

Covid-19 as Muse: An Examination of the Possibility of a Paradigm Shift in Contemporary Literature

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Abstract

Shakespeare's eponymous Hamlet claims the function of theatre, and hence of literature by due extension, is "to hold a mirror to nature". Every major historical or natural phenomenon in the past has led to a paradigm shift in the literature of the age. New genres have emerged, and old forms have been dismissed, if only for a stipulated span of time. For instance, after the first world war, soldier-poets such as Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen propounded the new genre of war poetry; the Indo-Pak split in 1948 led to a treasure trove of fiction by writers such as Sadat Hasan Manto and Khushwant Singh from India and Bapsi Sidhwa from Pakistan and is now referred to as Partition Literature; holocaust literature is another new genre that emerged after the rise of Nazism in the times of the second world war and writers and poets such as Markus Zusak and Paul Celan (respectively) have contributed to the said arena. The literature of an age, it could be asserted through an inductive study, models itself upon contemporary natural, cultural, historical and political upheavals in order to refashion itself to reflect the ordeals of the hour. The paper attempts to examine the relationship between the Covid-19 pandemic and the possibility of the advent of a genre of trauma literature based on the

virus outbreak. The paper argues that the corona virus pandemic is not unlike a war, a political crisis, or an (un)ethical racial extermination and hence holds the potential to induce widespread and profound trauma that could produce new trends in literature across all languages in the world. The emergence of trauma literature in the wake of the pandemic, the paper argues, could be a predictable trend and a coping mechanism to deal with the emotional devastation that continues to abound globally today.

Keywords: Trauma literature, literary trends, comparative study, pandemic

Introduction

The paper attempts to study the category of trauma literature, its significance and origin in the past and the possibility of a new genre of literature emerging in the wake of the Covid-19 Pandemic. The pandemic, when viewed as a historical tragedy, brims over with the possibility to bring forth a new genre of literature that deals with the virus and narratives surrounding the same. Just as there is a category of literature written upon

the atrocities of the world wars, the colonizing mission of the British and so on, a category of trauma literature on the pandemic too is a possibility. The following aspects are key to the paper.

Hypotheses

The emergence of a new genre of trauma literature, owing to the mental and circumstantial atrocities of the pandemic, could be predicted based on earlier trends in literature wherein new genres have risen after significant historical moments such as World wars, plagues, political upheavals etc.

Research Problems

The paper aims to predict trends in the literary scene in the future. Based upon historical literary trends in the category of trauma literature, the paper attempts to infer the possibilities in the literature of the future. As of now, much research hasn't been conducted on the link between the coronavirus and its impact on literature and culture. Scholarship on the pandemic and its effect in literature is majorly lacking.

Research Gap

Covid-19 has been a recent, contemporary phenomenon (November 2019 witnessed its emergence in the country of China). The need of the hour has been to focus upon issues of health and not academia or scholarship regarding the virus, no matter how pertinent. Not much has been published upon the issue with regards to culture, history, philosophy or literature. From the little that has been studied, the latest research tends to focus upon poetry

and prose in the lockdown(Howe, Chauhan, Soderberg, & Buckley, 2020; Flood, 2020). One does not find substantial or quality research on literature during the pandemic and speculations on the same *after* the pandemic. Research on the pandemic, so far, has primarily been of medicinal nature. There is a lack of serious literary and scholarly engagement with the issue, although there is ample journalistic and social media writing on the same. Thus, there exists a dearth of research on the literary angle of the pandemic.

Methodology

The paper attempts to address and examine literary trends in the past through the reading of relevant documents. Scholarly writing on the issue shall be read and critiqued in the paper. The methodology of the paper would be to study personal accounts on the internet and in daily conversation, published writings in the form of newspaper articles, research papers etc., that deal with the narrative of Covid-19. Based on the trends uncovered so far and the examination of the nature of the pandemic as historically momentous, new trends in the emergence of trauma literature shall be predicted.

Objectives

The objectives of the study can be briefly listed as the following:

- To collect and consume writing of the genre of trauma literature
- To examine the systemic formulation of trends concerning trauma literature

- To study the idea of the covid-19 pandemic as a potential stimulant for the formation of a new literary genre
- To predict future trends in literature dealing with the virus and its impact on humankind

A Brief Delineation of Relevant Trends in Trauma Literature

There have been tumultuous times in human history. These tragic fallings have been meticulously documented by historians all over the globe. These documentations, first-hand experiences, or personal retellings of those a part of the experience have inspired the formulation of literary renderings of those very events. The literature on the same has been widely written and heartily consumed.

