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## THEMATIC POSSIBILITIES IN THE POST-COVID FICTION WRITING

Dr. PRASHANT LUTHRA

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Sri Sathya Sai Institute of Higher Learning

Prasanthi Nilayam (AP)- 515134

Email: [prashantluthra@sssihl.edu.in](mailto:prashantluthra@sssihl.edu.in)



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### Abstract

History has witnessed several significant events that altered human psychology and the way we live in this world. The two World Wars and many recurrences of pandemics in the past, like yellow fever, cholera, plague, and many of their varieties, have afflicted humanity alike. The account of all this mass malady is discernible in the fiction of that period. Literature has always been a medium to express the ineludible pain and distress man went through. It finely reflects human susceptibility despite all the claims of scientific progress. The modern pandemic has exposed man's vulnerability in an age when he aspires to reign cosmos and claims to noose Nature through his so-called advancement of science. It has brought the man to a juncture when he needs to revisit his limits and reconsider going back to the basics. The new world order is emerging and is becoming a new normal. The pandemic has put to halt man's unbridled flight to selfish materialism. This new world will find expression in literature and touch upon how this new challenge has changed the course of life. This paper attempts to reconnoitre the thematic possibilities that fiction writers can explore in the wake of the modern pandemic.

Keywords: Covid, fiction, literature, themes

### Introduction

Fiction writers constantly look for a conflict that can engage readers and connect them with the story. Any historical occurrence that influences humankind, positively or negatively, leaves a lasting impact on the psyche of the age. The pain of partition after India's independence was felt by the two alienated communities who suffered and the sensitive minds, who could pen this pain in the literature of the age. The impact was so hard that the writers continue to relive those painful events in contemporary literature. Khushwant Singh, Saddat

Hassan Munto and several other writers expressed the pain of partition through their works.

Similarly, the epidemics in the past left an indelible mark on the way fiction was produced. The reference goes back to *Illiad* by Homer in which Apollo inflicts plague on the Greeks, which caused the death of the soldiers. Later, Apollo reveals that the cause of the epidemic was to reprimand the Greeks for Agamemnon's enslavement of Chryseis. The historical reference of plague points at its outbreak as a result of a moral violation. In *Oedipus Rex (429 BCE)*, A dreadful plague appears in Thebes as Oedipus unknowingly marries his mother after

killing his father. Thus the themes were predominantly moral for the lack of scientific reasons behind the pestilence in that age. *The Decameron* by Giovanni Boccaccio talks about the self-isolation of ten people for ten days due to the Black Death. As in the modern Covid, people entertain themselves with social networking or the internet; in the novel by the Italian novelist, these people tell each other stories. There is a mention of the Black Death in Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* where the plague does not affect the honest but kills the immoral. Chaucer writes, "the fear of contagion increased vices such as avarice, greed, and corruption, which paradoxically led to infection and thus to both moral and physical death". (Riva) Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* and several other plays also talk about the disease.

When a new outbreak has hit the world and shown the fresh batch of generation a new way to live in this world, it gives ample scope to the writers to express themselves in myriad ways. It is not just the direct impact of the pandemic that is visible in the form of death and suffering, but also the collateral damage it has done to the world on social, psychological and economic fronts that can find a place in the contemporary literature. This paper lists a few thematic possibilities that writers can explore in the wake of the current pandemic.

#### Exploring global themes

The significant attention falls on man's helplessness in the wake of the Covid pandemic despite the so-called technological advancements in the field of medical sciences. There is a scope in writing on man's tug of war against Nature and his futile efforts to tame it. If a man devises newer ways to tame it, Nature too knows how to adapt accordingly to survive alongside man. Covid pandemic has brought the man to a juncture where he realised that he has to live in harmony with Nature, leaving aside the idea of taming it to meet selfish ends. In Mary Shelley's *The Last Man*, narrator Lionel Verney speaks of humanity's obliteration due to the plague in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The novel *The Scarlet Plague* (1912) by Jack London narrates a futuristic apocalypse in 2013 of a fever called "Red Death", killing most of the world's

population. The epidemic's impact is that those who survive are doubtful about having once belonged to a civilised world. In medically advanced nations like the United States, the death toll has put a question mark on man's hyperbolic claims to win over death and disease. The fiction writers can explore the theme of the eternal struggle between man and nature.

