

**SITUATING PANDEMIC LITERATURE: A STUDY OF SELECT
NARRATIVES**

**A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
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NARRATIVES**

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**In partial fulfillment of the requirement of the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in
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MIZORAM UNIVERSITY**DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH AND CULTURE STUDIES****CERTIFICATE**

This is to certify that the thesis entitled “**Situating Pandemic Literature: A Study of Select Narratives**” is the bonafide research conducted by Zomuansangi under my supervision. Zomuansangi worked methodically for her thesis being submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Department of English and Culture Studies, Mizoram University. This is to further certify that she had fulfilled all the required norms laid down under the Ph.D. regulations of Mizoram University. Neither the thesis as a whole or any part of it was ever submitted to any other University.

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DECLARATION**Mizoram University****July 2025**

I, Zomuansangi, hereby declare that the subject matter of this thesis is the record of work done by me, that the contents of this thesis did not form basis of the award of any previous degree to me or to do the best of my knowledge to anybody else, and that the thesis has not been submitted by me for any research degree in any other University/Institute.

This is being submitted to the Mizoram University for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English.

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Aizawl

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Situating Pandemic Literature: A Study of Select Narratives

Chapter I-

Introduction- Situating Pandemic Narratives in Literature

The introductory chapter seeks to create a framework for the study of pandemic literature by tracing its conceptual and historical roots and subsequently appraising the specific literary texts selected for this study. It is only after a conceptual and historical foundation is laid that the discussion will focus on the primary narratives in the subsequent body of this chapter. The primary aim of this chapter is to trace how pandemics have been imagined, represented, and re-imagined in literary traditions, and how the term “pandemic,” as both a medical and cultural phenomenon, grew into a critical lens through which human experiences of crisis, vulnerability, and resilience have been portrayed.

Throughout history, pandemics have been a constant feature of human civilization in various forms. Though they are known and referred to in a variety of ways - occasional outbreaks, flu, plague, pestilences or epidemics, their impact is witnessed on the lives of people, no matter what class, race religion or boundary. The experience of pandemics has occurred throughout history in various centuries. The word “pandemic” in its Greek etymology comes from pan meaning “all” or “every” while demos mean “people,” thus, an event occurring upon the whole population to a degree. The pandemic crisis has taken form in many ways as public health disasters, civil unrest, economic collapse and geopolitical crises. It has infiltrated every aspect of human life. In *The New and Complete Dictionary of the English* (1775) compiled by John Ash, it is referenced as an adjective that signifies an ‘incident to a whole people.’ Even though the word is found to have “an ancient lineage, it was generally used to refer to social mores, particularly so-called vulgar forms of love (‘pandemic love’). Nor, on the rare occasions when it did pertain to disease, did the term ‘pandemic’ refer only to maladies considered contagious, as it does now” (Harrison 12). It is only in the last few years that scientists and historians have begun to use and popularise the phrase in relation to the general pandemic events. The term, which was once obscure and foreign jargon, is now among the most widely used terms. In fact, the word has re-emerged, to the point of being selected as the word of the year in 2020 by Merriam Webster who stated that “pandemic is the word that has connected the worldwide medical emergency to the political response and to our personal experience of it all.” In his chapter titled “Pandemics,” Mark Jackson made

the case that the concept of “the pandemic” is comparatively new and that it encompasses a wide range of potential outcomes, from potentially cataclysmic mortality on the order of 1918-19 to a disease like SARS, which claimed fewer than a thousand lives. In some ways, this imprecision is a drawback, but it also has tactical advantages. When a sickness is classified as a “pandemic,” it gains strength that none other illnesses, not even those regarded as epidemics, possess. Whenever a pandemic is declared, in particular, there is tremendous media speculation, as there was in the case of the swine flu, anxiety is created, and with fear comes a desire for security, or at least a specific idea of security. In addition, there is a demand that governments, together with other public and commercial organisations, take decisive action to shield themselves from accountability. He claimed that pandemics were perceived as fragmented epidemics and that knowledge of them was not always extensively or consistently transmitted. One factor contributing to this was the fact that the great majority of people continued to learn about pandemics through rumours spread by word of mouth. At the turn of the century, this was still mainly the case, but information was becoming more accessible.

As basic education expanded across many countries, including various European colonies, literacy rates increased and there was a corresponding rise in the availability of popular print media. Newspapers, once limited to the elite, became accessible to a broader segment of the population. Periodicals intended for the general readership began to frequently publish reports on disease outbreaks and the developing pattern of what gradually came to be known as “pandemics.” These accounts often identified the affected regions and described the drastic measures undertaken to curb the spread of illness, such as enforced quarantines and the demolition of contaminated properties. Visual illustrations often accompanied these stories, which may have intensified public anxiety. However, they also contributed to shaping a collective understanding of pandemics within the wider population

Pandemics thus became more definite entities, with presumed points of origin, sequential development and termination. But as well as existing in particular locations, pandemics inhabited a new kind of space- a relational

space or space of flows constituted by new technologies of communication and transportation (Jackson 23).

It might, at least, assist to explain the sharp increase in the modern use of the word “pandemic,” which used to communicate the scope of both real and imagined worldwide calamities. There are surprisingly few references to “pandemics” before the middle of the nineteenth century. It was mentioned that the Russian influenza and plague at the turn of the century caused a rise in the use of the phrase, but it wasn’t until a much deadlier pandemic occurred namely the influenza of 1918-19, that the phrase gained widespread use, especially in medical circles (Phillips 33). How might the pandemic be woven into these narratives is the question. The literature of the time demonstrates a particular skill in depicting the unique characteristics of the pandemic and its significant yet often overlooked impact. Understanding these traits can provide insight into how to address the challenges it presents. In terms of the lives of the people experiencing a significant and extensive upheaval, pandemics reflect life-altering and irreversible consequences. During a cataclysmic event like a pandemic, people face changing realities, misunderstandings, and fundamental shifts in their perception of life. The similarities between the current distressing situation and past literature about pandemics highlight the importance of reflecting on these themes.

In *Viral Modernism*(2019), Elizabeth Outka reflected on how the process of researching her book was often interrupted by moments of emotional intensity. Specific stories or statistics would arrest her attention, and the scale of the pandemic’s devastation would become unexpectedly overwhelming. She cited accounts such as soldiers who returned home to discover that their families had perished, the burial of mothers with their infants, and the vast numbers of children left orphaned. Outka identified several dimensions of loss resulting from the pandemic. These included not only the immediate loss of life but also the grief borne by those who survived, the long-term health consequences for many, and the erasure of the pandemic itself from cultural and historical narratives. She questioned how such loss could be represented, suggesting that the magnitude of the experience

challenged conventional narrative forms. In her examination of interwar literature and cultural production, she concentrated on retrieving these obscured stories and tracking the enduring impact of such losses. Her analysis revealed how these narratives exposed omissions and absences in the critical discourse surrounding the period. Outka argued that aspects once overlooked had become visible, thereby altering the established understanding of literary modernism. She emphasized that the figure of the ill or convalescing body became increasingly significant within the literature of the time (Outka 243). Owing to the nature and genesis of the pathogen, pandemics have generally been viewed as belonging exclusively to the scientific domain. Extensive studies and research have been conducted to discover the causes as well as develop remedies that will hopefully save humanities from the clutches of death. However, without discrediting the vital role played by sciences, the importance of social and human sciences such as the humanities during an event such as the pandemic have gradually been taken note of. As will become apparent in the course of this study, by exploring the emotional side of the pandemic, it is an intent to “collapse the distinction between biology and culture” (Boddice and Hitzer 3).

Pandemic literature and texts that cover ground on pestilences and diseases range from intimate accounts on how humanities have fared against the ongoing threats to collective memories that reveal and provide an insight on the dominant power discourses and ideologies of that time. It is unsettling to see how closely the patterns of human reactions, paranoia, conspiracies, and the power structure of those in positions of authority follow, even when the author renames the illness or writes about it in a chronology that is centuries apart. As a historian and literary critic, Rene Girard also commented about these similarities where he expressed that

It would be exaggerated to say that plague descriptions are but the similarities may well be more intriguing than the individual variations. The curious thing about these similarities is that they ultimately involve the very notion of the similar. The plague is universally presented as a process of undifferentiation, a destruction of specificities (Girard 2).

Writings that address these subjects provide a variety of viewpoints and approaches that may be interpreted as narratives that are investigative, scientific, personal, historical, factual, or fictional. These narratives include the paradoxes and ambiguities that arise at the philosophical, political, social, and personal levels as well as the process of recalling or forgetting trauma related to such occurrences. These dialogical and textually mediated discourses demonstrate how the humanities may be helpful and healing. German philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey in his *Introduction to the Human Sciences* (1985) spoke about the aim to achieve an “understanding” of the human world through interpretations and representations in works of literature for it is where the, “inner life of man finds its fullest and most exhaustive, most objectively comprehensible expression. That is why the art of understanding centers on the exegesis or interpretation of those residues of human reality preserved in written form” (223).

Despite the fact that pandemics are a common occurrence, there have been pauses and gaps throughout literary history. Another interpretation is that pandemics and illnesses are often subtly depicted in literature rather than being obvious. By conducting systematic and careful observations of pandemic representation through the literary lens, it is found that there are many works of literature which correspond to it. Like Outka suggested, “If we know what to look for, the literature of the era emerges as particularly adept at representing the pandemic’s particular qualities and its vast yet hidden presence” (3). These novels are marked by a revelation of the darkest times in life and how humans dealt with such trauma. It is also observed that these types of writings and their writers displayed disparate approaches, ranging from the use of “I” as in personal narratives, memoirs and autobiographies to a collective experience. They will be studied alongside the nonfiction books that focus on the history, background, autobiographical memoirs and journals that recorded and give a glimpse of the condition witnessed by survivors or researchers.

Reading the letters and stories told by the survivors of the pandemic, and the literary representations that simultaneously revealed and hid these very stories, launch us into new narrative streams, allowing us to hear voices long

ignored in part because the viral, dust- like form at the heart of the story was itself invisible and silent (Outka 37).

In *The Posthuman Pandemic* (2021), Saul Newman and Tihomir Topuzovski discuss how the pandemic not only prompts a political emergency by causing a renewed examination of the nature of political institutions and practices, but also an emergency in the arts. They questioned how the crisis, with all of its unknown ramifications, ought to be portrayed artistically. They offered their opinion that, “As paradigmatic of the posthuman experience, the pandemic will no doubt provoke further questioning of our accepted notions of human autonomy, sovereignty, agency and centricity, which will find expression in new cultural and artistic forms. We believe that art offers a unique way of interrogating and understanding the posthuman condition” (38). By examining these factors, it is possible to analyze how artists’ responses are relevant to discussing and visualizing the pandemic. The pandemic issue, in particular, calls into question the conventional wisdom on the complex relationships “between life and death, between nature and culture, and between humans and other living beings,” as well as the ways in which these relationships are reflected in several works of art. The fundamental relevance of modern artistic practices is examined in Arthur Danto’s work, titled *Unnatural Wonders- Essays from the Gap Between Art and Life* (2007) where he claims that “artists have become what philosophers used to be, guiding us to think about what their works express. With this, art is really about those who experience it. It is about who we are and how we live” (xvi). During times of widespread crisis, individuals sought meaning by engaging with fictional, historical, and other narrative forms. Stories began to serve multiple purposes. They offered means of escape, functioned as tools for remembrance or caution, provided emotional support or alternative perspectives, and documented the pandemic in comprehensive detail. These narratives may be grouped into various categories. Some arose directly from lived experiences, while others employed fictional pandemics as narrative settings. Certain texts used disease metaphorically to express philosophical concerns, and some focused explicitly on the human response to real illnesses in order to explore existential and ethical questions. As Vijay Tadakamalla observed in his article

“Pandemics in Literature,” the long-term literary significance of many of the pandemic-related works currently being published remains uncertain. It is difficult to determine which of these texts will endure over time or which writers will succeed in transforming a topical subject into a work of lasting artistic value (Tadakamalla).

As stated earlier, in order to situate pandemic narratives in literature, their imprints throughout human history need to be traced to a certain extent. The first plague pandemic that was found to be recorded occurred in the sixth century, during the reign of Emperor Justinian I of the Byzantine Empire and hence known as the ‘Justinianic’ plague. The descriptions of the nature of the disease and outspread suggested that it could be similar to bubonic. The plague would then reappear sporadically over the next few centuries but “came back with a vengeance in the fourteenth century.” Especially in the years between 1346 and 1353 CE, “the second plague pandemic ravaged Europe, northern Africa and West Asia, an episode dubbed ‘Black Death’. The colour in this title refers to the colour of the bubo that the plague causes, though given the high mortality rate in Europe, ‘White Death’ would have been equally appropriate. It was also called the ‘Great Mortality’, ‘Great Pestilence’ and ‘Universal Plague’ by contemporaries” (Tumbe 16). Throughout history, pandemics have left an indelible mark on civilization such as the Bubonic Plague, The Great Influenza and Covid 19 in the present timeline. Their haunting presence can be felt by thousands of people in every corner of the earth as thousands of lives are afflicted and disrupted by it. This means that if one were to look for pandemics in literature, they would find them practically everywhere. Classic literary works, from fables like La Fontaine’s “Les Animaux malades la peste” to epics like Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, contain references to it. It is evident from these older depictions that the disease is viewed as a curse, retaliation, or a punishment given by the heavenly gods. Even in sacred writings like the Bible, instances of plagues are occasionally portrayed as God’s vengeance directed on individuals or communities who have sinned and insulted him. Rene Girard in his study of “The Plague in Literature and Myth” states how the theme of pandemic spans the “whole range of literary and non-literary genres, from pure fantasy to the most positive and scientific accounts,” thereby arguing that pandemic narratives have been present all along, even claiming

that it is “older than literature - much older, really, since it is present in myth and ritual in the entire world” (2).

Through the centuries, a dramatic struggle with the horrifying multi-headed monster pestilence continued unabated. Due to their uncanny ability to extract a dreadful toll on humanity, pestilences found an abundant expression in important religious and historic sources, as well as in significant works of literature and visual art (Alalykin-Izvekov 24).

When examined within a literary framework, the relevance and resonance of pandemic narratives became increasingly apparent. Despite their significance, themes related to illness and widespread disease had historically been overlooked, marginalized, or insufficiently explored in literary studies. Virginia Woolf recognized this neglect and expressed her surprise at the lack of serious literary engagement with such topics. In her nonfiction essay *On Being Ill*, she reflected on the profound emotional and spiritual impact of illness, observing that it revealed hidden dimensions of human experience. Woolf wrote that even minor ailments could expose inner landscapes previously unknown, comparing the effects of fever and physical decline to the uprooting of deep-seated aspects of the self. She remarked on the strange omission of illness from the ranks of central literary themes, despite its ubiquity and capacity to alter consciousness. Illness, in her view, had been excluded from the literary canon that traditionally emphasized love, conflict, and jealousy (317). Woolf suggested that poetry would be a more appropriate form for articulating the complicated experiences of illness. Her essay emphasized the deep connection between bodily pain and more general human awareness and the difficulty of transforming experience into narrative. Since Woolf wrote, other writers have attempted to describe the emotional and psychological effects of illness and have sought to represent its effects through language and literary expression.

It would be beneficial to review the definition of “sickness” from *the English Dictionary of 1623* for a historical perspective on the term. It denoted ‘an absence of ease (dis-ease), an uneasiness, an inconvenience, an annoyance.’ The emotional experience of sickness and narrative are closely related, as has been extensively

studied, “Narrative knowledge is what one uses to understand the meaning and significance of stories through cognitive, symbolic, and affective means” (Arnstein 53). A pandemic’s experience sets off specific emotional reactions that are positioned within a narrative arc, akin to the phases of grieving. Understanding emotions requires an examination of the sequence of events and their implications, as emotions respond to and evaluate these occurrences. Tilmann Habermas in his book, *Emotion and Narrative* (2018), claims that a narrative format is necessary for this. It enables the expression and understanding of emotions. The narrative structure necessitates providing the pertinent background information required to comprehend the significance of events for a particular person. It also connected the events and enables the transportation, interpretation, and re-evaluation of the events. As a result, the process of emotions has a narrative aspect. Furthermore, the emotional events and the feelings they arouse could be changed by telling the story of them (2). It focused in particular on the significance that emotions play in resilience narratives, exploring the function of empathy in the construction of resilience narratives.

As scholarly and cultural interest in pandemic narratives experienced a resurgence, literary works dealing with themes of disease and contagion were revisited, reinterpreted, and examined anew. These texts offered insight and consolation by presenting shared human experiences across different historical moments. Although the exploration of literature set during or concerning pandemics had previously been undertaken, the term “pandemic literature” had only recently begun to emerge as a recognized category within literary scholarship. Despite this renewed focus, there remained an absence of a formal or universally accepted definition for the term within the field. In a recent volume of *Contemporary Literary Criticism* published by Gale, the section titled “Pandemic Literature- Responses to Pestilence in the Contemporary World” addressed this thematic domain. The introduction to this section observed that pandemic literature often engages with critical concerns such as historical reflection, acts of witnessing, and the function of testimony in narrative (483).

Pandemics impacted everyday life and caused significant disruption, even in regions that were unaffected or where mortality rates were relatively low. It is interesting that in almost every occurrence of plague, there are Quakers, false prophets, mock astrologers or preachers who invoke mass fear, panic, superstitions and misconceptions. In order to look at the condition of humanity in the face of abnormality, sickness and death, rather than the mortality bills, scientific observations, obituary, official reports or historical records, fictional narratives and stories offer both subjective and objective accounts. They allow firsthand experience that could be felt through the characters but also tend to distance themselves from reality on the basis of them being works of fiction. The *Decameron* (1353) by Renaissance humanist Giovanni Boccaccio is among the first works of pandemic fiction. It revolves around themes of solitude and storytelling as a way to pass the time while the protagonists flee to a deserted villa on the outskirts of Florence to escape the Black Death, a raging pandemic. *The Canterbury Tales* was written in the fourteenth century by Geoffrey Chaucer, one of the first authors of English literature. It contained a story called “The Pardoner’s Tale,” which not only takes place during the plague but also employs the disease as a metaphor for moral death. Boccaccio’s *The Decameron*, which addresses the physical, psychological, and spiritual impacts of the plague in Florence more directly, may have influenced the writing of *The Canterbury Tales* itself.

The significance of fiction and storytelling in representing the emotional and psychological dimensions of pandemics was affirmed by Françoise Davoine in *Pandemics, Wars, Traumas and Literature*. In the chapter titled “Writers, ‘Our Most Valuable Allies’ in Wars and Pandemics,” Davoine emphasized the critical contribution of creative writers in interpreting crisis. Referencing Freud’s notion of writers as *bundesgenossen* or “travelling companions,” he argued that the insights offered by fiction writers deserve close attention. These writers often possess a deeper understanding of the human psyche and emotional reality than conventional philosophical or scientific frameworks, drawing from intuitive and imaginative sources not yet fully accessed by empirical inquiry (50). The capacity of fictional narratives to illuminate the realities of pandemics derives from several functions.

Fiction allows readers to confront difficult truths, find emotional release, and receive guidance or caution through imagined scenarios. Stories provide comfort during uncertain times and reflect on the social, ethical, and political dimensions of crisis. Barbara Kingsolver underscored the empathetic power of fiction by contrasting it with impersonal media reporting. She explained that while news outlets may report large-scale loss of life as statistical facts, fiction narrows its focus to the experiences of individual characters. In doing so, it humanizes those affected, allowing readers to connect with their daily lives, emotions, and relationships. Kingsolver stated that fiction could lead readers to imagine the finality of a single life lost, recognizing its value as equal to their own (231).

In the effort to establish the literary significance of pandemic narratives, several influential texts and their authors have been positioned within a broader literary framework. In many of these works of fiction, the presence of disease remained in the background, subtly shaping the narrative without dominating it. In other cases, a central character contracted the illness, or the entire plot directly engaged with the experience of the pandemic. One of the most prominent early examples of such literature is *A Journal of the Plague Year* (1722) by the English writer Daniel Defoe. The novel presents a fictionalized account that takes the form of an eyewitness narrative, told by a character identified only as H.F., who claimed to have witnessed the 1665 outbreak of the bubonic plague in London. Through this character, Defoe constructed a detailed and immersive representation of the crisis, blending historical realism with narrative invention. The author opened with a poetic summation of the event-

A dreadful plague in London was
In the year sixty-five
Which swept hundred thousand souls
Away; yet I alive! (Defoe 315)

Before composing *A Journal of the Plague Year*, Defoe had written *Due Preparations for the Plague*, in which he defended the quarantine measures implemented by Sir Robert Walpole's government during the Marseilles outbreak.

As a journalist and pamphleteer for *Applebee's Original Weekly Journal*, he had originally supported strict governmental responses. Nevertheless, in the later work, he reversed stance and criticized the very measures she had previously endorsed. In *A Journal of the Plague Year*, Defoe was not using a historic setting to justify current state practices, but to ultimately question and often criticize it. His description documented the failings and fundamentally the inadequacies of the government's response to the plague, and especially the response of the government to try to control the disease's spread and maintain order. As Cravens observed, Defoe's work balanced factual and fictional modes of inquiry. He employed fiction as a means of encouraging public vigilance in the face of future epidemics and major catastrophes such as the Great Fire of London that followed shortly after. Cravens noted that Defoe did not simply seek to cultivate individual self-awareness but aimed to construct a hybrid narrative that combined historical documentation with critical reflection. In this way, fiction became a tool to advocate for the biopolitical betterment of society, particularly the protection and welfare of its most vulnerable members. Defoe, according to Cravens, used the novel to express a form of "objective scrutiny for all readers" by weaving researched content into imaginative form (58). *The Journal of the Plague Year* is frequently compared with the personal diary of Samuel Pepys, who also lived through the 1665 plague. Unlike Defoe, Pepys recorded the events in a more restrained and sometimes indifferent manner, often reducing references to the plague to brief entries or omitting them altogether. Defoe's account, by contrast, incorporated extensive research and aimed for specificity in both geography and experience. He referenced works such as Dr. Nathaniel Hodges's *Loimologia*, a seventeenth-century treatise on the London plague, and Richard Mead's *A Discourse on the Plague*. He also included mortality bills and public notices to enhance the authenticity of the account. Defoe demonstrated a meticulous commitment to detail, identifying affected neighborhoods, individual streets, and even particular houses. His attention to historical accuracy led many early readers and scholars to classify the text as nonfiction. This categorization remains contested. The distinction between history and fiction in Defoe's work has been a point of scholarly debate, complicated by the flexible boundaries of genre at the time. Although fiction is not bound to factual accuracy, Defoe's narrative strived for

realism through rigorous inquiry. His work represented an attempt to preserve the historical memory of the plague while also offering a cautionary tale. In doing so, he demonstrated how fiction could serve as a critical instrument for reflecting on state power, public response, and human suffering during times of crisis. In his interview with *The Paris Review*, Gabriel García Márquez remarked that a single falsehood could undermine an entire journalistic account, whereas one truth in fiction could validate the entire narrative. This insight pointed to the distinct standards by which truth and believability operate in different genres. Writers who embraced imaginative or fantastical elements in their work, including those who subverted conventional reality, continued to be acknowledged and respected within literary circles. One such example in the realm of pandemic literature is Márquez's *Love in the Time of Cholera* (1985). Often cited as a defining work of magical realism, the novel employed a background of plague both literally and metaphorically to convey the emotional and psychological state of its protagonist, Florentino Ariza, who experienced symptoms of illness akin to those of love-induced suffering.

The 1918 influenza pandemic, often referred to as “The Great Influenza” or “The Spanish Flu,” bore several resemblances to earlier pandemics that had affected global populations. At the same time, it possessed unique features that warrant close examination, particularly through the narratives and themes that emerged from both individual and collective experiences. As the most significant pandemic before the onset of COVID-19, the 1918 outbreak had a profound influence on numerous contemporary authors, including those whose works are analyzed in this thesis. A number of literary and scholarly texts have explored the events of 1918, frequently intersecting with the broader historical context of the First World War, which tended to overshadow the pandemic's consequences. In *The Great Influenza- The Story of the Deadliest Plague in History* (2004), John M. Barry described the pandemic not only in terms of destruction but also as a moment in which society was engaged in dual conflicts. He wrote that it was “a society fighting a war against nature superimposed on a war against another human society” (15). Barry noted the speed and intensity of the fatalities, observing that many people “died with extraordinary ferocity and speed,” which contributed to the alarming rise in the death toll during

the latter part of 1918. The period between September and December, particularly the month of October, recorded the highest mortality rates. He compared the scale of death with other major historical catastrophes, stating that “Influenza killed more people in a year than the Black Death of the Middle Ages killed in a century; it killed more people in twenty-four weeks than AIDS has killed in twenty-four years” (15).

