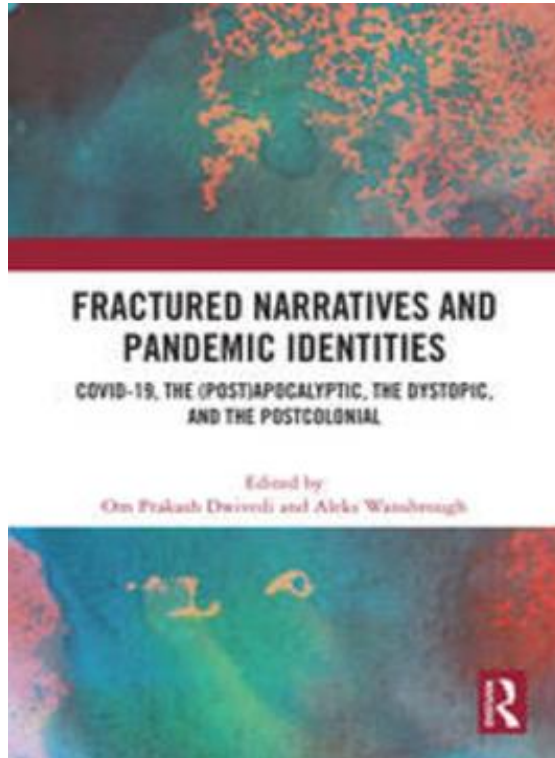


Om Prakash Dwivedi and Aleks Wansbrough (eds.), *Fractured Narratives and Pandemic Identities: COVID-19, the (Post)Apocalyptic, the Dystopian and the Postcolonial*. Routledge, 2024, 138 pp. ISBN: 978-103-272-813-1.



The COVID-19 virus, which began to spread in late 2019 killed over 7 million people as of April 2024 (WHO Dashboard, 2024). It is arguably the most devastating pandemic in recent memory not only due to the high mortality rate, but for the socioeconomic, political, and psychological implications that it engendered. It unmasked and exacerbated vulnerabilities in existing global systems. The quick spread of the virus caused government-mandated shutdowns and stringent contact and mobility measures across the globe, resulting in the loss of livelihood, disrupted learning, and loss of agency. In all this chaos, many had found themselves, and their immediate realities changed.

Fractured Narratives and Pandemic Identities: COVID-19, the (Post)Apocalyptic, the Dystopic, and the Postcolonial provides an examination of these implications using various literary, artistic, and cinematic texts. It introduces different perspectives of how the pandemic fractures identities by firstly recognising it as an apocalyptic moment in recent history. Secondly, the book pursues this end by providing

explorations of how the pandemic and its aftermath are closely linked to other global crises. Consequently, the essays in this book, originally published in the *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, collectively emphasise that the pandemic has not only generated dystopian-like realities but also given rise to fragmented narratives and identities. In doing so, the focus of the book is to examine how these fragmentations expose deep-seated geopolitical, economic, and sociocultural asymmetries, particularly between the Global North and the Global South. Each contributor provides a study of interrelated subject matters that centre around various aspects of identities which, according to Om Prakash Dwivedi, have emerged due to “economic disparities, legacies of colonialism, and forms of social alienation” (5).

Dwivedi, in the Introduction, makes it clear that examining the pandemic using texts is vital to understanding how difference, Otherness, and marginalisation are laid bare in such dystopian ways. Dwivedi characterises the reality of the pandemic this way because the various utilitarian and authoritative responses to the virus containment measures, echo measures often seen in speculative writing. He also argues that whilst speculative fiction often presents an exploration of threatening scenarios, its critique of colonialism is often overlooked (5). This neglect is particularly jarring when one considers how postcolonial works often reveal how colonial projects have abetted in the creation of devastating and enduring post-apocalyptic landscapes in the lives of the colonised. Hence, each essay focuses on texts about or from the Global South, from countries such as Iran, India, and Pakistan, as well as diaspora, such as the Caribbean diaspora that resides in Britain. Yet, this collection does not exclusively deal with the Global South, as several of the chapters engage with issues concerning Otherness in the context of the Global North.

There is no clear explanation about how the essays are arranged. Some of the essays focus on ecological and decolonial dimensions of the pandemic. In his chapter “Pandemic: Invisibility and Silence,” Sean Cubitt boldly asserts that there is no alternative to understanding the pandemic but through ecological and decolonial terms. Additionally, Cubitt explains how the pandemic forces us to be simultaneously visible and invisible using three considerations: anti-cosmopolis and the neo-consensus, and lastly the idea of the virus. He reflects on how the pandemic, much like other issues such as global warming and coloniality, is disproportionate in the ways it affects people and highlights how colonised peoples are often silenced during such calamities. Yet, Cubitt argues that this alienation can be overcome by learning more deeply about ourselves. Similarly, Johan Höglund’s “The Adivasi and the Undead: From (Post)colonial Carnage to Necrocene Apocalypse in *Betaal* (2020)” extends this ecological aspect. Höglund

presents an interesting reading of *Betaal* Justin McBrien's concept of the necrocene, with which he argues that intersecting practices of colonialism and capitalism contribute to the destruction of land. Additionally, Höglund augments the analysis using W. Moore's concept of the capitalocene to argue that capitalist ventures directly contribute to various climate catastrophes. In this vein, Höglund contends that *Betaal*'s flesh-eating zombies reveal not only the discomfoting associations between capitalism, colonialism, and land but also the violent nature of capitalism.

