

# Crafting Global Health Narratives: Pandemic Discourses and Power in Lawrence Wright's *The End of October*

OPEN ACCESS

Volume: 12

Special Issue: 1

Month: April

Year: 2025

E-ISSN: 2582-0397

P-ISSN: 2321-788X

Citation:  
Dhanalakshmi, S., and  
M. Kasirajan. "Crafting  
Global Health Narratives:  
Pandemic Discourses  
and Power in Lawrence  
Wright's *The End of  
October*." *Shanlax  
International Journal  
of Arts, Science and  
Humanities*, vol. 12,  
no. S1, 2025, pp. 9–13

DOI:  
[https://doi.org/10.34293/  
sijash.v12iS1-Apr.8925](https://doi.org/10.34293/sijash.v12iS1-Apr.8925)

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## Abstract

*People in the contemporary world deal with various pandemic outbreaks that profoundly affect our quality of life. Past pandemics such as COVID-19, Spanish flu, the plague etc have impacted many people's lives where the world was not prepared for tackling such diseases with the medicines influenced by the Westerners which further pushed them towards mortality. Moreover, the other regions and Central Asians date back to their traditional way of curing diseases and suppressing the influence of disastrous pandemics. This study explores how narratives surrounding pandemics shape public perception and health responses, often leading to the marginalization of indigenous practices. Lawrence Wright's novel "The End of October" provides a compelling framework to examine the pandemic experience, focusing on the origins and societal implications of a fictional virus. The depiction of the "Kongoli flu" outbreak in America highlights the complex political and cultural dynamics of quarantine measures and public response. Moreover, this analysis emphasizes the need for an inclusive approach to health narratives, advocating for a recognition of diverse medical practices that can enrich global health strategies. By integrating various cultural perspectives, this study fosters more effective and compassionate responses to future health crises.*

**Keywords:** Pandemics, Global Discourse, Quarantines, Containment and Cultural Practices.

## Introduction

Pandemics are infectious diseases that disseminate across nations, affecting individuals, large-scale populations, and both public and private sectors. In real-world circumstances, the pandemic literature can be related to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic issue where the whole nation faced a decrease in population and economic and political crises. This genre has started to shed light on modern healthcare systems, technological developments, improvements in scientific studies, and pandemic-related worldwide interconnection. It has its roots in historical narratives such as outbreaks of Bubonic plague, Cholera, Smallpox, and Spanish flu, etc. In a more recent

context, viruses like Ebola, and SARS managed to completely wipe off a substantial number of persons afflicted, although seeming less lethal than their earlier strains in terms of sheer number. The World Health Organization (WHO) recognized the new coronavirus called Covid-19, as a global outbreak within a month after it initially appeared in the Chinese region of Wuhan at the end of 2019. Within a couple of months, it was elevated into a global pandemic.

In 2020, Wright published a fiction novel *The End of October*, a medical thriller portraying a serious illness spread across the country, where the protagonist Dr. Henry Parsons, a pathologist forces himself to identify the mysterious killer virus and the solution to cure the virus. Dr. Parsons was a famous pathologist and microbiologist who travelled to an internment camp on behalf of the World Health Organisation where forty-seven people were recorded dead of acute hemorrhagic fever. The disease spread over and slashed the country, leading to quarantining the nation, whereas educational institutions, religious places, government, and private workplaces got shut down except the hospitals. The United States was shaken by the mysterious virus killing all people in the country, leading to an economic crisis and quarantining the nation to prevent the spreading of viruses. Through the novel, Wright created an insight into the prevention taken from spreading diseases and the tolerance of accepting accidental issues. Wright portrayed Dr. Henry Parsons as a one-man army, who investigates the spread of a killer virus without knowing the consequences which lead to the lives of people to death.

When it involves influencing policy decisions, societal views and allocation of resources during pandemics, global health narratives are very significant. The power relations across countries, organizations, and communities are frequently apparent in these narratives, emphasizing the disparities in opinions and reactions to medical emergencies. Through the portrayal of the Kongoli virus outbreak, the novel challenges the disparities associated with global health responses, the preeminence of Western biomedical concepts, and the demise of local knowledge. This analysis explores the real-world challenges, revealing the ways in which pandemics become conflict zones for opposing narratives and hegemonic authority.

