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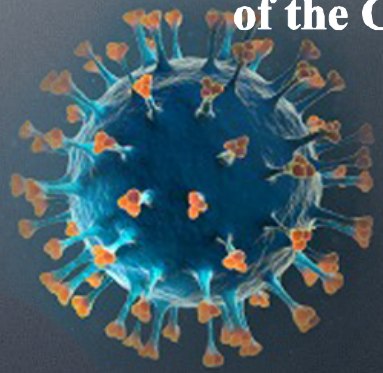
Journal of Literature & Aesthetics

AN INTERNATIONAL PEER-REVIEWED JOURNAL

Special Number on
The Role of Humanities in the Context of the COVID-19 Pandemic
Part II



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Editorial

This is the second issue of the two-part special issue series on the topic "the role of humanities in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic." The first issue contains general articles on the topic exploring multiple aspects of the pandemic from a humanities point of view. The present issue carries articles analysing the literature written in response to the pandemic. It also carries articles offering new strategies on revaluing earlier literatures such as the works of Alessandro Manzoni, Shakespeare and Sophocles in the light of the pandemic. Another significant feature of this issue is that if carries poems from around the world representing the initial response of the creative writers of different languages to the pandemic situation.

Prof. C.T. Indra's paper "*Lockdown Lyrics*: A Peep into Tamil Muse and Musings" offers a close reading of a large body of Tamil lockdown poetry. Chongtham Rameshwari's paper presents a northeast migrant's perspective on the question of national identity and displacement in the time of the pandemic.

The other articles in the issue provide valuable insight into the study of this special topic and considerably extend and enrich the scope of the area.

S. Sreenivasan

Manoj S.

Lockdown Lyrics: A Peep into Tamil Muse and Musings

C.T. Indra

Abstract

The prolonged period of lockdown, total or partial, has considerably altered human awareness about our environs, social milieu, customs and habituated responses, not to speak of habits. Literature and arts have risen to the challenge of capturing this altered human predicament. This paper examines the volume of poems translated from Tamil into English under the title *Lockdown Lyrics* (2020). The translator Dr. K.S. Subramanian has taken up 103 Tamil poems written by different poets, mostly amateurs, hailing from different backgrounds and professions, and rendered them into English. Soon after publishing this volume he himself died. In a way it was a triumph of spirit over matter. The paper groups the poems under different concerns such as ecological, existential, economic, sociological, utopian, religious, aesthetic and so on, and examines the nature of the preoccupations in chosen poems by way of illustrating these concerns. It also applies the mode of *bildungsroman* to a couple of poems to highlight how children lost their innocence under pressure during the Covid19 lockdown and tragically became adult in their consciousness. It underscores the point that the translator has done a great service to his mother tongue by bringing Tamil poetical responses to the lockdown into the sphere of global literature on the pandemic.

Keywords: new normal, ozone, ecological, socialist, migrant workers, death, funerary verses, bildungsroman, art and poverty, challenge of poetry

I

The vocabulary of world languages, one surmises, must have added to their word-horde very similar terms, phrases and expressions in the last eight months and more since the pandemic Covid-19 broke early in 2020 and struck at the world from China to Antarctica [the last being the latest addition to the list], taking countries and peoples unawares. Many

terms would have been adopted wholesale from English, e.g. Corona, Covid 19;others would have been rendered in different languages , drawing from their existing root words or investing existing terms for epidemics with more contemporary nuances. I am thinking of the Tamil word '*thotru'* which is archetypal for any epidemic and its current usage in the corona era, ' *perunthotru*' for pandemic. Not only the terminology, but also the vein of thought and images must have developed almost in very similar lines in various languages.

This paper takes the readers to the volume of poems in Tamil translated into English by Dr. K S Subramanian, with the alliterative title *Lockdown Lyrics* (Discovery Book Palace,Chennai, 2020). The sad part of it is, the translator himself died very soon after publishing the volume. This adds poignancy to the reading experience while it also impels one to marvel at the triumph of mind and intellect over adverse circumstances. It is worthwhile checking if in other Indian languages poems written on the theme of the Corona pandemic have been translated into English as a volume, even as the world is choking still under the grip of the virus.

The volume *Lockdown Lyrics* contains 103 poems by Tamil poets, not only from Tamil Nadu, but also Sri Lankans from our neighbouring island, a few of them diasporic Tamils, settled in North America or France. The translator K S Subramanian provides an initiation into the poems in his introduction titled 'Archway' (vide pp. 5 to 9). He regards the pandemic experience of "getting cooped inside the house sans sunlight" as an ironic reversal of " the ancient Sangam [Tamil] counsel" enshrined in its poetry, namely " The world my little village, humanity my kin"(p.5). As an editor and translator, K S Subramanaian's intention is to "highlight the tectonic shift taking place in the social psyche and established ethical norms" (p. 5). He is curious to explore through translation how the poets have encountered this profound unsettling of the moral universe. He talks of the "vortex of ethical dilemma" (p. 6) into which the world has been thrown. He considers his attempt "to collect Tamil poems on the Corona and Lockdown phase of our social history" and to translate them into English as a means to " capture a significant footprint in history"(p.6).He confesses that he was pleasantly surprised to find that the poems were not just " repetitive and somewhat wearisome" but voiced " different concerns, perspectives, experiences and life situations and different geographical settings"(p.6).He acknowledges the inevitability of repetitive elements, given the archetypal nature of the affliction and the ensuing suffering and trauma. However, he discerns "angles of vision and distinctive existential footprints" (p.6) within the overarching archetypal concerns of existence.

As a " curtain-raiser" (p.6) to this collection, the translator himself has picked up a few poems for brief comments on their themes such as " horror element" (p. 7) " Nature's Retribution" , " Beneficial fallouts(?)" (p. 8), "A new visibility", for the migrant labourer,(p. 10), " A Lockdown picture"(p. 11), " Lockdown ennui"(p. 12), " A slice of Black Humour" (p. 13), and " A note of hope" (p.14).Useful as these tips are from the translator, I will explore some of the poems under some large categories I have identified and also highlight some nuanced expressions in the following section.

II

The concerns and perspectives of the poets range from the immediate personal to the larger sociological, politico-economic, ecological, non-anthropocentric, existentialist and religious, not to leave out the spiritual. This is but natural, given the global nature of the virus spread. There are also some interesting random gender-oriented reflections on domestic situations and role reversals at home. Some poems are in a utopian vein, voicing hope against all odds. I am sure, literatures impelled by the Corona virus in various languages have very similar preoccupations. Hence, in some ways, it may be said that the pandemic has been responsible for the creation of a world-literature which encompasses the human predicament. Technically speaking, almost all the Tamil poems are short and are in the form of vignettes and montages, though not sweeping montages. There is a ruminating mind, or an exhorting voice or a satirical snapping, a pathetic confessional tone, a spirit of resignation or an exclamatory ejaculation expressive of surprise and recognition of an entirely new reality, all ushered in by the pandemic. Some are modernist in imagery, mode and voice. The translator has made best efforts to capture these shades of articulation of emotions and thoughts. It is like a workshop volume, almost in a hurry to bring it out before he calls time on his existence. Indeed, he did call his time on his life very soon after translating and publishing these poems.

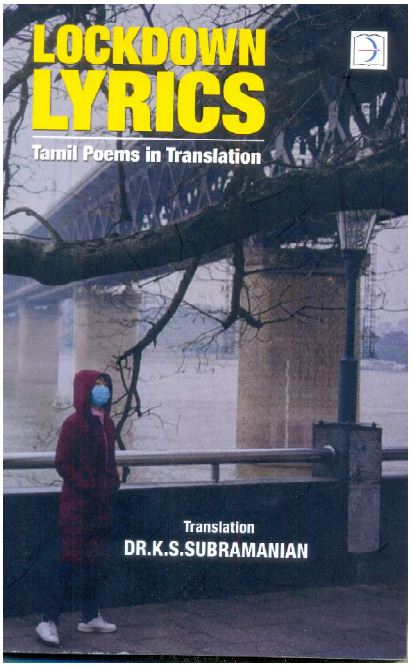
III

Everyday living and thoughts on the 'new normal'

The term 'new normal' has become now part of the vocabulary in English, but its linguistic counterparts are in other languages too, thanks to the prolonged impact of the Corona virus on our existence. We start with the familiar sphere of everyday life. Most poems in this volume use the mode of compacting the thoughts and images in vignettes. The familiar sights are captured by the poem "Conversations", typically cast in the modernist tone with no frills attached: the discovery of the utility of terrace in the house or in an apartment building to engage in "walking", "exercising" and young people "sticking receiver in the ears". Suddenly the speaker realizes what a blessing it is that technology has given us the cell phone, for what would have happened if there were no cell phones, how would we have handled the lockdown? Technology has provided one means of connectivity to negotiate this isolation imposed by the lockdown (p.119). He imagines the pre-cell phone era and muses on the present (p.120). On the home front, one adventitious outcome of the lockdown is the amity arising from "lively chats" between "elderly couples" without the "squabbles usual" (p.120).

Another poem (untitled) also recognizes the place of the cell phone in our existence. But it takes a new turn of thought:

> But for the cell phone
> an orphan
> I would have become. (p.35)



In terms of form, another poem "Corona Vignettes", which describes the new normal in everyday life, is a prose poem. In a matter- of-fact tone, hiding the sense of surprise, it records moments of recognition of daily life – pacing up and down in the hall, not having "a daily shave", spending the day "with only a lungi and a banian", irregular supply of the Hindu paper and absence of Supplements in it (no advertisement, no money!), filling up the petrol tank once in a month, indulging "in long chats over my cell phone with any and everybody" (p.33). In this poem there are some recordings of the familiar rendered unfamiliar. The speaker used to enjoy the different languages spoken by different kids in the park; now they don't stir out of the house (p.34). He becomes aware that "My town has the look of an ancient city" (p.34), as if it were a ghost town. The ending is striking :"There are hardly any pedestrians in the road but accidents continue to happen. Ambulance continues to speed past" (p.34). An indirect reminder of the injured, dying and the dead.

One poem, "Stories Question Papers", uses the gadget of cell phone as metonymy for the larger predicament under globalization:

> The modern world
> has shrunk within the palm
> like the compact cell phone (p.31)

The vast expansive world has become handleable like the compact cell phone. The speaker wonders, but has it brought answers to the riddle of our life?

Everyday life to existential musings:

There are many poems in the volume which make a seamless transition from recording to reflection on the existential predicament of human beings during the prolonged lockdown. A Sri Lankan woman- poet living in France, offers a sombre commentary on our existence. Apparently, Nature is flourishing in spring; but it also impels the poet to "count the deaths dutifully" (p.159). Time becomes a theme of preoccupation with the poet, who tries to comprehend it. But she confesses that "escaping my grasp / Time keeps crawling / eyeing the hands slamming / to speed up its pace" (p.159). Time stands still in a domestic scene, depicting a sordid picture, of dirt on the walls and "blood marks of crushed mosquitoes / specks of dust obstinate omnipresent / utensils piling up defying constant washing". The poem ends with a realization of angst.

'The house but a mere prison.' (p.160)

In another poem, "Corona Phase House", the existentialist boredom during the Corona lockdown is presented by a daily mundane task:

Calendar sheets are ripped daily
but days don't move (p.158).

Human beings have not learnt to cope with this aspect of Time: Time seems to move, but yet it stands still.

A graver engagement with the experience of ennui which the lockdown has trapped man in, is found in the poem, "The Age of Corona". It describes life as "twilight" (p.133). No mental activity engages the sedentary person. Being house-bound, given the state of consciousness ushered in by this languor and ennui, mind "suspended / between dream and wakefulness", the poet observes a series of paradoxes:

Chores awaiting not possible to perform …
Roads ready vacant but nowhere to go.
……..
Days drag on in cycle inexorable
Food – sleep – food. (p.133)

Now comes the sophistication which makes the poem truly literary. It inter- textually invokes the title of a famous novel in Tamil of G.Nagarajan who captures the quintessence of ennui in the title, 'Tomorrow is but one more day' (p.133) (2011, English translation , Penguin Modern Classics). The protagonist of that novel finds time trite and experience meaningless and sordid. The poet here finds a kindred soul in the novel's anti-hero because life during the lockdown too holds nothing to feel buoyed-up about, for tomorrow is going to be no different from today. The poet's mind turns to a deeper perception leading to a superb ironic whimsical ending. Urged by the government to 'Lock down lock down', life tells man to

'Creep inside creep inside' (p.134)

This 'creeping inside' could be, in a reflective state, conducive to philosophical rumination. But given the overarching existential ennui,inertia and apathy, the poet exclaims that the lockdown has made philosophers of us all:

At this rate
in house after house
would take shape
bearded philosophers. (p.134)

Beard here is external and not a sign or symbol of thinking intensely on the difference between mind and matter.

A short poem, "A Silent Witness", in sharp epigrammatic visual, presents life in Nature free, while man is in prison, imprisoned as he is by the terror of Covid :

Birds winging across skyspace
Cows grazing in the meadow
Monkeys hopping from branch to branch
Through the iron window bars
I keep witnessing in silence. (p.132)

It is not as though the existentialist perspective always results in a nihilistic view of life. While acknowledging the impact of being exiled at home, one poem exhorts the reader to think of those feeling lost in loneliness and reach out to them. "Loners of Metropolis" stresses that the need of the hour is to cultivate a humane concern for the other in a spirit of sharing and caring:

Spare a thought
For the anguish
Of loners behind locked doors. (p.2).

The speaker visualizes the yearning for solicitude and concern in the hearts of the loners. The poet suggests that we take time to ask

'Ayya, have you had your meal?' (p.22)
Towards the close the poet addresses them as
O my beloved loners of Corona Age (p.23)

and ends somewhat sentimentally, nevertheless poignantly by asking them

Forget not to be happy. (p.23)

In another poem "Fiery Hunger" (p.118) the crisis of Corona has forced us to think of the 'tug' of hunger and privation among the dispossessed and deprived. 'Tug' is the recurrent word used suggesting different connotations, pleasant as well as horrible. Here it is the poignant pinch of hunger which forces the little child, crying for food, to pull the shroud of her mother lying dead in a railway platform. The poet asks

Do we have epic references
of a little child pulling the sheet
covering the dead mother
and crying for food? (p.118)

The poem earlier refers to the Mahabharata where 'Duchaadhanaa' tugs at 'Paanchaali's' saree in the Kaurava court in the dicing scene. While that infamous incident has become a canonical point in Indian cultural history, the poet wants to know if any epic will be written on the existential predicament of this orphaned child.

Cogitations on the knowledge of death:

The sense of loneliness naturally finds in many poems a turn towards thoughts about Death and relief from existential trauma.

"The Dread of Death", sensitively explores the existential terror:

> The person
> who portrayed mind as a space
> somehow failed to tell man
> about the dread of death
> germinating in that very mind. (p.60)

People can die in various ways. But the poet notes,

> The final gift is but one. (p.60)

The next moment he voices a philosophico-existential concern:

> But the moments they're gifted
> aren't ever the same.
> Death is but the same one. (p.60).

The last line underscores the paradox of variety tending towards sameness. The eternal question, since the time of the Mahabharata, we may say, is, 'Death is sure to take you, but what is death?' Death is a sure fact. But it is a question that fetches as many answers as there are people. Therefore, in the concluding stanza a fresh image of death as a visitor is invoked:

> Not the one to be dreaded
>
> but the one to visit us for sure. (p.61)

But he notes poignantly

> Not till moment before death
> human mind accepts this. (p.61)

The existentialist vein of thinking is evident in the ensuing comment:

> No wonder the dread of death
> keeps tailing (*sic*) him
>
> Through the entire length of his life. (61)

Bravely the poet concludes with a philosophical ending:

> the fear is the supreme obsession.
> Death
> the supreme liberation. (p.61)

The rhyming of 'obsession' and 'liberation' which the translator manages to execute, is meant to lift up the sagging spirit of the human self.

The poem "This One" reiterates the point that there is no getting away from the reality of the terror of death. The voice deliberately keeps an even tone and uses a language interspersing information jargon and whimsical dismissal:

> Today it is a global threat
> ……
> They declared that
> soon will die
> this Chinese commodity. (p.121).

But the flippancy in our attitude is chided by the remainder of the poem:

> But at the onset of SARS epidemic
> we refused to learn any lesson. (p.121)

People are so casual that it would appear to them as spread of "snake fever" (p.121). But the sting is not far:

> May be the fever afflicting me now
> will also…….
> After all
> only when afflicted personally
> courage tends to disappear,
> truth begins to bite. (p.121)

The conclusion offers a general moral realization which arises from knowledge of our ignorance.

Ecological Concerns:

The idea of human mind constrained by consciousness, leaving man imprisoned in a situation of a pandemic, takes us to another set of poems in the volume which examine a range of topics: Man versus Nature, animals in freedom while man is in fetters, man-animal conflict leading to a supremacist attitude, depletion of Nature's resources, ecological alarms, hope of healing the divide. All these, triggered by the overwhelming power of the Corona virus upon the earth and its inhabitants. I will take up a few instances of poems voicing these concerns.

A simple poem like "The Rule of the Virus" lists the benefits accrued from the reign of Corona virus:

> Shorn of pollution
> the vast spaces breathe free
> and renew their chlorophyll. (p.32).

The unforeseen ecological benefit accruing from Corona is presented in scientific vocabulary. Then the poet goes into a poetic mode to represent the sense of freedom which creatures of Nature feel, unhindered by man's intervention:

> The animals and birds
> are singing new lyrics.
> The nature returning
> to its primordial past. (p.32)

The indirect indictment of human intervention in Nature's life and upsetting its rhythm takes a pro-Corona stand in the last stanza when the poet pitches Corona against God. He declares,

> The virus is ruling the earth.(p.32)

It is ironical that God should be "praying in earnest / for a return to human nature" (p.32). Perhaps, the suggestion is that there had been a nefarious collusion between God and man which harmed Nature almost beyond repair and it is Corona which has released Nature from this bondage. This poem highlights the value of flora and fauna, the non-human world at large, which is in contrast to the anthropocentric view of life we have entertained for centuries.

In "A WalkThrough Corona-wrapped Night", another poet feels sad that the respite from human misdeeds may not last long and the rejuvenated ecology may again become fragile. The scientific fact of ozone depletion because of mindless suicidal carbon footprint is used with a very fine, fresh perspective. The poem is set in Canada, but soon it extends to other regions. The poet comes out in the night, finds the whole city "immersed in slumber. / The impact of virus" (p.41). Lake Ontario is majestic and on its bank the young one of a fox is cuddled by its mother; a few deer dart across the street. The happiest outcome of Corona's supremacy over Man and Nature is

> Ozone hole has shrunk .
> The flowing Ganges turned clean. (p.41).

There is also a happy thought on the decrease in consumerism of contemporary global culture when the poet adds:

> The fancy purchases of non-essentials
> have shrunk. (p.41)

But the voice turns from joy to apprehension when the poet realizes that once the Corona virus is controlled, Man may return to his wonted ways of exploitation of Nature and earth will be back to square one. This fear is articulated very effectively by a concrete poetic description:

> While returning
> after the city round

my heart seized by a mild grief.
the rivers going to lose their
limpidity. (p.41)

It is a fine thought. Will this idyllic phase last long? The poet yearns for the impossible. The alarm is sounded in the following verse:

The hole in the ozone layer
waiting to enlarge again….(p.42)

as if the Ozone itself were complicit with man's atrocities. This turn of thought, which makes one and the same image of the Ozone hole both positive and negative, underlies the dialectic of the poem. The poet asks in despair,

When at all would the world
rise from helpless slumber?
When would the slumber
of the mankind cease
and a new dawn blossom? (p.42)

The preoccupation with the primacy of the Ozone hole finds an urgency of voice in another short lyric, untitled. It speaks sternly, while also pleading for a return to old ways of transport, shunning choking monstrous motor fumes. The poet offers recipes or prescriptions for regaining Nature's purity:

To remedy the Ozone hole,
to savour a handful of flowing Ganga water,
to immediately sweep aside
the pollutants in the air,
to usher in with no loss of time
bullock-carts in the villages,
and horse-carts in the towns (p.69).

To accomplish all these, one does not have to be an eco-warrior. You simply surrender to Corona and

Virus will take care .(p.69)

This may be read as an ironic exhortation; but it implies that what activists can't achieve, the virus can accomplish by restoring the balance in Nature:

no need for you
to march in protest
holding a flag or raising your arms… (p.69)

In a few poems, the predicament of people being kept indoors while animals roam free is viewed as Nature's retribution for man's tampering with her ways. In some poems it also

takes on a religions angle. For example, the title of the poem, "We asked for it" itself suggests the idea of man paying the price for his transgressions. How humans have controlled the existence of other living creatures on the earth and the deleterious effects of this hegemony are presented in a series of vignettes in the opening stanza:

> Roots of Mother Nature cut asunder
> Green dreams surrendered to arid deserts
> Dainty sparrows mere companions of flowerpots.
> Like fishes locked in fish- tanks
> Other marine species
> lifeless in plastic stench. (p.68)

the last image visualizing the supermarket culture which rules the whole world. The poet regrets man tampering "myriad species" with impunity, making some even extinct. In the second and the last stanza the poet's voice becomes a voice of warning, asking human beings to beware of the retribution waiting in the wings:

> Today
> Waiting to settle scores with you
> a Virus potent
> O Man! You have reaped all the fruits.
> Here are the answers to your queries.
> The deeds many
> You have treasured long (p.68)

The poet views the "curse condign" descending on man

> in the form fierce as Virus. (p.68)

The alliteration and shift of adjective 'fierce' after the noun 'form', the use of the somewhat archaic sense of the term 'deeds', all add to the employment of a prophet's intoning of warnings in the oracular tradition.

Yet another poem valorizing the significance of the Ozone layer resorts to a religious perspective, foregrounding the notion of retribution. It begins by talking about ecological disasters signified by climate change, accentuation of heat triggering forest fires, singeing all living things, on land and in the sea. It goes on to condemn man's exploitation of earth's resources by gouging the soil:

> Burrowed by machines fierce
> earth turned into gaping hole
> land lies bare-chested. (p.172).

The poet goes on to condemn "human selfishness" and the result is

> God shuddered
> and cast a curse. (p.173)

Like an Old Testament prophet, he bellows.

> 'Corona, scatter death'
> Lo! It has risen ….(p.173)

Corona is seen as a scourge by this poet, sent by Nature to purge the atmosphere of pollution, perhaps following the dictum, 'to remove a thorn by a thorn' or 'to remove poison by poison'. This appears to be the message of the poem.

The sense of urgency about ecological disaster takes a more positive tone in some poems advising man to engage in course correction before it is too late. Take for example, "The Song of Solitude". It is an exhortation to us on the value of life, going beyond the pandemic and it advises us to live in harmony with Nature:

> O Man!
> Now at least do learn
> science, money and power
> won't serve you.
> Retrieve the life
> blended with nature.
> Fill the hearts with humanism
> and the spirit of self-help. (p.116)

All this may sound preachy. But how many of us have not been pushed to a corner by the virus and come to such existential moments of commiseration? It is for us to reflect deeply within ourselves. The poem goes on to take a utopian turn, counselling fellow- human beings to mend their ways, overcome prejudices and selfishness and think of the noble people serving humanity at this dark hour:

> Learn to live meaningfully.
> Even in the midst of raging problems
> the medical personnel safely
> are rendering service noble.
> With the lessons from Corona
> let us build a new world,
> help the indigent.
> Let us respect the value of distance
> decimating racial religious animosities.
> Let us lead a life
> in sync with Nature. (p.117)

The details given here are familiar scenes from contemporary epidemic situation globally. This should be a rare chance for us to overcome so many of our shortcomings and build a new society, if not, a Universe.

Economic and Sociological concerns:

The moral indignation expressed in some of the poems we have looked at earlier at the devastation of Nature and the callous materialism of contemporary societies, finds a sharper, concrete visualization in poems dealing with the tragic instance of the plight of Indian migrant labourers trudging their way back home in non-descript villages, showcased by all the media. Using this image as the icon, we click into the portfolio of socio-economic, even political themes handled by some of the poems in the volume *Lockdown Lyrics*. The phenomenon of homeless labourers pullulating in metropolitan cities, now during the lockdown becoming panicky and rushing to railway stations and bus stations only to find that no transport was available, hence starting to walk back with kids on shoulder, torn luggage and slippers, on the scalding tarred roads of the highways in the summer heat, on railway tracks, hoping to reach their native village, has an economic aspect to it. It implies the perennial binary of country versus city. Globalization has exacerbated this binary so much that practically India's villages are in the big cities which flaunt their IT credentials, indirectly promoting the boom of real estate business and construction of rapid transport systems such as metro rail. This so-called economic boom has left the migrant workers homeless or displaced during the Corona Virus Lockdown. The larger issues in this scenario are the hidden evils of late capitalism, the lopsided development of urban areas, depletion of water bodies, malnutrition among the poor. The list is distressingly long. Sometimes it creates a sense of guilt in the middleclass, but the latter's own predicament of uncertainty about its life leaves that problem beyond its capacity to remedy.

Migrant Workers' Lot:

The poem "Highways of Distress", a new metaphor for anti -capitalism, helps to serve many of the concerns and structures of ideas noted above. The motif of country and the city is deftly brought in by two contrastive vignettes. In the villages the farmers were toiling at agricultural tasks:

> They had sown fields
> their backbone arched in sheer agony. (p.48)

But their life holds no future for their children. Hence economic drives motivate them to leave the countryside and seek subsistence level existence in the metropolis:

> To eek *[sic]* a measly living
> separated as refugees
> in their own native land (p.48)

Already the paradox of their tragic predicament is reiterated by the phrase "refugees in their own native land". The opening stanza tells you whether they are better off having moved to the city. It captures the sites of their new kind of labour in metropolitan urban areas:

Making apartment blocks
and painting them
dangling in mid-air
pledging their dear lives
burrowing the earth like rats
and laying tracks
for metro speed trains. (p.48).

They risk their lives in executing these tasks. In a censorious tone the poet chides in a censorious tone you and me, the beneficiaries of their risky labour:

You're sitting in comfort
and spinning wordy drivel
Those concrete roofs
they had constructed
perilously suspending in thin air (p.48)

But now the camera turns on their present plight of no-job-no income – no roof over the head – no food in the lockdown months, forcing them to go back to their native places:

With handloads of rags
in scalding roads
too poor to afford a pair of slippers
they're treading their weary way. (p.48)

What follows exemplifies the import of the title "Highways of Distress". The long march back to home turns out to be a highway of distress:

With hapless kids
languishing in thirst and hunger
jumping from
one tiny patch of shade to another
the highway of distress
keeps lengthening (p.48)

It is said that many had not reached their destination, perishing half-way

crushed in the rail track
pummel[l]ed in accidents
of life simply ebbing away. (p.49)

The value of such lives is nothing, which is a grim reality of globalization and late capitalism. The poem ends in a pathetic note that the "dream desperate / to die in their own native village" (p. 49) remained a dream. It bemoans the frail human desire.

The pathos of this fall out of the lockdown finds a more intimate, poignant expression in the dramatizing of interpersonal relation between a migrant father and his little daughter in

the poem "A Long Trek". It is in the form of a dialogue in homely Tamil. Each set of twin lines in the early stanzas raises some hope.

> Where are we heading Appa.
> To our native soil Magalae. (p.46)

'Magalae' is 'daughter dear' in vocative case, explains the translator in a note (p. 47):

> Why did we come here Appa.
> To earn a livelihood Magalae.
> Why go again Appa.
> To save ourselves Magalae. (p.46)

Do they save themselves? More important than the implied answer to this question is the arduousness of the process of going back. The little girl whines:

> My legs are paining Appa.
> ……
> I feel hungry Appa.
> ……
> My eyes are dimming Appa (p.46)

The father tries to reassure her of the hope of mitigation of their travails which sounds hollow even to her tender mind:

> Wait a little longer Magalae—
> We can rest a while on finding shade.
> ……..
> Wait a little longer Magaale—
> Some benefactor would come by. (p.46)

To an innocent question from the girl why the Government can't come to their rescue, he answers in a matter- of-fact tone:

> There are 137 crore people.(p.46)

We can infer from this pathetic catechism the enormity of the situation created by the lockdown. The solicitude the father shows for the girl's physical feeling of sinking is touching:

> My eyes are dimming Appa
> Don't worry Magalae. I'm your father.
> I would somehow save you Magalae.
> No Appa. I feel I am going to die
> That won't happen Magalae. (pp.46-47)

The whole lyric has an elegiac tone with an overwhelming sense of defeatism accentuated by the hopeful tone of the last two lines:

No Magalae. Some way will appear.
Lose not hope. (p.47)

A poem like "May Day Song 2020" takes the theme of the migrant labourer's suffering to a collective ideological level of condemnation of capitalism and its callousness. May Day is internationally declared as World Labour Day (p.85). But in the month of May in India during the lock down, the labourer, who is to be rested and celebrated, is pitilessly exiled and the May Day made a mockery of by the long march of migrant workers on Indian Highways. Three vignettes are sharply etched:

Handload headload
load in the stomach
pain as travel ticket
here are they treading
the children of Bharatmata. (p.85).

Earlier they used to carry headloads of construction materials when employed. Now they carry symbolic loads of their dispossession.

Homeless hapless lowest-rung workers
who had built skyscrapers.
On seeing blood oozing
from their dark skinfolds
dissolves in commiseration
the tar-coating
of the May month Indian Highway.

The noun 'Indian Highway' is qualified by the freshly coined compound adjective "The May Month", to throw in relief the scalding heat and lava-like road topping in the pitiless summer heat:

The scalding hands of the sun
assault the little toy children
scampering in perplexity.
As symbols of arid tomorrow,
with empty water bottles
the young ones with backloads.(p.85)

What is galling to the poet is that during "a universal pandemic", and "an uncertain migration" the political mercenaries should mouth pious platitudes:

In a scene of World Labour Day
Political mercenaries
as purveyors of rhetoric. (p.85)

The poet recalls in sadness how the most well-known and fiery spirited of Tamil poets of colonial times, Subramania Bharati, with his iconic turban, hailed both the farmer and the labourer:

> Bow down shall we to
> Farming and Industry (p.86)
> Alas! Today both are left to perish.

The satire on the materialist drive in globalized societies occasionally finds a socialist turn in some poems. "Lockdown Time" is one such poem. It starts with recognizing the adventitious benefit that has accrued from Corona and the lockdown:

> With machines taking rest
> the environment takes time
> for its own renewal. (p.174).

The poet goes on to note its positive impact on human nature which is normally self-centred:

> In the mad scramble of life
> Only now has blossomed
> the sprout of goodwill. (p.174).

The poet cannot resist taking a potshot at capitalism even while acknowledging the presence of goodness in human nature:

> Even the capitalist brood
> ever converting
> moments into commodities
> have started investing
> in concern and solicitude.(p.174)

The positive shift is suggested by the remark "this is a period of respite" (p.174). Corona virus brings out the dormant humane aspects in people:

> Here
> helping hands
> share some noble norms,
> particularly the youth good samaritans
> ……..
> In the hospitals around
> the angels of compassion
> in the streets and roads
> the sentinels of security
> steeped in tireless toil. (pp.174-175)

The poem ends fondly hoping for a change of heart among the usually indifferent people. Hence the message-like statement declaring that

> This is a lockdown time,
> the time for humanist impulse
> taught by Corona cruel. (p.175)

Another short poem, "Corona", too recognizes the revival of our humanity and rise of social-consciousness in us:

> Self-centeredness in decline.
> Urges to seek common good.
> Prompts love for fellowbeings.
> Makes us feel the pangs of hunger .
> Has made an indigent of the rich.
> .....
> Has placed the insolent rich
> in the grip of fear of death. (p.103)

The poet ends on a little idealistic note on the rise of empathy in people:

> The invisible Corona
> performed the miracle
> of breathing life into humanity
> hitherto lying limp and lifeless .
> This glory has
> reduced everyone to tears. (p.103)

The socialist angle with a satirical edge finds a Blake-like expression in the poem "The Angels". The focus is on the conservancy workers who are selflessly cleaning the streets with "busy brooms" on a "Grey-morning time" (p.51).The poet ironically calls them "the angels in blue". In fact, they are covered in "black hue" (p.51). One recalls Blake's poems like "London" and "Chimney sweeper". The chimney sweep is black, covered in soot. Here the Indian poem on lockdown scene rues that angels they may be, but they are "languishing in hunger" (p.51). Like an admonishing prophet the poet says to the reader, "I'll show them unto you", for we are in general indifferent to the workers' labour; we take it for granted that their task in the early hours of the morning is to keep the city clean. The poet affirms that black they may be, but

> They are the purveyors of purity
> for the fellowmen who grudge
> even minimum courtesy to others.(p.51)

The poet wants to hail the dedication of these nameless workers. Hence the exalted ending of their portrait:

They don the diamond tiara
of humanist grace. (p.51).

