
Revisiting Narratives of Epidemic/pandemic: Analyzing Portrayal of Indian Society in Selected Literary Pieces

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Abstract:

The paper analyzes how Indian storytellers viewed society undergoing an epidemic/pandemic. Recently, we have experienced the COVID-19 crisis and its consequences, such as the dilemma of personal space, the emergence of social solidarity and the breaking of the social fabric, changing notions of *touchability* and *physical proximity*, and so on. Epidemics clearly distinguish between normal and abnormal functioning of society and challenge established norms. It is interesting to pay attention to how such narratives look at the state of exception, i.e., abnormal time, quarantine procedure, declaration of highly infected areas as 'dangerous zones', and their impact on the social body. Various Indian writers have narrated such odd scenarios in their literary works, which provide a more profound acknowledgment of people's mindsets than historical accounts of epidemics and pandemics. They have woven such extreme conditions and their influence on different classes and castes in their multi-layered epidemic narratives. The question of *existence* and *survival* becomes a central issue during contagion. A literary writer has deep insight into human relationships with their complexities and survival crises. Such narratives also focus on love, loss, regret, emotion, and the stoical response of human beings. The paper examines Indian writers' responses and depictions of society and pestilence in their storytelling.

Keywords: epidemic, social fabric, quarantine, proximity, contagion.

Introduction:

If one is to trace the roots of epidemics, one needs to go back to the initial

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phase of human existence. Epidemics are as ancient as human civilization. One may hardly find a society that has not encountered any epidemic outbursts. Historians have frequently written about epidemics and pandemics, but when a disease enters the literature, it does not remain a mere medical disease. For a literary writer, disease becomes a metaphor for expressing social evils, injustices, and inequalities. Recently, we encountered the COVID-19 pandemic, which has altered all the established norms. In the context of plague pestilence, Rene Girard writes:

The plague will turn the honest man into a thief, the virtuous man into a lecher, and the prostitute into a saint. Friends murder, and enemies embrace...Social hierarchies are first transgressed and then abolished. Political and religious authorities collapse. The plague makes all accumulated knowledge and all categories of judgment invalid. (833)

Thus, dealing with a pandemic is almost similar to dealing with war. But a pandemic is a war of all against the war of everyone, as there is no visible enemy. Various restrictions are imposed to overpower this invisible enemy.

The paper deals with two novels, *The Blind Matriarch* by Namita Gokhale and *Kalpaash* by Mohan Parmar. Both books deal with the theme of the coronavirus crisis and the response of Indian society. *The Blind Matriarch* is a multi-layered portrayal of an Indian middle-class family undergoing the Covid-19 pandemic. In the novel, the Matriarch family lives in a four-story C100 house in Delhi when Covid-19 breaks out. Lockdown restricts their lives and makes them all stay together. Every family member re-examines their pandemic-stricken life and sets novel destinations accordingly. Blind Matangi-Ma, the central character, registers the changing dynamics of her family during the pandemic. She holds the family together with her humanitarian approach, although she is inwardly full of sorrow and pain. The story concerns pain, reminiscence, love, loss, and regret. It explores the emerging complexity of individual space in a joint family due to the sudden outburst of coronavirus. *Kalpaash* is the thirteenth novel by Mohan Parmar, a Gujarati Dalit writer. It is a portrayal of humanity and human relations during the Covid-19 pandemic. It provides a context that makes readers think about Dalits who have been living in caste-based discrimination for centuries. *Kalpaash* thoughtfully indicates that life during COVID-19 became monotonous and painful due to social distancing and lack of physical proximity.

Ironically, the writer remarks that the threat of infection is situational, which does not allow us to step out of our circumference and touch others, but what about *untouchables*? The story revolves around three central characters, Avinash, Nitin, and Anjali, from a small Gujarati family in Ahmedabad. In the novel, Avinash, the father of Nitin, is a generous man who always supports needy people. He strictly follows Covid-19 guidelines and wants others to do so. Nitin keeps on dreaming throughout the story; he talks with Yama, the god of Death. He has created a *new* world in his

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dreams where one may get plenty of *humanity*. The novel ends with the Death of Avinash. Thus, *Kalpaash* is a response to caste-based discrimination, while *The Blind Matriarch* is a response to the gender-based structure of Indian families undergoing the COVID-19 pandemic.