### **Pandemics as Narratives: The Role of Discourses**

The concept of “Pandemic Discourse” defines the narrative and societal communication that precede the outbreak, its repercussions and reactions to a pandemic. It incorporates debates about politics, disparities in society, media representations, public health communication and cultural reflections. Establishing policies, public behaviour, and institutional trust may be profoundly affected by the way in which information is communicated and transmitted. The selected novel *The End of October* written by Lawrence Wright offers pandemic discourse as a central theme, which explores the outbreak of a deadly virus from the intermittent camp called “Kongoli flu”. The main protagonist of this novel Dr. Henry Parsons, an epidemiologist travels to Indonesia to identify the origin of the virus outbreak. To his surprise, the intermittent camp of HIV patients was occupied with the dreadful virus that left their lives in despair. Among the HIV patients, three doctors were lying blue hopelessly with the death note typed in the computer left unfinished which insisted on being aware of a seamless creature hiding over with conspiracy of killing lives of people worldwide, “A creature we cannot see because we don’t have the tools to peer into the cells, so she hides from us, laughing at us, and now killing us” (31) and the real controversy started when the driver Dr Henry, Bambang Idris encountered the virus outbreak and left to Mecca for the Hajj Pilgrimage. Because of the Pilgrimage travel the whole nation encountered the disastrous pandemic which resulted in quarantines, Mental health disorders, anxiety, stress and generational trauma etc. As the virus grabbed control, the narratives highlighted the necessity of scientific and biomedical opinions in understanding the situation. This led the protagonist and Government and international

organizations like the World Health Organization to prioritize vaccine development, quarantine approaches and Western-led medications. Therefore, the whole nation was quarantined and the role of mass media created awareness among the people and intimated the rules and policies for public health and wellbeing. Regarding the scientific community, Parsons and his lab mates were in search of the virus's origin and its impacts on people's bodies. They scrutinized the hospitals in Mecca and recorded the cases of virus-infected dead bodies. Not only tracing the spread of the virus, instead they dated back to the history of pandemics such as the Spanish Flu, and Ebola virus and its medications. Using this Illness Narrative, the origin of the virus, the death statistics, containment, military interventions and cultural practices can be explored in this study.

### **Narrative's Role: The Origin of the Virus and its Destinations**

Narratives play an important role in finding the origin of the virus, as well as in finding death statistics, containments, and navy interventions. Identifying Kongoli as the place of origin was of primary importance in the narrativisation process. The Kongoli camp was gradually forgotten by Parsons, eliminating the origin of the virus and leading to a worldwide disastrous pandemic by Hajj pilgrimage (Rossolatos, 2020, p.5). After the Kongoli camp in Indonesia, the virus erupted in Mecca during the Hajj pilgrimage by Bambang Idris. Mecca was chosen as the new capital by the virus and its other new destination was unknown because the pilgrims travelled back and forth to their own countries before implementing the quarantine by all over the neighbouring countries (Rossolatos, 2020, p.6). "...perhaps, if we have time, but the only way we can gain even a bit of time is to prevent the pilgrims from returning to their homes and spreading the virus everywhere at once. Billions could die" (135).

Storytelling, serving as a nuanced and adaptable metaphorical process, relies heavily on interpretation, is frequently analyzed, and often sparks intense debate. highly disputable. (Alexander, 12). The eruption of the Virus from the Kongoli camp created a panic attack among the government, and scientists, where Dr Henry Parsons as a protagonist and epidemiologist volunteered himself to analyse the root cause of the virus and identify the vaccine created a spark that who would be tested with the vaccine between the people and the governmental organizations.

Meantime, you should consider making a priority list saying who gets the antibody serum and in what order. It's going to be really scarce. Members of the government? First responders? Children? Military? Pregnant women? National Guard? A lottery? These are choices you'll have to make." (172).