The rise of fascism and the Second World War was a traumatic event, especially in Germany. With the emergence of Nazism and Hitler's Tyranny, a considerable section of the Jewish population was sent to concentration camps wherein rituals of systemic torture took place. This horrible mass genocide led to immense upheaval; letters were exchanged amongst Jews, journals maintained (The diary of Anne Frank (1947) is the most poignant example here), correspondences saved etc. Anne Frank, in her diary, writes of the war and of life-

"I see the world gradually being turned into a wilderness, I hear the ever approaching thunder, which will destroy us too, I can feel the sufferings of millions and yet, if I look up into the heavens, I think that

it will all come right, that this cruelty too will end, and that peace and tranquillity will return again."

The lines above help console the reader caught in conflict (personal or collective); one brand of trauma literature deals with consoling the desolate, like Anne Frank's diary does. On the contrary, a section of writers choose to depict gruesome, hopeless and shocking narratives of trauma in order to help the reader taste the slice of death and torture that the text focuses on. Writers such as these belong to schools of naturalism and realism.

Poets such as Paul Celan described the atrocities of the war in works such as *Death Fugue* (Buck & Gotz, 1999) wherein he describes a concentration camp, a tyrant master, and the death of his parents. Markus Zusak (2005) penned a hugely popular text *The Book Thief* set amidst the backdrop of Nazi Germany. The protagonist, a foster child, lives through a series of Nazi bombings, forging relationships, educating herself, hosting a potentially dangerous Jew in their basement, and watching all her family perish by the end of the book. Eugene Ionesco (1959) wrote his absurd play *Rhinoceros* as an act of resistance against the Nazi movement. The humans on stage would find themselves suddenly metamorphosed into Rhinos, a symbol to depict one's attachment to the Fascist party of the time then. A treasure trove of literature that dealt with the retelling of the Second World War, the torture of the Jews, personal narratives of loss, strength, goodwill and love began to be written.

Anti-war literature, anti-semitic (and anti-anti-semitic) tales to do with the event emerged and continue to be written even today. Thus, emerged the category of *Holocaust Literature*.

Partition Literature is a category of literary works that emerged after the Indo-Pak split in 1948. The event of the Partition was one replete with tragic happenings of love, loss, murder, rape, abduction, theft, fraud etc. As scores of people moved from one country to another (the privileged boarded trains, buses or flights while the majority of the population set off on foot in long processions called *kaafirs*, at times as long as 20km; scholar Urvashi Butalia (1998) has extensively worked in the domain of Partition and explains the unworking of the grave tragedy in her text *The Other Side of Silence*. New narratives emerged; letters were exchanged between relatives and friends across the borders; newspaper reports carried conflicting claims, cases were filed in police stations and local panchayats and so on. Hence, the event was documented in history through the said documents, was recounted to friends and family members, and is constantly re-examined today. All the above lead to the formulation of literature specifically on the event of the Partition. Writers began to weave narratives based on first-hand experiences and historical documentation. Khushwant Singh (1956), hailing Pakistan originally but an Indian citizen by law, wrote his acclaimed novel *Train to Pakistan*. The text deals with a town named Mano Majra on the border of India and Pakistan and how amidst the

struggle of the days and the religious fanaticism evoked by ideology, compatriots turn tyrants and murderers. Bapsi Sidhwa (1988), a Pakistani author, penned her critical novel *Ice Candy Man* that focuses upon the Partition through the eyes of a Parsi child caught amidst the Hindu-Muslim rife. Sadat Hasan Manto (2014), an Urdu writer who shifted from Mumbai to Lahore in the wake of the Partition too, wrote short stories such as *Toba Tek Singh* and *Khol Doon* the issue. Manto, not one to mince words, explains why his stories appear to be unbearable to those too frail of heart or to the faction of jingoists-

“ज़मानेकेजिसदौरसेहमगुज़ररहेहैं, अगरआपउससेवाकिफ़नहीहैंतोमेरेअफसानेपढ़ियेऔर अगरआपइनअफसानोंकोबरदाश्तनहींकरसकतेतोइस कामतलबहैकिज़मानानाकाबिले-बरदाश्तहै।”

These lines in Urdu, (approximately) wish to direct the reader to the same idea that Shakespeare's Hamlet does-that literature is a mirror to reality. Manto responds to the average jingoist who claims that his short stories are violent, obscene and tasteless. He believes that if one finds his brand of writing to be intolerable, then it is not his stories but the society that happens to be intolerable (at the moment, at least). Several other writers and poets view the Partition as a muse; the event continues to be of great interest still.

Various other trends have emerged in trauma literature. For instance, categories such as Civil war literature in America, the Freedom struggle literature in India, Famine literature in Ireland, the literature on

Princess Diana's death in the UK, the literature on the black movement and slavery etc., have been some prominent themes in trauma literature over the past several decades.

Reading and writing serve as tools of catharsis. Literature hence becomes a coping mechanism. Every historical tragedy or trial has led to the creation of relevant literature as can be deduced from the above trends.