The socialist message implied in this praise may be that we who benefit by their toil, exploit their services, are reluctant to contribute to their material well-being.

Not all poems are socio-economic in their concerns. Some poets tend to view the global disaster of multitudes of people falling dead afflicted by Corona from a religious perspective. To them Corona is a kind of retribution for man's transgressions and his supremacist attitude towards Nature and the environment. We have seen a couple of them while surveying the poems on ecological disasters. The idea of a transcendent God or power behind this phenomenon of the virus does linger in some of our minds, though we may not be willing to share it in public. One poem titled, "Notes on an Absurd Play", views it in mythological terms:

Hide and seek game
played by the virus
between Existence and Life
Virus opens wide
its eyes of fire
Manmada reduced to ashes. (p.24).

The allusion is to the burning by Lord Siva, of the Lord of Love in Hindu purana, namely Manmada.

Making use of the religious perspective, some poems engage in banter and wit. An 'untitled' poem is an instance of airy wit in these times of gloom. It engages our fanciful imagination by presenting even the God in the temple as afraid of the virus and therefore wanting to maintain social distancing from his consort:

Through the crevices
in the locked door
peeps out god.
Frozen in the Corona dread
pulling his head back
telling his consort to stay
three feet apart
drawing a circle
he ensured self- isolation. (p.170)

The poet, tickled by this non-Godly behaviour of the deity, exclaims with a touch of humour:

Such a fate even for you?
May be god you are -
But Corona is Corona. (p.170)

Corona lords it over even God!

"Greeting the New Year" is a poem of earnest prayer welcoming the Tamil New Year with the plea" to vanquish disease vile" (p.177). The poet regards the "Pall of gloom" that has descended "in land Bharat" as god-sent:

> Everything His play esoteric
> Let's adopt solitude guard fortitude
> God almighty would save us sure
> Let us treasure that faith supreme
> .....
> Let's implore God for life prosperous. (p.177)

In another poem "And Beyond", which dramatizes a variety of views and voices on the pandemic, the opening lines present a religious perspective:

> 'Look, this Corona has rattled even the God'
> Would mockingly remark some.
> 'God Himself is Corona' -
> Would raise arms in prayer
> a few. (p.126)

We get a feel of people's sense of bewilderment in being trapped by the virus.

While there are several ideological scaffoldings erected to understand the unforeseen entrapment of man by an unseen virus, the sheer imminence and inscrutability of Death is explored in some of the poems, a couple of them I would like to call 'funerary verses'.

One poem titled " Death at Corona" muses on the socio-cultural dimensions of a funeral during the pandemic. It rightly begins,

> Death during an epidemic
> more sorrowful
> that death in general.(p.80)

It notes how no expression of social graces or elaborate rituals or social sharing of grief are possible. This point, the poet puts in a fanciful thought with grim wit:

> With face covered by mask
> the dead can't properly discern
> how much grief is manifested for him. (p.80)

With no socio-cultural expression of loss and grief allowed, the poet wryly remarks,

> The deaths during the Lockdown period
> barely resemble deaths
> No time available
> to condole the bereaved

It's much like
murdering someone
and burying hurriedly in secret (p.80)

Such a turn of thought is an index to the characteristic of poetry as a fascinating fresh exploration of experiences.

The lyric "Life Parting in Air's Language" may be considered a secular exploration of the process of dying, or to be more precise, ceasing to breathe. It offers a new perspective on death by virus. It says enigmatically:

Small breath is life
big breath, Death. (p.128)

It wonders,

In which touch
Our death? (p.128)

The inscrutability of breathing and ceasing to breathe is captured brilliantly towards the end of the poem:

Even a virus
can decipher air's language
even when one coughs .
But where it starts from
where it ends…
None can translate
the life parting
in air's language. (p.129).

Understanding air's language is an act of translation.

New *Bildungsroman* poems:

There are a couple of poems which are in the mode of *bildungsroman* – of a child growing into maturity and consciousness of the world around him / her even while the poets are sticking to an ideological perspective on the plight of the migrant labourers in one poem and a middleclass domestic scene in the other. In "Torments that Follow", death is looming large as a father and little daughter are setting out of the city on the long march. The poem is in the form of a pathetic but heroic dialogue between them. The girl is anxious about venturing in the outside world. The father bravely tries to reassure her:

Fear not, Magale! [daughter dear]
We are only in our house.
To bake bread for your little tummy
Appa has some wheat flour. (p.90)

The little girl is apprehensive of leaving their familiar environ. The father tries again to evade reality. But the critical turn of thought happens at this point when the little child tells the father that she understands the reality:

> I have come to know everything, Appa.
> .....
> You've converted our little house
> into three bundles.
> Further
> you've picked up old slippers
> from the garbage heap
> and are mending them.
> sAnd
> You're seeking alms of bread slices. (p.90).

What would be normally dismissed as a vignette of sordid urban life, actually turns out to be a poignant picture of their abject poverty, for what was their house is now all wrapped up in the three bundles containing their meagre possession. The father admits that their native village is an arid place. The little daughter asks,

> If we do go there
> would we survive, Appa? (p.91)

The father gives an ambiguous ,even ambivalent answer : reaching the village itself is a big 'If', thus ending the poem on a grim poignant note. The child grows into adult consciousness in the course of this bleak conversation.

Moving from the slum to a middleclass home, the poem "The Moment She Became Amma" (pp.92-93) presents another instance of a little child developing an adult consciousness of the need to observe the rules of lockdown even while at home. The girl is affectionately mentioned as ***"Kuttima Little Angel***" (p.92). Her mother (Amma) admonishes her when the child tries to go out. Kuttima is compelled to run in circles within the four walls; she can't have any play of her impulses. When she tries to be naughty the mother pulls her up: "If Appa sees you'll get blows …" (p.93) and tosses the notebook on to the loft. Every act of the little girl, be it writing across the wall, or pouring water on the floor, invites harsh reprimand from the mother who herself betrays frayed nerves because of the stress of managing the home front during the total lockdown. How does Kuttima find her way to let off her frustration? By becoming an 'Amma' to her own Barbie doll and imitating all the adult acts, by sanitizing the doll, then ripping a piece of cloth to make a face mask for her doll – two ubiquitous images of lockdown - and finally playing the role of the parent by sternly telling the doll:

> 'Better sit here quiet.
> If you get down, would get blows.'
> The moment the Barbie doll was chastised

has become an Amma
Kuttima. (p.93)

The child loses its innocence and cannot indulge in throwing tantrums anymore.

Art Transcending Limits:

There are some poems which affirm the power of art and creativity despite the despondency created by the virus menace. One such is the poem "The Artiste" (pp.124-125). It is set in a typical temple town in the Tamil land. Thanks to the lockdown, the temples are shut and "silence reigns" (p.124). But can you stop a *nadaswara* vidwan (musical maestro playing the majestic South Indian wind instrument) from sitting in his own house playing the pipe, filling the Sannidhi street with his "mellifluous alapana"? (p.124). The act is both a symbol of his confinement and the liberation his music brings. The poem is marked by music, for even the "dainty doves / meander on the lyrical path and float into the temple tower" (p.124). While every creature is virtually cribbed and cabined, there is an exception:

The artiste
brimming the entire skyspace
with soulful melody (p.125)

But the touch of Corona colours even this almost transcendental sublime ethos, for the artist can't sustain his playing for long because his stomach is empty and he suspends the music

to fill his hungry stomach
by reserving his slot
in the queue for free dole. (p.125)

The poet subtly hints at the poverty that wracks such artists, for during the Corona lockdown, there is no performance, no work for artists and hence no income. The poet creates a sad feeling too at the end.

Since this article is about a volume of poems, it won't be fair to leave out references to the role of poetry in these grim days of severe deprivation at the material, creaturely level. The poem "And Beyond….." raises the question:

In these horrible days
is it proper to be writing poems? (p.126)

This question may be regarded at the archetypal level as a question about any form of creation and self-expression; be it poetry or dance or music or cricket. When all around us, there is a mad struggle for buying "an essential commodity" (p.126), is it ethical to indulge in artistic pursuit, in writing poetry? Can art exist for its own stake? Naturally the question evokes varying responses:

Some would feel pangs of guilt.
'Should sure be writing' –
the resolve of a few others. (p.127)

But the poet poses a lofty question:

Virus can control
the movements of people;
Would the mystery of their thought-wave
ever be in its grasp? (p.123)

Is this a defiant gesture by an artist? Is this a Shelleyan affirmation? Thus, such poems offer fresh thoughts away from the pandemic.

So, what is the function of poetry in such times? Another poem "Untitled" puts it crisply. Public platforms are silent; roads with sounds are "stifled" and lie "limp" (p.122). With a touch of witty insolence, the poet notes,

Gods
standing unnamed— (p.122)

Perhaps an allusion to the practice of reciting the thousand names of deities in Hindu temples and performing loudly the *archanas* before the thronging pious devotees. Cheekily the poet ends saying,

Me
with pen in hand.(p.122)

Gods may go without verbal propitiation, but poetry is there to give word to such experiences. Surely this is a gesture of both defiance and affirmation.

IV

CONCLUSION

The range of concerns and line of thinking in these hundred odd poems on the theme of the Corona virus are an indication that confined, cribbed and cabined the human beings may be, forced by the Lockdown regulations, total or partial; but the mind and the spirit find their own 'zone' , as they say in cricket journalism, and what is more, voice and thought to articulate. Poetry is an act of exploration of experience in striking language which concretises it. It finds a happy alliance with philosophy and religion when a context calls for a deep reflection on what befalls individuals or the collective humanity. It may not build a system of thought as does philosophy or religion. Bur it gives interiority and corporeality to empirical experiences and the reflections ensuing from them. In this volume of Tamil poetry several poems attempt to do that. That is why they are not just catalogues of the woes caused by the Corona virus, but attempts to comment on them. Another point about the volume is that many of the poets have engaged in writing poetry not as a vocation but as an expression of

their creative and humanist impulse. The translator has done an impressive job of selecting them for his anthology and finding comparable expressions in English for the Tamil words and terminology to reach a global readership. Translating these poems at a ripe age and publishing them before he himself rode out on his breath, leaves the reader with a sombre admiration for the spirit of the deceased translator. K S Subramanian has enabled contemporary Tamil language to contribute to the corpus of literature and art produced in India and the globe on the subject of the pandemic through his volume of English translation *Lockdown Lyrics*.

Work Cited

Subramanian, K.S. *Lockdown Lyrics: Tamil Poems in Translation.* Chennai: Discovery Palace, 2020.

I wish I were gigantic

Azam Abidov

I dedicate this poem to all innocent people killed and living in conflict zones, including in Nagorno-Karabakh.

I wish I were gigantic,
Those who launch a war
Don't tell me you are leading,
You laugh,
You watch,
Ignore,
You keep my soul bleeding.
I wish I were gigantic,
As big as Planet Earth,
I ain't romantic,
I'm antique,
I've not sense of self-worth.
I let you call me villain
And stop my heavy breath.
So choak me! Then I fill in
With my body Planet Death!
I wish I were gigantic,
Comes after me Full Bliss,
I leave the world sans panic,
Sympatehic and in Peace!
I wish I were gigantic!

Oh, My Blossoming Soul

My strength is enough to shed tears from my eyes,
I tie up chains to my hands,
I always drink love
And eat love-pricks with great pleasure.

To our life that is mournful and brilliant
Phoenix comes asking refuge
We fly and to our wings
The sky comes near and near.

I don't care of my body,
Oh, my blossoming soul is the capital of my spirit.
In the slum which is unseen and full of love
A pregnant Happiness bears a child.

There is A Bird

I was told, that I'm a bird,
All the seasons fit me.
To know myself never I could,
To fly around wings to be.

However, do not sing for me,
So much of eulogy, don't arrange.
There's such a bird, you set it free,
But it flies back to the cage.

Please never say I'm like that bird!

Gabriel, touch me gently…
(Ghazal)

Gabriel, touch me gently with your wings,
Oh, my gracious - from the backstage - woe stings.

Graves are either gardens of endless delight
Or deep holes of the hell, where Evil flings.

I want to be a spot in hairs of the camel,
Like a leaf my life in windy weather swings.

The task of time is killing of all lavish gifts,
It never comes anew – life's chimes – it never rings.

Among the dead, be the most attractive, Aazam,
As Solomon is the best of all earthy kings!

I Am Clay

I am clay –
Liquid and weak.
I have neither tongue
Nor mouth, to speak.
Everyone likes
To make some figure
From me,
To make a shape.
I am clay –
Liquid and weak.
I always go
Through palms.
I leak…
I leak…

TOO LONG

We
strive to go to rich countries
send our husbands and wives
they do hard work
or sell themselves
The other people in this country
have luxurious weddings
from the sent money
and sing a song of happiness
We all work for the government
The tongue of the government is too long.

A BAT and a MAN

A bat could smile,
Bear a child and breastfeed
and also menstruate.
The bat really wanted
to laugh and weep
like a human being.
So the bat summoned a man
In a market fair
For a feast
And have an affair.
The bat treated the man
With a piece of her flesh.
And now
The bat knows
how to laugh and weep.
Her laughing sounds
Like a mourning
Her weeping sounds
Like a laughter
And is heard and spread
All over the world.
The cursed friendship
Sparkles in the sun.

FAREWELL TO EARTH

Where is your forehead,
Mother Earth?
My Facebook friend
From Vietnam
Is taking me to his
Space Station
He has built in his blissful childhood.
With the same creation,
The same flesh
And even the same God
We are not working enough
To promote
The Exchange of Love:
My tears cannot extinguish
Big fires in Australia,
I cannot keep breathing anymore
Because of dying humans,
Animals and birds all over.
My friend told me
I will be the first poet
In his station,
So I can take some fellows to join
From elsewhere,
Including from Iraq,
North Korea,
Iran and U.S.
To foster our poorest exchange
And be able to cast
The Shadow of Peace
Over you –
Mother Earth.
You deserved all
Wonderful things
Existence could offer!
But I don't deserve you.
So where is your forehead?
I want to kiss and thank you,
And say good-bye.

I AM NOT ALONE

I am not alone
In giving away all my savings –
despite a homeless myself –
To a friend buying a house;
I am not alone
In receiving an award
From a foreign government
For the excellent service
To my motherland.
I am not alone
In being ignored
By those who envy me
And my passion to Life,
To Change
And Exchange.
Perhaps
I am the only one
Who
at the age of 45
Dreams of
Becoming a funny poet
with a beard and moustache
At the age of 50!
Am I not alone?

A Reading woman

A woman's sitting in a slum
The slum is in a dump.
As she gets the hump:
The woman is reading.

It is dark in the dump,
There is a dim light
Inside the slum.

The woman is reading
Under the wan candlelight.

Her hope from life is dim, dim…
The reading woman
of my dream!

Wall and Poetic Bridge

Go ahead and build a great, long wall –
Do not leave a small space in between!
Make sure none on it can ever crawl –
Set up a burning wire and touch-screen!
As you build it – take a look above –
See us laughing – so would you bewitch?
In our hearts full of delight and love
We have built a higher Lyric Bridge!
We share future, present-day and past,
We target common people, not the witch!
We will break below the overcast –
We are the poets on the Lyric Bridge!

Poverty, Pestilence and Popular Imagination: a Reading of Alessandro Manzoni's *The Betrothed* in the Age of Pandemic

P. M. Abdul Sakir

Abstract

The pestilence of plague had ravaged Italy throughout its history especially during the early modern period and it had caused great devastations upon the people and the country. The 1630 Milanese plague is set as the backdrop of the novel *The Betrothed* by Alessandro Manzoni. The novel makes an exploration of the socio-political and cultural upheavals happened in the period before and after the arrival of plague in Milan. The paper examines the trajectory of the affliction of plague in Milan with the accompaniments of military advancements, famines and the miseries of economic deprivations. The paper further explores the way false and unfounded stories regarding the origin of the disease contrived by the popular imagination pave the way for the resultant mistrusts and brutalization.

Keywords: Famine, Pestilence, Origin Stories, Popular Imagination, Brutalization

Pestilences and pandemics have ravaged mankind throughout history. The regular occurrences of the diseases have made drastic reconfigurations in the demography of the regions where the illness has originated and spread. The growth of mankind, his various activities- socio-political, economic and cultural- and flow of life have been momentarily arrested by such epidemics. The occurrences of bubonic plague in early modern Europe had vastly depopulated the continent and exposed the human vulnerabilities. Volatile economic conditions too have contributed towards the fast spreading of the diseases and towards the greater miseries and human casualties. Until medical science provides scientific explanations and vaccines and effective cure for deadly diseases, mankind had widely expatiated on false, illogical and superstitious popular imaginations regarding the origin of the illnesses.

The French Surgeon Ambrose Pare has memorably written that the plague was a "furious, tempestuous, monstrous, dreadful, frightening, wild and treacherous malady" (cited in

Crashaw 570). Plague had attacked Europe widely and particularly Italy at various points of its history in the second millennium. Human mortality rate in these epidemics was very high. The plague of 1630 had claimed 80,000, around 40 percent of the population of 200000 (Alfani 411). The people of Italy had gone through serious famines and poverty particularly during the preceding years of 1556 Udine Plague and 1630 Milanese Plague. The wretched conditions of poverty and deprivations made the entry of the pestilence easier to the above cities. The paper examines the trajectory of the arrival of plague in Milan in Italy with the accompaniments of military advancements, great famines and economic deprivations. In the absence of rational medical explanations, false stories are contrived on the origin of the epidemic. The paper further examines the way these unfounded stories viciously take hold upon human imaginations and acquires circularity among the people which pave the way for the resultant mistrusts and brutalization.

1630 Milanese Plague is the setting of the novel *The Betrothed* (1824), written by Alessandro Manzoni (1785-1873), a nineteenth century Italian poet, novelist and philosopher. The interconnectedness of economic deprivations and the occurrence of the pestilence are woven through the narrative of *The Betrothed*. The novel tells the story of Renzo and Lucia intertwining with the political and historical narratives of the time in which they lived. The novel begins with the attempt made by Renzo and Lucia to get married but it was refused by the Friar Don Abbondio and, towards the end of the novel they get married. In between Manzoni tells the readers the story of Italy especially Milan and exposes the socio-political, religious and historical undercurrents and dynamics of the region. In another way, the novel is a fine documentation of the war, famine and pestilence occurred in seventeenth century Italy with the Spanish and French invasion.

Pestilence and Poverty

Through the prism of the story of Renzo and Lucia and Don Rodrigo, Don Abbondio and Father Cristoforo, Manzoni looks at the socio-political and economic conditions of Milan in early modern period. The 1630 Milanese plague was preceded by a famine in which people suffered widespread shortage of food grains and other food stuffs and the authorities had to order decrees for controlling and regulating hoarding and price rise of food grains. People too were prevented from collecting too much food stuffs in their homes. The government had fixed the prices of food stuffs and proclaimed declaration of greater penalties like hefty fines and corporal penalties "up to service in the galleys, at the discretion of His Excellency, and according to the gravity of each case and the rank of the person involved" (Manzoni 197). Even though the steps like this had been taken by the government, it didn't stop the inevitable from happening. The author gives a detailed description of the horrendous scenes of human deprivation and miseries. He writes:

> Shops were closed everywhere, and the workshops were nearly all deserted. The streets were a terrible sight – a parade-ground for passing miseries, and a dwelling place for the miserable who could no longer move on… all wandering from door to door, from street to street, leaning against the corners of buildings, lying huddled on the paving-stones,

> by houses and by churches, either pleading pitifully for alms or silently torn between cruel necessity and still unconquered feelings of shame; lean, exhausted, and shivering with cold or hunger in their scanty, ragged clothing, which often still showed traces of their earlier prosperity (198).

People, irrespective of their social class or social position or occupations they pursued, were ended up as beggars, penniless and starving. Amid these miseries of hunger, famine and deprivations, Manzoni writes that, a team of six priests under the leadership of Federigo Borromeo took care of the neediest through their generous act. Cardinal Borromeo distributed grain and money to various parishes and distributed alms to the needy and secretly rescued many poor families. Every morning, the Cardinal was able to distribute two thousand bowls of rice soup from his palace. The famine had spread still and reached mortal proportions. Manzoni adds that "Death was everywhere, and from every side more people flocked into the city" (200). Famine, hunger and human miseries had caused for great reconfigurations in the demography of Milan. As people died, their places were filled by people who migrated from the neighboring villages and districts and even from towns outside of the frontiers. The exodus of people in large numbers across the borders of Milan and the wretched and unhygienic conditions in which people lived caused by the famine and miseries made Milan a vulnerable place and the threat of the breaking out of a pestilence of some kind was looming large in the atmosphere. The ubiquity of death in Milan is evident of this possibility. Manzoni writes:

> 'I myself',…, 'saw the corpse of a woman lying in the road that girds the walls round about … half-chewed grass was dropping out of her mouth, and her lips were still twisted as if in an expression of angry effort … on her back was slung a bundle, and on her chest was slung a baby in its swaddling clothes, weeping as it sought for the breast … some compassionate people came by, who picked the poor little creature up, and carried it away, thus fulfilling in the meanwhile the first duty of a mother(201).

Manzoni further observes that a great blessing of the great famine that ravaged the city was that the contrast between rags and riches that was widely apparent in Milan was completely eroded (Ibid). The threat of an epidemic seemed more imminent as more number of people died and the miseries of hunger and deprivations increased. The number of beggars was increased and corpses began to pile upon in the city. Significant warnings regarding this have been given by the Commission of Public Health. Then the authorities decided to move all beggars to the Lazaretto, the pest house, where they would be properly fed and looked after at the public expense. As plague had afflicted Italy at regular intervals, the original purpose of this building was providing shelter to those stricken by plague. Lazaretto of Milan was a rectangular enclosure outside the city separated from the city wall by a road and a water-course. Each side of the rectangular building was divided into a series of small rooms in a single storey. Manzoni tells that "the construction of the Lazaretto had begun in 1489 with money from a private legacy and had been continued with the help of public funds and of other requests and gifts" (Ibid). Dante. M Zanetti authenticates this fact. He views:

> The plans for the lazaretto dated from the era of Francesco Sforza, mid-fifteenth century, and the cornerstone was laid in 1488, shortly after a severe plague in 1483-1485. Threats of plague between 1506 and 1516 hastened its completion, a nearly square compound of 288 rooms surrounding a large campground, bounded on the outside by a moat or ditch. It was fully operational during the plague of 1524, though it was insufficient to the needs of that great plague (cited in Carmichael 152).

All beggars of the city were invited to the Lazaretto to take refuge in it and those who resisted the invitation and preferred to remain in the city streets were forcefully brought to this place, even by putting in chains. Soon the number of inmates in the Lazaretto was increased to nearly ten thousand. Carmichael observes:

> Estimates of the lazaretto population during the peak months of plague range from 12,000 to 16,000 daily—far greater management challenge than that in Fra Paolo's plague. But the lazaretto had also become a small city unto itself, with more space devoted to the maintenance of living quarters (both "clean" and "dirty" servants' areas), and stables for the horses (156).

Historical evidences speak for the fact that wretched conditions had prevailed in this pest house. Authorities were not able to maintain cleanliness and food distributed inside was of inferior quality or "adulterated with various heavy unnourishing materials"(Manzoni 201). Amidst the shortage of healthy and clean food and water, the high toll of daily deaths inside the Lazaretto created the panic of pestilence inside this pest house. As the daily death toll became above hundred, the health commission doubted the spreading of the infection. Thus lazaretto was opened and all those who were not stricken by the illness were permitted to go and the city again "resounded with the cries of the poor" (Ibid).

Reading Alessandro Manzoni's *The Betrothed* gives us textual evidences for corroborating the fact that imperial designs of the military forces of the nations have played a pivotal role in spreading bubonic plague in Europe at different points of its history. Manzoni adds that "plague had afflicted the whole of Europe, in one country or in another country, at regular intervals" (Ibid). The author provides the indication that plague was brought to Milan with the military advancements of Spanish Emperor Don Gonzalo. He tells:

> While the French army withdrew in one direction, the army of the Emperor was advancing from another. It had invaded the Grisons and Valtellina, and was preparing to descend on the duchy of Milan. Apart from all the other disasters that might be expected to follow from their passage, definite news had reached the commission of public health that this army was carrying the plague with it (203).

Plague had been brought to Milan in Italy by the invading army troupes. The history of the occurrences of diseases in Europe is concomitant with imperialistic designs of the marching military troops and they became harbingers of destruction and catastrophes. Manzoni notes that throughout the route the army had passed, corpses began to be found and people began to fall ill in large numbers and in groups with strange symptoms (217). The

author points out the initial inaction and unwillingness to report the illness as plague has caused for its further spreading. He observes that Ludavico Stella, a reputed physician, reported the health commission about the outbreak of plague in the village of Chiuso, a remote hamlet in the district of Lecco. But the commission, due to their negligence, failed to report it as plague. When more deaths began to be reported, the health commission sent two delegates to make necessary observations. When they travelled through the territory of Lecco and Valsassina and through the district of Monte de Brianza and Gera d' Adda, what they found was "barricades across the entrances to villages, or villages that were almost completely deserted, their inhabitants having run away and set up tents in the surrounding fields, or wandered further from home"(218). It shows that plague had made its inroads into the remote areas of Milan even though the authorities had failed to recognize it. Manzoni writes that the Governor Ambrogio Spinola gave decree for the public festivities for the birth of the prince Carlos, the first born son of King Philip IV "oblivious or uncaring of the danger of a great public gathering in those circumstances"(Ibid). Similarly the attitude of the people to the news of a contagious disease and imminent disaster and death was "incredulous mockery and angry contempt" (219). He views that "the famine of the previous year, the cruelties inflicted by the soldiers, and the general distress of mind that followed these things, seemed to everybody to be more than enough to account for the deaths" (Ibid). The author writes about the soldier who brought plague to Milan:

> …the unhappy, doom-laden soldier entered the city carrying a great bundle of clothing which he had bought or stolen from the German troops. He went to stay with relations in the East Gate quarter, near the Capuchin monastery. He fell sick almost as soon as he arrived, and was taken to the hospital. A bubonic swelling was discovered in one of his armpits, which made the doctors suspect the truth; and four days later he died (Ibid).

The health commission did isolate his family and put them in house quarantine and the bed and clothes were burned. But the soldier who carried the seeds of the disease had already passed the same to others. The two nursing orderlies and the good friar who gave him spiritual comfort had fallen sick and the owner of the house in which the soldier stayed was moved to the lazaretto. The first move from the part of the health commission was restricting the movement of the people from the places where the contagion was spread. But the inordinate delay in strictly executing the resolution of restricting the entry of afflicted people to Milan caused for the spreading of the disease. The author writes that the resolution was taken on 31st of October 1729 but it was published only on the 29th of the following month (Ibid). The fear of quarantine and putting people in the lazaretto made the people evading from reporting the cases of affliction and they did it by bribing the grave diggers and their superintendents. People took the life in lazaretto as "unceasing and pointless acts of harassment" (220). The chief physician and the professor of medicine at the University of Pavia, Manzoni writes, was accused by people as "the ringleader of those who wanted there to be plague at all costs and that he was the one who was terrifying the whole city, with that scowl of his, and that great ugly beard, and all to improve business for doctors"

(Ibid). The people of Milan even evaded from calling the disease as plague and they first called it 'malign fever' or the 'pestilent fever' and they didn't admit the fact that the disease was transmitted by contact (Ibid).

Pestilence and Popular Imagination

As the death toll out of plague and confusions inside the lazaretto were increased, divergent theories and stories began to be constructed regarding the origin of the disease. The doubts of the people regarding the origin of the disease began to acquire multiple proportions. Manzoni views that a letter signed by King Philip IV and dispatched to the Governor endorses the monstrous treachery devised by some enemies as the root cause of plague. The health commission proclaimed rewards for information leading to the conviction of the author of the outrage.

Galore of traditional stories and folktales had flourished regarding the genesis of the epidemic in early modern Europe. Many of the plague narratives are documents of individual experiences and they provided measures to prevent the occurrences of the disease in future. More, these narratives had significantly helped for capturing the essence and meaning of a deadly disease like plague before it was scientifically proved as microbial transmissions based on the germ theory of the disease. Ann G Carmichael observes in this regard:

> Different oral and written memories sometimes fused, sometimes diverged, in order to promote particular ideas about how the plague could be handled, about who presented a danger to the community in times of crisis, and about whose version of the past carried the truths upon which future action could be guided (Carmichael 133-34).

False stories regarding the origin of a disease become the cause for the targeting, expulsion and demonization of a particular community by the dominant communities and such commonplace injustices were widely prevalent during the sagas of early modern European plagues. When plague entered Udini, the Italian town in 1571, a Jewish pregnant woman became its first victim. Within two months, the Christian Udinese "decided to expel the Jews from Udine "in perpetuity." To effect this action they needed the local Venetian governor's cooperation, which Domenico Bollandi readily supplied, possibly as a strategy to save their lives" (136). Candido, an Italian diarist, remarks that as plague was first discovered in a Jewish household first, on the façade of the house a sign with the word MEMINI, with the meaning "Remember" was exhibited. Carmichael views that this infamous memorial remained on the house from 1556 to the early twentieth century as a reminder of why none of the Jews were permitted to reside within Udine (137). Carmichael, citing Predo, observes:

> Between 1348 and 1350 the idea of *pestis manufacta* first took shape: a plague-causing substance could be manufactured—that is, created by humans rather than merely harnessed by them or passively transmitted in their person or belongings. Thus Jews did not have to have plague to cause it or to spread it (Ibid).

These historical evidences substantiate the view that before the scientific discovery of the actual causes of the transmission of the disease, false narratives and stories of plague were constructed with the vested interest of targeting a particular community. As more people were fed with these stories, the harassment and brutalization of the targeted group were legalized by the authorities and became more widespread. Ann .G. Carmichael observes that the origin legends of plague operated like a folkloric tradition. He further views that "the material, historical realities are effectively suppressed by a collective memory of where plague appears first" (138). The false propaganda of these sorts has worked upon the imaginations of the common people and they used it for their purposes of vendetta. Many of such stories have been later proved as false and unfounded stories. Edward Muir observes that "Documents strictly contemporary with the plague of 1511 give no account of the relationship of Jews to the outbreak of plague; they do not mention any one house or even district of the city in particular as the early focus of plague controls" (Muir 209). Similarly, Edward Eckert, who painstakingly studied the overland routes of the spread of plague in Germanic Europe, views that origin stories of plague are xenophobic in nature and they make people "to watch closely and bear witness to the sinister but everyday causes of catastrophe"(Eckert 133). The origin stories of plague devised and manipulated by people are sinister in nature and intended for the purposes of escaping the wrath of the experiences of the disease and to play venomous games upon the targeted communities. Manzoni's *The Betrothed* renders us the instances of such stories fabricated by people to escape from the somber realities of the pestilence.

Manzoni's *The Betrothed* is replete with instances of man turning vengeful and xenophobic in the midst of the pestilence. The acceptances the false stories get regarding the origin of the disease authenticate this argument. The theory that the disease spread by anointing unguent as the cause of the spread of the disease was widely spread among the people faster than the disease itself and thus the fear of the disease was projected towards the fear of the anointers. The violence of the disease was called as "a subtle, instantaneous, most penetrating poison" (Manzoni 225). Plague had created a panic situation of mutual suspicion and foreigners began to be mistrusted, arrested, interrogated and beaten up cruelly. Manzoni writes:

> Any traveler who was found by the peasants off the main road, or who loitered on the road to look around, or who lay down for a rest; any unknown person with anything strange or suspicious about his face or clothing, was an anointer. The first word of his arrival from anyone, even a child, was enough to set bells ringing and crowds gathering. The unhappy stranger would be stoned, or dragged off to prison by the mob (Ibid).

Manzoni has undertaken extensive researches into the 1630 Milanese plague and has found the strong grip the false stories regarding the origin of the plague had on human imaginations. In his book *The Column of Infamy* (1964), Manzoni makes remarks about the people's fear of *untori* or unguent spreaders and about the contriving of unfounded stories about them. He cites one such story:

> One rainy mid-summer day in 1630, a widow named Caterina Rosa looked out her window and saw a cloaked man with a black hat pulled down over his eyes. Walking close by the wall, he was dipping what looked like a stylus in and out of what resembled an ink pot, stopping to wipe his fingers along the walls (*Infamy* 202).

