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"The Urgent Literary Response to the Covid-19 Pandemic in David Hare's "Beat the Devil: A Covid Monologue"

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ABSTRACT

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Covid-19 is one of the iconic life-and-death events in the third decade of the third millennium. The outbreak of such a pandemic has killed millions of people in different countries around the world, while others are still fighting to survive and to save their loved ones. The implications of this unseen but present virus extend beyond health and also affect the ways we manage our lives and everyday activities. Therefore, the world is working hard day and night to stop the death toll as soon as possible and regain humans' pre-pandemic normal life. As Covid-19's palpable impacts have left nobody, nowhere, and no field unaffected, literature is there to record such impacts. In particular, the British dramatist David Hare (1947-) takes the initiative of dramatizing his personal experience of such a contagious disease which is accompanied by a scandalous mismanagement by the British government officials. He responds to the worldwide pandemic just a few months after its spread outside the Chinese borders via his monologue *Beat the Devil: A Covid Monologue* (2020). It chronicles the various stages of illness as well as the incompetent reactions of those in power.

Introduction

Twenty years after the beginning of the twenty-first century, the human race stands in face of the novel Covid-19 crisis that was announced a pandemic by the World Health Organization because of the rapid spread of the virus in many countries other than China by March 2020. This new cruel virus has set the whole world on fire and has turned the globe upside down. People everywhere around the world are victims on both the physical and psychological extremes. They either suffer from the clinical symptoms of the virus that, in many cases, end in death, or they fight against strong waves of fear, stress, and panic of contracting the virus or having a dear family member or a friend infected. Quarantine and strict social distancing policies have been imposed to suspend the spread of Coronavirus infections. Schools and universities have been closed, and online learning approaches have been adopted to protect students from infections. Companies and institutions have adopted remote working strategies such as online conferences and meetings instead of in-person ones. Recreational activities in clubs and malls have been stopped to prevent direct contact with others. The number of public transport users has been minimized especially in rush-hours. Unnecessary travels have been cancelled, and conferences, workshops, or any unimportant gatherings have been delayed. Thus, lives have been drastically changed with the outbreak of such a pandemic.

As literature is a mirror which reflects the countless experiences that humans undergo on various extremes, fatal diseases and pandemics have been frequently discussed in many literary works all over ages. One can state that there has been great interest in telling stories about the humanity's fight against pandemics as with other catastrophic events like wars and natural disasters,

for example. This can be attributed to the fact that literature of plagues provides readers / audience with a version of real-life experiences and shows us the severity of suffering and fear of death, which "much like contagious disease ... can spread like wildfire" (Schweitzer 6), experienced by the stricken public. In reverence of the importance and effectiveness of the literary responses to pandemics, Abhik Roy adds,

... literature helps break the barriers, connecting us across different historical periods and time zones with others who have experienced similar tragedies. More importantly, literature shows us that we have a lot in common with others who are from distant lands and different times, encouraging us to appreciate the fact that we are not the only ones who are dealing with the worldwide devastation wrought by the pandemic ("Literature and Pandemics", *thestatesman.com*).

As with other health crises throughout the history of humanity particularly the AIDS epidemic, Covid-19 pandemic has been quickly responded to via literature. "Because its association with death is too powerful" (Sontag 24), literature has never waited a long to conceptualize and address the pandemic shortly after its spread beyond China all over the world. The British dramatist David Hare is the first literary figure to dedicate a new play to this recent global epidemic: *Beat the Devil: A Covid Monologue* (2020).

David Hare (1947-) is one of the most celebrated literary voices in the United Kingdom. He is a leading political dramatist and a pioneer of verbatim or documentary theatre who is known for "his continued enthusiasm and talent" (Bull 141). His literary career started in 1970 with the production of

first piece of drama *Slag* (1970) and has continued for over three decades when he has contributed to the British theatre with a rich body of plays. Actually, Hare's plays are mainly addressed to discuss serious issues in the UK especially wars and their consequent havoc and disillusionment as it is apparent in his 2005 play *Stuff Happens* where he condemns the invasion of Iraq in 2003. His other plays include *Plenty* (1978), *Via Dolorosa* (1998), which is a 90-minute monologue about his visit to the Palestinian territories, *The Permanent Day* (2003), *The Power of Yes* (2009), *The Moderate Soprano* (2015), and the most recent monologue about the current global Coronavirus.

Aim and Significance

The aim of this research is to chronicle humans' Covid-19 experience and its consequent traumas as immediately reflected through literature. It takes as its basis David Hare's personal monologue *Beat the Devil* (2020) which stands as the first piece of dramatic literature to come out in response to the outbreak of such a health catastrophe. The research gives a detailed analysis of the play so that readers can come close to the dramatist's infection experience and its physical and psychological influences. It also sheds thick lights on Hare's outspoken condemnation of the UK government's failure to deftly respond to the emergency as with other countries that have professionally responded to the viral spread that he grants a large space in his monologue. Hence, in this paper, the researcher attempts to discuss Hare's literary approach to Covid-19 from human and political perspectives and give voice to his messages to the public and governments from the battlefield of illness.

