

Contagion to Quarantine: Literary Analysis of Cataclysmic Change

Dr. Ruchi Tomar*

Navyug Kanya Mahavidyalaya
University of Lucknow (UP)

Abstract

The present paper will explore the literary analysis of COVID 19 and offer innumerable examples of the contribution of literature in overcoming the crisis of present situation. Literature has always played a central role in making us the realization of our capabilities. The aesthetic characteristic of literature appeals to the emotional situations and modern dilemmas that enriches our real life. Thus, this paper is relevant enough to bring about the impacts and repercussions of the present scenario. It also elaborates the ways and means of coping and combating this menace. In order to restore equilibrium during quarantine and lockdown phase, literature is the best weapon. The word 'Quarantine' has both French and Italian influences. In the late 1400s, English speakers borrowed the French word *quarantaine* which means a period of about 40 days. In French language also, Quarantine derives from the word '*Quarante*' which also means the number 40. By the 1600s, English speakers started using the 'Quarantena' to mean 'isolation as protection from disease'. Therefore all words such as quarantine, isolation and lockdown are used to prevent exposure to people who have or may have any contagious disease. All specific genres like prose, poetry, drama, fiction focusing upon the portrayal of COVID 19 as a contagious disease which forced the people to self-quarantine themselves and thus a cataclysmic change can be observed.

Keywords: Quarantine, Lockdown, COVID 19, Cataclysmic Change, isolation.

The history of contagious diseases has not been unknown to human beings. They have hounded different parts of the world time and again. May it be Red Death, Black Death, Influenza, AIDS or American Plagues of the 16th century, Spanish Flu and the more recent one COVID 19. They have taken a huge number of lives so far. Earlier, humans have successfully emerged from the difficult times and move on. Like the Black Death in the 14th century killed many of the Europeans but time passes on and the social structure coalesced itself back. It was believed that it was God's rage but it didn't increase the death toll. The same belief had with other contagious diseases as well but in the 21st century, Science finds itself in a challenging phase and not able to swallow the COVID 19 contagion which is so hard to control.

As to no immediate control or cure, lockdown has been taken as one of the measures by many governments. Other measures include self-quarantine. People have to 'stay at home and stay safe'. The social upheaval caused by COVID 19 turned the people towards dystopian or post-apocalyptic books and movies. Since the disease spreads mainly through close contact

between people therefore contagious people asked to wear masks in public places to maintain social distancing. The present day world is sated with the pain and affliction caused by COVID 19.

Therefore, the literary phenomenon over such a vast period of history of contagious diseases has witnessed a variegated experience of cataclysmic change occurred in the process. The hidden space of the virus make everyone edgy into a nervy position. The sepulchral image of death started looming large into the minds of the people. Earlier in all the infectious diseases, lockdown and quarantine words were never into use. But 21st century has a visceral impact of contagion. The word 'Quarantine' originated from the Italian word 'Quaranta' was adopted as an obligatory means of human-human and animal-human separation to prevent the contamination of disease. It was started in the time of 'Black Death' in the mid 1300's but its relevance can be widely understood in COVID 19.

Thus, apocalyptic outbreak of diseases have been a recurring motif of not only the world as well as the literature because literature is the mirror of the society. There are many constituent elements of literature helps us in the scrutiny of the world in the grip of contagious diseases like COVID 19. According to Harish Trivedi who taught English Literature in Delhi University:

Literature regards each individual with compassion and goes deeper than what statistics or historical records can tell us. Literature may not explain away or fight off things such as Pandemics, even as modern science sometimes can't, but it does become a source of consolation a way of sharing our common humanist concerns, and, in its own way, provides the deepest and most insightful record of the events. (23)

Since time becomes immemorial as disease turned into a contagion and locked people into a quarantine. Therefore, literary artists have now been inspired and influenced by their social and natural environments started writing about the recurring diseases that have appeared and reappeared in human history time and again. W.J. Long said: "Behind every book is a man; behind the man is the race, and behind the race are the natural and social environments where influence is unconsciously reflected". (2) In the time of a contagious disease which creates a cataclysmic change not only in the world order but also of the human beings. Literature tries to push off the sense of meaninglessness from the lines of all mankind. The claustrophobic confinement i.e. lockdown and quarantine makes people to find solace in literature. Literature therefore not only informs the reader but also console them and spread Robert Browning's optimism too when he says in Rabbi Ben Ezra: "Grow old along with me the best is yet to be". (1) It is the time to unlearn the learn and relearn the new. As per a poem published in 'Hindu' newspaper:

