

**Capturing the Essence of Life during Pandemics in
Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* and Amir Tag Elsir's
Ebola 76:**

A Comparative Study

إدراك جوهر الحياة في زمن الجوائح

دراسة مقارنة بين رواية "الرجل الأخير" للأديبة ماري شيلي
ورواية "إيبولا 76" للأديب أمير تاج السر

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**A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfilment of Requirement for the
Degree of Master of Arts in English Language and Literature**

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Authorization

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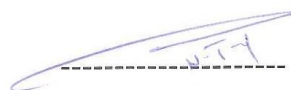
Thesis Committee Decision

This thesis “Capturing the Essence of Life during Pandemics in Mary Shelley’s *The Last Man* and Amir Tag Elsir’s *Ebola 76: A Comparative Study*” was defended and approved on 5/6/2021.

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Dedication

I would like to dedicate this modest effort to my parents and to my beloved husband Khalid and sons Anas & Omar; their continuous love, patience, support, and encouragement throughout this project made the journey a bearable and enjoyable one as well.

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Finally, I dedicate this research to all people who are still not able to capture the essence of their lives during coronavirus. I also dedicate it in memory of all the lost lives and suffering patients.

Table of contents

Subject	Page
Thesis Title	I
Authorization	II
Thesis Committee Decision	III
Acknowledgment	IV
Dedication	V
Table of Contents	VI
English Abstract	VIII
Arabic Abstract	X
Chapter One	
1.1 Introduction	1
1.2 A Brief Biography of Mary Shelley	4
1.3 A Brief Biography of Amir Tag Al-Sir	6
1.4 Statement of the problem	7
1.5 Objectives of the study	7
1.6 Questions of the study	8
1.7 Significance of the study	8
1.8 Limitations of the study	9
1.9 Definitions of terms	9-11
Chapter two	
2.1 Introduction	12
2.2 Review of theoretical literature	13
2.3 Empirical studies	23
Chapter three	
3.1 Methodology	29
3.2 Sample of study	29
3.3 Procedures of the study	30
Chapter Four	
4. Discussion & Analysis	31
4.1.A. <i>The Last Man</i> / Characters Analysis	31
4.1. B. <i>The Last Man</i> /Themes Analysis	38

4.2.A. <i>Ebola 76</i> / Characters Analysis	43
4.2. B. <i>Ebola 76</i> / Themes Analysis	50
4.3 Comparison between <i>The Last Man & Ebola 76</i>	53
Chapter Five	
5.1 Conclusion	60
5.2 Recommendations	69
References	71

**Capturing the Essence of Life during Pandemics in
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Abstract

This thesis introduces a comparative study between *The Last Man* by Mary Shelley (1826) and *Ebola 76* by Amir Tag Elsir (2012). It examines the similarities and differences between the two narratives with a view to finding out how the two mentioned novels are written by two different writers who also belong to different cultures, times and languages, but nonetheless, they have similarities in their perspectives on human beings' responses during harsh circumstances specifically epidemics and pandemics.

Adopting the methodologies of comparative literature and analytical approach, the study explores the two works depending on introducing a comparison based on analysing the main themes and characters in the two novels. The analysis focuses on two major themes in the narratives that discuss how human beings can capture the essence of life and make their lives meaningful during epidemics and pandemics. It also tries to illustrate the ability of humans to deploy their morality and ethics during such catastrophic times.

Although, there are differences between the two literary works, they share many similarities. This indicates that no matter who people are or where they come from or what they do in life, they desire to search for meaning in their life.

Shelley's and Elsir's narratives share thoughtful ideas about how people seek to feel that their lives are meaningful and significant.

Keywords: Comparative Literature, Ebola, Pandemics, Mary Shelley, Amir Tag Elsir.

إدراك جوهر الحياة في زمن الجوائح
دراسة مقارنة بين رواية "الرجل الأخير" للأديبة ماري شيلي
ورواية "إيبولا 76" للأديب أمير تاج السر
إعداد: سارة حمزة
إشراف الدكتورة نسرین يوسف
الملخص

تقدم هذه الرسالة دراسة مقارنة بين رواية "الرجل الأخير" للأديبة ماري شيلي ورواية "إيبولا 76" للأديب أمير تاج السر، حيث تبحث في أوجه التشابه والاختلاف بين العملين اللذين كتبنا من قبل كاتبين مختلفين من ناحية المنشأ والثقافة واللغة ويكتبان في زمنين مختلفين أيضا ومع هذا فإن هنالك أوجه تشابه في وجهة نظرهما في تصوير ردود افعال البشر في الاوقات الصعبة وبخاصة في اوقات الجوائح.

اعتمدت هذه الدراسة على مناهج واساليب الأدب المقارن والمنهج التحليلي لدراسة العملين الأدبيين وتقديم تحليل للأفكار الرئيسية والشخصيات الرئيسية في كلا الروايتين. يركز التحليل على مناقشة فكرتين رئيسيتين وهما كيفية قدرة البشر على ادراك جوهر الحياة وعيش حياة ذات معنى خلال زمن الجوائح بالاضافة الى مناقشة قدرة الانسان على الحفاظ على الأخلاق الحميدة خلال هذه النكبات.

على الرغم من وجود اختلافات بين العملين الأدبيين ، إلا أن هنالك الكثير من أوجه التشابه بينهما والتي تشير الى انه على الرغم من الاختلافات الكثيرة بين البشر ولكن في النهاية الجميع يرغب بالحصول على معنى حقيقي وعميق للحياة. يشترك العملين في تقديم فكرة عميقة عن سعي الانسان و أن يشعر بأن حياته لها قيمة ومغزى.

الكلمات المفتاحية: دراسة مقارنة، ايبولا، الجوائح، ماري شيلي، أمير تاج السير.

Chapter One

1.1 Introduction

Throughout history, men of religion, philosophers, politicians, artists, and scientists have been questioning what it means to be a human being and what the essence of existence is. Today they are questioning what it means to be a human living during a devastating pandemic like the coronavirus that is harvesting thousands of lives on a daily basis.

Humanity is currently living in catastrophic situations, witnessing the collapse of economic, social, and cultural achievements in front of an invisible, contagious virus. This virus has major effects on human's psychological and mental well-being from the implementation of lockdown and quarantine by governments to the realization that we have lost control over our lives. People nowadays are mesmerised in front of TV screens in order to stay up to date with the pandemic that is costing them their jobs, social lives and forcing them to start new habits such as wearing masks and gloves wherever they go.

Recently physicians and psychologists are discussing shocking reports of heightened feelings of anxiety and depression, with some fearful attitudes of post-lockdown anxiety and paranoia. Between hope for the situation to come to an end and the endless waiting for the new vaccine to save lives, again people are back to question the purpose of their existence and try to search for meaning in their lives.

Unsurprisingly, all eyes are directed to historical studies and literature in particular, seeking incitement and better understanding of how our ancestors have dealt with the trauma of epidemics and pandemics in the past, and how they survived while losing control over all aspects of life. Undoubtedly, literature of pandemics is still able to provide humanity with an intimate perspective for life taking into consideration that others were able to cope with difficult times and found meaning for their lives. Literary works present us with manifestation on how individuals lived throughout enormous changes among infected as well as their friends, families and neighbours. Reading literature equips humanity with the art of finding balance during pandemics. It teaches us how to live our lives day by day and to seek happiness in each moment.

Despite all of the advanced technologies and artificial intelligence, literature narrates to us the most remarkable story ever told which is the story of how humanity was able to face fear, disappointments, sadness, sudden change, the bitterness of reality and maintain their hope for a better future. Literature stands in front of pandemics and teaches humanity how to experience life in all its colours and potentials. It encourages us to celebrate our humanity and find meaning for being alive during traumatic times.

This study introduces a thematic comparative study between Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* (1826) and Amir Tag Elsir's *Ebola 76* (2012). It traces how the two writers who come from different times, write in different languages and belong to different cultures share similar attitudes towards multiple aspects of life. It sheds light on each writer's experiences in conveying the journeys of their protagonists lived during a pandemic disease. In this study, The researcher will shed light on how these literary works can take us in a journey beyond statistics of global deaths and degree of spread to show how the crisis has influenced the lives of those infected as well as their families and beloved ones. Those stories from the past can help us remember that those hard times shall pass and even in our darkest moments we must endeavour to see the light.

It is worth mentioning that Shelley's novel is recognised by literary critics as an apocalyptic novel. The main story involves some attempts to prevent an apocalypse event, dealing with the impact and consequences of the event itself. Shelley's *The Last Man* is not only an exploration of the apocalypse, but also an assessment of the viability of long-considered traditional Romantic themes. In this regard, Stafford (1994) points out in *The Last of the Race*, the period generated an influx of pieces named The Last Man:

In addition to the 1826 novel by Mary Shelley around which this essay is focused, the title is shared with "a poem by Thomas Campbell (1823), an unfinished drama by Thomas Lovell Beddoes (1823-5), a satirical ballad by Thomas Hood (1826), a painting

by John Martin (1826), and an anonymous prose fragment in Blackwood's Magazine (1826). (p.2)

Many authors, writers and critics showed great interest in apocalypse which demonstrates their fascination with the concept of finding an end to things. This fascination cannot be studied away from the historical context of the French Revolution that influenced Romantic writers, a point that will be clarified later on.

1.2 A brief biography of Mary Shelley

The English writer Mary Shelley was born in London in 1797. She was the daughter of the well-known philosopher and political writer William Goodwin and the famed feminist Mary Wollstonecraft who is the author of "The Vindication of the Rights of Women" (1792). Shelley was so much influenced by her mother's views about women liberty and right of education and became a strong feminist herself. However, critics believe that her novel *The Last Man* contradicts her feminist views.

Shelley was married to the famous English poet Percy Shelley who was one of her father's students, they travelled to Europe and were best friends with Lord Byron. In 1817, she published a travelogue about their journey to Europe entitled "History of a Six Week's Tour". In 1818 she made a debut to her soon-to-famous horror novel "Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus." (Biography.com, 2014)

In her book, *Mary Shelley, her life, her fiction, her monsters*, Mellor (1988) describes the sufferings and pains of Shelley while she wrote her novel *The Last Man*. She says that Shelley became a widow at the age of twenty-four and worked hard to support herself and her son and suffered from the disapproval and opposition of her husband's family. She died of brain cancer in London in 1851 but it was a century after her death when her novel *Mathilde* was finally released in the 1950s. *The Last Man*, which was published in 1826, was written during Shelley's bleakest period of life: after the deaths of three of her children, two by widespread infectious diseases that science has since contained. This incident followed the drowning of her husband in a boating accident.