Discussion

Beat the Devil (2020) is a 50-minute play in which the dramatist crystalizes his serious live experience of Covid-19 and "with vivid, forensic details" (Crompton, *whatsonstage.com*) shows how it feels to contract a virus that the

medical staff does not altogether know how to cure. On the other side, Hare; as usual, speaks against the British government's failure to deal professionally with the pandemic directly after it has stepped out of China to hit the rest of the world:

This ... play, too, turns recently lived reality into drama, using Hare's own harrowing experience of the illness as its narrative framework. The playwright contracted coronavirus at the start of lockdown, and this is a dissection of its debilitating effects as well as the politics around the illness (Akbar, *theguardian.com*).

As we live at an extraordinary time when crowding is restricted and "going to theatre is no longer normal" (Ball 878), *Beat the Devil* was performed in an indoor theatre, The Bridge Theatre, with just 250 audiences wearing face masks instead of 900 on 27 August 2020 (Crompton, *whatsonstage.com*). It was performed only by Ralph Fiennes who speaks for David Hare himself to describe "the progress of the virus as it devastates [his] body and mind" (Benedict, *variety.com*). Fiennes stands on the stage before the audience, recalling Hare's 16-day journey with the virus and expressing his sweeping anger as this invisible virus "removes his independence and his remaining crumbs of faith in the British government" ("Beat the Devil", *mercantile.solutions*). In fact, Hare returns to the monologue form after his 1998 one mainly because of two reasons. On the one hand, he wants to give voice to a personal experience that he has gone alone through its episodes as a Covid-19 sufferer. On the other hand, using an ordinary cast of actors who interact and communicate directly with one another on the stage is impossible during such circumstances (Benedict, *variety.com*). But, this time he is not the

performer as he is still recovering from the virus, and so his part goes to Fiennes.

Since the very start of Hare's poignant monologue, which is "a rapid-response disquisition upon a sadly universal subject from an intensely personal perspective" (Benedict, *variety.com*), Covid-19 is rendered as an extraordinary disease. The dramatist shows his readers/audience that the pandemic is not a straightforward one. However, it has a vague, complex nature that doctors and health professionals struggle to understand. Although Covid-19 is recognized as a respiratory disease, many cases around the world prove that its destructive impacts can go beyond the lungs. It can cause kidney failure, brain problems, blood clots, and overdrive of the immune system:

'It doesn't resemble any other disease,' says another doctor. 'You have to go back to HIV/AIDS to find a virus so little understood'.... In fact, Covid-19 seems to be a sort of dirty bomb, thrown into the body to cause havoc. A lot of patients are actually dying of kidney failure. There's muscle inflammation in nearly everybody. In some cases, patients are delirious or suffering inflammation of the brain but all this is less pervasive than the blood clotting (Hare 9-10).

Hare is also surprised as this disease sometimes refutes the medical rule that if the oxygen saturation is below the 90s, doctors have to use ventilators to help carry enough oxygen to the lungs. According to this autobiographical monologue, in some cases, there is no relation between the rate of oxygen saturation and the amount of oxygen that reaches to vital organs (*Beat the Devil* 8).

In "his report from the physical frontlines as he succumbs to infection" (Benedict, *variety.com*), David Hare, through Fiennes, recounts that he

contracts the virus while he is working on the second episode of his upcoming TV series "Roadkill" (Hare 7) in collaboration with the series' editor and director. Everything is going smoothly till the director, Michael Keillor, tells his co-workers that Covid-19 has infected him:

The three of us ... do an honourable day's work. At some point, the director, Michael Keillor, ... makes us all a welcome cup of tea. We share a plate of biscuits. On Tuesday, Michael rings to tell me that the previous night, without warning, when he got home, he collapsed. And this morning he can't move and he can't breathe (Hare 8).

As the one he is working directly with and meeting nearly every day is now a Covid-19 patient, the dramatist decides to isolate himself as he may also be infected. Quickly, he starts to notice the virus' most common respiratory symptom. He cannot get enough air into his lungs as usual. This difficulty of taking a normal breath makes Hare sure that he is a new victim of the new Coronavirus as all the news he has read and heard says that this virus attacks the lungs and the respiratory system, and one of its main symptoms is shortness of breath:

I noticed as soon as I started walking I was air hungry. Uh-oh. It's that quick. Already I'm not breathing so well. From the little I've heard people say, don't let it go to your lungs (Hare 8).

According to *Beat the Devil*, David Hare passes through two stages of illness. In the first stage, the symptoms of the virus are not so severe at all. They are so mild that he doubts that he has actually contracted Coronavirus. Unless his general practitioner assures that he is a Covid-19 patient, the

dramatist can misinterpret the symptoms as they are initially flu-like: "'Maybe I haven't got it.' He replies darkly: 'Oh, you've got it' (Hare 9). However, in the second stage, after the first five days of illness, the disease starts its fierce attack against Hare. Nearly all the symptoms suddenly turn unbearable. First, he says that he has unexpected gustatory and olfactory problems. He complains that he can no longer taste water and food properly, nor can he smell well. Everything that gets into his mouth has the same taste of sewage:

I'm walking and trying to wash the taste of sewage out of my mouth. It's not easy to do. My doctor has warned me that I might lose my sense of taste and smell. They say it is a common symptom Everything tastes of sewage. When I go to the tap at five in the morning and drink the fresh water, all I can taste is sewage (Hare 6).