We may be young or old
 But we must be bold,
 Against the enemy untold.
 We can't go to malls
 Nor can we go to waterfalls,
 Because this virtue is a scaring,
 Sending our spines into shivering.
 If you have to go out, think twice,
 Wear your mask, be wise.
 After coming home, sanitize.
 And wash your hands thrice.
 COVID 19 is the name,
 It is playing a hide-and - seekgame

By following the rules, we can ensure endgame. (3)

This is a composition of a class VIII standard student of Karnataka. Therefore the virus has just not only impacted human beings, it has equally wedged the literature as well. The scratch of COVID 19 is going to leave its mark as scar, the virus will undoubtedly leave its mark on the pages of literature. The literature at this life threatening time of Corona performed a dynamic role- focus stressed upon what Sidney said: “The end of poetry is to teach and please, hence it is usable to society....to delight and teach...discard the vices...imitate the noble and virtuous action...” (3) Thus, the role of literature is to help the society to relieve the new life amidst contagious phase and pose a dynamic change into it. Don Arbores, an intellectual to contributed corona poetry asks question ‘For Better or Worse’. He comments on the use of technology which tries to replace humans in COVID times. He said:

The virtual hug cannot replace the actual hug,
And I- contact is not the same as Eye contact.
Yet we make do with Zoom
And face time,
And whatever else there is.
But still, we long for what comes after,
And what used to be. (4)

Here, Mr. Arbores emphasizes the significance of human touch, closeness and longing for the lost life in COVID times. Everything becomes virtual and so on. There is an urge to go back to what normal life is lingering in the heart of every human being. Today, the cataclysmic change that occurred due to contagion COVID 19 devastated everything. This can be defined clearly in Derrida’s words as ‘deconstructed’ and ‘decentred’. Thus, W.B. Yeats said in ‘Lapis Lazuli’: “Art and Literature is happy and uplifting so in the time of crisis, it puts a jarring note to those who are hit by it”. (5) Literature and literary writings seem to be ready to deal with the cataclysmic change. Now a days, literature is all about talking about the renovation of nature and new relationships between human beings. Due to lockdown and quarantine, people are locked inside their homes and in this phase, literature plays a crucial role in providing comfort to their minds. Earlier in all other infectious diseases such as Black Death etc., literature discussed about the plight of human beings and solutions were hard to be observed in them except few works. But today, literature is not only assert the fictitious world but also brings the reality. It also reconstruct the cataclysmic change occurred in the definition of contagious diseases. New phrases are now more in the use in literature and different new areas of research also come up like Quarantine Literature, Migrant discourses, Pandemic Literature and so on.

When the literature of COVID 19 will be taken into consideration in the future, there will be the stories of survived human beings and new ways of defeating the unknown enemy will also be examined. Social distancing, self-quarantining turned people towards pandemic and epidemic literature. Thus, literature has a magical ability to make its readers away from isolation, retaining sanity, fostering resilience, infusing empathy and above all instilling a ray of hope. Mikhail Bulgakov in ‘The Master and Margarita’ said: “That is what literature does. It induces its readers to hope and look at the beauty of life in the middle of all adversity. Literature during the phase of lockdown not only helps its readers but heals”. (9) As the whole world grapples with COVID 19, awareness through literature is the basic necessity. Poetry is an effective way to spread information about the transformation that it brings and how to deal with it. A remembrance here is of a self-composed poem of Dr. Alka Rani Agarwal who is teaching in a college in Chandausi:

Away! Away! Go Away!

Don't let Corona sway;
 Sit apart, even to love
 Lest you'll be its prey!

Away! Away! Move Away!
 Don't allow Corona to stay;
 Break chain of transmission
 Or quarantined for 14 day!

Away! Away! Keep Away!
 Don't permit Corona to spray;
 Meet only on virtual platform
 To put infections droplets allay!