The pandemic’s occurrence during wartime led to various complications, including misattributions regarding its origin. The term “Spanish Flu” became commonly used not because the disease began in Spain, but because Spain, being neutral during the war, did not enforce press censorship. In *Pale Rider- The Spanish Flu of 1918 and How It Changed the World* (2017), Laura Spinney explained that Spanish newspapers reported openly on the early outbreaks of the flu. She pointed out that, while other nations were experiencing the spread earlier, their press remained largely silent due to wartime restrictions. Consequently, when Spain’s uncensored reports became public, countries such as France, Britain, and the United States, under governmental influence, began referring to the outbreak as the “Spanish flu,” despite it having likely originated elsewhere (58). Alfred W. Crosby, in *America’s Forgotten Pandemic- The Influenza of 1918* (2003), emphasized the paradox that, despite its staggering death toll, the 1918 pandemic did not evoke widespread cultural or historical recognition. He wrote, “The important and almost incomprehensible fact about Spanish influenza is that it killed millions upon millions of people in a year or less. Nothing else, no infection, no war, no famine, has ever killed so many in as short a period” (329). He observed that this absence of lasting impact in public consciousness could not be explained by a lack of data or documentation. The devastation was recorded in extensive statistical archives across nations that were not in states of collapse. Nevertheless, the event failed to generate the level of awe or memorialization typically associated with other historical disasters.

For many decades, the pandemic remained largely absent from mainstream discourse. Few contemporary literary or historical texts addressed it, and much of the memory surrounding it persisted only within private or familial accounts. This lack

of representation contrasted sharply with other major twentieth-century events such as the Great Depression, global conflicts, or acts of terrorism, all of which produced significant cultural and commemorative responses. In the case of the influenza pandemic, survivors rarely formed public communities or produced widespread memoirs. Instead, there seemed to be an effort to suppress or forget the trauma associated with the event. This may be attributed to the ordinary nature of death by disease, which often escapes the kind of symbolic resonance that warfare or political crises generate. As Lawrence Wright noted in *The End of October* (2020), historians consistently observed the silence of survivors. “You could almost believe that it hadn’t happened,” he remarked, “except for the gravestones with similar dates. We lived through it- that was the attitude” (406). This collective amnesia underlined the difficulty in translating biological catastrophe into narrative form and contributed to the marginalization of the 1918 pandemic in cultural memory for much of the twentieth century. Barry, remarked that the 1918 pandemic had endured more vividly in personal memory than in literature. However, he also noted the fragility of memory, cautioning that recollections tied to personal experience are inevitably lost with the passing of those who lived through the event. He reflected that memory now persists in second-hand forms, stories passed down through families. These include accounts of relatives who were orphaned, or of rare moments of emotional vulnerability, such as a parent moved to tears.

In recent years, particularly with the advent of the twenty-first century, scholars and writers have attempted to reengage with the legacy of the 1918 pandemic through renewed literary and historical inquiry. One such effort is Ryan A. Davis’s *The Spanish Flu- Narrative and Cultural Identity in Spain, 1918* (2013), which sought to explore how narrative played a role in shaping the collective Spanish experience of the epidemic. Davis observed a noticeable absence of fiction devoted specifically to the influenza pandemic and emphasized the vital function of language, metaphor, and storytelling in influencing not only thought but also behavior. He asserted, “In all our preparations for the coming pandemic, then, we would be wise not to give short shrift to metaphor and language, and the way they shape not just our thinking, but also our actions. Perhaps then we would pay more attention to the

stories we tell and the consequences that follow” (178). Davis argued that one of the most important lessons of the 1918 pandemic lies in recognizing the influence of narrative and symbolic expression in public and private responses to crisis. Alfred W. Crosby, in *America’s Forgotten Pandemic- The Influenza of 1918* (2003), expressed his surprise at the absence of the pandemic in the fiction of major writers who lived through the event. He observed that prominent literary figures of the early twentieth century, including Gertrude Stein, F. Scott Fitzgerald, William Faulkner, and Ernest Hemingway, appeared to have excluded the influenza from their creative works, despite the fact that the pandemic had personally affected their lives. For instance, Fitzgerald’s experience with the pandemic delayed his entry into World War I, and his adviser died of pneumonia in early 1919. Nevertheless, Crosby pointed out, “the pandemic plays no role of significance in *This Side of Paradise* or elsewhere in his fiction. Fitzgerald, who felt himself the chronicler of his age, left out something that killed a half million of his fellow citizens in a half year” (340). Addressing the broader absence of literary representation, Crosby acknowledged that a few writers did choose to write about the pandemic. However, he argued that this recognition came not by choice but by necessity. In his view, those authors “had no choice but to grant the pandemic due recognition because it struck too close to their hearts ever to be forgotten” (341).

An important perspective on the connection between the 1918 influenza pandemic and war literature is offered by Elizabeth Outka in *Viral Modernism- The Influenza Pandemic and Interwar Literature* (2019). Citing the works of authors such as Katherine Anne Porter (*Pale Horse, Pale Rider*), Thomas Wolfe (*Look Homeward, Angel*), and William Maxwell (*They Came Like Swallows*), she observed that these texts not only address the pandemic directly but also reflect the subtle and gradual intrusion of the virus into the narrative, along with the complex reasons for the silence that surrounded its outbreak and transmission. She noted that many of these works were only written in the late 1920s and 1930s, suggesting that more explicit references to the pandemic emerged only after some temporal distance had passed. Outka wrote that, as the immediate danger of the pandemic faded and the fear of its return diminished, writers appeared more willing to confront it. They

began to represent its devastation more openly, reflect on its significance, and examine its lasting psychological and societal effects. She explained, “Starting with the clearest, most obvious representations of the flu in the interwar era allows us to uncover, in the subsequent sections, the more coded references to the pandemic in works produced in the outbreak’s more immediate aftermath” (4).

Katherine Anne Porter, who survived the influenza pandemic herself, wrote *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* (1939) in part to reckon with the trauma she had endured. The protagonist, Miranda, whose experiences closely resembled Porter’s own, became the vessel through which the author expressed the effects of illness, both physical and emotional. The narrative showed how even healthy, young adults were quickly overcome by the virus, and how its effects disrupted everyday life, halting both personal and professional routines. After regaining consciousness in a hospital, Miranda remarked on the stark change in her perception, saying, “Sitting in a long chair, near a window, it was in itself a melancholy wonder to see the colourless sunlight slanting on the snow, under a sky drained of its blue” (47). Through Miranda, Porter communicated the disorientation and sensory dullness that accompanied survival. Beyond the struggle of daily life, Porter’s story explored the emotional burden left on the living. She emphasized that death, while final for those who perish, remains an ongoing reality for those who survive. The dead cannot reflect on their own passing, but the living must bear the responsibility of remembrance. In one scene, Miranda and her partner Adam sang the song “Pale Horse, Pale Rider,” a traditional spiritual that recounted the loss of loved ones verse by verse, first the mother, then the father, and eventually the entire family. Miranda commented, “But not the singer, not yet,” and reflected, “Death always leaves one singer to mourn” (150). This moment emphasised the survivor’s role in bearing witness and preserving memory, distinguishing those left behind as carriers of the emotional and historical weight of loss. Cathy Caruth, in *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996), described trauma as a rupture in the continuity of consciousness. She characterized it as “a wound of the mind, the breach in the mind’s experience of time, self, and the world that is not, like a wound of the body, a simple and healable event, but rather an event that... is experienced too soon,

too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor” (4). This aligns with the experience depicted in Porter’s story, where Miranda’s illness and recovery are interwoven with moments of disorientation, dreams, and a deferred reckoning with the trauma she endured. Sigmund Freud also addressed this phenomenon in his studies on traumatic neuroses. He observed that dreams linked to trauma often returned the patient to the original scene of the traumatic event rather than transporting them to memories of healthier or safer times. He noted, “Dreams occurring in traumatic neuroses have the characteristic of repeatedly bringing the patient back into the situation of his accident rather than, for example, show[ing] the patient pictures from his healthy past” (Freud 282). This repetition signals the unresolved nature of trauma and the difficulty in assimilating such experiences into coherent memory or narrative. The pandemic not only left an imprint on collective life, shaping societies and national histories, but also marked individuals in deeply personal ways. Katherine Anne Porter once stated that the experience “just simply divided my life, cut across it like that,” a sentiment that, as noted by Lodwick and George in their interview (1990), resonated with many others who lived through that era (10). Her testimony captured the way pandemics fracture personal timelines and permanently alter the trajectory of those who survive them.

William Maxwell’s semi-autobiographical novel *They Came Like Swallows* (1937) offered a poignant narrative of a pandemic-related death, portrayed from the varying perspectives of the surviving family members. These differing viewpoints illuminated the emotional and structural collapse within a household affected by the influenza outbreak. Maxwell appeared to draw significantly from his own painful experience during the 1918 pandemic, when his entire family fell ill. In *October Mourning- A Novel of the 1918 Spanish Flu Pandemic* (2006), James Rada Jr. captured the magnitude of loss experienced across parts of the United States, particularly during October, which marked the peak of the pandemic’s death toll. The novel is set in Cumberland, Maryland, and follows Dr. Alan Keener, a young physician who suspects the arrival of influenza in Allegany County after treating a woman named Sarah exhibiting symptoms. Another central figure, Kolas, a street

preacher suffering from delusions, believed he had been chosen to spread the flu as divine punishment. This character served as a literary representation of the kinds of false prophets and pseudoscientific figures who commonly emerged during outbreaks, heightening public fear and misunderstanding. Susan Meissner's *As Bright as Heaven* (2018), set in Philadelphia during the 1918 pandemic, portrayed a family's transformation through grief and love. Similarly, Emma Donoghue's *The Pull of the Stars* (2020) situated its narrative in Ireland during the same period, focusing on the experience of women working in maternity wards during the outbreak. Ellen Marie Wiseman's novel *The Orphan Collector* (2020), also set in 1918, emphasized the act of remembering what she called the "Year of the Forgotten Death." The novel served as both a commemoration and a reflective lens on contemporary experiences. Its use of fiction grounded in historical research highlighted how literary texts can offer reliable, well-researched representations of the social and emotional realities of past pandemics, particularly through their capacity to document overlooked truths.

A central tragedy of the 1918 pandemic lay in its invisibility and pervasiveness. The threat appeared everywhere, yet often remained unacknowledged, leaving individuals fearful of both the environment and one another. This sense of persistent dread found expression in W. B. Yeats's *The Second Coming* (1920), a poem shaped by multiple historical crises including war, political unrest, and revolution. Yeats also had a personal connection to the pandemic. His pregnant wife contracted the virus and nearly died, and this trauma infused the poem's language with haunting imagery. Descriptions such as "mere anarchy" and "the blood-dimmed tide" echoed a fear of unknowable and uncontrollable forces. Yeats's poem captured a deeply personal anxiety that mirrored broader collective fears, thus transforming individual experience into shared cultural expression. T. S. Eliot, another major literary figure of the period, also fell ill with influenza. The illness, along with concern for his family and the impact on his mental health, profoundly shaped his vision of modernity. *The Waste Land* (1922) reflected these anxieties, portraying a fragmented, disordered world in which meaning was elusive and despair pervasive. Virginia Woolf, who authored *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), similarly confronted the

perceptual and psychological dislocations brought about by illness and trauma. Outka argued that the atmospheric dread, bodily vulnerability, and disoriented perception found in works by Woolf, Eliot, and Yeats stemmed directly from the pandemic. She suggested that hallmarks of modernist form, such as open-ended narrative structures, ambiguous characters, and extended syntax, proved well suited to capturing the pandemic's elusive presence. Outka wrote, "Modernism helped fuel the pandemic's erasure, instantiating the gaps and the silences even as it represented them. The authors were, at times, complicit in this erasure, their works revealing the ways that even a lethal mass illness may be present everywhere yet hard to see clearly, especially when bodies are caught in its grip" (4). Close readings of these texts reveal how trauma at both personal and societal levels became deeply intertwined, often shifting between the psychological effects of war and those caused by disease. Outka observed that literary readers and critics have been trained to recognize war-related trauma in modernist literature while overlooking the marks left by the pandemic. She noted, "We are trained in modernism to see the trauma of war but not the trauma of the pandemic" (4). As a result, much of the literature from this period has been interpreted through the lens of warfare, relegating the pandemic to a marginal or incidental role. She further pointed to the gendered assumptions behind this hierarchy, with war associated with masculine heroism on the battlefield, while illness and domestic suffering were deemed private or feminine concerns. Even the soldiers who died of influenza during wartime were often remembered as combat fatalities, obscuring the true cause of their deaths. She also emphasized that the virus complicated more than the consequences of war. It operated in a decentralized and unpredictable manner. During the 1918 pandemic, both men and women faced life-threatening conditions, and the home became just as dangerous as the battlefield. The enemy was no longer a visible or nationalized figure, but a silent, indiscriminate force capable of turning the body itself into a site of attack. Unlike war, which often invites political and moral debate, the pandemic offered no such framework for grief. Outka wrote, "The virus was both indiscriminant and delocalized, changing both targets and locations" (7).

She added that while war often prompted collective action and memorialization, the anguish of the pandemic “went underground” because it lacked clear narratives of heroism or resolution. To counter this erasure, Outka proposed that readers must learn to recognize the hidden symptoms of the pandemic in literature. She encouraged a method of reading that could uncover traces of the virus’s presence within texts and cultural memory. Through this approach, readers might identify the fragmented, ghostlike impressions left behind by the pandemic and more fully understand how they continue to inform both literary form and historical understanding (7).

Another genre that has frequently incorporated pandemic themes is apocalyptic or dystopian fiction. A foundational text in this tradition is Mary Shelley’s *The Last Man* (1826), which is often categorized under apocalyptic and science fiction. Shelley’s narrative projected a vision of the future, spanning from 2073 to 2100, in which a global pandemic overran the earth. Her character described the scale of devastation, observing that no part of the world offered refuge from the disease. “I spread the whole earth out as a map before me. On no one spot of its surface could I put my finger and say, here is safety” (204). She also noted the breakdown of societal norms, writing that “As the rules of order and pressure of laws were lost, some began with hesitation and wonder to transgress the accustomed uses of society” (250). These passages reflected Shelley’s concern with institutional collapse and the fragility of social order when confronted with widespread catastrophe. At the same time, the text suggested that disparities in power and class often exacerbated injustice during such crises. Jack London’s *The Scarlet Plague* (1912) offered another significant contribution to post-apocalyptic literature. His story examined the fear and desperation that emerged when society was faced with the threat of extinction. The protagonist, James Smith, attempted to flee the spreading contagion with his companions, yet ultimately found himself the sole survivor. The narrative followed his recollections as he became one of the last living individuals with knowledge of the world before the plague. London emphasized the democratic nature of disease, observing that it spared no one, regardless of identity or social status. “And after all, what did it matter? Everybody died anyway, the good

and the bad, the efficient and the weaklings, those that loved to live and those that scorned to live. They passed. Everything passed” (London 98). His novella also reflected upon the innate human need for community and communication, underscoring the importance of social connection even in the face of devastation. It was not unexpected that fictional narratives frequently intersected with the representation of catastrophes. In the years leading up to the COVID-19 pandemic, disaster fiction had already become an established genre, with numerous titles exploring scenarios of collapse and survival. Although many of these works did not aim for realism and instead employed highly stylized or speculative elements, their content often resonated deeply with readers during times of real-world crisis. The settings, imagery, and emotional tone of these stories acquired new relevance, revealing the enduring power of fictional narratives to engage with shared human fears and hopes. Despite their often-grim premises, these texts did not necessarily promote despair. Many of them centered on perseverance and the human capacity to endure. At their core, they remained stories about survival. In the aftermath of global health emergencies, societies frequently return to cultural texts that have speculated on or warned about the devastating effects of mass outbreaks. Fictional representations of contagion not only mirror the evolution of scientific understanding but also embody the fluctuating emotional, psychological, and social responses to disease. Canonical works such as Michael Crichton’s *The Andromeda Strain* (1969), which narrates the arrival of an extraterrestrial micro-organism; Stephen King’s *The Stand* (1978), a post-apocalyptic epic centered on a deadly flu-like virus; and José Saramago’s *Blindness* (1995), an allegorical tale of mass visual impairment, have experienced renewed engagement in the light of recent global experiences. These texts resonate strongly in a contemporary context in which the lived experience of a pandemic has become universal.

The twenty-first century witnessed a surge in literary engagement with pandemic motifs well before the global outbreak of COVID-19, reflecting growing anxieties around viral contagion, systemic fragility, and civilizational collapse. Octavia Butler’s *Parable of the Sower* (1993) predicted an eventual environmental breakdown and social chaos in sometimes bleak detail, while Max Brooks’s *World*

War Z (2006) collected oral histories of a global zombie pandemic. Justin Cronin's *The Passage* (2010) and John Scalzi's *Lock In* (2014) depicted pandemics created by science and its technological experimentation, while M.R. Carey's *The Girl with All the Gifts* (2014) reflected on the post-human. Emily St. John Mandel's *Station Eleven* (2014) and later, *Sea of Tranquility* (2022) discussed art, memory, and survival through temporal pandemics. Ben H. Winters's *The Last Policeman* (2012), and Peter Heller's *The Dog Stars* (2012), emphasized the emotional and affective aftermath, and the social disintegration of disaster, during creeping catastrophe. Together, they established a pandemic canon creating a new form of contemporary science fiction, and speculative realism that blurred the line between contemporary science fiction and realistic speculation. *Pandemic* (2018) by Robin Cook, *The Book of M* (2018) by Peng Shepherd, *Severance* (2018) by Ling Ma, and Yōko Tawada's *The Last Children of Tokyo* (2018), all subsequently expanded narrative frameworks surrounding pandemic fiction and included critiques of surveillance, capitalism, memory, and genetic mutation. Responses that were gendered and artistic emerged in *Wilder Girls* (2019) by Rory Power, and *A Song for a New Day* (2019) by Sarah Pinsker. Chuck Wendig's *Wanderers* (2019) blended a speculative narrative of mass sleepwalking and social breakdown with Karen Thompson Walker's *The Dreamers* (2019) which made sense of collective unconsciousness.

As COVID-19 reshaped reality, literary responses grew more intimate, introspective, and testimonial. Paul Tremblay's *Survivor Song* (2020) evoked the social collapse induced by a rabies-like contagion. Rumaan Alam's *Leave the World Behind* (2020) and Mike Chen's *A Beginning at the End* (2020) dramatized family dynamics and societal tension in lockdown. Medical and political thrillers like *The Pandemic Plot* (2022) by Scott Mariani and *The Retreat* (2023) by Louis Saunders captured conspiracy and post-pandemic fragility, while J.M. Creek's *2064: The Great Pandemic* (2023) imagined future outbreaks. These works documented how pandemic literature moved from speculative futures to immediate, lived crises. Equally significant are works that critique systemic inequalities and reframe vulnerability as a function of power. Giorgio Agamben's concept of bare life, the reduction of individuals to biological existence under sovereign power illuminates

how institutional responses to the pandemic rendered certain populations disposable. In *Homo Sacer*, Agamben cautions against the normalization of the state of exception, which renders human life subject to sovereign abandonment (Agamben 83). Achille Mbembe extends this logic in *Necropolitics*, arguing that modern regimes manage populations through their capacity to orchestrate death rather than preserve life, determining “who may live and who must die” (Mbembe 11). These theories resonate with global health failures where systemic racism, institutional neglect, and stigmatizing discourses shaped outcomes. The omission of racial and ethnic data in early pandemic tracking, as seen in the disproportionate deaths of ethnic minority doctors in the UK and Black-majority counties in the U.S., resonates upon biopolitical governance selectively manages risk and protection (Khunti et al.). These omissions expose what Davis refers to as “deliberate negligence,” a structural failure resulting from capitalist and geopolitical priorities. In *The Monster at Our Door* (2005), Mike Davis presciently warns that unregulated agribusiness, public health disinvestment, and Western hubris would culminate in catastrophic viral emergence. He asserts, “The infrastructure of public health, rather than being strengthened, has been intentionally starved and dismantled” (Davis 142). His critique underscores that pandemics are not aberrations but systemic inevitabilities.

Fiction writing became increasingly akin to testimony, and it was through hybrid forms that authors sought to document the moral, emotional, and ecological realities of the pandemic. Zadie Smith’s *Intimations* (2020) and Mark O’Connell’s *Notes from an Apocalypse* (2020) provided philosophical musings on mortality, anxiety, and privilege. Rachel Clarke’s *Breathtaking* (2021) and Tony Scott’s *Along Came COVID* (2021) represented the frontlines, and the psychic toll on health care providers. Other titles like Deborah Levy’s *Real Estate* (2021), Clare Pollard’s *Delphi* (2022), and Carley Moore’s *Panpocalypse* (2022) emphasized psychic fragmentation, gendered isolation, and bodily grief. Pandemic literature has also entered the territory of graphical storytelling. *COVID Chronicles* (2021), *Outside, Inside* (2021), and *Keeping the City Going* (2021) all documented resilience, loss, and essential labor in the visual mode of storytelling. In recent years, literature has begun to negotiate already the psychic and planetary consequences of contagion.

Isabel Allende's *Violeta* (2022), Daisy Hildyard's *Emergency* (2022), and Oana Aristide's *Under the Blue* (2021) embedded their pandemic narratives within ecological collapse and artificial intelligence dystopia. John Green's *Everything Is Tuberculosis* (2025) reimagines global health literature through memoir and moral reflection. His work reminds us, "when we know about suffering, when we are proximal to it, we are capable of extraordinary generosity..." (Green 2025). Green's fusion of science, testimony, and ethics calls for proximity-based compassion, expanding pandemic literature to include *ongoing* global crises like TB and their representational absences. Together, these texts affirm that pandemic literature is more than a genre. It is an archive of collective trauma, moral critique, and cultural memory. By articulating biopolitical abandonment, systemic racism, ecological precarity, and the search for meaning amid chaos, this evolving body of work becomes an essential lens for reading both historical and emerging crises.

The COVID-19 pandemic has not only reshaped societies but also catalyzed the emergence of a distinct literary subgenre now referred to as "lockdown literature." Defined by its intimate engagement with isolation, altered domestic spaces, and sociopolitical upheaval, this subgenre reflects the psychological and cultural ruptures precipitated by the global crisis. A key observation arising from pandemic-era discourse is that, for many, the fear of confinement and imposed constraint exceeded the fear of contagion itself. As Susan Sontag argues, the threat of infection generates two opposing forms of anxiety, "on one hand, a libertarian individualism that rejects lockdown mandates and celebrates newfound freedoms in the absence of structure; on the other, a deep existential dread of infection that stigmatizes, silences, and isolates those afflicted" (Songtag). Public and digital spheres became sites for the negotiation of meaning, as people collectively authored and circulated narratives to structure the disorder of pandemic life. While some gravitated toward conspiracy theories, others shared introspective accounts that chronicled the transformation of identity, intimacy, and community. Michael A. Peters has observed the symbolic and spatial consequences of lockdowns through evocative imagery, deserted cities, abandoned markets, silent churches, and closed classrooms, as emblematic of what he terms "the disappearance of human agency" in

urban life (Peters). This portrayal echoes Michel Foucault's conception of "plague towns," where public health interventions in the Middle Ages relied on strict spatial segmentation, revealing the bio-political logics that continue to shape our present. As Peters notes, "not much has changed," pointing to the continuity of these spatial strategies in contemporary pandemic governance.