For example, he tells readers/audience that even the Chinese plate that he is used to preparing for his family and is usually delicious and tasty has a completely different taste. This unexpected awful taste makes Hare think that he "must have misremembered the recipe" (Hare 10) and added other ingredients not the ones he used to.

Actually, many studies of the widespread virus have reported that the dysfunction of taste and smell is registered as an early sign of Covid-19. Although researchers do not give a definite answer to the question of why Coronavirus patients suffer from changes or even loss of both taste and smell, most of them assert that the virus affects its patients' nasal cells and taste buds. For them, they are strong markers of infection, and any person who feels changes in these two senses should directly start self-isolation. They are also not sure when survivors can taste and smell again. Only towards the end of the

monologue and of the dramatist's pain-ridden journey that has reduced him to "total despair" (Hare 16), he tells his recipients that he gets his distorted senses back. When the disease departs his body, he can taste and smell normally as he could before. There is no longer sewage in food, water, and air. Thus, the disappearance of this symptom is an evidence of recovery from Coronavirus as Hare tells:

I wake up and say to Nicole that I quite fancy a croissant.
I might have come out of coma'But you haven't wanted anything for a week.' 'No, but I would quite like a croissant.' I look round. I smell the air. It doesn't smell of sewage (*Beat the Devil* 19).

As "the disease has just been for a beansprout cue to get its notorious second wind" (Hare 11), Hare has a severe cough which is one of the common symptoms of Covid-19 that at least 60 % of patients have (Song, et. al. 534) and unfortunately lasts during the post-recovery stage. Then he comes to suffer from an excessive feeling of fatigue. It is similarly believed to be a long-term symptom which remains for a long time after the patient recovers from the disease: "there's only one symptom that will remain permanent throughout. That's exhaustion" (Hare 9). The dramatist states that by nightfall he starts to feel unwell. Chronic tiredness and physical weakness suddenly invade him. He lacks energy and is no longer able to practice the simple things he usually did before. He has lost his previous efficiency and motivation for work and turns devoid of his multi-tasking and high accomplishment abilities. What he wants to do is just to keep lying down and sleeping. In justification of such a feeling of exhaustion usually associated with Coronavirus, the dramatist tells that it can be attributed to the immune system's reaction to the infection. As the patient's body fights against the virus, his/her immune system releases

chemicals that are known as 'cytokines' that cause inflammation which in turn leads to pains, exhaustion, and aches:

.... Unfortunately, before going to sleep, I've started reading about cytokine storms. That's when your immune system, threatened, goes into overdrive and causes more severe problems than the original virus (Hare 12-13).

Next, David Hare is hit by fever which comes on top of the most common symptoms of Covid-19. His temperature is no longer normal but, as the thermometer says, goes to 40 degrees Celsius to the extent that sweat pours off everywhere of his body. In medical terms, this high temperature usually results from the human body's fight against the infection:

It's on the evening of the Chinese lunch that my regulator goes crazy. Since neither Nicole nor I are confident of successfully using a thermometer, we assume that my bedtime reading of 40 degrees ... is down to the thermometer not having been used for years. But then when I wake up in the middle of the night ... in a lake of sweat ... we decide maybe it was 40 after all. It feels like it (Hare 11).

Later on, the dramatist describes how his temperature drops dramatically, causing him "to shake with Arctic cold" (*Beat the Devil* 12). According to Center for Disease Control and Prevention, this shiver can also be one of the signs of Coronavirus infection. Medically, it often happens when the muscles shake to get heat to raise the body's temperature in order to generate the inflammatory substances to get rid of the infection much faster. This is why the patient feels terribly cold (Miller, *health.com*).

It is now the turn of vomiting in the queue of Covid-19 symptoms that

attack David Hare: "I've entered the vomiting phase and I'd say it's the worst so far" (Hare 16). Actually, it is one of the gastrointestinal signals that sometimes accompany the infection and "might be the initial symptom" (Zhang et. al. 2). According to recent researches, patients with such symptoms as diarrhea, nausea, or vomiting also develop the virus' most common respiratory symptoms of shortness of breath and cough (DeSimon, *emersonhospital.org*). Also, even if no respiratory symptoms show up, anyone who suddenly suffers from vomiting, diarrhea, or nausea should directly expect him / herself to be a Covid-19 patient. In fact, this symptom, researchers report, may result from the virus' attack against the gastrointestinal track, the medical treatments of Coronavirus disease, or from the worry and anxiety caused by this worldwide emergency (Zhang et. al 3-4).

Showing this digestive symptom, it comes evident that the dramatist has almost all the key signs typical of Covid-19. So, according to Hare's monologue, respiratory symptoms are not the only signs of infection. Although they are the most common, other unusual manifestations may be brought about by contracting the virus; must be taken into consideration; and added to the checklist of the disease to quickly detect cases of infection and control the spread of the virus:

We're so focused on a cough and fever, but it's possible there are people with digestive symptoms that are not being tested," Dr. Brennan Spiegel told (McFall-Johnsen, *businessinsider.in*).