Manzoni notes that the man with the pen was named as Guglielmo Piazza and he with another unguent spreader named as Giangiacomo Moro were "hastily tried and sentenced to death, then piecemeal tortured and dismembered"(Ibid). The fear of anointers thus acquired wider circularity and it became the common talk of the people inside the families and outside in the society. Manzoni notes that the rumor of unguent spreaders was percolated to the present from the past incidences of plague and the imagination of the people added colouring and vividness to such stories and that had sustained the interest of the people and provided it credence as well. There prevailed many such popular stories of anointing in circularity and Manzoni relates one such story in *The Betrothed*:

> …a certain citizen of Milan, on a certain day, had seen a coach and six arrive in the cathedral square, inside which sat, among others, a great nobleman, with a dark and fiery face, burning eyes, bristling hair and menacingly curled lips. The onlooker gazed with interest at the coach, which stopped in front of him; then the coachman invited him to get in, and he found himself unable to refuse. The coach drove off on a winding course through the streets, and put its passengers down at the door of a certain palace. The onlooker went in with the rest of the company, and found himself amid scenes of beauty and terror, desolate wastes and lovely gardens, ugly caves and splendid halls, in which ghosts sat at council. Finally he was shown great boxes of money, and told to take as much as he liked – on condition that he would also take a jar of unguent and go through the city anointing the walls. He refused, and in the twinkling of an eye he found himself back at the place where he had been picked up (*Betrothed* 229).

The stories were also spread of the *monatti* and *apparitori*, the servants of the government, and their involvements in the role of the spread of the disease by deliberately "taking the drop infected clothes off the carts on purpose", in order to maintain and "spread the pestilence, which had become their livelihood, their domain, their pride and joy" (228). Manzoni adds that the absurd beliefs which dominated men's thoughts have then "acquired extraordinary power" (Ibid) and this has contributed towards the special fear of anointers.

Manzoni believes that the authors of the imaginary stories of anointers were the victims of plague itself and they themselves gave it a wide currency as well. The dreams of the learned men were also unfounded as the popular delusions. The author tells that the appearance of a comet in the month of June in 1630 was taken by the learned people as a "manifest proof of anointing" (229). People searched books, both ancient and modern, and authors like Livy, Tacitus, Dion, Homer and Iliad for finding out whether they "had written authoritatively about poisons, spells, anointing and powders"(Ibid). Both the educated and the crowd had mutually contributed towards contriving the confused and terrifying public follies. Even the educated doctors believed that poisonous anointing and witchcraft had

created plague, instead of being transmitted through contact. The following story has been cited by Tadino, one of the physicians who predicted the coming of plague, as the proof of anointing and diabolical conspiracy:

> Two witnesses, he says, swore that a sick friend had told them that unknown visitors had come into his room one night and offered to cure him and make him rich if he would promise to anoint the neighboring houses; but when he refused, they vanished, their places being taken by a wolf lying under the bed and three great cats on top of it, 'which did remain there until the Break of Day (230).

The author emphasizes that the whole illogical and irrational manipulations regarding anointing and witchcraft as the causes of plague is an example for how systematically reason and scientific logic have been thrown into disarray by popular delusions. The delirium of the pandemic exerts its influence upon the human imagination and makes him less thinking and making him more capable of dwelling on unfounded false stories. It is also evident of the fact that human beings are unwilling to recognize the contagious nature of diseases. Among the confusions, Manzoni writes, there were some people who believed till their end that "the whole idea of the anointing was a fantasy" (Ibid) but they were less courageous to debate a popular view widely believed by the people. The intelligent people of Milan preserved their senses for remaining unconcerned of the popular stories about unguents and for hiding from the "violence of general opinion" (Ibid).

In the novel *The Betrothed*, Manzoni puts his characters in the backdrop of larger socio-political and historical churnings and examines how famines, military advancements and epidemics act upon the destinies of people individually and collectively. The novel offers an insight into the interconnectedness of famines, military advancements and pestilences and the way the great human drama is unfolded in the backdrop of these ravages. A reading of Manzoni's novel *The Betrothed* evinces the fact that a disease of such a staggering proportions like plague had been brought to different parts of Italy at different points in its history in the second Millennium by the invading armies with imperialistic designs and the inroads of the diseases were made easier by the wretched conditions of famines and economic deprivations. Further, the contriving of false and unfounded stories regarding the origin of the diseases like that of anointers had exacerbated the fear and experiences of the diseases. People had used such stories for evading form the tormenting realities of the disease and thus the fear of the disease was misdirected towards the fear of the anointers. Thus the novel *The Betrothed* is an authentic record of the trajectory of the 1630 Milanese plague and it offers an insight into the way it had affected the people of the region and the way people had responded to it.

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Polemics of Identity, Space and Displacement in the time of Covid Pandemic: A Study from a Northeast Migrant's Perspective

Chongtham Rameshwori

Abstract

This paper re-examines the concepts of identity, space and displacement from a Northeast migrant's perspective in the context of the recent coronavirus outbreak. The question of racism in India is not new and innumerable accounts of violent racial attacks against Northeast migrants in the Indian metropolis at the time of an ongoing pandemic have once again exposed its reality. The paper contests that the pandemic is merely used as an excuse by 'mainland' Indians to openly display a deep-seated racial hatred against the 'others' who are not a part of the imagined 'Indian' community.

Keywords: racism, covid, northeast, migrant, metropolis

Benedict Anderson in his famous work *Imagined Communities* (1983) defined the idea of a nation as "an imagined political community – imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign." According to Anderson, a nation is imagined as a "community" because it is always conceived as "a deep, horizontal comradeship" regardless of any form of inequality, discrimination and exploitation (7). The idea of India as a nation imagines a 'community' of people who share an intrinsic commonality in terms of race, caste, language, religion and culture, etc. Despite the cliché unity in diversity, the national Indian identity is rooted in the concept of this single homogenous community and is exclusive of the 'others' who exist within the nation. The national identity of a person belonging to the so-called North-East is often questioned and ridiculed by 'mainland' Indians who are projected as the ideal part of the nation. But this questioning of their 'Indian' identity has made their living in the Indian metropolis a ghastly nightmare aggravating into innumerable accounts of racial hate, crimes and harassment by mainlanders in the recent outbreak of the Covid pandemic. This paper re-examines the concepts of identity, space and displacement of northeast migrants in the

Indian metropolis and studies how their racial 'otherness' is one major factor that prompted a large wave of displacements of northeast migrants from different parts of India.

'Indian' identity and the northeasterners' sense of belonging

British political theorist Bhikhu Parekh, in his essay titled "Defining India's Identity", states that a national identity is about "national self-definition" built on the basis of similar goals, values and ideals. Parekh argues that national identity cannot command "widespread loyalty" unless ordinary men and women are willing to own and identify with it, which they can only do if they are actively involved in its formulation (2). The national Indian identity is generally perceived to be equated with one's loyalty to the Indian nation rather than one's national affiliation and is widely understood to be associated with the shared mainstream identity of Indo-Aryan or Dravidian descent only. Moreover, the possibilities of a local identity in terms of religion, race or ethnicity is negated by the national identity that is supposedly grounded in the dangerous ideals of one nation, one religion, one race and one identity.

Bhikhu Parekh

While the obsession with 'Indianness' and 'Indian' identity is articulated through various institutionalised channels such as media, sports, entertainment, etc., the national identity is enforced upon those who do not wish to identify with the nation. As a matter of fact, it permeates every aspect of an individual's life and whether one wishes or not, it is simply inescapable. For an individual who is racially distinct from the supposed 'Indian' identity, it is a matter of constant negotiation and assertion. As Patricia Mukhim, social activist and writer from Shillong, observes in her phenomenal essay "Where is this North-East?", the Indian identity of a person from the North-East has always been "a paradox" because her identity is solely related to her "facial features" which are distinctive from "the majority Indian population which is largely Aryan or Dravidian" (180).

The national Indian identity of an individual from the North-East is filled with a sense of alienation and an entirely different experience for a northeast migrant living outside the native home state. This sense of alienation is rooted in various historical, political, social and cultural reasons and is constantly accompanied by the binary of 'us' and 'them'. Historically, the so-called 'North-East' was never a part of the Union of India and the region comprised of different ancient independent kingdoms before the arrival of the British. Once the British left, various tribes and communities in the region merged with the Indian Union. Eminent Naga anthropologist Dolly Kikon, in her 2005 essay "Engaging Naga Nationalism", comments that the North-East region does not find itself within the narrative and memory of the nation, yet continues to occupy a central position regarding the territorial integrity of India. While

Mukhim perfectly sums up the northeasterners' sense of alienation, "to assume that the people of a particular race should be willing to be subsumed under another emerging nation is presumptuous. It is but natural that freedom from British rule was seen as a mere exchange of masters"(178).

Popularly referred to as the 'North-East', the region is comprised of eight states – Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Nagaland, Mizoram, Manipur, Tripura and Sikkim. The term itself has been contested by various intellectuals and scholars from the region who feel that clubbing these different states under a single category is an injustice to the region inhabited by different peoples with diverse ethnicity, language, tradition and culture. Also, the term was conceptualized according to the geographical viewpoint of the mainland, thus reducing the region's stance for possible self-definition. As Mukhim argues, "locating a region by placing oneself at a point central to oneself is a patently arrogant stance. To people of the North-east, their world is central to themselves. So they find it difficult to understand why people refer to their living space as 'North-East'" (179).

The North-East is perceived to be distant, disturbed, unsafe and primitive in the Indian national imaginary while a northeasterner's national identity is considered as not 'real', not 'Indian' by the mainlanders because the northeasterners are racially different from the supposed Indian 'face'. For the rest of the nation, the North-East is a mysterious entity – the exotic 'other' whose identity always comes with a tag of the Asian Mongoloid race, the 'chinky' race which is inferior to that of the 'imagined' Indians. Therefore, any aspect related to the North-East is determined by the 'self' of the mainlander while the culture, religion, language, ethnicity, and food of the northeasterners are deemed inferior, wild and backward as compared to those of the mainstream imagined community. Also, the 'Indianness' of the northeastern people is often questioned in various social, cultural, political and academic spaces. The idea of the North-East is thus never free from countless negative racial stereotypes which are extremely pervasive and are often perpetuated systematically.

Identity and space of Northeast migrants in the Indian metropolis

The physical identity of northeast migrants i.e., their racial difference from the Indian mainstream is central to their everyday lived experiences in the Indian metropolis and this difference is explicitly articulated in any interaction between northeast migrants and mainlanders in these cities. Australian researcher Duncan McDuie-Ra, in his 2012 pioneering work *Northeast Migrants in Delhi: Race, Retail and Refuge*, rightly observes that other migrants can "blend in" to the mainland in ways that northeast migrants cannot because the former's "nationality and origin" are not questioned at every turn (87). Unlike other Indian migrants, the northeast migrants not only have to prove their identity but also have to explain where they come from in almost every interaction. McDuie-Ra notes that northeast migrants are not simply viewed as the racial 'other' because their otherness is also associated with the ways the region is understood and misunderstood socially and politically in the Indian mainstream. And it is precisely this otherness that largely determines how they are viewed

and treated in these cities or as he aptly puts it, "racism defines the Northeast migrant experience in Delhi" as well as other Indian metropolitan cities like Bangalore, Kolkata, Mumbai, etc (87).

The nationality of people from the North-East is questioned in both public and private places of mainland Indian cities and instances of being asked for the "proof" of their Indian citizenship are nothing new to migrants and visitors alike. The identity of a northeast migrant is reduced to a single derogatory epithet – 'chinky' and few others like 'momo', 'chowmein', 'Chinese', 'Nepali', etc. The latter two may necessarily not reflect any trace of racism but the utterance of it towards the "intended targets" in order to "derogate" them is what makes these words equally similar to the racial slur 'chinky' which Christopher Hom would say has a "negative tone that expresses a negative psychological attitude" towards the northeasterners, thus "accounting for the derogatory force for the epithet" (420). An irony in calling a northeasterner 'Chinese' is pointed out by Alana Golmei, lawyer and activist from Manipur, in her 2017 article "Don't call us 'chinky, momo, chowmein', says a Northeastern woman", "if I am thought to be from South Korea, China or Japan, I'm treated very well, but once I am identified as a North-easterner, the problems begin."

Racial epithets are extremely derogatory in nature because it is not only about the surface name-calling but also about the underlying racist ideology that is manifested in numerous discriminatory practices including violence, hatred and contempt. In his essay "The Semantics of Racial Epithets", Christopher Hom develops an idea called "combinatorial externalism" which refers to the view that "racial epithets express complex, socially constructed, negative properties determined in virtue of standing in the appropriate external, causal connection with racist institutions" (431). Meanings of racial epithets, Hom argues, are not only contextual but also supported and semantically determined by their corresponding racist institutions. While explaining the derogatory force of an epithet he asserts, "one of the main distinguishing features of racial epithets is their capacity to derogate their intended targets in deep and explosive ways" (426). Racial slurs such as 'chinky', 'momo' not only invoke threat and insult but also enforce a harmful perception that affects and determines the lived experiences of northeast migrants and the general population of the region to which they belong.

Although the physical identity is undeniably central to their migrant experiences, Duncan McDuie-Ra goes beyond the notion of northeast migrants as solely 'victims of the city' by analyzing the ways in which they create "a sense of place" for themselves and examines how they exercise their agency to navigate, negotiate and survive in the Indian metropolis. Focusing on the migrants in Delhi, McDuie-Ra refers to this sense of place as the "Northeast map of Delhi" and defines it as the collection of places where northeast migrants live, pray, socialize, celebrate and establish everyday patterns and rituals (148). He uses John Friedmann's idea of "place and place-making" to understand how northeast migrants create their own 'places' in Indian cities. Friedmann defines 'places' as "small spaces" of a city which are "shaped by being lived in" and his idea of 'place-making', drawn from Henry Lefebvre's (1991) concepts of everyday life and "lived spaces", refers to when a material

space is inhabited for some considerable period of time and acquires its own embedded patterns and rhythms of life (Friedmann 260). The "places" which the migrants inhabit are not "granted" but made through "social practices" which include the patterns, rituals and interactions of everyday life (McDuie-Ra 146).

McDuie-Ra asserts that the creation of places and the capacity to express ethnic and tribal identity of the migrants are interlinked (146). The social practices not only enable the expression of identity but also assert their 'difference' in a physical place that supposedly has no space for them. He cites three major components of places where the migrants create a space of their own – neighborhood, food and religion. McDuie-Ra here refers to Arjun Appadurai's (1996) conceptualization of neighborhoods as localities that are relational and contextual. According to Appadurai, "neighborhoods are inherently what they are because they are opposed to something else and derive from other, already produced neighborhoods"(qtd. in McDuie-Ra 149). The creation of neighborhoods by northeast migrants, McDuie-Ra points out, depends upon place-making in a particular locality as well as also recognizing the difference between this locality and other localities. Some notable "northeast neighborhoods" in Delhi are Humayanpur, Munirka, Vijay Nagar, Sant Nagar, etc. These neighborhoods provide a sense of security because they are considered to be, as McDuie-Ra observes, "safer, more familiar, more friendly" and at the same time "less dangerous, less alien, and less hostile/racist"(149). A sense of home is recreated by northeast migrants in these neighborhoods through what Friedmann terms as "places of encounter" where "daily rituals of life are performed, creating new subjectivities" (Friedmann 272). These places of encounter may be public such as offices, parks, etc., or privately owned like restaurants or 'northeast shops' where foods and spices from their 'home' are served and sold by the migrants.

McDuie-Ra cites northeast food stalls or shops as an interesting form of 'place' through which northeast migrants recreate a sense of home. Several restaurants run by the migrants serve 'northeast cuisines' while vegetables, spices, dry fish and local snacks from the native region are sold at the northeast shops. The centrality of food to migrant experiences in the city not only accounts for their sense of belonging but also acts as a space for negotiation within the mainstream. It is important to note here that food habits of the northeasterners are considered wild and less civilized as compared to those of the mainland and instances of being mocked for their food habits or even confronted by landlords for cooking 'disgusting', 'smelly' foods are central to northeast migrant experience. Therefore, carving out a space for themselves where they can nurture their food habits and create the ultimate sense of home in a relatively 'alien' place indeed needs negotiation and is definitely an act of assertion. Another 'place' that invigorates a sense of belonging is the space where the migrants practice their religious faith, especially small churches whose services are dedicated to denominations from the region.

The northeast migrants' method of recreating a sense of home in the Indian metropolis is comparable with what postcolonial scholar Simon Gikandi terms as "the production of locality"

in his essay "Between Roots and Routes." Gikandi's idea is based on how refugees from conflict-torn nations "recreate locality" in the metropolis of their host country thus protecting their roots of the place to which they originally belonged and left behind. He cites the neighborhoods of Somali refugees in Seattle and Minneapolis, Cardiff and Nairobi where they produce 'Somaliness' and reproduce a Somali identity abroad (33). Much similar to the refugees producing and reproducing localities through cultural forms or religious beliefs right in the centres of metropolitan culture, the northeast migrants recreate forms of locality through food, religious worship and celebration of their native cultural festivals, etc., in the mainstream space. Several 'northeast' restaurants and shops, small churches associated with some major tribes from the North-East, cultural events such as *Thabal Chongba*[1] held every year in Mukherjee Nagar ground or JNU campus, Delhi or in Shanti Nagar, Bangalore, and *Ningol Chakouba*[2] held in Lajpat Nagar, etc., are some of the ways migrants recreate localities. These spaces not only invoke their sense of belonging but also reinforce their identity in the mainland. The northeast migrants thus demarcate "a zone of ethnicity and locality" in the Indian metropolis by adhering to "local loyalties" although not "old" if compared with that of the refugees.

According to Gikandi, the refugees are the "other of the cosmopolitan" because they are "rootless by compulsion" and they do not want to be cosmopolitan yet they are "global" because they cannot return to their old spaces of identity and must learn to live outside both their home and host countries. Hence, despite their adherence to "old loyalties", they are forced to develop an alternative narrative of global cultural flows (26). Similar to the refugees, the northeast migrants could be considered as global because they provide what McDuie-Ra calls "de-Indianised" aesthetic in the drive to transform Delhi or other Indian metropolis into global cities. McDuie-Ra defines 'de-Indianised' as "spaces which seek an aesthetic that transports consumers away from the city, and even the nation, outside and into the global world of fashion, food, and brand-name consumer goods" (72). These spaces are physically within India, he notes, but resemble other global spaces. McDuie-Ra cites new consumer spaces such as shopping malls, hospitality or services sector like call centres, etc. while observing that northeast labour is desired in these spaces which are crafted as global because they are open to peoples outside the boundaries of the nation and its consciousness. The migrants thus reproduce de-Indianised aesthetic without the need for foreign labour as their "un-Indian" features appeal global aesthetic (72).

Covid as an excuse for racism against the Northeast migrants

The onset of Covid-19 pandemic which was first reported in Wuhan City of China in December 2019 has led to an alarming rise in racism against people of East Asian and Southeast Asian descent. News of racial hate crimes, verbal and physical attacks, discrimination against Asians worldwide has accompanied the news of this pandemic. As a matter of fact, anti-Chinese and anti-Asian sentiments have become prevalent to such an extent that the disease is now associated with this particular race. Chinese and Asians in general are blamed for causing the pandemic by laymen and intellects alike whose hatred

and prejudices are fuelled by various xenophobic conspiracy theories ranging from calling the virus a new bio-weapon to stating that it was engineered in a lab at Wuhan. People of Asian descent have become the walking target of a global racial hatred and xenophobia that will probably persist even after the pandemic ends. The Asian mongoloid face has thus become the face of the coronavirus disease and interestingly, the word 'coronaracism' has been widely used to refer to racism against Asians during this pandemic.

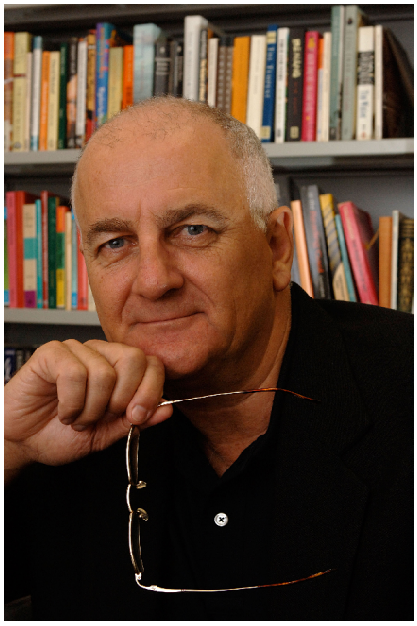
Coming to racism in India during the time of covid pandemic, northeast migrants have become the selected target in major Indian cities like Delhi, Bangalore, Kolkata, Mumbai, Chennai, etc. Incidents of racial attacks, denial of entry into supermarkets, verbal and physical assaults, eviction from rented accommodation and several others have increased manifold since the outbreak of the pandemic, making their living in these cities a nightmare. The fear psychosis has resulted in the recent exodus of tens of thousands of northeast migrants leaving their places of study or work and fleeing for their respective home states. This has however evoked the painful memory of another exodus in 2012 when thousands of panic-stricken northeast migrants thronged the railway stations in Bangalore to flee for their lives after rumours of local mobs targeting them of racial attacks began to circulate.[3]

The recent exodus of northeast migrants from different parts in the country was provoked by reasons similar to that of the mass exodus of migrant labourers all over India, such as loss of income, uncertainties about education, careers and jobs, vulnerability due to the disease, etc. But the alarming increase in racial attacks and discrimination against northeast migrants was another reason that led to their evacuation through state intervention.[4] The pandemic has made mainland Indians' ingrained racist predatory nature resurface and their obsession with the national 'Indian' identity is now projected more than ever. I use the word 'predatory' because it has become a life-threatening situation for the northeast migrants not because of the pandemic but because of the mainlanders whose ever-increasing verbal and physical attacks have inflicted a constant sense of fear and uneasiness in their minds, making their living a complete nightmare in these cities. The northeast migrants are solely targeted for their distinctive physical features that marked them out as the racial 'other' in mainstream national consciousness.

Added to the 'usual' racial slurs 'chinky', 'momo', etc., are the new words 'corona', 'coronavirus' or 'chinese virus'. These epithets not only indicate the binary of 'us' and 'them' but also come with a grim reminder or perhaps even a warning that the northeast migrants do not belong in these 'Indian' cities. Calling a group of people the name of a disease in an extremely terrifying time of a global pandemic and violently attacking them clearly shows that racists would take any opportunity to exhibit their hatred towards this group of people. Moreover, associating a particular race with the disease is a reflection of the racial hierarchy that regards them as a category of sub-humans. As a recent article on coronaracism published in a Manipuri website rightly puts it, "calling the 'northeastern' people 'corona' spreads faster than the virus itself."[5]

The 'usual' questioning of the identity of northeast migrants has now become everyday encounters of being refused entry into grocery stores or even forced to leave their rented rooms.[6] Denying access to basic essentials and accommodation in such trying times simply shows that the pandemic is used as a 'perfect' excuse to exhibit a deep-rooted racism against northeast migrants and northeasterners in general. Following the incident of two students from Nagaland being denied entry into Mysuru supermarket[7], Dolly Kikon posted the video on Twitter and aptly wrote, "Racism in India is an everyday affair."[8] The covid pandemic has indeed given a section of the mainland Indians a 'perfect' opportunity to harass, attack and abuse people from the North-East: from name-calling to physical assaults including multiple incidents of being spat on[9], beaten up[10] or even thrown out of a moving train.[11] While most of these cases remain unreported and only get social media coverage, innumerable accounts of racism faced by the migrants are a proof that mainland Indians do not need any reason to be racist, their racism is simply ingrained. Racism is another pandemic that northeast migrants currently face in 'Indian' cities.

Responses and discussions on racism in India usually center upon the idea of 'Indianness' of the northeasterners while the national Indian identity is imposed yet again rather than addressing the real issue of racism. The imposed narrative of northeasterners being "Indians" in the context of racism asserts the idea that one has to be a member of the imagined Indian community to be treated with respect and dignity while non-members can be harassed and attacked. It also implies that one is spared because he chooses to identify with the Indian nation. However, one's nationality need not be a reason for being subjected to racial hate crimes and one does not have to be a non-Indian to be racially attacked and discriminated against. Moreover, the question of cities like Delhi being a racist place in these interactions is countered by the argument of metropolitan cities being dangerous places where anyone could be a victim but the counter argument conveniently ignores the fact that people who look 'un-Indian' are solely targeted, abused, violated and killed.



Bill Ashcroft

The recent exodus of northeast migrants due to the outbreak of the covid pandemic brings to mind the departure of more than one million Chinese migrant workers which writer Bill Ashcroft mentions in the beginning of his essay "Transnation". Ashcroft introduced the idea of transnation as a rethinking of the concept of the nation-state and defined it as a space that lies between nation and state, a space where "the fluid migrating outside of the state that begins within the nation", thus accounting for the internal migration within the nation (73). Much similar to the Chinese migrant workers, the

northeast migrants are away from 'home' and 'within' the nation. They are therefore the ideal subjects of the term Ashcroft coined and their places of work or study in major Indian cities can be regarded as spaces of transnation. According to Ashcroft, transnation extends beyond the state but exists both within and beyond its boundaries and is therefore a space in which these "boundaries are disrupted" and "national and cultural affiliations are superseded" (73). He further claims that the idea of a transnation disrupts the binaries of centre and periphery, national self and other.

I would argue here that Ashcroft's claim of transnation dissolving these binaries is contradictory in India if the context of North-East is considered. The national Indian identity is an exclusive notion in terms of race because the Asian Mongoloid race of the so called "North-East" is considered to be not a part of the imagined community and any aspect of it is always perceived on the basis of the center, i.e., the national 'Indian' self. Although India has different communities categorised as "others" in terms of religion, caste, etc., the North-East is the racial "other". Rather than dissolving the binaries of centre and periphery, national self and other as Ashcroft argues, the spaces of transnation that the northeast migrants occupy in fact reinforce the binaries because these spaces are exactly where their identity is a constant reminder of them being the racial other through a series of interactions and negotiations with the mainstream on a daily basis. Interestingly, these spaces are occupied due to the migrants' national affiliation but their cultural one becomes more assertive and distinctive instead of superseding it as Ashcroft asserts.

Ashcroft cites the Lagos market women mentioned by Ulf Hannerz and states that the subjects of transnation occupy a perpetual in-between space, an in-betweenness that is negotiable and shifting, thus demonstrating their actual agency as they navigate through the structures of the state (77). Much similar to the Lagos market women who go on shopping sprees to London and return with products to be sold in Lagos, few northeast migrants especially Manipuris engage in trading of local foods and spices to be sold to other northeast migrants in Delhi, or 'pashmina' shawls, 'dupatta', clutches and jewellery from markets such as Chandni Chowk, Sarojini Nagar, etc. which are in great demand in Manipur. These migrants may not cross international borders as the Lagosian traders but they do occupy an "in-betweenness" where they set out to create "spaces of engagement" between the northeasterners and the Indian mainstream, thus exercising their agency as they navigate and negotiate. Comparable to the Lagos market women incorporating global aesthetics to their local lives, the migrants assimilate 'non-northeast' aesthetics into their localities. Thus the spaces of transnation which northeast migrants occupy allows not only for assimilating non-local elements into locality but also recreating locality within the metropolis.

Conclusion

The recent exodus of thousands of northeast migrants from different parts of the country has once again exposed the reality of racism in India. Innumerable accounts of violent racial attacks on them by mainland Indians amidst the global pandemic are a proof

that the pandemic neither fuels racism nor causes a fear of contracting the disease from the northeasterners whose Asian mongoloid face looks nothing 'Indian'; it only gives the mainlanders a perfect opportunity to openly exhibit their inherent racism against the 'others' who are not a part of the imagined Indian community. It is worth mentioning here that mainland journalists tend to sideline the issue of racism by calling it as ignorance or mere bigotry, rather than acknowledging the fact that racism is an everyday reality for northeast migrants in the Indian metropolis. In spite of the actual agency demonstrated through "recreating localities" or other forms, the reality of racism haunts them now more than before and therefore they have to depend on the safety of 'home'.

Notes

1. A traditional Manipuri dancing in which young men and women join hands and dance in a rhythmic way forming a circle.
2. A Manipuri festival that celebrates daughters and married women, by inviting them for feast and gifts in their paternal home.
3. "After rumours, northeast people flee Bangalore." *The Hindu*, 16 Aug. 2021, https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/karnataka/after-rumours-northeast-people-flee-bangalore/article3776549.ece
4. "21 Shramik Special trains reach Northeast areas, 8 more to arrive soon." *The Economic Times*, 10 May 2020, https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/21-shramik-special-trains-reach-northeast-areas-8-more-to-arrive-soon/articleshow/75661782.cms
5. "Lin Laishram and Coronavirus in the time of Mayang Racism." *Anouba Meerol* (a blog run by Manipuri youths), 29 Mar. 2020, http://anoubameerol.com/lin-laishram-and-coronavirus-in-the-time-of-mayang-racism/
6. "A global pandemic wasn't enough? Naga students are being called 'coronavirus' and forced to leave home." *WhatsHot Kolkata*, 24 Mar. 2020, https://www.whatshot.in/kolkata/nagaland-students-in-kolkata-called-coronavirus-forced-to-leave-their-house-c-20746
7. "Nagaland students denied entry into supermarket in Mysuru; Staff booked." *Deccan Herald*, 30 Mar. 2020, https://www.deccanherald.com/national/nagaland-students-denied-entry-into-supermarket-in-mysuru-staff-booked-819079.html
8. @DollyKikon. "Meanwhile in Karnataka, Naga migrants from Northeast India not allowed to buy food. Shameful. Racism in India is an everyday affair." *Twitter*, 29 Mar. 2020, 11:24 a.m., https://twitter.com/DollyKikon/status/124414097567438 4384,
9. "Eyes were burning from the paan, says Manipuri girl called 'corona' by Delhi man who spat on her." *The Print*, 23 Mar. 2020, https://theprint.in/india/delhi-man-spits-on-manipuri-womans-face-calls-her-corona/386357/

10. "Manipuri girl called 'corona': Assaulted by locals in Gurugram." *The Quint*, 14 May 2020, https://www.thequint.com/news/india/manipur-girl-racially-abused-assaulted-by-locals-in-gurugram

11. "Man from Assam thrown out of train in Andhra Pradesh over coronavirus fear." *Times Now*, 27 Mar. 2020, https://www.timesnownews.com/mirror-now/crime/ article/man-from-assam-thrown-out-of-train-in-andhra-pradesh-over-coronavirus-fear/570435.

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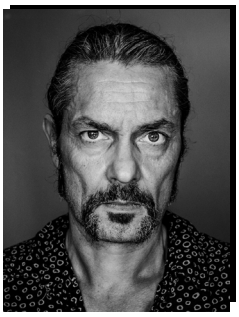
The King's Call

Claus Ankersen



Winter is tightening its grip
King Frost rides under the skin
with King Corona's stormtroopers
from England, mutants
from all over the world
USA, Brasil, South Africa and Japan
among the first
to keep us together
at out toes
separetely into the new
year two of the Covidcene

One bomb follow the next
while we diligently reshape our spines
in snake formation
as if for another kind of Black Friday
towards the entrance of the vaccine
center
two meters apart
and light years away from the non-
human
who refuse to acknowledge
science and sense

(Someone must be held accountable
for all that hatred, it is hissed in the
home theatre)

We cuddle up meekly
with belief in authority and faith
in the future, only alien to ourselves
and other aliens with different opinions
ready to fight the weak
and always properly dressed
for icy roads and brisk winds
it suits us pretty well
that now we just party
in imagination

Friday Beers stays a mirage
in the case with the other
antiques of the past
perhaps it's for the best
the teeth looks nicer anyway
the skin smoother
the eyes clearer
seen through filter and screen

Please remember
Stand together separately

NOW IS THE TIME

In the roaring

I am there already, in fantasy
in the middle of a jumping sea
body to body with everybody else
at the greatest street rave of the world
a small part of the all
on the roaring streets
in the roaring twenties
out there at the end of the tunnesight of pandemia
in lick-eachother-land
after the great reset
that the lawabiding proselytes will see
celebrated in untamed partying
and naked skin, liberty-dance of mucous menbranes
erecting of flesh-towers with pennants of tongue
not to mention a lot of expensive drinks
on luxury cruises, in close quarters
with fellow immunes
and brand new bitcoin-caps
on bald heads

The poets and the loyal upholders
already now, in the roaring
jollily rolling with the blood
thumping in sync
in the ecstacy of jubilation
at the eternityparty on the other side
where everything will be well again
because we did
what was required, stuck together
seperate, when it mattered

In the fantasy, at the end
of the run through the viral gauntlet
we shall resume our dance
around the great throne of Mammon
save our skin and do
what we do best
serve the purposes of the great ones
forward forever
together
separately

Edge of Paradise

All we hope for
is the gold at the end of the rainbow
All we hope for
is the rainbow
that it'll pass again.
that we can return
that the Great Master Director in heaven
says cut and thanks and done
so we can shake our heads and leave the set
put up your coats and hike
out of the studio and back

All we hope for
is that everything can be as it was
on second thought:
that it gets better
everything has to get better
when things have to change
may it be for the better.

We need to be better to each other.
better to the animals in cages and slaughterhouses
better to the world and to nature
we need to make less of a mess and buy less.

