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## DISEASE, CONTAGION, AND THE DANGERS OF PANDEMICS: AN ANALYSIS OF LAW- RENCE WRIGHT’S THE END OF OCTOBER-

DR. MOLLY.M.A

Assistant Professor, Dept. of English  
Pavanatma College, Murickassery

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### ABSTRACT

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Atomic war and global warming are existential threats to human civilization but the gravest danger is pandemics. Throughout history diseases have occasionally overturned societies. Lawrence Wright is an American writer, journalist, scriptwriter, playwright, musician, and Staff writer for The New Yorker magazine. He won Pulitzer Prize for his 2007 nonfiction book *The Looming Tower: Al Qaeda and the Road to 9/11*. Wright’s acclaimed novel, *The End of October* (April, 2020), one of the most revelatory novels in recent, depicts a global pandemic in which an unfamiliar virus works its way around the world, leaving economic recession, conspiracy theories, and mass death which evoke the current moment. It is striking how close the subtleties of the unfurling pandemic in the novel equal our own COVID-19 experience. We are all on in the Covid-19 pandemic and the entire world endures its biggest outbreak. Nobody can think about anything besides the COVID-19 virus right now. It is interesting to trace how Lawrence Wright worked admirably of envisioning what may occur in a worldwide pandemic and what he predicts as a feature of the novel's plot, is now upstaged here by the recent, COVID-19 experience.

Lawrence Wright’s novel *The End of October* offers a frighteningly prescient or prophetic look at how the world would react in the event of a global pandemic. Authored before the present COVID 19 pandemic, the novelist exposed the terrifying fragility of our social structures and political institutions. Wright’s virus, the Kongoli flu - a deadlier illness than COVID-19 - sweeps around the world, unleashing a chain of dystopian horrors. Food grows scarce, governments collapse, a cyber-attack takes down the internet, and war breaks out between the U.S. and Russia, dragging the world into a new dark age. The novelist, illustrates how a pandemic can start a domino effect and then how society goes to hell - hundreds of millions dead around the world, a complete breakdown of society. Dead bodies piled up in the streets, lawlessness, civilian militias, starvation. Eventually even the electric

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grid fails. In an epigrammatic way Wright sums up the aftermath of the pandemic like this: “Little was left of modernity except for weapons” (390).

It is remarkable how close the details of the unfolding pandemic in the novel parallel our own COVID-19. The easily transmitted disease, which literally turns its victims blue, is first detected in a refugee camp in Indonesia. Within one week, forty-seven people are pronounced dead with acute hemorrhagic fever. Henry Parsons, the protagonist, is a microbiologist and epidemiologist who reaches there on behalf of the World Health Organization to investigate the new disease. The pandemic in this case is the result of a novel influenza virus, named the Kongoli flu. The Kongoli pandemic moves from Indonesia to Mecca at the hour of the yearly hajj. Henry Parsons' infected driver carrying the disease unknowingly proceeds to make the pilgrimage to Mecca to join the millions of worshippers in the annual Hajj. The driver dies and the doctor finds that there will have shocking repercussions across the globe. Henry Parsons, the protagonist, realized the danger, manages to talk Saudi Arabian officials into putting Mecca under quarantine, but not for long. When attempts at quarantines in Mecca fail and the infected pilgrims return home, they carry the disease all over the globe. The outskirts of Saudi Arabia are shut and planes grounded.

Meanwhile, the quarantine in Mecca inflames existing global tensions and the novelist unravels an inevitable, history-shaping pandemic like how the Governments would fall, economies would collapse, and wars would rise. Iran attacks Saudi Arabia, claiming that it is holding Iranian citizens without cause. In light of the relatively few disease-related deaths in Russia, suspicions arise that the virus was bioengineered by Putin. The Russian leader, of course, blames America, where cities and institutions begin crumbling. Russia and the US use the ensuing conflict to begin a proxy war, with each superpower blaming the other for the spread of the virus as designed as a weapon. The disease slashes across the United States, dismantling institutions—scientific, religious, governmental—and decimating the population, along with masks, gloves, and diagnostic test kits. The power, telephones and web are down. Raiders and groups of thugs are wandering generally void urban communities, food is scant, hoarders have discharged stores. India and China are no longer able to produce essential medicines because they are fighting the pandemic within their own borders, and the US has no stockpiles of those medicines. The fabric of society begins to crumple. The disease is carried by birds, which means it will inevitably spread across the world. The CDC predicts that another wave of the disease will arrive within six months, by the end of October. Some political figures are requesting war, either by atomic assaults or germ fighting. Survivors are asked to rehearse social separating, and there is a forecast that another rush of the illness will be coming.

The novelist says: “Disease was more powerful than armies. Disease was more arbitrary than terrorists. Disease was crueler than human imagination.” The entire world is under attack and there is no treatment for the scourge affecting the world population. “Science knows no borders, nor does disease -- especially a disease that can literally fly across international boundaries” (394). Henry Parsons, eventually stumbles onto the early stages of a vaccine, and succeeds in tracing the virus to its surprising origin. The conclusion offers a glimmer of hope for us in these uncertain times.

Consider, though Lawrence Wright authored this fiction before the current pandemic COVID-19, but we could trace certain parallels with COVID-19 causing global panic, anxiety and stress. The recent pandemic breaks out in China not in Indonesia, ravishing the world. People die, countries shut down, no cure, no vaccine. The Kongoli virus described in the novel is hemorrhagic, closely related to Ebola than to COVID-19, and it is spread from Indonesia to the rest of the world because of Muslim pilgrimages and avian migration. The epidemic affects the world's population and the social, political and economic aftermath. The novelist's predictions regarding a pandemic closely related to COVID-19 and the quarantine we are now living and battling a virus.

## **REFERENCE**

Wright, Lawrence. *The End of October*. Knopf Publishers, 2020.