

EVOLVING HORIZONS

An Interdisciplinary International Journal of Education,
Humanities, Social And Behavioral Sciences

(A Peer Reviewed Journal)

Volume 9 • November 2020 • ISSN : 2319 - 6521

SOCIAL DISTANCING AND THE ADOLESCENT MIND: WHAT THE SPANISH FLU TAUGHT US

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Abstract

Pandemics are undeniably wondrous periods of historical analysis. From their emergence on the horizon to the choking gasp of their final prey, pandemics are practically tailor-made as mass events, with their unpredictability and their dreadfulness leavened by skepticism, cowardice, bravery, and a number of other expressions of the human spirit. Social archivists have stated that the 1918-19 'Spanish Flu' left hardly any remnants in mass memory as it was eclipsed by the First World War, hence its historico-geographical depiction as the 'forgotten' pandemic. This paper aims at portraying how this forgotten pandemic affected Indian experiences. India, being colonized and war stricken, saw the death of over 12 million people but interestingly enough; the "Great Influenza" had always been a less compelling story to the mass memory. The dread and vulnerability can only be seen in Indian and world literature when authors look back on 1918 from a different perspective. In this paper we aim to travel beyond the notion of forgetting the "The Great Influenza" by investigating the ways in which popular responses draw on the narratives of sociopolitical, psychological and substantial discourses that create a common space of people's experiences due to social alienation, from the age of the Spanish flu, to the current Covid-19 pandemic. The terrifying and profound fear of contamination which resulted in social distancing is a process that can mutilate our body and metamorphose our soul into something no longer recognizable, no longer human. This assumption challenges the Indian-ness of social integrity and is worsened by the realization that such affliction is passed onto us by our fellow humans. Such realizations poison and untangle the individual and social fabric of Indian experiences and create a gargantuan impact on adolescence. This paper aims

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at understanding this notion of alienation and its effects on young Indian students as it has altered the idea of school and socio-educational spaces, and has transformed it into an alienating and distanced experience. By studying the historical effects of a pandemic on the literature of the time, we aim to understand the psychological consequences of social distancing and the digital divide in the current educational scenario.

Keywords: Pandemic, Indian experiences of pandemic, 1918 pandemic, Mental health, Adolescence

INTRODUCTION

Pandemics are unquestionably astounding periods of historical analysis. From their emergence on the horizon to the choking gasp of their final prey, pandemics are practically tailor-made as mass events, with their unpredictability and their dreadfulness leavened by skepticism, cowardice, bravery, and a number of other expressions of the human spirit. Pandemics promise to amend the mass in bizarre ways. It is a transitory event that segregates life and way of life into a pre-pandemic and a post-pandemic. Even though the “new normal world” will emerge changed, how those alterations will manifest is far from certain. The sensory details of this outbreak—the masks, the cold faces of doctors and nurses creased with anxiety and exhaustion, the closure signs, the antiseptic smells, the empty streets, the scattered dead bodies—will weave their way into people’s minds and bodies, triggering us back to this moment, years in the future. For India, the experience has also held an eerie familiarity. India’s new consciousness of the traces of

that pandemic shifts is of the perception that the experience from a century ago have resurfaced, becoming apt in ways common mass both feared and never wanted. During every pandemic, there comes a time when the truth is so grim that people start to assess the situation in cold statistics- the number of affected, jobs lost, financial and health care crisis, and in, 2020 a recurring phrase that has emerged, the “number of positive cases”.

Beyond the statistics, the psychological trauma caused due to social isolation is equally real and it is portrayed in the genre of “pandemic literature” by both western and Indian writers that have existed in the last 200 years or so. Literature observes every individual with empathy and goes deeper than what statistics or past record can tell us. It studies the impact of global health changes on the mind and its reactions to every ordinary and extraordinary occurrence of the surrounding. Virginia Woolf in her essay “On Being Ill” highlights how literature has majorly denied illness a place as celebrated as love, battle and jealousy among the prime themes of writing. She states that those works of literature that deal with illnesses and maladies of health, tend to concentrate only about the thoughts of the mind, often ignoring the assault on the body. Woolf (1926) reflects:

....literature does its best to maintain that its concern is with the mind; that the body is a sheet of plain glass through which the soul looks straight and clear, and, save for one or two passions such a desire and greed, is null, negligible and non-existent. (p. 32)

Though Woolf’s main claim that illness needed a greater place in world literature had already started expanding by the time she was writing

this essay, much of what she infers literature to be primarily reading as the effect of illness on human mind and soul was legitimate. Literature thus, may not elucidate or fight off things such as pandemics, even as modern science sometimes cannot, but it does become a space of consolation, a mode of sharing our universal humanist concerns, and, in its own manner, provides the most sincere and insightful record of the mass's wave of consciousness. The dread and vulnerability can only be seen in Indian and world literature when authors look back on 1918 from a different perspective. In this paper, we aim to travel beyond the notion of forgetting the "The Great Influenza" by investigating the ways in which popular responses draw on the narratives of sociopolitical, psychological and substantial discourses that create a common space of people's experiences due to social alienation, from the age of the Spanish flu, to the current Covid-19 pandemic.