Storytelling assumed a central role during lockdown, as individuals oscillated between being creators and consumers of narrative. This dynamic convergence blurred traditional boundaries and showcased the interpretive function of storytelling in coping with trauma. According to Kristopher Lovell, "To understand lockdown, one must prioritise (if not necessarily centre) storytelling within their interpretive framework" (404). He emphasizes that to neglect narrative is to overlook how individuals attempted to reclaim agency through stories, stories consumed for escape and those created to assert control over chaotic lived realities. Literary responses to lockdown during pandemics range from speculative and crime fiction to realist domestic narratives, offering a spectrum of interpretive frameworks. Sarah Moss's *The Fell* (2022), written during a bleak winter lockdown, captures the psychological toll of confinement through characters increasingly destabilized by isolation. Catherine Ryan Howard's *56 Days* (2021) employs lockdown as the backdrop for a crime narrative, while Ann Patchett's *Tom Lake* (2023) explores interpersonal relationships constrained by pandemic protocols. These texts echo an underlying truth- for many, the home, often idealized as a refuge, became a site of psychological strain, food insecurity, or domestic violence. In *Record COVID-19: Historicizing Experiences of the Pandemic* (2023), Lovell curates a collection of anonymous testimonies meant to serve as a "future resource" for scholars and citizens alike, an effort inspired by Angus Calder's work on postwar mythologies. As Lovell notes, "Grand narratives started to overshadow some of the smaller narratives," cautioning against the historical tendency to subsume individual trauma into national myth (402). In India, pandemic literature took on both personal and communal dimensions. *Lockdown Literature from Mizoram* (2020), edited by Margaret L. Pachuau, presents a multilingual anthology of poetry and prose capturing themes of fear, fatigue, death, and community organization. It documents not only emotional experiences but also

local practices such as community task forces and funeral rites, illustrating how global experiences were interpreted through culturally specific frameworks. Udayan Mukherjee's *Essential Items- And Other Stories from a Land in Lockdown* (2020) offers brief but poignant reflections on human fragility, while Shobhaa De's *Lockdown Liaisons* (2020) gives voice to diverse experiences of love, estrangement, and vulnerability. Namita Gokhale's *The Blind Matriarch* (2021) depicts a multi-generational household navigating the uncertainty and grief of India's pandemic experience, described as "a clear-eyed chronicle of the tragedies of India's encounter with the Coronavirus." Amitava Kumar's *A Time Outside This Time* (2021) draws a metatextual parallel between the concept of the novel and the novel coronavirus, interrogating the flood of information and misinformation in the pandemic era. Nonfiction and visual media also contributed significantly to the emerging pandemic archive. Vinod Kapri's documentary *1232 km- The Long Journey Home* (2021) chronicles the plight of migrant laborers forced to undertake perilous journeys during lockdown, described as the most significant internal migration since Indian independence. In *Jamlo Walks* (2021), Samina Mishra and illustrator Tarique Aziz narrate the tragic story of Jamlo Makdan, a 12-year-old girl who died while walking home during the exodus of displaced laborers. These narratives reaffirm the urgency of documenting marginalized experiences and resisting the erasure of inconvenient histories.

Gabino Iglesias shares his ideas in "Are We Ready for COVID-19 as a Central Theme in Literature?" where he states that we typically steer clear of things that make us uncomfortable, and there's a chance that some readers will view pandemic literature as precisely that. The stories explored so far demonstrate that the pandemic can serve as a starting point for narratives. Writing about it can act as a therapeutic means to process trauma and understand its psychological effects. This body of work contributes to a growing collection of literature that offers insights for navigating the recent past, present, and near future. Not only has the pandemic forced significant changes in daily living, but it has also caused challenges for academics working in this new and uncharted territory. The increasing attention being paid to publications by respectable publishers that discuss the pandemic is indicative of this

trend. Fiction and nonfiction on the pandemic started to appear in our libraries and bookshops and have since become increasingly prevalent. The increasing demand for publications has demonstrated the enduring nature of pandemic as a literary theme. The common objective upon their debut in literature is to aid readers in comprehending the psychology of the pandemic as it pertains to interpersonal relationships, grief, and coping with one another. Some of them are written aiming to comprehend the pandemic within a political, social, and cultural framework. It is hoped that these literary works offer an insight into the multitude of experiences that comprised the pandemic and one that can be used to represent humanity, a moment of living history, collective memory and individual stories, experiences from the particular to the universal, even though it is nearly impossible to archive all of the works that are currently shelved or categorised to represent pandemic experiences.

An examination of the historical trajectory of pandemic literature reveals striking parallels across diverse epochs, despite the temporal and cultural distances that separate these works. The recurring motifs and thematic preoccupations observed in pandemic narratives spanning different eras communicate a remarkable continuity in human responses towards widespread disease outbreaks. These commonalities are manifested in various aspects of the narratives, including societal reactions, psychological impacts, and attempts to grapple with the existential challenges posed by pandemics. These literatures consistently reflect a range of human responses to pandemics, including fear, apprehension, and the collective struggle to contain the spread of disease. Notably, there is a persistent theme of attributing blame, often resulting in the stigmatization of particular groups as vectors of contagion. This scapegoating mechanism appears to be a recurrent social phenomenon during times of widespread illness, as evidenced in both historical and contemporary pandemic narratives. Another significant parallel observed across pandemic literature is the dichotomous approach to memory and record-keeping. On one hand, there is a discernible tendency to attempt erasure or suppression of the traumatic experiences associated with pandemics. Conversely, there is also a compulsion to document and preserve these experiences, perhaps as a means of processing collective trauma or as a cautionary tale for future generations.

To frame the current inquiry, four contemporary novels- *Songs for the End of the World* by Saleema Nawaz, *The End of October* by Lawrence Wright, *The Orphan Collector* by Ellen Marie Wiseman, and *Homebound* by Puja Changoiwala, written or published in the context of the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, either immediately before, during its onset or after are selected for study. The primary texts selected for this study demonstrate a remarkable affinity with the broader canon of pandemic literature. These works seamlessly integrate into the existing corpus, whether they are categorized as speculative fiction, historical narratives, or as part of the emerging subgenre of “pandemic literature.” Despite their contemporary origins, these texts have engaged with timeless themes and narrative structures that have characterized pandemic literature throughout its history. They served as compelling examples of how modern authors continue to grapple with the perennial questions and societal issues that arise during times of widespread disease outbreaks. The inclusion of these works is justified by their narrative complexity, thematic depth, and the ways in which they both draw from and contribute to the evolving discourse of pandemic literature.

This thesis will undertake a critical exploration of pandemic narratives by situating a selection of contemporary literary texts within a wider tradition of literary responses to infectious disease. Through an interdisciplinary lens that draws from cultural studies, power theory, trauma theory, and reception theory, it aims to examine the dynamics of reading and writing pandemic experiences in literature. Nawaz’s *Songs for the End of the World* depicted the outbreak of a fictional virus, ARAMIS, through interlinked character narratives. It focused on the psychological and ethical dilemmas faced by individuals and communities during times of collective uncertainty. The novel addressed global conspiracies, systemic collapse, social inequities, and racism, while also highlighting the importance of empathy and relational support. The text’s engagement with frontline labor, racial scapegoating, and technological mediation positioned it within a distinctly contemporary landscape of pandemic representation. Lawrence Wright’s *The End of October* provided a speculative account grounded in scientific realism, informed by historical parallels to the 1918 influenza pandemic. The novel centered around Dr. Henry Parsons, an

epidemiologist tasked with investigating the emergence of a deadly virus, Kongoli. Wright's narrative critiqued institutional denial, xenophobia, and biopolitical manipulation, while reflecting on the geopolitical tensions exacerbated by health crises. The novel demonstrated how global pandemics serve as instruments for both national paranoia and ideological contestation, thus foregrounding literature's role in dissecting the ideological uses of disease. Wiseman's *The Orphan Collector* reimaged the 1918 influenza outbreak through the eyes of a young German immigrant girl in Philadelphia. The novel addressed xenophobic scapegoating, economic hardship, and the erasure of immigrant experiences. By centering the narrative on a child's struggle for survival and justice, the story highlighted the racialized dimensions of historical pandemic memory. The text also paralleled contemporary concerns by invoking mass grief, social isolation, and ethical lapses in public care systems. Changoiwala's *Homebound* focused on the COVID-19 pandemic through the lens of subaltern experience. Depicting the migration of a working-class family from Dharavi to rural Rajasthan, the novel chronicled the socio-economic rupture caused by lockdown measures. Through the voice of Meher, a young girl aspiring to become a journalist, the novel brought to light the human toll of displacement, hunger, and political neglect. Drawing on interviews with real migrant workers, the narrative emphasized the moral imperative to remember and represent those rendered invisible by state narratives and media coverage.

The texts selected for this study offered a diverse range of perspectives, from frontline workers and scientists to children and displaced migrants, demonstrating how pandemic literature encompasses both macro-level sociopolitical critique and micro-level emotional testimony. The inclusion of varied national and cultural contexts, as seen in American, Indonesian, Chinese, Arabs, English and Indian narratives, further emphasized the global reach and differentiated impact of pandemics. Each text illuminated the asymmetrical effects of disease on different social strata, highlighting how pandemics exacerbate existing inequalities along racial, economic, and cultural lines. By examining these novels through multiple critical frameworks, this study aims to unpack the complex mechanisms through which literature processes and refracts pandemic trauma. These include the

invocation of memory, the negotiation of ethical responsibility, the representation of marginalized voices, and the contestation of power structures. The selected texts functioned as cultural documents that not only narrated the lived realities of pandemics but also challenged dominant narratives of heroism, nationalism, and scientific certainty.

In framing this thesis within a literary-historical trajectory, this introductory chapter has emphasized the importance of pandemic literature as a vital cultural and ethical discourse. The genre's long-standing tradition of engaging with illness, fear, and survival, alongside its adaptability to contemporary forms and crises, attested to its enduring relevance. This historical context has allowed for a deeper understanding of how contemporary pandemic novels inherit, modify, and innovate upon narrative conventions established in earlier works. In the chapters that follow, the selected primary texts will undergo rigorous analysis from multiple critical perspectives. Each will be explored in terms of its cultural backdrop, authorial intent, reception, and narrative structure, with particular focus on how the act of writing and reading pandemic experiences serves as a mode of witnessing, resistance, and communal meaning-making. Ultimately, this study argues that pandemic literature not only documents crises but actively shapes public memory, ethical imagination, and literary expression in times of unprecedented global disruption.

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Chapter II- Navigating Discourses and Responses within the Pandemic

This chapter will focus on analyzing the primary texts and situate them within the context of relevant theoretical frameworks from a range of prominent theorists. By considering these dynamics, more informed and compassionate approaches can be developed to address the challenges confronting communities and individuals, aiming toward a more equitable and inclusive society. The chapter aims to deliver a nuanced understanding of the complex interactions between governance, societal response, and individual autonomy during pandemics. Pandemics have triggered worldwide health catastrophes and ignited significant discourses surrounding responses to issues related to the outbreak. These discourses, which are marked by differing perspectives and interpretations, provide insight into the intricacies of human responses to emergency scenarios. This chapter explores the multifaceted discussions surrounding the pandemic, examining various viewpoints and their ramifications. It seeks to analyse and assess the multitude of responses observed throughout pandemics, while emphasising upon their consequences and root causes. When pandemics happened, they elicited several responses from individuals, societies, and governments. The range of responses, from strict lockdowns to resistance to public health measures, demonstrates the complex nature of human behaviour during crises. The responses observed highlight the relationship between governmental policies, society behaviours, and global dynamics. It has also turned into fodder for political discourse, as governments try to combine public health priorities with socio-economic concerns. Political narratives influence governmental decisions, such as implementing lockdowns, mask mandates, vaccination drives, and economic stimulus packages. Furthermore, the politicisation of public health policies has worsened societal differences, as shown by rallies against limitations and conspiracy theories eroding faith in governmental institutions. Pandemics have also exposed deep-seated socio-cultural divisions, highlighting inequalities in healthcare availability, financial stability, and community unity. Socio-cultural discourse involved conversations on structural disparities, community strength, and togetherness during challenging times. It is observed that marginalised communities such as ethnic minorities, low-income workers, and undocumented migrants experience a higher impact in terms of infection rates, healthcare outcomes, and socio-economic disruptions. On the other hand, it has also encouraged altruistic

behaviour, mutual assistance, and grassroots action, which have strengthened solidarity and resilience in communities. Narratives promoting shared accountability, compassion, and fairness have surfaced, pushing back against long-standing disparities and promoting structural changes after the pandemic.

When a disease outbreak occurs, factors such as denial, concealment, unpreparedness, and conspiracy theories usually unfold. Using a representative set of texts, it will be possible to examine how effectively and what consequences can be derived from the circulation of power, fear, and conspiracies during a pandemic. In addition, the analysis will reveal how much authority and autonomy is exercised, as well as how freedom is abused at the individual and higher levels. Vlad Alalykin-Izvekov traced how the phenomenon of calamity is one of the most potent driving forces behind the turbulent and eventful trajectory of humanity's story. He mentioned how calamity has played, is playing, and will continue to play a significant role in "the evolution (and revolutions) of the history and culture" of the entire world. The human mind, behaviour, social structure, and cultural life are all significantly impacted by catastrophes. They rarely showed up alone, frequently setting the other off and amplifying the effects of the other. In her work *Contagious: Cultures, Carriers, and the Outbreak Narrative*, published in 2008 Priscilla Wald asserted that pandemics invariably depend on shared fears, difficulties, and experiences in addition to shared microbes. She pointed out that the word "contagion" literally means "to touch together," suggesting that the experience of a communicable disease outbreak can evoke a profound sense of social interaction and community-building. Based on her readings of classic works by authors such as Boccaccio, Defoe, and Mary Shelley, Wald argued that the experience of an epidemic "could evoke a profound sense of social interaction- communicability configuring community" (12). This perspective highlights how pandemics, despite their capacity to divide and isolate populations, can also serve as a unifying force, shaping shared narratives, fostering solidarity, and redefining the boundaries of social belonging. Wald's introduction established the foundation for understanding pandemics not merely as biomedical phenomena, but as complex social, cultural, and political events that reveal the interdependence of individual and collective

experiences. This conceptual framework enables a critical analysis of pandemic discourse through the lens of several thinkers for instance, Foucault's biopolitics explains how states regulate life and normalize control, Arendt highlights the reconfiguration of authority in times of crisis and Agamben's notion of the state of exception reveals how rights are suspended under emergency rule. Priscilla Wald's work highlights the role of narrative in shaping collective identity and exclusion during outbreaks. Expanding this perspective, Max Weber's theory of bureaucratic authority offers insight into how institutional control is framed as neutral expertise. Judith Butler's focus on precarity reveals the uneven distribution of risk and care, particularly among marginalized groups. Patrick Brown contributes a contemporary view on how trust and epistemic authority shape public responses to medical uncertainty. Collectively, these theorists illuminate how pandemics are as much political and ethical events as they are biological ones.

People were being born and people were dying, and joy and grief were handed out with a logic as blind as the human heart. But as far as Elliot was concerned, the first sign of the coming disaster was just a call buzzing in over the radio at four a.m. on a Thursday morning (Nawaz 13).

Saleema Nawaz's book *Songs for the End of the World* (2020) begins with the above passage. The narrative introduces Elliot, who learned about a viral outbreak through his device. The virus is described as potentially more deadly and contagious than swine flu. Health officials had begun contact tracing and identified a restaurant called Cipolla as a point of exposure. Elliot realized he had recently eaten at this restaurant with friends. The story mentioned that Cipolla had been firebombed, possibly out of fear or grief. A health department hotline number is provided in the news article that he reads, along with instructions to stay home and report any exposure. He later received a call from his sister but doesn't answer, feeling overwhelmed by the situation. The narrative describes his emotional state, "Elliot's grief was suffocated by an overwhelming sense of unreality, as if he were witnessing a montage of his own suffering- Elliot staring at a wall, Elliot burying his face in his hands, Elliot slapping himself for acting like a prisoner of cliché during one of life's most serious moments." As Elliot searched for information about

memorial services for his gym friends, he discovered some funerals have already occurred. The text notes “The surface of his skin felt electric with mortality”(16). He eventually contacted the Department of Health to report his potential exposure. The employee he spoke with is unaware of the latest news reports and doesn’t recognize the restaurant name, but processed his concern as a possible exposure case. The health department employee instructed him to stay at home for 21 days due to his potential exposure. She asked if he shares a toilet with anyone and advises him to take his temperature twice daily, calling emergency services if it reaches 104 degrees. The employee stated someone would call him back the next day and instructed him to make a list of everyone he has seen and everywhere he has been since the exposure. (85) The opening passage of Nawaz’s novel sets the stage for this dynamic. The introduction establishes a world where information is both vital and unreliable. The early morning radio call represents the abrupt nature of crisis information, while the reference to “logic as blind as the human heart” suggests the emotional responses that often accompany such information. As the story progresses, multiple instances demonstrate how the flow of information shapes the power dynamics of the crisis. When Elliot contacts the Department of Health, the employee’s lack of awareness regarding recent news reports highlights how even official sources can contribute to confusion rather than clarity. This scenario illustrates the potential for undermining public trust and creating space for alternative narratives.

Foucault’s concept of power/knowledge offers a relevant framework for examining information dynamics during a pandemic. In *Discipline and Punish* (1975), Foucault argues that “power and knowledge directly imply one another... there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations” (27). In Nawaz’s *Songs for the End of the World*, the management and manipulation of information emerge as critical instruments of power. Through fragmented official communication, conflicting expert advice, and widespread rumours, the novel illustrates how uncertainty becomes fertile ground for the exertion of social control. Characters respond not only to the virus, but to the

narratives surrounding it- narratives that are shaped by institutions seeking legitimacy and authority. While Foucault's claim that "power is tolerable only on condition that it mask a substantial part of itself" (86) is not directly mirrored in the novel's events, it remains a useful analytic lens. The ambiguity and contradictions in public health messaging in Nawaz's narrative obscure clear accountability, creating an environment in which power can operate through fear, speculation, and silence. In this sense, the novel echoes Foucault's broader insight that the concealment of power's mechanisms enables its more effective exercise, particularly under the guise of public safety.

By the third day of his involuntary isolation, Elliot no longer viewed his situation as a "forced staycation" but began to feel abandoned and increasingly alone. The sense of exclusion became so intense that he briefly entertained the thought that becoming infected might be preferable to enduring such emotional solitude. As he browsed through his phone in search of pictures of his friends, he questioned why he rarely used his camera. When their faces were nowhere to be found, he collapsed into "uncontrolled, agonizing sobs," overwhelmed by despair. Despite the depth of his sadness, Elliot found slight relief in an email from a well-wisher whose response demonstrated sympathy rather than fear. Still, Elliot admitted that he might not have been able to reciprocate the same empathy had the situation been reversed. A week into his quarantine, at his sister's urging, he turned on the television. There he saw his former girlfriend, Keisha Delille, who served as the associate director of infection control at Methodist Morningside Hospital. On the news, she explained that the virus could be "twice as contagious as the average seasonal flu and significantly more deadly," and that researchers had classified it as a novel coronavirus (19). He initially responded with panic and anxiety, yet his fear soon turned into quiet discomfort about his probable survival. He feared that focusing too much on his chances might tempt fate. Out of caution and guilt, he avoided contacting his friends' families or anyone else familiar. After completing two weeks of isolation, Elliot once again saw Keisha in a news broadcast. She addressed the public regarding the virus, now named ARAMIS (Acute Respiratory and Muscular Inflammatory Syndrome), which had already infected more than 2,000 individuals in New York City. The footage showed

her standing on the same hospital steps as before. While the news anchor spoke in a voiceover, Keisha held up an image to the cameras and announced, “The authorities are taking the unprecedented step of releasing a photo of someone who may be infectious” (24). Elliot had begun to notice a particular cadence in the broadcasters’ voices whenever they discussed the virus. He described their tone as “concerned, but not quite crossing over into panic” (24). The video appeared to have been filmed at Cipolla, a restaurant that had become widely recognized as the origin of the outbreak in New York City. When the camera returned to Keisha, she emphasized the importance of tracing the virus’s progression, stating, “It’s important from a research point of view to reconstruct the spread of the disease in order to understand it.” She then looked directly into the lens and urged the public, “And the sooner we can track down and monitor everyone who has been exposed, the better the chance we have of containing this” (25). While exercising on his treadmill, Elliot looked out the window and noticed that the world had changed significantly during his time indoors. Streets were quieter, and traffic had decreased. Joggers now wore masks, women no longer gathered for lunch, and teenagers no longer moved in cheerful groups. Instead, they walked individually, their heads lowered, moving quickly to their destinations. Clearly, “it was not business as usual” (26). As the quarantine neared its end, Elliot reached the limits of his personal self-sufficiency. Overcome with emotion, he broke into tears of gratitude even just for the person who delivered his food and stayed to chat with him for five minutes in the hallway. Upon noticing his tears, the delivery person was startled and slowly withdrew. Elliot admitted that he starts “to feel like a rat” when “boxed into a couple of hundred square feet” (26). He also shared that he prefers watching people’s reactions to him through the distorted lens of the peephole, where they would all pause to read the sign on his door that reads ‘Quarantine.’ “It was a lens that matched his current perspective on life—circumscribed but far-reaching, and consequently distorted. Exposure to a deadly virus had a way of helping you see the big picture, even as it simultaneously cut you off from doing anything about it” (28). Twenty-one days later, Elliot dressed in a tank top and shorts and went for a run around the block. As he proceeded along the sidewalk, however, pedestrians deliberately kept their distance while casting wary glances in his direction. Although he had maintained a considerable distance from a

grimly walking mother and her daughter, the woman abruptly pulled her child aside and shot him a disapproving look as he passed. His emotional turmoil, a mixture of grief, unreality, self-recrimination, and an overriding fear resonates with the insights presented in Steven Taylor's *The Psychology of Pandemics*. Taylor emphasized that pandemics have a profound psychological impact, often surpassing their medical effects. Elliot's sense of unreality, his critical self-reflection on his seemingly clichéd reactions, and his intensified awareness of mortality align well with the psychological responses to pandemic crises discussed in Taylor's work. The shocking nature of pandemic news and the ensuing emotional turbulence match the text's depiction of how sudden fear can lead to exaggerated or irrational behaviours. Taylor examines both psychological and behavioural responses, such as anxiety and panic buying, which are also themes woven into the novel. He asserts that the psychological impact of pandemics, what he terms the "psychological footprint" often eclipses the purely medical implications (p. 44). This is exemplified by the 2014-2015 Ebola outbreak, where the "epidemic of fear" affected more people than the virus itself (p. 44). These observations highlight how fear and anxiety can ripple through populations during infectious disease outbreaks, leading to widespread psychological effects and behaviours.

The 21-day quarantine imposed on Elliot is a reminder about the implementation of power by the authorities. The core of the public health strategy was the period of confinement, which was called a "quarantine" period after the Italian word *quaranta* (forty). Its length was believed to be determined by Christian Scriptures, as both the Old and New Testaments make numerous references to the number forty in the context of purification- the forty days and forty nights of the Genesis flood, the forty years that the Israelites wandered in the wilderness, the forty days Moses spent on Mount Sinai before receiving the Ten Commandments, the forty days that Christ was tempted, the forty days that Christ stayed with his disciples after his resurrection, and more. With such religious backing, the conviction held that forty days were sufficient to purify a ship's hull, the bodies of its passengers and crew, and the cargo it carried. The city would be spared and all virulent vapours would be dispersed safely. In the meantime, the biblical resonance of quarantine

would strengthen adherence to the administrative rigour involved and would offer spiritual solace to a terrified city. In *Epidemics and Society- From the Black Death to the Present*, Snowden explained that the regulation of plague prompted a considerable expansion of state authority into areas of life that had previously been considered private. These public health interventions served as a precedent for how governments would later address other epidemics, offering a model that enabled the state to intervene in daily life. As Snowden noted, officials gained the ability to regulate the economy, restrict individual movement, monitor populations, forcibly detain people, enter homes, and limit civil freedoms, all under the justification of responding to a public health crisis. This legitimized intervention, which was endorsed by the church and by influential medical and political figures, played a vital role in the growth of absolutist governance. In this context, the campaign against the plague became an important factor in the expansion and validation of centralized state power (Snowden 82). Snowden also described maritime quarantine as conceptually simple but requiring a powerful state apparatus to implement effectively. Although intended to prevent disease, the rigid quarantine measures often had negative consequences. Their severity and the fear they generated sometimes led to widespread evasion, public resistance, and even instances of civil disorder. In certain situations, the anticipation or enforcement of quarantine not only failed to control the outbreak but contributed to its spread. Populations, fearful of the repercussions, frequently chose to hide sick individuals, which deprived authorities of accurate data and undermined efforts to respond to the crisis effectively.

Elliot's initial difficulty about getting accurate information from the health department echoes Daniel Defoe's observations in *A Journal of the Plague Year* (1722). Defoe highlighted the suspicion and mistrust directed toward authorities during an outbreak, as well as the difficulty in getting accurate information from these same authorities. This resonates with Elliot's experience of contacting the health department and the employee's lack of awareness of current developments. In his book, Defoe mentioned the suspicion which the commoners have about the recorded number of deaths because authorities were attempting to conceal the devastating truth from them. As the bubonic plague affected the city of London, he

shared detailed observations of the damage. It is expressed, in one of these accounts, that in spite of the utmost human vigilance, it is impossible to prevent the spread of the plague by enforcing quarantine. Specifically, this implies that it was neither feasible to identify infected individuals solely through auditory cues, nor reasonable to assume that those afflicted would possess full awareness of their own condition (244). Defoe describes “the apprehensions of the people,” which were oddly heightened by the error of the times; in which, he believed, the people were more dependent than ever on prophecies and astrological conjurations, dreams, and old wives’ tales. This passage echoes the increasing popularity of conspiracy theories at the time of a pandemic, highlighting how misinformation can thrive in uncertain times.

