Literary forces that surround pandemic poetry

Shrishti Sinha

Azim Premji University, Bengaluru, India

Abstract— This article studies the literary forces around the pandemic in India. It looks at the purpose and motivation of pandemic poetry, the role of the writer and writing behaviours and the role of the digital medium. A combination of primary and secondary texts has been used to present the therapeutic and community building role of poetry. Additionally, interviews were conducted with thirteen poets who were writing about the pandemic and posting their work on Instagram. The main theoretical frameworks used are Susan Sontag's 'Illness as a Metaphor' and the affective communities as theorized by Leela Gandhi and Emma Hutchison.

Keywords— covid poetry, pandemic poetry, Indian covid poetry, poetry and digital media, therapeutic role of poetry

I. INTRODUCTION

Poetry during Covid helped build communities against perceived common negative figures like the government, the virus, other sections of society by creating solidarity. In some countries like the U.S. and the U.K., the government compiled these poems into collections and created spaces that encouraged writers to express common sentiments. The Sutton Poetry Project, U.K.[i] and the project Salisbury in Sandiego[ii] are two such examples. Both these collections assigned themes to the poet. These collections depicted two categories of poets - one that expresses anger and resentment against the common enemy and the other that tries to unite against the common enemy through sentiments of hope. There are overlaps between these sentiments and often rage and grief leads to hope, empathy and solidarity in the poetry. Hence, poetry plays a therapeutic role by giving people a space to express their grief and rage and also helps locate and relate with others who are feeling similar emotions. By facilitating such interaction, poetry provides comfort to both the reader and the writer.

In India, the government showed no initiative to the harness the therapeutic role of poetry. However, there was an outburst of poetry on social media and independent collections and anthologies compile the pandemic poetry.

This article focuses on various literary forces that surrounded the pandemic in India, mainly the new role of the writer, the purpose of poetry, and the role of the digital medium. The background used to study the phenomena of pandemic poetry is the international collections and two key theoretical frameworks, Susan Sontag's 'Illness as a Metaphor' and the affective communities as theorized by Leela Gandhi and Emma Hutchison. Additionally, other primary and secondary texts have been used. A google form was also sent on social media to 13 writers who had put up their poetry on social media.

Based on these questions, this paper presents findings on the above-mentioned factors in three sections. Section 1 shows that the purpose of poetry is to create hope and form communities as opposed to appealing to aesthetics. The motivation behind the poetry was to express one's emotions and reach out to people experiencing similar sentiments. Section 2 claims that the amateur writer becomes significant in the pandemic as they undertake the role of building communities by posting their poetry. Section 3 delves into how the digital sphere has provided these amateur writers with a non-filtered space that allows them to publish their work that might not have been accepted in literary journals. This demonstrates that the pandemic poetry is not usually aesthetically appealing nor is it expected to be as observed in the Covid-19 pandemic poetry collection.

II. METHOD

Sontag's 'Illness as a Metaphor' shows how an illness becomes a metaphor in literature. The curious origins of an illness like Covid makes it mythicised in the public imagination. This study applies the theoretical framework to understand how Covid emerged as various metaphors in pandemic poetry. These metaphors of demon, saviour and more create identities of Covid against which communities are built.

Leela Gandhi looks at how disparate entities got together to approach imperialism. These communities did not have anything in common, but they got together in many ways to fight colonialism and imperialism. This paper applies her framework to analyse how Covid has helped build affective communities where there are common sentiments caused by the virus.

Emma Hutchison looks at how trauma builds communities. When the trauma is widespread and the damage is far-reaching it enters the social landscape through which communities live out their lives and shape their politics. Witnessing a global pandemic, even if someone is not directly affected by it, causes communities to configure. People within these communities help allay each other's suffering. Even though trauma is experienced individually, it can help form the social attachments needed to build a community. Poetry supports the formation of such social attachments in the pandemic which helps create affective communities.

The questionnaire was:

1. Age and Nationality

2. Is this your first-time writing poetry/a literary piece? Have they been published before?

3. Have you been writing for a while or have you had any formal education in literature?

4. What motivated you to write about the pandemic?

5. What goals do you have in mind while writing?

6. What themes have you written about? (Related to the pandemic

7. How has social media helped you? What platforms are you on?

8. Can you tell me about your writing process? What challenges do you face? Is it easy or hard?

1. Purpose of poetry and motivation behind it

Jeroen Dera's article, 'Evaluating poetry on COVID-19: attitudes of poetry readers toward corona poems' claims that poetry has two dimensions - heteronomous and autonomous. [iii] The autonomous position claims that poetry should be written for aesthetics; art for art's sake. Poetry should not be used as a tool for other motives, rather poetry should be read, written and enjoyed in itself. This stance contributes to the idea of the literary form being inaccessible and elitist. Pandemic poetry by amateurs emerges in stark contrast and falls under the heteronomous dimension of poetry. It is poetry with a purpose and uses the form to convey a message that affects people. Hence, pandemic poetry is not aimed at literary goals but rather social and therapeutic goals. Pandemic poetry's aim is to find hope and form communities together based on common sentiments.