Away! Away! Hide anyway!
 Don't be Corona's blood slay;
 Home is the only shelter
 To save from trap of array! (1)

Thus, from the above given lines it is reflected that literature has entered into the people's lives in the way that they realize that creativity and resilience in literature is very crucial to face this adversity with readiness. COVID 19 transferred into many phases- from contagious disease to lockdown then to quarantine, therefore, a cataclysmic change can be observed in people's lives altogether. A major section of people stays home thus a sudden upsurge of poetry on Corona virus emerge. Different metaphors like Coronapoetry, Coronapoets, Coronapoems, Pandemic poetry and so on. The constant use of such metaphors in literary texts is a major source of inspiration for people who are fighting against the unknown enemy. These terms bring a horrored picture of those who become victims first to the disease then to the metaphor itself. Susan Sontag in her work 'Illness as Metaphor' (1978) marks: "A disease is considered to be an evil invincible predator". (56)

Today, social media platforms are full of explorations of the cataclysmic change that COVID 19 brings in itself and to the lives of people and the world altogether. For example, Nandini Yadav She said:

Corona or Karma!
 There was chaos all around
 The whole world is terrified
 Heaven on earth
 What a tragedy this is,
 Since I was born.
 Neither seen it
 Enters the chest of the earth
 There is a dagger like Corona,
 Gone neighbours are listened
 Closed roads
 You have to stay home now
 Just to live
 It's time to stop yourself. (1)

The similar strain can be observed into the poem 'Lockdown' written by Richard Hendrick. He begins:

Yes there is fear
Yes there is isolation
Yes there is manic-buying
Yes there is sickness
Yes there is even death
But, it's said in Wuhan after so many years of noise
You can hear the birds again
They say that after just few weeks of quiet
The sky is no longer thick with fumes
But blue and grey all clear..." (67)

Thus, different themes can be seen in modern texts' approach to Corona. Some are feeling sick of quarantine, few seems to be enjoying and others defined Corona as a dagger and so on. In few works, people also giving thanks to Corona in their lives. One such example can be taken from an unknown poet on Instagram when he said:

Hey Corona
Thanks for returning us the world
Where the Birds sing
There are no crimes and fights...
Thanks for shutting our mouths
For balancing the death curves
Thanks for showing the real face
Of the real virus' of the world.

The above given lines exactly reflects the difference in people's approach towards Corona. Lines also somehow seems to be similar to Sontag's vision. She said: "Illness have always been used as metaphors to enliven charges that a society was corrupt or unjust...Disease metaphors are used to judge society not as out of balance but as repressive. They turn up regularly in Romantic rhetoric which opposes heart to head, spontaneity to reason, nature to artifice, country to city". (57) Therefore, the choice of metaphors can affect not only the way in which we talk about something but also the way we think about something and experience it. Some readers claim that contagion fiction provides comfort but others argue the opposite. Even Quarantine, one of the measure of COVID 19 need not to be monotonous and stifling. It can be a gateway to works in literature that define the history of the world.

Perhaps the most searing announcement of social distancing and quarantine that COVID 19 implied can be seen in Urdu poetry also basically in the Ghazal of Mirza Ghalib translated by Rakshanda Jalil:

Let us go and live somewhere where there is no one
No one who speaks to me in my language , no one to talk to
I will make something that is like a house
(But) There won't be any neighbours, nor anyone to guard it
Where I to fall ill, there will be no one to tend me
And when I die, no one to mourn me.

The above given lines are perfectly exemplifying the present day situation of any country due to COVID 19. People die but no one is there to mourn upon their death. Social distancing and quarantine thus isolated the human beings in the present time. Today, the lockdown and the cataclysmic change that COVID 19 bring, poems are life-saving drugs whose intake in

isolation has proven restorative powers. In this time of chaos and uncertainty, poetry is used for curative metaphors and images. Shuiyina, Chinese nurse wrote:

Please don't decorate me in garlands
Don't give me applause
Spare me recognition for work injury, martyrdom,
Or any other merits
I didn't come to Wuhan to admire the cherry
Blossoms.
And I didn't come for scenery, the reception of
Flattery.
I just want to return home safe when the epidemic
Ends.
Even if all that remains are my bones
I must bring myself home to my children and
Parents. (1)

