

---

**Cartoons and Covid-19: Investigating Socio-political Scenario during the Pandemic**

---

**Rana Vaghela<sup>1</sup>**, Research Scholar, Dept. of English, Gujarat Vidyapith, Ahmedabad.

**Dr. Atulkumar Parmar<sup>2</sup>**, Head & Associate Professor, Dept. of English, Gujarat Vidyapith Ahmedabad.

---

Paper Received on 30-08-2024, Accepted on 28-09-2024  
Published on 30-09-24; DOI:10.36993/RJOE.2024.9.3.603

---

**Abstract**

Recently, the world has encountered the COVID-19 pandemic, which has significantly impacted different socio-political agencies such as families, schools, governing bodies, industries, etc. It challenged the existing system and introduced a new order of things. Leading scientists and political leaders were the epicenter of human eyes. The eyes were beholding them in what manner they would save the world and become a savior of humankind. However, in so doing, they acted partially and discriminated against people, and the eyes witnessed that as well. Social and political regimes treated people in diverse manners. All these aspects of pandemic-stricken life have been collected in different forms of literature, including novels, poetry, drama, and non-fiction. Cartoons remained one such form that explored and illustrated socio-political dilemmas and tendencies in a mimic and satirical manner. The present paper deals with how cartoons portrayed the reality of social and political agencies during the time of the COVID-19 pandemic. It also investigates how cartoons expressed the restricted and quarantined world of minor or backward communities and other non-human living beings during and before the COVID-19 pandemic. Along with social and political axes, it also captures the touch of economic affairs and social hierarchies influenced by social Darwinism during the pandemic. It is a study of a few selected cartoons but not limited to them in order to explain the hidden reality of different agencies and the nature of societal structure.

**Keywords:** Pandemic, agencies, quarantine, cartoon, dilemma

**Introduction**

Although the term 'epidemic' or 'pandemic' creates panic in our thoughts, it is not altogether un-encountered or unheard to us. In the history of human civilization,

epidemics have frequently occurred. In the history of humanity, epidemics, and pandemics are as old as human existence. It is astonishing to ponder that if the roots of epidemics are as old as human beings, then why do they make us frightened, and why do not the medical team find preventive medicine to prevent the occurrences? The answer to this thought is not that much more complicated as it is all-accepted that the nature of these sorts of diseases is beyond any prediction. In addition, epidemics and pandemics always find mankind unprepared to condemn the devastation caused by such diseases. Thus, they are beyond any prediction and foretell, and therefore, they remain a chief concern of worry.

The recent occurrence of the COVID-19 pandemic made the entire world experience the anxiety and panic of the virus. It made such an adverse impact on almost all concerns of life that the repercussions of the pandemic can still be read from human behavior. The resonance of the pandemic can be traced in every branch of human knowledge. Different disciplines, such as medical science, historians and archeologists, religious preachers, etc., have dealt with the pandemic in different manners. Literature is one such field that collected the memories of the COVID-19 pandemic in historico-imaginative ways. Different literary genres reflected the pandemic crisis in a different manner. Novels and poetry remained dominant genres that captured the fragmented and fragile life in myriad ways. Gujarati novels such as *Kaalpaash*, *Koronakand*, *Ek Yatra aavi pan*, etc., and English novels *The Blind Matriarch*, *The Sentence*, *Companion Piece*, *Jaan is Okay*, *Delphi*, *Violeta*, etc. captured the COVID-19 pandemic from different perspectives. Poetry on COVID-19 formulates various discourses of political resistance, social sympathy, and human agony. These are much-debated corners of literature after the occurrence of COVID-19. Among these literary genres, one such genre reflected the COVID-19 condition in a light but more paradoxical manner, and that is through cartoons. Daily newspapers had a flood of cartoons on the COVID-19 pandemic. With its humorous style and biting satire, cartoons expressed less discussed topics effectively.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, it was not an easy task to separate sympathy and self-love. On the one hand, the news media was bombarded with sad stories about homeless and helpless people that sprouted sympathy in the hearts of well-off families for these miserable people, but at the same time, the virus made people demarcate boundaries of social distancing that restricted not only physical outgoing of people but their feelings and emotions for other as well. Christina Rossetti, in the poem 'The Plague,' puts a remarkable line, "many dead make men hard-hearted."<sup>1</sup> That reflects the public's struggles for their survival during the time

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.poetrynook.com/poem/plague-0> accessed on 20 September 2024.

of the COVID-19 crisis. This reflection of 'chartered-life' life during the pandemic is crucial to understand the socio-political public response towards the pandemic. It also reminds us of William Blake's 'London' poem; although it does not deal with the pandemic, it talks about the pandemic of human nature and industrialization that arouses violence and exploitation, which resulted in fear in every face in chartered streets. Similarly, the pandemic has chartered every gesture of people and created boundaries in the form of social distancing. The widespread term 'social distancing' became a key tool in the literary expression of pandemic-stricken life. The term carried both expressions: on the one hand, it expressed the suppressed condition and falling-apart-world of people who were restricted within their *houses*, and on the other hand, the term expressed the condition of marginal communities in the context of pre-pandemic life and of the current time.