All we hope for
is a fairer society
with more for everyone and with enough
for all needs to be met
so we can make love
and love some more
so time will again grow round and steady
so Infinity will fall from above
and come live in our hearts
where it belongs

All we hope for
are handshakes, big hugs and kisses
All we hope for
is love, friendship, closeness, solidarity

All we hope for
is the great fraternization
fully automated luxury
and Paradise.

All we hope for
is paradise paradise paradise
even on weekdays
paradise now

Thanks, Uzbekistan!

Rahim Karim

Uzbekistan built in a month in Kyrgyzstan
three modular infectious diseases hospitals with 400 beds
for the treatment of patients with coronavirus COVID-19.
"A friend in need is a friend indeed",
No wonder our peoples speak.
Oh, how Allah likes it,
Oh, how I like it !!!
May that trouble never happen
Not in Kyrgyzstan, not in Uzbekistan.
Let the doctors walk in hospitals
No masks in their wards.
Let the silence reign in hospitals
The doctor's illness is fear...
Let hospitals become amulets,
That scare disease.
May friendship grow stronger
Friendship will save you from a pandemic.
Mercy will save the whole World,
After all, the main philosophy of Allah !!!

God's Power

In the twentieth year leaving us
God showed Mankind that
what He is capable of.
Proved that if he wants,
can instantly suspend the entire White Light.
That He does not care about the plans of Mankind.
His planes, trains, ships, even rockets
unable to compete
even with His little bees, birds,
caterpillars, fish ...
Try after this
not to believe in the power and might of the Lord.

Ball Earth As A Wounded Bird

Today in my palms the Earth Ball,
So sad, so helpless, so sick!
Lies motionless like a wounded bird.
And I feel sorry for him today.
I twist it gently, twirl it
In order not to hurt him.
And wherever I turn it,
Pain is everywhere, blood is everywhere, sadness is everywhere.
Our Earth Globe has broken wings today
I do my best to heal his wounds.
Day and night I pray to God to help me with this,
For only He can finally heal him.
Today the globe has a high temperature
Sometimes he coughs, suffers from shortness of breath.
Lies at the artificial lung apparatus!
And his life hangs in the balance ...
Today the entire Earth Globe looks like a huge clinic,
He breathes heavily - through the mask.
Especially in this winter season,
When all around is white, like in a hospital room.
I try to warm him with the warmth of my hands
I do mouth-to-mouth resuscitation.
I'm doing a heart massage.
In the hope of saving a BIRD named BALL OF EARTH !!!
Oh God save our Human nest
Let us get rid of this deadly disease.
Forgive us for our sins, I beg on my knees
Have pity on our children - your creations!

Song of Despair in the Time of the Pandemic

Chris Song

We share atypical memory
Some died obscured
We sing our grief; riot control echoes
Still purging tear smoke from the heart
we resigned ourselves to blood buns
The drugstore clerk, masked in the dark
rolls down the shutters, his eyes aglitter
dead set on the pneumonia
Some fall silent but fulfilled
Others speak but emptied

We choke on water and cough
Eyes doubt, bodies lean off
elbows panic, as indifferent as sensitive
The mask puffs with breathing
The number of cases grows everyday
The sun sets to grill the officials
making efforts not to close the border
A breach remains forever closing
Some decide to go on strike
Others plan to settle scores

We draw a neutral stick in the temple
Spring drizzle muses on the growth of
mould
Haven't worship door gods for many years
Let's have the ones auspicious for health

Stew a soup, get rid of the damp-heat
and cleanse the lung. Speaking of which,
Qingming is approaching, let's burn
some paper masks to replace the offerings
Some want to go out for a mask hunt
Others stay in unwilling to speak

Silhouettes show up on the cruise deck
and soon disappear into the mist
We wave ambiguous hands from the shore
How should we meet them after the mist lifts?
We cut short the travel and rush back for shelter
Capricious on the border is the body temperature
Contagious in Lan Kwai Fong are tears and laughter
Sober up, go to the gym, and get another round in!
Some spread panic wearing masks
So do others not wearing one

The fridge is stuffed with frozen dumplings
Can we regain the warmth of home?
Self-isolated in the small flat
the relatives we miss are always far-off
We follow a recipe to make a family dish
but still we lack the seasonings of lineage
Rationing affection and toilet paper
let's practise living life in the apocalypse
Some roll deprived of sleep during the day
Others sneak out to line up for masks at daybreak

The corona iris stares down the world
A pandemic crystalizes the hostility of eyes
unimmune from the colour and tongue of hatred
The poet who pondered on virtue and justice
passed on. You and I continue to lyricize
Shadows of the virus bewilder our strokes
from the beginning of spring to the vernal equinox
The summer still seems far. Will I see you again?
An outcry bursts from the Lion Rock
Earth and sky echo a whimper of despair

Impression

Maria Filipova-Hadji
Trans. Andrew White

The snow covers up last night's cares,
and in my soul silence falls
which seems like a solitary cabin,
lost among the whiteness.
Its little white flame flickers
and evokes memories of a hundred summers.
In my soul begins to babble
a brook, hidden under the ice.

At Dawn

Maria Filipova-Hadji
Trans.Eugenia Slavova

Trees make love at dawn,
when the sun is still asleep
and a gentle breeze whispers love songs
in their leaves...
They bow their branches
and caress,
and then subside
and touch again...
What a love!
Silently-in full leaf
and vocally-reciprocal!

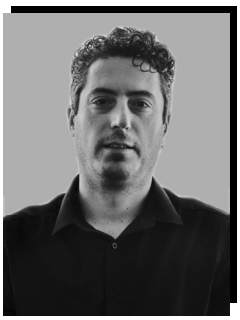
The grasses underneath
are slowly dancing waltz,
neglecting people's footsteps
and their looney world.
I want to run away
of this world
and every night
with the grass to dance
to the music of the gentle breeze...
Trees make love at dawn
and their love
is my verse.

I Stripped My Thoughts

I stripped my thoughts
and dipped
into the warmth of your eyes.
The scent of music
streamed down between your fingers.
From every sound
my body shivered,
until it became a string
and rang inside your soul

Breathing exercises

Zvonko Taneski



Caught firmly in the grip
with the intention of eradicating evil
we suddenly notice the footprints in the
snow.
Someone was here tonight to check
if we were still breathing.
Wet soil offers the necessary juices
to our thirsty throats.
Wet soil offers the necessary juices
to our thirsty throats.
Yesterday we were to test on Covid
in the village twenty kilometers from here.
It is in the black zone, as are our fatal
thoughts.
No, you will try in vain
to look for it on the map,
it is enough to imagine the lush landscape
around
and the blue birds in the fields.
They move their wings
to remind us that breathing exercises
should be done regularly.
The winter sun, though shy, will still appear
on the vault.
Look and breathe deeply,
feel the snow melt under your feet.
But first, practice your passion for love.

Pandemic, Performance and Theatre: Challenges and Possibilities

An Interview with Abhishek Majumdar

Kouser Fatima

Abstract

The Covid-19 outbreak has affected lives globally. The whole world is in a standstill as countries had imposed lockdown to check the spread of the pandemic that severely impacted businesses, economy and everyday life. As a part of this, theatres were closed down. An incredible number of events have been postponed and cancelled. That struck at the roots of performing arts like folk performances and theatres. Performing artists whose survival completely depends on theatres are the worst hit by the global pandemic.

Here the researcher talked to an eminent contemporary playwright, artistic director and a teacher Abhishek Majumdar about the challenges faced by the theatre and performing artistes, worldwide. Through this interview, we get information about the possibilities and perspectives of theatres at the time of pandemic. Needless to say that Covid –19 situation has also affected people psychologically. The interview gives glimpses of the Indian Theatre and artistes related to theatre companies and their struggle for their livelihood.

Keywords: Pandemic, Performance, Theatre, Covid-19

Introduction to Abhishek Majumdar

Abhishek Majumdar is a veteran name in the contemporary Indian Theatre world that needs no introduction. He is a playwright, theatre director, teacher and actor who has devoted his best to the performing arts, writing plays and their productions. He is one of the rarest creative geniuses who wrote on the contemporary and controversial issues like communal riots, geopolitical and socio-political issues that overpower the present world. Although he has been sternly criticized by the people and plays were banned, he did not quit and produced several masterpieces Like *The Djinns of Eidgah* and *Pah La*. Majumdar is considered as a 'fearless writer' (Arifa, *The Guardian* Tue 2 April, 2019). He is also a founder of a

Abhishek Majumdar

theatre company with Shikhar namely *Indian Ensemble* established in 2009. He is an Ex-artistic director of the company. Currently he is working as an Artistic Director at 'Bhasha Centre' founded in 2018 *(Interview with Segal* 16 April, 2020*)*. He is best known for his contribution to the dramatic world by producing research based plays. His plays have been staged worldwide. His plays have been performed in India, in Asia Europe, Latin America, USA and China as well.

Here is [e]conversation of Kouser Fatima with Abhishek Majumdar

It has been observed that theatres across the world were closed down immediately after the outbreaks of Covid-19. What has been the impact of the pandemic on theatres and performances?

Since theatre is a live act and essentially requires the congregation of people, worldwide the pandemic has effected it directly. In India I think rural, folk and commercial theatre is most immediately affected because their livelihoods are dependent on performances.

In countries which have many theatres or a large theatre industry like the UK it is similar.

However I think even other so called experimental companies and makers like myself and my peers are beginning to feel it as well due to cancellations of performances and the general uncertainty about when we can go back to rehearsal and performances.

Various organizations/ institutions have been successful to work from home during the pandemics, but how for various theatres, especially theatres in India, have been successful in this regard. What are the challenges they have faced?

Again, like I said if you look at folk, rural or commercial companies, I do not think there is much scope to work from home. Ultimately that is not the framework they are in.

I would say some companies in the metros of India , who have a certain relationship with the internet in their usual lives and also work that is not necessarily very high volume have moved to having several conversations online and also in some cases creating some sort of early zoom plays .

There's been a lot of talk about canceled sporting events, but what about canceled shows and other performances - how is this crisis impacting the larger performance community?

Immensely. Financially those companies are affected which depended on the theatre for a livelihood.

However if you look at our work which in a way necessarily loses money despite filling halls, because of the nature of the work and its scale, are financially obviously losing little. However the impact on our work is enormous because we cannot work.

How is the performance community responding to assist and educate the public during this crisis? How can live performance still exist in a time of social distancing? What role do performers play, or should they play?

I am not sure if the performance community is any more enlightened right now than anyone else. I do not think we have any special knowledge about the pandemic or how to be in it in order to assist and educate the public.

I do however think, once theatres open there will be a premium on being able to be in a room with other people, have a live experience and yet feel safe.

Theatre managements and creators have to work together to enable the above.

I think live performances will have a crucial role to play due to their live-ness.

Also, we need to bring back theatre for children in a big way after this because the effects on the mental health of children are enormous.

We also will need to talk about the rights that have been taken away during this Pandemic.

I think Covid-19 has changed the functions of all the other art fields. It has also opened the new ways of functioning theatre centres in the technological world. What are the alternative ways of functioning the theatres during Covid-19 like situations?

In my view, we need to start small when we open. In size.

But large in ambition. If we are able to discuss the big issues and ideas in a small comfortable space, I think theatre would have done its job.

How can State or people continue to support artists in the uncertain times like covid-19 and social distancing?

I think several artists absolutely need relief packages.

Like schools do.

These are essential functions of society that have evolved over thousands of years.

Society must remember that education and art rely on their participation and in hard times it must contribute to preserve its practitioners.

Everyone is well aware of your contribution to the Indian Dramatic World. Most of the works are research based or we can say firsthand experience. Does Covid-19 outbreak in any way hit your ways of work?

Yes recently I have worked on two short pieces.

Both of them are based on my field work in the area of food relief over the last months.

One is called 'Rashan' which is in Hindi and it is being part of Rage Theatre's One on One which premieres online early August. The other is a play in English called 'Salt' which was written for the Folkteatern Goteborg in Sweden as part of a series they curated called 'Urgent Drama'.

It has been performed and made available online in Swedish. It is also being translated to Gujarati and a director is looking at making a YouTube version of this in Gujarati.

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Thus Spake the Corona Virus

S. Sreenivasan
Trans. S.K. Prathap

S. Sreenivasan

You cannot see me with your pointed eyes
For I am less than an atom,
My body just a spot of acid
Within a particle of protein.
A few interwoven strands wound
Across a little globe makes my being.
Unmoving am I that stick dispassionately on
Anything that touches my self.
How deranged do you wallow
In fear of so paltry a thing as I!

The human race is of one body that
A sculptor carved in a single form.
The humans have the same
Organic cells and system of nerves;
Born am I now to awaken this wisdom:
Same are the hue, smell and atoms
Coursing through the blood in their veins.

For hiding unto yourself the truths
That your forefathers had known
Here I sow, in retribution, upon the outlets
Of your global markets, numberless
Deaths, miseries and evil days of endless tears.
This the Kaliya dance I perform
Upon the raised hood of your hubris.

Yet, spending my wrath, shall I
Depart from these fear stricken cities.
May you too return to the pristine villages
The cosmic designer has made for you.
Mongolian, Aryan, White,
And Brown, Black, Dravidian -
Throw to the beds of the black sea
Such foul thoughts of divisiveness.
May the depths of knowledge fill you
And right away shall I leave.

Before I go will I whirl into
A dance of death, and perchance
Blow your market laws to smithereens;
Shed your pride and bid me farewell.

In Hiding

Santhan Haridasan
Trans. S. Sreenivasan

In my solitude
poetry gushed forth
and flowed like a stream.
No more the dream these days
The dreams are in hiding too frightened
to come into words,
lest the hand that writes
with the quill
Might touch the words !
If the poet sneezes
the words might shatter on the paper.

while coughing
what's scattered wildly,
The Pangolin ?
The Snake ?
The Bat?

Those in the apartment
strike the vessels.
stifled love ,by virtue,
grateful out of fear.
They sing with an open heart.
Smile at each other
under the masks.
Exchange jack fruit and mangoes,
praise the stale times,
since love comes

only in stale times.

They lit night lamps
sans jubilation
like relighting the heart's
extinguished light.

They stand
without touching each other,
not the low-caste and the high-caste
The time has dawned
when there is equality
even in untouchability.

The leaves throb green.
Fresh air fills
where the smoke had encircled
We've left our arboreal setting long back.

Now we reign the cities
we have built.
The cities are empty,
we are in hiding in our homes.
The wild beasts rule
the deserted cities.

Virtue rules the land
The land peers at virtue
Invisible crown,
You lead us.

I am waiting for
the word in hiding,
the dreams;
I have to scribble
the unending lines
soon after you come.
When you come
will the poet's voice
still be alive ?
Could I see you?
Will the poet's quill
lie unused ?

Vera Virus

Nishi Chawla

Glossing over our vulnerable lies,
We hurl rocks and they fall like petals
They inhabit our relentless habits. Rupture
Wrong after wrong. So we wrestle
Our own shadow, in defiance.
A living curse, we float, nimbly, go around.
Conjuring a virus-less world, in motion
We choose ultimatums in feasts of praise,
Reckless, we try using beneficent bullets
Seek bright shelter, in lonely outlines,
Isolated rhythms, pulsating, dazzling,
Glorious triggers of disallowed desire.
Shaping us as primordial escorts, we are
Plunged into the littlest of beings.
Barbarous, graphic nostalgia sucks in
Unfettered we fly, enveloped by
Gargantuan gods that swirl in alchemy
Alongside, dishonored, replaced.

A Reading of the Cholera Epidemics from Nineteenth Century Colonial India

Semanti Basu

Abstract

This paper will attempt a study of the colonial state's varied responses to the cholera epidemics that eventually became global pandemics in nineteenth century colonial India. It will discuss two particular events associated with the cholera outbreaks in the nineteenth century India: Firstly, its implication in terms of information-gathering and knowledge control by the state and secondly, the varying colonial attitudes in dealing with the epidemic depending on the colonial government's relationship with the native people. The study reveals how the disease was politicized by the colonial state in certain instances and how it led to selective usage and dispersal of knowledge by the state for its own gain. This may help in an understanding the more recent attitudes and policies adopted to fight the global COVID-19 pandemic in a post-colonial state.

Keywords: colonialism, disease, epidemic, cholera

The global catastrophe and panic caused by the COVID-19 pandemic has brought a number of factors into sharp focus. Apart from the large-scale devastation of life and property and the unpreparedness of the world in fighting a contagion of this scale even with modern medical advancements, this pandemic has also shown us the extent to which the state controls the bodies of its subjects. The COVID-19 pandemic, it may be said had as much to do with medicine and health-care as politics. The different measures and attitudes adopted by the governments of various countries impacted the lives of their citizens as much as the crisis caused by the actual disease.

It is essential that this pandemic be examined in the context of how governments implement policies and collect knowledge of their subjects to better understand the impact of such pandemics on human lives. It is without question that the COVID-19 situation also allowed

for greater surveillance and information-gathering by centralized governing bodies. It is also clear that much of what we perceive of the disease is through the data and information that the government dissipates to us which may be selective and controlled and is certainly in many cases open to doubt. This can be clearly exemplified by the fact that there have been numerous instances of media coverage of underreporting or partial data release of COVID-19 related figures by the government, especially in India. The pandemic also demonstrates how certain groups of the population or certain spaces may be delineated as more responsible for the spread of diseases and seen as polluting or miasmatic. For instance, the coinage of the term, 'China virus' by Trump or the biased and communal reporting by certain sections of the Indian media of the Tablighi Jamaat as the only super-spreaders of the virus are clear instances of racial and communal attitudes using the disease to further political agendas.

Such instances make it necessary to consider the pandemic and its handling and effects in terms of the interactions between the state and its subjects. Much of the Indian attitudes of disease control purely in terms of governmentality and jurisdiction and policies are direct inheritances from the colonial British government. In such a scenario it is essential that British colonial handling of epidemics be examined. The British rule in India which lasted almost two hundred and fifty years encountered a number of severe epidemics that eventually spread and became pandemics not just in the colonies but also in England and Europe. This paper will concentrate on the first instance of a contagious disease being termed an epidemic officially and what this meant in terms of governmental management. It will also try and decipher the comparative attitudes towards epidemics over the nineteenth century by the British government in its colony in India. The first instance of the colonial government declaring a contagious disease as an epidemic was during the cholera outbreak in 1817–21 in India which then eventually spread to Europe. As such this paper will attempt to deal with two particular events associated with the cholera outbreaks in nineteenth century colonial India. Firstly, what it means in terms of information-gathering and knowledge control by the state when it officially declares the outbreak of a disease as a pandemic and; secondly, to see how the colonial attitudes varied in dealing with the same disease depending on the colonial government's relationship with the native body.

In order to create a contrast between the instances of the disease spreading in 1817 and earlier instances of cholera in India, we have to examine the earlier understandings of the disease as well. It is not that cholera was unknown to Europeans or was considered a particularly Indian disease emerging in the colonies before the nineteenth century. Srabani Sen in her essay, "Indian Cholera: A Myth" catalogues various accounts of cholera in European writings right from the time of Herodotus. There are also mentions of a disease like cholera, although mentioned by different names, in ancient Hindu, Arab, and Chinese texts (Sen 347). She also records a number of European travellers in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries mentioning accounts on the native Indian population and European sailors and travellers suffering from cholera. For instance, 'The Portuguese explorer Gasper Correa described cholera death of 20,000 men in the army of the Sovereign of Calicut as early as

1503 in the "Lendas da Indie" published in 1543. Correa also met cholera in an epidemic form in the spring of 1543 in Goa. Local people called it "moryxy"' (Sen 348). However, as Mark Harrison points out in his essay, 'A Dreadful Scourge: Cholera in Early Nineteenth Century India', "The term 'cholera' traditionally denoted an acute diarrhoeal disease or constitutional state characterized by the predominance of black bile or 'choler'" (Harrison 507).

Nalini Kanta Sirkar in "Cholera in Calcutta–Its Sanitary and Municipal Conditions from Early Times" also records how a certain English merchant settled in Kolkata in the eighteenth century also donated large sums of money to the temple of Ola Bibi or Ola Chandi (Sirkar 261). The goddess Ola was associated by Bengalis with cholera and the disease was often seen as a manifestation of her wrath. Large offerings would be made to her by the natives to protect themselves from cholera. But as Arnold has pointed out there were a number of other deities, sometimes male, who were worshipped in other parts of India as well to ward off cholera (Arnold 130). Sirkar also quotes in his essay Warren Hastings' letter to Major Scott recording the decimation of British troops by a disease called 'mordeshi' or 'cholera morbus'. He also, however, notes that this strain of the disease was particularly virulent in its effect, killing a large part of the troop. He calls it a 'species of plague' (Sirkar 263). All these examples are meant to suggest that cholera did gain epidemic like proportions in India before the 1817–21 outbreak and was not completely unknown to the officials of the East India Company.

However, it seems that the first outbreak of a very virulent form of cholera in 1817 led to a somewhat different reaction from the East India Company officials. Srabani Sen in her essay documents the five major cholera pandemics that broke out in colonial India. She writes,

> First (1817-1823), it started in Jessore and Calcutta in 1817 and spread all over India in 1818; Second (1823-1837), it was more widespread as it started in India and spread to Russia in 1823 and then to Poland, Germany, Sweden, Austria and finally to England in 1832; Third (1846- 1863), Cholera again invaded Europe and then America. It was thought to spread from Bombay by the sea to Egypt and later invaded Europe; Fourth (1864-1875), the disease again prevailed widely over Asia, Africa, Europe and America; Fifth (1881-1896), the disease spread over Egypt, Asia Minor and Russia in 1883-1887. A severe outbreak in 1892 among the Hardwar pilgrimage was supposed to spread cholera from India to Europe via sea route. There was a severe outbreak of cholera at Hamburg in 1892 and in several places of France, Italy and Spain (Sen 347).

Harrison points out that in general, early years of Company rule was in most instances non-interfering and not necessarily averse to using local knowledge and remedial practices in curing diseases. Seema Alavi in her essay "Unani Medicine in the Nineteenth Century Public Sphere: Urdu Texts and the Oudh Akbar" notes the large number of hakims and practitioners of Unani who were hired by the Company to help deal with the cholera outbreaks. In fact in *Islam and Healing: Loss and Recovery of an Indo-Muslim Medical*

Tradition, Alavi says that native practitioners of medicine freely enlisted with the Company to help deal with cholera (Alavi 113), possibly also because the Company initially paid quite well for their services. Since, there was very little knowledge of cholera when the first epidemic began in 1817 and Company policy was to treat it like any other natural disaster, there was little or no interference with native conceptions of the disease.

As has been already indicated, most of the native population assumed cholera to be the wrath of divine deities or demons and, thus, perceived the disease as some kind of divine intervention. In the early years since there was very little interference with native practices of dealing with the disease. However, a report in the *Asiatic Journal and Monthly Miscellany* from 1818 titled "Epidemic in Bengal" does record an instance of official intervention. It records how a young woman claiming to be an incarnation of Ola Bibi appeared at a temple in Salkea. The report further states:

> She sat there for two days in all the state of a Hindu goddess, having a young Brahmany to attend on her as priestess, and was reaping a rich harvest from the terror she had sown in the minds of the people, when unfortunately her fame reached the years of our indefatigable first magistrate. Mr. Elliot gave orders to his native officers to seize her and bring her with her co-adjutor to his Kuchherie; which indeed they did, but not without much fear and trembling, and some artifice.

It further records how the magistrate accused her of imposture and sentenced her to six months in a correctional house. The native peons and officers who had so far been trembling in fear of displeasing the goddess, on seeing her pleading for mercy like any other common criminal finally lost their fear and "hauled her to her place of punishment" (Epidemic in Bengal 1818: 454). This report clearly shows that reformist tendencies in viewing the native population and their practices were slowly entering the public sphere, and this attitude seems very far removed from the account of the English gentleman, Mr Duncan, donating large sums of money to the temple of Ola Bibi. While, the employment of native medical practitioners by the colonial state to fight the epidemic of 1817–21 points towards a methodology of medical intervention that was accommodating of native practices, the intervention of the law to reform what were seen as crude and disgusting native religious practices suggests a more reformist political response by the colonial state. The article in the *Asiatic Journal and Monthly Miscellany* goes on to say, "Though the very lowest classes are those on whom such impositions principally operate, there are some of the more wealthy Hindus who, from motives not very obvious lend themselves to the support of the superstition on which they are founded" ("Epidemic in Bengal" 1818:454).

Even though the Company initially treated the disease as only a sort of natural disaster in 1817, the recurring occurrence of the disease afflicting a large number of people in 1818, forced them to begin a process of information gathering. Harrison records that in December 1818 Company began the process of formally collecting information about the disease. "In December 1818, the deputy adjutant-general, Major Stuart, called for the systematic collection of observations relating to prevailing diseases and 'remarkable cases, with modes of

treatment'" (Harrison 527). The Bengal Branch of the Military wrote to the Company Court of Directors it was imperative to know more to stop the fatal scourge of this epidemic and received enthusiastic response. Harrison sees the first impulsion to gather further knowledge about the disease come from the army because it suffered the most direct consequences of cholera ravaging and killing many of its men.

Arnold, very importantly, notes in this context that the military was closely associated with cholera also because the first epidemic of 1817 came during a period of expansionism of British territory in India. "When the cholera erupted in 1817 the English East India Company had held control of Bengal for sixty years, but only in the previous twenty had its territorial power been extended into large areas of southern and northern India. The arrival of the epidemic in western India in July-August 1818 coincided with the final defeat of Marathas" (Arnold 126). It is interesting to note that the period of robust information gathering coincided with such aggressive expansionism, even though it also coincided with the real epidemic. Since the advent of a more structured Company domination and annexation of Indian territory after the 1810s, there had been a greater impetus on knowledge formation and information gathering to maintain and control these newly acquired territories.

Both Arnold (1986) and Harrison (2019) document that in the absence of germ theory and microbial knowledge; the cholera epidemic began to be associated with the particular climate and geography of India. For example, Dr. R. Terry, secretary to the Bengal Medical Board, wrote "there is no considerable town in the low and humid climate of Bengal, that is at present entirely exempt from its [cholera's] operation—the obstruction to ventilation in native towns, from rank and luxuriant vegetation, powerfully aids the influence of the season…" (Terry, qtd. in Harrison 529). It is interesting to note that after the Uprising of 1857, a lot of writing by British residents in the colony mirrored these very sentiments. The climate and geography of India had become associated with not just a particular illness like cholera but with a general sickliness associated with the native population that gave them a greater propensity for violence and disorder (Bayly 1996).

The other native associations that were a result of British inquiries into cholera were its affiliation to native poverty and, hence, filth and dirt and Hindu pilgrimages. Arnold also notes how the knowledge on cholera coincided with the coming of Christian missionaries to India in 1813 after they were allowed to preach in British territories. The missionaries often wrote of the pervading filth and lack of sanitary conditions at Hindu pilgrimage sites. Arnold writes "missionary propaganda had a profound and enduring effect on the way in which Europeans thought about Hinduism, its sacred places and its connections with disease. Puri epitomized all that was, in western eyes, obscene and degrading about Hindu India" (Arnold 140). The initial responses to cholera during the 1817–21 outbreak and the medical writing around it that recognized that the disease spread more widely amongst slum-dwellers living in unsanitary conditions led to faster and better urban planning in the major urban centres in British India, especially in Calcutta where the outbreak was very major in 1817–21. Such

aggressive urban reform of the cities helped in lowering incidents of cholera in the cities. But as Harrison notes,

> the link between cholera and filth was generally accepted and had become part of a cultural and moral critique that aimed to elevate Western over Indian civilization. This reflected a general shift in attitudes towards the governance of India and a movement away from conservative forms to those which sought to apply universal principles based on scientific rationality, as understood by such thinkers as James Mill and David Ricardo (Harrison 541).

The cities which were seen as more Westernized were considered more reformed than villages and cholera became a rural disease. This eventually led to more biased attitudes towards spatial politics and certain spaces like native parts of cities and so on became more associated with disease. This also happened in the case of particular groups of the population who became known as disease-carriers. Arnold writes of a "western-trained Bengali doctor in 1906" who addressed the middle classes and "dwelt at length on the dangers of catching the disease from street-traders, sweet-sellers and servants" (Arnold 138).

All of the above mentioned instances are only a very brief reading of the cholera outbreaks in nineteenth century India. They by no means represent a complete reading or even a well-documented reading of the colonial state's encounter with these epidemics. However, they do try to signify how the disease was politicized in certain instances and how a greater impetus towards surveillance and information-gathering by the state in the context of epidemics may lead to selective usage and dispersal of knowledge by the state for its own gain.

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Corona . . . Corona

Reji A.L.

Corona, a curse of God to Humanity
Or a trick by humans to reduce population
But it leads people to isolation and home quarantine
Lakhs of people die across the globe
Though it started at Wuhan
Speedy transmission of viruses where
Airports, terminals, parks and markets as transportation hubs
From human body to body through droplets
China, Japan, Korea, Vietnam
Malaysia, Combodia, Canada, India
Thailand, Finland, Italy, France . . .
And United Arab Emirates, none would spare.
Doctors and nurses, parents and children
Prime ministers and Presidents
Natives and immigrants
All in Quarantine, sealed bodies.
Order comes: "Test every suspected cases"
Positive and negative, gained new meanings,
None will be acquitted
Clinics and hospitals are full
Schools are closed, a ban on mass gatherings
A time for online wedding, teaching and kurbanas.
The sweet smell of sanitizers and
The glimpse of masks speaking to masks
Accelerate fear, anxiety and social phobias.
Pandemic of domestic violence, suicides,

A dance of rape in the hidden corridors
All the borders closed,
Suffocation normal; but breathing abnormal
A steep decline in global market
Emerging neo-markets of clinical emergency
Hate Covid and Love Life, remember all
In the midst of universal garbage in 2020,
An unlearn and relearn of 'social hygeine'.
The giant Corona opens its mouth
To engulf you and me; Sometimes
Remdesivir and Chloroquine are in vain
Good Bye oggi Good Bye qN(luàn).
Now, live with corona, be new normal,
Travelling virtual lands of no man's,
global and local seems to be quarrelling myths
Home be a silenced cold planet
Motionless pictures painted on the walls
Cries for salvation
Covishield or Covaxin, Doubt!
Waiting for good Domani
Waiting for fine Mingtian
Om Santhi! Amen! Ameen!

Notes:
Remdesvir- antiviral drug originally designed to target Ebola
Chloroquine- a drug that's used to fight malaria
Oggi – Italian word for today
qN(luàn) – Chinese word for crisis
Domani- Italian word for tomorrow
Mingtian- Chinese word for tomorrow

Literature as a Narrative Vaccine of Pandemics: Rereading Shakespeare

Sumithra Devi S.

Abstract

The global pandemic Covid-19 has changed twenty-first-century life in dramatic ways. The shared grief and shared struggle have made humanity realize the significance of solidarity and collective action. It has also driven mankind to reflect on the nervous and weedy layers of experience, which normally drive them to different actions. Literature has offered alternate worlds to humanity, connecting them across continents and cultures, and uniting them in their untold suffering. The present paper analyses how literature has offered a narrative vaccine to humanity during the onslaught of pestilences, with special emphasis on Shakespeare. The Shakespearean genius could not have turned his back to the tragedy that struck his times and affected his theatrical career, and hence the readers have a virtual gold mine of ideas and thoughts on the plague, which are as relevant to Covid-19 as they were centuries ago. The paper also highlights how the great minds of the past not only endured devastating plagues, but also came out triumphant.

Keywords: pandemics, humanity, agony, narratives, survival

Human suffering, both physical and mental, is the hallmark of pandemics. Fear of an unseen lethal enemy, who might be clinging on to the skin, waiting to invade and destroy, is more than fear of death. A veritable explanation for the pandemic came not from virologists or epidemiologists, but from the poet of all times, William Shakespeare, whose immortal character in *King Lear*, Gloucester, speaks the following words, "As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods / they kill us for their sport" (4.1. 1000). The present generation of humans, largely born after Hiroshima and Nagasaki, had not seen the kind of human suffering that the earlier generations had faced. More than eight hundred wars were fought since the Second World War, but none had the kind of reach that the big wars, natural calamities and the big pandemics of the past had. The way Covid-19

swept across the world looked like a nightmare and the beginning of the end of the world. The lockdowns were unprecedented, leaving roads, production centres, educational institutions and entertainment venues totally deserted. Solitude and silence became the unalterable plight of mankind. Without a proved vaccine or medicine, the virus has defeated science and technology. The world stands still, seemingly seeing the signs of the impending end of the world and a second coming. While Galileo's telescope was powerful enough to reveal that the earth is a part of an infinite universe, even the most modern and sophisticated microscope of the modern day cannot unravel the world of the covid microbes, leaving humanity on a learning expedition.

Nobody of the present generation had witnessed scenes of elderly victims of the disease being dragged out of hospitals to be eliminated to make space for the younger patients, thronging in multitudes. Suddenly, getting over sixty-five years of age became a death warrant, after spending years of research and innovation to prolong human life. Many countries had taken pride in the longevity of their citizens on account of advances in science and medicine. In the topsy-turvy world of Covid-19, humanity appeared to grow old overnight, and mankind seemed stunned beyond belief.