### **Narrative Role: The Virus Death Statistics**

Mass media played a crucial role in recording the death statistics caused by the outbreak of the Kongoli flu. An infographic displays the 'death statistics' that were widely distributed across the global news as a component of the multimedia narrative regarding the pandemic. During the hard times of disorder and extreme levels of insecurity, the media played a key role in ritualizing public death in America, where people died, the neighbours became strangers and the streets and houses were haunted by the death polls (Rossolatos, 2020, p.6). While Dr Henry was in Mecca, his wife Jill and her mother died in their native, and Jill's mother was buried properly by her, and the same happened with Jill's body buried by her children Teddy and Helen. After Jill's death, the house became haunted to the children, and Helen experienced sexual harassment by robbery men, she was saved by her brother Teddy, who shot down the robbery men. Both the children escaped from the haunted house and reached their aunt Maggie's house. Meanwhile, Dr Henry was Investigating and recording the death statistics of the people around Mecca and other parts of the country. Trying to identify the medicine, he failed and felt shameful before the virus spread. Mass Media helped the government by informing the public health policies and quarantine measures to the people, which ensured the tightened level of security, quarantine and preventive measures. Most of the lives of people were killed by the seamless creature "Kongoli Flu".

### Containment and Interventions

The Virus's reconfiguration of geographical boundaries prompted the establishment of specified areas for conservation within the desert. Two places were confined in this novel: the intermittent camp in Kongoli and Mecca City (Rossolatos, 2020, p.7) where the pilgrims were quarantined because their departure to other countries could spread the virus across the globe. Prince Majid, a lieutenant and friend of Dr Henry requests the preventive measures steps from the King of Mecca city. Dr Henry suggested a way of quarantining all the pilgrims in the city and providing them with food and daily needs. This was a crucial task for the police and military to control thousands of pilgrims and they had to shoot down the people who tried to escape from the quarantine. This task terrified both the military and pilgrims. After a long day of quarantine, a young man broke out to escape the deserted place where space plays a crucial role in spreading the virus (Gayathri, 2022, p.2). Giving the space for the virus was the reason for the evolution of new cases of variants. Thus, COVID-19 also enjoyed its space by using the fear among the people and the lack of preventive measures implemented by the government, hiding the spread of the virus resulting in a great pandemic after the Spanish Flu era. The Kongoli flu took its space through Bambang Ibdri and travelled to Mecca along with him resulting in the great pandemic all over the nation. Thus, the containment strategy failed at the starting point of restricting him from travel and also made a careless mistake by not washing his hands properly after visiting the contaminated virus HIV intermittent camp of the Kongoli. "No. I'm fine. But listen to me. Don't touch anything. Wash yourself, you understand? It will take some time for me to do my work. Wait for me outside." He asked again, "Do you understand? Don't touch anything!" (29). Regardless of Dr Henry's warnings, Bambang failed before the virus game and died in the hajj pilgrimage causing numerous deaths in the city of Mecca.

### Analysis Structure of Narrative Space

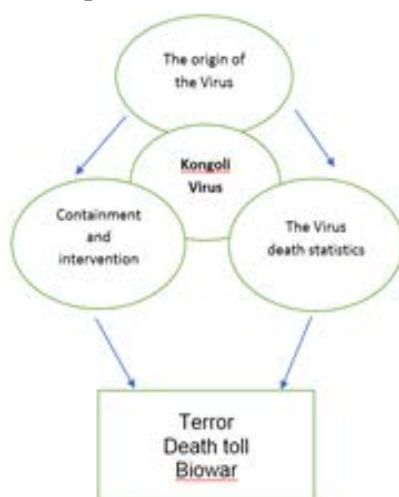


Figure 1 Kongoli Virus's Narrative Space

### Conclusion

The study of pandemic narratives, particularly Lawrence Wright's *The End of October*, illustrates the intricacies between public perception, health responses and sociopolitical factors that influence global health campaigns. The Role of Narratives has been explained through three factors: The origin of the virus, the virus death statistics, containment and interventions. This emphasizes

the important role of acknowledging the different medical techniques and cultural perspectives as essential components in resolving the health and pandemic crisis. Finally, adopting a diverse narrative about pandemics deepens understanding and fosters a shared responsibility to tackle disparities in health care and empower marginalised voices.

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