In her article *Seasons in a Pandemic: Mary Shelley on What Makes Life Worth Living and Nature's Beauty as a Lifeline to Regaining Sanity* (2020), Popova comments:

From that fathomless pit of sorrow, on the pages of a novel about a pandemic that begins erasing the human species one by one until a sole survivor — Shelley's autobiographical protagonist — remains, she raised the vital question: Why live? By her answer, she raised herself from the pit to go on living, becoming the endling of her own artistic species.

It is unnegotiable that Shelley showed the ability to predict a futuristic event in *Frankenstein* that has been written by her a decade earlier. However, in *The Last Man*, she sets the events a century ahead of her time picturing a contagious and life-threatening virus that will hit in the last decade of the twenty-first century.

1.3 A Brief biography of Amir Tag Elsir

Taj Elsir was born in Northern Sudan in 1960 and trained as a gynaecologist. He has published more than a dozen books in Arabic, some of them translated into English, French and Italian, including novels, poetry and non-fiction. The International Prize for Arab Fiction revealed that Elsir's first novel *Karmakul* came out in 1988. His novel *The Grub Hunter* (2010) was shortlisted for the International Prize for Arabic Fiction in 2011 before being translated into English and Italian. His novel *366* (2013) was longlisted for the prize in 2014 and was among the winners of the 2015 Katara Prize for the Arabic Novel. *The Resort of the Enchantresses* (2015) was also longlisted for the 2017 Prize.

The Daily News Egypt commented that "Taj Elsir, a former poet who has written ten novels, is widely regarded as a giant among Arabic fiction writers." He lives and works as a medical doctor in Doha, Qatar. Rehab (2015) describes Elsir's novel *Ebola 76* as a black humour that portrays the outbreak of Ebola in 1970s Congo and Sudan. Humorous and tragic in turns, the narrative weaves its way from the graveyards of Kinshasa to the factories, brothels, and ex-pat communities of southern Sudan, as the disease selects its victims from amongst the novel's energetic odd fellows.

1.4 Statement of the problem

The present study seeks to examine how Shelley's and Elsir's characters behave during epidemics and pandemics and to explore their different journeys and reactions toward fear, fate, doubt and change. It intends to study the difficulties and the struggles the characters experience throughout the development of the plot. After a thorough research, it can be stated that the two novels have not been studied before in parallels before. Therefore, this study attempts to bridge this gap in literature and to highlight the role of literature in dealing with issues that relate to human beings' lives. The study is timely since the entire world is currently living difficult times and trying to cope with Covid-19 pandemic.

1.5 Objectives of the study

This thesis aims to:

1. Examine how the perceptions of the meaning of life during epidemics and pandemics are depicted in Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* and Amir Tag Elsir's *Ebola 76*.
2. Explore how the novelists represent the state of being a human while living in unordinary circumstances and dealing with unending changes.
3. Scrutinise how the two works portray the characters in terms of ethics and morality during pandemics.

1.6 Questions of the study

In order to achieve the mentioned objectives, this study attempts to answer the following questions:

1. How is the perception of the meaning of life during pandemics depicted in Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* and Amir Tag Elsir's *Ebola 76*?
2. How do the novelists represent the state of being a human while living in unordinary circumstances and dealing with unending changes?
3. How do the two works portray the characters in terms of ethics and morality during pandemics?

1.7 Significance of the study

The significance of the current study stems from the fact that it sheds light on two literary works that are written by two different prominent authors from different times, countries and consequently different cultural backgrounds. In addition, the study is timely as it approaches the role of literature in dealing with a highly significant issue namely the spread of pandemic, a dilemma the world is witnessing at the moment. Thus, the study can be useful in learning from past human experience as it provides parallel situations with the ongoing spread of the Corona Virus pandemic. The present study attempts to show the similarities and common characteristics of mankind during pandemics by studying the characters' life journey and their determination to identify themselves and to find meaning for their lives.

1.8 Limitations of the study

This research will be limited to study Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* and Amir Tag Elsir's *Ebola 76*. The findings cannot be generalized to all of the literary works of Shelley and Elsir.

1.9 Definitions of terms:

1. Comparative Literature:

Comparative Literature compares the similarities and differences between two narratives of two different authors, in which the authors used imagination and symbolism. Comparative Literature is an academic field dealing with the study of literature and cultural expression across linguistic, national, and disciplinary boundaries. It may also be performed on works of the same language if the works originate from different nations or cultures among which that language is spoken (Isma'el, 1998). In his essay "Redefining the Subject Matter and Methodology of Comparative Literature in an Age of Globalization", Al-Mousa (2013) discusses the importance of comparative literature in enabling human beings to grasp the experiences of people by portraying their differences and common values and cultural codes at the same time, he adds: "In these terms comparative literature may be geared towards highlighting cross-cultural human commonalities, and yet recognizing different peoples' diversities and unique mores and values which could be

viewed as distinct components of a universal civilization as it is reflected in world literature.”

2. Ebola

Ebola Virus Disease (EVD) is identified as a rare and fatal type of disease that may affect humans and nonhuman primates. It is located mainly in the Sub-Saharan of the African continent. (EVD) is an infectious disease that can be transmitted through direct contact with mucosal surface such as an infected animal or a sick or dead infected human with (EVD). The (WHO) dedicates a special website that tracks any updates concerning the Ebola virus, the site includes symptoms and diagnosis, the website reveals that the virus is reported to cause a severe fatal fever that appears after an incubation period ranging from 2 - 21 days. Fever is accompanied by severe nausea, diarrhea, shortness of breath, hypotension, bleeding and coma.

According to “Ebola Virus Disease” article published by the World Health Organisation (WHO) in (2021) Ebola was first identified during two major outbreaks in Central Africa in 1976 in Zaire and Sudan. The second outbreak was in West Africa between the years 2014-2016, it spread in Guinea within a few weeks and became a global epidemic within months. Scientists are still working on developing a vaccine for Ebola but none is licensed by the FDA to the current day. Symptoms are being treated according to their occurrence.

3. Pandemics

A pandemic is defined as an outbreak of a specific disease universally. It is originated from the Greek word (*pandemos*) **pan** means all and **demos** stands for people. The World Health Organisation (WHO) defines pandemics as an epidemic that has an infectious spread across a large region and affecting a substantial number of people.

Throughout human history, there have been a number of pandemics of diseases such as smallpox and tuberculosis. The most fatal pandemic in recorded history was the Black Death (also known as The Plague), which killed an estimated 75–200 million people in the 14th century. The term was not used yet but was for later pandemics including the 1918 influenza pandemic (Spanish flu). Current pandemics include COVID-19 (SARS-CoV-2) and HIV/AIDS. Gould 1966, p. 617.

The Intermountain Healthcare online magazine published an important article on April 2020 entitled ‘What’s the difference between a pandemic, an epidemic, endemic, and an outbreak?’. The article aims at setting essential definitions for the terms which are being used mistakenly even by specialists working in the health sector. The article explains:

AN EPIDEMIC is a disease that affects a large number of people within a community, population, or region.

A PANDEMIC is an epidemic that’s spread over multiple countries or continents.

ENDEMIC is something that belongs to a particular people or country.

AN OUTBREAK is a greater-than-anticipated increase in the number of endemic cases. It can also be a single case in a new area. If it’s not quickly controlled, an outbreak can become an epidemic. For example, when COVID-19 was limited to Wuhan, China, it was an epidemic. The geographical spread turned it into a pandemic. Endemics, on the other hand, are a constant presence in a specific location. Malaria is endemic to parts of Africa. Ice is endemic to Antarctica.

Chapter Two

2.1 Introduction:

This chapter covers the literature that has been written so far about Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* and Amir Tag Elsir's *Ebola 76*. The theoretical literature aims at exploring what theories already exist and have been investigated to describe the important themes dealt with by the writers. Furthermore, it addresses the literature related to their works. The empirical part investigates studies that have been published to analyse and critically reflect on the works of the two writers.

Finding the (Essence) of life is the main domain of the whole research therefore it is beneficial to look up the meaning of the word (Essence) in different resources. The word essence is originally rooted in the Latin word *esse* which means *be* which stands for 'meaning'. Cambridge University Dictionary defines the essence of something as its basic and most important characteristic which gives it its individual identity. Consequently, capturing the essence of life can be found in seeking meaning and purpose to maintain living which is different from one person to another. Many people claim that the essence of life is all about finding happiness, others believe that it is all about establishing a relationship with God.

Here comes the role of reading literary works about past pandemics that hit humanity in the past. Those works pave the way for humans to enrich their journey in experiencing life. Furthermore, they stand as a source for meaning-making by promoting self-reflection and deliberately paying attention to your own thoughts, emotions, decisions, and behaviours. Such type of fiction enables human beings to observe and analyse themselves in order to grow as a person and increases awareness of how we engage with ourselves and others, it impacts social cognition, and such abilities as empathy.

2.2 Theoretical studies:

Martela and Steger (2016, p. 531) conducted a review that aims at distinguishing between three main types of meaning in life which are: coherence, purpose, and significance. ‘Coherence refers to “a sense of comprehensibility and one’s life making sense.” Purpose means having “a sense of core goals, aims, and direction in life,” and significance refers to “a sense of life’s inherent value and having a life worth living”.’ They add that some people tend to lose sense of their life. For them, significance is dependent on having a definite purpose. Thus, if one has a purpose in life, they can accordingly feel the significance of it. However, other factors such as relationships with friends or family play an essential role in this regard.

In his book *Man's Search for Meaning* (1964), Frankel says:

Man's search for meaning is the primary motivation in his life and not a "secondary rationalization" of instinctual drives. This meaning is unique and specific in that it must and can be fulfilled by him alone; only then does it achieve a significance which will satisfy his own will to meaning. (106)

Frankel stresses the idea that the search for meaning in life refers to the concept that individuals are highly motivated and influenced to be able to recognise the nature of their personal existence and to feel its significance. Frankel elaborates his idea about finding meaning in life by emphasising that logotherapy can handle all of the problems that face people including losing will to have a meaningful life which is affected by life circumstances causing the case of 'Existential Frustration' as Frankel calls it.