When novels and poetry were collecting responses of fragmented and quarantined lives towards a socio-political approach to combat COVID-19 and registered their resistance towards the system, cartoons, a powerful means of expressing current social and political upheavals and visual commentary, remained a wide-reached means of the expression of inequalities and partialities of the system. As lockdown, quarantine methods, and social distancing were key strategies to stop the spreading of coronavirus, it echoed in the lives of migrated workers, laborers, and other people inhabiting slum areas. Maintaining distance from others was a mandatory precaution. However, it worsened the condition of homeless people who had to vacate their rented inhabitation since their earning was curtailed due to the enclosure of working fields. They had to retreat to their far native places to get shelter.



illustrated how the pandemic considerably worsened their agony because of their economically poor condition. It was also a time when social distancing not only restricted and shrunk people's outgoing but their world of sympathy as well. Financially and socially superior communities reflected the defamed behavior of social Darwinism, i.e., the survival of the fittest. The pandemic became a site wherein the social, political, and medical spheres merged and formulated the discourse of COVID-19 guidelines. The critical medical practices towards the restricted and forsaken people remained justified in this discourse. The cartoon 'Social Distancing' in Figure 1 by Hafiz Khan represents the scenario of the Thali-Tali approach to COVID-19 and the condition of poor people. The thali-Tali approach was celebrated to battle COVID-19 and to strengthen the spirit of Corona Warriors. The critical view this cartoon captures is that how some people celebrated the Thali-Tali approach by maintaining social distance in their homes with louder noise of dish beating and claps while the homeless people whose spirits and souls were at constant risk. It resembles Ghanshyam Shah's portrayal of a society undergoing the plague of 1994 in Surat. Shah artfully shows how the flood in River Tapi became a moment of great joy for the upper strata of society who gathered to behold the swollen River, but at the same time, the flood caused anxiety and fear in the lower strata of society whose inhabitation and life was painfully affected by the flood. The cartoon ironically illustrates two such paradoxical lives of the same system. It seems that some people are beating dishes and clapping in the retreat of the poor people who may be super-spreaders of germs. The cartoon also illustrates large-scale retreats and the echo of an incident of Nizamuddin Markaz on 21 March 2020, which took place in Delhi.

The cartoon also illustrates the untold agony and difficulties caused by COVID-19 to socially and economically backward people. This demonstrates the paradoxical approach towards which some people celebrate it while others return to their native without enough transportation facilities. It also reminds us of the old tradition of pilgrimages, which was a key cultural element in almost all cultures across the globe. The only difference is that those were happy and chosen pilgrimages, whereas the cartoon portrays the pilgrimage of painful present and their fearful future. The luggage on their shoulder and head represents how they are carrying their presence in their heads, i.e., in the dire times of the virus, they are roaming in the streets. It seems that the beholders from the balcony are happy with the retreat of these people as it will reduce the danger of contagion, or in other words, they are germ carriers, and their retreat is better for the rest of the sound people. This ironically represents how the timely approach of social distancing had an adverse impact on the human mind during the COVID-19 crisis.

An objective study of any society undergoing Covid-19 would illustrate how the balance between life and death was dangling between indoor and outdoor lives. Although societal structure created partiality in the name of these methods, social

distancing, and quarantine procedures were timely and helpful in combating the contagion. If any individual perceives that only the governing body is supposed to work sole-handedly to combat the virus, it may lead to great destruction. During such dire times, individual subjects and governing bodies have to work in a reciprocal manner. It becomes the responsibility of the state as well as a citizen to act wisely and according to the needs of time.



**Figure 2: Rigorous work of the medical team and desired support from the citizens**

Figure 2 illustrates artfully how hard the health care and the medical department worked to keep the infection at bay. However, at the same time, the individual subject has to take responsibility and precautions not to step out of their homes and be useful to the medical assistants. The sand watch realistically represents the death watch that was uncontrollable during the time of the COVID-19 pandemic. It states that the only available way out was to shut oneself indoors and restrain himself/herself from going out unnecessarily. Many people during the COVID-19 did not follow pandemic guidelines and stepped out for no reason. These sorts of acts may worsen the condition of patients in society. Therefore, such cartoons make us look at our own duties and responsibilities as ideal citizens. Everybody is supposed to contribute, if not wealth, his or her support and cooperate to reduce the infection rate.



