish” in Spanish flu problematically by presenting a doctor—with equivocal medical knowledge—as a specialist “Fresh from Spain”. The appellation for the affliction bears testimony to wartime reporting of the statistics of the disease. Since Spain was a neutral country, questions of wartime censorship did not apply to its media reportage as such the initial/actual reports of the epidemic came from Spanish mass media. The doctor’s suggestion that the patient avail himself of the therapeutic benefits of imbibing fresh air in the mornings while strumming a guitar and bull fights in the afternoons is

absurd. The irony of the situation is further accentuated by the title of the comic strip: “It’s a Simple Prescription”. The stereotyping of Spanish men widespread in popular culture as guitar-strumming, bullfighting, moustached menfolk brimming with machismo is poignantly underscored in the cartoon for humorous effect.



Figure9. Cliff Sterrett, Polly & Her Pals, October 19, 1918



Figure 10. Edwina Dumm, “Cap” Stubbs, December 3, 1918

In Edwina Dumm’s “Cap” Stubbs comic strip, the topic of social distancing is problematized. The comic strip seems most relevant now as the Covid-19 Pandemic has resurrected the the practice of social distancing as the most important non-pharmaceutical interventional method to obviate contagion. Although, we cannot but acknowledge the benefit of the practice in preventing infection, the contingency that such an exercise might have far-reaching psychological impact on kids cannot be denied. In the 1918 instalment (fig 10), we see Cap struggling to find a playmate in the pandemic ridden atmosphere when kids were forced to remain in the house. He is the representation and

the representative of the testing times as he presents himself as a lone figure with a dog and no human to communicate. His situation is akin to the character of Meena in Priya's *Mask* who like Cap feels despondent at not finding a mate to share playtime with.



**Figure11. Priya's *Mask***

In the following cartoon we see the mask, another important protective measure during the influenza pandemic, assuming a newer, political role, in this case. The following illustration claims that the influenza has muzzled the fall season's usual political blathering behind protective masks and has deftly brought down its annoyance.



**Figure 12. Los Angeles Times, October 14, 1918  
Covid-19 and Priya's *Mask***

A key take-away from the three pandemics in the paper has been that while the people at large, on the one hand, oscillated

between disease-related paranoia and insouciance, on the other hand, certain protective measures for self-defence were mandated by health agencies. The mask, for instance, has since a long time been unequivocally regarded as the most significant defensive measure to combat the spread of infection. In fact, “[m]ask-wearing was enforced during the 1918 Spanish flu pandemic, but many refused, citing the government mandates as threats to their civil liberties,” (Canales, May 9, 2020). Figure 13, for instance, invokes the readers’ patriotic sense to cooperate with the campaigners in their effort to eradicate the Spanish Influenza by wearing a mask.



**Figure 13: Wear a Mask Campaign, 1918; courtesy** [https://www.businessinsider.in/tech/news/these-surprisingly-relevant-vintage-ads-show-how-officials-tried-to-convince-people-to-wear-masks-after-many-refused-during-the-1918-flu-pandemic/slidelist/75638263.cms?utm\\_source=](https://www.businessinsider.in/tech/news/these-surprisingly-relevant-vintage-ads-show-how-officials-tried-to-convince-people-to-wear-masks-after-many-refused-during-the-1918-flu-pandemic/slidelist/75638263.cms?utm_source=)



**Figure 14. Stagnant Time: 2020 and 1918; Courtesy of the BBC and NY Times**

It is interesting to note, in this respect, that just like anti-mask crusaders during the Covid-19 pandemic (see fig 14),

many protesters during the 1918 pandemic cited that “government-mandated mask enforcement violated their civil liberties” (Canales, May 9, 2020).

Against the background of largescale confusion mainly and rumour relating to the donning of the mask, Priya’s *Mask* comes as a refreshing narrative that problematizes the Covid-19 pandemic and embarks on a mission to eradicate the Covid-19 pandemic. Priya, India’s first female superhero, emphasises the importance of wearing a mask and being compassionate to one and all to help culminate the spread the pandemic. The narrative begins with Priya receiving a divine/supramundane decree from nature herself to use her powers and balk the spread of the invisible enemy: the Covid-19 virus (Fig 15).