Man's will to meaning can also be frustrated, in which case logotherapy speaks of "existential frustration." The term "existential" may be used in three ways: to refer to (1) existence itself, i.e., the specifically human mode of being; (2) the meaning of existence; and (3) the striving to find a concrete meaning in personal existence, that is to say, the will to meaning. (107)

He stresses the notion that finding meaning in life must be an ongoing process that has futuristic vision and freedom of choice in life decision; if man feels that his life is meaningless then he will fall in the trap of the existential frustration. Furthermore, Frankel focuses on the importance of perceiving a sufficient amount of meaning in life because finding an answer to that question would make any individual able to feel that his life is significant, comprehensible and purposeful.

Metz published his essay “The Meaning of Life” in 2013. In this essay, he discusses the controversiality of the question throughout history ‘Another uncontroversial element of the sense of “meaningfulness” is that it connotes a good that is conceptually distinct from happiness or rightness.’ He insists that individuals should ask themselves and search for an answer.

First, to ask whether someone's life is meaningful is not one and the same as asking whether her life is happy or pleasant. A life in an experience or virtual reality machine could conceivably be happy but very few take it to be a prima facie candidate for meaningfulness. Indeed, many would say that talk of “meaning” by definition excludes the possibility of it coming from time spent in an experience machine. Furthermore, one's life logically could become meaningful precisely by sacrificing one's happiness, e.g., by helping others at the expense of one's self-interest. (p.7)

Metz clarifies his theory by arguing that living a pleasant life does not necessarily mean that it is a happy one since happiness is an arbitrary meaning that differs from one person to another. He adds that happiness for some people means that they willingly have to sacrifice their own happiness for the sake of others. Metz continues his search to define “the essence of life”. He explains that ‘One answer is that a meaningful life is one that by definition has achieved choice-worthy purposes or involves satisfaction upon having done so.’ However, for such an analysis to ‘clearly demarcate meaningfulness from happiness, it would be useful to modify it to indicate which purposes are germane to the former.’ (119)

Nozick (1994) argues that seeking a meaning for life is faced by number of important limitations that can never be ignored including death, traces and

God's plans. Nozick wonders why many people think of death as a problem. He explains that since death is an infinite truth then it encourages many people to live a virtuous life and think of leaving a fingerprint before they die. He elaborates his idea by saying, 'But in the face of death as absolute fins to our future and boundary to our possibilities, we are under the imperative of utilizing our lifetimes to the utmost, not letting the singular opportunities-whose 'finite' sum constitutes the whole of life-pass by unused.' *Philosophy and The Meaning of Life* (71).

Park (2010) suggests that the sources for the essence of life remain stable for a temporary period of time and change according to the occurrence of special events or incidents such as wars or pandemics. Park differentiates between two important meanings for life; the global and situational meanings.

everyone has both a global meaning system (which includes beliefs, goals and subjective sense of meaning or purpose etc.) and a situational meaning. When differences occur between these two meanings, tension would appear. People would then reduce these differences by meaning-making in order to regain a meaning in life and adapt to these stressors. (P.4)

He elaborates that the global meaning can include beliefs, goals and subjective sense of purpose for life; whereas, the situational one appears according to the state that people are living and have big impact on people's future decisions when they are faced with traumatic situations.

It is remarkable that essential factors that define life for people such as family responsibilities, social responsibility, religious belief, minimalistic living, pleasure and wealth might be affected when getting through traumatizing situations. This finding is presented by scientists Changkai Chen, Yongjing Zhang, Anran Xu, Xing Chen and Jingru Li who conducted an interesting research entitled ‘Reconstruction of Meaning in Life: Meaning Made during the Pandemic of COVID-19’.

during the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020, people’s understanding of the source of life meaning has changed. First of all, people have shown to attention to different contents. They no longer pay attention to what was known to be secular values such as personal achievements and social status. Instead, showing desire towards a simple and harmonious lifestyle. Secondly, the amount of attention in which people pay to a certain factor has also changed. They show reduction in attention towards pleasure and religion, they want to contribute to the community and obtaining autonomy were focus on as an alternative.

They explain that the pandemic changed people’s perspective about worldly things such as personal achievements and social status in the community. They claim that people have become more temper toward living a harmonical and minimalistic lifestyle. They also stress that people’s amount of attention to certain details of life have also changed according to the situation of living. They contend that people reduce attention to pleasures and become contributors in their communities.

Probing the essence of life has become a necessity especially when living during pandemics. Dr. Zimmitti (2020) illustrates the harshness of the process: ‘The hard part is it takes time and effort to know yourself. We no longer can rely on activities outside of ourselves to give meaning to our life. While the

interruption of normal caused by the pandemic feels uncomfortable, there is another way to view it.’ She explains the impact of change resulting from pandemics on humans such circumstances forces people to reconsider the speedy pace of their lives. She invites people to take a deep breath and reevaluate their daily routines that hinders them from accepting the sudden change following the pandemic. She, in addition, invites people to focus on new vital activities in their lives rather than being indulged in meaningless habits that are useless in helping them to survive the new situation.

Zimmitti proceeds in her article to explain essential steps that would benefit people while accepting the sudden and shocking change during traumatic situations. She explains that exploring one’s inner values can be the first step towards self-discovery away from materialistic lifestyle. In this respect she says: “Inner values guide the life you want to live regardless of tangibles. “(214) Zimmitti recommends family members to sit with each other and to create a personalized list of values, letting the inner morals to lead their actions

Furthermore, scientist Trzebiński conducted a study last May (2020) entitled ‘Reaction to the COVID-19 Pandemic: The Influence of Meaning in Life, Life Satisfaction, and Assumptions on World Orderliness and Positivity’, In this study he argues that reaching the highest level of life satisfaction correlates with having lower levels of anxiety and stress. Furthermore, Trzebiński stresses the importance of positive feelings in serving as a buffer

against anxiety and non-productive ways of thinking in addition to decision making when facing any type of threats.

In their article “From Shattered Goals to Meaning in Life: Life Crafting in Times of the COVID-19 Pandemic” published in (2020), Jong, Ziegler and Schippers propose that life crafting intervention plays a significant role for individuals to rediscover the essence of life especially after being shattered in a grief-like situation. ‘We expect that a renewed sense of meaning can help people cope with this collective trauma and hopefully resolve their grief over the loss of normalcy.’ Gardner (1978) contends the fact that well-written literature will also enrich our language with words, concepts and visions of human existence. He describes art of being moral and argues that it can better life and rebuff darkness.

Diseases, Plagues and Pandemics in Literature

Alù (2020) explains that ‘Literature of the past on plagues and devastation—from Giovanni Boccaccio’s *The Decameron* (1353) and Daniel Defoe’s *A Journal of the Plague Year* (1722) to Albert Camus’s *The Plague* (1947) and Margaret Atwood’s *The Year of the Flood* (2009)—have been reviewed and re-examined in light of present situation. According to him, literary images of worried faces, exhausted bodies and uninhabited cities have been compared to those depicted in visual images pertaining to parallel past conditions

such as the 1918 influenza pandemic. Such comparisons are set with the objective of finding similar situations to our current one.

Holz (2020) discusses the importance of classic fiction in portraying people's feelings, pains and emotions during past plagues and diseases that affected humanity in the past. She contends that the theme of diseases is timeless she says, "Literature is neither a computer program nor an "oracle," and yet again and again "classics" suddenly seem up-to-date."

Negrea (2020) signals out the increasing number of writers who have been diagnosed with cancer, AIDS or chronic diseases have turned to memoir as a way of making sense of their life-threatening illnesses. She adds that 'illness narratives have drawn praise from medical educators who believe they have a therapeutic value for patients and a pedagogical benefit for students.'

Bolaki (2016) attempted to present a definition for the literature; she says: 'The varied works and intermedial projects examined in the five articles can all be broadly defined as "illness narratives". Bolaki argues that "illness narratives" are characterized by multiplicity and a refusal of categorizations.

Dugdale (2014) discusses that the theme of infectious disease is not a new affliction especially if infectious. He adds that disease fiction is among popular themes and plot devices in fiction such as *The Plague Year* (1722) by Daniel Defo and *The Masque of the Red Death* by Edgar Allan Poe in (1842).

Anz (2015) contends that literature plays a significant role in understanding diseases and pandemics in the past and in the future as well as medicine. He says, “The humanities in general, and literature, have been most sensitive to the fact that scientific description of disease does not include its subjective experience. Medicine is a social practice, assisted by science but in no way identical to it.” He explains that Literature and art can bring a symbolic space that can amazingly represent all notions about health and sickness in different cultural aspects.

Jurecic (2012) traces a history of the cultural emergence of illness narratives, from their absence during the influenza outbreak in the wake of World War I to their proliferation during the 1980s HIV/AIDS crisis. She draws attention to the problems they raise for criticism.

From the winter of 1918 until the spring of 1919, an influenza outbreak swept the globe, killing fifty to a hundred million people, as much as 5 percent of the world’s population. Despite the flu’s ferocity, for much of the twentieth century this pandemic nearly vanished from popular consciousness. Although more United States soldiers died from the flu than from combat during World War I, it has rarely been given a significant place in American histories of the war. (p.397)

Jurecic indicates the devastating results of the influenza outbreak ended the lives of 5% of world population. She continues to explain that there are some factors that contribute to the spread of illness memoirs. These factors include the growth of the publishing industry and people thrive to have better understanding for the diseases away from scientific and medical explanations. Illness memoirs add

meaning to the diseases and provides readers with full explanation of the patient journey.

Kottows (2007) emphasise that disease-subject narratives have influence on the quality of the patients lives and that they contribute to portraying the real life-story throughout the disease circumstances. They also encourage physicians to read texts about diseases in order to understand their patients' changing conditions and emotions.

Scott (2000) adds that studying the patients' stories from all angles is something inevitable. He adds that literature presents the opportunity to structure sympathy, to grow feelings of empathy, and to enhance awareness and lexical resources. Canguilhem (1977) illustrates that "Disease-subjects" narrates the story of disorder in someone's life. Therefore, it is essential to discover the most efficient techniques in order to discern how those subjects stand against crisis and how their lives are adjusted during dramatic situations. He divides the process into two parts: the first phase is a pure medical practice for the disease- subject and the second phase shows how the patients modify their preferences and possibilities according to the new circumstances.