Therefore, poems in literature are not just the snippets of speech capturing the memorable moments of our lives- but also picturize the horrifying reports from the front lines of the subconscious that battleground of sense making at constant war with the chaos of existence among COVID 19. Sally Morgan in her poem 'My Corona' shows how people try to cope up with the Corona virus crisis:

The Coronavirus looks like a dog toy
Or a child's koosh ball
With its primary color
And fanciful shape.
How can something so whimsical
Be so insidious?... (7)

Thus, literature play a significant role in generating awareness about COVID 19 and how to prevent it. In his book 'Discipline and Punish', Michael Foucault gives a detailed description about plague stricken city and delineates the measures to be taken against the epidemic. He talks about 'partitioning spaces', 'closing off houses', 'constant inspection' etc. Foucault's description resonates the modern precautionary measures adopted by various countries to prevent the spread of contagious disease like COVID 19 and its after effects - lockdown, quarantine and social distancing. The spread of COVID 19 has persuaded human beings to realize the fragility of human existence in the face of fatal disease but also make us learn to be optimistic like Daniel Defoe in 'A Journal of the Plague Year' wrote: "...a close conversing with death, or with diseases that threaten death, would sum off the gall from our tempers, remove the animosities among us, and bring us to see with differing eyes than those which we locked on things with before". (87)

The contribution of literary artists and their works are unparalleled in COVID 19 times. Literature is hopeful in taking calamity and lend us strength to tide over these troubled times. Bhaskaran Bara, an artist, writer and a poet said: "Humans have always had their own ways to cope with disaster and literature and poetry have always been born out of great suffering". (80) Thus, COVID 19 is inspiring the literary writers. The virus and its aftermath i.e. lockdown, quarantine and the accompanying emotions are being written about in fiction, non-fiction and poetry. The experience of quarantine with all emotions of fear, loneliness and uncertainty resulted in the birth of a new genre- Quarantine literature. The march of migrant workers

inspired Siddharth Gigoo to write 'Love in the Time of Quarantine', a short work of fiction in which two stories run parallel to each other. First is of one of the lovers who are separated by time zones due to lockdown and the other of a migrant labourer family that has nowhere to go.

Another instance of the portrayal of lockdown and quarantine can be seen in Malachu Edwin Vethamani's poem 'Reading Tennyson on Pandemic Days' which emphasized upon the role of literature in figuring the cataclysmic change that COVID 19 bring upon the lives of the people. She wrote:

A deadly number game has befallen us
 We keep count like never before.

Why are we weigh'd upon with heaviness
 And utterly consumed with sharp distress,

Zero
 No business
 Cash registers forcibly closed
 Someone has blundered.

One
 A metre away
 Close proximity frowned on.

The day to night, the night to morn,
 And day and night I am left alone.

Two
 Couples Self-isolate
 Prescribed companionship.

And when I raised my eyes, above
 They met with two so full and bright-
 Such eyes I swear to you, my love,
 That these have never lost their light.

Fourteen
 Days of Self-isolation
 Thoughts of Self and Others.

For every worm beneath the moon
 Draws different threads, and late and
 So on
 Spins tolling out his own cacoon
 (1)

Therefore, literature is successful in analysing, reviewing, discussing, interpreting, interrogating the today's world health issue COVID 19 and its contagious wings that grabbed the human beings. Though Pandemic continues to change its faces from contagion to quarantine and lockdown but literature seems to be capable enough to strive upon the

cataclysmic change occurred in it. Literature tries to uphold the strength and inner power of human beings by figuring the solutions to COVID 19 pandemic. It also makes us believe that time never stops, it passes on and nothing can stay back. Literature also discussed that behind every pandemic or natural disaster, it is human beings who are somehow responsible for their self-destruction.

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*I did my Ph.D from University of Lucknow, Lucknow. Till last year I was working in Navyug Kanya Mahavidyalaya, affiliated to University of Lucknow. I have five years teaching experience of UG and PG classes. Besides this, 15 research papers have been published in reputed journals. I have more than 26 paper presentations in different offline and online National/International Seminars/Conferences.