Given the similarities to the current circumstances, a character named Owen Grant, a writer, found himself enjoying the unexpected popularity of his book *How to Avoid the Plague*, which appeared to be a novel but functioned more as a survival manual. Like David, the protagonist of his story, Owen displayed paranoid tendencies and firmly believed that complete isolation was the only reliable method of surviving a pandemic. He chose to remain confined in his home and refused any form of external contact. Concerned about his increasingly erratic behavior, his publishing company sent Sarah, one of their employees, to visit him and gather information. Sarah recognized and empathized with his state of mind, acknowledging that, “She knew what it meant to be paralyzed by doubt and indecision, and the terror that could lead a person to seek refuge indoors” (123). She reached him on a deeper level by discussing the theme of survival “both as a reader and as a person who wants to survive.” This deeply resonated with Owen, who admitted, “I’m glad you mentioned survival, as I wanted to highlight that it isn’t necessarily unethical to look after yourself in a plague situation” (124). The narrative pointed out that while caring for others might seem morally virtuous, protecting one’s own health also served an essential public purpose by reducing the risk of further contagion. It suggested that individuals ought to make serious efforts to safeguard their well-being. For those who needed to care for infected family members, the text advised designating a specific room or space for the sick. It also emphasized the importance of being

responsible and preparing in advance by acquiring essential items, such as N95 masks and sufficient food and supplies, to remain indoors for several weeks if necessary (125). Owen's insistence on complete isolation during the outbreak resonates with Judith Butler's concept of precarity, which highlights how risk and vulnerability are unevenly distributed and politically mediated during crises. In *Frames of War*, Butler writes that "precarity designates that politically induced condition in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support and become differentially exposed to injury, violence, and death" (25). Owen's isolation can be understood as an attempt to exert control over his own precarity, reframing survival as a personal moral imperative. Yet the novel complicates this logic through Sarah's empathetic engagement, reminding both Owen and the reader that survival is not only biological but also narrative and relational. Her recognition of his fear repositions survival within a shared human context, suggesting that care for oneself cannot be ethically detached from responsibility to others.

Travel warnings have been issued due to concerns about ARAMIS, prompting Mexico, the U.S, and countries belonging to the E.U., to prohibit their citizens from traveling to and from China. In response, China demanded the repayment of certain debts. During a televised address, the President of the United States attempted to avoid admitting the country's financial inability to procure sufficient antivirals for everyone in need, a fact which the media did not hesitate to highlight. Despite American ICUs reporting an adult survival rate exceeding 60% amid overcrowded conditions, the nation saw a surge in gun and generator sales. The book introduced another character Keelan Gibbs, a professor of philosophy at Lansdowne University, who presented compelling theories in his work *Ethics for the End Times*. Gibbs explored the choices that governments face, such as whether to uphold free speech or censor misinformation that could incite vigilantism and worsen disease spread. He suggested that protecting public health might require limiting the freedoms of those exposed to or infected by the disease. Furthermore, he raised ethical questions, such as the legality of using lethal force against quarantine violators. Using 'The Survivalist's Code,' Gibbs analyzed challenges which

individuals might encounter, questioning the adherence to rules set by a potentially corrupt government and pondering responsibilities toward each other if government structures collapse. He considers the extent to which pre-existing social contracts endure in the face of catastrophic events, and whether a moral or civic obligation to care for one's neighbors continues to hold under such circumstances. (181). Gibbs' discussion in *Ethics for the End Times* about potentially restricting personal freedoms to protect public health aligns closely with utilitarian thinking. The ethical framework of utilitarianism, as explained in the text, prioritizes actions that maximize overall well-being for the greatest number of people. Gibbs's consideration of censorship and the potential use of force to enforce quarantines stem from a utilitarian perspective. The interview excerpt where Gibbs warns against hoarding reflects this utilitarian approach. Hoarding, according to Gibbs, acts against the greater good. Utilitarianism is an ethical theory that emphasizes the importance of maximizing overall well-being or happiness for the greatest number of people. This theory was first formally articulated by Jeremy Bentham in his 1789 work *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, and later developed by John Stuart Mill in his 1861 book *Utilitarianism*. The utilitarian approach would suggest that individuals should act in ways that produce the greatest good for the greatest number, even in the absence of government or in the face of corrupt leadership.

GIBBS- Preparedness isn't wrong in and of itself. But it's also critical not to give in to fear. It's fear that prompts people to hoard more resources than they need to survive, they're nervous there won't be enough for everyone.

Question- What do you think is the biggest single ethical issue surrounding ARAMIS?

GIBBS- We're already talking about it- fear and the way it can subvert reason and decision-making. In previous flu pandemics, healthy people starved in quarantine because others were too frightened to bring them food. But these days, we have plenty of information on how to safely interact with those in quarantine while avoiding infection (212).

In the interview excerpt, Gibbs warns against excessive hoarding driven by fear. This aligns with utilitarian thinking, as hoarding benefits the individual at the expense of the wider community, thus reducing overall societal well-being. Also, Gibbs' example of people starving in quarantine due to others' fear illustrates a failure of utilitarian ethics. The greater good would have been served by safely providing food to the quarantined, as opposed to letting fear dictate actions. George J. Annas, in "Bioethics and Bioterrorism," a chapter from *Ethics and Infectious Disease*, discusses similar ethical issues in pandemic preparedness and response, resonating with themes in Gibbs' work. Annas asserts, "We will survive only so long as we uphold human rights. The more we undermine human rights and democracy, the less reason we will have to fight for our survival, and the less we will deserve to survive. In this fight, it is critical to recognize that freedom is not just an end of economic development and social justice; it is a means as well." He emphasizes that the universality of human rights and bioethics is vital, as these principles apply to all humans simply because we are members of the same species (p. 377).

Lawrence Wright's novel *The End of October* (2020) opens with a scene of health officials meeting in Geneva to discuss emergency infections. A character named Hans states, "Forty-seven death certificates were issued in the first week of March at the Kongoli Number Two Camp in West Java" (9). Millions of displaced people were placed in quickly put together camps that were fenced off and looked like prisons. Indonesia as a breeding ground for illnesses provides an excellent setting. Prior to this, there were measles outbreaks, prompted in part by a fatwa against the vaccine, HIV was spreading more rapidly here than in any other part of the world, which the government cited as justification for its repression of the transsexual community and gays. The camps were described as having inadequate food and medical resources, making them susceptible to epidemics. There were insufficient rations and few medical facilities, so it was not surprising that an epidemic spread here. The novel introduces Dr. Henry Parsons as the main character. He is described as physically short and frail, with a slight deformity from childhood rickets. The text suggested that his facial features and voice appear disproportionately large for his small stature. Dr. Parsons is credited with identifying the index case of a

new disease- an 18-month-old boy from Guinea, infected by fruit bats. The narrative implied that Dr. Parsons is modest about his achievements. The book states, “In the never-ending war on emerging diseases, Henry Parsons was not a small man; he was a giant” (11), emphasizing his importance in the field of epidemiology despite his physical appearance. This novel envisions the thwarted, downside version of Foucauldian “biopolitics” and state regulation of human life, where microbes in human hands can become weapons. Pestilence has been utilized in warfare for centuries, dating back to the fourteenth century when the Mongols catapulted the bodies of plague victims over the walls of Kaffa. The narrator detailed how the U.S. program tested anthrax and other dangerous diseases on human volunteers, mostly, conscientious objectors. After the Second World War, Nazi scientists who had experimented on prisoners of war were brought into the American research effort. They explored the use of insects, such as lice, ticks, and mosquitoes, to spread yellow fever and other diseases. Another instance cited is the Japanese involvement in the war, who were accused of poisoning over a thousand wells with cholera and typhus and dropped plague-infested fleas into China, causing epidemics that persisted long after the war. Since President Nixon banned the creation of offensive biological weapons in 1969, new diseases were still being tested on, but classified as defensive tactics. Because of this, authorities and experts were attempting to determine whether the illness was caused by a bioweapon. They brought up Al-Qaeda’s attempt to acquire bioweapons and also mention another group called Aum Shinrikyo, who had microbiologists working with them; these scientists would have been able to modify genes if they had access to modern technology. Henry warned them not to undervalue any terrorist organization’s capacity to create new viruses. He remarked that, “Biowarfare has always been a part of the arsenals of the great powers. We shouldn’t be surprised if this turns out to have been concocted in a laboratory. We know the Russians have tinkered with influenza” (142).

Dr. Henry was unable to gain cooperation from then-health minister Siti Fadilah Supari during his last trip to Indonesia. He wanted H5N1 avian influenza samples, which is associated with a high mortality rate, because it represented a potential global risk. However, countries such as India and Indonesia were becoming

increasingly possessive of viral samples, primarily due to the fear that the rich would develop vaccines or treatments with their viruses that they would never have access to. Indonesia maintained that foreign pharmaceutical companies would profit from their strain of a virus without any guarantee of them having access to a vaccine or treatment. Dr. Henry's analysis was to create a cooperative agreement that would focus on both parties being able to share in their cooperation. The community of epidemiologists monitored with increasingly rising concern, while Indonesia stood firm. The nation treated the virus as a sovereign asset akin to "gold or oil," asserting what Minister Siti termed "viral sovereignty" (21). Henry believed that while knowledge could be dangerous, the absence of it posed an even greater threat, "Knowledge was dangerous, Henry reasoned, but ignorance was far worse" (21). Upon returning to Indonesia, Henry encountered bureaucratic delays. His mission to collect samples was obstructed by hesitant officials, including the new minister of health, Annisa Novanto. Although she attempted to maintain a calm demeanor, her anxiety was apparent. The narrative referenced a prior encounter between Henry and Novanto during a rabies outbreak in Bali, where she had prioritized managing the press over addressing the public health crisis directly. Her primary concern remained economic, especially regarding tourism. She remarked, "Look, supposing the place is a pesthole, what can we do with our meagre resources? You make us a pariah. Tourists will not come. Why do we have to suffer for this?" (23).

At a medical camp, Henry found a tragic scene where several young healthcare volunteers had died while treating a mysterious illness. Their personal notes and medical records revealed that they had been inadequately prepared and lacked the necessary resources to respond to the outbreak effectively. Reflecting on the situation, the narrative explored the devastating nature of disease. Henry recognized the immense bravery required to confront such an unseen enemy. Unlike soldiers who charged into visible combat, even the most courageous individuals might retreat in fear from the threat of infection. Disease, in Henry's view, surpassed traditional threats in severity and unpredictability. "Disease was more powerful than armies. Disease was more arbitrary than terrorism. Disease was crueler than human imagination" (29). The book also recounted a meeting among high-ranking political

leaders who initially focused on a range of international concerns while failing to recognize the emerging disease threat. The attention shifted once World Health Organization data revealed alarming conditions in the Kongoli refugee camp, where approximately 70 percent of the population had been infected. The majority of those exposed had died, raising immediate global alarm. A similar outbreak had been reported in Mecca, increasing the concern that international air travel could accelerate the virus's global transmission. In the meeting, Health Minister Barlett anticipated significant challenges in managing public health. He expected hospitals to be overwhelmed and warned of public panic manifesting in behaviors such as hoarding essential goods. The Commerce Minister added to these concerns, predicting deaths at major travel hubs if preventive action was not taken quickly. The officials urged swift and large-scale interventions. They agreed that "as much as possible, we need to urge people to shelter in place," and emphasized the importance of making the announcement without delay to allow for logistical preparation. They recommended mobilizing the National Guard, increasing police presence, sealing borders, and closing down all sports and entertainment venues. They even advised the discharging nonemergency patients from hospitals, shutting schools, postponing public events, and temporarily ceasing regular government operations. To prevent widespread exposure, it was advised that "travelers need to get home at once, before the pandemic takes root in America" (127).

The novel explores "viral sovereignty," exemplified by Indonesia's reluctance to share H5N1 avian influenza samples due to fears of exploitation by wealthier nations. Dr. Parsons negotiated a compromise, highlighting the interplay between national interests and global health cooperation. This scenario ties into Foucault's analysis of power dynamics and knowledge as instruments of control. The novel highlighted government officials' concerns and anxieties, focusing more on public image and economic impacts of a disease outbreak than on effective management, exemplified by Health Minister Novanto's prioritization of media appearance over public health needs. In "A Framework for Global Pandemic Response," Rebecca Katz and Julie Fischer analyze the Revised International Health Regulations (IHR 2005) during the 2009 H1N1 influenza pandemic, examining the

balance between global governance and national sovereignty. They noted that “the early actions by nations outside the governance structure of the IHR...serve as a vivid reminder that nations are sovereign entities that can and will make their own decisions in response to a public health threat, regardless of global health governance structures” (8). Overall, the emergence and global spread of the disease serve as a stark reminder of the societal dynamics of risk and vulnerability. This risk-centric approach profoundly influences policy-making, organizational practices, and individual behaviors, illustrating the need for critical examination of its implications and limitations. The pandemic illustrates the relevance of Ulrich Beck’s “risk society” thesis, which emphasizes that industrialization’s risks are globalized, transcending national borders and affecting societies in complex ways (Beck 1992, 77). In this context, the pandemic has brought the “politics of science” into focus, highlighting real-time disagreements among scientists and the contested translation of theories into policies (Fugelli 2001). Such exposure risks undermining public trust, particularly when political leaders frequently alter their claims to be “following the science,” while further exacerbating the erosion of trust in scientific expertise and the politicization of public health responses.

The novel vividly illustrates the darker aspects of biopolitical control, as theorized by Foucault. In *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault defines biopolitics as efforts “to ensure, sustain, and multiply life, to put this life in order.” Biopolitics involves how society exerts dominance and control over the origin and maintenance of human life. Foucault stated that the development of modern medicine and technology in the nineteenth century brought about a new kind of power that allowed governments and institutions to view society as a single body and impose rules and laws on the entire population. Biopolitical measures during pandemics include mask requirements and six-foot distancing to protect the population and prevent widespread illness. Vaccinations also represent biopolitics, where governments decide which groups must be protected, thus exercising control over life and death. Governments have used disciplinary power to alter citizen behavior and control pandemic spread, demonstrated through lockdowns, quarantines, and vaccination drives. The pandemic has highlighted the biopolitical nature of governance as nations

manage the virus and protect public health. Foucault suggested that these controls may infringe on individual rights and demonstrates how pandemics enable states to increase regulatory power, normalize monitoring, and maintain societal structures under the guise of public health. The concept of “viral sovereignty,” illustrated by Indonesia’s reluctance to share H5N1 samples, emphasise how national interests intersect with global health imperatives, reflecting Foucault’s ideas about knowledge as a control tool. This tension, analyzed by Katz and Fischer, reveals the struggle between national sovereignty and global cooperation. The novel demonstrates how public concern often shifts towards economic and political implications rather than genuine public health needs, as seen with Health Minister Novanto’s actions. This reflects Foucault’s perspective that authorities may prioritize existing power structures and public perception management over effectively addressing health crises. Foucault’s theories ultimately reveal how states leverage pandemics to exert increased control, assert authority, and reinforce societal hierarchies through biopolitical means.

In addition to this, Agamben’s concept of “bare life” and his critique of the state’s power to determine the value of human life offer a crucial lens for examining the biopolitical management of populations during a pandemic. This theoretical framework shed light on how governments and public health institutions categorize and classify different groups within society, often in ways that deprioritize the dignity and autonomy of certain individuals. At the core of Agamben’s analysis is the notion that the state, through the invocation of “states of exception,” can reduce human beings to a state of “bare life”- a form of existence stripped of its political and legal rights, reduced to mere biological survival. During a pandemic, this dynamic can manifest in how certain groups are perceived, represented, and subsequently treated by those in power. The depiction of Prince Majid’s actions in Mecca points to the potential weaponization of disease as a means of biopolitical control. The sealing off of the city and the lethal enforcement of compliance through military means reveal the extent to which power dynamics can override individual rights and freedoms, reflecting Foucault’s argument that biopolitical measures can become mechanisms for domination. The incident with the young pilgrim signifies the

transformation of individuals into “bare life,” as described by Agamben, where the state’s power reduces people to mere biological entities, stripped of their rights and subjected to control for the sake of public order. The novel described a scene in Mecca where Dr. Henry observes Prince Majid attempting to control pilgrims during a disease outbreak. The city is sealed off, trapping the inhabitants. A young pilgrim defies orders and runs towards an unfenced area, resulting in his death by machine gun fire. Prince Majid responds, “May God forgive us. May he accept our painful sacrifice” (145). Dr. Henry reflected on the necessity of the quarantine, understanding that infected individuals could spread the disease to their loved ones if they escaped. The narrative notes that some might survive or be immune, but most infected would likely have a different outcome. Their conversation was abruptly interrupted by the sudden activation of a microphone in one of the mosque’s minarets. The sound was unexpected, as it was not the scheduled time for prayer. The voice encourages the pilgrims to revolt.

“Fellow Muslims!” a young man’s reedy voice cried. “Must we die like animals in a cage? We are millions. They cannot kill us all. But if we stay, everyone will die!” Henry wondered what the soldiers below, with their weapons ready, were thinking. Would they see the throng as fellow Muslims, besieged, defenseless, unjustly held, so many of them friends or family members longing for the safety of home? Or would they see death in their faces, the death that might await so many more if the afflicted managed to escape into the world? (153)

The scene culminates in a mass attempt to escape. The crowd rushes towards the fences, facing gunfire. Despite casualties, the crowd’s momentum eventually breaks through the fences, and survivors flee into the desert. Arendt’s concept of the “banality of evil,” detailed in her work *Eichmann in Jerusalem- A Report on the Banality of Evil* (1963), reflected on how ordinary individuals can commit atrocious acts by blindly obeying orders, underscoring how bureaucratic systems can lead to a loss of personal responsibility. Arendt noted that “the sad truth is that most evil is done by people who never make up their minds to be good or evil” (287), which aligns with the tragic events in Mecca. The soldiers, as part of a bureaucratic system,

execute violent actions without moral contemplation, demonstrating a detachment from the personal responsibility of their actions. Agamben's work, *Homo Sacer*, on the "state of exception" is also relevant here. The drastic measures taken in Mecca like sealing off the city, employing deadly force against those attempting escape demonstrate a suspension of normal legal and political boundaries. The government's prioritization of disease control overrides individual rights and due process, illustrating the concept of a "state of exception." The justification for the violence, as expressed by the Prince, is cast as a "painful sacrifice," illustrating how extreme measures can be morally rationalized during a public health crisis. While not explicitly stated, the scene in Mecca highlights the fear and panic within the pilgrim population, leading to a desperate mass escape attempt. In this context, Ross Upshur's exploration of quarantine ethics in "The Ethics of Quarantine" aligns with Arendt's concept of the "banality of evil." Upshur argued that while quarantine involves civil liberty curtailment, it can be justified when public health authorities use the "least restrictive measures" for disease control (394). Such actions risk fostering bureaucratic detachment from personal ethical responsibility. This situation amplifies the importance of transparency and communication during public health crises, addressing the fear and manipulation present in events like those in Mecca. As public health officials work to maintain credibility and ethical responses, they strive to prevent fear-driven chaos highlighting the ethical complexities and psychological dimensions inherent in managing public health challenges effectively and humanely.

Returning to the narrative within Philadelphia, which historically faced devastating contagions like the 1918 Spanish flu, its previous experience resulted in thousands of deaths, overwhelming healthcare workers and burial services. The city's previous encounter with the Spanish flu resulted in thousands of deaths, overwhelming healthcare workers and burial services. The mortality rate was particularly high among doctors and nurses, despite their valiant efforts. Mayor Shirley Jackson, having researched past pandemics, came from a medical background with a mother who was a nurse. She had participated in a tabletop exercise at Johns Hopkins regarding a potential fatal disease outbreak. When the new disease was discovered outside Saudi Arabia, Jackson implemented the Incident

Command System, coordinating various health and emergency agencies. Jackson contacted Lieutenant Commander Bartlett at the Public Health Service, who was responsible for coordinating urban health responses and served as the agency's liaison to the White House. She ordered additional medical supplies from the national emergency supply depot and contacted the deans of three local medical schools to prepare students for emergency situations. The mayor equipped first responders with smartphone-connected infrared thermal cameras for quick fever detection. She also converted the Wells Fargo Center into a temporary hospital. Her preparedness efforts were praised on the front page of *The New York Times*. Despite these preparations, the city faced unexpected challenges. The description of Philadelphia's prior experience with the 1918 Spanish flu, its devastating consequences, and the preventive measures implemented by Mayor Jackson directly relate to the themes of community preparation and the importance of learning from past pandemics. The article "Preparing for the Unknown, Responding to the Known-Communities and Public Health Preparedness" by Katz et al. further supports the Mayor's initiatives. Their study explored community readiness for public health emergencies in the United States, with particular attention to the advancements made since the 9/11 attacks and the subsequent anthrax threat. The authors highlight improvements in infrastructure and collaborations, but also persistent challenges like funding, capacity, and competing priorities. The principle of learning from past responses and preparing for future outbreaks aligns with the spirit of the regulations. The article also highlighted the tension between global health governance and national interests, a tension which implicitly factors into the city's response strategies.

What Mayor Jackson wasn't prepared for was the panic. There was a startling rise in suicides and homicides, as well as hate crimes, especially against the large Muslim community in the northern part of town. By now the origin of the disease, in an Indonesian detention camp for Muslim homosexuals, was well known, and the conspiracists were inflaming fears that Kongoli was a plot. (Wiseman 161)

Definitions of panic, associated with the pandemic have been and still are tinged with tension. Panic is characterised as a relic of irrational (and premodern) reactions, a definition that is supported by the word's etymological antecedent, the Greek goat-god *Pan*, who was associated with the wild and whose presence caused "panic" when he moved around. The "intensification of instinctive excitement" or the "association of panic with herd behaviour" refers to the "collective outbursts" that panic can cause, such as rumours, crazes, and riots. At least since the nineteenth century, panic has been perceived as the expression of a "primitive" fear. Panic was a holdover from man's animalistic past, according to the influential analysis of collective psychology written by the psychologist William McDougall in the early 20th century, "The panic is the crudest and simplest example of collective mental life" (23). McDougall noted that panic among humans appears to stem from the same instinctive reactions found in animals. At its core, panic involves a shared amplification of instinctive arousal, marked by fear and the urge to escape. He argued that this heightened emotional response within a group can be fully explained through what he called primitive sympathy, a mechanism through which instinctive emotions become collectively intensified (25). In examining the historical and conceptual dimensions of mass fear, particularly in the context of disease and imperial governance, researchers have increasingly turned their attention to the phenomenon of panic as both a social and psychological response. The book *Empires of Panic* explores the complex relationship between imperial networks and episodes of panic, examining how technologies such as telegraphy, medical science, and public health systems functioned both to disseminate information and to regulate "panicked" bodies. The text also considers how the threat of disease gave rise to distinct sites of anxiety and contributed to various manifestations of collective panic. Panic itself has been characterized as either a psychological condition or an emotionally charged group reaction. It is typically viewed as an irrational response to an external threat, whether natural or human-made, real or imagined. Neil Smelser defines it as "a collective flight based on a hysterical belief" (131), highlighting its perceived lack of rationality. However, as Clarke and Chess note in their study "Elites and Panic- More to Fear Than Fear Itself," the concept of panic has been subject to varying interpretations. A commonly accepted definition portrays it as a

sudden onset of intense fear or alarm, which frequently leads to disproportionate or irrational behaviors. This perspective presents both the abrupt emergence of panic and its capacity to elicit extreme reactions.

Mayor Jackson described how the death industry had been devastated by disease and fear. Private ambulances were essentially non-existent. With private ambulances largely unavailable, she commandeered FedEx and UPS vehicles to transport deceased individuals to hastily prepared mass graves in city parks. Many bodies remained unclaimed or undiscovered. The mayor encouraged Philadelphia's citizens to volunteer at local hospitals and assist with burial efforts. She personally set an example by helping care for the homeless population, which was disproportionately affected by the epidemic.

“We in this city will not be divided by fear,” she said.

“Philadelphia is still and always will be the city of brotherly love. That is who we are. No matter what you read on the internet or who somebody wants to blame, our job is to love our brothers and sisters, to comfort them in this time of tribulation, to unite our community. Remain calm, open your hearts, aid the needy, and we will get through this together” (Wright 161).

Ten days after the outbreak began, Mayor Jackson succumbed to the Kongoli flu. Her death was a significant blow to the city's morale, from which Philadelphia struggled to recover. Following her passing, the disease continued to spread. Weber critically examines the efficiency and limitations of bureaucratic structures in his seminal work *Economy and Society* (1922). He argued that bureaucracies are characterized by “precision, speed, unambiguity, knowledge of the files, continuity, discretion, unity, strict subordination, reduction of friction, and of material and personal costs” (223). However, he warns that such structures can become dehumanizing, turning individuals into mere cogs within an impersonal machine. This insight is reflected in Philadelphia's response to the pandemic, where the city's highly procedural approach struggles to address the overwhelming human tragedy, revealing both the inefficiency and rigidity of bureaucratic systems during crises.