2.3 Empirical studies

The Last Man (1826) by Mary Shelley depicts how the world teetered as a result of a lethal plague that decimated the world's population, resulting in a gradual emptying of the world of humans. The plague destructs human populations and simultaneously wears away their interconnected economic and political systems. The story is narrated exclusively by Lionel Verney who keeps pondering about who will read his story after he becomes the last remaining man.

Botting (2020) explains that Shelley pioneers her contemporary writers in introducing a novel that addresses the post-apocalyptic theme and the dare of writing under the condition of seclusion, which means that the reader and the listener are absent. As Shelley shows in her novel, pandemics can bring forth deep fears and anxieties. They are also able to remodify human behaviour in a widely recognized way. The British novelist used the pandemic to criticize the social structure and illustrates how pandemic breaks the class barriers while it leads to the ruin of civilization.

In her essay published in the New York Times, 'Mary Shelley Created 'Frankenstein, and Then a Pandemic'', Botting elaborates on the notion of the instinctive tendency of finding meaning in life in the novel. She describes the moment at which the protagonist Verney recognises that he is the only person to

survive the plague. His hope for having a future encouraged him to start a journey across the continents to search for other survivors.

In the final frame, Verney departs on an epic sea journey to discover them. For companions, he brings some signs of his humanity: his mutt, and the works of Homer and Shakespeare. Although Verney is not certain that he will find fellow humans, he discerns a deeper obligation to himself and the whole planet to act upon that hope. Interestingly,

Verney chooses to take his mutts and some literary works for Homer and Shakespeare. This choice shows Verney's wisdom and optimism to survive. Botting argues that Verney is obliged to maintain his humanity by acting upon his sincere sense of the interrelation of his fate with other forms of life — human or not.

Riva (2014) comments on Shelley's futuristic and wide scientific knowledge about plagues and the concept of immunity which was not that popular in her time;

In English-language literature, *The Last Man* (1826) by English novelist Mary Shelley (1797–1851) was one of the first apocalyptic novels, telling of a future world that had been ravaged by a plague; a few persons appear to be immune and avoid contact with others.

Mary Shelley's apocalypse novel which is set in futuristic Britain between the years 2070 and 2100, details humans' response and reaction towards health crisis. The novel shows Shelley's good knowledge about scientific and

medical terms such as “contagious” and “immunity” which were not that popular during her time.

In her essay *Pandemics from Homer to Stephen King: what we can learn from literary history*, Haith (2020) explains Shelley’s sanctification for friendship not only with humans but even with pets because Shelley’s last man is left with a dog. This reflects Shelley’s beliefs in the importance of companionship during catastrophic times and her criticism for the political situations in her time.

Menadue (2020) adds that Shelley is a pioneer in writing about the topic of pandemics and that *The Last Man* 1826 is one of the most important literary works that tackles science fiction issues in its time. He continues to urge that ‘The novel describes a far future (to Shelley) pandemic which eradicates all human life towards the end of the 21st Century and includes contemporary scientific discussion of vaccination, as well as sociological factors such as the conflict between religious and scientific representations of cause, effect, and cure.’

On the other hand, facing life during pandemics and finding essence and purpose in life can be also found in Amir Tag Elsir’s short novel *Ebola 76* which was translated from the Arabic by Chris Bredin and Emily Danby. The French translator, Roberge (2019) comments on the novel saying that it is about the spread of Ebola virus in South Africa written in a beguiling way. Roberge

discusses the uniqueness of Elsir's novel in terms of introducing a topic about an epidemic.

Furthermore, Roberge contends that during pandemics people think that they will come together and share their pains and sufferings but unfortunately the opposite happens. The virus is seen as an addition to the miseries that people live on daily basis. Roberge praises Elsir's portrayal of the reality that hits societies in addition to the contradictories that surface during pandemics. He comments on Elsir's ability to portray reality of the situation in a very genuine way. For him, the characters do not show the human traits that are expected to surface during crisis; it takes them a long time until they show sympathy towards and care for one another.

In her article published in the Guardian (2015), Housham describes (Ebola 76) as follows:

Infection is, instead, the order of the day, and the Ebola virus itself is anthropomorphised as a gleeful, wily baddie. Like a medieval danse macabre, Ebola leads a parade of wretches to the grave, but Tag Elsir's apparent disdain for his characters robs his narrative of empathy.

Housham thinks that readers will face contradictory feelings of empathy and apathy while reading the novel. She adds that those feelings are a natural response due to the horror presented in the novel's incidents in addition to the devastating number of deaths among the characters.

The most awkward character within Elsir's novel is Ebola itself, it has a striking dark and ominous presence that haunts the pages of the novel. Laughing with glee and gliding slyly from body to body, Ebola represents one of the evilest and unpredictable of villains. Abdelghany discusses the novel's deep bitter moments in an essay entitled *Review: Ebola '76* by Amir Tag-Elsir (2015), she says:

Short and quick-paced, like its eponymous hero—for Ebola is portrayed as a predator stalking its victims to hunt them down—the novella strikes just the right balance between descriptive and figurative detail, naturalism tempered with absurdity.

Yasen (2020) comments on Elsir's *Ebola*, she says that the writer succeeded in portraying the social miserliness in all of its forms, abysmal poverty in addition to social fragility that resulted from ignorance, backward tribal customs and politics of aging. Yasen adds that Elsir's craft in writing was significant when he personified the virus and let it speak to the protagonist Noah, who later on considered himself as a partner for Ebola in spreading the epidemic after his awakening and not being able to end his life: "Published for the first time in Arabic in 2012, *Ebola 76* was considered by critics as a prophecy for the return of the virus, which actually happened in 2014"

Hussney (2020) comments on Elsir's unique journey where we are introduced to the killer (Ebola) inside bodies starting from its outbreak in the Republic of Congo and passing by Sudan. She adds that this is literature that recreates reality in a different form. Al Hussney emphasises that if man wishes to understand life, then he should look in literature and that if man wishes to understand humankind then he needs to look in literature because they are two faces of one coin.

Al Hussney praises Elsir's magnificent handling of the storyline, complexity of plot and characters. She adds that the writer was able to present a typical layer of the society in a unique way that enables readers to figure out how people usually react during crisis. Feelings of fear, panic, doubt, patience are portrayed beside models of characters who showed off their worst personalities and behaved meanly during the pandemic.

Abdulrahman (2020) explains that Elsir is one of the most prominent and pioneering Arabic writers whose literary works are well recognised on international levels and translated into many languages. Abdulrahman indicates that *Ebola 76* which was published for the first time in the Arabic language in 2012 was about a virus that spread during the seventies of the past century. Interestingly enough, Elsir's novel continues to gain huge fame similar to Camus' *The Plague* especially in the author's portrayal of the pandemic's spreading details.

Chapter Three

Methodology and Procedures

Introduction

This section clarifies the methodology that the researcher uses to carry out this study. It consists of the method, sample of the study and procedures.

3.1 Methodology

This study depends on the analytical descriptive approach. It examines the significance of finding the essence of life during pandemics specifically the ones presented by two prominent writers who also come from different eras and cultural backgrounds. The study illustrates how the writers handled the concept of finding the essence of life in their novels as presented by their characters. Moreover, the study depends on using the comparative approach to make relevant and valid comparisons and contrasts between the two novels.

3.2 Sample of the study

The sample of the study consists of two selected novels; Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* (1826) and Amir Tag Elsir's *Ebola 76* (2012).

3.3 Procedures of the Study:

To achieve the requirements of this study, the researcher followed certain procedures to conduct the study:

1. Reading critical reviews about the novels.
2. Reading the biographies of Mary Shelley and Amir Tag Elsir.
3. Reading the original text of Amir Tag Elsir's 'Ebola 76' (2012) in Arabic and in English.
4. Reading the original text of Mary Shelley's 'The Last Man' (1826) intensively.
5. Collecting and read data that is related to literary reviews and previous studies about the two novels and the essence of life.
6. Comparing the two previously mentioned novels based on the concept of capturing the essence of life.
7. Discussing the findings.
8. Writing the conclusion
9. Documenting the references of the books, articles and web sources based on the APA style.

Chapter Four

Discussion and Analysis

This chapter attempts to answer the main questions of the study by illustrating how the perceptions of the essence of life during epidemics and pandemics are depicted in Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* and Amir Tag Elsir's *Ebola 76*. It discusses the main themes and examines the characters' behaviours in response to epidemics and pandemics throughout the two novels. By doing so, the chapter analysis literary depictions of the human nature when faced with existential threats and explores its impact on morality and ethical views.

4.1. *The Last Man* by Mary Shelley

A. Characters Analysis

Characters throughout *The Last Man* question life's ultimate meaning and supply variant answers depending on the circumstances they face throughout their lives journeys. Shelley introduces her lengthy novel in three volumes that can be summarised into three titles: "Love", "Plague", and "End of Humanity". The events are based on a circle of close friendship between the main characters. Critics agreed that they are inspired by Shelley's own life; the circle included her husband, the well-known English poet Percy Shelly and their friend Lord Byron, which added extra authenticity and strength to the plot of the novel because Shelly explores her own feelings and experiences of isolation and loss of beloved ones.

Popova (2020)

Martela and Steger (2016) concluded that the essence of life revolves around distinguishing between coherence, purpose, and significance. They add that humans need firstly to comprehend the world around them. Second, they need guidance for their actions and finally they need to find a value for their lives. All these elements can be seen in Shelley's protagonist and narrator of the novel, Lionel Verney. In volume one, Shelley introduces the readers to the character of Lionel as an orphaned son who grew up in the woods without family and who carries cruel and pessimistic views about life and hatred feelings toward the British nobility until he becomes friend with the Earl of Windsor, Adrian. Adrian plays significant role in taming Lionel and provides him with guidance through caring and loving actions that change Lionel's views about life tremendously. Lionel's friendship with Adrian refines his manners and he starts to show appreciation for nature, poetry, philosophy, and the beauty of life. Lionel says:

This was the first commencement of my friendship with Adrian, and I must commemorate this day as the most fortunate of my life. I now began to be a human. I was admitted within that sacred boundary which divides the intellectual and moral nature of man from that which characterises animals. My best feelings were called into play to give fitting responses to the generosity, wisdom, and amenity of my new friend.
(p.29)

As can be concluded from the quotation, Lionel starts to appreciate his role in life, finds purpose for his existence and feels that his experiences in life makes sense, which makes him devoted to protecting his country and family. He

becomes more determined to face the plague with all his strength and spends all efforts to stay alive even though he was the only man to survive the plague.