The heteronomous dimension of poetry raises another significant question regarding what motivated people to write. In the international framework, the collections had already set the purpose of poetry for the participant by giving themes. The digital sphere provides room for diversity of motivation and reason behind writing.

Eight participants in the interview responded that writing was a way to deal with the circumstances and emotions that the pandemic had brought about. Five participants looked at the pandemic as an opportunity for change and used their poetry to comment on the socio-political conditions of the country, "the opportunities it presented for change." [iv] In both the cases, the writers aimed to share and express their emotions regarding the circumstances of the pandemic by putting their poetry on social media. By doing so, they hoped that others on the platform would resonate with their emotions, hence, aiding in community formations. Along the same lines, five respondents stated that they wanted to connect with people and make them think. Hence, pandemic poetry allowed people to express themselves and form connections based on these expressions.

The poem titled 'Airborne Particles' exemplifies this motivation and purpose of poetry. One hundred poets from across the world came together to collaborate on the poem. The poem started by a Romanian writer was continued by writers from over sixteen. The readings of the poem were uploaded on YouTube. ' "I hear the kestrel and the koel calling in streets/ emptied of screeching, braking cars. The stoplights /blink red, tapping out a virus alert./ Might that be a coded verse from you, Hafiz, / a password to a gate that we could each open/ in our different scripts, our separate solitudes?" '[v]

This initiative created a piece that crosses geographical boundaries tied by the common thread of solitude in the pandemic and attempted to connect people through the shared solitude in the pandemic. The poem includes lines from the 14th Century poet, Hafiz at the beginning, ' "Don't surrender your loneliness/ So quickly/ Let it cut more deeply." ' The common figure of Hafiz and the loneliness he expresses is traced throughout the poem by asking questions of him and by directing the lines to his figure. The

common figure and sentiment express how the isolation caused by the pandemic has not only crossed geographical boundaries but rather presented a paradoxical relationship with solitude. While solitude is synonymous with isolation, solitude itself has been felt through time and space making it shared. Hence, even in the pandemic while solitude came from being alone, it was not felt alone. Such poetry allows readers and writers to identify with each other and understand that the pandemic is a shared struggle. It being a *shared* struggle provides comfort and hope in the face of isolation. The motivation behind this initiative was to create a collaborative work across geographical space and time and the purpose of the poetry was to build a community of people who were struggling with isolation.

The need to form literary communities that help people find solace with each other also led to independent and media house published anthologies coming together. 'Singing in the Dark' is one such initiative by Penguin among many which includes works from over a hundred poets, across six continents, written in 20 languages. The poems range from the anguish and rage caused by the pandemic to its celebration. The poems are supposed to help people cope with various emotions that the pandemic has stirred. [vi]

2. Writer in the pandemic, their role and writing behaviour

Out of the thirteen interviewees only one was a first-time writer and twelve others had written poetry before. Four of them were amateurs, two were enrolled into literature programs, two had been featured on social media platforms frequently and five of them had been published or are going to be published. The age group of the participants was between twenty and sixty. Majority of the poets did not have a background in writing poetry beyond social media.

While there is no concrete evidence regarding whether there were more first-time writers in the pandemic in the country, it is fairly evident that people were writing more. This can be attributed to two reasons: people had something common to write about and people had more time to write. A nine-year old from Hyderabad who has originally started on social media published two poetry anthologies, because she had the time to write in the pandemic. [vii] The interview of the editors of literary magazines substantiates this claim. [viii] An editor claimed that during the first wave there was an increase in the number of contributions because writers had more time. However, with the increasingly stressful circumstances of the pandemic, the number and quality of submissions reduced. The interview states there was an explosion of poetry submissions that dealt with the themes of isolation, vulnerability and the virus. The boom in writing wasn't one-sided, readers were also looking for connection, consolation and comfort through such literature. Although

the literary magazines received fewer submissions after the first wave, the digital sphere was still alive with new poetry flooding people's feeds each day. With the second wave, the themes of poetry had shifted from isolation and solitude to grief and rage against the government. As stated by 'The Spark Magazine's' editor, submissions largely reflected on the pandemic-ridden and the post-pandemic world. [ix]

'Airborne Particles' is one poem among many available on various digital platforms. Most of the poems, unlike the one mentioned, have not been written by people who are recognised as poets in literary circles. They are amateurs, self-taught, poets who write on social media. Hence, in the pandemic these writers become significant for the purpose that poetry wants to accomplish i.e., to form communities.

Five respondents claimed that they wanted to connect with people and make them think. The pandemic poet knows that there are other readers and writers whose ideas will resonate with theirs. "Feeling less alone (maybe my writing will resonate with other people) and getting my feelings out." [x] They perform the role of forming communities and expressing solidarity with people who are facing the same struggles.