**Figure 3: "I am spreading faster than you."**

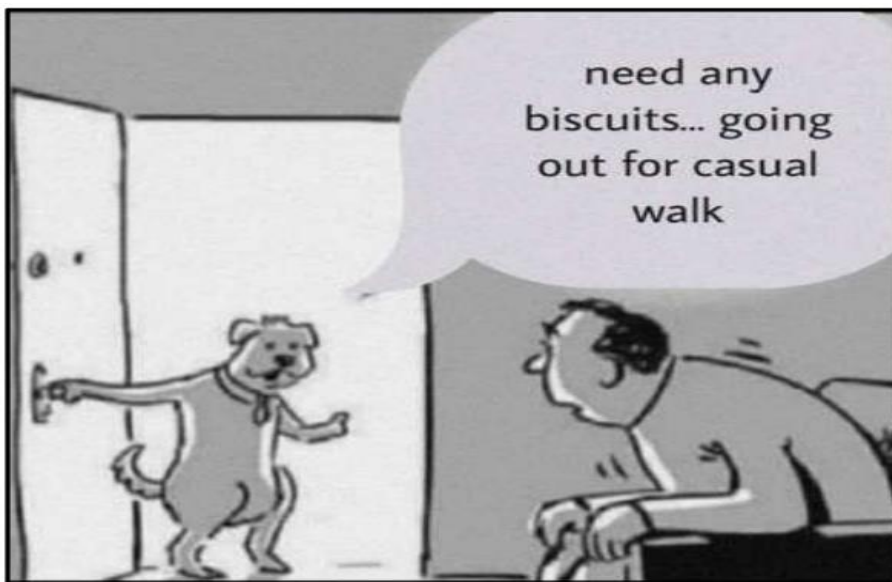
When the world encountered the emergence of COVID-19, it recalled the memory of Albert Camus' portrayal of the Oran government and Defoe's plague account of London and measured the condition of present life in the context of the pandemic. As the arrival of the plague in Oran City did not make any noticeable impact on the people since they were living a worse life than the plague, cartoonists tried to locate this discourse during the time of COVID-19.

Camus' *The Plague* collects the destruction of World War II and lives at constant risk; therefore, his plague is more metaphoric than medical. After almost seven decades, the condition remained the same in 2020. Figure 3: "I am spreading faster than you" by Kevin "Kal" Kallaughter ironically reveals social ills and evils that are more lethal and deadly than the pandemic. Here is a discussion on who is more virulent between a virus and the collective body of social ills such as communism, rumors, misinformation, fear, casteism, etc. The cartoonist explains how the lives under the state of normalcy were surrounded by bloodthirsty social evils practiced in various domains such as religion, politics, gender, race, and class. These evils caused uncountable lives in indirect ways in the state of normalcy, as Michel Foucault calls it, *to make life and to let die*, i.e., preserve or foster some lives and eradicate others. Giorgio Agamben calls these two spheres of life *Bios*- politically qualified lives and Natural bare lives. The cartoon in Figure 3 minutely speaks about the social evils that resulted in the eradication of *Zoe*. This cartoon is the best example of a threshold of the state of normalcy and the state of exception. The emergence of the pandemic indeed caused many lives in visible ways, but in the pre-pandemic world, social ill and evils, which were equally prevalent, caused many lives to die.

The cartoons about COVID-19 not only share the corrupt souls of human beings but also mirror the exaggeration in the field of industrialization and confinements, which produced limitless pollution and affected the animal world. When the lockdown was introduced in most countries, it curtailed transportation,



factory production, sea voyages, etc, which resulted in the purification of the atmosphere. The prohibition on outgoing reduced transportation that lessened carbon omission, the enclosure of mills and factories stopped polluted water releasing into rivers or sea, and as the world was under lockdown and quarantine, the naïve creatures could go out of their restricted bushes for grazing or hunting as it is their true nature. For these creatures, the arrival of Covid-19 was like a boon that lifted curtains on their restricted and prohibited lives. They lived, even though for a shorter span, their true natural life.