The terrifying and profound fear of contamination which resulted in social distancing is a process that can mutilate our body and metamorphose our soul into something no longer recognizable, no longer human. In this period of isolation, people tend to turn to literature and art to come to terms with reality, and place it in the context of history. As people continue to stay indoors because of the pandemic, they follow the turn of seasons with apathy — they look out of their windows and see flowers blossoming and the varying shades of green on trees. Yet this serene vivacity invites anxious thoughts as scenes of pandemic described in literature — bodies piled sky-high waiting for entombment, cries of pain sweltering through the country, ruined health care facilities, destroyed economic condition and last but certainly not the least, the fear of loneliness and

trauma due to isolation. This assumption challenges the Indian-ness of social integrity and is worsened by the realization that such affliction is passed onto us by our fellow humans. Such realizations poison and untangle the individual and social fabric of Indian experiences and create a gargantuan impact on adolescence. In India, references to pandemics can be found in works of some of the biggest names in Indian literature such as Suryakant Tripathi, Jayanta Mahapatra, Ahmed Ali and Munshi Premchand. These writers drew a human face to the experiences of pandemic by giving a glimpse into the lives of common people, and the socio-cultural and psychological context of these catastrophic events. The never-ending anxiety mirrored in Suryakant Tripathi's account, who was known as Nirala or "the strange one." His personal loss is portrayed in his memoir, *A Life Misspent*.

This was the strangest time in my life. My family disappeared in the blink of an eye. All our sharecroppers and labourers died, the four who worked for my cousin as well as the two who worked for me. My cousin's eldest son was fifteen years old, my young daughter a year old. In whichever direction I turned, I saw darkness. (Tripathi, 2016, p.51)

In his novel, Tripathi stresses on the rapid mode of transmission of the influenza virus, which is mirrored in the current day and age as well, the rapid surge of cases and statistics, words that seemingly isolate us further from the violent reality of the people behind these cases. Tripathi recounts the rapid succession in which his wife contracted the disease and succumbed to it, followed by the cousin who had come over from his ancestral house to care

for his sick wife. The narrative then, with rapid succession, recounts the deaths of his uncle, sister-in-law and her infant baby, but when it comes to the members outside his immediate family, the language shifts to that of statistics and numbers. It is said that a single death is a tragedy, a million deaths is a statistic. Perhaps to deny this cold reality we seek a poet to tell us what it felt like to live through that dreadful age of despair and isolation—to convert the cold numbers into human experience. Nirala is recognized as a prominent figure in modern Hindi literature, undoubtedly the 1918 flu pandemic left a cavernous impression on him, as it did on many Indians which can be seen in the trauma and agony portrayed in their writings as the result of isolation and personal loss. The sense of loss and isolation that he experiences is explained in the words “The Ganga was swollen with dead bodies.”(p.50) The rapid transmission is doubly horrific as the ones most at risk comprises of our loved ones. The fear of passing on a deadly virus to family members and the impossibility of caring for the ones we love due to the fear of transmission, reflected by his uncle’s words, “What madness brought you here?”(p.51), ricochets with the fears experienced by the adolescent mind in the current day and age. With the most at-risk group being 40-60, which is the average age of the parents of school-goers, the fear of transmission forms a constant source of anxiety in the child, causing unprecedented levels of stress.

Another poignant account of the Indian experience of Spanish Flu is found in Ahmed Ali’s novel “Twilight in Delhi”. In the novel, he suggests that “Influenza broke out in epidemic form, and from the houses in the mohallah all around, heart-rending cries of lamentation and weeping began to rend the air. There was hardly a house where a death did not take place.”(Ali,

1940, p. 207). He recounts the horrific nature of the deaths and the overwhelming pace at which the disease rapidly inserted itself into the fabric of our society by stating,

Men carried dead bodies on their shoulders by the score. There was not a single hour of the day when a few dead bodies were not carried outside the city to be buried. Soon the graveyards became full, and it was difficult to find even three yards of ground to put a person in his final resting-place. In life they had had no peace, and even in death there seemed no hope of rest. (Ali, p. 207)