Gradually, it dawned on the world, the reality that this was not the first time that humanity had faced game changing pandemics with its dance of death. The mortality rates for past pandemics have been far higher than Covid-19. The Black Death, a devastating global epidemic of bubonic plague, is estimated to have killed more than one-third of the world's population in the fourteenth century. Old-world diseases, which Europeans had developed a resistance and immunity to, are estimated to have killed many Native American tribes in post-Columbian sixteenth-century North America. More than twenty large scale epidemics across the globe have been recorded in history. At that time, humanity did not have the kind of technology in medicine, communications and facility for recording facts and figures for posterity.

Apart from scientific information, the creative writing of the times captured the different aspects of the pandemic, particularly the agony of suffering in all its poignancy. A wide variety of writers, poets and story tellers have left behind the tales of the tragedy in different languages. They have also tried to soothe the pain of the people by stressing philosophical interpretations of the malady. Many of the masterpieces of the time illustrate the state of the human condition of the time. These writings give comfort to the Covid-19 victims that the earlier generations have also suffered and that humanity has survived the pandemic and moved along.

Literature offers alternate worlds to humanity. Pandemics, from the plague of AD 166 to the twenty-first century Covid-19, have inspired narratives of fear, isolation, loss, and struggle. Survival of the fittest, thinking along Darwinian routes, almost always envisages administrative competence and unprecedented heroism from the masses. In addition, human behaviour, during the pandemics, has had a distinct pattern, that has

been marked by gloom, dejection, panic-hoarding of essential commodities, dependence on superstitions and the irreconcilable fear of death. Stigmatization of the afflicted has always been a dark side of the pandemics that sheds light on the selfish and paranoid aspect of the human mind. Though less comfortably, physical distancing and lockdown have become inevitable to ward off pestilences that "travelled through the air as if on wings, it burned through cities like fire, spreading germ-ridden mobs, terror, and butchery" (Atwood 20).

From the Roman Emperor, Marcus Aurelius' *The Meditations* and Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron* to Albert Camus' *The Plague* (1942), literature chronicles the predictable and unpredictable responses of humanity to contagion and death. It also reveals the circumstantial and cathartic mitigation of xenophobia, racism and other entrenched discriminatory practices, as the society needs to be taken through an equitable restructuring to contain the crisis. The times of isolation, nevertheless, serve to re-inforce the value of human bonds better, irrespective of differences, as stated by Albert Camus in *The Plague*, "this drastic, clean-cut deprivation and our complete ignorance of what the future held in store had taken us unawares; we were unable to react against the mute appeal of presences, still so near and already so far, which haunted us daylong" (66-67). Above all, literature lends the much needed therapeutic touch of solace as it embodies human feelings. In fact, the arts and humanities have always been the elixir of life, enabling the connoisseurs to escape into the Arcadias of the mind.

Fear is central to pandemic fiction. The ancient world believed in the supernatural origin of contagion, viewing them as the divine's punishments for human sins, as depicted in Homer's *Iliad* and Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*. In *Decameron*, Giovanni Boccaccio (1313-1375), the Florentine writer and poet, challenged his readers to think about their responsibility to others, especially the poor and the marginalized ones, during pandemic times. Boccaccio was personally affected by the bubonic plague. When the plague struck Florence in 1348, he lost both his father and stepmother to the plague. In order to survive the outbreak, Boccaccio fled the city, seeking refuge in the Tuscan countryside. During this period, he wrote *The Decameron*, which is a collection of stories that seven men and three women shared with each other while they were quarantined inside a villa during the plague. To pass the time, each person amused the others by telling a story at night. The stories, told over ten days, contained dramatic and humorous elements in their descriptions of human behaviour: aristocratic pretensions, clerical failings, romantic disasters, corrupt institutions, business deals and marriages gone awry, and more. To this day, Boccaccio's *Decameron* is regarded as one of the greatest Italian literary masterpieces.

The Meditations, by Marcus, records the mental resilience skills required to face the challenges of the plague. An avowed stoic philosopher of antiquity, Marcus reminds the readers of the significance of patience, self-discipline and wisdom, and exhorts them not to be in denial of the ultimate truth of life, the inevitability of death.

Later medieval writings reflected more on human behaviour and ethics, linking vices such as sloth, greed, selfishness and sexual profligacy to the moral and physical origin of infectious diseases. The Arthurian legend, for instance, depicts the Fisher King as suffering from a festering wound in the legs or groin, which is the eventuality of his ethical failings. Geoffrey Chaucer's Summoner in *The Canterbury Tales* is lecherous and corrupt, and is seen suffering from carbuncles on his skin, which no salve can heal.

Thomas Nashe (1567-1601) was an Elizabethan playwright who became famous around the same time as Shakespeare. When the bubonic plague hit London in 1592, Nashe fled to the English countryside to avoid getting infected. This was the same time when he wrote his magnum opus, *Summer's Last Will and Testament* (1600), a play that captures his experiences as he was living through the pandemic. Scholars point out that this play is notable for breaking new ground in developing English Renaissance drama. One famous and oft quoted passage form the play, titled, "A Litany in Time of Plague" began to be read as a short lyric of Elizabethan times, which reads: "Adieu, farewell earth's bliss/ This world uncertain is/ Fond are life's lustful joys/ Death proves them all but toys/ None from his darts can fly/ I am sick, I must die/ Lord, have mercy on us" (52-53). The verse describes how it feels to live inside an infected body, speaking the voice of illness and echoing the proximity to death. Nashe died when he was only 34. While details about his death are uncertain, several of his biographers have blamed the plague for his death.

Isaac Newton (1642-1727) found himself in the unenviable position of trying to avoid the deadly plague a few decades after Shakespeare wrote several of his highly successful plays. In 1665, when Newton was in his early teens, and a student at Trinity College, Cambridge, the bubonic plague struck England again. Consequently, Cambridge University cancelled all classes. Newton was forced to retreat to his family estate, which was approximately sixty miles away in order to continue with his studies. While there, Newton produced some of his best works and developed his theories on optics, playing with prisms in his bedroom. This was also the time when his theory of gravity evolved. In fact, the world is familiar with the story of the apple tree outside his window and how the tree may have been instrumental in his revelation. In 1667, Newton returned to Cambridge with his theories. He was made a fellow and two years later, a professor. In 1705, Newton received his knighthood at his beloved Trinity College from Queen Anne, when she was visiting Cambridge University.

From the seventeenth century onwards, greater emphasis came to be laid on human reactions to pestilences, as illustrated in Daniel Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year* (1722), which is an insightful account of the plague that ravaged London in 1665. Defoe's insights into human behaviour in the work inaugurated a novel approach to the treatment of pandemics in literature, and served the purpose of a practical hand-book that outlined the measures to be taken in the face of such an adversity. It also chronicles the anarchy of daily life that goes into doldrums during the onslaught of a dreadful disease. The

beginnings of a focused attention on the clinical features of pandemics happened with the publication of Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* (1826), where immunization is dealt with as a narrative trope. Similarly, the American writer Jack London harped on scientific discoveries on pathogens in his *The Unparalleled Invasion* (1910) which was a turning point in the already existing tradition of pandemic fiction.

Samuel Pepys (1633-1703) was one person who stayed in London throughout the 1665 plague. The British naval administrator kept a diary, which documented the severe outbreak of the bubonic plague in London. Pepys' diaries offer a firsthand account of living through the horror of that year. His diary provides detailed information about sick people and corpses, his horror at the sheer numbers of dead, and how the toll started to decrease as the weather grew cold at the end of the year. Pepys' diary continues to be used as a great source of historical knowledge and as a reflection of a brave man who didn't run away from the epidemic but chose to stay in what is regarded as one of the most terrifying times in human history.

Edward Munch (1863- 1944) was a Norwegian expressionist artist who did not just witness the Spanish flu pandemic around him, he contracted the disease around the beginning of 1919, but was fortunate enough to survive it. Although Munch created thousands of pioneering and influential paintings, illustrations, lithographs and etchings, ironically, he is known all over the world for creating The Scream, which Arthur Lubow in Smithsonian Magazine describes as a "sexless, twisted, fetal-faced creature with mouth and eyes open wide in a shriek of horror, re-created a vision that had seized him as he walked one evening in his youth with two friends at sunset" (par.2). Munch, who lived until eighty to make great art, is revered today for creating paintings that capture our angst and tragedies. Munch believed that a painter must not merely record external reality, but should convey the impact the remembered scene had on the artist's sensibility. In times of coronavirus, Munch's iconic painting, The Scream, has taken on a new significance because it captures the anxieties that humanity goes through in contemporary times, about illness and death, of financial and societal collapse. If one feels depressed or discouraged during this pandemic, there are certainly great examples set by the great minds of the past. They not only endured devastating plagues, but they also came out triumphant. The present generation may want to draw inspiration from these brave men, who made the best out of their excruciatingly difficult situations.

There are others like Francesco Petrarch (1304-1374), Titian (1488-1576), Anthony van Dyck (1599-1641), Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750), and Gustav Klimt (1862-1918), to name a few, who were undaunted by the plague, creating works of profound importance during those difficult times.

The early twentieth century narratives, centred on plagues, fuelled by a deep-seated conviction in science, freed the people from the shackles of traditional assumptions of diseases, though the invisibility of the microbes continued to grip them in fear. Moreover,

the rapidity with which the germs engulfed the human body, in the wake of the Spanish flu and other infections that resulted in deaths, made diseases alarmingly frightening. Jack London captures this in the following lines in *The Scarlet Plague*:

> The heart began to beat faster and the heat of the body to increase. Then came the scarlet rash, spreading like wildfire over the face and body. Most persons never noticed the increase in heat and heartbeat, and the first they knew was when the scarlet rash came out. Usually, they had convulsions at the time of the appearance of the rash. But these convulsions did not last long and were not very severe. The heels became numb first, then the legs and hips, and when the numbness reached as high as his heart, he died. (1)

William Shakespeare stands majestically tall in the way he dealt with adversities because his whole life and writing career as a playwright were interrupted by a raging plague. His plays have been mistaken often as books of quotations because of the wisdom that is displayed in them for every occasion. Any Shakespearean glossary will lead the reader to an appropriate quotation to describe certain phenomena, to find meaning in life and death, to express love and to soothe wounds or to laugh loudly. Enough material will be found even on the pandemic and its impact on mankind in Shakespearean plays. The Shakespearean genius could not have turned his back to the tragedy that struck his times and affected his theatrical career, and hence we have a virtual gold mine of ideas and thoughts on the plague, which are as relevant to Covid-19 as they were four centuries ago.

Living through a pandemic, with periodic closures of theatres throughout Shakespeare's career due to the bubonic plague had an impact on his career. Shakespeare scholars believe that his career was interrupted by severe outbreaks of the plague and it is believed that his son died at the age of eleven in 1596. This may have led to his exploration of grief of fathers and sons in his plays. During an outbreak between 1592 and 1594, he turned to sonnets because the theatres were closed. Shakespeare narrowly escaped the Great Plague of London as it reached Stratford-upon-Avon on July 11, 1564, when he was about three months old. Nearly two-hundred people died in the town, which had a population of thousand. Shakespeare's house was unaffected and his life was spared by divinity that shapes the affairs of human existence. Realization of that luck when he grew up may have weighed on his mind. He referred to the plague, as has been noted by Shakespeare scholars, as an exclamation or metaphorical expression of rage and disgust in his plays *Macbeth* (1623), *Romeo and Juliet* (1597), *King Lear* (1608), *Timon of Athens* (1623), *Coriolanus* (1623), *Much Ado About Nothing* (1623), and *Twelfth Night* (1623). For someone who narrowly escaped death from plague when he was an infant, Shakespeare did not make it a theme in any of his plays. Nowhere did the plague preoccupy him. Shakespeare is unique in focusing on the past and remaining relatively indifferent to contemporary events.

In the case of the pandemic of his time, he taught posterity that plague erased social, gender and personal differences. Shakespeare responded by emphasizing people's unique

and inerasable differences. Emma Smith, a Shakespeare scholar remarks, "his work is a narrative vaccine" (par.1). It may be accurate to say that the plague is not there in Shakespeare, but its impact is everywhere in the dialogue, as philosophy, as warning and even as curse. Shakespeare did not refer to the plague as a dominant factor in his plays. He seemed to have immunized himself against it. While the theatres had to be closed for an epidemic in 1592-3, and the public, remaining under fear-wraps, Shakespeare, then an emerging playwright, produced his hugely successful narrative poems "Venus and Adonis" (1593) and "The Rape of Lucrece" (1594). Again in 1603-4, when plague made the coronation celebrations for the new king, James I, almost impossible, and one in five Londoners yielded to the disease, Shakespeare was probably writing *Measure for Measure* (1623), a war that he waged against civic corruption, with his pen. In the plague outbreak of the summer of 1606, Shakespeare may well have been working on *King Lear*. But the impact of the disease on the play is inexplicit. According to Smith, "there are references to plague which have lost their specificity over time, but which must then have caused a shiver" (par.5). A panic-stricken Lear even curses his daughter Regan thus, "a plague-sore or embossed carbuncle / In my corrupted blood" (2.4. 990) This also indicates the fact that Shakespeare was not only concerned with the plague, but also that he shared the obsession that the Elizabethans generally had with perfect skin. Elizabethan London was a meeting-ground of plague, smallpox and syphilis.

The language that Shakespeare uses in *King Lear* is exceptional. Lear had to see his daughter suffer from inflamed lymph glands, which was a deadly effect of the plague. The plague had particularly affected the younger generation of the times, and this might have been what Shakespeare suggested through the plight of Regan. In addition, the language that Lear uses reflects the total desperation he had over his children's extreme cruelty and ruthlessness. Though the plague was not a theme, Shakespeare had the dreadful disease uppermost in his mind. He knew that the audience would relate to the ravages of the plague and thus understand its horror and agony. In his plays, there are several instances of images and themes from various sources to make the dialogue forceful and effective. Some contemporaries of Shakespeare like Thomas Dekker and Ben Jonson featured the direct effects of the plague on the seventeenth century society. While Dekker wrote a series of pamphlets on the plague, Jonson brought out the play *The Alchemist* that captures the happenings inside a house during a lockdown. Shakespeare, on the other hand, focused on the psychological scars left on the people by using the vocabulary of the times. The occasional outbursts about the plague on appropriate occasions might have affected the minds of his audience in a way a detailed narration would not have.

King Lear realizes, in his own misery that he had not cared about the misery of his people, when he exclaims:

> Poor naked wretches, wheresoever you are
> That bide the pelting of this pitiless storm,

How shall your houseless heads and unfed sides,
Your looped and windowed raggedness defend you
From seasons such as these? O, I have taken
Too little care of this. (3.4 994)

Shakespeare was making a reference to the general state of affairs brought about by the plague and the apathy of the rulers to it.

Romeo and Juliet, believed to have been written around 1595, contains the famous line from Mercutio, "A plague o' both your houses" (3.1 287). Written post-1603, *Timon of Athens* sees the title character isolate himself in a cave after cursing all Athenians by wishing a plague upon them. He even goes as far as to invoke, "Breath infect breath, / at their society, as their friendship, may merely poison" (4.1 1124). In *Macbeth*, the poet sees disease infiltrate the language he uses. When Macbeth is unsure about killing Duncan, he fears the repercussions which may arise to plague the inventor, that they might quite literally infect him.

Washing of hands, which is the most effective way of preventing infection even today may have been on Shakespeare's mind when he created the scene of Lady Macbeth lamenting, "Here's the smell of blood still / All perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand" (5.1 966) when she is overwhelmed by guilt. She has taken to sleepwalking and is obviously in deep distress. She constantly has a candle with her and walks about muttering of the evil she and her husband have done. Perhaps, Shakespeare did not believe that hand washing does not help either in erasing the guilt or preventing infection. The helplessness of humanity could not have been expressed any better.

Covid-19 pandemic has changed twenty-first-century life in dramatic ways. People find themselves confined to their homes feeling bored, restless, listless, and unmotivated. But reactions have not been uniform. Stress and solitude took a toll on many, but many others quickly readjusted to work from home and began to find it economical, convenient and productive. Some found the forced isolation an opportunity to be reflective and creative. They dusted out to read the fat classics resting on book shelves for years and even created their own literary, philosophical and scientific classics. Webinars became a substitute for human interaction, though they could not generate the warmth of face to face communication. Like lunatics, who speak into emptiness, imagining a huge audience in front of them, people speak to a screen, crowded with faces, which show no emotions most of the time.

The virus has generally coerced humanity to recognize true human worth out of the consciousness of their fragile life in the biological world. This global pandemic gives them a moment to reflect on the nervous and weedy layers of experience which normally drive them to different actions. The virus forces them to confide in the warmth and love of home. It is the same love that preserves them at any time of want or hardship. It

causes them to care for each other. It makes them committed and risk their life for others. It is this capacity to empathize that saves them.

A vast amount of literature has been generated in the six months, after the initial feeling that the virus was transitory. When it became clear that mankind had to live with the virus for an indeterminate time, notebooks and pens, whether made of pulp and plastic, or the electronic variety and brushes and canvases came out to create a wide variety of works of art, not necessarily masterpieces, but chronicles of everyday events which were different from those of the pre-virus era. The novelty of the topics and emotions has given them a flavour of the times. Many of them expressed intimations of mortality and a sense of resignation. Others celebrated the opportunity to enjoy solitude and the sense of equality the situation had imposed on mankind. Many found silver linings laced around the dark clouds. Love flourished in imagination as the old escapades and secret encounters were no longer possible. A new world of imagination, creativity and opportunity opened up before men and women by the sheer inevitability of innovation.

It is quite possible that the time of the pandemic may engender a poem or a novel or a painting not only of infinite artistic value but also symbolic of the totality of the human experience. Every piece of writing or painting will preserve the mood of the people under the stress of the pandemic. After another hundred years, another generation will inquisitively look at this material for clues as to how the present generation endured the agony of the pandemic. The post-Covid -19 world will be different in every respect, and 2020, instead of being erased, will go down in history as a turning point in human history. Another generation will look at our creations as a new narrative vaccine and as a story of survival.

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"Thebes is Dying, Look": Teaching *Oedipus the King* in the Year of the Plague

Swati Moitra

Abstract

How does one read a text such as Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* in the middle of a pandemic such as the Covid-19 pandemic that we are currently experiencing? Does one maintain a stubborn distance from the present and find refuge instead in distant fifth-century Greece, or does one embrace presentist concerns and re-read *Oedipus the King* in a manner appropriate for this moment in history? In this essay, I speak of my experiences of teaching the same in a virtual undergraduate classroom and argue that the exigencies of our pandemic times demand a closer look at the plague in *Oedipus the King* and the voices of the suffering citizens of Thebes, and reconsider reading strategies for the same.

Keywords: Greek theatre, tragedy, Oedipus Rex, pandemic, kingship

Introduction

The chorus of Theban citizens in *Oedipus the King* asks the gods to witness Thebes' suffering in a song as the city reels under the plague,

Death, so many deaths, numberless deaths on deaths, no end—
Thebes is dying, look, her children stripped of pity . . .
generations strewn on the ground
unburied, unwept, the dead spreading death
and the young wives and grey-haired mothers with them
cling to the altars, trailing in from all over the city— ? (Sophocles 1984, 160)

The appeal rings out in tones of horror, asking the Athenian audience to witness the spectacle of mass death and experience pity and fear along with the suffering people of Thebes. This,

as Jantzen (2014) points out, is characteristic of the fifth-century tragedians of Athens who saw death as an evil. Jantzen writes,

> The tragedians take for granted that death is to be feared, dreaded and mourned.… There is very little in the tragedians about glorious death. Some lip service is paid to the notion; but the deaths that happen in the dramas are far more often horrific rather than glorious, like Jocasta's suicide when she learns that Oedipus is both her husband and her son (Sophocles 1984: 236), or the vengeful murder of Agamemnon and his mistress/ slave Cassandra by his jealous but equally adulterous wife and the chain of revenge killings in which that murder is one of the links (Aeschylus 1976); or Medea's crazed slaughter of her own children (Euripides 1963: 57). (Jantzen 2014, 130)

Later in the play, the chorus will later conclude that "count no man happy till he dies, free of pain at last" (Sophocles 1984, 251), echoing Solon's statement on the uncertainties of human existence and the whims and fancies of the gods and fortune. There is however little doubt that the Theban plague itself is an experience marked by suffering and horror, "[cutting] off life and its possibilities, [curtailing] the potential of the future" (Jantzen 2014, 130).

Teaching Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* in a virtual undergraduate classroom in Kolkata—as mandated by the University of Calcutta's undergraduate curriculum, under the Choice Based Credits System (CBCS)—in the year of the Covid-19 pandemic has made for a curious experience. Students with patchy internet connections come and go, struggling to follow along on their smartphones while ambulance sirens blare in the background, on their way to the designated Covid-19 hospitals in the vicinity. The teacher asks, "Am I audible?" for the n-th time, while struggling with a pet feline that insists on making its presence felt in the virtual classroom. There is an attempt at normalcy and productivity, even as the spectacle of death rampages all around, reducing people across the world to numbers, to a 'death toll' with margins of error varying from one region to another. How does one read a text such as Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* in these times? Does one maintain a stubborn distance from the present and find refuge instead in distant fifth-century Greece, or does one embrace presentist concerns and re-read *Oedipus the King* in a manner appropriate for this moment in history? I will admit to have turned to the latter, throwing historicist concerns to the wind on occasion. In this essay, I argue that the exigencies of these pandemic years demand a closer look at the plague in *Oedipus the King* and the voices of the suffering citizens of Thebes, and reconsider reading strategies for the same. To this end, I will address the historical question of the plague in *Oedipus the King* and its relationship with the Athenian plague (430-426 BC). Thereafter, I will turn my attention to the central question of health and rulership in *Oedipus the King*, looking at recent attempts to locate *Oedipus the King* in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic in the United States of America (USA) and the US federal government's pandemic response. The USA, with a death toll of above 500,000 people and an eventful election that saw the defeat of the incumbent president, makes for an useful case study in this regard, even if references to events in other countries—including India—will also be inevitable in the course of this essay. The final section of the essay will

centre on the voices of the chorus, representing the citizens of Thebes, and reflect on questions of death, survival, and human suffering.

The Plague as a Historical Event

Early on in our virtual classroom, it became evident that the traditional concerns while teaching *Oedipus the King*—the ones I had relied upon in the past—paled in significance when compared to the event of the plague, which now loomed all powerful in our lives. In the past, my classrooms have discussed Oedipus' journey from ignorance to recognition. Is Oedipus responsible for his own crimes, students argued, or is he a hapless victim of destiny? We often turned to E.R. Dodds' (1966) classic essay as a result. In his words,

> Certainly the *Oedipus Rex* is a play about the blindness of man and the desperate insecurity of the human condition: in a sense every man must grope in the dark as Oedipus gropes, not knowing who he is or what he has to suffer; we all live in a world of appearance which hides from us who-knows-what dreadful reality. But surely the *Oedipus Rex* is also a play about human greatness. Oedipus is great, not in virtue of a great worldly position—for his worldly position is an illusion which will vanish like a dream—but in virtue of his inner strength: strength to pursue the truth at whatever personal cost, and strength to accept and endure it when found. (Dodds 1966, 47-48)

In the past, my students spoke of the *oikos* and the *polis*, and the connection between the same (see Arendt 2018 [1958]): the house of Oedipus must come to ruin if the *polis* is to be cleansed of the plague. My brick-and-mortar classrooms ended up having lively conversations about Oedipus' responsibility as the king and his place in the *polis*, about what the fifth-century Athenians thought of the *polis*, and how we might think of the state in our own times. The experience of the Covid-19 pandemic, however, changed that. I read out parts of a piece by Ryan M. Antiel, a medical doctor, who wrote that our current scenario and the isolation it requires contains haunting echoes of Oedipus' Thebes when it was ravaged by plague. In the opening scene of the classic Greek tragedy *Oedipus Rex*, the contagion's effects are evident as the streets lie empty, children are ripped from their parents, and citizens from their *polis*.

A priest laments:

A blight is on the fruitful plants of the earth,
a blight is on the cattle in the fields,
a blight is on our women that no children
are born to them; a god that carries fire,
a deadly pestilence, is on our town,
strikes us and spares not, and the house of Cadmus
is emptied of its people while black Death
grows rich in groaning and in lamentation. (Antiel, May 21, 2020)

Is this not our story too, I was forced to ask, as we learned to live with empty streets and shuttered shops, and watched with horror as the pandemic hit closer and closer home? Had we not heard of crematoriums being too full, of bodies piling up in hospitals, of families unable to meet their loved ones for the last time? Elsewhere in the world, countries as disparate and at war against each other as Iran and America found themselves united by COVID-19 as they dug mass graves to dispose of their dead. Chinmay Tumbe, in his recent book titled, *The Age of Pandemics (1817-1920): How They Shaped India and the World* (2020), has pointed out what he calls an act of "collective forgetting" when he writes,

Between 1817 and 1920, over 70 million people in the world died from pandemics, a figure far greater than the number of people killed by wars. These pandemics were principally of three diseases—cholera, the plague and influenza—and India was at the epicentre of this mortality crisis, where over 40 million people perished. Never heard about this? Perhaps it is because we had collectively forgotten about pandemics till the words 'COVID-19', 'lockdown' and 'social distancing' came into our consciousness. (Chapter 1, "Pandemics of the Past", Paragraph 3, Kindle Edition)

I could not but conclude that to *re-read Oedipus the King*, taking a closer look at the plague, could make for an act of collective *remembering*, if only within the space of our virtual classroom in Kolkata. The plague in *Oedipus the King* is not the only reference to an epidemic in ancient Greek literature. The *Iliad* begins with a plague that kills soldiers in the Greek camp, courtesy an angry Apollo. Mary Beard, who calls this plague the "first pandemic in Western literature," has urged readers to remember that "western literature began with infection" (Beard 2020). It is an interesting insight, one that makes an intimate connection between human health, human suffering, disease, and literature. A real epidemic ravaged the historical Athens between 430-426 BCE. Thucydides' *History of the Pelopponesian War* claims that the disease travelled from Ethiopia to Athens via Egypt and Libya. The historian, who survived the illness himself, writes,

> No remedy was found that could be used as a specific; for what did good in one case, did harm in another. Strong and weak constitutions proved equally incapable of resistance, all alike being swept away, although dieted with the utmost precaution. By far the most terrible feature in the malady was the dejection which ensued when any one felt himself sickening, for the despair into which they instantly fell took away their power of resistance, and left them a much easier prey to the disorder; besides which, there was the awful spectacle of men dying like sheep, through having caught the infection in nursing each other. This caused the greatest mortality. On the one hand, if they were afraid to visit each other, they perished from neglect; indeed many houses were emptied of their inmates for want of a nurse: on the other, if they ventured to do so, death was the consequence. This was especially the case with such as made any pretensions to goodness: honour made them unsparing of themselves in their attendance in their friends' houses, where even the members of the family were at last worn out by the moans of the dying, and succumbed to the force of the disaster. Yet it was with those who had

> recovered from the disease that the sick and the dying found most compassion. (Thucydides 1950, 133)

Historians have struggled to pin down the exact disease that killed thousands of Athenians, including their leader, Pericles, and diminished the city's ability to fight the Pelopponesian War. It is, however, very probable that Sophocles and his Athenian audience would have known the plague intimately. Bernard M. W. Knox, writing in 1956, had observed that,

> …it should be noticed that Homer, Aeschylus, Euripides, and Androtion all mention the discovery of the truth, the point at which they would be expected to refer to the plague if it had been a traditional feature of the Oedipus story. The plague in Thebes seems to be a Sophoclean invention; to the extent that this is accepted, the connection between the Theban and the Attic plagues becomes more probable. (Knox 1956, 134-135)

Knox argues at length, pointing out that Sophocles takes up the "threefold blight" (Knox 1956, 136) of tradition—crop failure, loss of cattle, stillborn children—and adds a plague to it. Knox, therefore, makes a case for reading the Theban plague of *Oedipus the King* as a historical allusion of Athenian origin, drawing an accurate picture of an Athens ravaged by war, blight, and plague. Knox sets the date of the production of *Oedipus the King*, a subject of debate among scholars of Greek theatre, *after* a time when the plague had reappeared in Athens in a *second* wave.

> If the *Oedipus Tyrannus* was produced at the Greater Dionysia in 425, or even in the next year, all these puzzling expressions are explained; not only that, they can be seen as adding to the effect of the play when it was first produced a whole dimension of immediate reference which must have heightened the effectiveness of the performance enormously. (Knox 1956, 144)

Oedipus the King, performed before the plague-ravaged audience of Athens, is therefore strikingly contemporary in the year of the pandemic, more than two thousand years later.

The King and the Pandemic

This contemporary nature of *Oedipus the King* has not been missed by writers and journalists in a country like the USA, where more than 500,000 people have passed away after contracting Covid-19. A host of news articles appeared around March 2020 in US newspapers, at a time when it became apparent that the country was well on its way to be hit rather spectacularly by the pandemic, even as the country's leader behaved erratically and played down the threat of the virus. *When Plagues Followed Bad Leadership: Greek Tragedy of Oedipus Tyrannos is a Lesson for Trump on Covid-19*, wrote the Milawukee Independent (March 19, 2020). Carolina A. Miranda wrote an article in the *Los Angeles Times* titled, *Essential Arts: Trump and Oedipus Rex, lessons from times of plague* (March 28, 2020). Charles McNulty wrote a column in the same newspaper titled, *President Trump vs. Oedipus Rex: Leaders reveal themselves in times of plague* (March 26, 2020). The San Diego Times posted an opinion piece titled, *An Ancient Greek Tragedy Holds a Mirror*

to Trump's Coronavirus Leadership (April 2, 2020). As the pandemic progressed, showing no signs of abatement in the USA, Theater of War Productions—noted for their performances of Greek theatre among communities ravaged by trauma—launched their virtual production of *Oedipus the King*. David Crane, a professor of Classics at the Grand Valley State University, wrote a piece titled, *I Am A Virus: Staging Oedipus During the Pandemic*, wherein he spoke of the experience of watching *The Oedipus Project* online. Crane wrote,

> Comparisons between King Oedipus and President Trump were, of course, inescapable. Each figure has brought "radical change" to their respective governments; each is looking desperately for someone to blame; the specter of the "deep state" (represented in *The Oedipus Project* by John Turturro's Creon) fuels each figure's paranoia. Trump's aggressively defensive tone occasionally colored that of Oscar Isaac's Oedipus: "I, Oedipus — who supposedly knows nothing…."; "It takes wealth and the loyal support of the people to win the kingdom…." Creon asked a question of Oedipus that almost daily I find myself asking, *mutatis mutandis*, of Trump: "Who would choose to be king?" (Crane, June 22, 2020)

At one point, President Trump himself became a victim of the virus. Rachel Hadas, a professor of English at Rutgers University, wrote in a piece titled, *'What goes around comes around,' or what Greek mythology says about Donald Trump*, "Trump, like Oedipus, is the source of the pollution - or at the very least, a vector, a spreader, an enabler. Unlike Oedipus, the president has actively discouraged the hunt for the truth." (Hadas, October 8, 2020)

Why does such a comparison with an ancient Greek play, composed more than two thousand years ago, come so very easily in the year 2020? Mika Aaltola, writing about the "politics of pandemic scares" in 2011, offers an important insight in this regard,

> Diseases interact with power in that they can be read as signs of illegetimating weakness or as demonstrations of unimaginable strength. The production of health has been often framed as a powerful demonstration of the legitimacy of political rule and the absence of health suggests the existence of fundamental injustice and transgressions, not only at the physical level, but in the way political power is upheld. (Aaltola 2011, 44)

This is evident in ancient narratives, where miraculous healings, strange cures, divine interventions to diseases or curses, abound. In the *Mahabharata*, Dhritarashtra's disability—his blindness—disqualifies his leadership and becomes a larger metaphor throughout the epic. In the *Ramayana*, Hanuman's willingness to find a cure for Laxman after he is nearly killed in a battle with Meghnad, Ravana's son, is an important moment in the epic. It is a moment that highlights the incredible strength of character and loyalty that Hanuman possesses, represented here by the act of carrying the entire mountain on his shoulders. The tale of Oedipus itself, as Aaltola points out, is characteristic of disease mythology. Despite the fact that he is the legitimate heir to the Theban throne—something he is unaware of, until the very end of the play—Oedipus gains command over Thebes after he is able to correctly answer the Sphinx's riddle. In Aaltola's words, "The correct answer to the Sphinx's

question restores health in the city of Thebes and brings it new legitimate rule." (Aaltola 2011, 46) It is not blood or lineage, but rather the act of restoration of good health to Thebes that grants Oedipus legitimacy as a ruler.