As Hare shares his illness experience with the public, he describes these symptoms as crazy. They show up and hit him randomly not gradually all over eleven days of his infection. They go back and forth against each other in a

strange, perplexing manner:

So, unknowingly, we've slipped into the mad phase and it will be with me for the next eleven days. 'Mad', meaning any symptom can appear at any time. One day it's conjunctivitis. Next day it's diarrhea. Then it's coughing. Then it's friendly herpes (Hare 12).

It is worth mentioning that Hare's viral infection is accompanied by sudden, rapid weight loss. He says that during his ten-day battle against the virus, he has "lost six kilos" (*Beat the Devil* 19). Generally talking, according to recent studies of the virus, some survivors of Covid-19 are prone to lose weight and suffer from nutrition problems. The virus, in some cases either severe or mild, can lead to a reduced appetite and affect the desire for food. Quarantine, stay-at-home restrictions, as well as the disease-caused fatigue result in limited physical activity and so loss of the body mass. The virus-associated loss of taste and smell can also contribute to weight loss. The chronic feelings of fear, anxiety, and stress are also some of the common causes of weight loss. All these causes work together to give Hare "the body of a Bosnian prisoner of war" as he describes himself in the monologue (*Beat the Devil* 19).

Along with physical symptoms of Covid-19 most of which the playwright has unfortunately come to experience, he also suffers from some of their psychological counterparts. Hare's illness is accompanied by increasing depression, disabling feelings, and negatively affected well-being. He is swept by strong waves of insomnia, anger, confusion, anxiety, grief, and stress during his fight against the virus. In the middle of his monologue, he states, "I keep waking in the night ... usually around 2 a.m." (*Beat the Devil* 14). He is seemingly suffering from sleep disturbance which is common among patients

of Covid-19 and also among those whose lives have been in flux due to the unexpected outbreak of the pandemic a year ago. Sleep neurologists term this state "COVID-somnia" (Hurley, *journals.lww.com*) that has "both physiological and psychological reasons" (Huuang and Wenguang, *Rehabilitation from COVID-19*). Worry about his infection, what may happen to him as a result, and the health of his wife hit him with severe feelings of fear and anxiety that are common psychological responses to pandemics. The government handling of the whole situation fills him with pervasive irritability and stress that negatively affect his immunity to the viral attack. Restrictions of social distancing, separation from his loved ones, except Nicole, loss of his normal freedom, deprivation of his everyday life and work routines result in uncontrollable feelings of loneliness, boredom, and frustration.

Everything people have been attached to has been lost in the aftermath of the current pandemic outbreak, and so "there is a communal grief as ... [the] systems [they] depend on destabilize" (Weir, *apa.org*). This results in loss of self and identity which is considered a common psychological consequence of such a catastrophic event. Contracting such a virus and the consequent loss of health, safety, freedom, certainty, security, and control have caused David Hare, who stands for millions around the globe, to lose his past sense of self and identity. Before the outbreak of the pandemic, Hare's identity is closely tied to his career as one of the outstanding literary figures in England and to his family and friends. He has a sense of himself as a brilliant man of letters who waits for a new artistic success in his great career that enhances his self-worth and self-esteem. He has identified himself as a sociable person who cares to have close relations with people around him. Covid-19 has unfortunately forced him to separate himself from his work and from the ones he loves, and this leads to an identity crisis. He is socially isolated, and so he

is not allowed to go to the editing room in Oxford Circus where he revises the episodes of his new TV series. He is also devoid of any energy to work from home because of the virus' fatigue and tiredness. For the same reason, communication with family members, colleagues, and friends is limited to a minimum, and so he does no longer feel connected with and belonging to his surroundings. Thus, everyone and everything that used to confer his life a meaning is now gone, and so he feels he is not the one he was before. He feels that he gets divided into different persons who have nothing to do with each other except that they all exist within the same body:

One morning in the middle of the week, Nicole has asked me how I'm feeling. I have replied, 'One of my bodies is fine, but the others aren't great.' I have gone on painstakingly to explain that the virus has divided me into several separate identities which all sleep in the bed together side by side (Hare 14).

In fact, social support can help patients of Covid-19 to overcome this adversity and cope with its consequent negative feelings. It prevents them from getting stuck in grief and to move on in their lives. Social support networks can help survivors of any traumatic experience not to fall preys to the disasters-related negative mental emotions and eroded identity as psychologist Erika Felix says:

One thing we've learned from disasters is the ongoing importance of social supports. The lesson is to keep checking in on people, and keep the support going even after this period of lockdown ends. For some people, the stress will continue after quarantine ends, especially if

their jobs or relationships are affected (Qtd. in Weir, *apa.org*).

On the fiftieth anniversary of the premiere of his first play at Hampstead Theatre, David Hare starts to feel much better. The virus' symptoms do no longer attack him as they did on the previous days, and his body recovers from the debilitating impacts of the infection. His health condition is improving. He starts to regain his appetite and desire for food. His lack of energy starts to fade away. Loss of taste and smell also start to linger. He states:

April 6th 2020 was always going to be a date of special significance today I've been a playwright for fifty years And yet April 6th is also the day – inexplicable and unexplained – when I stop being ill. I wake up and say to Nicole that quite fancy a croissant. I might as well have come out of a coma I look round. I smell air. It doesn't smell of sewage. When I later speak to my friend Howard Brenton, who has also had it, he says that the disease departs 'like a demon leaving your body' (*Beat the Devil* 19).

