

Writing Precarity, Violence and Altruism in Pandemic Times: A Close Reading of Select Short Fiction of Shobha De and Udayan Mukherjee

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Abstract

The outbreak of the COVID pandemic triggered a global crisis of epic proportions. The speed at which it spread and the vast global area that it covered, made it the most wide-spread and the most disastrous of all the pandemics that have devastated the world in the past. Much has been written on the wide-ranging effects of the COVID 19 pandemic on economy, politics, globalization and the environment. This paper seeks to explore the moral, social and cultural impact of the pandemic, by engaging with select stories from Shobha De's *Lockdown Liaisons* and Udayan Mukherjee's *Essential Items and Other Tales from a Land in Lockdown*.

Keywords: Pandemic, Lockdown, Vulnerabilities, Human Relationships, Gender Violence.

Introduction

Trauma, trials and tribulations, and intense emotions, have always given birth to great literature, and pandemics and epidemics are no exception. Human history has witnessed and survived many moments of crisis and natural calamity. As has been in the case of previous epidemics or instances of socio-political upheavals, a great body of literature, marked by an imperative to bear witness to the biggest crisis in recent history, is expected to come out of the covid experience. Shobha De's *Lockdown Liaisons* and Udayan Mukherjee's *Essential items and Other Tales from a Land in Lockdown* are among the first few works of fiction in the corpus of Indian English writing that can be classified as Pandemic literature. What De and Mukherjee have put across through their tales, is the fact that Covid-19 is more than a mere disease. It is an illness that has serious social, cultural, political and economic ramifications. According to Arthur W. Frank "disease can be reduced to biochemistry, while illness involves a biography, a reflective consciousness, multiple relationships and institutions" (Frank, 17) Thus, while disease can be reduced to a specific bodily condition, illness encompasses the overall experience of individuals at the societal level. One of the first consequences of the pandemic was the lockdown that was imposed almost all over the world in an effort to stem the spread of the virus.

The stories of De and Mukherjee, explore the cultural and moral dimensions of the pandemic, cutting across different strata of society and are narrated from different perspectives. The paper deals with eight short stories and addresses issues such as the increased vulnerabilities faced by marginalized sections, financial uncertainties, gender-based violence, and the spirit of altruism, all of which have been brought about or amplified by the pandemic. The aim is to explore these concerns through the lens of human relationships as portrayed by the two authors.

Increased Vulnerabilities of the Marginalized

Mukherjee's story, *A Life or Death Situation* and De's *Leaving*, highlight the plight of the working class struggling to cope with the loss of livelihood. The protagonist of the first story, Kallu, is kingpin of the *domsat* a burning ghat. As a consequence of the initial period of the lockdown in India, during which everyone was ensconced in the safety of their homes, the number of dead bodies coming in daily have considerably reduced. This, in turn, means a loss of earnings for the workers at the ghat. Smarting under the weight of adverse circumstances, Kallu and his friend Shibu have no qualms about extracting an exorbitant amount of money from the family of an old couple suspected to have died of the virus, in an ashram, in

exchange for cremating their bodies. However, despite the calculating and heartless manner in which Kallu brokers this deal, the reader cannot help sympathizing with him and Shibu and even admiring them for their resourcefulness and their instinct for survival. At the same time, the story makes a sad comment on the loss of humanity resulting from extreme circumstances. De's story, *Leaving*, centres on the story of a migrant labourer from Bihar who is working in one of the construction sites in Mumbai. As the 'Chinawaali bimaari' strikes them, his fellow migrants dwelling in Dharavi, one of the world's largest slums, leave the place in droves. De poignantly remarks on the desperate condition of the migrant workers: "Dharavi was sealed off, and there was a sense of dread, as if death was waiting to enter each gully and take us one by one. There was no construction work. Our money had run out... If we stayed here, we would die of corona. If we walked home, we would die of starvation or heat stroke" (De, 15). The protagonist in particular, faces an added dilemma-whether he should leave his lover, Suman, behind, or should he stay back for her? He does not have the option of taking her with him because he has a wife and children at home. After making the painful decision of leaving, he agonizes over the dangers and vulnerabilities he would leave her exposed to. Whatever little money he still possesses, he wants Suman to have it and dreads breaking the news of his departure to her. It is most touching that he has saved a ripe mango for her so that he can offer her some form of happiness, before disclosing his plans of leaving. Thus, De's story restores our faith in humanity even in the face of adversity.

Economic Uncertainties

De's *After this, Dubai?* and Mukherjee's *Holidays* both explore the financial uncertainties that were produced and exacerbated due to the pandemic. While De's story focusses on an urban upwardly mobile couple, Mukherjee's story is about a *chawl*-dwelling couple and their two teenage sons. In "*After this, Dubai?*" De reveals the economic insecurities faced by individuals working in television and journalism. The protagonist, a television script writer, finds herself unemployed due to the lack of financial stability in the industry post-lockdown. Meanwhile, her husband also loses his job, leaving the couple