It is this legitimacy—gained through the restoration of health, through an act of common-sense rationality on the part of Oedipus—that is threatened by the plague in *Oedipus the King*. At the very onset, Oedipus asserts with the swiftness of a modern-day politician,

> I wasn't asleep, dreaming. You haven't wakened me—
> I have wept through the nights, you must know that,
> groping, laboring over many paths of thought. After a painful search I found one cure:
> I acted at once. I sent Creon, my wife's own brother, to Delphi—
> Apollo the Prophet's oracle—to learn what I might do or say to save our city. (Sophocles 1984, 162)

The knowledge that his very legitimacy is at stake prompts Oedipus to dispatch Creon to the Oracle at Delphi at the first opportunity, even as he reassures his constituents that prompt action is being taken. It would perhaps not be an exaggeration to argue that Oedipus, who takes pride on his intelligence, *knows* what is at stake. It is not simply the lives of ordinary Thebans, but also his very position as the ruler of Thebes that hangs in the balance courtesy the plague. Later in the play, Oedipus' conflict with Teiresias is not merely a product of his arrogance or blindness, of *hubris*, but rather an acute awareness of the shape of things to come: should Teiresias' grasp on the reality of the situation be proven more than Oedipus' own, it marks the end of Oedipus' legitimate reign in Thebes. The king is responsible for the health of the state, both physical and spiritual. It makes or breaks political careers—as it did for both Oedipus and Donald Trump. The latter, at the time of writing this essay, has been replaced by his successor, President Joseph R. Biden Jr., even as American columnists decry the former President's *hubris* and struggle to come to terms with the human cost of the pandemic.

In sharp contrast to Oedipus' staunch acceptance of the truth after the final revelation, however, the former American President's response to the pandemic was one couched in denial. As Dodds tells us, "'This horror is mine,' [Oedipus] cries, 'and none but I is strong enough to bear it' (1414). Oedipus is great because he accepts the responsibility for all his acts, including those which are objectively most horrible, though subjectively innocent." (Dodds 1966, 47-48) Part of this denial, as contemporary scholars of the phenomenon dubbed 'post-truth' have argued, is characterized by a certain form of 'carelessness' (Hyvönen 2018, 33) of speech and action. In Ari-Elmeri Hyvönen's words,

> [Post-truth rhetoric] means an unwillingness to engage with other perspectives, a reluctance to accept that speech has repercussions and words matter. It involves creating uncertainty over whether what is said aloud is actually meant; it means believing that anything can be unsaid.… Rather than trying to persuade, careless speech seeks to create confusion and bring democratic debate to a halt. (Hyvönen 2018, 33)

A TIME Magazine cover from April 3, 2017, a few months after Trump became the President of the USA, screamed in bold red letters over a stark black background, "Is truth dead?" That a modern-day politician such as the former US President, whose relationship with truth has historically been marked by "careless speech" (Hyvönen 2018, 33), would refuse to confront the truth of disease and the human cost of it unlike the pre-modern Greek monarch, is perhaps a foregone conclusion. Part of this denial, however, must also be understood in terms of the 'stigmatization' (Sontag 2001) of Covid-19 as a disease itself, a process that President Trump contributed to. In a forum as significant as a presidential debate, Trump mocked his opponent, Biden, for wearing masks, "'When needed, I wear masks. I don't wear masks like him,' he said of Mr. Biden. 'Every time you see him, he's got a mask. He could be speaking 200 feet away from them, and he shows up with the biggest mask I've ever seen.'" (Victor, Serviss and Paybarah, October 2, 2020) Similar mockery abounded in election rallies (Goba and Berman, September 3, 2020) among adoring followers, who propagated the same. Following his recovery from Covid-19, Trump tweeted from his now-suspended Twitter account, "'FEELING GREAT!"... also insisting that he is 'looking forward' to holding a second scheduled debate against Biden in Miami on October 15." (AFP, October 6, 2020) Dr. Anthony Fauci, one of the leading members of Trump's White House Coronavirus Task Force and currently the Chief Medical Advisor to President Joe Biden, summed up both these aspects of Donald Trump's response to the pandemic in the following words,

> It's really tough to get into his head, but I think what was going on with him is he was not interested in the outbreak. The outbreak to him was an inconvenient truth that he didn't accept as a truth. It's something that got in the way of what he really wanted to do.
>
> He's a pretty macho guy. It's almost like it diminishes one's manhood to wear a mask. To him, a mask was a sign of weakness. The unfortunate aspect of this is that a lot of people in the country took that on as a mantra. That's the problem. (Nicholas, January 28, 2021)

As Susan Sontag (2001) has pointed out, the association of 'shame' or loss of manhood with illness—even illnesses understood as collective punishment meted out by the gods, such as the plague in *Oedipus the King*—is a modern phenomenon. For Oedipus, the truth is a constant and the plague a divine punishment, as opposed to a subject of shame or a loss of manhood that must be denied by "careless speech". (Hyvönen 2018, 33) In the age of 'post-truth' and organised digital disinformation machineries, however, such firm acceptance of responsibility even in the face of questions about legitimacy might appear as a mere pre-modern oddity than genuine political choice.

Citizens and the Pandemic

Antiel's incisive piece, referred to earlier in this essay, points to another important dimension of *Oedipus the King* that holds immense contemporary relevance,

The plague of Thebes also speaks to the communal nature of suffering. Despite the modern fixation on "individualized medicine," the current pandemic reveals radical individualism as a facade. We are social animals. A physician in New York recently told me, "The worst part about COVID-19 is that patients die alone, without their families by their sides." Experts recognize that the isolation experienced by mandated physical distancing is having serious mental health consequences. (Antiel, May 21, 2020)

That the pandemic is a collective responsibility has been a topic of discussion since its inception in the early days of 2020 across the world. Healthcare workers frequently point out that when a person wears a protective face mask, it is not simply for their personal protection, but also an act of care that protects others from oneself. The pandemic has weaponized our bodies, and each and every one of us has the potential to cause immense harm, regardless of our intentions. Oedipus, at the very end, asks Creon to expel him from Thebes for the sake of the city and its people, "Do one thing more, for your sake, not mine." (Sophocles 1984, 245) It is a bid to prevent further harm, and to do penance for the harm he has already caused to the community that once loved and nurtured him.

Oedipus' concern for the Theban citizens is befitting a character who begins the play with the assurance that he has suffered along with them in their pain. However, the question of the "communal nature of suffering" (Antiel, May 21, 2020) should also force us to turn our attention to the chorus, which represents the voice of the citizens of Thebes on stage. What do we make of this voice, and what they have to say about the relationship between the king and the citizen? The very first conversation between the chorus and Oedipus is instructive in this regard, wherein they exhort Oedipus to *witness* their suffering, "Thebes is dying, look." (Sophocles 1984, 160) As the conversation progresses, they remind Oedipus of his past triumph against the Sphinx, saying,

Act now—we beg you, best of men, raise up our city!
Act, defend yourself, your former glory!
Your country calls you savior now
for your zeal, your action years ago.
Never let us remember of your reign:
you helped us stand, only to fall once more.
Oh raise up our city, set us on our feet.
The omens were good that day you brought us joy—
be the same man today!
Rule our land, you know you have the power,
but rule a land of the living, not a wasteland.
Ship and towered city are nothing, stripped of men alive within it, living all as one. (Sophocles 1984, 161)

Their tone is reverential, but it would perhaps not be too far-fetched to locate a hint of a threat when they ask Oedipus to act and 'defend' his former glory. Oedipus must 'defend'

himself, not because he is afflicted with the plague, but because if he cannot restore health to Thebes as he once did in the past, what other claim does he have upon the throne? For all that he is the legitimate heir to the Theban throne—unbeknownst to all—it is not blood that made him the King of Thebes. A leader not respected by his subjects is no leader at all, for he has no political power over them. Nowhere is it made as powerfully clear as it is in the very first speech of the Theban elders. As Eric Dugdale points out, "Although Sophocles' play is not set in democratic Athens, Oedipus is nevertheless portrayed as having been appointed as king by the will of the people (1202–3), and there is an intimation that his rule is dependent on their continued support (54)" (Dugdale 2015, 435). The chorus represents this will.

The choric songs as the voice of the citizens, furthermore, represent the horror of the plague, "Death, so many deaths, numberless deaths on deaths, no end—/Thebes is dying, look, her children stripped of pity…" (Sophocles 1984, 160). This, again, is strikingly contemporary in 2020-21, as we watch the death toll rise worldwide and lose people whom we have known and loved. In the past year, the world has witnessed people being stripped bare of their dignity as health services struggle to survive the onslaught of critical care patients. Body bags, piled up; mass graves, unmarked; crematorium queues and government-mandated funerals—the chorus might well be speaking in the language of ordinary citizens across the world. In the USA, as studies have shown (see Andrasfay and Goldman 2021), Black and Latino communities have experienced a disproportionate number of deaths. Immigrant neighbourhoods such as central Queens in the city of New York have borne the brunt of mortalities, and struggled with food, healthcare, and rent. (see Correal and Jacobs, April 9, 2020) A report commissioned by Public Health England pointed urgently to the risks faced by BAME (Black, Asian and minority ethnic) communities, claiming that "'historic racism and poorer experiences of healthcare or at work' meant black and Asian people were less likely to seek care when they needed or speak up if they had concerns about risk in the workplace." (BBC, June 16, 2020) In India, where mortalities have remained lower in proportion to the overall population, saw the exodus of countless migrant workers walking and hitchhiking their way to home, many of them dying gruesome and untimely deaths in the process. The chorus' expression of horror gives voice to the disproportionate suffering experienced by ordinary citizens across the world, especially those from marginalised communities.

True to this sentiment, as the play progresses and the question of Oedipus' identity and culpability becomes greater and greater, the choric songs speak of the uncertainty and the anxiety of the citizenry caught in the middle of a plague. For instance, after Teiresias holds Oedipus responsible for the plague in Athens, this is what the chorus says,

> The skilled prophet scans the birds and shatters me with terror!
>
> I can't accept him, can't deny him, don't know what to say, I'm lost, and the wings of dark foreboding beating–
> I cannot see what's come, what's still to come... (Sophocles 1984, 187)

The anxiety and the terror caused by disease and mass death translates into further horror for the chorus in the final acts of the play. It speaks only of its horror as it witnesses the truth unfold for Oedipus, and the repercussions of the same. The final song of the chorus, featuring the oft-discussed line, "Count no man happy till he dies, free of pain at last" (Sophocles 1984, 251), must be understood as a statement from survivors,

> People of Thebes, my countrymen, look on Oedipus.
> He solved the famous riddle with his brilliance,
> he rose to power, a man beyond all power.
> Who could behold his greatness without envy?
> Now what a black sea of terror has overwhelmed him.
> Now as we keep our watch and wait the final day,
> count no man happy till he dies, free of pain at last. (Sophocles 1984, 251)

Oedipus has fallen, Thebes has survived. The Thebans, as they look back at their own survival of the plague, are offered a grim reminder that such horrors continue to scar the lives of those who are touched by it, long after the event.

Conclusion

It seems impossible at the moment to imagine a return to 'normalcy' after Covid-19, or an end to our virtual classrooms, even as vaccinations begin to roll out and a gentleman named William Shakespeare becomes the second ever person in the world to take the vaccine. Antiel writes,

> As a genre, tragedy aims to teach citizens how to bear and respond to suffering, how and when it is proper to feel pity and fear. The original Athenian audience watching the play would have recognized that if this could happen to Oedipus, "whom all men call the Great," the same could happen to them. Tragedy instructs us to accept the limits of our existence. The coronavirus is a reminder of our vulnerability and our finitude. (Antiel, May 21, 2020)

It is difficult to predict what the world will look like when the pandemic does come to an end, whenever in the future that is, or if we will be speaking as survivors the same way that the Theban chorus does at the end of the play. But revisiting the play in class, and learning to embrace the concerns of our present, allowed me to hope for one thing: if tragedy as a genre teaches us how to bear and respond to suffering, then perhaps the tragedy of King Oedipus can prove cathartic in these pandemic times for those of us who turn to it.

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Gaze and the Diseased Body: Reading the Plague Pamphlets of Thomas Dekker

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Abstract

The plague discourse of early modern England finds wide dissemination in the pamphlets of Thomas Dekker. In an era of pre-medicalization of the human body, Dekker's pamphlets throw significant light on the issues of how the epidemic is socio-culturally understood and regimented. In reading Dekker's plague pamphlet, this paper attempts to explore the ways of gazing at a diseased body during the time of the Renaissance. Perceiving an ailing body is not a neutral act; rather the gaze is essentially fraught with discursive formations of its time. In the absence of a specialized body of institutionalized medical knowledge, the understanding of the plague during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries is legitimized and controlled by scriptural prescriptions. In demonstrating this aspect Dekker's pamphlets deal with the irreducible dichotomies of body and soul, medical studies and religion engendered by the religious discourse of the epidemic.

Keywords: epidemic, somatic, body, gaze, medicalization

The unprecedented catastrophe and havoc inflicted by the bubonic plague in early modern England is a significant event in the genealogy of the medicalization of the human body. From the time of the Black Death of 1347 till the Great Plague of London of 1665, England was ravaged by the bodily misfortune afflicted by the epidemic, and this period ranging four centuries is conspicuous not merely because of the devastation caused by the epidemic, but also because of the ways in which the disease was socio-culturally understood and the way the diseased body was perceived. Though classical medical discourse is bequeathed to Renaissance England, it is a period of pre-medicalization of the human body, and in a time when the relationship between the human body and medical gaze is not established the diseased body becomes a complex site of contesting medical, religious, and politico-cultural discourses. During the plague-ravaged years between 1520 to 1625 in England, socio-cultural explanations of the plague-ridden body throw light on the ways of legitimizing and normalizing

the measures of controlling and containing the epidemic. Devoid of the consolidation and specialized categorization of the medical knowledge, the contagious epidemic's attack on human anatomy and the perceptible somatic symptoms are explained and rationalized through a set of ideas beyond and outside the ailing body. As Margaret Healy has observed, "every culture's system of medicine is required to meet two ends: first to provide convincing explanations of bodily misfortune; and secondly to attempt to control the underlying processes, to re-establish order" (10).

Bereft of the medical diagnosis and cure, the sixteenth and early seventeenth-century explanation of the epidemic relates the somatic event to the spiritual realm. The overwhelmingly convincing narrative of that time espouses the epidemic as the act of vengeful God's rage on the sinning souls of humans. So the plague-ridden body is caught within the dichotomies of body and soul, medical science, and religion. Conceived as divine retribution, the religiously-packed quasi-medical explanation of the epidemic on the one hand seeks to separate the disease from its corporeality, and in doing so it envisages constructing a narrative to find resort from this bodily misfortune in the realm of faith. The canonical literature of the period is relatively sketchy and flimsy in the representation of the epidemic and its impact on society. However, lesser-known texts like Thomas Dekker's plague pamphlets *London Looke Backe* and *The White Rod and the Black Rod* set forth the plague discourse of early modern England in dealing with issues like how the plague-infected body is perceived, in what ways the epidemic is understood, and importantly how convincingly the failure to contain the catastrophe of the disease is rationalized and legitimized to evade the fear and dissent of the mass. Dekker's pamphlets are significant cultural documents in disseminating issues related to the locationality of a diseased body in complex intertexture of medical, religious, and political discourses of early modern England. This paper is an attempt to read Dekker's plague pamphlet in the light of the discursive formations of the epidemic of that time, and in doing so it is sought to demonstrate how the perception of a diseased body is embedded with ideas that are not merely confined to the studies of medicine and human anatomy.

London Locke Backe (1630) looks back at the bubonic plague of 1625 that ravages London, and in this pamphlet, Dekker throws substantial light on how the epidemic is understood and managed during that time. Due to the outbreak of the plague, theatre is closed and Dekker's vocation as a playwright goes through a period of stasis. It is during this time he tries his pen as a pamphleteer in limning the experience of the epidemic. His pamphlets are not mere records of the stats and facts of the devastation and casualties endangered by the epidemic; rather these are the reflections on the ways collective/social "gaze" is constructed in comprehending the unprecedented epidemic. He commences his pamphlet with an appeal to look back at the sins of those who have survived the epidemic. Essentially viewed as God's retribution for the sins of human beings, the epidemic is appropriated within the domain of religious discourse during the early seventeenth century. The vengeful God expressing His rage in the form of a devastating plague on a sinful human

community transforms the disease from its somatic apparatus to a religious/spiritual dimension. Within the religious framework of corporeal morbidity, instead of medical cure and its absence, Dekker observes at the outset that repentance and mercy are the ultimate respites:

> To Looke Backe, at our sinnes, begets a Repentance: Repentance is the Mother of Amendment; and Amendment leades vs by the hand to Heauen: So that if wee looke not Backe, ther's no going forward…. (*LBL* 175)

Recounting the experience of the 1625 plague of London, Dekker postulates that the root cause of the epidemic lies in the sins of man, and therefore, the spots and blisters of the plague are visible in the body but the actual pestilence resides within. In demonstrating this Dekker conceives the image of a house where the door denotes the body, and the space inside the house stands for the soul. The marks of the plague are visible in the door/body, but the disease is rooted in the malfunctioning inner space/corrupted soul: "the spots were the signes that hung at the Doors, but the Pestilence dwelt within" (179). Therefore, the body is viewed as the mirror of the soul. The bodily infirmities and morbidities are perceived as the embodiments of the sins committed by a corrupt soul, and in this context, it can be said that the epidemic of the early modern era is caught in a chasm between the symbolic/body and the real/soul. The prevalent body of medical knowledge fails to address the "whys" and "hows" related to the nature of infection and the fatality of the plague in the human body, and even though the classical legacy of Galenic model of medical regime is widely accepted, it cannot be considered as a specialized category of medical practice that brings human body under the purview of causative explanations and curative measures of a medical treatment. As Margaret Healy observes:

> In sixteenth-century England the majority of interpreters of bodily misfortune were not learned physicians. Indeed, we might even conclude that attempting to separate medical writings into a distinct category – a practice inevitably encouraged by modern disciplinary boundaries – is a contentious and extremely problematic exercise when applied to this period. (6)

The Galenic model mainly proposes isolation of the infected person and social distancing as preventive measures, and in the absence of an institutionalized medical approach/system, the bubonic plague is appropriated to a religious explanation. When the disease cannot be explained and treated at the somatic level, the diseased body is embedded with doctrines of religious faith. Emanating from the worldliness of men, the sins are categorized as the prime cause of the epidemic as a way of chastising humanity to bring it back to the path of virtue and penitence. The religious discourse of the epidemic constitutes the central axis of Dekker's plague pamphlets, and his narration enumerates how widely accepted the religious explanation is during that time:

> When our Sinnes were in full Sea, God call'd in the waters of our punishment, and on a sudden our miseries ebb'd: When the Pestilence struck 5000, and odd-in a Weeke into the Graue; an Angell came, and held the sword from striking; so that the waues of Death

> fell in a short time, as fast as before they swelld vp, to our confusion: Mercy stood at the Church doors, and suffered but a few coffins to come in…. (*LBL* 180)

The suffering inflicted upon the body by the epidemic is perceived as a means of purging the ailing soul. The epidemic time, though marked by sufferings of bodily infirmities and morbidity, is viewed as a phase of restoring human community from the grip of worldly licentiousness to the path of God. This is a phase of recognizing and acknowledging the sins through repentance, and repentance is the only way to obtain God's mercy which can only mitigate the devastation of the epidemic. In the face of man's unchecked sins the plague is reckoned as the divine justice to remind and bring back man to the ways of God: "…that Nimble executioner of the Divine *Justice:* (The Plague or Pestilence) hath for the singularity of the Terrors waiting upon it, This title; *THE SICKNESS*" (181). Since therefore in the epidemic is considered as the manifestation of divine justice, the remedies of the bodily suffering cannot be provided by medical science. It is only through repentance that humanity can recover from the clutches of the epidemic, "Repentance is a Siluer Bell, and soundes sweetly in the Eare of Heauen" (191). In the overwhelmingly convincing religious explanation of the epidemic the legacy of medical knowledge of Galen, Hippocrates, and Paracelsus bequeathed to Renaissance England is completely relegated to periphery as something obsolete and non-effective: "…my Patients in the end, shall confesse: That Gallen, Hyppocrates, Parcelsus, nor all the great Maisters, of those Artes, did neuer lay downe sounder prescriptions. And here come my Medicines martching in" (189). Devoid of medically-crafted curative measures the ailing body becomes a site of divine justice. Therefore, it can be deciphered that the biblical Word provides an indispensable lens in interpreting the contagious epidemic's havoc. Rebecca Totaro and Ernest B. Gilman have argued that the blisters and spots of the plague are the marks of God's judgment, and early modern England perceives the epidemic as vengeful God's wrath on human sins:

> The marks of plague were marks only of judgment, in no way to be read as badges of honor or signs of God's love; moreover, they were signs of judgment, common to all, not particular to any individual and all the more clearly signs of God's great, just wrath… When God's word of wrathful judgment took shape on the human body, its clearest manifestation was as the plague. (8)

Here it can be said that Renaissance understanding of the epidemic traverses the boundaries of medical science and religion, body and soul, and in doing so it problematizes the position of the diseased body. The problem lies in that the corporeality of the disease finds its explanation in the intangible soul/mind. The bodily experience of the disease is appropriated to a spiritual journey of the soul.

Understanding and interpretation of an epidemic are essentially fraught with the discursive formations of a given society where the event takes place, and Dekker's pamphlet is a case in point as it disseminates the Renaissance medical discourse during the plague epidemic. The religiously-charged explanation of the disease notably shows the state of pre-medicalization of the human body during the time of the Renaissance. Michel Foucault in his

seminal essay "The Birth of Social Medicine" (1994) postulates the idea of the medicalization of the human body, a process, he describes, emerges in the eighteenth century that brings the human body with its anatomical functioning, human behavior, and human existence within the purview of a body of medical knowledge: "… starting in the eighteenth century human existence, human behavior, and the human body were brought into an increasingly dense and important network of medicalization that allowed fewer and fewer things to escape" (Foucault 135). The network of medicalization constitutes the medical gaze that figures out the human body as the site of medical intervention at the biological level. Medicalization of the body marks "the birth of the social medicine" (136), a social practice of medicine initiated by the state for the "acquisition of a specific body of knowledge" (138) for observing, diagnosing, and prescribing dedicated cure of sickness, and more significantly administering the entire process. Before the eighteenth century, before the medicalization of the human body, explanations of diseases rest upon a body of knowledge/discourse concerning not entirely the human body, and this evident in Dekker's representation of the Renaissance understanding of the bubonic plague. Foucault has pointed out that in the absence of the "social medicine" and medicalization of the body different infectious diseases, particularly the plague break out and disappear without any medical explanation of the disease's nature of infection and its cure:

> We know that various infectious diseases disappeared from the West even before the introduction of the twentieth century's great chemical therapy. The plague – or the set of diseases given that name by chroniclers, historians, and doctors – faded away in the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, without our really knowing either the reasons of, or the mechanisms of, that phenomenon, which deserves to be studied. (134)

The religious explanation of the epidemic during the Renaissance, therefore, cannot be misconstrued considering the fact that medical study of disease was rather at an incipient state at that time. From Dekker's postulations it can be deciphered that in the absence of a social medicine the comprehension of the epidemic is controlled and regimented by the dictums of scriptures and faith, and hence the cure, instead of focusing the somatic, foregrounds the soul as the locus of the regime of plague management. It is repentance, not the medicine that can ensure God's mercy, and only God's mercy can act as an antidote in subsiding the devastation of the epidemic:

> Then say, though thy sinnes in thy sickness made thy conscience shew a face to thee as blacke as Hell, yet speake thou to it, and tell it, that this recouery with new repentance (continued) shall make it like wings of a Doue, … Say to thy Soule, it shal bee as white as the snow in *Zalom,* and confess that Gods Mercy is like mountain of *Bashan.* (*LBL* 190)

Decoding the plague as a religious metaphor involves the politics of shifting the focus from what the disease is, and in doing so it substantiates a way of perceiving the pestilence as an agency of God. The metaphorical thinking involved in the understanding of a disease

surfaces the attempt to situate the experience of the disease within the trajectory of everyday life, and this socio-culturally constructed metaphor to make the disease a part of the everyday experience has been examined by Susan Sontag in her book *AIDS and Its Metaphors* (1989) where she views metaphorical explanation of disease as means through which the disease "can be made to seem part of the ordinary horizon of expectation… on the struggle for rhetoric of ownership of the illness" (93). Metaphorical thinking of a disease does not focus on the "whatness" of the disease; rather the metaphorical dimension of the disease, according to Sontag, aims at normalizing the fear of the ailment by interweaving it with explanations and experiences that are part of everyday life. What Sontag views as "the struggle for rhetoric of ownership of the illness" points to the process of infusing the disease with ideas and convictions that are prevalent in a given society, and this fusion marks the consolidation of an explanation that explains the disease in the light of the ideas that are well accepted when the event of pestilential outbreak takes place. Perceiving the plague religiously, not medically, points to the early modern stance of appropriating unforeseen, cataclysmic experiences to the realm of religious convictions. Dekker's pamphlets, while highlighting the metaphorical conceptualization of the plague foreground the religious underpinnings that operate within the collective thought process in early modern England.

It is not for nothing that religious metaphor of the plague espouses such a convincing explanation in the early modern era; rather epidemic like any other disasters, according to Ranger and Slack, posits the challenge to explain and combat the misfortune: "epidemics like other afflictions and disasters present and presented common dilemmas, arising from the need to explain and combat them" (Ranger & Slack 4). The necessity to explain and combat the unprecedented bodily misfortune, in an era before the medicalization of the human body, facilitates the construction of the religious metaphor of the plague in early modern England. In reiterating the dominant plague discourse of its time, Dekker in *The Blacke Rod and the White Rod* (1630) emphasizes the reciprocity of justice and mercy in the phenomenon of the epidemic. In analyzing the design of the epidemic's recurrence in short intervals in the sixteenth and seventeenth century, Dekker introduces the rhetoric of the black rod and the white rod respectively representing the divine justice that is followed by God's mercy: "....eyes only at that Blacke Rod, and that white Rod, which from time to time, have smitten and spared, This Kingdome of Great Britaine" (*BRWR* 202). Dekker puts forward the same thesis pertaining to the sins of man as the prime cause of the epidemic:

> Why carries it the Name of Plague? *Plaga* signifies a stripe, and this Sickness, comes with a blow, or stripe, giuen by the hands of Gods Angell, when (as he did to *David*) he sends him to strike a people for their sins. (*BRWR* 204)

Here, it is pertinent to note that from Dekker's plague pamphlets emerge an explanation of the epidemic that replaces the medical underpinnings of the disease with the religious postulations. The plague discourse of early modern England marks a substitution of the somatic with the soul, anatomical function with the quintessence of human values. What emerges from such an explanation is that the epidemic is patterned by a divine script, and

the corporeal manifestation of the disease is just a mere palpability; rather behind that palpability/visibility of the diseased body lies a grand design for the human soul controlled by the script of the divine providence. The plague as an epidemic is not diagnosed in an ailing body, instead, the epidemic seems to constitute a textual event in scriptures to be read and circulated. In this connection Ernest B. Gilman has rightly stated that issuing from the biblical Word, the early modern analysis of the plague transforms the epidemic into a language event:

> … the infliction of plague is to be understood fundamentally as a language event foreshadowed by, and issuing from, the Word — an event, therefore, fundamentally discursive even before it becomes the subject of plague writing, an event that presents itself as a text to be read. (73)

It is indeed not erroneous to describe the epidemic as a language event as the bodily manifestation of the disease is foreshadowed by scriptural underpinnings of the somatic symptoms. Issuing forth from this religious discursive formation, the disease is attributed to a scriptural pattern controlled by justice and mercy (black rod and white rod) of God. It can be, therefore, said that every era has its way of perceiving and locating a disease/diseased body in relation to the dynamics of discursive formations. Thomas Dekker's plague pamphlets are significant cultural documents of early modern England in demonstrating the religious explanations of the epidemic. From the reading of Dekker's plague pamphlets, it is evident that a bodily infirmity is attributed to the status of a disease by the agency that perceives it.

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Corona

Satyanarayana

The magazines are slipping down from A K 47 s
The ICBMs are staggering away from their catapult launchers,
the bayonets are showing slothful signs of rusting
and the nukes in the armories have slumbered into their first nap.
Now there is no America versus Russia, Syria and Iran,
no India versus Pakistan, no Israelites verses Arabs
No Hindu, no Jew, no Muslim and no Christian...
no black versus the white...
It's now the entire humanity versus one vicious virus..
a quid pro quo....
for human avarice
CORONA...
chopping in a row the bone and flesh
like a ruthless chainsaw
and growing as COVID 19
ready to clean the world of sin.

The Coolie and the Suitcase: Representing Surrogate Motherhood in Amulya Malladi's *A House for Happy Mothers*

Salil Varma R.

Abstract

Amulya Malladi's *A House for Happy Mothers* is examined for the diverse attitudes of motherhood that the novelist weaves into the narrative. Published in 2016, the novel is about the stress and trauma experienced by an NRI couple in their successful search for a surrogate mother in India. Malladi offers a double vision by presenting the problems faced by the surrogate as equally important to the narrative and the paper is an attempt to chart the emotional and economic problems experienced by surrogate mothers, the questions of limited choice, the stigmatization of childless women, mechanisms of internalizations of the dominant ideology of motherhood and their relation to surrogate motherhood.

Keywords: surrogate motherhood, commercial surrogacy, altruism, intended parents, commodification

In 2020, the Government of India passed a law banning commercial surrogacy and limiting altruistic surrogacy to Indian couples. Malladi's *A House for Happy Mothers* is about commercial surrogacy and the conditions that force people into it. The novel, a fictional representation of the surrogacy industry, is in many ways a continuation of the studies conducted about the socioeconomic aspects of surrogate motherhood. "Exploitation, namely the taking of unfair advantage, such that one individual or party gains at another's expense… (Kirby, 2014, p. 25), emerged as the constant theme in all the studies set out in the Indian context" (Gola 61). Malladi's novel addresses this concern in its own fictional mode.

The paper attempts to analyze the relation between Asha, the surrogate mother, and the child that she carries, and also the attitude of other surrogate mothers in Happy Mothers Clinic, the surrogate house in which Asha is housed. The relation between Asha and the

intended parents (Priya and Madhu) is also a concern of the paper along with the socioeconomic conditions that drive women to become surrogate mothers. Apart from Asha, it is argued that other surrogate mothers like Keertana, Kaveri, and Vinita throw light on the emotional challenges that surrogacy entails and the survival mechanisms with varying degrees of success that these surrogate mothers mount, particularly of an emotional nature.

A House for Happy Mothers (hereafter HH) opens with Priya in California at an emotional low, intensely praying to God to give her one last chance. A lullaby plays in her mind. She is waiting for the news from her surrogate mother's pregnancy test result. Sushila, when she comes to know that her daughter Priya has opted for surrogacy, objects to it as she sees it as an exploitation of the poor: "I will never support this. It's an exploitation of the poor, and you should be ashamed of yourself." (HH 5). Through Sushila's position Malladi introduces and addresses a concern that has been voiced by feminist scholars who have studied the repro-migration: **"**On the other hand, reproduction and biological motherhood have increasingly been drawn into the realm of commodities. Wombs can be rented, eggs and sperm and even children can be bought and sold through commercial surrogacy (Hewitson). There is also a growing market for mothers' milk and even wet-nurses (J. Smith)" (Bjørnholt 395). Priya's husband, Madhu's dismisses the idea: "This is a baby. You can't' just rent a body" (HH 5).

This 'renting out the body' as Madhu puts it, is often the focus of the conversation of the surrogate mothers in *Happy Mothers* and Malladi presents widely divergent responses and attitudes of the surrogate mothers who share one thing in common- poor living conditions and the desperate need to get out of it:

> The biggest concern that people have about surrogacy is that, however it is organized, the practice itself is inherently exploitative of women and turns them, their bodies and the babies into commodities. No model of surrogacy could work if exploitation and commodification are the inevitable results of allowing women to carry babies for others. (Walker and van Zyl 29)

Malladi presents a number of women who come to the Happy Mothers' house as surrogate women, give birth to the babies and go away to their villages, contented with the money that they earn through their surrogate role. Asha herself is introduced to surrogacy by Kaveri, her sister in law who had become a surrogate woman. Social ostracization remains a concern: "She doubted her brother would approve of her getting pregnant with another couple's baby for money. And she would be ashamed if he ever found out" (HH 20). Asha's fear is predictable: "Surrogate mothers report being aware of the ambivalence and potential hostility that other people might have towards surrogacy. …Hence, the question of when and whether to tell other people is not necessarily a straightforward matter" (Edelmann 149). The sense of shame that Asha feels is well documented: "…what makes their work experience atypical is the high degree of sexualized stigma attached to it—making surrogacy a special kind of stigmatized and sexualized care work. (Pande, 2009a,145)

Limited choice or lack of choice with regard to surrogacy figures repeatedly in the narrative. Malladi writes of Asha reflecting on her surrogacy: "Asha wondered if there had ever really been a choice for her. Could she have said no? Could she have been selfish and said, "No this is my body; I decide?" (HH 21). Asha's lack of agency is the root of the anti-surrogate stance of reproductive justice activists: "But to portray surrogacy contracts as representing meaningful choice and informed consent on the part of the contracting surrogate mother, rather than to see her as driven by circumstances, also reveals an idealized perspective and a failure to take account of realities. (Field 27). Instead, renting out the womb subverts the possibility of autonomy: "When reproducing bodies of women become the only source, requirement and product of a labour market and fertility becomes the only asset women can use to earn wages, women essentially get reduced to their reproductive capacities, ultimately reifying their historically constructed role in the gender division of labour" (Noronha and D'Cruz 10).