The writing process in the interview was generally described as reflective and spontaneous. Individuals recognised that they were writing in a community. As they were not trained in writing, they faced challenges with articulation and also struggled with inspiration.

In the interview, the respondents pointed out three themes on which they had been writing. Eight respondents were dealing with the emotions around the pandemic like isolation, loneliness and loss of comfort. Four respondents were writing about how the pandemic had made them re-evaluate their relationship with nature and four respondents were invested in the socio-political conditions of the country amidst the pandemic.

3. Role of the digital sphere and aesthetic quality of the poems

The digital sphere is a space that has made pandemic poetry accessible to anyone who has social media to read and to write. Although access to technology is still limited in India, social media users in India stood at 518 million in 2020. [xi] Many poems on social media were written in simple language, had grammatical errors and played around with the conventional forms of poetry. Some were written in the form of rants; some were written as lists. Hence, the heteronomous dimension of poetry has allowed everyone on social media to be a poet and express their views. A pandemic is a global phenomenon; hence, everyone has something to offer in terms of perspective that might be significant for various other people.

As opposed to digital media, literary magazines are more stringent in terms of the quality of the content. As reflected by an interview of the editors of literary magazines in English, Hindi and Tamil conducted by The Scroll, editors were not fond of the pandemic poetry.[xii] Throughout the accounts of the editors, there was a common observation about pandemic writing i.e., its poor quality. Literary magazines have certain aesthetic standards to maintain and hence they filter out content based on quality. Therefore, a lot of the pandemic writing could not find a place in these magazines. "The badly-written pandemic poem, one that deals with the overt effects plainly, has on occasion found its way into our inbox."[xiii] Hence, social media became a medium to post pandemic writing because of the absence of a filtering process in terms of quality. Social media makes it easy for the writer to post and the readers can access that writing with a few clicks, free of cost. and easy for the readers to access, free of cost. "Readers are seeking – through tiny windows of time and technology – connection, consolation and comfort." [xiv] The poetry available on social media became a source of comfort for both the readers and writers.

'I know' is a poem from the collection 'Covid-19 Pandemic Poems', volume III written by Shivani Lad from Mumbai. The introduction to the collection states that the poetry collection acts as "a healing force at the time of collective grief and pain." [xv] It is in human nature to write and express one's feelings to survive calamities. When there is grief and loss, art rescues humanity by providing solace. Keeping this in mind, the volume published fifty poems to understand the effect of the pandemic and trigger hope in the readers.

The poem is an exemplar of the poetry in the collection. The poems have not been curated or edited to meet any stylistic requirements, rather even typos and grammatical errors have been published. This reflects the purpose of the collection and pandemic poetry in general which is to create hope and express. Thus, the collection provides a space for the writer to express and for the reader to find solace without putting aesthetic restrictions.

"I know it's difficult

But believe me you will

I know situations are hard

But believe me you heal

I know you're lonely

But need to walk alone

I know you're broken

But struggle is going on"

The first two stanzas of the poem build an intimate connection with the reader by expressing that the poet knows what the reader is going through. It creates hope by urging the reader to have faith in recovery and healing. However, the poem uses simple language to express these sentiments. There are missing articles and missing pronouns e.g., "but need to walk alone" instead of "but *you* need".

"I know you miss them

But this battle was tough

I know pain was extreme

But be a strong enough

I know you lose hope

But keep little trust

I know this hurts you

But now wait is must

I know you need support

But have to stay separate

I know you feel guilty

But don't feel any regret."

The latter three stanzas also build similar intimacy with the reader. It validates the problems of the reader and at the same time asks them to be resilient. However, there is a lack of a clear flow of thought in the poetry. It is unclear what the poet wants the reader to wait for or what is at the end of the wait as healing is mentioned in the first stanza.

The entire poem uses only one punctuation, a full stop at the end of the poem. There is no rhyming scheme or meter. Repetition is used to validate the grief and provide hope by using "I know - But". Hence, the central idea of the poem repeats every two lines.

Although the poem does not carry literary merit in terms of aesthetics, it is doing what the collection wants it to do i.e., to create hope. Hence, such poems cannot find space in literary magazines but they are significant for collections that want to record poetry written during the pandemic. Such poems written by amateurs emerge as significant in the pandemic as they create hope and provide solace to the reader.

III.   CONCLUSION

Access to digital media was crucial to pandemic poetry as it helped poets connect with people and create a community of writers and readers. Both the readers and writers found a sense of solidarity in the poetic form of expression. Through the poetry, readers and writers were also able to go beyond online literary communities and think about how they connected with fellow citizens in their own social

communities. A sense of unity emerged within different sections of the society as they were facing similar problems.

This article only focuses on poetry written in English; however, these mediums have poetry written in different vernacular languages from all over the country. Access to social media combined with a global catastrophe has created an environment where everyone has something to say and those words provide a sense of comfort to others. Aesthetics of poetry like rhyme, meter take a backseat while poetry becomes a form to grieve, express and find solidarity.

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