

Reweaving the Slave World with an Abhorrent Eradicator in Lawrence Hill's *The Book of Negroes*

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Abstract

Sixteenth and seventeenth-century pandemics have deserted the villages and plantations of various parts of the world. Smallpox has erupted the persons of all age groups with great harshness. Smallpox is a serious, communicable disease categorized by the hasty onset of legitimate symptoms. Lawrence Hill's The Book of Negroes explores the impact of smallpox among the slaves in the plantation through the characters of Georgia and Aminata. The process of variolation is formed to save the lives of the slaves from death. It also highlights the harshness and the symptoms of the infected persons and how it transmitted from one place to another through the slave trade.

Keywords: Pandemic, smallpox, death, symptoms, inoculation

A pandemic is a disease that affects a large number of people across the world over multiple countries. There are a variety of epidemics and pandemics all over the world that causes serious damage to the economic growth of the countries. Throughout history, human beings have been targeted by various infectious diseases that threaten the security of the public. It brings out the changes in the economic development that results in poverty, conflict, and famine. Some of the

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the pandemics that affect the economy of the countries are cholera, plague, malaria, smallpox, and so on. Smallpox is a serious, communicable disease categorized by the hasty onset of legitimate symptoms followed by a rash marked on the face and other parts of the body. Bouche claimed this disease as “terrible devastation among the Blacks” that kills about thirteen hundred black people within a short period (206-207).

Pandemic results when the disease has been transmitted to healthy population around the world. Thus the measure of quarantine indicates the isolation of people, from an infected group. It causes economic depression in all countries. Smallpox is one of the oldest human diseases. According to Sampaio “smallpox is a moral evil . . . which very few escape. This may be due to the difficult onset of the eruption . . . as they live entirely nude, outdoor, and almost always in the water, they are quite amphibious animals, and necessarily their skin pores need to be more closed”(24). It is first examined in 1157 BC over three thousand years ago in Egypt and then in various parts of Asia, China, Europe, West Africa, America, and into other countries. Ranlet says that around 30,000 slaves in Virginia have lost their lives due to smallpox at the time of British revolutionary in Virginia.

During the eighteenth century, smallpox has grabbed the lives of many children and slaves from Russia, France, Sweden, and America. People follow many steps to control the death rate as a result of it, Edward Jenner, an English physician in 1796 brought hope that the disease can be controlled. As a part of his experiment, “he inoculated an eight-year-old farm boy by cowpox virus, after observing the reaction, reinoculated him with the smallpox virus, the body did not develop the deadly disease, demonstrating that inoculation with smallpox would protect against smallpox”(WHO 5). Inoculation against smallpox is adept in England around the 1700s, and it has been used in slaves. The native Africans also practiced inoculation methods. This procedure is called variolation and widely accepted by people in many countries.

Lawrence Hill in *The Book of Negroes* explores the harshness of smallpox and its preventive measures through the characters of Georgia and Aminata. Georgia explores the processes of variolation to the slaves in Appleby’s plantation. She has adopted the system of inoculating the smallpox virus to the bodies of the slaves at a particular period to avoid death due to smallpox at that time. Georgia a black slave woman from Africa in Appleby plantation performs variolation and other traditional treatments to the slaves in her plantation. According to Jeslin, “The violence that Aminata faces in Appleby’s plantation is too hard because the basic needs of a person are denied by their master” (67-68). She treats Aminata with the poxvirus by cutting her forearm though she faces several harshness from her master. Georgia announces Aminata:

that she was going to make me very sick, but only to ensure that I wouldn’t die later. She said we needed time, and that this was the good time to do it. There was sickness going around the country, she said. In

Charles town. In the low country. In crowded areas. The sickness came it took many lives. Georgia said she had learned from an old low-country women how to prevent pox. (162-63)

Georgia explores the harshness of smallpox to Aminata since she has not been aware of the disease. By hearing the death news of the people who suffered from smallpox, Aminata gives permission to Georgia to perform the treatment to prevent the pox.