Lionel says: 'I form no expectation of alteration for the better; but the monotonous present is intolerable to me. Neither hope nor joy are my pilots-restless despair and fierce desire of change lead me on. I long to grapple with danger, to be excited with fear, to have some task, however slight or voluntary, for each day's fulfilment.'

(p.450)

Lionel's determination to save England and his family makes his life more meaningful and purposeful even though he gets infected by the plague from a dead man's body. He is able to fight off the infection and regain his consciousness to dedicate all his efforts to save the others.

On the other hand, Frankle's (1984) existential frustration can be seen in the character of Adrian, the Lord of Windsor. Adrian is portrayed as an imaginative person who enjoys reading philosophy and embraces republican ideologies. He shows no interest in power-grubbing against the will of his mother, a Greek Countess, and late Queen of England, who tried by all means to force her son to claim his right to the throne of England. Adrian showed disinterest in ruling England in the beginning of the novel claiming that he wants to devote his life for love and that his body is fragile for leadership. However, surprisingly, Adrian becomes the first one to lead England when it is hit by the plague, as if he was blocked from a meaningful goal in his life. Only at this moment, he finds motivation and passion to exist and contribute to serving his country to get

through the devastating plague. Shelley depicts the tremendous transformation in Adrian's body from a weak and pale one into a strong body that is full of life and energy. Finally, Adrian is able to find concrete meaning in his personal existence and starts striving to lead England to the safety shore. Lionel describes his visit to London to check on Adrian's health, he says:

I was struck by the improvement that appeared in the health of Adrian. He was no longer bent to the ground, like an over nursed flower of spring, that, shooting up beyond its strength... His eyes were bright, his countenance composed, an air of concentrated energy was diffused over his whole person, much unlike its former languor.' (p.241)

In volumes II and III, Adrian becomes fearless, courageous and crowns his life by doing goodness to mankind which corresponds to Park (2010) theory about the essence of life. Park claims that humans have situational and global meanings for life. Those goals remain stable until they are faced by stressful life events. The person who is able to find balance between them will consequently be able to make meaning of his life which is the best explanation for Adrian's character transformation. Lionel narrates how Adrian stood out to lead England when Ryland feared for his life and panicked:

How lovely is devotion! Here was a youth, royally sprung, bred in luxury, by nature averse to the usual struggles of a public life, and now, in time of danger, at a period when to live was utmost scope of the ambitious, he, the beloved and heroic Adrian, made, in sweet simplicity, an offer to sacrifice himself for the public good. The very

idea was generous and noble, but, beyond this, his unpretending manner, his entire want of the assumption of a virtue, rendered by his act ten times more touching. (p.242)

According to Metz (2013), living a meaningful life does not necessarily mean that a person is living a happy and pleasant life. It can be totally the opposite, by sacrificing one's happiness for the sake of beloved ones. He adds the essence of life for some people means that they have freedom to choose and to help others even at the expense of self's interest. Metz's theory is clearly seen in Shelley's female characters, Perdita, Idris and Clara. Perdita, Lionel's sister, sacrifices her love to live in isolation and distant areas for the sake of her husband Raymond, who becomes the ruler of England. Perdita dedicates her life to become the perfect wife for her husband and the perfect queen for the nation. Although, Perdita dies before the plague, she faces plenty of stressful situations in her life including the devastating war conditions. Lionel describes Perdita's devotion to her husband in sickness and health he says: 'Perdita rested on his restored society, on his love, his hopes and fame even as a Sybarite on a luxurious couch; every thought was transport, each emotion bathed as it were in a congenial and balmy element.' (p.170)

Lady Idris who is Adrian's sister and who later becomes wife of Lionel is against the fierce disapproval of her mother, lives the apocalypse of war and the plague when it reaches England. She opens the doors of Windsor castle for all people and provides refugees and patients with shelter, food, and medical care

until she herself gets infected and dies of the illness. Throughout her life, Idris is torn between her motherly feelings and her love to her country but never reveals her feelings to anyone. She dedicates her time for looking after the needs of everyone which leads her to self-satisfaction.

Maternal affection had not rendered Idris selfish, at the beginning of our calamity she had, with thoughtless enthusiasm devoted herself to the care of the sick and helpless..Each night I returned to the Castle, and found there repose and love awaiting me. (p.265)

Clara who is the daughter of Perdita and Lord Raymond living with her uncle Lionel following the death of her parents, accepts the loss of her parents as part of God's plan. Consequently, she decides to make her life meaningful by devoting her life for virtue and goodness. Clara decides to look after her cousins during the plague and supports her family on all levels. She also nurses the patients and tries to comfort them and ease their pains.

Clara, our lovely gentle Clara, was our stay, our solace, our delights. She made it her task to attend the sick, comfort the sorrowing, assist the aged, and partake the sports and awaken gaiety of young. She flitted through the rooms, like a good spirit, dispatched from the celestial kingdom, to illumine our dark hour with alien splendour. (p.266)

Nozick (1994) argues that living a meaningful life face number of limitations that include death. Therefore, many people do not see death as a problematic issue; they believe that the truth of death motivates humans to do virtuous things and focus on leaving a fingerprint that would be remembered by next generations. Nozick's theory is perfectly reflected in the character of Lord Raymond who is an ambitious and hot-blooded nobleman. He sees military victories as the ultimate goal for his existence. We see his insistence to be remembered as the leader who won all his war against the enemies and died while fighting the enemies till the last breath.

However, Lord Raymond falls in love and marries Perdita but his love to her is a secondary love as his love for adventures and military life was even more. Raymond confesses his regret of getting married because this decision hinders his endeavours to fulfil his goal. Thus, he decides to go back to military life again.

B. Themes Analysis

Shelley's apocalyptic story is a thorough portrayal for how humans respond during catastrophic circumstances. Throughout the three volumes, Shelley presents the variable reactions of the English people in particular and humans in general in order to show how unordinary situations reveal the hidden potentials of people. Shockingly, sometimes that potential is pure selfish and unfortunately destructive. Nevertheless, in other times, nobility and love are seen to unite people. Through this exploration of human motives, Shelley argues that when tragical events take place, people have the choice to either be controlled by their worst tendencies and desires or to go beyond them. In *The Last Man*, we see that while the whole world is thrown into extreme turbulence, the king of England and other characters including Raymond and his army are competing for political control and dominance. We see politicians taking advantage of the situation to achieve extra victories. Raymond's thrive for power is clearly manifested in his decision to conquer Turkey and to raise the Greek flag on Haji Sophia. Lionel narrates his conversation with Raymond, as follows:

Raymond's eyes were fixed on the city. "I have counted the hours of her life," said he; "one month, and she falls. Remain with me till then; wait till you see the cross on St. Sophia; and then return to your peaceful glades. (p.177)

It is noticeable that Shelley criticises the selfish nature and prejudiced mind-set of politicians and aristocrats that eventually destroyed the world alongside with the plague. However, the pandemic brings out the very best in others. It even

encourages people to cross the boundaries of prejudice and selfishness. One of the novel's shining examples of human kindness is Adrian's role in maintaining a good heart and spirit despite the intense situation. He spends all efforts to protect his country when he takes over as the ruler of England during the climax of the plague. Adrian is committed to his people; therefore, he leaves Windsor returning to London as protector against the fatal plague derived with his selfless personality. His presence is able to calm the citizen's terror and to bring survivors back from the depths of despair.

Another vital theme is how fear of pandemics can impact the morality and ethics of human beings. In this regard, Shelley succeeds in criticizing the social structure before and after the plague by narrating a story about pandemics. The plague story was able to bring forth deeply rooted fears and modify human behaviour in a great way. Shelley describes the initial denial of politicians in England as they believed that they were immune from the plague and that it will not reach England. They were bothered in chasing their political dreams instead of uniting the community and taking serious procedures to protect people from the brutal plague. Lionel describes the minor changes that the protector of England Ryland took to save his nation from the plague:

His measures were thwarted, and his schemes interrupted by this new state of things..

A sudden break in the routine of our lives. In vain our protector and his partisans sought to conceal this truth; in vain, day after day he appointed a period for the discussion of

the new laws concerning hereditary rank and privilege; in vain, he endeavoured to represent the evil as partial and temporary. (p.225)

In the previous quotation, it is clear that the current ruler of England is concerned with achieving his personal dreams of becoming an unforgettable hero who frees England from previous unfair king. Rather than looking after the needs of his nation and the high risk of the virus and urgent need to come up with an emergency plan to save his nation.

When the plague spreads, it becomes unstoppable because of its contagious nature, rumours about black sun spread too and they are fuelled by beliefs of supernatural powers whereas, others believe that the plague is God's punishment for the sinners in the community. This new level of panic causes chaos in the streets and began to tear apart the remains of the society. Plenty of fraudulent religious fanatic people exploit the situation and claim that they can lead the people into salvation. Unfortunately, many people believed them and listened to their lies.

A strange story was brought to us from the East..a black sun arose: an orb, the size of luminary, but dark..and eclipsed the bright parent of day..the men filled mosques; the women veiled hastened to the tombs and carried offerings to the dead thus to preserve the living..Christians sought their churches, (p.216)

The true evil character however in Shelley's novel is the imposter-prophet who tells lies to fulfil his own ambitions of power. He starts downplaying the plague and recruiting followers hoping that after the plague he will be remembered as a

great prophet and hero. In other parts of England, gangs of youth start to break into houses and kill their original residents or steal their money and food. They commit numerous disgraceful actions against dying people and dead bodies. They show no sympathy toward weak people and are driven by greed. However, Shelley depicts another type of people who respond in a different way during the plague dilemma. Ethics and morality of those people increase in a recognisable way; they open their doors for people in need and share compassionate feelings with patients deleting all class barriers and putting human's dignity as their priority. Such actions reflect the belief that they are equal and that they are all in this together. 'Deeds of heroism also occurred, whose very mention swells the heart and brings tears into the eyes. Such in human nature, that beauty and deformity are often closely linked.' (p.257)

Such characters show solidarity and justice for all population including those on the margins of society such as homeless people and the immigrants who ran away from all around Europe seeking England as sanctuary from the plague that wiped out their countries. Lionel describes the situation of equality between people during the plague:

We were equal now; magnificent dwellings, luxurious carpets, and beds of down, were afforded to all. Carriages and horses, gardens, pictures, statues and princely libraries, there were enough of these even to superfluity; and there was nothing to prevent each from assuming possession of his share. We were all equal now. (p.304)

The previous quotation shows how the pandemic deletes all barriers between people; no one is immune against it. Possessing the world's most expensive furniture or living in huge castles will not protect people from the lethal plague.