Like most surrogates, Asha is worried about society. But there is more to it: "Asha couldn't help but wonder what else could be ruined. Her heart, her mind, her body? What if this baby destroyed her womb? What if God struck her down for going against his wishes, giving birth to a child he didn't wish to see born?" (HH 22). Religious beliefs, divine plan, fate, dangers involved in pregnancy, effects of surrogacy on her mind all play out in Asha's mind:"It has been suggested that surrogate motherhood raises 'intense feelings of endangering the family and society, evoking adultery and incest taboos and raising legal concerns and theological objections" (Shiloh, et al. 868)). On her journey with her husband to Dr. Swati's Clinic in Hyderabad she feels a pang when a fellow passenger asks her about her children and she says has two but is haunted by the question." What would she say after this baby growing inside her came out? Would she still say two children, even though she had carried a third and given birth a third time? (HH 22). The question is a vexed one and points to a pattern of thinking among surrogates: "They not only claimed that the fetus is nourished by its (gestational) mother's blood but also emphasized that this blood/substance tie imparted identity to the child" (Pande, 2009b, 383).

Through Asha, Malladi presents how the traditional notions of motherhood are invariably tied to pregnancy and childbirth. Surrogacy for Asha thus satisfies these two related experiences and thus she is a mother though in a sense the child is not hers. Racial origins also affect the surrogate: 'Asha had been happy to know that her baby would be mostly Indian. Not that it mattered, but a part of her felt that it made more sense for an Indian to push out an Indian baby from her womb" (HH 24). Asha touches upon the questions of belongingness and its relation to specifics of corporality. Her response is atypical. "Some women say that after seeing the children, they didn't feel like they were theirs anymore, because the children were different from their own children. These differences were based on physical realities, which made them understand the babies' 'otherness' and belongingness to them" (Matsuo 18).

As suggested earlier, responses to surrogacy widely vary. Kaveri feels worthwhile with having given so much happiness to the couple from Nottinghamshire. Kaveri thus approaches her role as a surrogate in totally altruistic terms. Putamma, Kaveri's mother supports both her daughter and Asha in "renting out their wombs." For her it for a good cause and better than selling a kidney. Unlike Kaveri, Asha experiences conflict but feels that the point of choice of courting conflict is over: "She was still not sure they were doing the right thing. But there was no point broadcasting the fact. The baby was inside her. That was the end of the story" (HH 25). Asha represents the traditional Indian woman who accepts her husband's decision without any resistance. When suggestions of buying a flat come up Asha feels she is not consulted. But she cannot assert herself since she is typical Indian woman: "She had never countered any decision Pratap had ever made. Women like her didn't do that kind of thing. But it still chafed that he hadn't talked to her. It was as if she were just a body, not a person with feelings and a mind. It was as if she didn't exist" (HH 27).

> The choice (or lack of) to undertake surrogacy in this sense reflects systemic inequities associated with poverty and structural violence, wherein large-scale economic and political inequities predispose the vulnerable to suffering (Farmer 1997), where 'compulsion' makes visible the moral dilemma posed by the choice of surrogacy-or-poverty (Bailey 2011, 736) (Unnithan 296).

Asha does not agree all of a sudden to be a surrogate mother and the reader comes to know that she is emotionally blackmailed into it by the promise of a good education for her son Manoj, who is very intelligent. Malladi presents the life of poor women who do not have much of a choice when it comes to finding ways of improving their station in the society: "While middle-class white women (single and married, lesbian and straight) avail themselves of the services of sperm banks and fertility clinics, poor women, including many women in the Global South, are more likely to provide than consume reproductive services. Indeed, marketized reproduction *depends* on economic inequalities among women" (Park 71).

Asha's thoughts about her earlier pregnancies throw light on how pregnancy and maternity are handled on a routine basis. She cannot help thinking that the child that she is carrying and the pregnancy that she is in are more important than her and her earlier pregnancies. This mood passes and Asha is moved by the childless Priya and makes a gesture of kindness: "I will think of this child as a gift for you. I promise" (HH 52). Asha's response is typical: "Most of the women commented on this element of altruism in accounting for their decision to become surrogate mothers and …specifically identified the pleasure and joy given to the commissioning parents as the 'best part' of being a surrogate mother" (Blyth 194). Asha is sometimes confused and sometimes clear about her emotions towards the child that she carries: "She stroked her belly and then stopped; it was a futile gesture. This wasn't hers. She couldn't fall in love with this baby as she had with her own. She just had to let it grow" (HH 55). Asha's worries do not end there. She doubts about the moments after she gives birth to Priya's and Madhu's child. She thinks of taking a look at the newborn but can't decide whether after a single glance, would she be able to give the baby away?" (HH 55).

Kaveri represents the business like mentality that some surrogate women take. Her answer to Asha's question whether she felt it difficult to part with the baby exemplifies this pragmatic attitude: "It wasn't mine. It was someone else's. I always knew that" (HH 57). Kaveri's reply is endorsed by sociological studies: "They also note that a common explanation in response to the question of how the current surrogate pregnancy differed from previous pregnancies was that knowing the baby was not hers and considering it the intended parent's baby from the very beginning of the process made the surrogate mother feel differently towards it" (Edelmann 150).

Kaveri's response is one of the many possible responses that surrogate women have. Kaveri remembers the response of a woman in Happy Mothers, quite unlike that of hers. She recalls: "In the last months when I lived in the house, there was one woman who was very upset. She felt the baby was hers and that she would be cutting of a part of her soul. But we sign a contract. It's our job to be smart and not get attached to what's not ours." (HH 57). Kaveri's description sets Asha thinking: "Asha hoped she wouldn't be like that woman when the time came to give up the newborn. She hoped that she would be detached and not feel anything. But as she put a hand on her stomach, she wondered how a woman could not be attached to the life growing inside her" (HH 57). Asha's responses are part of the subjectivity that she has internalized: "Emphasis on the 'naturalness' of the maternal uses the physicality of pregnancy and birth as its starting point: women's experiences of birth are defined through their bodies, their subjecthood stealthily replaced by their state as an inhabited subject" (Sweetman 18).

Asha's concern voiced by many is part of the research into the mechanics of the coping strategies associated with relinquishment that surrogate mothers have to face: "In essence, a surrogate must be able to anticipate a pregnancy in which she will feel little emotional connection to the baby, or successfully deny attachment to it. In fact, she must be predisposed to defenses that will protect her from her loss at relinquishment" (Kanefield 8). Later in the narrative Asha comes to know that Kaveri was very upset and was in a tearful mood after her surrogacy and Asha doubts that the case of the woman that Kaveri talked of was Kaveri herself. Kaveri is sensible in her advice to Asha: This is not yours. They put it inside you and you're like a machine; you're just growing it; you're not a mother to this one'" (HH 57).

> Parker (1983), for instance, explained his findings that surrogates did not report feelings of loss by suggesting that ''there may be some psychological coping mechanism already in place to deal with expected loss.'' He interprets the surrogate telling herself that the baby is "not mine'' as a form of ''dealing with anticipated loss.'' Like Parker, other researchers focus on the surrogate's not mine mantra as a mechanism for warding off innate attachment. (Teman 1109)

Malladi presents the emotional stress felt by surrogate women primarily through Asha and Kaveri in the early part of the story and later through what transpires at Dr. Swati's clinic to

which Asha is shifted after she suffers some bleeding that she suffers after a medical examination. In *A House for Happy Mothers* diverse responses to childlessness or being a mother are paralleled by another set of divergent responses to motherhood by the surrogate women. Kaveri is often the sounding board for most of the thoughts of the surrogate women. Flooded with gifts from Priya and Madhu, Asha is moved but is gently cautioned by Kaveri who tells Asha that "they take their baby and don't look back until they want another" (HH 93). Kaveri, herself a surrogate twice, thus stands for the emotional dangers of being a surrogate mother, and also the strategies to be taken to reduce the sorrow of parting with the child that one has carried in one's womb though it is somebody's child. Kaveri's advice comes partly, as Asha has rightly guessed, from her own difficult period after parting with the baby.

The economic reasons that force women to act as surrogate mothers, that Malladi describes at length in the narrative add to the social reason and individuation of the Indian society. All of them are driven by the promise of money which will help them to shift from a hut to a brick house, finding money to marry off daughters, to give better food and sound education, to have an indoor toilet, to drink water from a fridge. Images of poor living condition run through the novel and serve to underscore the economic pressures that force women to surrogacy:

> The surrogate mother is creating life as a livelihood and using her bodily capacities as a means of survival, a survival that is challenged in several ways. …she is emotionally, bodily and physiologically precarized as surrogacy entails emotional labour and the bodily risks associated with pregnancy. As such, in the process of transnational surrogacy, bioprecarity operates on multiple levels, capturing the entanglement of bodily and economic interdependency. (Nilsson 114)

Health concerns result in Asha being moved to Dr. Swati's clinic. Asha is upset about leaving home earlier than expected. The sudden shift to the clinic is seen as a relief to Asha by Kaveri who sees it as a break from the household duties like cooking and cleaning: "As surrogate mothers, they suddenly find themselves in an unfamiliar relationship with a hyper-medicalized system of reproduction, a medical system that has previously been inaccessible to them as lower class women in an anti-natalist state" (Pande, 2017, 271). The response to such surrogate houses is mixed:

> Surrogates recruited by some Indian clinics such as the well-known Anand clinic (see BBC 4; 'House of Surrogates' 2013) live in designated dormitories away from their own husband (to avoid infections) and from their children—they spend time being 'farmed'. The positive effects on the surrogate are said to be that they are less likely to be stigmatised by their communities and they receive some skills training, but the negative aspects can be much longer term. For example, the welfare of their own relationship with their husbands could suffer. More worrying is their nearly year-long absences as a mother to their own children. (van den Akker 202)

Kaveri even suggests that Asha may not even come back once she gets used to the comfort of not doing any household work. But Asha remains the traditional woman: "Asha didn't believe it. Home was home. No matter what palace you went to, if it wasn't yours, if your family wasn't there, it wasn't better than home (HH 118). The impact of being housed in Surrogate homes or hostels has drawn flak:

> In such a facility, there is an element of medical and social scrutiny for food, diet, sexual behavior, mobility, and even daily household work. The ethical concern that arises from the making of such homes mandatory is that women confined to these homes are unable to participate fully not only in their personal lives or also in public life; they are restricted in participating in their non-reproductive aspirations such as education, occupation, and social functions; hence, the "institutional surrogate mother" becomes treated as the "means to an end". (Saravanan 90)

Malladi raises questions about the role of autonomy of the female body. In a heated argument between Pratap and Asha, Asha complains that she is stuck with someone else's baby because Pratap cannot support the family financially and that he has sold her for money to which Pratap replies: "You're still my wife, and even if I asked to do this, there's nothing wrong with it. Many women do this" (HH 121). Pratap expects absolute obedience from his wife and Asha too later regrets having raised her voice: "She didn't want be to be the kind of wife who raised her voice at her husband and fought with him. (HH 121-122). "Socialization of the girl child at home and in society inculcates self-effacement and self-denial as virtues in females, and trains them to see their life primarily in terms of service to others, as noted by several anthropologists and sociologists studying Indian society" (Gupta 36). Asha represents countless women who concede the superiority of men and their dependence on their husbands for advice in worldly matters.

Asha's stay at the clinic brings her into contact with other surrogate women. Keertana who has three children of her own, who is seven months pregnant with her second surrogate child, is proud to have a house, and TV and is saving up for her daughter's dowry. She advices Asha to go in for second surrogacy when Asha tells her of worries about giving her son good education.

> Intimate labor remains a primary source of livelihood, which women increasingly gain by being paid for it in the marketplace rather than through performing it within a heterosexual marriage in exchange for support. The commodification of intimate labor raises feminist contentions over the relationship of "care" and the economy. Some bemoan an increasing commodification of the intimate. (Boris and Parreñas 8)

As the story progresses the reader comes across more women in the clinic who are all pressed to be surrogate women for want of money. Asha's worries about pregnancy are more in the direction of the emotions that she may experience when she will have to part with the baby. Earlier in the narrative, if Kaveri was the person who constantly reminds her of how to see her pregnancy, in the clinic it is Keertana. Keertana's reply to Asha's question

whether she felt bad when she gave up the baby is close to Kaveri's: I know some of the mothers cry and nonsense, but I always knew this was a means to an end. I was relieved when it was born. Out with it and away with it. And frankly I was glad to not to be taking one home. No way was I cleaning up another baby's shit" (HH 126). Her response is part of her coping strategy: "In essence, a surrogate must be able to anticipate a pregnancy in which she will feel little emotional connection to the baby, or successfully deny attachment to it. In fact, she must be predisposed to defenses that will protect her from her loss at relinquishment" (Kanefield 8).

Asha is not sure that she will be able to see the child with such indifference and without emotion. Keertana's advice, Asha knows, is worthwhile, and pragmatic but she feels it is easier said than done. Keertana refuses to see the child and forbids the parents from sending pictures of the baby that she carried for them. It is her way of protecting her mind from the trauma that surrogacy brings in the form of parting with the baby that the surrogate has carried in her womb. Keertana describes the relation between the surrogate mother, the child and the real parents as she sees it: "I am just a coolie; suitcase belongs to someone else. And you'd better take that smile off your face when you stroke your belly, Asha. There's only hurt and pain if you forget that this one is not yours to keep. It's a suitcase. The contents are valuable, but you give it away when you reach the destination" (HH 126). The position is not unusual. Blyth notes: "Many surrogates and intended parents regard the surrogacy arrangement as a business arrangement which will terminate once the baby has been delivered to the intended couple (qtd.in Edelmann 151). Susan Markens observes:

> In the future, surrogate mothers may come to be viewed more as "alternative reproductive vehicles"— uteruses for hire in the commercial reproductive marketplace—than as individually important persons with the right to the integrity of their own relationships with husbands and children, and to the privacy and independence of their reproductive capabilities. (61)

Asha is lovingly cautioned by Keertana very much in the manner she is cautioned by Kaveri who by now, the reader knows has learnt the lesson the hard way. Keertana has no soft feelings for surrogacy simply because she knows that she cannot allow them, for her survival and emotional wellbeing depends precisely on distancing herself from the child and mercilessly barring all tender thoughts from her conscience. Asha realizes that Charu, Veena and Narthaki are all in it for the money they will get. Keertana's attitude seems to be the best for Asha: "She seemed to have no moral or emotional issues with being a surrogate. She was doing it for money, plain and simple, and she didn't think there was anything complicated about that. Her philosophy was simple: She wasn't going to win the lottery; this was her lottery. So she had to put in a little effort to get the prize; it was worth it" (HH 131).

Malladi reserves for Asha the epiphanic understanding that the ironic nature of the title i.e. whether the inmates of the house are happy or whether the house is for happy mothers, or is it just a house of unhappy mothers working to make someone else happy:

> Even though they had all the creature comforts they could dream of, none of the women in the Happy Mothers House was happy. Asha saw it everywhere. The frustration of being away from their families, the humiliation of lying to everyone about their pregnancy, the conflict of having a baby inside them they mustn't bond with - these were definitely *not* Happy Mothers. (HH 154)

The narrative takes a turn with Dr. Swati asking the inmates of the house to participate in a TV Show to be aired in Britain. Asha agrees only because Dr. Swati put it as quid pro quo. "In India, the surrogate's altruistic motivations and maternal duties used to be continually reiterated by surrogacy brokers to intimidate her to not demand higher payments or voice her concerns" (Blazier and Janssens 623). Asha has no choice but to agree to Swati's suggestion that she appear on the TV. Malladi describes Asha feelings: "She felt disgust rise within her, for Doctor Swati, the parents, herself, the baby… everyone. Chitra was right. This was a bazaar. Firs she had to sell her womb to get money. Now she had to sell her honesty to get Manoj into a good school" (HH 158). The question of choice is fraught with problems:

> The single-pointed focus on ''choice'' occidentalizes Indian surrogacy work: it makes it difficult to raise questions about the kind of life a woman has to lead to make this work count as a ''good choice.'' It obscures the injustice behind these choices: the reality that, for many women, contract pregnancy is one of the few routes to attaining basic social goods such as housing, food, clean water, education, and medical care. (Bailey 722)

The narrative gradually shifts focus to the seamy side of surrogacy. Asha is taught and trained to respond to questions. Though anonymity is guaranteed by Swati some of them refuse but there are others who cannot. Asha confides in Vinita that she too does not want to appear on the TV show but does not have the choice to say so. Both have no choice as both are poor and Asha consoles Vinita: "No one here comes from a good family… we all come from nothing" (HH 162). Vinita's realistic appraisal of the situation is addressed frequently in debates on the evils of surrogacy. Generations Ahead, the first organization in the United States to fight for reproductive rights (it closed in 2012) notes:

> Given the numerous ways in which structural inequality and racism shape the reproductive decisions of all women, many advocates are concerned either that women of colour and Indigenous women will be systematically excluded from the benefits of ARTs, or that these technologies may be used to 'design' babies, further deepening racial bias against certain physical features. (276-277)

The social reality is what puts these women in a place where they do not even have an illusion of choice. Asha feels increasingly betrayed and used, particularly after the shoot. She tells Keertana: "We're just business. We're not people. We're just…nothing. I'm a womb" (HH 183). This commodification was pointed out as early as late 1980s: "This commodification process is very clearly seen in the notion of "surrogate" motherhood. There

we talk openly about buying services and renting body parts-as if body parts were rented without the people who surround the part, as if you could rent a woman's uterus without renting the woman" (Rothman 96). Keertana agrees that Asha is right, one has to take care of oneself and advises her to see surrogacy as a way of making her daughter strong and independent like Doctor Swati.

Asha misses her children and their home and in her darkest moments she wonders: "Would this time evoke one happy memory… would she ever look back at it as a black mark in her life?" (HH 206). There are moments of great agony when Asha feels conflicted: "This was their baby. She had known it all along, but she supposed that there had been a tiny part of her that fantasized that the baby somehow, some way could be hers. Now with the mother standing there, staking her claim, her fantasies dissipated and she felt beyond foolish" (HH 252). Asha represents the difficult and confusing emotions that are felt by many surrogate women and through Asha, Malladi shows the emotional turmoil experienced by surrogate mothers.

As her pregnancy advances Asha gets increasingly upset and goes on dreaming about carrying the child home along with her two children. Her agony increases. She cannot get rid of the thought: "It made her irritable. This push and pull inside her. this large unhappiness. This melancholy that she couldn't' shake. …She should be like Keertana. waiting to get that baby out and be on her way back to her life. Instead she was moping. She was making herself sick of herself (HH 286). When the labour begins Asha's thoughts are for withholding the baby, a continuation of the fantasies that she has about taking the baby home: "Asha couldn't stop crying, couldn't stop wanting to hold this baby inside her, keep it for herself" (HH 295). After the child is born Asha cannot contain her tears she starts howling and prays intensely that she won't have to see the baby and that it will be taken away.

> For, like the nanny, surrogates perform 'emotional labor' to suppress feelings that could interfere with doing their job – including feelings of attachment to the babies they bear…. Surrogates do the emotional labor of separating themselves from the baby they carry, and from the part of their body that carries the baby they must part with. We could describe this as the emotional labor of estrangement. (Hochschild 1136)

Asha's reaction to Priya's suggestion during their last meeting to take a look at the baby shows that it had not been easy for her to give up the baby as easily as Keertana had said. "Asha could only nod, her eyes becoming glassy with tears" (HH 300). Her thoughts of the throwing away the envelope that contains the phone numbers of Priya and of not wanting to see them in the future suddenly dissolve when Priya tell her that Mona will be in touch with the school where Manoj will be learning. Asha understands the value of Priya's help: "She had done that for them and Asha knew that she would never be able to repay that debt. Priya had saved Manoj's life and in turn, Asha's as well. Maybe Asha had given them a gift that they couldn't get themselves, a gift they pined for, but they had given Asha an even bigger gift-a future for her son. (HH 300). Though money is involved there are also other

mechanisms that work to underplay its role: "The thrust towards altruism in surrogacy is rooted in a discourse that seeks to demarcate motherhood from the desires of commerce. Ideas of motherhood, family and commerce are instead placed within the prism of gift-giving which helps maintain idealized notions of 'what should be' "(Majumdar 2). Asha's resistance melts and she finally thanks them for helping Manoj. The moment is portrayed graphically "Priya almost stopped breathing and relief seeped through her. She turned around to look at Asha, into her eyes. Asha held her gaze for a moment and then turned her head and closed her eyes' (HH 301) Asha's response is understandable considering the egalitarian position of Priya: **"**As the process of commercial surrogacy encompasses both a contractual monetary agreement as well as care, nurturing and an often- expressed wish to help others, it involves tensions between 'money and love', tensions being characteristic for emotional and intimate labour" (Hofmann and Moreno 115). Whether it is money or love is a contentious position in all commercial surrogacy.

The authorial perspective takes over completely and the novel ends**: "**Though their social circumstances, their different worlds- they had touched each other in an irrevocable way. (HH 301). The sentiment is not unusual. As Pande writes: "Although the surrogates recognized the immense class difference between the intending couple and them, they sometimes constructed relations in their narratives or fantasy that transcended the transnational and class differences" (Pande 2009b, 388)

A House for Happy Mothers thus ends on a happy note and displays Malladi's grasp of the wide ranging attitudes towards surrogacy, emotional toll on surrogate woman, the social perceptions and the cultural sanctions related to gestational surrogacy, social understanding of infertility and scientific methods of curing it. The evils of commercial surrogacy appear in the narrative in the form of poor living conditions of rural women, jobless, tied to the drudgery of household work, desire for the male child, issued of marrying daughters off, and finding dowry. By presenting the intended parents as helpful beyond the contractual bonds, and as interested in the larger welfare of the surrogate family and not just a pragmatic view the possibility of a position not totally exploitative is argued for by Malladi though it is heavily qualified by the exceptional attitude of the intended parents. That it is an exception rather than the norm as pointed out by Dr Swati in her reproach about the expensive gifts looked upon by envy by other inmates of the Happy Mothers Surrogate House and the wish of the intended parents to maintain a relation with the surrogate mother and points to enormity of the social inequality that makes surrogacy in the first place possible. The middle ground thus remains an exception through and through. Problems are hardly resolved in a novel that begins with a lullaby playing in the mind of Priya and ends by making that lullaby real for Priya by denying it to Asha, a foregone conclusion, despite the lyrical description in the closing lines of transcending all social and class differences.

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March for Hunger in the Indian Metropolis: Analyzing the Casteist Selection of Victims in the Bengal Famine and Covid-19 Pandemic through Bhabani Bhattacharya's *He Who Rides a Tiger*.

Noduli Pulu

Abstract

At the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic in India, a substantial workforce was made redundant as the country went into a strict lockdown on 25 March, 2020. Such an extraordinary calamity facilitated a domestic migration unseen in post-Independence era. The present article examines a comparable event of large scale mobility i.e., the 1943 Bengal famine when the rural populace suffered a similar penalty. In particular, the asymmetry of occupational victimization and monopoly of market during a calamity are examined from the lens of the Hindu caste system in India. For this purpose, the article critically examines Bhabani Bhattacharya's 1954 novel, *He Who Rides a Tiger*. Additionally, the article revisits and investigates the mass incarceration during the famine, domestic migration, performativity and subversion of the caste system in the novel.

Keywords: famine, caste, migration, occupation, Covid-19

There is a critical consensus that Bhabani Bhattacharya belongs to the general pantheon of Indian socialist-realist writers of the 1930s. His literary ventures have continually engaged with the social reality of Bengal, in particular, the Bengal famine of 1943, generally remembered as *Panchasher Manantar*. This undertaking was inaugurated in his 1947 fiction *So Many Hungers!* and continued in the subsequent release of the 1954 work *He Who Rides a Tiger*. Kalo, a dark-skinned Kamar (lower-caste) as the novel's hero is tasked with raising his daughter Chandralekha. And the onus of Kalo's endeavor is placed at the larger tableau of Bengal's tempestuous political and economic history of famine and war. In the novel, the Japanese, the British and the Quit India revolutionaries are mired in a state of conflict during the onset of a famine. Consequently, Kalo forsakes his lucrative occupation as a blacksmith in Jharna town to join the mass exodus to the city. And what he encounters there is

an asymmetrical victimization that is inherently casteist. En-route, Kalo is convicted of larceny and later resorts to working as a stretch bearer and operative for a harlot house. The deficient employment for the rural itinerants in the city impetuses Kalo to question the authority of caste on his subjugation.

One can see a similar predicament among the workforce from informal sectors at the commencement of the Covid-19 lockdown in India. From the congruence that can be detected between the novel's primary character Kalo's plight and the Covid-19 migrants from the Indian metropolis, this paper interrogates the legitimacy that the Hindu caste system holds during a calamity. In particular, the asymmetry in victimization of specific occupations will be a central objective. Additionally, the lower-caste proletariat and upper-caste bourgeois dichotomy in the novel along with the emerging caste and class duality in Bengal will be an important concern of the paper. Other areas of investigation will include the mass incarceration in Bengal that further oppressed the famine victims, the trope of naming, performativity of caste and subversion in the novel. Finally, an upper caste writer's socialist venture into caste issues will be critiqued.

The novel anticipates economist Amartya Sen's incredulity about food availability decline (FAD) as the standard interpretation of the 1943 famine, as cited by the Bengal Government's 1944 Famine Inquiry Commission (FIC). Sen has argued that the severity of food shortage in 1943 was an incongruous corollary to what could certainly not have been categorized as a catastrophic year in crop harvest. An equivalent economic position is held by Sugata Bose who affirms that the famine appeared "amidst plenty". Germane to these judgments is the Bengal Provincial Congress Committee's note that the "famine was more man-made than an act of God" (qtd. in Islam 425, 431). This controversy of the 1943 famine as "man-made" finds support in Bhattacharya's scrupulous chronicling of the lower-caste proletariat and upper-caste bourgeois dichotomy in the novel. For instance, throughout the course of the novel, the series of racketeering that emerges tends to monopolize the inflation of rice and commodity.

The city traders' barter system in rural villages appears first in the race of exploitative business as Chandralekha receives "three measures of rice worth a half-rupee a year ago" for her silver medal. And in the city, rice mixed with gravels is distributed in relief centres by private charity which "does hungry bellies no good" (Bhattacharya 56, 162). In truth, the upper-castes in the novel hold a maneuvered occupational position. An illustration of this is the *bhodrolok* city doctor who profits from trading skeletons of the deceased destitutes. Another disgusting display of it is on the temple's installation in the city when the upper-caste merchants donate huge sums of money, "wealth from the black market, untaxed profits, gains out of big rice deals made because of the famine" (Bhattacharya 102). Among them, a notable profiteer of the rice trade is the temple's board chairman, Sir Abalabandhu whose

hoarded rice grains surge in profit with a higher starvation mortality rate. Almost all the upper-caste vocations alluded in the narrative such as the stockbroker Motichand, jute entrepreneurs, city traders and the temple trustees from the business community are the primary beneficiaries of the famine. As a result, they also become its footing as the inflation stimulated by their trade assists in a higher destitution ratio. Even the FIC nodded to this, citing that one of the crucial roots of the famine was inflation of rice. An inevitable question arises, who were the largest famine affected communities? Or as Sen enquires from "which occupation categories did the destitutes come?" (70).

Through the protagonist Kalo's voyage from his district town, Bhattacharya archives the mass exodus from rural districts in Bengal to the city; "Jharna was now a ghost of a town. Hundreds were on their way to Calcutta" (19). This account can be authorized with Sen's verdict; "The Bengal famine was essentially a rural phenomenon" (63). Sen further elucidates it:

> The famine revealed itself first in the districts away from Calcutta, starting early in 1943. Its progress can be watched in the reports of the commissioners and district officers all over the province. Beginning with descriptions of 'hunger marches organized by communists' on 28 December 1942… 'town filled with thousands of beggars who are starving' (17 July)… 'deaths still occurring' (9 September); 'disposal of dead bodies ... a problem' (27 September)…. (55)

Hence, it can be reasonably deduced that the fatalities were suffered largely by the rural people whose occupations consisted of agriculture, craftsmanship, fishing and labour. And in the Hindu varna system these occupational markers are accorded to the Shudras (lower-castes). Unlike the Brahmin born out of the head and Kshatriya from the arms of the primordial man *Purush*, the Shudras are believed to have been born from the feet, and therefore, they are predestined to engage in menial tasks. Dr B.R. Ambedkar, writing on the nature of caste, cites Sir H. Risley:

> ...a caste may be defined as a collection of families or groups of families bearing a common name which usually denotes or is associated with specific occupation, claiming common descent from a mythical ancestor, human or divine, professing to follow the same professional callings and are regarded by those who are competent to give an opinion as forming a single homogeneous community. (7)

As caste practices permeate the "man-made" famine, it allows what Bose recognizes as a "social selection of victims" (721). For instance, peasants from district towns in the novel are compelled to sell their land in order to buy their own harvested grain at an inflated price: "The money was spent, the rice eaten, and the hungry peasants starved while their fields bore the harvest they did not own and could not touch. A harvest that was a mockery" (Bhattacharya 44). Ecological theorist Stephen Collis advances the concept of the "Biotariat" to theorize the

"position of existence that is enclosed as a 'resource' by and for those who direct and benefit from the accumulation of wealth" (Collis). This means that the "Biotariat" approach accommodates even laboring humans with the environment as victims of an exploitative configuration. But for Bhattacharya, the abusive treatment meted out to the lower-castes surpasses even that of the environment as convict and revolutionary named B-10 incites the destitute to revolt by saying, "A dog may look at food and even sniff it from afar, but you may not" (Bhatacharya 39).

The author intermittently employs the literary technique of "mirroring" while recounting Kalo's experience. It helps exhibit Kalo's vulnerability and portends the future of the rural lower-caste migrants in the city. For instance, at the railway station, Kalo envisions himself and Lekha as part of the distraught "hungry marchers". Subsequently, when working as a stretch-bearer of the deceased, Kalo ponders; "How long could he go on this way? He would sink, sink, until he was lost in that mass of misery on the streets, until his skeleton, which had more value than his living body, would sail across the black water to schools of medicine" (Bhattacharya 47). Through the permeating hunger and destitution in the city, the novel also succeeds in deconstructing the utopia of "sonar Bangla, the 'golden land' of the old folk poem". Bhattacharya writes: "The great city was bulging with unemployed hordes, hungry men who had flocked to it by the thousands, looking for work. Who would use their willing hands?" (134, 45). Ambedkar's commentary becomes relevant here:

> If a Hindu is seen to starve rather than take to new occupations not assigned to his Caste, the reason is to be found in the Caste System. By not permitting readjustment of occupations, caste becomes a direct cause of much of the unemployment we see in the country. As a form of division of labour the Caste system suffers from another serious defect. (48)

Supplementing to Ambedkar's formulation that caste fails as an economic organization, one can say that in a state of calamity caste is a behemoth waiting to attack the vulnerable sections of society.

On the onset of the Covid-19 virus in India and the government's declaration of lockdown on 25 March 2020, the projected number of jobs lost during the first two weeks was at least 119 million (Naskar 46). In particular, professions that are predominantly occupied by lower-castes like daily wage earners, domestic helps, drivers and farmers were reported to have been most aggressively affected. The nation witnessed a re-enactment of the novel's domestic migration as daily wage earners and workers from informal sectors marched back to their rural districts for survival. In the novel, the hungry populace in Bengal face a comparable situation as they are forcefully evacuated from the city to the countryside. Bhattacharya records that "The city authorities have borrowed military lorries and trucks and set up what they call evacuation squads…. Throw the hunger back into the countryside. There it will remain unseen" (194).

Theorist Simon Gikandi, writing on refugee migrants in the metropolis, diagnoses a "dislocated locality" in their psyche owing to the common trajectory of entering metropolitan spaces as an escape from a crisis (23). For Gikandi, the recourse they take is in the recreation of their locality. Counter to theorist Appadurai's observation that such a recreation is bounded by apprehension, Gikandi notes that it permits them to be systematized with a subjectivity that is identifiable and dependable. Consistent with this, Bhattacharya writes that the rural destitute "dislocated by the hunger of the times" also participate in the recreation of the endogamy of caste system that they are subjected to in the metropolis (31). Most lower-caste migrants in the novel either join the "hunger marchers" who live scavenging for food or resort to unfair means. As a result, casteism saturates even the world of migration.