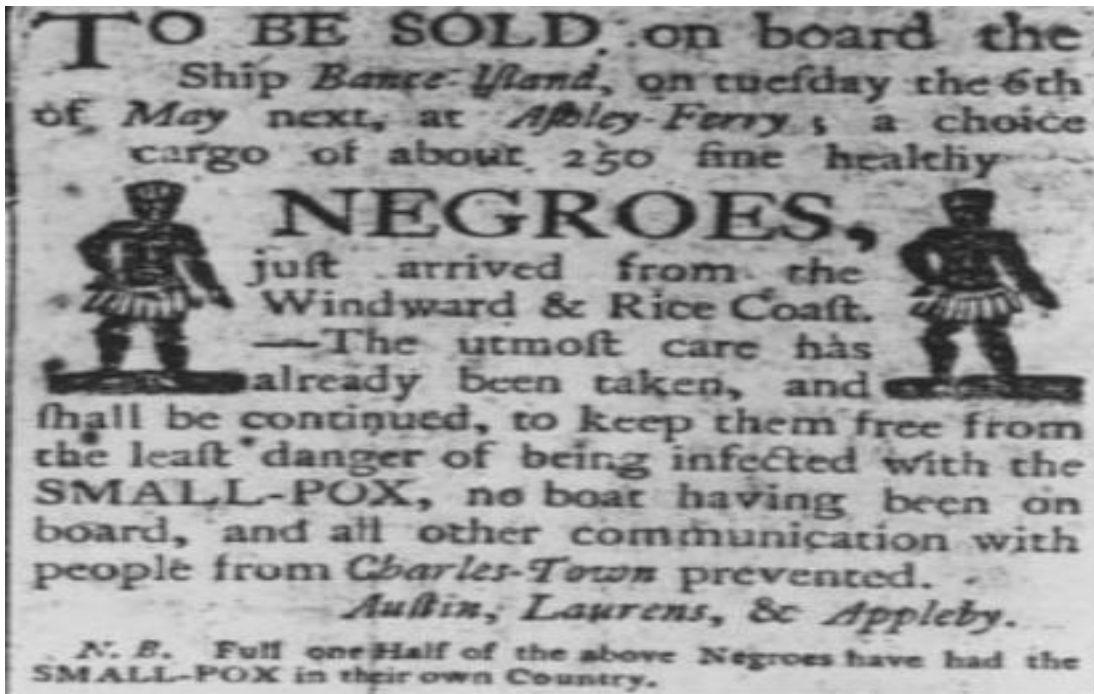


Fig:1 A Report on smallpox in Charles Town (MPI/Getty Images)

Blakemore says that it is a Boston advertisement for a shipment of around two hundred and fifty slaves from Africa in 1700, predominantly emphasizing that the slaves are free of smallpox, having been isolated on their vessel.

To perform the variolation Georgia has inserted a bit of thread into the forearm of Aminata that she has taken from another man whom she had made sick in the same method. Behbehani too explores the same process of variolation that:

In Greece, Turkey, Arabia, North Africa, and the Caspian sea region, a modified method of variolation namely, removing some of the thick liquid from a smallpox pustule of an infected person and rubbing it into a small scratch made with the needle on the arm of the child, was widely used as an empirical folk practice. (458)

Thus this practice becomes more common among the people of different countries to prevent themselves from the disease and deaths.

The patient who suffers from smallpox adopts various symptoms such as, fever, headache, vomit, and sore in the parts of the body. According to Alden, if a person is

infected by the smallpox virus, “ the victim confronted his or her destiny, for there was no effective treatment . . . the disease characteristically announced itself by provoking headaches, fevers, chills, and nausea. After those signs subsided, a rash appeared, first and nose intensively on the face, throat, arms, and hands and subsequently throughout the body” (198). After the incubation period, Aminata has fever, headache, and other symptoms of smallpox. She remains sick for nearly half a month and then recovers from the sickness. She says, “ my fever came back I had a headache so bad that I had to lie and cover my eyes against the light. When I leaned over the bed to vomit, I saw one of my teeth fall into the pail. Within a day, sore began to fester in my mouth and nose”(164). It shows the harshness of the smallpox virus when it enters into the body of human beings.