**Figure 15. Priya's *Mask*; page 4.**

The narrative subverts the trend of the damsel-in-distress popular in children’s literature and fairy tales and vindicated in Bollywood movies that underscores and thrusts patriarchal social codes in the Indian sub-continent, but portraying a female superhero, who along with her tiger, Sahas, meaning bravery, is a knight errand with a mission. Priya’s avatar deeply resonates the religio-cultural codes of society in that she is Shakti/Durga, the mighty ten-armed goddess who defeated the demon Mahisasura. As Priya rides Sahas over a city ravaged by the pandemic, we get a glimpse of the sad state of affairs: vacant streets, closed shops, fleeing birds and poor and the jobless brave the elements and file toward home in remote corners of India. The predicament of the underprivileged and the deprived is especially emphasized narrative using different shades of the red colour and by showing Priya’s protective scarf tangled in her wrist. The suggestion is that a deep sense of helplessness

persists in the whole world. In the atmosphere of uncertainty, fear mongering, anxiety, and denial march with deliberate steps. Priya befriends Meena who is equivocal as to the contingency that surrounds her. She moans the fact that her playmates are staying in and all her favourite haunts are shut till further notice. The transmogrification that the world has undergone is too stark for her to accept and understand. Priya comes to her rescue with information and empathy.

The questions of religion, gender and communalism as potential causes of violence in a pandemic-ridden society are handled with compassion and skill as Priya and her friend Burka Avenger, Pakistan's female superhero, team up and fight their opponent, Baba Kaboom and the fast-spreading virus. By showing Priya and Jiya, the Burka Avenger in the same frame standing next to one another surveying the world facing the contingency of pandemic-peril, the artist and the author reiterate the narrative of female friendship and suggest that now that Priya and Jiya are together, the female agency has doubled-up its potential and the nemesis is due to have a hard time. The whole narrative is peopled with powerful female characters who defy the gender norms and present the importance of female comradeship as the force that sustains and saves the world. Meena's mother who is a health-care worker saves innumerable lives by putting her own safety at the front. The night sky and Meena's mother in the forefront with the *Thank You* banner on the back speak are illustrative in showing how the history of a

pandemic is deeply rooted in women's life histories.

**Figure16. Priya's Mask, page 10.**



Here, Terence Ranger's words that we need a feminine reading of

history makes sense because it is ultimately women who during times of crisis mostly perform the task of caregiving. Even people who apparently do not deserve compassion like Baba

Kaboom receives help and not wrath from the female members of the community. The story ultimately suggests that the sustaining power of the patriarchy along with the practise of wearing masks can defeat the Covid monster. The last frame of the graphic narrative shows Priya majestically riding her Sahas while a motley of kites that display different Covid protocols mandated by health-care agencies surround her. Here again she is displayed as an epitome of victory flying high above the ground, her cape fluttering, her tiger poised majestically ready to continue his march forward. The narrative also emphasises the need to abstain from falling prey to false information when it comes to battling a disease. Ultimately, the fact Priya is situated above the raft of kites and the clouds vindicates her victory and reminds us that when it comes to crisis women are the real heroes.



**Figure 17. Priya's Mask; Page 15**

## **Conclusion**

A study of the comic and graphic representations of the major pandemics that the world has encountered suggests that when it comes to pandemics certain codes, practises, pictorial motifs, and anxieties recur as ubiquitous tropes. Further, pandemics

have a way to symbolically castrate human achievements and regress human potential by death and destruction. The renaissance (used in the sense of rebirth) that usually follows a pandemic, by means of the development of vaccinations, medications, the overhauling of cultural and social codes not only invigorate the human psyche, but force us to acknowledge the grit of the human race against a nemesis. The works that have been taken up in the paper are artefacts from popular culture that portray the history of the testing times in non-linear graphic ways. Read as historical pieces, these narratives represent and are representative of pandemic times and their encounter with the human subject where women play a special role as caregivers and feminist icons. Fear feeds fun, and fun causes fear – such is the aesthetics of pandemic in pictures.

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