There is a scope in exploring a political novel involving nations in a spat accusing each other of spreading the virus leading to a complicated world political order that may take the world to the verge of a world war. In recent times, China has been at the centre of all the accusations resulting in a new diplomatic permutation and combination in the world.

The disease has brought opportunities for some. At the global level, there has been a race between the nations to bring out the Covid vaccine to capture the world's desperate market first. Growing opportunism can be a theme worth exploring. India being the most populated country, has been a potential market for the world. When it came out with its indigenous vaccines, it foiled the aspirations of some of the top global players in the pharmaceutical industry. When the world fights with the deadly epidemic, a few nations fight for economic supremacy. Which is essential: money or life? - makes an excellent theme to work on. Destabilising the economy of rival nations through viruses can be another interesting theme to explore.

The spirit of global philanthropy has come to the forefront during the Covid times. A few nations have indeed gone out of the way to help other countries by supplying vaccines. The media occasionally calls it vaccine diplomacy, where the nations carry a hidden agenda behind the charity. A genuine charity or diplomacy in disguise makes a good theme.

The fast mutating virus has posed a big challenge for scientists to come out with a customised antidote. This gives scope to a science fiction novel narrating a war between an intelligent virus and a pool of scientists striving to find a common vaccine for all its variants.

### Exploring Micro Themes

The pandemic has directly affected an individual and society; this may provide rich material to fiction writers. With every catastrophe, there comes a crisis of faith, and hope loses its meaning. In *The Year of Wonders: A Novel of the Plague (2001)* by Geraldine Brooks, inhabitants of an isolated village lose their faith and instinct to live when the bubonic plague arrives. In the recent spell of the Covid pandemic, similar disillusionment is discernible when even science struggled to deliver. The lack of faith in science makes some people doubt the vaccine's efficacy and talk about its long-term ill effects on health. That gives an idea of a futuristic novel in the backdrop of a world disillusioned with science.

The world experienced an economic setback due to a sudden halt in economic activities resulting in mass layoffs. The restrictive measures taken by the government due to the Covid-19 pandemic have a substantial effect on the global economy and increased the unemployment rate. (ref. lancet) It affected both white and blue collars. Mass migration, where many of these workers died on their way home, makes a subject to explore in fiction. Even in big cities, where EMI culture sustains a reasonable lifestyle, people cannot meet the EMI deadlines and commit suicide. India reports more than 2800 suicides due to joblessness. (Ref) This unemployment is unique because it was unpredictable for many before the pandemic, as any apparent reason did not bring it. A good amount of fiction can be written depicting the plight of the victims of this pandemic joblessness.

Out of the lost hope and pessimism, there has been an exceptional display of philanthropic spirit. Several doctors and supporting staff all over the world worked tirelessly to fight the pandemic. In this struggle, many have lost their life. (Ref Tribune) The helplessness and mental trauma of doctors, witnessing much death in front of their eyes, wailing families and their struggle to procure oxygen indeed deserve to be depicted in the Post-Covid fiction. These unsung warriors and their selfless spirit of service can certainly be a theme of an inspirational novel. There may be a crisis of faith

concerning science and God; however, faith in humanity stays.

After humanity at its best, there are plenty of instances showing humanity at its worst. In *The Scarlet Plague (1912)*, Jack London depicts how some rioters commit killing and robbery during the plague outbreak. He writes, "In the midst of our civilisation, down in our slums and labor-ghettos, we had bred a race of barbarians, of savages; and now, in the time of our calamity, they turned upon us like the wild beasts they were and destroyed us. And they destroyed themselves as well." (London, 105) As for some, the pandemic is an opportunity to serve; it is an opportunity to earn for many. Black marketeers, counterfeiters leave no chance to make money out of this pandemic. There have been instances when life-saving drugs were sold at exorbitant prices and counterfeit medicines dumped in the market. Such themes can dwell on the sinister aspects of human beings amidst the Covid pandemic through dark fiction.