The economic crisis created by the double edged swords of the war and the disease is also highlighted in the text when Ali recounts the acts of the shroud-thieves, who would go to the graveyards “at the dead of the night with spades and iron hooks”(p.208) and dig up the freshly carved graves and pull out the winding-sheets, which allowed the jackals and hyenas to feast on the corpses. The dehumanization of death, especially when the numbers are overwhelming is also portrayed in the cavalier response of the grave diggers, who suggest that “this is the best that we can do.” (p.208) is an attitude that adolescents find echoed in the Government and other healthcare provisions, which causes a further sense of alienation from the society which seems to have accepted the inevitability of death for the infected. The songs crafted by the people, further echo these sentiments, where the gruesome face of death and devastation brought forth by the pandemic, whereby the profit-oriented hospitals are called out for being “gay and bright” (p.209). Indeed, the cost of treatment for COVID-19 is another looming factor which adds to the

stress of adolescents, who are often forced out of the education system to support family members undergoing treatment.

In the poem, 'The Abandoned Cemetery at Balasore, India' Jayanta Mahapatra summons an ambiance of "timeless ennui" that presages an epidemic looming over human kind. For the poet, the pandemic personifies "a quiet power" as it "moves easily, swiftly" through "past and present" into "the growing young, into the final bone", threatening to put "all truth with ruin". The poem emphasizes the triviality of human life against an infectious malady's compelling power. Thus, even far removed from the epicenter, Indian experiences of the pandemic of the Spanish Influenza can be used to trace the dehumanizing aspects of a pandemic on society, and is crucial in the planning of steps to be undertaken while preparing a response action towards the current crisis.

As literature is the mirror of human emotions, it is interesting to see how eastern and western experiences merge in the portrayal of psychological trauma and hopelessness. In the post modern era, Albert Camus' *The Plague* (1942) brought readers' attentions to the societal repercussions of pandemics – predominantly isolation and breakdown of the state to either control the disease or moderate the consequent panic. The self-isolation in Camus' novel crafts a concerned consciousness of the price of human contact and relationships in the people of the plague-stricken Algerian city of Oran. In "The Plague," deportation is geographic; unfolding the agonizing isolation from those outside the city gates. The plague disconnects people from their former lives. Regardless of their avid longings to go back, the past is suddenly alien — a disconnected mem-

ory. Camus was preoccupied with the notion of this detachment and absurdity of existence as he gave the example of Sisyphus who was, like mankind, punished to push a stone up a hillside only to repeat again just as people are doing in this lock down and unlock phase of Covid 19 as nothing seems to help in decreasing the death rate of Covid 19. According to existentialists our society is absurd, and Camus' novel examines our connection to the irrationality of modern existence. Crucial to Camus' existential isolation was the inconsistency between the power and true face nature, and the misery of the human condition. Katherine Anne Porter's *Pale Horse Pale Rider*, a novella published in 1939, is a semi-autobiographical account of the flu pandemic in the United States in 1918 at the end of World War I. Both the actual realities of war and the pandemic function as layered metaphors for the quest of meaning and love in life, that underscore the fragility of lives and the importance of relationships. The war and the flu mingle together as threats to the established norms of existence, describing how a city responds to a major health crisis, thereby projecting the protagonist Miranda's changing perspective of existence of her self in a life that has been totally altered. Fighting back the flu herself to return to her former life, Miranda learns that her lover has succumbed to it, thereby deciphering and redefining the boundaries of isolation, as the pale image of death leaves her with an unknown life that is unfathomable.

This modern isolation and absurdity of existence hits differently to the adolescent students as the new normal changes the notion of familiar school and educational spaces. Bedrooms are becoming lecture halls and seeing friends face-to-face now means video calling.

Exams have been cancelled or hastily overhauled to allow them to be finished online. In a third world country like India where it is a mere dream to give smart phones and new technologies to every household, some students are forced in making changes and struggling to make the most of what they have to hand, students without the technology or space to work from home are worrying about how not attending classes will affect their grades. In the storm stress period of adolescence, this worry is even turning into catalyst for suicides, as reflected in the recent suicide of a Class VIII student of a reputed school in Kolkata. The girl was said to have committed suicide following

a tiff with her parents regarding excessive mobile phone usage. With our gradual reliance on technology to remain connected at this day and age of social isolation, the shift in the mode of curriculum is immediately necessary in order to bridge the divide between students and their social spheres. Focus needs to be put on not only reformulating the modes of education, but also on understanding the different areas of stressors that adolescents face and introducing new ways for them to cope with the stress and anxiety that has plagued them during the age of the pandemic.

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