Any epidemic or pandemic significantly impacts the human mind, behavior, and thought process. Mainly, we consider the routine flow of life appropriate and faultless unless external elements touch it. The same applies to our social relationships with others and *ourselves* during contagion. Contagion and self-consciousness are associated with a fragile bond of feelings and affections that may break or tighten due to the 'extremity' of unusual disturbance. The extremity can be noted on both sides, i.e., it could make an adverse impact in the form of fear, which could be seen in the breaking of social fabrics, or affirmative upliftment, which results in the emergence of social solidarity. Historical accounts of epidemics and pandemics may or may not reflect these extremities, but literary pieces offer in-depth expressions of these complexities. This contradictory notion is crucial in epidemic and pandemic narratives. In *The Blind Matriarch* and *Kalpaash*, one may discover how this complexity occurs in a joint family. Due to Covid-19, their worlds fall apart. The old Matangi Ma is the center of *The Blind Matriarch*, who holds the family together throughout her life, but finally, in the latter half of Covid-19, it starts falling apart.

Similarly, in *Kalpaash*, Avinash holds the family together. Still, after his Death, at the end of the novel, the reader can sense that the family is broken inwardly as the center is absent now. Instead of merely focusing on the end, it is better to travel from the front to the back pages of such narratives as it paints a personal world for each player of the two texts. The beauty of such narratives is that one may feel the essence of how social fabrics break and emerge social solidarity during abnormal times.

A sudden outburst of pestilence creates disorder in society to such a level that it challenges established norms of familial love, societal proximity, religion, medical science, etc. Alliances and the bondages of affection disintegrate. Neighbor forsakes neighbor, brother, sister, parent children, and vice versa—dearest and nearest become warehouses of germs. As a result, distance needs to be maintained between them. During Covid-19, we have seen how dead bodies were abandoned and left alone by kith and kin. Going further, there seems to be a prohibition on love-making and pleasure-giving moments. No one risks harboring physical proximity at the cost of life in contagion. The pandemic alienates husbands, wives, friends, colleagues, parents, children, siblings, etc., whether they live under the same roof or are separated. Distance does not blur the intensity of contagion- it affects all, nearby and far away; it does not differentiate between people; mentally, it influences all.

In *Kalpaash*, Mohan Parmar portrays this dilemma and expresses how the social fabric breaks. Avinash, Nitin's father, is a staunch follower of pandemic

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guidelines. He refuses to let Nitin and other family members participate in any social gathering and does not want Nitin to visit his friends or the office.

Similarly, in *The Blind Matriarch*, the joint family lives in the same flat, but all are disjointed. Shanta's NGO stops, Satish starts working from home, Ritika loses her job, adversely impacting her behavior, and the children cannot play outdoor games- the entire family is disassociated from the outer world. Rahul wanted to hug Matangi Ma but could not, as he had been instructed not to do so. Shanta's nature is very soft and mild, but due to infection, she maintains distance from others and does not hold anyone in her arms, even if she wants to. In *Kalpaash*, Nitin is disturbed due to so-called *social distance*, which does not permit anyone to share feelings in such dire pestilence. He feels he has been cut from the rest of the world, where there are only "dried-up feelings" (2). Each family is broken not only outwardly but also inwardly. As Nitin says, "In the family if anyone got an infection, the rest of the family members maintained considerable distance seemed to become hell" (58). The bondage of affection loosens during pestilence, gradually resulting in vanishing feelings and emotions. The occurrence of COVID-19 is temporary, a situational act, but based on these two texts, we need to rethink the feelings, emotions, and pain of those communities whom our system has marginalized based on caste and gender.