Actually, this is not the final phase in his illness journey. Many survivors of Coronavirus disease report that their illness experience does not come to an actual end after testing negative. They take some time to turn normal again and perfectly fine. They are caused to suffer from some post-Covid-19 physical and mental symptoms regardless of the mildness or severity of the infection. So, it is suggested that patients can reach the stage of full recovery a month or two after the infection. In his monologue, David Hare is aware of the virus' lasting consequences that result in long-term troubles which are not easy to overcome:

It's going to take a long time to get better, I know that, and I know not to rush it. I'm very weak. I know to take it easy. Not, for instance, to go back to running the country (Hare 20).

Although Hare is happy to be alive after a fierce battle with this life-threatening virus, he admits that he, as a survivor of a traumatic experience, has strong feelings of anger. Hare feels angry and annoyed as some Covid-19 patients recover and remain alive, while others whom he perceives as more worthy of life are caused to die. He is overwhelmed by contempt and rage against the world at large as an unsafe place to live in, the British government as dishonest and unprofessional in pandemic planning, and the virus that unfairly ends the lives of some of its victims:

I admit that later that afternoon when it is clear that I am indeed clear, I begin to cry – not altogether selfishly, not just at my own fortune, but at how unfair it all is. So many people, many younger than me, fitter than me, better than me, poorer than me, are going to die when they don't need to. I don't have survivor's guilt. I have survivor's rage (Hare 20).

As usual, literary works on pandemics and traumatic incidents often describe the mismanagement, incompetence, and selfishness of politicians in response to such experiences. As important as sharing David Hare's illness experience during the Covid-19 pandemic is criticizing the British government handling of this worldwide health crisis. In this monologue, he gives vent to his fierce outrage with the irresponsible and incompetent attitudes of those in power regarding the life-threatening virus. He perceives such attitudes to be

much worse than the British response to Suez Crisis and Iraq, especially with the fact that the UK is the sixth of the worst affected countries around the world with about 100.000 cases of infection (Perrigo, *time.com*) and more than 32.000 deaths by May 2020 (Horti and Nicu, *newstateman.com*). As he directly confesses to his recipients "in words ... dripping with fury and disgust" (Ball 878), Hare states that he cannot understand the reason why the British top officials, unlike those in many other countries around the world, are so careless in their reaction to such a catastrophe and is heartbroken to see rising numbers of British citizens getting infected and falling dead as a consequence:

I'm still bewildered by the British handling of this latest chapter in our island story. Surely, looking abroad to the examples of Angela Merkel in Germany or Jacinda Ardern in New Zealand Given how well those leaders were doing, and how badly we were doing, did it really never occur to anyone in power that possibly following their example and leveling with the public might be a more fruitful political tactic? (Hare 21).

Hare is particularly enraged at Boris Johnson as he seemingly prefers to enjoy his holiday to supporting his country in face of a global fatal disease. He has never taken the pandemic seriously nor has he worked with his government on emergency plans, resulting in about thousands of deaths in the first wave of the virus:

From the moment the pandemic was headed this way, the prime minister scares me because I keep thinking, 'Johnson doesn't quite seem on top of this.' He spent the middle of February on a

twelve-day holiday ... divided between celebrating his girlfriend's pregnancy, negotiating the final details of the most recent divorce and skipping COBRA meetings. He leaves it until 23 March reluctantly to announce the full measures. He seems to be struggling with his own instincts (Hare 11).

At the time when WHO gives strict orders to adopt social distancing measures "where individuals are told to remain three feet away from each other at all times" (Schweitzer 62), the British government allows "the Cheltenham Races" (Hare 13) and Liverpool vs. Atletico Madrid match to be held although the virus is going out of control. All gathering places are lately closed, and citizens are not officially prohibited from going to them. When the whole world tends towards lockdown, the British politicians have illogically kept the country open and allowed all visitors from all over the world including Italy and Spain, which are considered the centers of Covid-19, to enter the kingdom "unchecked and unquarantined" (Hare 13). Thus, they are late to announce full lockdown to reduce the number of infections and to adopt physical distancing strategies and prevention restrictions. Actually, this has paved the way for the virus to strike the entire country:

The government was slow to act, didn't give Coronavirus the priority and attention it deserved and has made some significant mistakes ... They've handled it very badly (Perrigo, *time.com*).