4.2. *Ebola 76* by Amir Taj Elsir

A. Characters Analysis

Epidemics force everyone to confront deep questions about human existence; questions that would correspond to what many great philosophers have already answered in different ways. However, a close analytical reading to *Ebola 76* leads readers to conclude that there is no single hero in Elsir's novel. All the characters introduced in the novel can be described as antiheroes. According to Roberge (2019) none of the characters have the traditional heroic traits of conventional fictional protagonists. The traditional type of heroes is the most commonly used in literature who are always courageous and eager to do the right thing. Readers also admire the suffering of classic heroes and their inner conflict while trying to find purpose for their lives.

Elsir's novel is an archetypal example of black humour where he introduces us to how Ebola virus spreads viciously, affecting the population of Kinshasa city who already live in deep poverty and lead miserable lives. The contagious virus is transmitted to Nzara city by a factory worker where the virus spreads like wildfire ending with horrible destruction.

The main character is Lewis Nawa who is a Sudanese factory worker. His disrespect for the institution of marriage and his multiple affairs makes him the first person to transfer the virus to his city in the south of Sudan. Throughout the novel, Nawa has never sought the meaning of his life or tried to learn lessons

from his illness even when he gets the virus and almost dies. He reveals to his wife that if he lives again, he will never be faithful to her. Such an attitude goes against thoughts suggested by Frankel (1964) through which he claims that man starts to recognise the meaning of his life when he is exposed to abnormal conditions; that is Ebola virus in the case of Nawa. The following quotation reflects Nawa's beliefs and shamelessness feelings:

Lewis had betrayed his loved ones, propelled to Kinshasa by his own lust, only to bring back a virus that would kill those around him. He had failed to heed his conscience when he had the chance, both after his deathbed awakening, and again during that second dawning of awareness. He lay sprawled on the scarlet sheets. (Ebola 76 p.117,118)

In this quotation Nawa prefers to lay down and do nothing in his home, unwilling to help people around him especially after becoming immune from the virus.

Furthermore, scientist Metz (2013) stresses that it is logical for individuals to make their lives meaningful precisely by sacrificing their own happiness which cannot be found in Elsir's characters. Shockingly, when Ebola starts harvesting the lives of the citizens, readers would expect that families, neighbours, friends will show solidarity to one another, and will come together to share their pains and sufferings. Unfortunately, this does not happen. Careless feelings surface among almost everyone till the end of the narrative. People of Nzara city are seen to ignore the pains and sufferings of patients who are carried to hospitals and

continue their daily chores because they are used to seeing miserable scenes on daily basis.

But this piteous scene in the street did not attract much attention, for it was not particularly uncommon. The people of Nzara and many other towns and cities in the south were accustomed to such tableaux painted by disease and framed by the harsh realities of poverty. (*Ebola 76*, p.41)

The quotation above reflects the miserable life that people of the city experience on daily basis; they become accustomed to that life to the degree that they do not sympathize with one another.

The findings of a recently published study “Reconstruction of Meaning in Life: Meaning made during the Pandemic of COVID 19” (2020) conducted by scientists Chen, Zhang, Xu, and Jingru Li suggest that when humans experience traumatic situations, such as the spread of Ebola disease in Elsir’s novel, they usually reduce their attention toward pleasures of life and become more willing to contribute to the well-being of their communities. Nevertheless, the situation in *Ebola 76* is totally the opposite. The characters become more egocentric and isolated from their community. James Riyyak character manifests how an isolated self-centred personality contributes to arousing the catastrophic situation. Riyyak decides to produce face masks to increase his profits without paying attention to the health condition of his workers who might be infected by the virus and eventually contribute to the spread of the virus in the city.

Zimmitti (2020) illustrates that experiencing abnormal and uncomfortable situations during pandemics lead humans to pay attention to the quick pace of their lives; it invites them to contemplate their habitual routines that consume them. Consequently, people start to figure out the essence of their existence. In the novel, Elsir's characters are so indulged in their daily routines to the extent that they resist to change them when the epidemic fatally breaks out into their city. The following quotation shows how merchants of the city refuse to admit the dangers of the virus and decide to pursue their business-as-usual thinking that if they do, they will betray the heritage of their ancestors. They reject to re-evaluate the risk and that survival must be their priority.

In the market, the Arab merchants refused to take any notice of the grim whispers hinting at a foreign epidemic that was both incurable and fatal. The Arabs had monopolised trade for decades, ever since the days when their shops were filled with slaves, woven bark shoes and dyed rooster feathers. Now, they had no intention of locking up the businesses their fathers had left them and abandoning their sole source of livelihood, of settling their accounts shredding their debt books and hurrying from the towns, as empty-handed as their ancestors had first arrived there. (Ebola 76, p.60)

Elsir's novel is a perfect genuine reflection for the contradictory and complexity in understanding human psychology during the infectious epidemic. He is able to portray the variable reactions of fear, panic, and doubt. Thus, his representations of human reaction add to complexities to what theories might suggest in this regard.

Endless scenes of tragedy now filled the streets: invalids carried aloft, carted by donkeys, or simply dragged over the rough ground. Schools and government offices had been abandoned, and all those with the means and the will were preparing to flee before the borders closed and the towns was cut off from the outside world. (Ebola 76, p.66)

The quotation above illustrates the tragic scene that monopolize Nzara and Kenshasa cities after the spread of Ebola virus. Thousands of people are fleeing to the borders and begging authorities to allow them to leave to other countries. They give no more attention to importance of education or anything else. The scene of death is becoming part of their normal lives.

What is remarkable about Elsir's depiction of the epidemic is his personification of the Ebola virus. Throughout the novel, Ebola is given humans qualities including behaviour and emotions. This literary device contributes to upgrading the reader's emotions of fear and increases their involvement in the shocking incidents of the novella. For example, Elsir describes the virus saying: "Ebola was all around, it hovered inches from him, anticipating its moment to pounce. The virus had already claimed the bodies of most of the people he encountered there." (Ebola 76 P.2)

"In the literature of pestilence, the greatest threat isn't the loss of human life but the loss of what makes us human." Lepore, *The New Yorker*, March.2020 Elsir's *Ebola 76* provokes the reader to question what really distinguishes humans from other creatures. In this regard, the author tries to indicate that morality and

ethics especially during pandemics are supposed to be defining features of a human-being, particularly during pandemics. The novel provides fictional stories that feature how the people who face the atrocities of the spread of the disease deal with the situation and respond to it. Therefore, the novel is, a chance to wonder about endurance, religious beliefs, and the different kinds of faith. The following quotation describes the horrible situation of the virus and how the city hospital is not able to provide patients with proper medical care, at the same time the authoritarians insist arrogantly that the situation is under control and show no mercy to the suffering of patients.

The last IV's were hooked into bleeding arms and every available scrap of cloth draped over a feverish brow. Now Novalgin had run out, this was the only way to lower temperatures. Gone were all semblances of care and tenderness. Gone were all attempts at a decent, dignified burials. Such things were luxurious in the time of Ebola. Following this, in a tone of utmost optimism, authorities announced that the situation was under control. (Ebola 76, p.67)

Ebola 76 portrays how people behave when the virus ravages the city. It presents a chaotic situation; all laws and order have been violated. Dead bodies of infected patients are piled disrespectfully in huge holes dug in the ground.

At that point, now that time had come for her daughter to be buried in the mass grave the authorities had assigned to Ebola's victims-people of all races and creeds slung in together, without time spared for them to be bathed or covered. (Ebola 76, p.77)

Hungry poor start to pillage markets. Murder, robbery and drunkenness are everywhere as if the virus has swallowed up their humanity. Elsir, narrates the devastating death story of Kanini, an abused girl and the one who transmitted the virus to Nawa, she is killed in a brutal way:

And so, it was that Kanini, the wayward country girl, became the latest name on the list of people to die needlessly for the simple reason that the world is home to peculiar folk who enjoy gratuitous slaughter. Perhaps if she survived until Ebola had taken her she wouldn't have been chopped into pieces and dumped in some bin. (Ebola 76, p.84)

Zimmitti (2020) explains that people's inner values and morals guide their decisions and actions after traumatic conditions, which does not apply to the people who live in Kanshasa and Nzara cities during Ebola outbreak. After recovering from the virus, we expect Nawa to search for his wife, to apologise to her or to try to rebuild their marriage relationship, Nevertheless, he does the opposite; he does not even bother to search for her.

Lewis felt no regret for having aired his dirty laundry during what he had mistakenly reckoned to be his deathbed awakening. In fact, he still half hoped to come across some wretched girl with whom he could pursue his infidelity, which now had become second nature to him. (Ebola 76,p.81)

The previous quotation depicts the non-ethical attitude of Nawa toward his wife. He remembers that he admitted earlier to his wife that he will remain unfaithful to her even if he recovers from the virus. He insists on pursuing his immoral actions even though he is the source of the spread of the virus. Despite his

sickness he is still unable to capture the essence of his existence and make his life purposeful.

B. Themes Analysis

Elsir's novel can be listed under the Post-colonial African literature for many reasons but mainly for portraying the situation of African countries that received political independence after being formerly subject to European colonial rule. It addresses the consequences of decolonization in South African countries and how the coloniser left their countries in harsh conditions after stealing their precious resources different from what they claimed about upgrading the infrastructure and building schools, colleges, factories and hospitals. In reality, original citizens were deprived from the minimal amount of their rights and only foreign expatriates enjoyed the resources of colonised countries. Elsir mentions how parents used to force their children to leave school and work at factories:

“The unemployed vied for vacancies, and fathers deprived their sons of few opportunities available for education.” (Ebola 76.p.35) Elsir points how the helicopter aids reached out for the foreigners and left people without any kind of help.