In the realm of pandemic discourse, Mike Davis's *The Monster at Our Door: The Global Threat of Avian Flu* (2005) stands out as a prescient and urgent intervention that critically interrogates the failures of global health governance long before the emergence of COVID-19. Davis traces the intersections of capitalist globalization, agribusiness, and viral mutation, asserting that the structural conditions for a catastrophic pandemic were already well in place by the early 2000s. He argues that industrial poultry farming, corporate lobbying, and weakened public health infrastructures created a fertile breeding ground for zoonotic spillover, particularly in economically vulnerable regions (Davis 56–78). In doing so, he challenges the notion that pandemics are “natural disasters” and reframes them instead as predictable outcomes of neoliberal deregulation and ecological disruption. His warnings, largely unheeded, serve as a sobering indictment of policy inertia, especially among Western powers that continued to underfund disease surveillance systems and emergency stockpiles. As Davis notes, “The infrastructure of public health, rather than being strengthened, has been intentionally starved and dismantled” (Davis 142). His work thus anticipates many of the critiques that would emerge during the COVID-19 pandemic regarding preparedness, biopolitical neglect, and inequitable access to medical resources. In placing responsibility on systems rather than individuals, he contributes a critical leftist voice to pandemic literature, one that demands structural accountability over reactive heroism.

The opening page of Ellen Marie Wiseman's 2020 novel *The Orphan Collector* begins with a document dated September 28, 1918, describing how the deadly influenza virus quietly spread through the bustling, cobblestoned streets of Philadelphia on a bright September day. It moved undetected, “unseen and unheard amidst the jubilant chaos of the Liberty Loan parade and the patriotic marches of John Philip Sousa.” Spectators, unaware of the danger, did not realize that the virus had already escaped from the Naval Yard, that over 200 patients had been admitted to local hospitals the previous day, or that medical experts specializing in infectious diseases had strongly urged the mayor to cancel the parade. Within the enormous crowd were the novel's protagonist, Pia Lange, her mother Mutti, and her infant twin brothers. Pia, a young girl with a mysterious ability to sense the emotional and

physical states of others through touch, experienced ominous sensations such as tingling, pain, and a sense of unease when making contact with bare skin. Yet, as a child with no agency, she was powerless to prevent the looming catastrophe. At the same time, public officials and the press attempted to minimize the seriousness of the outbreak, asserting that the influenza posed no real threat. They argued that the virus was an old affliction historically associated with environmental factors such as stagnant air, fog, and insect infestations, conditions not currently present in Philadelphia. In lieu of urgent intervention, the public was instead advised to adhere to the Board of Health's recommendations, which included keeping feet dry, staying warm, eating onions, and ensuring both good ventilation and regular bowel movements. The initial handling of the Spanish influenza outbreak in Wiseman's novel reflects Arendt's concept of the "banality of evil," where officials' inaction and minimization of the crisis contributed significantly to its disastrous effects. In the narrative, state officials and media underplayed the severity of the influenza by promoting outdated and ineffective public health advice, such as staying warm and eating more onions. This form of inaction, despite not arising from explicit malice, aligns with Arendt's notion that ordinary individuals can cause harm through passive compliance within a bureaucratic framework. By failing to heed expert warnings and continuing with activities like the Liberty Loan parade, the authorities inadvertently facilitated the virus's spread (p. 23). Their inaction and focus on minimizing public panic, rather than addressing the real threat, accentuates how bureaucratic decisions, driven by adherence to routine rather than critical judgment, can lead to severe consequences. This resonated with Arendt's idea that individuals caught in systemic roles may perpetuate harm through a lack of critical agency and responsibility.

As Philadelphia succumbed to the Spanish influenza, state officials and media attempted to downplay its impact, echoing Agamben's analysis of how states of exception are employed by governments to maintain control during emergencies. The enforcement of quarantine and police actions during the pandemic, as described in the book *Homo Sacer- Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (1998) reflect Agamben's warning of how "the state of exception... establishes a hidden but fundamental relationship between the juridical order and life," suggesting an erosion of civil

liberties under the guise of public safety (1). Meanwhile, Agamben's theory aptly describes the transformation of public spaces and norms as the city utilizes its juridical power to enforce new rules, such as the mandate of gauze masks and limiting public gatherings, creating an environment where life and law intersect in new and uncomfortable ways. Foucault's concepts of disciplinary power and the panopticon are evident in the city's response to the pandemic, as depicted in *The Orphan Collector*. The novel illustrates how quarantine enforcement, movement control, and constant surveillance imposed a disciplinary regime over the citizens of Philadelphia, creating an environment of fear and compliance. These measures reflect Foucault's interpretation of modern power, where authority is exercised through meticulous regulation and surveillance. The enforced wearing of gauze masks, isolation of affected individuals, and police patrols instilled a pervasive sense of being watched and controlled, akin to Foucault's panopticon, where "one sees everything without ever being seen" (977). Such disciplinary actions transform everyday life, encouraging self-regulation among citizens as they internalize the presence of surveillance. The atmosphere during this time, described as having an "undercurrent of heightened awareness," highlights how fear and obedience were legislated into the public sphere (p. 45). Foucault's theory elucidates how these practices of monitoring and control, under the guise of public safety, reinforce dominant power structures while restricting individual freedoms and fostering a culture of compliance.

After the parade, seventy-two hours later, every bed in Philadelphia's thirty-one hospitals was occupied by patients suffering from a brand-new illness called the Spanish influenza, and the hospitals began turning away patients. Pia could not help but notice that the streets were filled with the smell of death on her way to school, as everyone had cheesecloth pouches or pouches of camphor or garlic around their necks. She learned that those who became ill frequently passed away by evening, their faces turning black and blue and oozing blood from their mouths, noses, ears, and even eyes, which was the most terrifying thing of all. Pia saw a Red Cross ambulance speed past the school, and a man reading a newspaper on a bench with the headline- "ALL CITIZENS ORDERED TO WEAR GAUZE MASKS IN PUBLIC."

She also overheard the teachers discussing how the war was causing a shortage of physicians and nurses, and how poorhouses and churches were being used as makeshift hospitals. A new rhyme was being chanted by a group of girls skipping rope, and it sent chills down her spine.

There was a little girl, and she had a little bird,

And she called it by the pretty name of Enza;

But one day it flew away, but it didn't go to stay,

For when she raised the window, in-flu-enza. (Wiseman 23)

Public behavior during the influenza outbreak reflected an urgent yet restrained response, as individuals moved quickly through the streets without fully breaking into a run. One elderly man used his cane not just for support but to push aside others in an effort to hasten his movement. A nearby older couple, both wearing gauze masks, exited a building while carrying luggage, suggesting a hurried departure. Traffic, including both automobiles and horse-drawn vehicles, moved at an unusually brisk pace. The atmosphere carried a collective sense of tension and anticipation, akin to the expectancy surrounding major public celebrations such as Christmas or the Fourth of July. However, unlike festive excitement, this atmosphere bore a sense of threat and unease that was perceptible to all. Health directives appeared prominently on posters affixed to telephone poles and buildings. These included instructions such as “When obliged to cough or sneeze, always place a handkerchief, paper napkin, or fabric of some kind before the face” and “Cover your mouth! Influenza Is Spread by Droplets Sprayed from Nose and Mouth!” (Wiseman 18). Additional warnings, like “Spitting Equals Death,” were enforced by police through arrests of noncompliant individuals. One particularly striking poster depicted a well-dressed man standing beside the outline of a monstrous clawed figure emerging from a pool of saliva, captioned with the directive: “Halt the Epidemic! Stop Spitting, Everybody!” (Wiseman 18). The protagonist observes the unfolding scenes of a pandemic outbreak in the city. Many homes were converted into boarding houses or offered rooms for rent to sailors. Crepe ribbons in black, grey, and white

were hung from various doorknobs, twisting in the afternoon breeze. Some doors displayed signs warning others to stay away due to quarantine for influenza. A woman in a black dress was seen sobbing as she tied a white crepe ribbon to a doorknob after exiting the silversmith's shop at the end of the alley. The crepe colors indicated the deceased's age- gray for the elderly, white for a child, and black for an adult. The sidewalks were monitored by numerous police officers, all wearing gauze masks and instructing pedestrians to keep moving. People with empty glass bottles lined up silently outside the pharmacy, their eyes hollowed with fear and their faces tense with anxiety. Some individuals maintained their distance from one another, and those passing on the sidewalk wore white masks or used newspapers to cover their mouths. A notice on the pharmacy's window stated- "Formaldehyde tablets. Melt under your tongue. Proven to kill germs and prevent infection and contagion. Fifty tablets for fifty cents"(27). An advertisement for phonographs in the neighboring sporting goods shop window read- "This machine is guaranteed to drive away Spanish flu. Stay at home. Keep away from crowds and theaters. Doctor's Orders. Hear the new October records on your new phonograph and you'll never know you had to stay in nights or miss gasless Sundays"(27). Across the street, a truck bore a sign- "Eat More Onions, One of the Best Preventatives for Influenza," with people gathered around it, holding sacks and baskets. A group of colored people stood to one side, hoping for any leftover onions.

The book also addresses the contentious issue of mask mandates, despite its setting in the 1918 pandemic rather than the 1980s. In one scene, Pia is walking through the city when a streetcar pulls up nearby. Two men wearing black bowler hats approach the vehicle, one of whom is wearing a mask. The conductor, also masked, steps forward and denies entry to the man without a face covering. "You're not getting on without a mask," the conductor asserts, permitting the masked individual to board while physically preventing the other. The unmasked man, visibly frustrated, protests, stating that he has an important meeting and cannot afford to be late. He insists on being allowed to ride, but the conductor refuses, firmly reiterating the policy. At that moment, a police officer arrives and reinforces the conductor's stance. Resting one hand on his club, he tells the man, "You heard him.

No mask, no ride” (28). The exchange underlines both the enforcement of public health measures and the tensions they can provoke in everyday interactions. Pia’s mother informed her about the quarantine’s enforcement, which included closing all homes and public spaces, including places of worship, education, and public gathering spots like movie theaters and factories. Funerals were also prohibited, and everyone was advised to stay home due to widespread illness. Without a radio or newspaper subscription, Pia’s family, living in a poor neighborhood and being immigrants, learned this information by word of mouth. Her mother heard the news at the butcher shop from another customer who listened to the radio. The quarantine made the city feel surreal and apocalyptic to Pia, with no children playing in the alleys, no delivery wagons on the cobblestones, and no women chatting from porches or windows. As her mother, Mutti, felt unwell, Pia took care of her brothers while observing that “panic gripped the city” (45). Philadelphia General Hospital’s director pleaded for volunteers as nurses collapsed from exhaustion, and physicians and medical staff were dying. A few nurses died each day, and undertakers ran out of coffins and embalming fluid. Policemen guarded the remaining coffins, while gravediggers either fell ill, charged excessive fees, or refused to bury influenza victims. The city jail’s chief proposed employing prisoners to dig graves but retracted the offer due to a lack of healthy guards. “The citizens of Philadelphia began whispering the word plague” (45). While this was going on, *The Philadelphia Inquirer* scorned the closure of public places.

What are the authorities trying to do? Scare everyone to death? What is to be gained by shutting up well-ventilated churches and theaters and letting people press into trolley cars? What then should a man do to prevent panic and fear? Live a calm life. Do not discuss influenza. Worry is useless.

Talk of cheerful things instead of disease (45).

In *American Pandemic- The Lost Worlds of the 1918 Influenza Epidemic*, Bristow examined the implementation of mask mandates and the public’s resistance during the 1918 pandemic. A letter to the editor in the *New York Times* from October 1918 reflected the era’s sentiments, indicating that many Americans viewed the

pandemic as a result of German warfare tactics, dubbing it the “German plague.” Evangelist Billy Sunday also fueled these beliefs, suggesting that the flu was part of German propaganda. While most Americans did not subscribe to the idea of a German plot, the war provided a framework for understanding the epidemic, which was often seen as more devastating than the war itself. Notably, Hermann Biggs, New York’s Health Commissioner, noted that the epidemic’s toll in deaths and disabilities was far greater than that of the war. The use of martial rhetoric during the pandemic became widespread, as influenza was commonly described as “the enemy,” which spurred Americans to “battle” the disease. This language suggested a structured and collective effort to combat the epidemic, with health professionals taking on roles metaphorically akin to soldiers. Preventive measures such as mask-wearing were styled as “facial armor,” reinforcing the wartime analogy and promoting public compliance. Norman Fairclough, in *Language and Power* discusses how language is pivotal in pandemic discourse. Governments and media use language to inform, influence, and legitimize authority. Describing the pandemic as a “war” invokes ideas of valor and solidarity, which can support government measures while potentially minimizing civil liberties. As the pandemic’s harsh realities set in, resistance to public health measures grew, driven by various motivations, including dissent over strategy and frustration with prolonged restrictions. This resistance highlighted the complexity of implementing public health mandates, illustrating the varied responses of local officials to measures such as vaccines, mask mandates, and public space closures. Christian Scientists, among others, criticized traditional health practices, believing that fear, not the mask mandates or closures, was the true driver of the disease. They viewed conventional measures as ineffective, arguing that they cultivated fear and inadvertently fueled the epidemic. Together, Bristow and Fairclough’s analyses, along with themes in Wiseman’s *The Orphan Collector*, illustrate how language, wartime rhetoric, and public perception intersect during pandemics, shaping societal responses and highlighting the challenges of balancing authority and individual freedoms in crisis management.

The narrative also introduces the antagonist, Bernice Groves, a twenty-year-old woman living near the Lange family. Like many others, she was afflicted by the

same sorrow and hardship brought on by the pandemic. She sat at the third-floor window of her row house in the Fifth Ward on Shunk Alley, gazing outside for what felt like the thousandth time in recent days, contemplating the possibility of ending her life. The passage of time had become indistinct since the onset of the outbreak. “Had it been a week? Ten days? Fourteen?” During this period, people refused to let anyone into their homes except for immediate family members, and even that was not always permitted. The alley below remained eerily quiet. No children played outside, no women rushed out for errands, and no men passed by whistling or smoking on their way home from work. Laundry lines stood still and unused. In the past few days, the only signs of life Bernice observed were street sweepers dispersing some kind of powder along the cobblestones and a brown dog sniffing two sheet-covered bodies across the street before running off, nose to the ground. “More often than not, she wondered if she was the last person alive on earth” (51). It was disclosed that she found it easier to comprehend why Mr. Werkner, the man who lived upstairs, shot his wife and two children before turning the gun on himself rather than allowing the flu to claim their lives. He had taken matters into his own hands while the rest of the city waited in fear and bodies piled up outside morgues and cemeteries. “She would have done the same thing if she’d known a week ago what she knew now. And if she had a gun” (51). She recalled how her infant had been laughing and in perfect health a week prior, talking while reaching out to her with his chubby little hands. Then he woke up with a fever and a cough but refused to be nursed. Following two days of attempting every flu remedy prescribed, such as onion syrup, lime chloride, whiskey and Mrs. Winslow’s Soothing Syrup, she bundled him up and fled to the nearest emergency hospital, a nearby poorhouse which was converted after the pandemic began. She held her swollen bosom in her hands, her aching breasts filled with milk her son would never drink, her body offering a painful reminder of her loss, unaware of the extent of her grief. Overwhelmed with intense grief and depression, she cried out in agony as she squeezed her breasts, blaming herself for Wallis’ illness. Despite having read the warnings and seen the signs, she reproached herself, believing she should have stayed home rather than attending the parade until the danger passed. She thought she should have kept Wallis safe from the crowds of immigrants on the sidewalks and the balloon vendor. She regretted not

pushing the dark-skinned boy away from Wallis's buggy and warning him not to touch her son with his dirty hands after he dropped his toy flag on Wallis's blanket and reached in without permission. She held herself responsible, believing Wallis' illness and death were her fault (55). This mirrors Judith Butler's exploration of vulnerability and performativity, particularly during pandemics, as discussed in her book *Precarious Life- The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (2004). Butler argues that societal structures often fail to recognize and support vulnerable groups, exacerbating their precariousness during crises (40). This lack of recognition can lead to systemic inequities, where individuals, like Bernice, act out of desperation and fear, influenced by a lack of social support and acknowledgment.

One morning, Bernice looked out her window and noticed a horse-drawn wagon approaching the alley, accompanied by two men. One of them called out, "Bring out your dead!" His voice was weary but detached, resembling that of a newspaper vendor on a deserted street. Bernice stepped back inside to observe, recalling stories she had heard about the yellow fever outbreaks, when some victims were reportedly buried alive in haste. She began to wonder if similar events were unfolding again. Radio broadcasts reported that over five thousand influenza-related deaths had occurred since the parade. Although embalming students and morticians from other regions had arrived to assist with managing the growing number of deceased, their contributions proved inadequate. Before Wallis became ill, a newspaper reported that flu-related death notices filled an entire ledger, and trucks were being used to transport bodies from the morgue to Potter's Field. Bodies were tagged for future identification before being interred in trenches excavated by steam shovels, and the workers responsible for filling the mass graves were themselves falling ill. A broadcast from the Pennsylvania Council of National Defense declared, "It is doubtful that the city of Philadelphia has, at any time in its history, been confronted by a more serious situation than that presented in connection with the care and burial of the dead during the recent epidemic" (58). Given the overwhelming conditions, Bernice believed that the possibility of people being buried alive could not be ruled out.

Pia worked tirelessly to keep herself and her brothers alive in their cramped apartment as bodies accumulated outside. She rationed Mellin's Infant Food and supplemented the boys' diet with porridge, soft-boiled eggs, cooked potatoes, and mashed carrots. Struggling to replicate her mother's lentil soup, she ended up with it either half-cooked or too mushy. Despite disliking her mother's Postum, she drank it, saving the least appealing foods for herself while giving Ollie and Max anything she could make soft. When not caring for the twins, Pia watched out the window, hoping to see her father return from the war. Occasionally, neighbors placed sheet-wrapped bodies on their steps. She considered whether to take her deceased mother outside but couldn't manage it alone and felt it wasn't right. She said a reluctant goodbye to her brothers, placing them in the cubby before venturing out for food and necessities. Exhausted and showing flu symptoms, she collapsed on the street and was cared for by nurses in an abandoned church, where she recovered for days. Upon waking, she was startled and insisted on returning home but was too weak. A nurse reassured her, saying, "The Visiting Nurse Society sent people into the city to see if they can help citizens in their homes. Trained nurses, nursing students, anyone who has ever acted as a caregiver, really, has been called to service. I'm sure they'll take care of your brothers" (107). In fact, Bernice, the woman who kidnapped the infants, had once looked after her brothers. She argued that her misguided and immoral behavior, motivated by her ingrained animosity toward immigrants, was justifiable. She believed the city had become dominated by immigrants and filled with the sounds of foreign languages. As the flu spread into a full-blown epidemic, decimating Philadelphia's population, Bernice was left without her husband and son. She felt powerless, unable to control the chaos around her. In an attempt to restore some sense of order and purpose, she convinced herself that claiming to be the mother of the twins would allow her to make things right. Furthermore, she believed that no one could have blamed her for taking them after all she had endured (91). Amid Philadelphia's widespread suffering, the actions taken by individuals and the narratives they constructed revealed how systemic failures to support all members of society exacerbated fear and led to harmful behavior. Butler's perspective suggested that during a global health crisis, the limits of moral judgment became increasingly apparent, as fear and misinformation took precedence. For Bernice, those whose

social status was marginalized or recognized as outsiders, such as immigrants, were in a position of greater vulnerability because they were stripped of the structural protections, empathy, and resources, which became normalised. In those scenarios, hurtful behaviors were not always malicious; rather, they were often born out of desperation and what people felt was necessity.

The narrative illustrates the impact of societal failures in exacerbating the vulnerability individuals experience during global health crises. Characters such as Bernice and Pia help show that vulnerability is not an individual specific trait but is contingent upon certain events and social constructions. Researchers such as Goffman and Brown stress the importance of looking at vulnerability through political and social dynamics utilizing such analytical frameworks as; how can social conditions shape or heighten someone's sense of vulnerability, and whether that vulnerability should be analyzed as an effect of social conditioning, concerted or deliberate efforts, polity, psychology and/or behaviour, etc. Vulnerability as a social condition can be amplified or congested when one bears the unfortunate word of others, and discovering a source of empathy can thwart the trend of projecting vulnerability as a condition fixed to prior decisions or circumstance rather removing the veil of ignorance responsibility to challenge social systems that creates marginality and suffering for some who remain in an excellent state of vulnerability. The word 'political' refers to difficulties relating to power and authority that produce circumstances that have individuals feeling vulnerable and 'social dynamics' refer having to do with interactions/inferences within social contexts where we exist (Brown, xx). A careful analysis of these dynamics indicates that vulnerability is not fixed, but rather a state people occupy based on particular contexts, the demands placed on them, and their capacity to respond to those demands (Goffman 1961). This understanding challenges the presumption that any group is necessarily more vulnerable than another group. Brown's analysis of vulnerability provokes further thinking about how the nexus of power and social context produce, exacerbate, or reduce situations of precarity. Examining the political and social aspects of vulnerability, leads to the discussion about how those in power may be indirectly or directly constraining and controlling people's capacities, as well as how the built

environment and social context can impose a sense of helplessness and dependency. For example, consider people's forced vulnerability through exploitation in situations that include but are not limited to torture, and deprivation, that highlight power relations that can produce extreme suffering (Brown, xx). Politics and social context of vulnerability is useful for understanding the different interplay of power, authority, and social context that condition vulnerability to social, economic, and other forms of precarity. Examining these political and social dimensions can lead to more empathetic and informed approaches to addressing the struggles of individuals and communities when they are in vulnerable situations. It also reminds us that all of these dimensions are relevant personally because vulnerability is a state that can happen to anyone, and so examining the social or political dynamics also allows to reflect on particular assumptions and experiences. Understanding that one is vulnerable to vulnerability itself has the potential to foster empathy, solidarity, and commitment to changing systemic problems that continue to marginalize and exploit the most vulnerable in society. Examining vulnerability through political and social dynamics is essential to the understanding of the human condition. Adopting the premises in this approach affords a number of insights into power, authority, and social context as they shape the lived experiences of individuals and communities, and assists in mobilization towards more just and equitable and inclusive societies.

In the novel *Homebound* (2021) by Puja Changoiwala, the narrative delves into the migrant exodus during a pandemic, exploring themes of vulnerability and discrimination faced by migrant workers. This story aligns with the insights from various scholarly works and reports that highlight structural inequalities and power dynamics affecting marginalized populations during health crises. For instance, the UN Refugee Agency's 2021 report "Global Trends- Forced Displacement in 2020" provides empirical data on global displacement, outlining the challenges faced by refugee and migrant populations. The report reveals that, by the end of 2020, a record 82.4 million people were forcibly displaced due to conflict, violence, and human rights violations. Notably, the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated existing vulnerabilities, impacting access to safety and increasing incidents of gender-based violence, particularly among displaced women and children. The plight of migrant

workers, caught in systemic failure and often met with violence and indifference, is intricately portrayed in *Homebound*, reflecting the cruel realities highlighted in these works. The pandemic accentuated these disparities, disproportionately affecting those already vulnerable, and the UN report contextualizes this with the staggering numbers of displaced individuals, including the mentally and physically impacted children, emphasizing the global scale and urgency of the crisis.