Pandemic has left millions of children orphaned. As per a report, around 1562000 children have lost at least one parent or a grandparent; this must be a concern as this loss may negatively affect these children's social, physical, and mental development. Fiction writers may find it a subject to highlight the plight and prospects of these children under these traumatic circumstances.

There is another experience the present generation had during the pandemic is living under lockdown. The Governments implemented unprecedented lockdown to stop the spread of the disease. The economic implications of this lockdown have already been discussed; the psychological implications have been much more. Lockdown dragged people into depression due to loneliness; it is disastrous for mental health if one has not experienced it healthily. Long term loneliness may result in mental health problems like stress, depression and anxiety. Thus, a shift in the behaviour pattern due to loneliness can be a good theme for a psychological/social novel. It can be explored in the following ways:

- A jobless and homebound workaholic protagonist suddenly becomes irritable, putting his/her family peace at stake.
- -A social protagonist with very little interaction with family is confined with his/her family and finds difficulty in getting along well.
- -Loneliness drags a protagonist to drinking to cope with his/her loneliness.
- -Protagonist finds his family beautiful as he/she spends more time with family during the lockdown.
- -Protagonist indulges in social networking, creating problems for himself and his family.
- -Unable to meet the people who have been psychological support to the protagonist leads to various psychological issues.

There are ample ways to explore the theme of loneliness in fiction in Post-Covid fiction writing.

#### The rise of online culture:

The most lethal impact of the Covid pandemic has been on education setup. The prolonged shutdown of educational institutions has forced the system to experiment with online education, ironically publicised as the future of education. No one ever imagined a lifeless classroom where there is no man to man interaction. Teachers are teaching mechanically in front of the computer, unknown and unbothered of the attentiveness at the receiving end. With the absence of classroom discipline, students are being taught in the comfortable environment of the drawing-rooms. It will produce a different set of students who have not been exposed to the warmth of personal grooming and discipline. These circumstances can provide enough material to fiction writers. This theme can be explored in the following ways.

- -A passionate teacher struggling to get his rhythm in the new online teaching scenario.
- Growing emotional distance between teacher and student.
- Impact of social isolation on students.

- Social well being of students- a concern
- A student who needs special attention is unable to draw the attention of his teacher online.
- Living in a digital world out of fear of pandemic.

On a similar note, the work-from-home trend gives way to a new kind of work culture where the boundaries between office and home are being blurred. This novel trend deserves to find a place in Post-Covid fiction.

Most importantly, the dynamics of relationships has changed due to prolonged cohabitation during the lockdown. Marital harmony has suffered a lot due to Covid. Pandemic induced breakups are on the rise. The level of stress is rising and causing behavioural changes leading to splits. The focus, being homebound, has been more on domestic details and personalities, which have been ignored due to busy life in pre-Covid times. Depiction of these matrimonial complexities may find a place in post-Covid fiction writing.

Pandemic does not just take bodies; it attempts to take away spirits that run through mankind. Every time the pandemic struck, humanity showed a spirit of resilience to bounce back to normalcy. This resilience makes a beautiful theme to explore in fiction. Arundhati Roy states, "Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next." (Roy, 3)

#### Conclusion

Every calamity that befalls mankind leaves a permanent scar. Covid-19 pandemic is one such episode in history that has shaken man from the core. There have been such spells in history, but Covid is a new experience for the generation alive. This pandemic is different from the earlier ones as it is suspected to be manufactured, which is even more perilous. The enemy here is not a virus but the virus of greed in man. It directly concerns human values that are losing the moral grip to sustain a civilised society. The impact will stay for a long time.

This pandemic is not just a concern of medical scientists but many; psychologists, sociologists, economists, behavioural scientists, and writers. As discussed in the paper, the pandemic has raised many themes a fiction writer can deliberate on in his writings. Covid-19 has provided the writers a vast thematic scope ranging from global to individual, social to domestic.

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