Furthermore, the British government officials have unexpectedly failed to prepare well for the arrival of the virus. They have been inattentive towards the front-line health workers who play key roles in confronting the pandemic

outbreak. Although they are the Covid-19 heroes who work constantly to care for patients of such a contagious disease, they have never been provided with enough personal protective equipment (PPE) to save them from contracting the virus during their direct fight with its waves. Therefore, members of the medical staff desperately complain that they are "being sent naked to work?" (Hare 14) without face masks, gloves, sanitizers, and gowns. They are distressed as many of them, on a daily basis, fall victims of the fierce virus as a result of such insufficiency which is blindingly clear to everyone. Unfortunately, the Home Secretary Priti Patel has even refused to apologize for such insufficient supply of PPE. She has just stated that this is an inevitable problem at the time of a global pandemic due to the unprecedented demand for PPE everywhere around the kingdom, and that the government works hard to address this shortage:

she's today asked by a journalist at the regular press briefing if she will apologise for the failings of resources and equipment which NHS staff and their families blame on the government. Patel replies that she's sorry – if people feel there have been failings. The journalist ... gives Patel a second chance, and asks, 'but are you apologizing for the lack of personal protective equipment which has led to mass infections and the deaths of several nurses and doctors?' Patel replies: 'I'm sorry that people feel that way' (Hare 17-18).

Actually, her reply and inability to say sorry stimulates the dramatist's anger to the extent that he feels that watching a television at this time of illness "is a mistake" (Hare 18). When recalling public figures' justifications and responses to Suez crisis and Iraq war inquiries, David Hare perceives Patel's

as the most despicable of all:

And there are numerous broadsides ... leveled at Prime Minister Boris Johnson and his colleagues in the governing Conservative Party, none of whom, Hare tells us, accept the slightest responsibility for any mishandling of the pandemic (Wolf, *nytimes.com*).

Another indication of the inattention and carelessness towards the nursing staff in particular is granted a space in this first-hand Covid-19 monologue. Their great efforts and heroic sacrifices to manage and control Coronavirus have been also financially underestimated. Their pay rise proposals always go unheard. They feel that they are alone paying the price of the pandemic. Only with their warnings and threats to quit their jobs, the Department of Health and Social Care has recommended just 1 % rise on their salaries despite the government's previous promises to give them 2.1 % pay rise. Johnson states that this increase of their basic pay is what they can possibly give at such a hard time of the pandemic. As a political opponent of Johnson and his government, Hare criticizes this official offer that has nothing to do with what they did and are still doing during the consecutive waves of the pandemic ".... he will later pay due tribute to the very nurses whose pay rise he opposed (Hare 18-19).

Also, according to the angry dramatist's testimony, the British officials have failed to secure Covid-19 tests to all citizens to early detect those who get the virus and so block its spread due to the shortage of test equipment: "And yet how the hell are they ever going to control the disease unless they know who's got it?" (Hare 13). Moreover, the government has failed to keep the British old and weak people living at care homes safe from the virus, leading to thousands of deaths because they are the most vulnerable to

infection: “Almost a third of Coronavirus deaths to date have been in care homes” (Sharma, *chroniclelive.co.uk*). They have not been regularly tested to detect their contraction of the virus as soon as possible until the middle of April. What has worsened matters is that many old patients have been brought about from hospitals to care homes without test to free up space for positive-tested Covid-19 patients, resulting in countless infections:

... they neglected the equal danger to workers and residents in the care-home sector, where deaths are set to rise to alarming levels ... Why are we moving our most vulnerable out of hospitals, where they are protected, into care homes where they aren't? Can anyone explain? (Hare 14)

In fact, the government's delay to deal with the pandemic is accompanied by distortions and manipulation of facts that fill the dramatist with fury and confusion. All what they do is to lie and tell the public that everything is ok, and the crisis is under control. They never report the real numbers of confirmed cases and deaths that have gone much higher than those in Italy: “Maybe the politicians are inspired by the medicine... if our vital signs have decided that now is the time to lie to us, may be our government has decided the same” (Hare 12). They rename their failure and mismanagement of this emergency "with the anodyne ‘challenge’" (Hare 16). They, according to *Beat the Devil*, seek to deceive the British into thinking that what they perceive as unprofessional attitudes towards the situation are actually the scientists' recommendations: "'We followed the science' is government-speak for ‘Don't blame us’" (Hare 17). Also, they justify their unprofessional policy as a means of developing herd immunity to control the spread of this devastating disease although it is actually not:

At a COBRA meeting, also on March 12th, the government are still indulging their more fanciful advisers. They have been flirting with a policy of herd immunity-the happy-go-lucky notion that if the most vulnerable among us sheltered and hid indefinitely, it might be possible for everyone else to carry on and take their chances (Hare 13).

Thus, the monologue turns it clear to the British theatergoers that their country stands at the back of the European queue in suppressing the Covid-19 pandemic. Although it is not the only country to fail to manage the crisis, "Britain failed more than the most" (McTague, *theatlantic.com*). This poor control of the crisis has resulted from many crucial mistakes in decision-making with the outbreak of the virus as well as unjustified dishonesty that turns situations much worse as Hare sees: "Have they really not yet learned that the soothing bandage for the wounds inflicted by grief is the truth? (*Beat the Devil* 21). So, the thoughts and performance of those in power at times of crises never deserve the British's trust.

It is important to note that Trump's reaction to the pandemic spread does not differ from Boris Jonson's, and so David Hare also rebukes him for his underestimation of the pandemic and mismanagement of the crisis in its initial phases:

He's spent February denigrating Covid-19 – 'You're not as bad as flu, few Americans are at risk – but the morale of the virus seems undaunted by his tactics (14).