Some of the chapters deal with the (Othered) Body in various ways. For example, Aleks Wansbrough's chapter "Septopia and the wastilized Other: Allegorizing neo-liberalism in the age of COVID-19" focuses on Othered entities such as zombies, extraterrestrial life forms, and androids. Using Frederic Jameson's theory of the political unconscious and the study of allegory, Wansbrough employs the concept of septopia, also known as waste spaces in cinema, to study how Hollywood films address issues concerning neo-liberalism, class, and race. Using references to Hollywood films released in the early 2000s, Wansbrough urges that these films help us understand the repercussions of COVID-19 because they address similar crises. Silvia Gerlsbeck's chapter, "Fragmentations, phantom limbs, re-memberings: Negotiating bodies, representation, and subjectivity in Caribbean British writing" continues this discussion on Otherness and the body by examining how George Lamming's *The Emigrants* and David Dabydeen's *The Intended* engage with representations of the body. An interesting aspect of Gerlsbeck's treatment of these texts is how the body is seen as a means to reconsider concepts of representation and subjectivity, especially in the context of racialised and traumatised bodies.

Other essays in this collection examines ideas associated with governance, order, and dystopia. Tereza Østbø Kuldova's "Thinking the delirious pandemic governance by numbers with Samit Basu's *Chosen Spirits* and Prayaag Akbar's *Leila*" focuses on data-driven pandemic governance and the reading of postcolonial speculative fiction from India. Here, Kuldova asserts that the pandemic has made worse the use of metrics as a political tool such as for control and surveillance. Kuldova argues that the novels successfully illustrate how data-focused governance result in social injustice and dehumanisation. These issues may ultimately result in the loss of privacy and agency, and the demarcation of groups between those of elite classes and oppressed majorities. Here, Kuldova deftly examines how Indian speculative writing examine these issues by exploring dystopias created by the government by numbers and their possible end-scenarios. In the same vein Claire Chambers and Freya Lowden examine the importance of rebellion in subverting these types of oppressive

dystopian governments. In “Infection Rebellion in Bina Shah’s *Before She Sleeps*,” Chambers and Lowden examine the concept of gender control in these texts. Their study highlights how these dystopian scenarios, especially involving misogyny and other forms of social oppression, can no longer be confined to the realm of the speculative because the pandemic has made it a lived reality for many.

Pallavi Rastogi’s analysis of Zadie Smith’s *Intimations* also focuses on order by examining issues of affect in what she calls “a disorderly world.” This concept is similar to what we understand by post-apocalyptic realities. Her chapter, “Flattening the curse: Cooling down with Zadie Smith’s *Intimations*” makes a compelling case for empathy, reflection, and emotional regulation. This is particularly important as Rastogi points out that Smith’s writing could help us understand various nuances of complex issues of affect. Furthermore, Rastogi explains that Smith’s characterisation of Donald Trump as both a prophetic figure and a Biblical villain is an interesting take on the controversial American politician. At the same time, Rastogi urges readers to reconsider the process of this disorderly world within an emotional capacity.

The final chapter provides an interesting examination of art during the pandemic. Pramod Nayar’s chapter, tersely titled “The Art of COVID-19,” looks at how Banksy, an infamous and anonymous street artist, reconfigures the image of the nurse as a contemporary pandemic superhero by giving the nurse a mask and a cape. Nayar adds that the artwork juxtaposes the image of the nurse with other superheroes by having these pop culture icons placed in a trashcan. Doing so, Nayar contends, elevates the status of the nurse.

These essays significantly contribute to the study of the COVID-19 pandemic from arts and humanities perspectives as they provide thought-provoking and often novel approaches to engaging with its diverse aftermaths. Furthermore, each essay problematises various understandings about identity using speculative, postcolonial, and dystopic contexts. However, the book is not without its limitations. A thematic approach to the organisation of the essays could significantly improve the book’s flow. Currently, whilst there is some system of organisation, it is not easy to discern how each essay is placed in the book. Additionally, whilst the book is invaluable to the study of identity and COVID-19, it is too short for such an interesting, overarching discussion. Granted, the book of essays that were previously published in a special issue of a journal. But, due to its stimulating premise and the good quality of the essays, perhaps in the future it can be expanded to include more diverse engagement with contributors who study fragmented narratives and identities, especially from Global South perspectives.

Wan Nur Madiha Ramlan

Department of English Language and Literature

International Islamic University Malaysia

Email: madyramlan@iium.edu.my

References

“WHO Dashboard,” World Health Organization Data

<https://data.who.int/dashboards/covid19/deaths>.

December 2024.

Accessed

6