The aircrafts churning up the dust and drowning out all other sound had not come for the victims, their helpers, or anyone else on that patch of diseased and arid land. Instead, the helicopters landed with decorum in an expatriate's back garden, there on a so-called humanitarian mission to extricate all those far from their home country, the people who had never in any way been Ebola's victims. (Ebola 76, p.132)

It is shown in the novel that the massive spread of Ebola virus results from numerous reasons such as misinformation, corruption in the health system, superstitious beliefs. In addition, the novel presents colonisation as a main source of destruction and corruption that lead to the misfortune of the colonized. All these reasons contribute to arousing rejection toward representatives of past colonisers when they arrive and start instructing African people how to behave properly during epidemic. Hence, it can be argued that following the spread of Ebola, people commence to realize that colonisation is a source of destruction and that they have to exert all their efforts to get rid of it as it has been ruining their life. This moment can be seen as a moment of realization at which the people of Africa start to have a different perspective on their life under colonisation.

Furthermore, the outbreak of Ebola virus exposes some social and economic ills in Africa. When the Ebola virus spreads, deprived people living in far cities become more vulnerable to the disease because they are marginalised and isolated due to their social class. As a result of that, they have limited access to any reliable data about the virus. Consequently, they respond to the disease based on their cultural beliefs. In Elsir's novel, people refer to magicians to save them and bring the dead lives. Many people are convinced that the virus is the work of a resentful sorcerer; therefore, they seek salvation from wizened sorcerers.

Throughout *Ebola 76*, rumours and gossips play significant role in dramatizing the traumatic situation and add complexity to the lives of the characters. Nawa's wife, for example, falls as prey to rumours about the childhood of her husband and the origin of his family, which arouses feelings of hatred toward him and causes extra damage to their marriage relationship. Throughout the novel, it is remarkable how gossip and rumour can ruin a person's reputation and threaten cohesion of any community. In this regard, it can be argued that Ebola has played a significant role in forcing African to reconsider some aspects of their life and to approach some social and cultural ills they have in their community. Accordingly, though the characters do not show intentions of capturing the essence of their life, they are forced to rethink specific beliefs, thoughts and perceptions.

Those gossips contribute to turning James Riyyak -the owner of the textile factory- into a legend of power even though he was a rebellion chased by authorities. Riyyak exploits such gossips about him in spreading his dictatory authority on the workers in his factory and treats them like slaves. "Riyyak owned a giant cobra that could easily swallow an adult whole; another claimed he drank a cup of blood every night before bed." (*Ebola 76*, p.35)

4.3 Comparison between Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* and Amir Taj Elsir's *Ebola 76*

Despite the enormous differences between Mary Shelly and Amir Taj Elsir including cultural, regional, and religious backgrounds, they are successfully able to present fiction that present portrait of humans' response during catastrophic times like epidemics and pandemics.

Stunningly, both of Shelley and Elsir pioneered fiction writers of their times in introducing unprecedented topic about illness narratives. According to Botting (2020), Shelley's *The Last Man* was the first apocalyptic novel written in English language predicting that a plague will end human's existence and Elsir also is the first Arab and Sudanese writer to weave a story about how the virus resulted in "fearbola" phenomenon.

Both narratives portray the powerlessness of humankind when exposed to traumatic situations that risk their existence. Shelley expands the life-loss horrors by dramatizing the end of human race. Her protagonists are unable to face the plague and end it. Elsir's characters such as Riyyak attempt to produce only rage, revenge, and extra ruin to the situation in the city.

The Last Man corresponds to the importance of keeping strong domestic ties and the urgency for social responsibility while facing the plague. The protagonist Lionel desires for stable family and community life; he sees that when individuals help each other through the daily habits and during life-threatening

situations, they hold the community tight. On the other hand, Elsir's characters whom are described previously as antiheroes show no mercy to each other. They never put their needs aside for the sake of their communities; unfortunately, they contribute to spreading blame, rumours and self-interest among people who are already unhappy and live-in misery. Nevertheless, they find themselves forced to re-evaluate and reassess some social and cultural norms in their community. Moreover, as a result of the spread of the Ebola, they find themselves obliged to redefine colonialism; they realise that colonialism is a source of destruction that plights their life.

The two novels provide a political critique for what is going on in their countries. Shelley criticises many political and social ideologies in England during the nineteenth century. Reading between the lines would lead readers of Elsir's novel to see the work as a criticism of colonialism is being responsible for starting the whole misery and corruption in his country. Colonialism is referred to in the work in a covert way as the main reason for internal wars, economic corruption, limiting education opportunities among wealthy people and even collapse in health sector.

Both of Shelley and Elsir personify disease; yet, in different ways. Both depict disease as something that is more powerful than anything else. The virus is like a superior entity that can bring pain and terror to humankind. In the last volume, Shelley's plague, destroys everything: "The lesser population gradually

declined, and the famine and plague kept watch on the survivors, who, helpless and feeble, were ready to fall an easy prey into their hands.” (LM 207-208)

Shelley also refers to nature as a female entity as if she is trying to make a statement about its vital role as feminist power alongside with the masculine power. Her most powerful statement in this regard appears at the end of the novel when the entire human race is wiped out by nature in the form of the plague. On the other hand, Elsir personifies the virus from the early beginning of the narrative; Ebola is presented as an omniscient, devilish character that laughs at people’s miseries and decides their destinies.

Holz (2020) argues that art and classic literature play an outstanding role in portraying people’s pains and emotions, which is noticeable in Shelley and Elsir’s novels. Remarkably, it seems that the writers understood the importance of art and insisted on benefiting from its viability to express feelings of anxiety and helplessness. This helps in coping with events surrounding a crisis and its aftermath. Lionel finds himself at Drury Lane Theatre which is showing William Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*. Lionel expresses his relieved feelings to find the stage full of audience, who like him, try to escape the catastrophic situation and find comfort in Shakespeare’s masterpiece. “The play was Macbeth-the first actor of the age was there to exert his powers to drug with irreflection the auditors; such a medicine I yearned for, so I entered.” (TLM, p.269) Furthermore, when Lionel finds out that he is the sole survivor, he decides to start a long journey in order to

search for survivors; what is interesting is that he decides to take some books with him which are written by Shakespeare and Homer. Elsir also seems convinced with the notion that drama and music will not cure or solve the problems, yet he seems to believe in the power of art in coping with difficulties. The below quotation illustrates how Ruwadi-the blind old guitar player's insistence to hold his concert at the stadium and not to cancel it as the organisers suggested.

The people were in a state of mindless frenzy. This was not down to stupidity. The cause was fear. It was the very terror that presented a golden opportunity for the artists of the region to attract a large audience desperately in need of distraction, and a movement began to form that would soon earn the title Fight fear with Art (Ebola 76, p.107).

Despite the differences between Elsir and Shelley's characters, it is fascinating how they share the tendency to believe in superstition and ask for help from magicians during the spread of the pandemics. This attitude suggests that believing in superstitions is rooted in people's behaviour throughout the world, regardless of the people's historical, cultural, or racial backgrounds. Those beliefs appear to be interwoven with people's thoughts. "Many tribes had even mobilised their own cohorts of wizened sorcerers, equipping them with materials for fashioning amulets and ordering them to hunt out evil in whatever nook or cranny it might be lurking." (Ebola 76, p.9) One of the interesting characters in Shelley's *Last Man* is the astronomer Merrival, Shelley presents him as a thoughtful

scientist but people never believe his ideas. They mock his visions and millenarian expectations.

It is remarkable that Shelley and Elsir emphasise the notion that Ebola and the plague are not the main reason for the misery that threatens the lives of the characters. Nevertheless, it is depicted as a thriller that brings underlying desires to the surface. For instance, Shelley's novel, the happy circle that is introduced in the first volume is already threatened by Lord Rynold's imperialist campaign in Istanbul in addition to Adrian's nonbeneficial political ideas that didn't contribute to maintaining stability and wellness neither in Windsor nor in England as a whole. On the other hand, Elsir's novel is not a different case, Roberge (2018) depicts the situation successfully by saying that "The virus simply piles on, bringing unhappy lives to quicker ends. There's no camaraderie."

Surprisingly, women appear in Shelley and Elsir's works as subordinates with no significance neither before nor after the spread of the diseases. It seems that Shelley is convinced with some nineteenth-century conventional ideas about women role in society that is limited to being a wife and mother. Shelley and Elsir address new ways of understanding and highlighting the authority of the female voice in different societies and times, a voice that is unfortunately, usually undermined by male authority. Thus, the two authors show how pandemic and apocalyptic narratives are capable of reformulating humans' sense of authority. A good example of such a woman is her character Perdita who remains devoted

to Raymond. She also presents an idealistic image for the proper wife and daughter in the characters of Idris and Clara who have modest and self-sacrificing personalities and always show willingness to give up their personal needs and ambitions for the sake of their families. Women in Elsir's *Ebola 76* are also oppressed and have no freedom to choose the way they liked to live. They are not protected by the society and their role in the novel is limited to please and satisfy the desires and needs of the masculine characters. Tina for instance, reveals that she was abused on all levels until she married Nawa who also added to her miseries. She is also seen trying to please Nawa and her ultimate goal in life is to become a mother thinking that motherhood is going to solve her marriage problems. Women in Elsir's novel are deprived from education, they do not receive proper treatment from their husbands and fathers and therefore left in poor life condition that forced most of them to work in improper jobs like the characters of Elaine and Kanini. The twenty years old Darina also is described as the personal stick for the blind guitarist who does not treat her well and ignores her personal needs. One can argue that both Shelley and Elsir seem to be primarily concerned with showing the impact of epidemic and pandemics through male characters rather than female characters.

All in all, this chapter has provided an overview about how Shelley and Elsir's narratives correspond to the human response during time of epidemics and pandemics. It covers humans search for meaningful life and the controversial

issue of maintaining ethics and morality during such catastrophic times. The chapter also has offered a comparison between the two narratives by analysing important themes and characters within the perspective of humanity's universal search to make their lives purposeful. The next chapter includes the researcher's conclusions and recommendations.