If we talk in the context of India, social distancing has not been maintained for the first time in the Covid-19 pandemic. It has been maintaining caste and gender-based social distancing for centuries now. Its roots go back to the hierarchical religious formation of four *Varnas* in which at the top of the caste system are Brahmins and untouchables at the bottom. Being at the top, Brahmins have always kept their distance from lower caste people, which we now call Dalits. Since ancient times, Dalits have been forcefully instructed to maintain socio-physical distance from the upper castes. They were not allowed to touch not only people of upper castes but also their objects. It was/is believed that the mere touch or shadow of a Dalit could pollute Brahmins and their objects; as a result, various prohibitions were imposed upon *untouchables*. Likewise, gender discrimination has remained ever-active in power relations of male-female in India. Women have been seen as a subordinate category that needs to be ruled and governed. For most of the long history, women were deprived, suppressed, and marginalized based on male-dominating ideologies. In India, they were imprisoned in the patriarchal system whose duty was to look after family matters like child bearing-rearing and housework. They were supposed to keep themselves engaged in households and be *ideal* woman-mother-wife.¹ They were not free to live a wayward life like a man. They were cage-birds who were controlled, beaten, neglected, and, most importantly, used as a tool for procreation and to satisfy

¹ In India, the stereotypical image of a female as an ideal mother, wife, and woman plays a significant role in gender politics.

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sexual desires. Thus, both women and Dalits have been categorized into different *containment zones* and high-risk *areas* in the long history of India. Pandemic guidelines like social distancing and the formation of containment zones were followed by *all* during COVID-19 as a shield against the threat of the virus. But Dalits and women have been living similarly in caste and gender-based systems for centuries now. The difference between the pandemic and the Indian suppressive system is that COVID-19 is a short-time happening that equally affects all.

In contrast, caste-based and gender-based *distancing* for specific communities remained ever-active in India. Ironically speaking, women and Dalits might not have found many surprises in COVID-19 as they have been living through similar danger for centuries. We all realize what it means to *breathe* in COVID-19, but women and Dalits have been struggling to *BREATHE* for centuries. They did exist as a part of the system, but their existence remained exclusive. It has always been accepted and given equal space; it remained an exclusive inclusion in running the system.

The sense of exclusion in relationships is perhaps the most lamentable part of breaking the social fabric during the pandemic. Inclusive social relations become more exclusive in a pandemic. All near and dear ones are supposed to maintain distance to prevent infection. If anybody gets an infection in our family or neighbor, we start excluding them from our proximity. In calamities, we are expected to strengthen sympathetic human bonds and share our emotions and feelings with the vulnerable. Still, this bridge of emotional reciprocity no longer exists in epidemic and pandemic crises. Humanity and selflessness die somewhere deep beneath the pandemic, and selfishness emerges against the pestilence. People become more subjective and self-centered after witnessing abundant dead bodies. Christina Rossetti nicely expresses this pain in a single line: "Many dead make man hard-hearted." Nitin's action reflects this sharply when he steps ahead to help the dead body, but suddenly he stops as he says, "I too stepped forward, but the image of my two daughters and Anjali blinked in front of my eyes, and I retreated" (87). A similar moment occurs at the novel's end, when his father, Avinash, dies of infection. Nitin wants to touch, hug, and caress his father's dead body, but nobody else dares to come near for consolation. A reader can feel the condition when he says, "As soon as I looked at Navinbhai, he hurriedly rushed inside with a hidden head" (133).

Similarly, in *The Blind Matriarch*, the matriarch's family is excluded from the rest of the world. It can connect with the outer world only based on past reminiscence. Ritika feels a sense of alienation in a joint family. Addressing her solitude, the narrator says, "Marrying into a joint family had been like getting a visa to live in a foreign country" (149). She could not adjust to this massive family during the lockdown.

Both texts go far beyond this situational exclusion and highlight the correlation between those who have felt excluded and alienated for centuries. They have been

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quarantined based on caste, religion, and power. They did exist and were included in society, but it was exclusive inclusion, i.e., partial acceptance. Their role was considered just next to nothing. We all might have experienced what it meant to be living in quarantine and imprisonment during Covid-19. But Matangi Ma has been living a life of quarantine and imprisonment in a patriarchal society since the day of her marriage. She had been excluded and alienated from the patriarchal world long before the arrival of Covid-19. Her existence was there, but it was exclusive inclusion. Matangi tried but could not break that prison. Munny's case is quite similar; she had excluded herself from the panic world of his father. She is so angry with her father's brutality that she tries to kill the fetus of anarchy by killing her father. Likewise, Dalits have been living in quarantine and imprisonment by the caste system for centuries. They have been put in containment areas long ago.