The epistolary novel opened with a letter written by Meher on April 16, 2020, recounting the events of the previous night when a nationwide lockdown was suddenly announced. Indian citizens were unprepared for the abrupt enforcement of the total lockdown, which led to widespread panic and confusion. Additionally, social media platforms and news outlets played a significant role in the rapid circulation of rumors. Misinformation soon spread, including false claims that the government had arranged special trains to transport migrant workers back to their hometowns. As a result, large numbers of migrant workers, including Meher's father, crowded railway ticket counters, pleading with authorities to be transported home. They "pleaded to be ferried home; their strained, raspy voices muddled into a chorus, vocalizing their fear, anguish and despair. Loud, so loud. Unheard" (9). However, instead of finding trains ready to carry them to safety, they were met with silent, immobile platforms. Under the restrictions of the national lockdown, venturing outside was considered a criminal offense, and those who did so were subjected to violence. Meher, the narrator, was left uncertain whether those leaving in search of home would still be regarded as criminals. Reflecting on her experience, Meher wrote, "I'm not naive, Madam Journalist. Even as a fifteen-year-old, I understand that humans of a certain stature must expect a degree of bombing and beating from uniformed goblins. All of us in Mumbai's hundred-square-foot homes know that. That's why, when the cops pounded my father's spine with those blunt blows two days ago, he did not kick up a fuss. When Ma nursed those scarlet contusions with ice, she did not cringe; and when Happy, my little brother, and I saw his haemorrhaged skin turn into a velvety violet, we did not look away. It was predictable, mundane, almost boring" (Changoiwala 2). The passage reflects the normalization of state violence experienced by marginalized communities, revealing

how routine oppression had become woven into their daily lives. When COVID-19 reached the densely populated one-hundred-square-foot homes in the slum areas, the fear of hunger and unemployment proved far more immediate and tangible than the fear of an unfamiliar illness. Faced with precarious living conditions, many residents made impulsive and desperate decisions, such as fleeing to their hometowns on foot, despite the challenges and risks involved. In the first few days, some families survived the calamity of being stranded in a city with nothing but limited food that would last for a day or two. When that food ran out, they relied on cash to buy what they needed. A few days later, the cash also ran out and almost every household in the slum was troubleshooting with food distributions as the only way to survive. Things turned ugly quickly, and the situation degraded into a downward spiral of chaos and suffering. The narrator remembered going to one home where the mother had no food and could offer her children only water. She boiled the water and added salt to provide something for them. Children were seen rummaging through garbage for scraps. When a milk truck tipped on the freeway, people clawed their way through the tap to retrieve milk off the freeway, and stray dogs did the same. So many people were migrants. Migrants that made the conscious decision to stick around the city while their jobs and livelihoods were stripped. Some survived three weeks, and others could not wait three hours for assistance. It was noted that “within twenty-four hours of the lockdown in India, tens of thousands of migrants had already started walking home, the first wave of coronavirus refugees in the world” (107). Meher’s family, along with their neighbors, faced the difficult and often agonizing decision of whether to stay in place or attempt the journey back to their native villages. The term “homebound” captured this dual meaning, either a return to one’s place of origin or a state of confinement. For a lot of people, home did not mean safety or comfort, especially when that space was defined through physical hunger, mental anguish and domestic violence. What many were more fearful of was not the virus, but the limitations, deprivation, and anguish that came from trying to survive in such restricted and precarious situations.

The national lockdown that took place during the COVID-19 pandemic greatly increased levels of anxiety and stress amongst the population at large, with

migrant workers being most psychologically affected. The migrant population faced increased psychosocial distress, which often presented as panic attacks and volatile behavior (Choudhari 2020). These emotional responses caused a lot of migrants to leave the areas where they were economically active out of desperation and fear. Many of them gathered at bus depots and railway stations in order to return home to their home states, in spite of lockdown orders. This procession did not just violate public health orders but also increased their chances of exposure and infection and also quarantine or hostility. Their act, which they felt was a necessity, added to a continuous cycle of violation and larger risk of further trauma and marginalization. Kumar et al. observed that migrants were particularly susceptible to cumulative traumas across social, psychological, and emotional domains. These traumas often emerged from a pervasive fear of discrimination and neglect by local communities, coupled with overwhelming anxiety regarding the safety and well-being of their families in distant rural homes (2020). The sense of abandonment and insecurity, both in host cities and in relation to their familial responsibilities, intensified their mental health struggles. The pandemic thus not only revealed the fragile socio-economic positioning of migrants but also laid bare the structural inequalities that prevented them from accessing necessary support systems during a time of crisis.

In *Homebound*, the narrative depicts the harrowing journey of migrant workers during a pandemic lockdown, illustrating the suspension of normal rights and the prioritization of state interests over individual well-being. This aligns with Giorgio Agamben's concept of the "state of exception," where sovereign power expands during crises to bypass legal norms, reducing individuals to "bare life," or *zoē*, existence stripped of political and civil rights. The abrupt lockdown in India leaves migrants, including Meher's father, stranded and vulnerable, exemplifying Agamben's critique of sovereign power and its disregard for individual dignity. The harsh measures, lack of foresight, and neglect of the socio-economic realities of these workers reveal how the government prioritizes control at the expense of humane treatment. The description of migrants as "the first wave of coronavirus refugees in the world" (Changoiwala 107) hinted upon their reduction to bare life, being solely defined by biological survival within a system that denies them meaningful rights or

protection. This portrayal reflects Agamben's warning about the erosion of civil liberties in the name of public safety and highlights the systemic failures that intensify the suffering of marginalized groups.

Several governments worldwide had adopted different strategies to control the spread of the virus. Some regions promptly enforced stringent lockdowns and required mask-wearing, while others were hesitant, resulting in delayed reactions and worsened crises. A research conducted by Hale et al. (2021) recorded in "A Global Panel Database of Pandemic Policies," indicated that nations implementing proactive governmental initiatives had lower COVID-19 death rates than those with delayed or reactive actions. However, the efficacy of governmental responses cannot be exclusively credited to the strictness of measures. Socio-political variables, including leadership transparency, public trust, and adherence to scientific advice, is found to have a substantial impact on the results. Public responses to pandemic regulations varied significantly, reflecting the influence of broader social and cultural contexts as well as attitudes toward authority. While some individuals complied with public health directives, others resisted them, resulting in tensions surrounding measures such as mask mandates and vaccination campaigns. Psychological factors also played a critical role in shaping behavior. Perceptions of risk, exposure to misinformation, and adherence to individualistic values were found to be key elements, influencing how people responded to the crisis.

On 19 March, Prime Minister Modi made his first address to the nation on COVID-19. The main takeaway from the speech was that the day-long Janata Curfew of 22 March was imposed presumably to 'break the chain of transmission'. We did not know then but this was a dry run for the impending lockdown... there was momentary lapse of consciousness by the entire government, much like the oblivion over migrant workers, about the economic effects of a lockdown. (Ghosh 131)

The central government's Shramik train scheme has been roundly criticised by Harsh Mander, the author of *Locking Down the Poor- The Pandemic and India's Moral Centre*. The union government announces a number of special worker trains

following five weeks of lockdown and the daily appearance on newspaper front pages and television screens worldwide of images of thousands of walking migrants, many of whom were carrying small children. In his own words, he explained how, “This raised hope for some belated display of humanity by state authorities, an acceptance in principle of both the right of migrants to return to their villages and the states responsibility to support them to safely travel home” (55). These hopes, however, didn’t last long. Chinmay Tumbe, in his book *The Age of Pandemics*, emphasized that political dynamics played a significant role in shaping the outcomes of pandemics. He argued that the extent of government intervention during a public health crisis was influenced by the level of accountability that leaders felt toward their citizens and the strength of political opposition. The timing of intervention was often dictated by upcoming elections or the degree to which governments sought to focus public attention on or divert it from the pandemic. Tumbe noted that any action taken by a government was likely to be assessed in relative terms, often by comparing it to other regions or countries perceived to be handling the situation less effectively. He observed that “in order to not look bad, there is a clear incentive for politicians to take measures to downplay pandemic deaths” (165). Governments could achieve this by under-reporting fatalities, attributing them to alternative causes, or by simply avoiding widespread testing. In the context of India, Tumbe pointed out that sub-national governments sometimes refused to allow returning migrants back to their home states as a strategy to maintain low official case and death counts. He highlighted a significant challenge concerning the standard epidemiologist advice to implement lockdowns during a pandemic, particularly in poorer countries. He argued that such measures can disproportionately burden society and risk reinitiating disease cycles through undernutrition. In his view, lockdowns in developing nations differ fundamentally from those in wealthier countries; for individuals who cannot “work from home,” lockdowns lead to the closure of millions of livelihoods. This financial strain can further reduce food expenditures, pushing people down the nutrition ladder, ultimately increasing vulnerability to infectious diseases. He concluded that India’s devastating death toll during the 1918–19 flu pandemic was likely more attributable to high food prices and undernutrition than to the virus itself. He suggested, “A stringent lockdown in that context would have made things much

worse by driving up prices further. Better food distribution instead of a lockdown would seem, in hindsight, to have been the right thing to do” (166).

To further explore how vulnerability shapes experiences of crisis, one can turn to Pramod K. Nayar’s work on ‘extreme cultures.’ In his book, *The Extreme in Contemporary Culture- States of Vulnerability*, Nayar examines vulnerability as a key cultural discourse, presenting what he terms “extreme cultures.” These cultural practices represent humans caught in risky, painful, or life-threatening conditions, testing their corporeal integrity and mental resilience (Nayar, xx). Nayar’s analysis centers on discourse related to risk, corporeal fragility, and the exploitation of this vulnerability, whether voluntary or involuntary. He suggested that extreme cultures signal the social ontology of humans, where vulnerability can be transformed into helplessness, reflecting human dependence on their surroundings (Nayar, xx). The stigma associated with illness is also addressed. In one village, individuals exhibiting symptoms like a cold or cough are marked with a “DANGER” sign outside their homes. A health professional who attempted to educate villagers about Covid-19 precautions faced violence, was initially being spat on, then doused with hot water, and ultimately attacked with stones (171). Meanwhile, thousands of migrants traveled on national highways, “dressed in all colors of the rainbow,” with “burdened beasts” moving purposefully to escape urban areas and return to their true homes (38). Many others attempted to make the journey on foot to their villages but perished from exhaustion, hunger, and the heat. Media outlets reported on these events, with headlines such as “Indian migrants are dying to get home,” highlighting the plight of those walking back to their native regions (105). Documentation of these struggles includes letters from Meher to journalist Ms. Farah, detailing the harrowing experiences faced by migrants along their journeys. Meher recounts stories of a migrant pretending to be mad to evade police, a woman who gave birth on the road only to rise shortly afterward, and workers trapped in a warehouse without food or water due to the employers’ desire to retain labor (108). They even encountered a sick individual, likely infected with Covid-19, who had been abandoned after paying for transport. Despite efforts to convince him to seek medical help, he refused, insisting he would only die at home. Their attempts to assist him

ended when he began throwing rocks and mud at them, leaving Meher to reflect on the plight of the immigrant even as they moved on. Nayar posits that the “story of dying” cannot be detached from its narrativization, as the process of dying is perceived through cultural narratives that provide intelligibility to the experience (Offizier, 120). Extreme cultures symbolize one set of narratives that interpret dying and injury as effects of non-life-sustaining conditions that exploit vulnerable corporeality, showcasing the inversion of mutual dependency and transforming vulnerability into helplessness under oppression, victimization, or disease (Nayar, xx). Thus, extreme cultures serve as interpretative frameworks for understanding how humans lead their lives and create conditions for others facing similar precarity. While such cultures may appear morbidly focused on death, Nayar argues they ultimately underlines the complexities of living (Nayar, xx). His exploration of extreme cultures contributes significantly to cultural studies by spotlighting the centrality of vulnerability in modern representations and inviting critical examination of its social and political implications. By unpacking the ways in which vulnerability is understood, exploited, and narrativized, Nayar encourages deeper engagement with the precarious conditions affecting individuals and communities.

When police officials doused our bodies with those chemicals, ma'am, I felt like a sugar ant. It was irrelevant that I was a good student, a decent daughter, and that I hoped to be a diligent journalist someday. It was worthless, the honesty that my parents thrive by. Trifling, their obedience for every man-made institution of terror government, god, karma, hell and superstition. Trivial, their non-violence, the fact that they would never hurt anyone, not even an ant. What mattered was the depth of Baba's pockets, and the lack of it, somehow, coloured us fit for oppression. We could be crushed, no problem. (Changoiwala 102)

At the state borders, authorities detained migrant workers and subjected them to chemical sprays under the justification of disinfection. These substances, however, had harmful effects on their already fragile bodies, often causing allergic reactions and physical discomfort. As a journalist noted, “these migrants are desperate to return home. They have embarked on these dangerous journeys at great personal risk,

but their expeditions are met with chemical baths and police brutality” (116). Officials dismissed the migrants’ concerns. One officer remarked, “It’s only bleach. It’ll kill the virus on your body. You should be grateful we disinfected you.” Yet, the workers remained skeptical. One questioned, “If it isn’t harmful, why are your men wearing those white suits? Why are you standing so far?” Another asked pointedly, “Are you killing the virus or us?” while a third inquired, “Are you disinfecting rich people?” (Changoiwala110). These responses reflected not only the dehumanizing treatment endured by migrants but also the class-based inequities that characterized the state’s pandemic response. Law enforcement used batons to control the crowd, employing physical force rather than compassion. Shortly after the health officials departed, a politician arrived on the scene. The migrants attempted to tell him about the chemical spraying, but he showed little concern. His primary focus was on photo opportunities. Accompanied by aides carrying leftover food packets, he distributed them for the cameras. As he posed with the migrants, he directed them by saying, “No, no, do not smile for the camera... Look distressed, hungry, especially the children” (110). This moment illustrated the performative nature of political engagement during crises, where the appearance of aid took precedence over addressing the actual needs and dignity of the people. This scene evokes a powerful argument that, in many cases, human actions particularly those carried out by individuals in positions of power inflicted more harm than the virus itself. The suffering experienced at borders, the violence, and the pervasive sense of displacement were not natural consequences of the pandemic, but rather products of institutional neglect and political failure. Those in the weakest positions- migrant laborers, the working poor, and the socially marginalized bore the brunt of these failures.

The protagonist reflects on the human cost of the crisis with profound grief and urgency. The exodus forced the narrator to confront the precarity of migrant life, revealing that for many, home was not a right but an elusive, often unattainable hope. In *Homebound*, the experiences of migrant workers poignantly reveal the shortcomings of bureaucratic systems during crises. The narrative showcases how migrants endure police brutality and chemical sprays, illustrating the failure of such

systems to maintain human dignity and address real needs. These measures, intended as public health initiatives, instead dehumanize individuals, making them feel like “sugar ants,” valued mainly by their financial status. This situation highlights Weber’s concern that bureaucracies can devalue people to parts within a machine, neglecting individual suffering and circumstances in pursuit of order and efficiency. When the protagonist noted that people with the weakest positions- the poor, regular workers, and migrants are always the ones who suffer the most, it accentuates Weber’s critique of how impersonal bureaucracies could disproportionately harm vulnerable groups. The rigid enforcement of control measures, without regard for personal hardship, highlights a lack of adaptability to human crises within bureaucratic frameworks. Thus, while the goal of these systems may be to manage pandemics efficiently, their implementation can lead to deeper marginalization and suffering for the already disadvantaged. Weber’s insights suggest that relying too heavily on bureaucracy without considering its human impact can result in systemic failures, depicted in the inadequate responses to the plight of migrants. The novel ultimately highlights the tension between bureaucratic efficiency and the need for compassionate, adaptive responses to human crises while vividly showcasing the dehumanizing potential of bureaucratic rigidity for marginalized populations. The novel *Homebound* also highlights Foucault’s concept of disciplinary power, where authority is exerted not through obvious oppression but through practices presented as beneficial. The narrative illustrates how such measures shape a climate of fear and control similar to Foucault’s panopticon, in which constant surveillance leads people to internalize these control mechanisms. Police actions against migrants like beatings and chemical sprays, demonstrate how power is exercised through seemingly neutral acts that undermine dignity and individual rights. Meher’s reflection on feeling like “a sugar ant” emphasizes the reduction of personal value to economic terms, revealing how disciplinary power enforces compliance and dehumanizes people.

Calamities often intensify existing social, economic, and cultural challenges, while simultaneously inflicting significant harm on affected populations. Nevertheless, in revealing the underlying structures of a society, such catastrophes can also present opportunities for reflection, reconstruction, and reform. They may

catalyze the emergence of new, innovative, and constructive ideas, fostering developments that address long-standing issues. Among various forms of catastrophe, pestilence has played a particularly significant role throughout history. As societies evolved into more dynamic and sedentary forms, infectious diseases became constant companions. However, the historical impact of such diseases has often been underappreciated, largely due to the persistent uncertainty surrounding their origins and modes of transmission. Only recently, a number of prominent social scholars offered a number of ground breaking ideas, concepts, theories and paradigms which greatly contributed to a better understanding of the phenomenon of pestilence. As George Orwell (1903- 1950) sardonically quipped in his allegorical novella *Animal Farm* (1945), “some ... are more equal than others.” The pandemic has almost grotesquely amplified existing social, racial, ethnic and economic disparities. Spurred by the pandemic, social tensions have ensued (Vlad 19, 20).

Conveyed in pandemic narratives, catastrophes can bring out and emphasise the distinction between personal self-interest and social responsibility. Certain individuals, including doctors and nurses, sacrificed their lives in the service of others, while placing themselves at risk of infection even as they simultaneously compromised their own health due to physical exhaustion and prolonged exposure. Some individuals and groups simply looked for profit or advantage in the suffering of others, while some humanitarian groups and associations have risked their own lives to save others. What kind of society it is or whether it even qualifies as a “society” depends on how the majority behave in the face of danger. The pandemic is not a study in existential apathy; rather, it is a story about bravery, engagement, paltriness and generosity, small heroism and large cowardice, and a variety of responses that stem from fear, survival instinct and ramifications of power (Vlad 20).

Pandemics have generated a diverse range of discourse encompassing scientific debates, political narratives, and socio-cultural analyses. Comprehending and navigating these varied viewpoints are essential for formulating meaningful insights. The power dynamics present in the rhetoric around public health emergencies have also been exposed by the pandemic. Furthermore, magnifying neglected perspectives and promoting critical consciousness may lead to envisioning

more equitable and comprehensive approaches for addressing future challenges. The narratives explored in this chapter reveal the layered nature of human responses to pandemics. While these events trigger worldwide health catastrophes, they also ignite crucial discourses surrounding responses to issues related to the outbreak. Examining various viewpoints and their ramifications highlights the intricate interplay of governmental policies, societal behaviours, and global dynamics. These narratives showcase the challenges and opportunities that emerge during pandemics, revealing the multifaceted nature of human behaviours and the need for a more comprehensive approach to understanding the phenomenon of pandemics. In conclusion, this chapter has highlighted the importance of understanding the interwoven social, political, and cultural dynamics that are at play during pandemics. The chapter's examination of various theorists offers a nuanced understanding of how pandemics shape our world and prompt responses. It suggests that a more comprehensive approach to pandemic preparedness is necessary, one that recognizes the variance of human behaviours, emphasizes a more ethical approach to governance, and stresses the importance of building resilient communities capable of coping with future challenges.

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Chapter III- Bigotry, Paranoia and “Othering” in Pandemic Narratives

In the context of pandemic narratives, bigotry and paranoia are often linked as two-fold spectres haunting the collective consciousness, reflecting not only the fear of contagion itself but also as manifestations of other social phobias, deeper anxieties and prejudices embedded within. These narratives shed light on the fractured dimensions of the human psyche when confronted with the threat of existential termination. Bigotry, a form of prejudice that is rooted from the sociopolitical structures and historical inequality finds its fertile ground in times of crisis. The term “bigotry” is derived from the French word “bigot,” historically used to describe someone seen as a religious zealot or hypocrite. The spread of the virus is also followed by the increase in the practice of stigma based on religion, race, ethnicity, or nationality to blame the victims from the society’s minority groups. On the other hand, another phenomenon that emerged was “paranoia,” a term with etymological roots in the Greek language, formed from “para” meaning “beside” or “beyond,” and “noos,” meaning “mind,” suggesting a condition of mental disturbance or disordered thinking. Paranoia, arising from uncertainty and fear of the unknown, remained a recurring theme in numerous pandemic narratives, undermining trust and intensifying social tensions. The fear of contagion becomes entwined with the fear of the ‘other,’ leading to a cycle of suspicion and isolation. When there are no clear answers and reliable information, paranoia spawns conspiracy theories and disbelief that widen the social divide and hinder the chances of a collective effort to address the crisis. Combined, bigotry and paranoia in the pandemic narrative play the roles of warning the public against the possibility of giving in to fear and concession to prejudice during a global crisis. By confronting these themes head-on, pandemic narratives compel readers to interrogate their own biases and assumptions, challenging them to cultivate empathy and solidarity in the face of adversity.

Over the years, plagues, epidemics and pandemics have wrongly been associated with communities or ethnic groups in a way that stigmatizes them further than they would when perceived as pure victims of fate, bringing forward racialization, stereotyping and prejudices ingrained within societies even deeper. Throughout history, Jewish communities in Europe were falsely accused of contaminating wells and were subsequently persecuted and killed during the Black

Death in the 14th century. Irish immigrants in the UK and America suffering under difficult housing conditions during the Third Cholera Pandemic of the Nineteenth century were unwarrantedly accused of being responsible for disease transmission, boasting anti-Irish xenophobia. The prevalence of polio among Italian immigrants in the early 20th-century United States underscored another manifestation of ethnic prejudice. In the 2020's anti-Asian sentiment rose to unprecedented levels with COVID-19 pandemic leading to an overblown rhetoric aimed particularly towards Chinese communities globally. These examples demonstrated how pandemics exacerbated social prejudices and contributed to the imposition of significant stigma and discrimination. They unveil the darkest facets of human nature, casting a chilling light on the pervasive nature of bigotry and discrimination. One of the most insidious legacies accompanying nearly every global pandemic is the emergence of stigmatization, prejudicial treatment, racism, bigotry, paranoia, and xenophobia, all stemming from the frantic search to pinpoint the source or initial carrier, often dubbed "patient zero." Throughout the annals of time, certain groups or cultures have borne the brunt of this blame game, becoming scapegoats for the collective anxieties and fears of the afflicted populace.

In a study conducted by psychiatrists Debanjan Banerjee, Roy Abraham Kallivayalil¹ and T. S. Sathyanarayana Rao it is stated that "Infections have historically blurred origins and stigmatized the affected" (S104).

Over the years, territorial conflicts, violence, communalism, military disputes, diseases, famines, social divisions, and racism have been rooted in the processes of othering and social stigma. Throughout history, "othering" has also led to the genesis of imperialism, colonialism, sexism, gender dichotomization, and cultural subordination (the "subaltern natives," who are socially, politically, and geographically beyond the hierarchy of power and hence exploited by the privileged sections) (Canales 16).

The term "xenophobia" is composed of two Greek words- "xenos," meaning "stranger" or "foreigner," and "phobos," meaning "fear". Thus, the word literally translates to "fear of strangers." While the concept of fearing or distrusting foreigners has ancient roots, the specific term "xenophobia" in English is believed to have first

appeared in the early 20th century. The word “xenophobia” can be traced back to 1909, with its early appearance noted in the British periodical, *The Athenaeum*. This is in line with the historical context of this period which was marked by the growth of globalization and migration, the emergence of new social and political situations concerning the definition of citizenship and relations with other countries. Not long after this, Sigmund Freud noted in his paper on mass psychology titled “Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego,” originally published in 1921 state that it is “a natural process for the collective. We are no longer astonished that greater differences should lead to an almost insuperable repugnance, such as the Gallic people feel for the German, the Aryan for the Semite, and the white races for the coloured” (Freud 100). Sven Lindqvist’s book *Exterminate All the Brutes* (1996) made a thorough examination of European colonial history, focusing on the ideologies that gave rise to imperialistic and xenophobic attitudes. Lindqvist also provided different examples of how colonial powers viewed other races and cultures as underdeveloped by way of justifying their slavery and, in certain instances, extermination. The book echoed themes from Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1978), illustrating how narratives shaped by those in power construct perceptions of “the other,” often rooted in fear and misinformation. In a similar way, another important work that can be referred to, in terms of how the “other” is viewed is Frantz Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961). In it, the author writes, “Colonialism is not a thinking machine, nor a body endowed with reasoning faculties. It is violence in its natural state, and it will only yield when confronted with greater violence (23).” It is anarchy, also in barbaric form. It is war against everyone, but it does not tolerate either anarchy or war. Structural racism has to be dismantled and challenged. These books offer insight into the fact that xenophobia is not merely defined by ignorance and fear. It is a structure-related issue that has to do with imperialism and power.

The widespread fear and ignorance that often accompany a pandemic can be critically examined through the theoretical lens of Michel Foucault, who argued that “ignorance is part of the knowledge production process.” According to Foucault, knowledge is not neutral or purely objective but embedded within systems of power that define what is accepted and what is excluded. His approach to knowledge sought

to “uncover discursive struggles and excavate ‘subjugated knowledges’, knowledges that are disqualified or dismissed by dominant, standard, and sanctioned discourses” (Foucault 2003). In this context, ignorance is not merely the absence of information, but an actively constructed and maintained phenomenon that serves specific political and ideological functions. Building on Foucault’s ideas, Robert Proctor, in *Agnotology- The Making and Unmaking of Ignorance* (2008), explored ignorance as a deliberate and strategic tool used by those in power to uphold their authority. Proctor contended that ignorance can be intentionally cultivated by suppressing, delaying, or marginalizing specific forms of knowledge. His work revealed how power structures manipulate information to create doubt or confusion, thereby maintaining control and reinforcing existing inequalities. Ignorance, in this sense, is not accidental but systematically produced and weaponized in sociopolitical contexts. Mary Douglas further extended this critique by linking social inequality to the proliferation of ignorance and fear, particularly during crises. She argued that deep structural divisions within society such as disparities in wealth and status contribute to heightened hostility toward marginalized groups during moments of collective anxiety. Douglas observed that fear in times of danger often reinforces existing divisions within a society. In moments of major crisis, these social fractures tend to deepen further. She suggested that when there is significant economic inequality, those who are poor are likely to endure greater suffering than they would in a more equal society. Similarly, in contexts marked by intense xenophobia, foreign individuals are more likely to be scapegoated and subjected to increased violence (Douglas 34).