Equally important is the objectionable "mythmaking" that follows migration during a crisis in a casteist society. Scholar Sumit Ganguly reports that on 25 May 2020, the chief minister of Uttar Pradesh who is also a Hindu priest suggested that "migrant workers returning to his state were carriers of COVID-19," adding that "the bulk of them were Dalits" (Ganguly). Such a rhetoric of "mythmaking" that attacks lower-castes is a persistent sentiment in the novel. For instance, a city trader says to Kalo, "The lowborn people won't bend but they will crack. God has sent this mighty hunger to teach the lowborn people a true lesson" (Bhattacharya 16). This further subjects the victims to apprehension, mistreatment, violence and even legitimizes their predicament. The evils of caste system therefore becomes more pronounced in a state of economic, political and social crisis such as the Bengal famine of 1943 or the current Covid-19 pandemic. For this reason, Ganguly aptly concludes that even in 2020, Dalits remain "untouchable" beyond the limits required by current hygiene practices.

The huge demographic change in the metropolis due to the influx of rural migrants facilitate a new design in the fabric of class, what B-10 identifies as the "convict class". And lower-caste migrants like Kalo easily merge in this fabric. For instance, ruminating on her father's incarceration Lekha says, "When you steal from the rich, out of their abundance, even when you take something they don't want, you are locked up in prison" (Bhattacharya 147). Likewise, the 2020 Netflix documentary *13th* by director Ava DuVernay while examining the "mass incarceration" of the 1970s America records that a huge proportion of convicts were African-Americans or migrants. An imperative condition of these convicts was that they were "overrepresented in news as criminals" and charged severely for petty crimes ("13th" 01:12:49). The physiognomy of Kalo as a recurrent trope in the novel crystallizes this "over presentation". Scholar Sourit Bhattacharya notes: "Caste in the novel is represented through the markers of language, clothing, and physiognomy" ("Colonial" 57). At different instances, a policeman and a worker from Rajani's harlot house say to Kalo, "I know a man by the look in his face" (Bhattacharya 30). Kalo himself

ponders; "Thief was already written on his face. Now harlot-house agent would be. How could he hide the inscription?" (Bhattacharya 49).

The author satirizes this emphasis on physiognomy as the Brahmin stockbroker Motichand uses the same lines to reverentially address Kalo when he parades as a Brahman priest. But the author himself delves in this "over presentation" by fashioning Kalo as a skilled but deceitful smithy. Like the American mass incarceration, a similar strain of prison boom manifests in the novel which is introduced through Kalo's encounters in the jailhouse. He observes that the jailhouse is filled with Quit India revolutionaries and ordinary people sentenced heftily for small thefts. The maneuvered parameters of the notion of "criminality" becomes more pronounced as Kalo finds himself in an ironical position at Rajani's harlot house where he maintains cordial terms with the same policemen. Kalo ponders, "Since they would not let him live honestly, did they actually want him to be a criminal? A criminal to suit their purposes?" (Bhattacharya 76). Here, Bhattacharya dismantles the myth of the jailhouse as a reformative place as Kalo says, "The idea is to reform the convict, make him a better man, is it not? But they do their utmost to make the convict feel he is not human at all" (110).

Additionally, the documentary *13th* also reports how certain industrial corporations profited from mass incarcerations. In the novel too, the convicts are used as free labor for market production, "The oil press was worked by convict labour who carried a yoke on their shoulders and ground the mustard seed by walking endlessly round and round". And the only retaliation from the convicts is their ritualistic hymn sung while pouring their sweat into the oil for their invisible clienteles; "Eat this, the oil of our bones, eat. Take this to fry thy fish with... that, for the egg-apple curry thou fancy ... and this to rub thyself with. Eat this, the oil of our bones, eat" (Bhattacharya 33). This gesture becomes symbolic of the rising angst between classes which B-10 articulates best in his provoking speeches; "We are the scum of the earth. The boss people scorn us because they fear us. They hit us where it hurts badly—in the pit of the belly. We've got to hit back" (Bhattacharya 37). The aforementioned documentary also highlights that "once you've been a convicted felon the scarlet letter follows you" (13th). Conversely, the scarlet letter for Kalo in the form of his caste appears even before he is a charged convict.

As a lower-caste migrant's occupational means in the city become further diluted, Bhattacharya attempts to rationalize the recourse of fraud taken by Kalo as he postures as a Brahmin priest chosen to deliver Shiva's coming. Kalo's hoax becomes his modus operandi of avenging his karma: "We've got to hit back…Let them pray to a false god. Let them seek benediction from a kamar" (Bhattacharya 97). Despite the plural "we" one finds that the collective resonance of Kalo's fight is imprecise as Bhattacharya recurrently underscores Kalo's vengeance as a personal quest. And as the fraud progresses it takes an ironical form as Kalo ingrains Brahminism and is

unable to recognize his own self, "The tell-tale odors had been washed away with his sweat. He was even, like the muskdeer, fascinated by his own scent!" (Bhattacharya 126). To explain, Kalo suffers from a "double-consciousness" where he has to balance two identities. Bhattacharya writes, "Mangal Adhikari trembled with the strain of checking Kalo's mad impulse." (161). Post-colonial theorist Frantz Fanon in his psychoanalytical analysis of the colonial native in *Black Skin White Masks* (1952) speaks of the "schizophrenic duality" that emerges when the natives duplicate the white colonizer. For Fanon, such a duality in the psyche of the native generates feelings of insufficiency which manifest in aggression against his own community as "a form of self-assertion" (Nayar 158). As a result, Kalo re-enacts the twice born "mythmaking" when he curses and blames a low-caste as "society's scum" taking Bengal to its catastrophe (Bhattacharya 87).

By the end of the novel, there is an evident reversal of caste roles as Kalo purchases a bunch of bananas simply because of its aesthetics, an allusion to Kalo being convicted for theft of bananas. Bhattacharya uses irony here to underpin the susceptibility of people in a position of power to recreate oppression. As Lekha astutely observes, "A patriotic man hits out at his people's bad rulers, but when power comes to him, he becomes one with those rulers" (182). In the end, Kalo's revelation of his kamar identity is acclaimed by revolutionaries but its collectivism is debatable as the reason of his imperative disclosure is the prospect of his daughter's life-long sacrifice by marrying Motichand.

Weighed against Kalo's personal vendetta is the upper-caste B-10 who embodies the ideals of selfless revolution for collective good. And if Kalo has his moments of communal retaliation it is only because B-10's words echo in his mind. Their persistent dichotomy in the novel makes the author's authenticity of the lower-castes' representation debatable. To emphasize, the arc of Kalo's character especially in the form of extended monologues occurs through B-10's words, "We've got to hit back" (Bhattacharya 75). And when Kalo unconsciously attempts caste mobility for Lekha by giving her a brahmin name and educating her, it is simply dismissed by the author as an "odd whim" (2). Despite his own private pursuit against karma, Kalo still exhibits ingrained casteism as he disapproves of any association with the untouchables, which B-10 embraces. And when Kalo offers B-10 the fruits of his scam, he wants nothing to do with it and instead questions Kalo's morality, "could it be that there was in the fraud no purpose larger than filling your own belly and your purse?" (Bhattacharya 191).

The trope of dressing and undressing ensues in the narrative through Kalo who embraces the performativity of wearing the Brahminic thread for its assistances and B-10 who sheds it for its malicious character. As "Mangal Adhikari", Kalo is reincarnated, "He was scum no longer.... A smith reincarnated a Brahmin" (Bhattacharya

86). Conversely, Bikash Mukherjee disrobes his Brahmin name opting for a casteless name 'B-10'. For Bhattacharya, such uncloaking gives birth to "a new Brahmin!" (170). An illustration of this is the caste ambiguity of B-10 as he refuses to identify with caste allocations and instead, places himself in the class ladder professing, "I am of the convict caste" (Bhattacharya 147). His insistence on the categorization of class and caste identity resonates with Anand Teltumbde's observation about a "'class-caste' duality [that] came into being with the communists coming on to the scene". Bhattacharya's "new Brahmin" is prototyped by Teltumbde as an "upper caste educated middle class youth dreaming of a revolution in India inspired by the Bolshevik revolution in Russia in 1917…. What guided their actions was the youthful romanticism about revolution" (19).

In other words, through B-10's socialist attitude Bhattacharya chronicles the nascent origin of the communist revolution. B-10 dismisses the peasants for selling their ancestral land saying, "Serves them right. Selling one's ancestral earth!... They could have died on it, couldn't they?" (Bhattacharya 195). This points to the fact that his class dissent does not accommodate the occupational prohibitions of caste where their only resort for survival becomes selling of lands. Teltumbde's comment suits this purpose, "The caste question is an integral part of the class question and they cannot and should not be spoken in dual terms" (22). For Ambedkar too, "A caste is an enclosed class" ("Castes" 15). Therefore, B-10 can be diagnosed with Teltumbde "*ved vakya* syndrome" as "The dictum [Marx and Engels] informed them that once the material structure is revolutionized, the superstructure would 'automatically' conform to it… it reflected a Brahmanic attitude of taking the word as sacred.…" (19).

Another important upper-caste diagnosis in the novel is of the "sanctity of naming". It is introduced through "Kalo", a testament to his name with skin the "the color quality of ink…" (Bhattacharya 1). Jhumpa Lahiri in the 2003 novel *The Namesake* notes the culture of naming in Bengali Hindu communities:

> . . . a practice of Bengali nomenclature grants, to every single person, two names. In Bengali the word for pet name is *daknam*... paired with a good name, a *bhalonam*.... Good names tend to represent dignified and enlightened qualities…. Pet names have no such aspirations…. Unlike good names, pet names are frequently meaningless, deliberately silly, ironic, even onomatopoeic. (31, 32)

Through a brahmin priest the author apprises the readers that lower castes keep *daknams* like "Huba and Goba, Punti and Munni han?" Where the prestige of a *bhalonam* is absent. Therefore, the *bhalonam*, "Chandra Lekha, the Moon-tinted one" by a Brahmin priest is an irregularity outside the parameters of caste (Bhattacharya 2).

Kalo, in his belief in the ability of the *bhalonam* to create an efficacious path for Lekha, traces all her achievements to it; "What luck that he had given a befitting name to his daughter, the name that adorned the silver face of the medal" (Bhattacharya 14). Hence, the selling of Lekha's medal to a city trader is symbolic of the change in the trajectory of her name. Later, she is lured into working for Rajani's harlot house in the city and becomes a "fallen woman". Speaking on the women in his fictions Bhattacharya asserted their importance as "individuals and as symbols" ("Women" 116). Therefore, through Lekha's disgrace Bhattacharya satirizes the inherited belief of caste system in the predestination of names. But in doing so, the novel suffers from the overindulgence of the trope of self-sacrifice and pity in lower-caste females.

There is an influx of "hungry girls" lured from rural districts under the pretext of food and employment in Rajani's houses that B-10 supports by saying, "Why must she die for her honor, die for a dead idea?" (Bhattacharya 39). Here the author couches the lack of female agency in B-10's revolutionary philosophies and hunger as a theme reemerges as B-10 articulates:

> ... hunger of the masses of people uprooted from their old earth and turned into beggars, and the hunger of the all-owning few for pleasure and more pleasure, a raging fever of the times. Uprooted women with their own kind of hunger had to soothe the other hunger, had to cool the raging pleasure-fever with their bodies. (53)

As Lekha is to be installed as the temple's "Mother of Sevenfold Bliss" the author also calls attention to the "spiritual hunger" of the city. The temple's trustee deifies her as the "holy mother" with the chant, "Thou who art the secret breath in all created beings, Hail to thee, Mother, and hail, and hail, hail!" (Bhattacharya 206). This can be likened to Simone de Beauvoir's feminine prototype of a "holy mother" who isn't able to fully live "the life of a human being" (29). Lekha is continually misinterpreted and allotted patriarchal figures making decisions for her. And in the end, her conscious choice of marrying Motichand is also presented as a form of self-sacrifice for the greater good of Kalo's revenge, **"**I would at last be with you in your battle. That proud man would have a casteless spouse.… Then a child to complete the disgrace" (Bhattacharya 231). Pertinent to this is Alok Mukherjee's concept of the "strategy of containment" as Lekha is either projected in a discourse of pity or of deification (Rege). And the only possible dissent for Lekha is to join Kalo's caste re-enactment.

By using imitation as a form of subversion, the author suggests that one has to remain in the caste fold to destabilize it. Quite aptly, Kalo's disruption of the caste system is equated to riding a tiger and his dismounting it is only a moral triumph. In the novel, the only revolt where there is palpable momentum is in the class revolution of B-10 and Vishwanath. Even Kalo's revelation is immediately plugged

into class politics as the anti-class revolutionaries applaud him. Bhattacharya, as a creative writer with socialist sympathies rejects caste and class categorically. And only the rise of class revolution resounds at the end of the novel, "Food for all!" "Work for all!" "Jail for the rice profiteers!" (Bhattacharya 160).

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Beware… I am COVID-19

J. Bheemaiah

I am novel corona made in China
I am an invisible, dreaded pandemic
Globally notorious, universally hazardous
Human body is my cosy abode
For my boarding and lodging
I can live any longer until my prey perishes.

I can kill my victim anytime, remember!
I can transmit into other living bodies
My victim is mortal? I am immortal
If I am done away with in China
Elsewhere I can live, surely survive.

I sneak into the body to rock and ruffle
I attack the pulmonary, it is my target
Your mouth and nose as my safe passages
I am the Coronavirus, the COVID-19 in short
COVID-19 is my pet name for global game.

I travelled crossing the borders of nations
It is human bodies that transmitted me
Thus mortals carried me free of cost
I still madly ride over social animals.
I script their fate and show their way
Brahma you think of is second to me
Either to hell or heaven as it figures in mind
I am sure to carry you with nobody around.

Whoever it may be, young or old
Man or woman, meek or week
Commoner or king, master or slave
Rich or poor, sage or stupid
Innocent or ignorant, ghost or guest
I am unbiased in my treat at the most.

Children being the first victims to my bite
I started my mischief as human pathogen
Morbidity and mortality I cause in all
Don't take me so easy nor flirt with me.

Serving the victims in sleepless nights
In quarantines with no guaranty of life
Thousands of patients and millions of dollars
You would see in hospitals and then in grave
Lest I should kill one and all, you know it.

I created a global tremor for human clamour
I am more powerful and harmful than earthquake
Quake might be at one place or in some area
But the human quake I created is omnipresent.

Even HIV and cancer prostrate before me
Now you should make out what I am for
For a shiver in spines and a terror in psyche
I have turned out to be a Pandora box.

I know you were fond of China crafts
This is my witchcraft brought from China
Where are those magic goods now?
I live in humans who use these goods.

Greeting mode changes for social distance
Western mode of shake-hand is gone
Indian mode of folded hands comes in
It is my bang, don't you know this?

You are my food and shelter of the best kind
You are my breath, you are my living source
You must have made out with a force
In your mind, I am ruthless and unkind
My holistic aim is to destroy mankind
Beware of me in every kind and never be blind.

Decentralizing Academic Oligarchy: A Survey on Teachers and COVID-19

Sajaudeen Nijamodeen Chapparban
J. Bheemaiah

Sajaudeen Nijamodeen Chapparban

Abstract

Any space is prone to have a center and margins as the thirst for power that cumulates around those who think and are from the privileged background and so-called idealized and respected spaces of academics are no exception to this play of power dynamics. Often, teachers from the Humanities and Social Sciences talk and critically discuss various forms of discrimination, marginalization, exclusions, and other injustices to the human beings in society but they somehow neglect structural and sophisticated forms of discrimination against the teachers. The teachers of the privileged caste, class, religion, ideology, race and gender practice structural discrimination against their vulnerable counterparts. There are a handful of reports and studies conducted on students who face discrimination related to gender, caste, race, religion, ethnicity, language, nationality, and class in the Indian higher education system. Research in this area has not been carried out in any educational institute.

The present survey research attempts to find out and discuss different patterns and reasons for discrimination/exclusion of teachers by fellow teachers and administrators as well. It focuses on how the academic and administrative oligarchy functions and how certain coveted positions within the institute are grabbed by certain dominant classes without inhibition. It would critically examine the impact of lockdown on teachers from the underprivileged section that was imposed in the face of the COVID-19. Like any other space, teaching has been worst affected during the pandemic. Not but least, it also foregrounds as how effectively the virtual academics would be fruitful for the teachers with the underprivileged backgrounds and how the exclusionary mechanism would work in the virtual academics.

Keywords: marginality, discriminations, academic space, virtual academics, oligarchy

Introduction

J. Bheemaiah

All animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others.

- *Animal Farm* by George Orwell

"Academics" carries an ideal image of the most learned, educated, scholarly, intellectual, enlightened and knowledgeable community. The experience of underprivileged teachers would prove different after they start working with the privileged teaching community, as they confront all kinds of discrimination. They are deprived of the dignity of class, religion, region, culture, gender, and even ideology despite their academic merit. *The Constitution of India* guarantees justice, liberty, equality, and fraternity for all citizens. Its "Preamble" advocates "equality of status and of opportunity" and assuring the "dignity of the individual". The Article 15 states that "The State shall not discriminate against any citizen on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex, place of birth or any of them" and Article 16 talks about the "equality of opportunity for all citizens". It also says that "No citizen shall, on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex, descent, place of birth, residence or any of them, be ineligible for, or discriminated against in respect of, any employment or office under the State" (7). Despite the constitutional safeguards, our Indian intellectual community still indulges in discrimination against the underprivileged.

A study on this issue indicates that 84 percent of teachers are victims of social discrimination (42 percent of teachers in various institutions are discriminated against while 42.8% are bullied, humiliated, and alienated in their respective teaching places). The academic tormenters use their privileged background against any backlash from the victims. It frequently happens from the dominant sections that enjoy administrative positions. The international laws such as the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* also set certain legal framework to curb all types of discrimination such as in the following articles:

Article 1: All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood. (UNDH 4)

Article 2: Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status. Furthermore, no distinction shall be made on the basis of the political, jurisdictional or international status of the country or territory to which a person belongs, whether it be independent, trust, non-self-governing or under any other limitation of sovereignty. (UNDH 6)

Despite all these legal restrictions in place, discrimination still continues in society. The issue of discrimination is generally discussed and debated in academic spaces, platforms, and classrooms but the kind of discrimination that the teachers suffer from their colleagues

and even from the administrators on various dimensions is never pointed out. We are never bothered about such sensitive but very important aspects of social and academic life. The study on this issue indicates that structural discrimination, alienation and humiliation are unleashed against the underprivileged within academic spaces. Issues of teachers belonging to the marginalized sections are never accepted for an open discussion. The dominant classes indulge in making fun of the issues facing the hapless downtrodden teachers. Even serious problems of these teachers are dismissed as topics of casual conversation.

85.7% of respondents are of the view that someone should come forward to raise the issues connected with the patterns of discrimination/exclusion within the academic spaces but nothing would happen. The majority of teachers have landed in the cauldron of various burning issues within the departments and 33.3% of teachers are victimized at the hands of the administrators. Discrimination practiced against the target teachers based on gender is 23% and the same percent is calculated on religion, caste, class, and race too.

This paper is an outcome of the study through observations and also the survey conducted on the experiences of several teachers of the marginalized communities serving in various academic spaces. In fact, teachers are discriminated against such subtle ways that one cannot sense it. The strategies of social prejudice adopted by the dominant section are too nuanced to make out.

The following chart shows the levels of discrimination practiced against the teachers through the COVID-19 pandemic. Out of the total participants in this survey, 57% are women teachers and 43% men teachers out of which 66.6% are from the colleges and state universities while 23% from central universities and 9% from the private institutes. It indicates that apart from other forms of discrimination, gender discrimination is also a matter of great concern. The chart also clarifies that the Assistant Professors cadres are more discriminated against than the Associate Professor and Professor cadres, and one can observe the kind of relationship between junior and senior teachers.

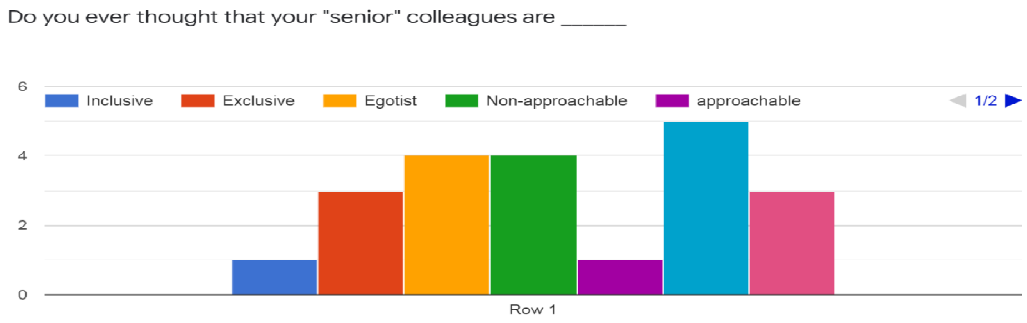

Chart: 1: Behavior of "Senior" Colleagues with "Junior" colleagues.

The study also reveals that the "senior" colleagues often display the senior-junior complex. They constitute 23.8% while others who constitute 38% are found to be egotistic and non-approachable. Exceptionally, some senior faculty members constituting 9.5% are quite approachable and inclusive. The survey also brings out the following facts:

- Some teachers internally avoid filling up the data forms
- Several teachers are silent against various forms of discrimination
- 37% of teachers are of the view that they will be targeted by openly speaking against discrimination.
- 19% of teachers do not want to create trouble through open discussions.
- 9.5% of people feel offended and fear that their comments would cost them jobs.

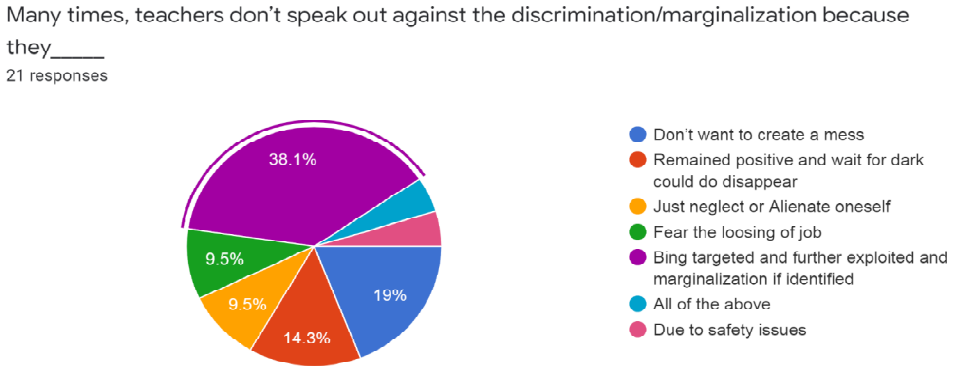

Chart: 2 this chart shows the common reasons for the silence of a teaching community with an underprivileged background prone to various kinds of discrimination.

Discriminatory attitude percolates into academic responsibilities which are preferably assigned to the socio-cultural elites who are projected as cultural ambassadors of society. One would see an element of nepotism, regionalism, caste and religion truncating opportunities to the marginalized academics, thus denying the right to sharing equal opportunities and responsibilities. The survey shows that 28.6% of positions/responsibilities are assigned on this basis and the rest 38.1% are assigned based on eligibility/experience while 33.3% on seniority. According to the survey, 71.4% of respondents admit that the academic oligarchy in connivance with administration operates with nepotism.

Various factors can be taken into consideration for participation in academic activities which may be combined with political interventions. About 57.2% of academic respondents are of the view that they have no academic and political networks which play a role in the (mis) management of administration. 42.8% of teachers opine that they are not

accommodated in other extra activities of their institute because of their socio-cultural background. Participation is denied to some teachers due to regionalism. One of the participants says that since "I belong to a different state, I am denied participation in the academic decisions in the departments." Some other respondents face double discrimination due to gender and caste discrimination. Most of the administrative positions in various departments of institutions are grabbed by "the upper caste men" who are to be served by the women belonging to the lower strata of society.

Teachers and Covid-19

The COVID-19 has a devastating effect on the economy, human beings, trade, labor, etc. It has also both positive and negative effects on the teaching community. The majority of teachers from underprivileged backgrounds feel that the rise of the virtual mode of teaching during the COVID-19 period has given some *space* to them in academic activities and *visibility* to their participation and contribution. Before lockdown, 14.2% of teachers did not organize any programs due to lack of financial support while 42.8% lack institutional support, but some of them did manage to organize academic programs because they were online and did not require much financial support. Here is a pie chart that shows academic participation through the virtual mode.

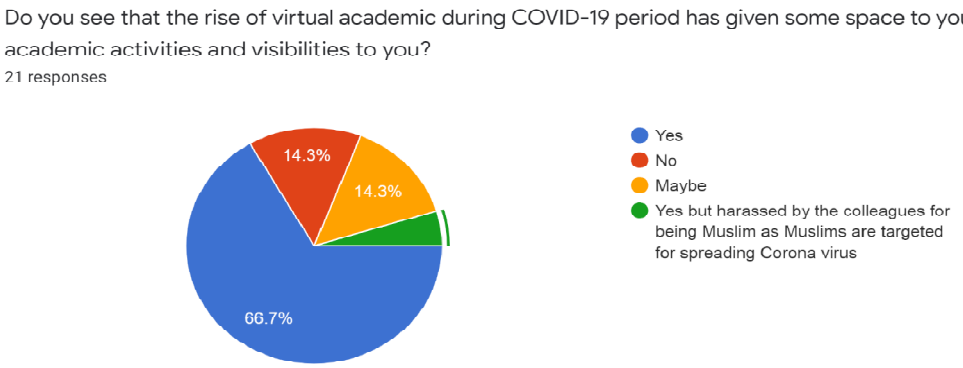

Chart 3 indicates the opinion of the participants that the rise of virtual academic during the COVID-19.

The majority of respondents do think that virtual spaces are more inclusive and transparent than 'in person'/regular spaces in academic life. In this survey, 28.2 % of participants opine that they are discriminated against due to their socio-cultural background. About 4.9% of respondents feel that they are being harassed due to their Muslim identity. One of the respondents rues that she was harassed by her college management "for being a Muslim as *Tabligh-Jamat* is held responsible for spreading Coronavirus". This was badly

propagated in the media. Roshni Kapur writes, "The spread of the Covid-19 pandemic in South Asia has also produced new forms of Islamophobia in New Delhi and Colombo" (*MEI*).

Discrimination in various educational institutions against teachers exists at various levels. In some institutions, it is less and in some other institutions, it is worst. Mostly, teachers are reluctant to speak out against the discrimination/ marginalization because they feel that they would be targeted and further exploited, and marginalized if identified. Some teachers working in private institutions have a fear of losing jobs.

This survey study reveals that invisibly visible exclusion, inequalities, marginalization, and discrimination exist in the academic community and institutions as well. It gives more emphasis on how the "virtualture"[1] (virtual + culture) rapidly emerged during the COVID-19. In India, some space and visibility to the teachers from underprivileged classes are given, in the virtualture, which would not have been possible in a regular mode of teaching. 47% of teachers feel that the virtual academic activities (attending/organizing webinars) are more transparent, inclusive, and democratic in nature but around 4% of respondents did feel that very soon a time would come for the privileged and power centric dominant groups to control these "virtualture" spaces and would try to v-marginalize[2] the already marginalized communities.

V-marginalization means the hijacking of these online/virtual spaces by discriminatory and exclusionary forces and turning them into suffocating zones. In the initial stage of virtualture, all teachers are given permission to organize events but gradually this virtualture will be filtered with social evils of caste, class, religion, gender, language, region, and of course the personal/departmental rivalry in coming days. The v-marginalities include deleting, hacking, blocking, spying, censoring the academics/ academic activities including denying the virtual space. The most violent form of v-violence (virtual violence) is posting derogatory comments, threatening, and indulging in physical violence, etc.

The virtualture during the lockdown has encouraged, provided space, and offered visibility to the faculty members hailing from the underprivileged communities and tried to decentralize the academia from the academic hierarchy and oligarchy. Without the (online) space provided by COVID-19, it wouldn't have been possible for many faculty members to organize academic activities for want of departmental, institutional, financial support, etc. Due to academic oligarchy, academic and political capital, it was difficult for the teachers to get approvals and sanction of funds to organize any programme. The COVID-19 has checked the structured academic oligarchy in our educational institutions which have always discouraged and denied the academic space for free functioning or organizing academic activities in the context of the marginalized faculty members.

Scope and significance of the study

This research can be developed into a major project and come up with a policy recommendation to the UGC, the Ministry of Human Resource Development, institutions/

universities to draft certain policies and constitute committees to mitigate discrimination against the faculty members within the academic spaces. It can also be extended to various levels of study such as school, college and university/institution, public and private, state-wise survey, etc. We have also received good responses from the Pure and Natural Sciences and some other disciplines. A discipline-wise study can also be conducted.

Conclusion

Despite the Constitutional provision and the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* to end all kinds of discrimination meted out to the margins on various grounds, they still exist in society and in academic spaces too. But this study finds that a majority of teachers (76.6%) feel that the discrimination, marginalization, and exclusion on various grounds against the teachers in the academic spaces can be mitigated or annihilated through the formulations of certain policies such as awareness programs, moral counseling, and the committees constituted to address the issue of discrimination within the academia. Apart from claiming the lives of all sections of people, Corona has done some good in disguise. Online teaching culture is one such phenomenon that provides freedom to teachers in handling academic programs. In that, the pandemic has kept the oppressors at bay for some time. Thanks to Corona, teachers of the oppressed communities get a sort of relief from the unwanted interventions of the dominant sections, especially in academic spaces. When the powers that be fail to address such sensitive issues, it is up to the oppressed people to take cudgels against the oppressors for their collective emancipation. Although less attention is given to such sensitive topics of discrimination and exclusion of teachers from underprivileged sections in academic spaces and institutions, there is a desperate need to introspect and retrospect those and see how inclusive and democratic these spaces could be.

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Footnotes

[1] This term is used to articulate the sudden rise of virtual culture in the teaching and learning process and other academic knowledge sharing activities during the Covid-19 lockdown.

[2] Virtually marginalize

Masks

Susheel Kumar Sharma

When I say a mask is necessary
For survival they turn their faces
The other way round and tell
Me to keep my dry mouth shut.

Glowing skin is a shield of the mortal
Black, white, red and green interior.
Claudius dresses up as a father and
Gertrude like a faithful, pure mother;
Hamlet wears a mask of pretence.
Masks veil Laertes into two worthies.
Ophelia wears the mask to be a pawn.
It makes Polonius a faithful minister.
Horatio is lost in the wilderness of masks.
A mouse-trap unmasks the conscience.
Lear, Shylock, Othello, Romeo, Macbeth,
Cordelia, Portia, Desdemona, Juliet and
Lady Macbeth too wait for their turns.

Masks do not hide one for long;
Corona is not ditched for years.
Masks do not replace shiny skins;
Ants remain undeterred by masks.
Masks do not claim to save lives;
One slowly turns into gritty dust.
Isn't a grave a mask for a new life?

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

Abidov, Azam (Aazam Abidov, A'zam Obid): poet, translator, short story writer and cultural adviser, was born in 1974 in Namangan, city of flowers, Uzbekistan. He was trained in philology. He has several books of poetry and translation to his credit, including *Tunes of Asia* (English translation of contemporary Uzbek poetry), *The Island of Anxiety* (poems in Uzbek, English and Spanish), *Dream of Lightsome Dawns*, *A Miracle Is On the Way* and *I Leave You in Complete Boredom*. He has also translated some ghazals and epic poems ('Farhod and Shirin') by Alisher Navoi, father of Uzbek poetry, into English. Azam also translated novels and short stories by famous Uzbek writers such as Erkin A'zam, Evril Turon and Salomat Vafo into English. Azam's poems have been translated into more than 20 languages and published worldwide. He was a Creative Writing Fellow at the University of Iowa in the U.S. (2004) and a writer-in-residence at LCB in Berlin (2017). He attended poetry festivals, creative writing workshops and cultural events in over 20 countries. In collaboration with Uzbek poet Bahrom Ruzimuhammad, Azam compiled two international poetry anthologies, *Fish and Snake* and *The Language of the Birds*, involving hundreds of contemporary poets from around the world. He is also a World Poetry Movement's coordinator of poetry events in Uzbekistan, and one of the founders of Maysara literary and cultural club at the Yudakov and Oybek House-Museums in Tashkent. In 2018, Azam launched the first-ever Writer/Artist Residency Program in Uzbekistan for foreign authors and artists (http://azamabidov.uz/?cat=29). Azam lives with his wife, journalist and poetess Nodira Abdullaeva, and with his three sons in Tashkent, Uzbekistan.

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