struggling to support their unplanned child and manage their debts from loans on their apartment and BMW, with no source of income. While the wife seeks alternative solutions and tries to adapt to the adversity, her husband's passivity and lack of empathy lead her to make a drastic decision. She chooses to relocate to Dubai with her baby to live with her sister and brother-in-law, despite knowing her brother-in-law's inappropriate advances towards her. Through this narrative, Shobha De exposes the precariousness of the superficial world these characters inhabit and illustrates how a single lockdown can shatter their illusions of stability. *Holidays* tells the story of Amol and Achala, and how they try to cope with the economic repercussions of the lockdown. Though Achala has been assured that she will have her maid's job to come back to, after the lockdown is over, and that she will be paid by her employers even for the period of the lockdown, Amol loses his job with the local courier service. To make matters worse the couple have an education loan, to pay off. It is indeed sad to witness the rising tension amidst the adoption of thrifty measures in the household, as their financial troubles and worries start closing in on the couple. While the wife tries her best to keep her spirits high and offers solutions like selling off her gold bangles, Amol takes offence because of the fact that the bangles had been a gift from his mother. The male ego is bruised and he eventually vents his frustration by inflicting violence on his wife. The last line of the story uttered by an elderly neighbour: "It's only after a storm that one knows what a house is really made of" (Mukherjee, 59) underlines the fragility of human relationships in the face of adversities. In both the stories, it is the female protagonists who show resilience and resourcefulness, in contrast to the men who seem to be overwhelmed by the financial pressures. However, an essential distinction between the two narratives is that the protagonist in "*After this, Dubai?*" is a financially empowered woman who earns more than her husband, granting her the liberty to leave her marriage. On the other hand, Achala is compelled to stay with her abusive husband as she lacks any alternative options.

Gender Violence

De's "*Little Joyful Things*" and "*The Man Who Wanted More*" delve into the controversial subject of marital rape.

In a nation where marital rape remains uncriminalized despite numerous calls for its prohibition, Shobha De appears to articulate the anguish and suffering experienced by countless helpless women who have endured this brutal and cruel act. The two stories approach marital rape and domestic abuse from distinct perspectives. "Little Joyful Things" features a female narrator, the wife, a sensitive and romantic individual who finds joy in dancing, singing, and appreciating nature's beauty. She desires more from life than what her insensitive and brazen husband offers. Despite her attempts to engage in meaningful conversation, her husband dismisses her and responds with vulgar and lewd remarks. Although she has always dreaded intimate relations with him, she never refuses. During the lockdown, she realizes that her husband has transformed into an insensitive brute who views her solely as a means to relieve his tensions and frustrations. The disparity in their personalities, interests, and preferences becomes glaringly apparent to her, prompting her to make the courageous decision to leave him. "The Man Who Wanted More" presents the story from the male perspective, characterized by a strong sense of entitlement and superiority. The husband serves as the narrator, revealing that after an arranged marriage, he compelled his wife to quit her job to care for him and his parents, to which she reluctantly complied. When he begins demanding dowry from her, she defends her parents, stating their inability to meet his demands. This leads to a heated argument, resulting in his wife refusing to speak to him. Despite this, he believes it is his right to engage in intimate relations with her. When she denies him, he is taken aback and expresses a desire to slap her, though he refrains. Eventually, unable to contain his frustration, he verbally abuses her and threatens to assert his conjugal rights, followed by divorce after the lockdown. This narrative serves as a stark commentary on gender inequality. By juxtaposing these stories, both exploring the premise of domestic abuse, during the lockdown when individuals felt trapped in their homes, Shobha De underscores the sense of confinement experienced by these women.

The Spirit of Altruism

Mukherjee's "*Shelter from the Storm*" and "*Old Friend*" offer a glimmer of hope and inspire us to restore our faith in humanity. "*Shelter from the Storm*" sheds light on the plight of migrant labourers, particularly those returning to West Bengal amidst the challenges posed by cyclone Amphan. However, the focus of the story lies on an affluent Bengali family, the Rajas, who have recently regained some of their lost wealth through the efforts of Dada Babu, the present Raja's son, as narrated by the protagonist. When the labourers gather at the palace gates, stranded and without food or shelter, Dada Babu initially attempts to dismiss them by offering a small sum of money. However, his six-year-old daughter, disturbed to learn that the children have gone hungry, causes a scene that captures the attention of her grandfather, Raja Babu. Despite objections from his son regarding potential risks, such as the spread of the virus, posed by allowing the labourers inside, the Raja opens both his palace and his heart to them. This story serves as evidence that even in the face of challenges like the pandemic, people can exhibit acts of kindness and generosity. "*Old Friend*" recounts the tale of an old acquaintance seeking reconciliation. While glancing over a news report on Covid-19 updates in Bengal, Abheek, an investment banker, is reminded of his school friend Bunty, who returned from America and established a restaurant in Kolkata years ago. Despite encountering Bunty at the airport once, Abheek never made an effort to reconnect with him. The thought of Bunty's situation during the lockdown prompts memories of Abheek's neglect, particularly towards Bunty's mother after she faced mental health issues. Abheek's academic brilliance had endeared him to Bunty's mother, leading him to spend more time at his friend's affluent residence, Tivoli Court, than at his own modest home. Abheek's ambition for success, fuelled by his modest upbringing, made him overlook those once close to him. It takes the pandemic to make him realize his negligence. Seeking to mend their relationship, Abheek reaches out to Bunty, initiating a conversation over the phone and extending a helping hand in a gracious manner.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is to be stated that the stories of both De and Mukherjee demonstrate a profound understanding of human nature and its vulnerabilities. The characters are intricately developed, and the stories delve into various aspects of behaviour. They beautifully capture the fragility of human relationships against the backdrop of the pandemic while raising questions on the issues of gender and class. They bring to light how the central government-imposed lockdown during the first phase of the pandemic in India, had varying effects on individuals, amplifying disparities in social status and privilege while

eliciting unpredictable emotions and behaviours in response to unforeseen circumstances.

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