In spite of the WHO's warnings that Covid-19 is a global health crisis that puts the whole world at risk and so needs urgent preparations, Trump has downplayed the threat of the virus to the USA. He has paid no attention to

such warnings nor has he listened to those of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) that the pandemic can have destructive consequences on Americans. In his interviews and on his Twitter official account, in response to the virus outbreak and its impacts on his country, the US president confidently states that the virus deserves no fear or worry, everything is under control, and there are only 12 cases of infection all over the nation that are fully recovered. Thinking that the risk is very slight, as with Johnson's, Trump administration “was very slow to institute any actions or policy responses ... President Trump did not issue a travel ban to China until January 31 His downplaying of the threat also continued into March” (Rutledge 507). Not before mid-March that he gave orders to take steps to stand against the spread of the virus among Americans.

In this monologue, David Hare sheds thick lights on the fact that this universal trauma of Covid-19 knows no social, economic, or physical differences. It goes beyond man-made borders and does not discriminate against people of lower classes or different races. The healthy, the rich, the powerful, the highly educated, and the white can equally undergo its horrendous experiences and endure its physical and psychological costs as with those who are classified as minority groups. In a word, the pandemic can attack anyone regardless of his/her class, power, wealth, or post. The virus; for instance, has attacked top political officials namely, according to *Beat the Devil*, the British Prime Minister Boris Johnson and the American President Donald Trump. On March 27, 2020, Johnson officially announced that he contracted the virus as a pageant of symptoms started to show up, and he tested positive for Covid-19. He stated that he would isolate himself and keep on leading the government through modern technological applications. Then, upon the advice of his doctors, he was taken into hospital and got oxygen

treatment at the intensive care unit. Hare writes:

At least, now that Johnson himself has gone down with it, Conservatives have stopped downplaying Covid-19 and recognized that it is ten times as deadly as flu. For the first time in the right-wing press, the disease has acquired a heroic dimension. Can't think why, but for some reason it's no longer a disease for losers. Suddenly Covid is for men – in particular, blond white men – who have extraordinary resources of character with which to fight. Our prime minister turns to be one of these (*Beat the Devil* 18).

Likewise, Trump who always has great trust in his health and the power of his immune system tested positive for the Coronavirus one month before the US presidential elections, and so did his wife: “The virus ... is meanwhile outwitting the leader of the United States” (Hare 14). He was rushed into Walter Reed National Military Medical Center to receive antiviral treatment for three nights (Breuninger, *cnn.com*). In his brief speech after leaving the hospital, he stated that he may have contracted this contagious disease during some of the White House recent public events. Hence, *Beat the Devil* is David Hare's shout at those who think that illness and disability are mainly the fates of lower social classes. He denounces the inhumane thoughts that having a high social status can guarantee safety from falling victims of any disease and that to be poor, black, and non-native is to be hit by viruses and fatal diseases and finally to die:

A famous film director remarks to me that I'm the only person he knows who's got it. Do I detect an undercurrent of rebuke, as though it's not the sort of thing the middle

classes are meant to get? Apparently, I've crossed class lines by carelessly catching a disease which generally attacks manual workers and ethnic minorities. After all, it's becoming clear that you're twice as likely as to die if you're poor. Diseases follow the social gradient. And skin colour. In England and Wales, you're four times as to die if you're black (Hare 15).

His message is to stop any kind of racism against disadvantaged people in this world. Middle and upper classes must no longer think that ailments and vulnerability should not be theirs, and that they should only have a place among their socially unprivileged and marginalized counterparts.

Therefore, the American President's racist attitudes against the sick and the weak are acutely criticized in *Beat the Devil*. Donald Trump despises anyone who has symptoms of illness and physical deterioration. He is always worried about falling ill and dying, and so he avoids those who have health problems and even expresses inhumane disgust against them. For him, illness is a reference to weakness from which he must secure himself at any cost. For example, he has insisted not to meet wounded soldiers and looked down upon them as losers. He has also mocked his presidential foe Hillary Clinton for what he perceived as signs of aging and illness. He always tries hard to keep himself safe from germs and viruses, and so he has "relentless desire to wash his hands" (Perry, *gen.medium.com*). He thinks that the sick and the disabled should be eradicated from the American society because their weakness is a burden upon their nation:

A habitual user of wet wipes, Trump is a man with a lifetime fear of contamination. During the election campaign in 2016, he has spoken in horror of one of his interviewers, Megyn

Kelly, 'having blood coming out of her wherever'. He has also repeatedly characterized Hillary Clinton's bathroom break during a democratic debate as 'disgusting' Trump can't conquer his disdain for anyone who gets ill. Sick people are what he calls losers (*Beat the Devil* 15).