Addressing upper caste people, the narrator of *Kalpaash* asks: "tired out of five days lockdown... what about those who have been living the lockdown for years" (3). Velji, a low-caste man, is enjoying the coronavirus crisis as he says, "To tell you the truth, the arrival of COVID-19 is necessary. It made people realize what the notion of *untouchability* is! They always kept their distance from our shadows. Unknowingly, if we touched each other, we would be bombarded with bad words. Now, all are getting polluted by their dear ones. We are very pleased to behold all these..." (110). The sudden outburst of the coronavirus was such a crisis that people strictly maintained social distance; as the narrator says, "Corona has made all people untouchable" (17). Thus, both writers point out how there is no novelty in quarantine and imprisonment during COVID-19 for specific categories as they have been constantly living in prison without bars. One indicates patriarchal brutality, while the other the notion of untouchability.

Epidemic narratives beautifully expose the complexity of personal space, which occurs when a joint family starts living together during lockdown. One's pleasure may become pain for others, but everyone has to cooperate with each other as all are supposed to. One becomes sad due to a tiny error, while the other remains extremely happy. In short, everybody's world differs from others, and they continue living accordingly unless disturbed. Large-scale events affect the functioning at the local level in contagion. Both texts are skillful portrayals of the inner world of each character living in the pandemic. In *Kalpaash*, Anjali and Nitin, even if they wanted, could not make a physical union due to contagion. Anjali is afraid of bearing the fetus in such abnormal times, and Nitin also agrees to it. But this suppression of sexual desire influences their behavior.

Nitin feels a sense of guilt when he tries to seek privacy with Anjali. When he sets his sleeping arrangements with his parents, he thinks about Anjali but hardly conveys his feelings when in touch. Likewise, Anjali gets disappointed when Nitin stays away from her, but when they stay together, she maintains distance; this is the

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complexity of both the characters. Nitin feels out of order in lockdown, exclaiming, "I was imprisoned, and somebody tied unbreakable locks" (2). The pandemic influences Nitin's unconscious mind, which reflects in dreaming. Throughout the text, he dreams about the darkness in which he is negotiating with the god of Death. All these affect his thought process and personal life. *The Blind Matriarch* expresses the complexity of each character in multiple ways. In the strange time of infection, as the narrator remarks, *Kalpaash*, Anjali, and Nitin, even if they wanted, could not make a physical union due to contagion. Anjali is afraid of bearing the fetus in such abnormal times, and Nitin also agrees to it. But this suppression of sexual desire influences their behavior. Nitin feels a sense of guilt when he tries to seek privacy with Anjali.

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A reader can sense her pain when she hugs Satish and says, "I don't know what to do! Everything is collapsing around us. How long can we hide here in this flat while our world comes apart?" (54). The lockdown makes such an adverse impact that she could not even understand little Rahul's love for her. Samir, the adopted son of Suryaveer, remains in search of his biological parents. Throughout the lockdown, he dangles between two bonds: adoptive and genetic. He correlates his space with outer objects like the injured bird, quantum physics, the Big Bang, and the universe's beginning. Matangi is blind and has been living in her own space of darkness. The arrival of COVID-19 does not alter her routine life, but she still feels abnormal; as Gokhale writes, "Everything was as it had been, but there was another unheard sound, a sense of monotonous expectancy, a fear, a waiting without end. She could hear it in her children's voices... hear it in Lali's tense...hear it in the news" (123). Matangi knew that lockdown was hitting them all in different ways, hitting their personal space, and they were all coping and could do nothing as they all had to survive. Both texts nicely expose the symbolic meaning of darkness, which has spread worldwide due to the pandemic. Both the writers nicely cover this pitch-dark panic scenario; in

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Kalpaash, Nitin dreams of darkness, while in *The Blind Matriarch*, Matangi is living in darkness. Both texts nicely incorporate the dilemma of personal space and disturbed mental scenarios due to the pandemic.