The COVID-19 pandemic served as a stark revelation of deeply rooted social inequalities, particularly those related to race and ethnicity. Brown argued that the crisis highlighted the need for a “reconciliation of ‘life as a fact of nature and as a fact of experience’,” emphasizing how structural racism, socioeconomic conditions, and institutionalized biases shaped the distribution and severity of pandemic-related impacts (Brown 2020). One of the critical shortcomings in the early pandemic response was the inadequate categorization of risk, especially due to the omission of racial and ethnic data in initial health reports. This exclusion rendered existing

disparities invisible and hindered an effective, equitable public health response (Khunti et al. 2020). As Sridhar noted, conditions such as overcrowded or poor-quality housing and precarious positions in the labor market, particularly among low-paid essential workers intensified exposure to the virus and limited individuals' capacity to protect themselves (Sridhar 2020). The theoretical insights of sociologist Erving Goffman further illuminate how stigma operates in times of crisis. His concept of "courtesy stigma" refers to the ways in which language and social labelling reproduce hierarchies by attaching negative connotations to groups who are already marginalized. In the context of the pandemic, the use of stigmatizing language reinforced social divisions and deepened discrimination, often targeting racial minorities or those deemed "deviant" by prevailing norms. Nelkin and Gilman explored the enduring tendency to seek explanations for disease in behavioral, ethnic, or social terms, despite advancements in biomedical science. They observed that "despite the sophisticated scientific understanding underlying concepts of disease in the late twentieth century, we still seek explanations based on behaviour, ethnicity, or social stereotypes. We still use disease to protect our social boundaries or to maintain our political ideals. And, at a time when control over disease is limited, we still blame others as a way to protect ourselves." They argued that by assigning blame to particular groups or behaviors, societies attempt to impose order on the unpredictable nature of disease and mortality. This tendency to "draw firm boundaries" reflects a deeper psychological need to distance oneself from the arbitrary suffering caused by illness and to deny the vulnerability that is intrinsic to the human condition (Nelkin and Gilman 378).

Recognizing the intersection of scientific knowledge, structural inequality, and lived experience is essential for developing a more nuanced and equitable understanding of pandemics in both public discourse and literature. Pandemic narratives, when read critically, reveal not only medical and biological realities but also the moral and political landscapes through which societies respond to crisis. With the emergence of pandemic narratives or works that have pandemic settings in the field of literature, the "othering" and stigmatization that happened along with the outbreaks are brought to light. Said's analyses of the discursive practices of the

“West” that positions and produce the “Orient” or the “Orientals” can be used as a focal point of locating the “othering” in select pandemic narratives. These fictional texts and their depiction of the marginalized or the ‘Other’ will be the focus of the study. The literary texts that are selected for this thesis also have parallel and similar incidences. Even though the author may use fictional names and communities, the responses and aftermaths are still very much prescient and reflective in nature.

In the Preface to *Orientalism*, Edward Said emphasized upon the role of humanism as a framework grounded in the agency of individual intuition and critical subjectivity, rather than in conformity to inherited ideas or established authority. He asserted, “Humanism is centered upon the agency of human individuality and subjective intuition, rather than on received ideas and approved authority” (xxii). For Said, literary works that seek to expose and confront truth, rather than conceal or uphold dominant ideologies, exemplify the power of humanist critique. He argued that such texts are integral to resisting the dehumanizing forces and injustices that have historically shaped human societies, stating that “humanism is the only, and I would go so far as to say, the final resistance we have against the inhuman practices and injustices that disfigure human history” (xxix). In the introductory chapter, Said clarified that his analysis was crafted with “several audiences in mind,” among which the literary community held particular importance. He anticipated that students of literature and criticism would find in his work new avenues of inquiry, as the concept of Orientalism provided “a marvelous instance of the interrelations between society, history, and textuality.” He further noted that the role of the Orient in the Western imagination linked the study of Orientalism to broader questions of ideology, politics, and power (Said 24). Said expanded on these ideas in *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), where he focused more specifically on literary and creative texts. He argued that writers, whether consciously or unconsciously, often operate within ideological frameworks that reflect the dynamics between cultures and imperial powers. Literature, in this view, plays a dual role as it possesses the capacity to influence historical trajectories, while also being shaped by the historical and cultural contexts in which it is produced. Said wrote, “I do not believe that authors are mechanically determined by ideology, class or economic history, but authors are,

I also believe, very much in the history of their societies, shaping and shaped by that history and their social experience in different measure. Culture and aesthetic forms it contains derive from historical experience, which in effect is one of the main subjects of this book” (*Culture and Imperialism* xxiv). This perspective revealed his conviction that literature must be studied not in isolation, but in relation to the historical and cultural forces that inform both its creation and its interpretation.

Songs for the End of the World is a character centered novel written by Canadian author Saleema Nawaz in 2020. The story is set in the time when “a catastrophe was coming” that turns out to be a disease called ARAMIS, which stands for Acute Respiratory and Muscular Inflammatory Syndrome. The novel is a collection of stories and narrations about the protagonist’s and other characters’ lives in a non-chronological timeline, which tells the story of peoples’ lives before and during the pandemic. The intimate focus on relationships and personal experiences seem to be the intent of the author, who felt that most of the existing pandemic narratives produced are far from comforting. She expressed that “pandemics are a time of great upheaval and uncertainty, and we often turn to stories for guidance when the world frightens us” (321). The characters in this novel all dwelt and pondered on life altering choices such as self-preservation, freedom, autonomy and duty towards family, friends and society as a whole. The author focuses upon various themes such as human connections, the breakdown of machinery, sacrifices of the frontline workers, the disparity between the poor and the elites, international accusations and conspiracies, but this chapter will solely focus on the aspect of racial subjugation. The blurb of the book stated that the lives of the different characters were interconnected and tied to the “mystery of the so-called ARAMIS Girl,” who is publicized and condemned on the internet after a photograph of an Asian server who works at the Italian diner is publicized as the patient zero, the first carrier of the disease. She is treated and regarded as a kind of “modern-day Typhoid Mary, well aware of her disease and recklessly infecting others. Soon afterward, xenophobia and hate crimes are directed towards the Asian American community” (128). Racial slurs and derogatory jokes made about the Aramis girl were circulated all over the internet and memes were even created in connection to her. This widespread

misunderstanding may stem from a more sinister theory about ARAMIS Girl. Users on popular conspiracy websites have noticed that ARAMIS Girl's initials (A.G.) match the abbreviation for antigen (Ag), which stands for antibody generator, a substance that triggers an immune response. In such a coincidence, ARAMIS Girl who is one of the characters in the novel, according to some online theorists, might be a biological weapon, initiated either by the American or Chinese government. This false story demonstrates how a simple mistaken identity can transform into an otherwise widely told story on social media; in this way, it may also raise the stigma surrounding ARAMIS Girl and Asian-Americans. Since the image went viral, over three dozen anti-Asian hate crimes have been reported in fourteen states, ranging from verbal abuse and vandalism to severe physical assaults (52). The narrative serves as a strong criticism of the practice of using individuals as scapegoats during times of crisis. In examining the formation and dissemination of conspiracy theories and rumors, the text illustrates how these narratives often give rise to racial scapegoating. The figure of the ARAMIS Girl becomes a symbolic focal point for communal anxieties, with uncertainty rapidly evolving into xenophobic sentiment and the exclusion of specific groups.

In real-world contexts, such dynamics frequently resulted in the persecution of individuals, particularly those belonging to racial, cultural, or social minorities. Efforts to identify the earliest carrier at the onset of a pandemic frequently targeted those perceived as outsiders. These individuals, often unconnected to the origins of the outbreak, were subjected to intense scrutiny, surveillance, and testing-actions that, in effect, resembled a modern-day witch hunt. As discussed previously, history offers numerous instances in which marginalized communities were unjustly blamed during times of epidemic and pandemic. During the Plague of Athens in 430 BCE, Ethiopians were falsely identified as the source of the disease. In the case of the Bubonic Plague, Jewish communities were accused of poisoning wells, leading to widespread persecution. Similarly, the 1918 influenza pandemic became mischaracterized as the "Spanish Flu," unfairly associating the Spanish people with the viral strain, a label that persists to this day. Another notable example is the stigmatization of the LGBTQ+ community, particularly homosexual men, who were

widely and inaccurately portrayed as the primary transmitters of Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS). Individuals have also been singled out and ostracized, such as Mary Mallon, who became infamously known as “Typhoid Mary.” Sander L. Gilman and Zhou Xun noted that the “moral panic” associated with various pandemics over recent decades was often a result of “heightened anxiety about social instability and the concomitant need to blame those seen as at fault for it” (209). Despite the fact that pandemics do not recognize national, racial, gendered, or socioeconomic boundaries, stigmatization and discrimination have frequently accompanied their outbreaks. As Torales et al. observed, “whenever a pandemic has struck the world, there has been stigma, prejudice, and marginalization with harmful effects for months to follow” (16). This tendency to vilify particular individuals or groups has been a recurring pattern rooted in social fear and ignorance. Rather than addressing the structural and scientific causes of disease, societies have repeatedly turned to scapegoating as a means of restoring a sense of control amidst uncertainty and crisis.

The book by Nawaz also highlighted the critical role that authorities and the media play in either fostering or mitigating fear and prejudice during times of crisis. The actions of Dr. Delille Case, while likely driven by public health concerns, illustrated how even well-intentioned decisions can yield unintended consequences. The release of a photograph, without full consideration of its broader social impact, marked the beginning of a chain of events that significantly intensified misinformation and public xenophobia. The situation brought to light how the narratives constructed and disseminated by those in power, particularly through media channels can substantially shape public perception and behavior during emergencies. In this instance, the manner in which officials framed the unfolding events appeared to produce a paradoxical effect- rather than inciting widespread panic and violence, it encouraged a form of collective cohesion. Nevertheless, the case served as a powerful reminder of the immense responsibility that comes with crisis communication. The messaging adopted by leadership figures and amplified through media outlets can either escalate tensions or guide the public response in a more constructive direction. Although Dr. Delille continued to defend the decision to

release the photograph on the grounds of public interest and informational transparency, she later acknowledged the unintended harm it caused. Expressing concern for the individual at the center of the controversy, she stated, “if this young woman is still alive, I hope that she receives the support she needs. We seem to have forgotten that there’s a real person at the bottom of all this.” Her reflection called attention to the ethical obligations of institutions not only to inform the public but also to protect the dignity and humanity of individuals who become symbolic figures in public discourse.

Another character observed and inquired about the “practical purpose it served to launch a manhunt for this young woman” since the virus had already spread in the city and focus directed on a certain individual seemed more like “a classic case of the authorities overreacting to make up for being caught off guard.” The fake news and conspiracy theories circulated online spread like wildfire and created mass panic, havoc and fear. The novel invites readers to reflect on broader societal dynamics, such as how fear can be manipulated and the impact of systemic biases. In times of crisis, fostering empathy, critical thinking, and solidarity are crucial to combating the spread of fear and the scapegoating of innocents, highlighting the need for responsible dissemination of information and a more inclusive approach to addressing public fears. Both Foucault’s insights into knowledge production and Proctor’s discussions on ignorance reinforce the idea that misinformation can be weaponized to perpetuate fear and xenophobia. Foucault emphasizes that ignorance, particularly related to marginalized communities, can be a strategic tool used by those in power to maintain control and manipulate public opinion. Proctor’s framework suggests that the narratives surrounding pandemics are inherently political, shaped by existing power dynamics. In the novel, the actions of authorities, such as the release of ARAMIS Girl’s photograph, exemplify how crisis communication can escalate fear and prejudice rather than alleviate it. The character Dr. Delille Case’s realization reflected the ethical responsibilities of those in power to consider the implications of their actions on vulnerable individuals, reflecting Mary Douglas’s assertion that societal gaps in knowledge can exacerbate division during crises.

The character of the mysterious girl was introduced early in the narrative as Edith Fraser, who preferred to be called Ed. Adopted from China at the age of ten, her birth name was Xiaolan. Later, while working part-time at a diner in New York, she used the name Naomi. She expressed a desire to work as a hostess but observed that all the hostesses at Cipolla were white women, implicitly highlighting the racial barriers she encountered. At her workplace, customers frequently misidentified her ethnicity, conflating her with other Asian communities. This recurring misrecognition served as a narrative precursor to the broader social ostracism faced by the Asian community in the novel. Edith had a limited presence throughout the novel, often appearing alongside the main characters, Owen Grant and Keelan. Her identity as an Asian American woman became central to the projection of collective anxieties and desires. Following the incident involving the ARAMIS Girl, anti-Asian sentiment surged, and it was speculated that Edith may have withdrawn from public view due to this backlash. As Keelan reflected, “a local Korean church had been graffitied and a new Chinese restaurant closed following a boycott.” Although it was difficult for him to envision such behavior in Lansdowne, he acknowledged that its lack of ethnic diversity made it susceptible to racial scapegoating during periods of social unrest (Nawaz 278). Although the narrative eventually clarified that Edith was misidentified, the damage had already occurred. Earlier in the novel, during the development of her relationship with the writer Owen Grant, it was suggested that she was captivated by his fame, hoping it might illuminate her own obscured existence- “the aura of fame as though it might catch her in its glow and light her up from within. And then, maybe, people will finally see her” (59). Edith had long struggled with feelings of invisibility but also admitted to experiencing the discomfort of being noticed for superficial reasons, such as her physical appearance or skin color. Her involvement in the controversy left her feeling isolated and unable to publicly defend herself. She was overwhelmed with guilt, believing that her exposure had brought harm to the broader Asian community. By the conclusion of the novel, she expressed a sobering realization- her experiences had led her to prefer obscurity over infamy. The public scrutiny and misdirected hostility she endured served as a profound commentary on racial profiling, visibility, and the psychological toll of being wrongfully targeted in a time of crisis.

The writer revealed that the real source of infection was another person who came from China, a kung-fu instructor who had appeared at the diner along with his students. It was detailed in the report that “Mr. Zhihuan Tsiang, the index patient, a visiting martial arts expert from China, infected everyone at his table, all members of a local gym. Mr. Tsiang died in China two days later, and the eight others developed symptoms within the week. All were dead within three weeks of the dinner, and six spread ARAMIS to their families.” The timeline of his visit along with his travels and people he came in contact with are rehashed, It was surmised that he had also infected a “taxi driver, a hotel clerk, and the hostess of the restaurant, who continued to infect other staff members.” He was what they call a “super-spreader” (195). In both instances, the outbreak was associated with Chinese characters, raising the issue of the prevalence of sinophobia. This means that the “yellow peril” case happened, where the East, as the enactment of an entirely different lifestyle, became the target of the West’s condemnation. The anti-Asian sentiment, rooted in the stereotypical connotations of Asians as heterogeneous and as viruses, is also seen with the case of Orientalists. This perspective raises the question of the Orientalists’ failure to acknowledge the diversity of culture and individuality of Asians, seeing it as a singular category. Joey S. Kim who penned the essay “Orientalism Restated in the Era of COVID-19” has observed how “the rise of Orientalist representations, stereotypes, aesthetics, commodities, and Orientalist discourse during the nineteenth century is the palimpsest from which U.S. Orientalism finds its current COVID moment.” She describes how the East and West discourse “pivots between imaginative idea and historical and political reality.” She argues that “Orientalism and its expressions of otherness propagate misinformed conceptions that are now finding expression in the Asian body as a viral signifier.” Her essay analyses and questions “the Asian and Asian American body as a historical, aesthetic, and phenomenological site of COVID signification” (13).

In another published thriller and suspense fiction; *The End of October* (2020) by an American author Lawrence Wright, the protagonist-a microbiologist and epidemiologist Dr. Henry Parsons is on a journey to track down and find a cure to the new severe virus strain from his travels in Indonesia called Kongoli virus that is wiping out hundreds of people and tearing apart organisations around the globe. The

virus eventually got connected to the Muslims, a religious minority in that western world. It is a powerful and prescient novel where the reader can understand how different diseases are used ideologically and politically to create public madness and fear by people who only wield negative forms of power. At the beginning, the protagonist Dr. Henry Parson, an American epidemiologist, was sent to Indonesia to investigate the outbreak of an unknown virus by the WHO where he first experienced the political tensions. “Withholding data was insane, he argued. Science knows no borders, nor does disease especially a disease that can literally fly across international boundaries on the wings of a dove” (20). On visiting the hotspot, forty-seven had already died of the disease and he immediately recognised a worrying fact that is “the identification of the first victims of the disease- gay Muslims with HIV was likely to create a pandemic of its own; one of hysteria”(59) The Indonesian Health Minister Annisa wanted to keep the panic down and withheld information because “rumors were already spreading about a gay disease infecting Jakarta”(59). Dr. Henry visited the virus hot zone, the gay correction camp which was set up to hide them. The government authorities were doing this to “protect” them otherwise they were flogged, hanged or even dropped down from buildings by extremists because of their sexual orientation which was seen as a perverse act that was plaguing their society. With respect to this issue, the analyses generated by Michel Foucault are notably important, predominantly in queer theory and practice, by disputing typical interpretations of power and resistance. Interrogating the historical connection of sex with sin, Foucault examines the societal mechanisms which have enforced that relationship in his book *The History of Sexuality Volume I* (1976). He revises the understanding of how queer communities have faced marginalization and various forms of abuse, ranging from violence to seclusion and social ‘othering,’ owing to ideas that see them as in need of transformation. He probes deeper into what Foucault said about how society exerts management over individual sexual identities through the aspect of confession. People rarely submit their confessions; often, these appear as a result of coercion or threats where they have to disclose information related to their identity. Society requires that sexuality reveals its truths, yet it concurrently assumes the right to explain and articulate those truths. This approach has society trying to surface the unseen portions of someone’s identity,

looking for confessions tied to truths deeply embedded in their awareness. Foucault paid close attention to the detailed functioning of power together with sexuality and individual identity in his study. Not only are the queer treated as criminals, they are also linked to sickness, madness or rebellious tendencies. Foucault stated in one of his interviews that "...if you are not like everybody else, then you are abnormal, if you are abnormal, then you are sick. These three categories, not being like everybody else, not being normal and being sick are in fact very different but have been reduced to the same thing..."(Je suis un artificier 95). Their attitude, way of living and modes of behavior have been perceived by society as an illness or something wrong with their genetics. Lawrence Wright, in locating the earliest outbreak of the virus amongst the gay community in orthodox surroundings is a reflection of how groups that are known as the "others" in terms of their sexuality are often targets of homophobia and bigotry. It may be noted that the homosexual, particularly the gay community are mostly associated with diseases such as Acquired Immuno Deficiency Syndrome when Gaëtan Dugas, a flight attendant was widely reported and believed to be the patient zero. This false narrative on gay men persisted through the years even though several attempts have been made to exonerate these accusations and counter these claims.

In *The End of October*, Wright situated the origin of the fictional pandemic within a marginalized and frequently stigmatized community, illustrating how disease narratives are often entangled with sociopolitical biases. The outbreak was traced back to Bambang Idris, the cab driver who had accompanied Dr. Henry P to the infected area and later traveled on a pilgrimage to Mecca. By anchoring the outbreak in this setting, the novel invoked long-standing Orientalist tropes, particularly in its depiction of Arab and Muslim cultures. This narrative decision reflects broader societal patterns in which certain communities are not only sidelined but are also cast as the origin or carrier of contagion, reinforcing historical and cultural prejudices. Henry, who lacked substantial familiarity with Saudi Arabia, entered the region with preconceived notions typical of Western Orientalist perspectives. His mental imagery of the kingdom was shaped by stereotypes such as 'deserts, veiled women, luxurious palaces,' and his impressions upon arrival

continued to reflect this lens. From within an airport lounge, he observed veiled women smoking hookahs, associating them with princesses while simultaneously feeling ignored, despite their evident curiosity. When a group of Arab men entered the scene, he noted, “A group of men entered in long white thobes, like a flotilla of swans. They were big men, fit, handsome, a perfectly matched set, each of them with identically trimmed black beards and the traditional red-checkered headscarf. The cordon they formed enclosed another man, similarly dressed but wearing a black cloak embroidered with gold trim. It took Henry a moment to recognize his friend” (Wright 78). This passage further illustrated how Western observers often view Arab individuals collectively, emphasizing aesthetics and uniformity over individuality. The novel’s portrayal of Arab and Muslim characters closely aligned with Edward Said’s theory of Orientalism, which critiques the West’s tendency to portray Eastern cultures through reductionist and stereotypical frameworks. Said observed, “In newsreels or news-photos, the Arab is always shown in large numbers. No individuality, no personal characteristics or experiences. Most of the pictures represent mass rage and misery, or irrational (hence hopelessly eccentric) gestures. Lurking behind all of these images is the menace of jihad. Consequence- a fear that the Muslims (or Arabs) will take over the world” (Said 287). Wright’s depiction mirrored this phenomenon by presenting Arab figures as symbolic rather than personal, contributing to a broader narrative of suspicion and cultural distancing.

Prince Majid’s character offered a more intimate exploration of the psychological toll of such representations. In a moment of personal reflection, the prince revealed that he had once been married to a “blond Western girl with blue eyes and excellent taste and a fine education,” a description suggesting the internalization of Western ideals. Despite his affection for his wife Marian, he came to realize that his identity in the eyes of others would always be filtered through the lens of his ethnicity and religion. He remarked, “I looked at who I was in their eyes and saw an Arab. A Muslim. That was the main thing. Not a prince. Not a doctor. After 9/11, that was constantly on my mind” (Wright 231). Through Prince Majid, Wright illustrated the complex dynamics of identity and belonging, as well as the lingering effects of cultural stereotypes on self-perception and interpersonal

relationships. This intersection of Orientalist representation and pandemic narrative in Wright's work stresses how disease becomes not only a medical phenomenon but also a cultural one, shaped by historical patterns of racialization and othering. The novel echoed the theoretical insights of Said and contemporary scholars in demonstrating how global crises can reinforce preexisting hierarchies and cultural misrepresentations.

In the subsequent chapters of the novel, the narrative presented a moment of cultural and ethical tension when the protagonist, placed his friend, Prince Majid, in a difficult position by failing to respect religious customs and norms. During the Hajj pilgrimage, it is a long-standing tradition that individuals of other religions are not permitted to enter the sacred city of Mecca. Upon learning of this restriction, Dr. Henry, either out of desperation or due to the urgency of the crisis, falsely claimed to be a Muslim in order to gain access. Prince Majid, immediately recognizing the falsehood, responded with disappointment and corrected his friend's actions. He reminded Henry that their hospitals were staffed with "competent Muslims" who were not only avoiding harm but were actively working "to save lives." Majid responded to Henry with a tone that combined both admiration and disappointment. He acknowledged Henry's exceptional abilities by stating that he could think of no one more capable of managing the crisis. However, he insisted that entering Mecca, their most sacred city, required sincerity and spiritual integrity. Majid expressed concern over Henry's apparent bitterness toward religion and urged him to show respect for Islam, which he emphasized as central to their identity. He warned that to dishonor their faith would be tantamount to committing a profound offense against their collective dignity and soul (Wright 99). This passage revealed the subtle yet persistent centering of Western norms and the disregard for non-Western religious traditions and cultural practices. The implication that only a Western, specifically American, figure was capable of managing the pandemic crisis reflected a broader narrative of Western superiority, particularly in science and medicine. This scene also hinted upon a lack of confidence, within the story's framing, in the expertise and capabilities of Muslim medical professionals. By positioning Dr. Henry as the sole figure capable of confronting the viral outbreak, the narrative implied a hierarchy of

knowledge and authority that marginalized local practitioners. The title of a chapter, “Henry Takes Charge,” further emphasized this dynamic, invoking the familiar trope of the American savior who emerges as the central agent of action and resolution. This depiction aligned with broader cultural critiques, such as those that circulated online during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic. A widely shared meme suggested that any Hollywood adaptation of the pandemic would inevitably feature an American protagonist who single-handedly discovers the cure and saves the world. The novel appeared to reflect this narrative pattern, framing the Western figure as not only central but indispensable, thereby reinforcing traditional structures of cultural dominance.