A person who suffers from smallpox gains pockmarks in their body when they are infected. Aminata says that Georgia checks her after the infection and says, “ yo u got off easy. Just a few pockmarks and none on your faces”(164). Alden too explores the pockmarks of smallpox as, “survivors were often left disfigured with pockmarks and some time with blindness”(198). It brings out the similarities of permanent or temporary pockmarks of the smallpox infection in the bodies of the infected patients.

When the epidemic disease spread all over the world, there is a strong economic crisis. During the slave trade “People in the city get affected by various diseases” (Jemi 294). As it spreads all over the world trades are stopped to prevent the spreading of disease. The contaminated people spread the disease from one country to another in the beginning. People from abroad vacate their place at the time of disease to prevent themselves from the infection. As a result, companies face the loss of workers that directs to the economic loss of the country. When slaves in Appleby’s plantation and Charles town are infected with the disease, the slave masters in the plantation escapes from the plantation to their homeland. Thereby the plantation undergoes severe economic loss. According to Martin, the plantation with “smallpox for their bounty and starvation and death for their wages. They might be seen scattered about in every direction, dead and dying, with pieces of ears of burned Indian corn in their hands, mouths, even of those that were dead”(241-42). It highlights the plight of slave masters and the slaves in the plantations. During the time of these diseases, almost half the number of slaves died and so the slave masters face economic depressions in their farmland. To balance this crisis the slave masters forces other slaves in the plantation to work hard by giving severe punishment if they protest to work.

Spreading of smallpox increases at the time of war, trade, migration, social chaos, and famine. Morgan says that half a million soldiers expired in the Franco-Prusian war around 1870 to 1871, and then at the war of Austrian Succession, Crimea war, Boer war, and Russo-Japanise war. Fenn explores how an epidemic spread all over the world and millions of slaves died due to the smallpox infection like that of the soldiers in the army. He claims the spreading of smallpox as it laid “the geographic and demographic gaps in our historical canon” (9). Ranlet says that

around thirty thousand slaves in Virginia have lost their lives due to smallpox at the time of British revolutionary in Virginia. According to Beula, a person “who travels from Europe to America in a ship which reveals the painful experience of the journey” due to diseases and the harshness that they faces in the ship (9).

Slave trade plays an important role in the transmission of smallpox from one country to another. Epidemic smallpox and the subsequent famine makes the Africans migrate from their place. Smallpox spreads in central Africa and other parts of the world through slave traders. It spreads to the Africans most rashly and there is low spread to the Native Americans that results in minimizing the population of slaves in the new land (Nunn 181). In about thirty percent of ships about fifteen percent slaves died at the time of their voyage. It occurs because of the long term incubation period. Thus due to this disease, there is a delay in crossing the equator borders from the coast of Africa and in other countries. The slave master in Appleby plantation too moves to his family members at the time of smallpox season to prevent him from the infection. Aminata says, “ he returned to the plantation around the time I had spent a full year on St. Helena Island”(Hill 177). It is the period of smallpox infection in his plantation. To safeguard the extreme possible global community health security World Health Organizations claims that, “ the countries – in collaboration with WHO and other relevant international organizations – must develop, maintain and strengthen appropriate public health and administrative capacities in general, not only at international ports, airports and land crossings” (9). It helps to control the spreading of epidemic diseases from one country to another.

The smallpox pandemics of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries grabbed the huge sum of slaves to death. The slaves in the plantation adopt the process of inoculation or variolation before the emergence of smallpox to their plantation to prevent themselves from the viral infection. Later this disease has been controlled only after the invention of vaccines.

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