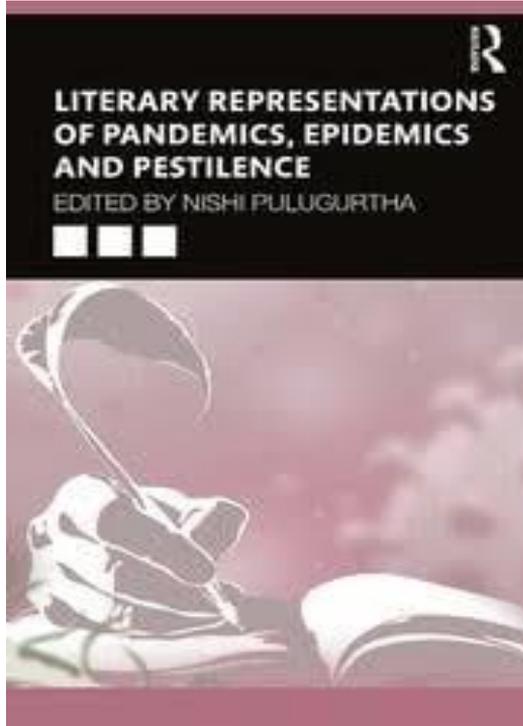


**Pulugurtha, Nishi ed. *Literary Representations of Pandemics, Epidemics and Pestilence*. London and New York: Routledge 2023. 192 pp. ISBN: 978-1-032-21091-9 (hbk)**



The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic lingers like a ghostly presence in our lives. Even now we read about controversies surrounding COVID vaccinations, ailments that have remained in the body as a residual effect of the pandemic, and so on. Pandemic is a biological crisis that has appeared time and again in human lives, completely disrupting the existing lifestyle of people. Though primarily a biological or medical concern, its impact pervades all aspects of human lifestyle. Huge loss of lives, fear of death, a general degradation of health and an overall dip in the mental health of people in affected regions become some of the predominant consequences of any pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic too had shaken the world in unprecedented ways, causing both temporary and irrevocable changes in people's lives. Since literature showcases human lives, an occurrence like pandemic, with its mass influence on the totality of human existence, is bound to be reflected in literary creations. Pandemic literature, thus standing at the concurrence of sociological, cultural, medical, and economic perspectives,

provides insights which cannot be acquired through other forms of writings, such as, historical or sociological studies. Therefore, with the onset and continuation of the Covid-19 pandemic, while there was a surge in the creation of pandemic literature, there was also a great deal of revisiting the existing ones. From such a perspective, *Literary Representations of Pandemics, Epidemics and Pestilence*, edited by Nishi Pulugurtha and published by Routledge is a significant addition to the studies of pandemic literature. The book represents pandemic literature both from India and beyond, giving a well-rounded perspective to the biological crisis.

The book is divided into five sections. In the Introduction, Pulugurtha discusses at length the need for this volume, highlighting the multiple aspects that it covers. The Introduction is an enriching addition to the subsequent chapters of the volume, contextualising them within the corpus of pandemic studies. The first section, “Memory and Contagion” highlights the ways in which memories of the contagion impact the creation of literature across the world. The opening essay of this section, Shipra Mukherjee’s “Vernacular Realities in Epidemic Literature” explores two texts from the Eastern region of India, Fakir Mohan’s Senapati’s ‘Rebati’ and Surya Kant Tripathi Nirala’s *Kulli Bhaat*. It draws attention to the underlying differences between representations of epidemic in Indian literature and those in the West. Mukherjee focusses on the complex, multi-layered approach to the lived realities of rural India which is also different from urban centres within the country. In the second essay of that section, “The Trauma and the Triumph,” Tania Chakraverty explores the presence of pandemic in Katherine Anne Porter’s “Pale Horse, Pale Rider,” situating the work in the backdrop of the Great War and the Spanish Influenza pandemic. Chakraverty provides a feminist reading of the same by reading the novella in the context of the first-wave feminist movement that sought economic independence of women and the social response to it. The last essay of this section, “Pandemic and Man-less Society” by Gautam Karmakar explores a dystopic novel *The End of Men* by Christina Sweeney Baird, written in the backdrop of the Covid-19 pandemic. Imagining the onset of a virus that killed men, Baird’s speculative fiction is not a just a study of the impact of pandemic but also a critical insight into the fine yet unstable balance of gender equations in society.

The second section, “Uncanny Dilemmas,” contains essays on literature that focus upon the uncanny or the incomprehensibility of epidemics. In the first essay of this section, Riti Agarwal reads *The Decameron* as an “Uncanny Riddle of Plague.” Humans have never been able to decode the mystery that pandemic is. There are retrospective evaluations of the situation and its associated issues, but plagues or epidemics have frequently brought out the worst side of human

behaviour. These have been reflected in narratives in various forms. Agarwal reads *Decameron* as a “collective imagination,” closely observing the ways in which another “new normal” is created. The next chapter talks about another landmark pandemic literature – Mary Shelley’s *The Last Man* (1826). While the previous paper speaks of creating new normal as a part of pandemic experience, Sarottama Majumdar explores the relationship between dystopian fiction and pandemics. An overhauling of normal lifestyle creates anxieties that promote apocalyptic vision. Majumdar reads *The Last Man* in the context of the nineteenth century scientific worldviews of the pandemic as well as in the trope of romanticism that celebrates going “back to nature.” Subham Dutta’s “Epidemic Anxiety and Narrative Aesthetics in Sarat Chandra’s *Palli Samaj* and *Pandit Mashay*” explores the two texts from 19<sup>th</sup> century Bengal. Dutta here tries to understand pandemic anxieties in rural Bengal. Despite a similar upheaval in human lives, this paper highlights a more orthodox casteist social hierarchies that become even more manifested during such periods. The last paper in this section delves into Camus’s *The Plague* (1947). Sacaria Joseph focuses on the theological conflict that is bound to rise when unprecedented loss of lives and associated pain makes one question faith. Joseph highlights the existential absurdity coexisting with an acceptance of one’s fate which becomes one of the ways of reading a complex narrative like Camus’s.