Beat the Devil (2020), being "such a fine piece" (Crompton, *whatsonstage.com*), has a variety of emotions other than anger, pain, and grief. David Hare and his wife's love stands as a spot of light amidst the monologue's gloominess. Actually, spousal relations and feelings are sometimes negatively affected when one partner falls sick or disabled, but Hare and Nicole's is not. In his monologue, David Hare shares with his readers/audience Nicole's reactions to his illness and shows how they get much closer after he has tested positive for Covid-19. He states that she is determined to stay by his side in every step during his 16-day Covid-19 journey. She, as her husband tells, turns to a professional caregiver during the time of his illness. She keeps alert to notice any physical change that Hare may experience as a result of the virus. "Convinced of her own indestructability" (Crompton, *whatsonstage.com*), the loving wife refuses to conform to the social distancing orders and to keep herself away from her husband in order not to contract the virus as he did. Against the prevention measures, they use the same household equipment. She also insists to sleep in the same room where Hare sleeps to take care of him at such hard moments when he grapples with this fatal disease although a Covid-19 patient must confine to his/her own room and bathroom. She is not at all afraid of getting infected as he says:

Nicole has thus far defied medical advice. We're meant to sleep in separate rooms, but we don't. We share a bathroom

too. Nicole's convinced she'll never get ill My wife doesn't seem to have grasped the notion of social distancing (Hare 12).

Even when the dramatist is hit by a severe wave of cold that many layers of clothing cannot resist and fail to curb, she fearlessly stretches her own body on top of his body to make him warm: "Don't worry, I'll get you warm" (Hare 12). So, Nicole appears to be Hare's greatest point of strength during his time of pain and suffering. She offers him hope and encouragement at every moment. She always fills him with the power he needs to keep fighting the virus. She plays the role of super-hero, and she forgets about herself for some time. She tries to make everything much easier for him to help him get rid of Covid-19. It is important to note that Nicole's selflessness makes her husband feel that he has a good friend and true partner who will never leave him alone in any of his life's challenges. Consequently, Hare appears grateful for her support and care during this unforgettable stage of his life that help him endure long, painful days. He has a great appreciation for her effort to be with him at this time of weakness. This experience, in a word, seems to support their lifelong emotions toward each other and enhance their communication abilities.

David Hare perceives his illness as a transformative experience. Although Covid-19 has departed his body, it has left him with a new personality that will never depart. Being on the verge of death for 16 days, the dramatist is happy and feels fortunate to be saved and granted a new chance of life. He feels grateful for being able to do simple things again without feeling pains. The pandemic has drastically altered his look of and attitudes towards life. Unbearable pains, random symptoms, and restrictive orders of social distance

and isolation have filled him with gratitude and thankfulness to the pre-pandemic days of health, work, and social and physical connection with people around. Every aspect of life he considered boring, meaningless, and exhausting or even overlooked turns to a blessing that he looks forward to again. For Hare, being safe and having family and friends around are the top causes of happiness, satisfaction, and relief that humans were unaware of before facing such a fatal disease though they are worth of years of thanking and gratitude to Allah. He also, as a Covid-19 survivor with a new personality, turns to have strong feelings of hope that one day the deadly virus will be defeated, threats of death or losing loved ones to death will diminish, life will turn normal, and the whole world will become safe: "The day will come when Covid-19 will be forgotten, just as Spanish flu is forgotten" (Hare 22). Thus, this unexpected globally imposed stop has caused us to realize that we have a lot in our lives to be thankful for. We are reminded of how our lives are special, blessed, and satisfying when we go through challenging and painful experiences (Empey, *ryersonian.ca.*). This is one of the important messages of *Beat the Devil*:

Perhaps this desire is in line with my new personality. I'm so glad to be alive that I wake every morning wanting to thank the universe for continuing to host me. In recovery I'm stuffed with joy. Unexpectedly, my character now allows me to say things like, 'This is a beautiful glass of water.' I am startled to come out of this experience a hippy (Hare 22).

Conclusion

In sum, *Beat the Devil: A Covid Monologue* (2020) is David Hare's urgent

response to the worldwide deadly pandemic of Covid-19 which is the 21st century's threat to the life and existence of the entire human race. The dramatist lively shares with readers/audience, through Ralph Fiennes, his experience as a Covid-19 patient and its consequent pains, feelings, and burdens. On one side, his monologue chiefly records the physical symptoms of Coronavirus infection that go crazily against one another and devour the human body's health and power and in millions of cases all over the world. Furthermore, it brings to the public's notice the virus' psychological impacts and indelible mental injuries that remain long after recovery and are not easy to overcome. On the other side, this little piece of drama is concerned with the British government handling of the pandemic, the officials' unjustified lying, and their inefficiency in dealing with the truths of the crisis. It, in other words, is an outspoken commentary from David Hare on his country's shameful mismanagement of the virus in its first wave in particular. Although this mismanagement is not surprising to British citizens, Hare insists to make it unforgettable via his play.

Beat the Devil can be considered the initial step on the way of literary responding to such a health crisis which kills off millions and till the moment has no clear-cut end. The breakout of Coronavirus is expected to fuel consecutive waves of literary works that portray the world and its people in face of such a viral pandemic. A host of other writers of different genres of literature will discuss in detail the pandemic, its realities, and consequences as they usually do with all the shaking and uncontrollable incidents throughout the history of humanity. These Covid-19-based works can successfully preserve every moment humans live during the pandemic time and prevent them from diminishing over years and centuries. So, future generations will be able to know everything about the distant Covid-19 pandemic that they will

have never lived through its distressful episodes.

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