Chapter five

5.1 Conclusion

**No man is an island entire of itself; every man
is a piece of the continent, a part of the main;
if a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe
is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as
well as any manner of thy friends or of thine
own were; any man's death diminishes me,
because I am involved in mankind.
And therefore never send to know for whom
the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.**

John Donne

Living in the midst of a worldwide pandemic has changed the lives of people beyond recognition. Billions of people are confronted with dramatic change on their lives on all levels not only that but also facing existential dangers and terrors. This thesis has tackled a number of crucial questions that must be asked during such traumatic times. It has depicted how humans can find meaning in their lives during pandemics and examined the extent to which they are able to preserve their ethics and morality. Answers were provided while depending on presenting a comparative study between Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* and Amir Tag Elsir's *Ebola 76*. The deployment of comparative literature approach enabled the researcher to scrutinize thematic and analytical scopes across two different cultures regardless of all other linguistic, geographical, or ethical differences

between the authors and their characters too. *The Last Man* and *Ebola 76* provoke the disturbing vision about how societies respond to threats during extreme circumstances which can teach us number of life lessons for the future.

The comparative study between the two novels reveals the close thematic connection between the novels and paves the way for readers to notice the different response of the characters during the traumatic situations which provides better understanding for human nature. Furthermore, the study compares between the two novels by focusing on how the writers were able to question the state of the individual mind and spirit, the characters' place in the society and how they react during the pandemic as part of a big community. The study also illustrates Shelley and Elsir skillful writing style that enables them to discuss crucial topics and evaluate human's morality and provide a critique for the political and social systems which are approximately similar to each other if we ignore the timing and regional elements between the two novels, again emphasizing to how extent human beings are similar to each other during traumatic circumstances.

In her article "Grounds of Comparison", Lacour (1995) quotes the popular statement for Rene Descartes to emphasise the methodology of comparison that facilitates knowledge among humans; "It is only by way of comparison that we know the truth precisely...All knowledge which is not obtained through the simple and pure intuition of an isolated thing is obtained by the comparison of

two or more things among themselves". This quotation expresses exactly the beauty of conducting comparative studies between literary works and different arts which gives extra understanding for essence of life. Such studies connect human beings and bring them together especially during traumatic times. It enables people to note and emphasize the similarity and differences between the literary works in a process that involves finding similar nature or qualities beneath any type of surface differences that separates humans.

In her apocalyptic narrative, Shelley's main character and narrator Lionel Verney becomes the last man on earth after the devastating plague harvested people's lives. The moment that Verney figures out that he is the only survivor he becomes sad and frustrated for a while, but this does not last for long time; his hopeful and optimistic attitudes toward life helps him to remain stable mentally and physically and to decide to start a journey all over the world's continents to search for survivors. Despite the tragical situation, Verney does not surrender to the painful circumstances and holds big noble hopes that he will find new companions and that the future generation will read his story. His optimistic views about the future in addition to recognising that his life must be purposeful enables Verney to survive the unbearable conditions throughout the novel. Verney is also driven by his beliefs about the importance of having good companionship in life and to have decent and compassionate relationships with his family and community, those inner values and beliefs are the reason behind

his charitable and heroic deeds toward his community. His actions during the catastrophic plague shows his moral views about life and the importance of generosity and having strong relationships to face the pandemic. We see Verney offering shelter for sick refugees and presenting them with all types of medicine and care.

On the other hand, Elsir's *Ebola 76* lacks the traits of a hero like Lionel Verney; the characters of the novel are presented as antiheroes. Significantly, when the virus outbreaks in Nzara and Kenshasa cities it appears as a bonus addition to the miseries that the characters already witness on daily basis. Nawa, who is the reason for transmitting the virus to his city is an egotistical person who is so indulged in fulfilling his desires and shows no compassionate feelings towards his wife or community. During such traumatic conditions resulted of the epidemic, people are expected to support and look after each other but unfortunately the characters of Elsir showed no mercy to each other. Characters such as Riyyak, the rich owner of fabrics factory, who became immune to the lethal virus dedicates his time in turning the condition into a lucrative situation by producing masks rather than clothes. Nawa too never shows any feelings of guilt for spreading the virus in his city. After waking up from his deathbed he is seen searching for his own pleasures and not offering help to anyone. He also never apologises from his wife Tina for his past mistakes and not spending any efforts to fix his marriage relationship.

It is important to emphasise that it is hard to judge people's response during catastrophic situations. Nevertheless, it is beneficial to study those behaviours and try to understand and accept the reason for such attitude. Each man has his own point of view about perceiving life and what might be considered right for us might be wrong for others. Still when we discuss general themes such as ethics and morals, we depend on what is generally accepted by social norms throughout history such as showing sympathy, empathy, compassion toward each other especially during harsh times such as epidemics and pandemics. We cannot force people to make their lives purposeful or coherent we also cannot criticise them for surrendering to the disease and not fighting back. What we can offer them is solidarity and to be role models for our sake at first place and for the rest of the world because at the end of the day "No man is an island".

Shelley and Elsir's literary depictions of plague and Ebola viruses respectively played significant role as changemakers. There are plenty of lessons that can be learnt from them; they invite modern readers to reflect on worldwide fear and to wonder how ordinary people dealt with the plague and survived.

Firstly, it is understood that viruses do not differentiate between people's status, color, ethnic group, or anything else that make people different from one another. We assume that it treats people equally and settles in their blood and bodies. Diseases do not consider the barriers that separate rich people from poor people; however, the characters of the two novels show that past pandemics

deepened and widened social divisions among communities. In Shelley's novel only noble and wealthy characters are able to stay immune against the disease because they are able to provide themselves with best healthcare opportunities and to stay at their castles; they do not have to put food on the table everyday like poor people. In Elsir's *Ebola*, only the rich and European foreigners have access to receive the immediate health care and were able to leave the country while hundreds of citizens wait hopelessly on the borders and are banned to leave the borders. This rings the alarm bells for all humankind who are currently living the time of coronavirus. We must start observing the social impact of the virus and how poverty and inequality can accelerate the rates of disease transmission and mortality for all of us.

Recently, many hideous names were called on the pandemic such as the (Chinese Virus), (Virus of the Snobs), (Urban Virus), and many other names that promote discrimination, and class war conflicts. It is essential that everyone has ethical responsibility while facing the global threat at least by not contributing to the spread of rumors or hiding truth from each other. This is the time to give extra appreciation to the undervalued people in the community who continue their countless heroic actions in serving the community without waiting for any rewards.

Secondly, human beings were not created to live alone or to isolate themselves from the others; good companionship is the main source of support that enables people survive pandemics. Being surrounded with good family ties and friends at home or at work provide you with plenty of emotional, biological and material resources that help people to survive and reproduce. It is true that after Nawa woke up from his bed death he became so aggressive but at the end we see him going home and roaming everywhere searching for his wife Tina. The reader can clearly notice his emotional collapse when he found out that she died of the virus. Furthermore, when Verny figures out that he is the sole survivor in England he decides to start a journey into the whole Earth continents to search for other survivors hoping that he will find someone and not to spend the rest of his life in solitary. Nowadays, quarantine, social distance, and lock down conditions add extra burdens on people to keep looking for new methods to fight the virus but at the same time to show solidarity with their communities and families. It is really horrible that even during these hard times, many people still do not recognize the value in people around them, the pandemic teaches us to honor the sacredness of life and appreciate the moments that we spend with each other.

During pandemics, humans lose control over their lives and when death feels close, human's fragility pushes them to become more vulnerable especially after hearing to the tragic stories from people who lost their beloved ones. Consequently, the instinct of self-preservation surfaces leading them to develop high level of anxious and defensive responses. Many studies and research confirm that people who believe that their lives are meaningful are the least affected by the challenges of the pandemics. The characters in Shelley and Elsir novels are hit by lethal pandemics. We see them going through different stages of grieving but the ones who had faster acceptance for the situation were able to regain meaning in their lives and make it purposeful despite the pain. Recognizing their role in life made Adrian, Idris, Verney, and Clara pay closer attention to their relationships and made them become positive contributors to their families and community. Finding the essence of their lives, even if it was an unconscious process for some of them, contributed to directing their pains and sadness into something valuable and increased their level of satisfaction even during the bleakest times of their lives.

It is important for all of us to find balance in our lives and spread positive vibes in our communities despite the hostility of the epidemics and pandemic. We can start by patronizing our priorities and start cherishing what is really important for us. Time has come to re-evaluate our roles in this life and get rid of any remains of selfishness or predatory competitiveness that unfortunately controls

many people. It is the time to shoulder responsibility as individuals and be part of the solution during this historical time.

It is worth mentioning that although Shelley is a Christian English novelist and Elsir is a Sudanese Muslim novelist, they both did not address the topic of religion directly in their novels; nonetheless, they were able to reveal that the most suffering characters are the ones who have lack of religious believes and faith. Shelley and Elsir tended to symbolically convey the message that religion and spiritual believes are essential in people's lives especially during traumatic times. When the Ebola Virus hit Kenshasa city and Nazara, none of them turn to ask for God's help or even mercy. It is shocking that even on their death beds, they are blaming others for their miseries or cursing. Even in Shelley's novel, churches are considered as locations to send sick people to die alone, no one is seen praying. They show indifference attitude and do not give any importance for the need to the spirituality force to help them overcome the crisis at least on mental level. While the coronavirus is still spreading massively in all societies, greater attention to religion and faith must be tackled. It can be concluded that religion is able to mirror the ruling cultural philosophies about people's daily lives and to interpret social and cultural norms as well. It can offer believers a new vision about their existence and the meaning of their lives. Being engaged with religious practices will give people extra control over the current situation and enable them to have hope as well as have sense of being secure and protected.

The current pandemic is paving the way for contemplating meaning in our existence and death as well.

5.2. Recommendations

After conducting this study, the researcher recommends that further scholarly research to be made on Amir Taj Elsir's novel *Ebola 76*. Although he is a pioneer Arabic write, one of the main challenges of the study was finding proper analytical research and sources about the novel in Arabic and in English.

Another recommendation to make is that more Arabic novels about pandemics and apocalyptic theme to be translated into many languages so people from all around the world can read about Arab's experience in handling epidemics and pandemics, just like issue similar to Camu's *The Plague* and Saramago's *Blindness* narratives.

Moreover, the researcher recommends conducting further literary comparative studies between Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* and another Arabic novel that deals with pandemics theme. In addition, it is recommended to conduct a comparative study between Amir Taj Elsir's *Ebola* and another literary narrative that discusses Ebola virus such as *The Hot Zone: A Terrifying True Story* by Richard Preston .

There is an urgent need to commence further studies on the importance of literature which discusses pandemics on people's lives and how it affects their ethics and beliefs.

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