The third section – “Moving between Language and Media” – brings together literature and other media. In a paper titled “It Mattered Not from Whence it Came; but All agreed it was Come: Plague Narratives as Narratives of Media and Foreignness,” Amit Baishya exposes the media complicity and the idea of foreign intervention in the popular conceptualisation of the Plague. Taking the opening passage of Defoe’s *Journal of the Plague Year* (1722) and juxtaposing certain aspects of it upon the later texts, Baishya unravels how representation in popular media creates panic and chaos. Mentioning Trump’s racist characterization of COVID-19, Baishya highlights the ‘foreigner’ trope in plagues, and to successfully make a case in point, makes use of the *Zombie* film *World War Z* (2013), to bring out the otherisation. The second chapter of this section, “Forgetting Difference: The Plague in Hindi and Urdu Literature” by Ishan Mehandru brings back the focus on the subcontinental experience of epidemics. Critiquing the Eurocentric epistemology that dominates pandemic study, Mehandru provides a different kind of understanding of the same. Through Rajinder Singh Bedi’s story, “Quarantine” and Suryakant Tripathi Nirala’s *Kullī Bhaat*, Mehandru focusses on the aspects of caste and untouchability, the integral features of Indian society. The essay argues how experiences of death and diseases are oriented along the communal, gendered, and caste-based lines.

Sanghita Sanyal's "The Periwig Maker and Defoe: A Déjà vu upon the Present" is a study of the short film *The Periwig-Maker* (1999) which has been based on Defoe's *Journal of the Plague Year*. Sanyal explores human behaviour in times of calamities, echoing the strange resemblances during the COVID-19 period.

The fourth section of the book "Fear, Disaster and Dystopia" includes four essays that explore how literature document the idea of 'fear' during such medical calamities and the reasons that lead to the creation of dystopic literature in the wake of such disasters. "Pestilence, Death, Fear and a Testimony of Female Outrage: The 1897 Bombay Plague in the Writing of Pandita Ramabai" speaks particularly of the female experiences during epidemics. Analysing the "Letter" that Ramabai had written, accusing the colonial government of its failure to provide safe healing spaces for women, the paper focusses on how her subjectivity as a woman in a colonial setup impacted the reception of her letter. It also problematises the standpoint of the anti-colonialists as they found it difficult to accept Ramabai due to her conversion to Christianity. Sumantra Baral's 'Pandemic as a Disaster: Narratives of Suffering and "risk" in *Twilight in Delhi*' is another essay that analyses the epidemic in the backdrop of colonial history. The essay criticises the silence with which mainstream nationalism in India dealt with the epidemic while exploring its presence in the novel *Twilight in Delhi* (1940). In the next essay "Pandemic Fear: Death and Ruin of Civilization in Jack London's *The Scarlet Plague*," Paramita Dutta looks at the dystopia written almost a century back from the perspective of fear and anxiety that pandemics create, almost stripping the humanity off its nobler feelings. The chapter draws parallels of this novel with the lived realities of the COVID-19 world. The last chapter in this section is Sayan A Bhowmick's "Pandemic and the End of the World in Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*" where he tries to understand the post-pandemic world through the lens of Margaret Atwood's speculative fiction. Using the backdrop of global politics, Bhowmik's paper explores the fear of a Frankenstein-like encore through medical or scientific breakthroughs that remains a threat to the modern world.

The last section, "COVID-19, Public Health and Social Justice" is unique, adding a fresh perspective to this volume. Not strictly pertaining to literature, this section significantly analyses the socio-cultural and political aspects of the COVID-19 world. Tabish Khair in "Power and the Pandemic through Two Gothic Tropes," though not dealing with any literary pieces in the strictest sense of the word, examines the pandemic through a lens of power and neoliberal capitalism. The final chapter of the volume reads digital obituaries as texts to expose the politics of remembrance. In "Following the Dead: Digital Obituaries as Rituals of Selective Remembrance during COVID-19 Pandemic," Yash Gupta

reads the digital obituaries as ritualistic performances based on normatively shared ideals. The obituaries are not just mourning in public, but as Gupta shows us, they are spaces that aid in biography creation, processing of grief and to negotiate with death – an occurrence so common in pandemics.

This volume of essays on the literary representations of pandemics and epidemics is noteworthy because of the span and depth of its chapters. Featuring literary representation from various parts of the globe, including literature closer home, it presents a multi-layered approach to the crisis, challenging the dominant, unipolar euro-centric approach to its understanding. Though the Indian representation is a little biased towards literary works from the East, there is an enriching presence of representative works from several languages. One interesting feature is how the volume, despite largely dealing with literary creations, also brings in media, politics, and social media representations – aspects that are indispensable parts of the contemporary world. While there are some repetitions of literary works like Defoe's *Journal of the Plague Year* and Nirala's *Kulli Bhaat*, the approaches are novel, emphasising the idea how some literary pieces resonate more with the collective consciousness or grip the public imagination more vividly. Overall, this volume is a much-needed addition to the study of pandemic literature and offers the readers the required critical lens to understand human behaviour during such calamities.

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