**Figure 4: "...need any biscuits...going out for a casual walk"**

Figure 4 tells us what it means to live a life of constant quarantine. In the boom of growing capitalism and industrialization, people have destroyed so many natural lives for material gain. The animal world remained under constant threat in the quest for material growth. However, the arrival of COVID-19 listed this bane on animals and freed them to live their natural life for a shorter period. In Figure 4, a dog asks his master if he wants anything as the dog is going out for a casual walk. It is a biting satire on the self-centered world of humankind. Ironically, it registers the voice of these suppressed and forsaken creatures who now witness that as they (human beings) restrict animal life, a powerful virus rules over humans. It shares a message that one should try to understand the condition of others as well. As Dhumketu, a Gujarati writer, writes in the short story "The Post Office," when we see the world from others' perspective, we can perceive the world in better ways; here, it is applicable to human beings who have forsaken the naïve world of animals. However,

for a brief period, Covid-19 made us realize what it means to live a caged life. It does not only indicate the agony of the animal world but also the entire suppressed and forsaken communities.



**Figure 5:"...and just the other day, we were rejoicing over the clear waters and missing pollution."**

As previously mentioned, the growth in industrialization has affected the lives of many creatures by producing limitless pollution. The cartoon in Figure 5 illustrates how the arrival of COVID-19 benefited other creatures. Like Camus's character Cottard in *The Plague*, they were happy with the pandemic. Cottard was delighted with the plague because it provided him freedom and liberty. Likewise, COVID-19 provided the other creatures with free space, clean air, and water. Releasing dirty water into the sea or River caused death to many creatures, but as the lockdown stopped everything, water and air pollution were reduced. This cartoon satirically portrays the nature of man who never learns from his past. Here, a fish laments the agony that it hardly had started enjoying the pollution-free water life when COVID-19 stopped. PPE kits and N95 marks in this cartoon illustrate two things: medical waste released into water, and two, once the need is fulfilled, humans can never be expected to be fair to the minor world. It is a satire of human nature that always hurries behind the profit, even at the cost of others' lives. This is the dark nature of man, which is reflected in all aspects of life, be it social, political, economic,



## Research Journal Of English (RJOE)

An International Peer-Reviewed English Journal Impact Factor: 8.16(SJIF)Vol-9, Issue-3,2024  
Indexed in: International Citation Indexing (ICI), Cite factor, International Scientific Indexing (ISI),  
Directory of Research Journal Indexing (DRJI) Google Scholar, Cosmos and Internet Archives.

---

or any other. The exploitative nature of mankind will remain unaltered.

Thus, the arrival of the pandemic symbolizes various aspects of humanity. Such calamities uncover the hidden intentions of institutions, and, therefore, ironically, these calamities are desirable to show a mirror to mankind. These cartoons have the capacity to capture the reality beyond the notion of realism. Such a cartoon explores the bright and dark side of calamity in the context of the socio-historical structure of governing agencies. One may find a variety of novel ideas and perceptions of life in such portrayals that reconstruct the past and present together in a very metaphysical way. With few symbols and sights, they rebuild human nature and compare the state of exception with the state of normalcy to investigate the true nature of different agencies.

### References:

- Agamben, Giorgio. *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Trans. Danial Heller-Roazen. California: Stanford University Press, 1995. Print.
- Camus, Albert. *The Plague*. Trans. Robin Buss. Penguin Random House UK, 2020.
- Defoe, Daniel. *A Journal of the Plague Year*. Ed. John Man. Hachette Group: Everyman, 1994.
- Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality: Confessions of the Flesh*. Penguin Random House, 2021.
- Gokhale, Namita. *The Blind Matriarch*. Penguin Random House India Private Limited: Penguin Books, 2021.
- Kallaughar, Kevin "Kal ."Cartoon- "I am Spreading faster than you!" *Nirikshak*. 06/04/2020
- Khan, Hafiz. Cartoon- "Social Distancing". *Nirikshak*. 03/04/2020.
- Kothari, Biren. Cartoon-"Need any Biscuits...Going out for a casual walk". *Nirikshak*. 07/04/2020.
- Morpariya, Hemant. Cartoon- "AND JUST THE OTHER DAY, WE WERE REJOICING OVER THE CLEA WATERS AND MISSING POLLUTION" *Nirikshak*.20/05/2020.
- Parmar, Mohan. *Kaalpaash*. Ahmedabad: Rannade Prakashan, 2020.
- Poetry Nook: Poetry For Every Occasion. Web. <https://www.poetrynook.com/poem/plague-0> Accessed on 20 September 2024.
- Shah, Ghanshyam. *Public Health and Urban Development: The Plague in Surat*. Sage Publication, 1997.
- Ulitskaya, Ludmila. *Just the Plague*. Trans. Polly Gannon. Granta Publicati