Pandemic narratives pay attention to the complexity of personal space and the breaking of social fabrics and are also expressions of the emerging social solidarity during extremity. Known and unknown people come together; they correlate with each other's feelings, forming a solid bond. Sometimes, in a joint family, we do not spend enough time with our loved ones even though we stay together. There may be physical proximity, but there remains distance in their feelings, emotions, and expressions. The pandemic provides a platform where they can merge into their inner world. As Girish Syal, one of the minor characters in *The Blind Matriarch*, says, "Every challenge is an opportunity...every crisis is also a call to innovation" (53). The pandemic provides a platform to Ritika where she can get rid of her years-old alienation. Ritika's vicinity with Matangi in lockdown eradicates her alienation and establishes a strong bond between them. Surya and Samir also build an unbreakable bridge of affection as they get to know each other more deeply. Samir builds a link with his biological family, which creates a dilemma regarding which world to choose. But after long pondering, he decides that "I will hold my multiple worlds together" (190). Matangi's sympathetic bond is always with the living; as she explains to Samir, "dead is dead, life is for the living. We must heal the living; they hurt more than those that have gone" (187). In *Kalpaash*, it seems that Nitish did not have enough time for his family before Covid-19. In the initial lockdown phase, he feels relaxed spending time with his family. His tiresome life provided him with leisure to connect with his loved ones in lockdown. He empties all the fatigue when he says, "Today I felt somewhat worthwhile living" (9). Anjali is happy with the lockdown; she says, "thank god lockdown has been implemented, now at least I'll have you all the time" (47).

Another characteristic of a virus is its impartiality. It equally affects rich and poor, friends and foes, Brahmins and untouchables, young and old, and males and females. Gokhale is more concerned about the nature of the virus. It will gather everybody at a place where anyone can be a victim. It affects beyond class, caste, and capitalism; it does not favor the right over the left wing, as the narrator says, "This was beyond capitalism, beyond class, beyond the spaces of the right and the left...This was about capture, submission, stagnation, selfhood, and loss of agency. A spell has been cast on the poor and the rich, the ill and the well" (99). Death and disease do not make any choice of one over the other. Lali's calling herself by a different designation is very crucial here; she addresses herself as "master, mistress, servant, we were all human in the end, and death and this virus disease didn't discriminate between rich and poor, Hindu or Muslim" (159). In *Kalpaash*, there are also glimpses of this aspect. Valji is not happy because upper caste people are

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suffering, but his happiness lies beneath the impartiality of the virus. He is satisfied because only the virus could reduce the gap; it made so-called upper-caste people realize what it meant to be untouchable.

To some degree, the pandemic exposes contradictions in religion and stoic responses. Gradually, public faith in a deity is shaken, taking the shape of skeptical responses. The pandemic gives birth to both stoical responses and questioning responses. At a shallow level, both texts deal with such responses. Matangi and Shanta's approach remains always stoical. They absorb deep sorrow inside them without letting it affect the other. Before the pandemic, Shanta was an atheist and still did not have faith in god, but after the pestilence, she started having faith in childhood memories of gods. Matangi had a contentious relationship with the gods. She was neither an atheist nor a disbeliever, but gods had been unjust to her. Perhaps that is why she does not expect anything from them. During lockdown, Lali starts believing in god. The pandemic changed Avinash's religious thoughts. With the arrival of Covid-19, he becomes skeptical. He was a theist till the outburst of COVID-19, and now he has lost all hope in god and has become an atheist; as he says, "the god which cannot break temple doors, it is futile whether to worship Him or not" (70).

Conclusion

Both texts cover detailed descriptions of pestilence-stricken society. Overloaded with love, loss, pain, regret, compassion, and submission, the epidemic narrative creates an intricate web of socio-economic, political, and religious life where all norms have disappeared. These sorts of responses broaden our understanding of the structural formation of a society in ordinary as well as abnormal times. A sudden outbreak of an epidemic helps us understand the categories of normalcy and state of exception in different contexts. When COVID-19 broke out, most people thought this collapse would result in a new formation in all fields. But it has been hardly three years since we encountered the COVID-19 pandemic, and Everything seems as it were. One can only hope that the pandemic will alter the age-old discriminative and oppressive structure of social life worldwide so that specific categories can breathe properly!

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