Covid-19 as an event of Historical Momentum worth Literary Rendition

Covid-19 is a *pandemic*. The term "Pandemic", as is defined by the World Health Organization¹, is an ailment that has to do with the entire population of the world, it is not indigenous to one country or region 504, 192,096 cases of the virus in the world exist as of April 17, 2022 (Worldometers, 2022). Clearly, a substantial part of the population grapples with the trouble that the corona virus proves to be. Every individual on earth today has either been affected by the virus or knows several people who have been affected by the virus and have either recovered or passed away. It is a phenomenon of world-scale, and there is not a logical agreement to refute the said claim. Thus, Covid-19 can be equated to any significant historical event of the past, and as a result of its tragical poignance, it is worth literary rendition.

¹<https://www.who.int/>

Covid-19 and the Possibility of the Rise of a New Genre of Literature

Drawing from the major narratives already in existence, future writing could revolve around stories of personal bravery in the face of the virus, shattering tales of losing loved ones, living in the wake of the virus and its repercussions on one's social, professional and personal life, the virus as a backdrop to a tale set in the time period, i.e., historical fiction and so on. The literature surrounding the polar disparity amongst various classes of society (such as the plight of the migrant labourers in contrast to that of well-to-do individuals), suddenly made visible owing to the pandemic, could be a prevalent theme. Science fiction surrounding the virus, its medical implications, its affectation etc., could be another major trend. Ethical and moral approaches to the pandemic could be focused upon; for instance, the idea that the virus is only a slow, elusive march towards the day of judgment, humans deserve to be punished for their sinful lives, or the pandemic is but a trial one is subjected to and would eventually perish and the sufferers rewarded for their pain and grit.

As delineated in Section 2, historically tragic events lead to the production of niche literature. In a similar fashion, the Covid-19 pandemic, when accorded the status of a historically momentous event, could lead to the rise of a specific category of literature. A trend could be predicted based on past literary history, and it could be argued that literature surrounding the narrative of Covid-19 (fictional, semi-autobiographical

tales of love, loss, suffering, disparity, political conspiracies, and science-fiction surrounding the virus and so on) would emerge. Literature about the era would serve as a means of cathartic expression, both for the figure of the writer as well as the reader.

Such writing could then be clubbed under a generic label that has to do with the pandemic. Much like one broadly refers to a different set of works(poetry, short stories, novels etc.) having to do with a certain event *by* the name of the said event, Covid-19 too could serve as an over-arching category to classify literary works written around it. For instance, like the now-familiar category of "Partition Literature" deals with all the fictional narratives of the Indo-Pak split of 1948, a future category of Pandemic literature, by any such relevant title, is arguably a possibility.

Findings of the study

- Corona Virus, it could be argued, is a historical event of great scale.
- It could be asserted that the pandemic has been a potent cause of trauma to the human population and is the great modern tragedy one grapples with within the day.
- Writing surrounding the virus already exists, majorly in the format of journalistic accounts, published and unpublished, online and offline.
- Deducing on literary trends in the past, the traumatic event that was the Covid-19 pandemic is in the position to give rise to a new genre of self-reflective literature.

Conclusion

It could be reasonably argued that a Covid-19 pandemic is an event of significant historical momentum. The entire world, each of the seven billion residents of earth, is facing the emotional, financial, political and biological brunt of the corona virus; this very fact makes the pandemic an event of unparalleled scale in human history. A substantial amount has already been written surrounding the virus-personal accounts of suffering and bravery, ethical and moral angles to the pandemic, stories and jokes regarding the outbreak of the virus and so on. Much like other trauma-inducing events in history, such as both the World Wars, the current pandemic too has the capacity to give rise to a new genre of literature that deals with narratives of the virus and those affected by it.

Implications of the Study

The project shall help document important historical events in the arena of literary trend-setting over the last few decades. The events documented in the paper shall serve as resource material for those interested in the foundation of English. Students of English literature, Cultural-Studies, and History-related disciplines might benefit from the following writing. Researchers in this arena might locate a point of reference or contention in the project and respond accordingly, adding to the domain knowledge in the field and thus, enriching it with their own academic or opinionated writing. The project shall highlight the narrative of Covid-19 and the possibility of it serving as a stimulant for the foundation of a new genre of literature. Thus, the project shall be a humble attempt

to contribute to the arena of the foundation of English literature and the emergence of trauma literature. The implications of the study could be summarized as follows:

- Documentation of relevant statistics surrounding the Covid-19 Pandemic
- Documentation of writing(both fictional and journalistic non-fictional) dealing with the pandemic
- Documentation of a few important literary trends in the past
- An examination of all the above shall be of use to scholars in the field of literature, history, cultural studies, and any other relevant discipline.

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