The discussion surrounding the Hajj pilgrimage amid the threat of a pandemic revealed a complex dynamic of blame that intersected public health concerns with cultural and geopolitical anxieties. Prince Majid’s apprehension about the potential spread of disease during the pilgrimage reflected a broader historical pattern in which religious gatherings, particularly those associated with non-Western populations, became focal points of suspicion and regulation. His concerns echoed earlier discourses, such as those noted by Marcel Proust in his reflections on cholera, which framed the disease not merely as a public health issue but as a geopolitical threat that necessitated protecting Europe from what were perceived as Eastern sources of contagion. Alexander White’s concept of “epidemic Orientalism” further contextualized this narrative, describing it as a framework through which colonial powers justified surveillance and control over colonized populations under the pretence of disease prevention. Rather than addressing the roots of infection or implementing effective disease management strategies within the affected regions, the emphasis shifted toward containment strategies aimed at preventing transmission to Europe. Historical records show that during outbreaks of diseases such as MERS, cholera, and others, Muslims were frequently associated with the origins or spread of illness, further reinforcing stigmatization. European powers, in response to the perceived risk posed by the Hajj pilgrimage, held multiple international conferences to discuss preventive strategies. These gatherings were particularly concerned with Muslim pilgrims traveling from India to Egypt and continuing on to Mecca, where

they might interact with Muslims from Europe. The fear was that such contact would facilitate the reintroduction of cholera into the European continent. Instead of focusing on eliminating the disease at its source, European authorities pushed for measures that would prevent its transmission across regions. One such recommendation was that the Ottoman Empire, which administered Mecca at the time, should construct large quarantine stations in the Red Sea region (White 210). This directive was perceived as an infringement upon Ottoman sovereignty and a reflection of European efforts to assert dominance under the guise of health regulation. Proust's own writing captured the geographic framing of cholera as a disease rooted in the East. He noted that cholera extended through territories such as the Gulf of Bengal, Burma, Indochina, the Chinese treaty ports, Korea, Japan, and all along the coasts of China as far as Vladivostok. He further remarked that it had spread throughout Iraq-Arabia, Mesopotamia, Persia, Syria, Arabia (including Mecca), and parts of Africa such as Massawa. Proust warned that ongoing economic developments across Africa would likely exacerbate the risk of further transmission. He emphasized that the defense of Europe against cholera remained a matter of urgent importance. As he described, "The aim of our efforts is to intercept all direct communication between the contaminated provenances of the Far East on one side; Egypt, the Mediterranean and Europe, on the other" (Proust 1892). These historical narratives demonstrated how disease control measures were often entangled with imperial agendas, producing a legacy in which public health interventions served not only to manage illness but also to reinforce political hierarchies and cultural stereotypes.

In his study of Orientalist discourse during pandemics, Alexander White referenced Proust's statement as "a clear depiction of the discourse of epidemic orientalism." White argued that Proust, in framing cholera as a global threat, situated the danger primarily in relation to its proximity to Europe. This framing placed Europe at the center of the narrative, positioning it as the threatened subject, while non-European regions were implicitly cast as sources of contamination. According to White, Proust's emphasis on protecting Europe revealed the underlying objective, "the protection of Europe is therefore only possible through the control of colonized

bodies and transports to Europe” (White 68). This perspective reflects how colonial anxieties shaped public health strategies, while often targeting mobility and bodies from colonized regions. In Wright’s novel, these themes resurfaced through the voice of Prince Majid, who articulated his concerns over how the Hajj pilgrimage was once again being framed as a center for the spread of infectious disease. He noted that people from around the world brought illnesses such as meningitis, typhoid, and cholera, and that the Saudi health authorities had managed these outbreaks in the past. He recalled that in the previous year, the pilgrimage had occurred without incident, marking a significant achievement. Nonetheless, he confessed that he had always feared such a catastrophe. Majid described the pandemic as feeling like a curse upon Islam, lamenting that although Muslims were themselves the victims of the current outbreak, global narratives would inevitably cast blame upon them- “This disease came from Muslims and now it infests our most holy place. We are the victims, but the world will blame us for this” (Wright 113). Majid’s statement highlighted the persistent global narrative that associates Islamic religious gatherings with epidemiological threats, reinforcing the kind of stigmatizing discourse White described. The association of Islam with disease, despite effective management and preventive measures, reflected a broader historical tendency to frame non-Western communities as inherently hazardous and in need of containment.

The Muslims themselves were suspicious, looking to assign blame to their adversaries and nearby communities with whom they have a history of tense interactions. “The grand mufti claims that Iran is responsible for this,” one remarked. Henry responded, “If someone is to blame, they are not just targeting Saudi Arabia, but all of humanity.” A member of the shura council countered, “That’s what you say, but how do we know this isn’t an Iranian plot against the kingdom?” They are of the opinion that their aim is to undermine their legitimacy, accusing them of failing as custodians of the holy sites. This is the agenda of the Shiite rulers in Tehran, who would destroy Islam to reach their malicious objectives. So, when they were told that plague had struck the pilgrims, they could not help but wonder, “Who stands to gain?” And we know the answer”(131).The Mufti who was present at the scene expressed his doubts and concerns about whether the Shiites were also suffering the

same kind of fate. Health and illness are always part of the symbolic register that defines a community's boundaries. Thus "the very idea of the public's health is intertwined with the self-understanding and self-definition of the imagined community." As observed earlier, the Muslims were blamed for the massive outbreak but they themselves were also looking for some others to blame. Through their effort to apportion blame, the power dynamics become obvious. This reflects larger global patterns where groups often seek to externalize blame during crises. Community responses depicted in the novel closely aligned with the insights of Sander L. Gilman and Zhou Xun, who analyzed how pandemics often politicized narratives of blame and responsibility. Their work, *I Know Who Caused COVID-19: Pandemics and Xenophobia*, examined the ways in which political discourse and societal structures influence public perceptions of health. They contended that the definition of health encompasses more than just biological issues, but also social and political factors. During periods of crisis, such as disease outbreaks, they observed that narratives surrounding blame and accountability increasingly become politicized. This politicization of blame and accountability contributes to a deeper mistrust of government and social groups, which strengthens structural divisions in society and acts as a barrier to a unified public health response. The novel showed many examples of how quickly trust and solidarity within communities disintegrated, with connections built over many months and years unravelling over mere days. Further, the narrative revealed the fragility of community connections under crisis and revealed preexisting ruptures along racial, class, and social status lines, ruptures that became more apparent with decreased collective moral consciousness and declines in social cohesion. The depiction of these ruptures was consistent with Gilman and Xun's claim that health crises do not simply create failures of medical practice amid persistent social problems, they illuminate and exacerbate the political and social fault lines within social relations. As such, COVID-19 became not only a biological threat but a point of contact for social disintegration, as community support dissolved into suspicion, paranoia, and scapegoating. They argued that within rigidly defined limits of a nation-state, whose own self-conception has tied health to a kind of responsible citizenship, a group cannot accept blame without ultimately trying to off-load some blame onto another group or onto the state itself, either as a hostile agent,

perceived as having been compromised, or as a hostile state weakened from external threats. It is commonplace to represent public health as a universal truth, albeit politics remain deeply imbricated in public health even in crisis. Its power rests in a common multi-symbolic frame of a community's own sharing of meaning and identity (Gilman and Xun 231).

When the so-called "Muslim flu," referred to in the novel as the Kongoli virus, began spreading across the United States, a predictable surge in suicides, homicides, and hate crimes followed, particularly targeting the Muslim community. This escalation was not confined to the national level. On the international stage, the rhetoric of blame intensified, as conspiracy theories proliferated. One theory suggested that Muslims had produced the virus in order to destroy Christian civilization. Another proposed that Muslims were innocent victims of an extermination campaign by neo-Nazi scientists. A third hypothesized that there was a global war against homosexuals (Wright 141). In Western societies, especially over the last few decades, Muslims have routinely been represented as threats to national security and been subjected to suspicion and surveillance. Edward Said noted that the global discourse tended to treat Muslims as objects of fear. This apprehension was also embodied in the novel by Tildy, a member of a special intelligence agency in Washington, D.C., who expressed her alarm at the implication that the virus was associated with Muslims. "Why did they have to be Muslims? She could envision the likely political and social consequences, but she pushed those thoughts away. There were too many other things to consider" (Wright 110). Her reaction accentuated an acute awareness of the potential for xenophobic backlash and institutional prejudice. The stigmatizing language used to describe the virus including terms such as "Muslim flu," "Muslim gay disease," and "Chinese virus," illustrated the persistent use of Orientalist rhetoric in contemporary discourse. These labels functioned not merely as geographic references but as ideological tools that reinforced racial and cultural stereotypes. The portrayal of Muslims, Asians, and other marginalized communities in relation to disease revived long-standing fears rooted in colonial histories and imperial power dynamics. Scholar Claire Jean Kim traced this pattern back to the late nineteenth century, when European imperialist powers were

expanding into Africa and Asia. In 1897, Russian sociologist Yakov Novikov, writing in French, introduced the term “Yellow Peril” in his essay “Le Péril Jaune.” This phrase employed a color-based metaphor to racialize and dehumanize Asian individuals. As Kim explained, the term quickly became a justification for widespread distrust and objectification of Asian bodies, stripping them of individuality and human complexity (Kim 12). Such discourses continue to shape public perception and policy, revealing the deep entrenchment of racialized language in global health narratives.

The immediate association of the “Orientals” with almost every occurrences of pandemic can be traced back to the historical accounts predominantly written from the Western viewpoints, from where the observations are taken as actual facts with no scientific verification. In *Encyclopédia of Diderot and d’Alembert*, compiled during the 18th century, the origins of the Plague of Mersailles was linked with the “Orientals” where in it was mentioned, “Plague comes to us from Asia, and for two thousand years all the plagues that have appeared in Europe have been transmitted through the communication of the Saracens, Arabs, Moors or Turks with us, and none of our plagues had any other source” (452). From these dated documents that contain allegations which were later on taken as truth and point of reference, nothing has changed much in the present scenario where the Orientals are still the subject of scrutiny and blame during pandemic outbreaks. This shows that to a certain measure, the “dominant” culture has strong prerogatives and authority to represent, reveal or repressed the truth towards cultures in the periphery through their words alone. Gilman and Xun the author of “*I Know Who Caused COVID-19*”- *Pandemics and Xenophobia* (2021) in their concluding chapter titled “Marginality and Disease” have reiterated the importance of words stating that they “matter because the emotions they generate have an impact on action. Words have histories, words change our world, making clear whom to blame and whom to absolve from blame” (213). Literature that reported and evaluated pandemic narratives provided a valuable framework for observation and analysis. Through the use of discourse analysis and individual interpretation, such texts enabled a structured examination of both historical and contemporary misrepresentations. They served as critical tools for

identifying underlying ideologies and power structures that shaped public understanding and response to health crises. The interplay between societal perceptions and individual experiences in Wright's novel echoes the sentiments expressed by Said regarding humanism and the need for literature to challenge preconceived notions. Said argued about the significance of understanding historical narratives and their influence on cultural representations. He suggested that engaging with these texts is crucial for revealing underlying ideologies and the political implications of those representations. Thus, through the juxtaposition of individual experiences within the narrative of the novel and the theoretical frameworks on Orientalism, xenophobia, and public health, it becomes clear that crises often amplify existing cultural anxieties and perpetuate cycles of blame. The multilayered dynamics present in the novel serve as a critical lens through which to examine the complexities of identity, public health responses, and the enduring legacy of colonial perceptions in contemporary society.

Ellen Marie Wiseman, a first-generation German American writer born and raised in a tiny hamlet in Northern New York has authored several fictions that have been translated to more than twenty languages. Inspired by what she saw of the ruins and tragic accounts related to her family's experiences during the war, her debut novel, *The Plum Tree* in 2012, resulted from a childhood visit to her mother's hometown in Germany. This book illustrates the experiences of a young woman excited to study love, the hurdles she faced in difficult contexts, and her effort to stay safe during a chaotic war environment. The account relates to historical situations and brings back the strength of resilience exhibited by humans, focusing on the more remarkable characteristics of human nature together with the basic hope. Her next book *What She Left Behind* (2013) delves upon suspense and psychological mystery while her other book *Coal River* (2015) is based on the real-life portrayal of the illegal child workers, the "breaker boys" who are forced to work in mines. The author puzzled through the experiences of two leading ladies in 2017 with a book titled 'The Life She Was Given', respectively set in two different time periods. The setting of the other story takes place during the Depression era and the author also offers an in-depth knowledge of traveling circuses and "freak shows" which was a

popular spot of not only entertainment but mistreatment and cruelty during that era. In one of her works titled *The Life She Was Given* (2017), the author spun a mystery surrounding the lives of two women who are depicted in two different timelines. The setting of the other story takes place during the Depression era and the author also offers an in-depth knowledge of traveling circuses and “freak shows” which was a popular spot of not only entertainment but mistreatment and cruelty during that era. Wiseman, as evidenced by her selection of subject matter and setting, received critical acclaim for her ability to portray lesser-known aspects of American life with emotional depth and perceptiveness. Her narratives often illuminated the more uncomfortable or overlooked elements of society. Through her focus on marginalized communities and their resilience, her work consistently conveyed a sense of hope and perseverance, offering readers a profound sense of encouragement and strength.

The Orphan Collector (2020) introduced a thrilling account of two significantly different women living through one of the deadliest pandemics in history. In January 2019, the writer handed over the manuscript to the editor, while expecting that the leading topics and conversations generated when the book launched would concentrate on the discriminatory attitude toward immigrants. Following its publication in 2020, Ellen Marie Wiseman observed that much of the reader response to her novel focused on its pandemic backdrop, a reaction that had likely been shaped by the contemporary global experience of COVID-19. Her portrayal of societal upheaval, fear, and latent xenophobia during the influenza outbreak, despite being set over a century earlier struck a familiar chord with readers, suggesting that history appeared to be repeating itself. Wiseman remarked that society seemed to have learned little from past pandemics, continuing to replicate the same patterns of error and hysteria. One review from *Publisher’s Weekly* reflected this sentiment, stating, “Wiseman’s depiction of the horrifying spread of the Spanish flu is eerily reminiscent of the present day and resonates with realistic depictions of suffering, particularly among the poorer immigrant population.” In a public interview, Wiseman shared that the idea for the novel originated from a suggestion made by a reader, who encouraged her to write about visiting nurses during the 1918 influenza epidemic. She acknowledged that this aspect of history had been largely

neglected in historical research and chose to undertake a thorough investigation into the topic as the foundation for her work.

Wiseman portrayed her protagonist as a young German immigrant whose family sought to establish a new life in the United States during a period marked by intense anti-German sentiment. As the Great Influenza pandemic coincided with the turmoil of World War I, political discourse became increasingly shaped by ideas of nationalism and ethnic identity. Hostility toward German immigrants intensified, especially among American and British populations who viewed Germany as the enemy. Patriotic zeal contributed to widespread efforts to eliminate perceived foreign influences within American society. German immigrants were met with suspicion and were expected to prove their allegiance to the United States. They were frequently accused of harboring sympathies toward Imperial Germany or lacking full commitment to their adopted country. Former President Theodore Roosevelt publicly criticized what he called “hyphenated Americans,” arguing that divided loyalties were unacceptable during times of war. One of the earliest and most visible targets of anti-German nationalism was the German language. In January 1918, the American Defense Society distributed a pamphlet titled “Throw Out the German Language and All Disloyal Teachers,” which proclaimed, “We can make war on the Hun language, and we will. Any language which produces a people of ruthless conquistadors, such as now exists in Germany, is not fit to teach clean and pure American boys and girls, and the most ordinary principles of self-defense demand that it be eliminated” (qtd. in Kirschbaum 103). Historian John Higham observed that the war gave rise to unprecedented anxieties about immigrants’ loyalty to the United States. In response to such pressures, many German-American families anglicized their children’s names to minimize associations with Germany and appear more assimilated (Higham 213). Efforts to erase German cultural influence extended beyond language. Food items and cultural symbols were renamed or replaced. For instance, “sauerkraut” was rebranded as “liberty cabbage,” while “Bismarck” pastries were renamed “American beauties.” Place names and institutions with German associations including “Berlin,” “Germantown,” and the “German National Bank” were renamed to eliminate visible traces of German heritage. Public monuments commemorating German figures, such

as Friedrich Schiller, were defaced or removed entirely (“From the Archives”; “The Schiller Linden Tree”). Additionally, the German-language press came under intense pressure. Many German-language newspapers and magazines were forced to cease publication due to declining readership, while others transitioned to English to avoid public harassment and possible government censorship. As Johanningsmeier noted, these developments reflected a systematic effort to suppress German identity in the name of patriotism and national security (35).

Among the many nicknames given to the pandemic, most of them were based on nationality or race such as the commonly known ‘Spanish Flu,’ ‘Spanish Lady,’ ‘French Flu,’ ‘Purple Death,’ ‘Flanders Grippe,’ ‘Naples Soldier,’ ‘War Plague,’ ‘Kirghiz Disease,’ ‘Black Man’s Disease,’ ‘Bolshevik Disease,’ ‘Hun Flu,’ it may be noted that some called it the ‘German Plague,’ or the ‘Turco-Germanic bacterium criminal enterprise.’ The discriminatory and misleading names linked with the disease reflect on the rumors and conspiracy theories surrounding the origins of the pathology. In his study *From the ‘Spanish Flu’ to COVID-19- Lessons from the 1918 Pandemic and First World War*, Cedric Cotter discussed how wartime censorship and propaganda had direct and detrimental effects on public health responses during the 1918 influenza pandemic. He noted that efforts by warring nations to suppress information about the severity of the outbreak significantly undermined attempts to control the spread of the disease. Moreover, after years of exposure to state propaganda, many members of the public had grown deeply skeptical of official communications and no longer trusted government authorities or public health messaging (Cotter 3). As public confidence in official narratives eroded, speculation and misinformation proliferated. Numerous individuals began to question the actual origin of the disease, expressing disbelief that such widespread death could be caused by natural means alone. In this climate of uncertainty and fear, conspiracy theories gained traction. In Allied nations, for example, some accused the German pharmaceutical company Bayer of intentionally contaminating aspirin tablets with the virus. Others alleged that German submarines had released flasks containing the pathogen into water sources, milk supplies, or public venues such as cinemas and political gatherings. Additional theories proposed that the disease was airborne and

had been deployed in a manner similar to chemical weapons. Cotter emphasized that the convergence of widespread fear, government censorship, racial and ethnic stereotypes, and wartime propaganda fostered an atmosphere ripe for scapegoating. The tendency to seek a culprit, particularly one perceived as foreign or unfamiliar, led to the proliferation of myths and reinforced societal divisions (Cotter 3). His analysis underscored how pandemics, especially in contexts of war and political instability, could be manipulated to advance harmful narratives and deepen mistrust within and between communities.

In his article “‘Spanish Flu’- When Infectious Disease Names Blur Origins and Stigmatize Those Infected,” Trevor Hoppe examined the implications of how pandemics are named and the social hierarchies embedded in those naming practices. He highlighted the notable absence in historical records of terms such as “American flu” or “European flu,” suggesting that this omission was unlikely to be coincidental. While some might interpret this as a natural outcome of epidemiological trends, Hoppe argued that it more accurately reflected global power imbalances. Countries in the Global North, particularly those with greater geopolitical influence, have often avoided association with disease by assigning responsibility to foreign or less powerful nations (Hoppe 1463). This selective naming practice revealed underlying biases that worked to obscure the role of dominant nations in the global spread of disease. By attaching specific geographic labels to outbreaks, such as “Spanish Flu” the discourse redirected blame onto targeted regions, frequently resulting in stigmatization. Populations associated with these geographic identifiers were often subjected to discrimination, social exclusion, and fear. Moreover, these naming conventions had broader consequences. They shaped public attitudes and influenced how health interventions were implemented. Stigmatized populations were less likely to receive equitable treatment or support, and diplomatic relations between countries were strained by the assignment of blame. The way infectious diseases were named played a significant role not only in the public’s perception of the pandemic but also in shaping international responses and social dynamics.

At the start of the novel, Pia's mother Mutti insisted that they must attend the Liberty Day Parade to display their loyalty. Since Pia was quite averse to human contact, she asked to be left at home to avoid the large crowd. However, her mother did not want to leave her alone at home saying, "the radio and newspapers told everyone to be watchful of their German-American neighbors and to report to the authorities. Before your father left, a woman shouted at me, saying he stole a real American's job. She spit and said to go back where I came from. I am not leaving you home alone" (17). It is also implied that Pia had been bullied at her school. It was believed that the Germans were poisoning food and milk, and that the German Americans were preparing to overthrow the government. Some Germans had even been imprisoned or placed in internment camps

The city was plastered with posters showing Germans standing over dead bodies and ads directing people to buy war bonds to "Beat back the Hun!" Churches with German congregations had been painted yellow, German-language newspapers were shut down, and schoolchildren were forced to sign pledges promising not to use any foreign language whatsoever. (Wiseman 18)

As if that were not sufficient, a special police unit known as the Home Guard, which was initially created to patrol the streets with firearms and protect crucial locations in the city such as the Water Works and pumping station, the electric light distribution plant, the telephone service, and several power stations at manufacturing facilities was now also monitoring the south end of the city to watch over German immigrants. The city's textile mills and industrial companies categorically refused to employ workers of German descent. This is how Pia's mother, Mutti, lost her job. Anti-German sentiment seeped into even the most mundane aspects of life- traditional German foods such as sauerkraut and hamburgers were rechristened with patriotic euphemisms as "liberty cabbage" and "liberty sandwiches." Pia understood her mother's warnings to avoid the parade that stirred nationalist fervour, but "that didn't make going to the parade any easier" (Wiseman, 18). The pervasive scrutiny forced Pia's family and many other German immigrants to censor their own speech. They vigilantly avoided speaking or writing in their native language and corrected each

other immediately should even a single German word slip out. In a further bid to prove their loyalty, Pia's father enlisted to fight for America in the war. In nearly every sphere of their lives-employment, education, social gatherings, even domestic routines, German-American families were forced into a performative display of patriotism to escape suspicion. This phenomenon is not merely fictional but rooted in documented historical realities. As Charles Johanningsmeier observes in his article "*World War I, Anti-German Hysteria, the 'Spanish' Flu, and My Antonia*", "To be regarded as truly 'American' and escape censure, all foreign-born and first-generation Americans now understood that they needed to conspicuously display their 100% patriotism for the United States, its values, and its customs" (Johanningsmeier, 33). The convergence of war, xenophobia, and pandemic anxiety thus created an environment in which immigrant identities were surveyed, suppressed, and subjected to performative loyalty. This climate of suspicion and coerced assimilation, vividly captured in *The Orphan Collector*, offers a sobering parallel to the real-world pressures exerted on marginalized communities during national crises.

A few days after the parade, as the virus began to spread rapidly throughout the city of Philadelphia and infected many of those who had attended, Pia's family, who had also been present at the event, were not spared from the outbreak. Her mother Mutti started showing early symptoms where she had terrible fits of cough. With the sudden imposition of lockdowns and quarantines, poor households were left with little food and medical supplies. Pia was worried as they were stuck in the house with their mother, whose condition worsened by each day. When she urged her mother to go to the hospital and get outside help, her mother replied, "I'm all right. I am not coughing or too hot, only tired. Besides, there is no money for a doctor. And they don't want to help a German, anyway" (45). Due to the sudden surge in infection cases, the hospitals were overcrowded. At the same time their neighbour Bernice Groves, a widow with an infant was also rushing towards the hospitals because her baby seems to be infected with the flu. When she was instructed to wait in line, she vehemently retaliated, saying that they should prioritize and let her enter because she is "their own kind." She had attempted to keep to herself regarding the

newcomers who had entered her city, but this situation was over the line. With a German having taken her father's job on top of everything else, she felt she could no longer remain polite. She turned and glanced back at the nun and policeman once more. She asked what they were doing and exclaimed that many of the people there were foreigners who shouldn't be seeking assistance from doctors intended to help Americans, saying it wasn't right. In response, it was explained that they were there to help everyone. She exclaimed "Half these people are foreigners. They shouldn't be trying to get help from doctors meant to help Americans. It's not right!" In response, it was explained that they were there "to help everyone" (Wiseman 54). She created a scene at the hospital and was made to leave. Her baby, Wallis, died when they returned. She grieved and cooped herself up at home alone with bitter thoughts. When she saw her German neighbour, on the verge of death, she was reminded of the "immigrants at the hospital, trying to get help from doctors meant for Americans instead of turning to the witches and wizards they believed could heal them through some kind of sorcery. Wallis might have lived if it hadn't been for them. Then again, it seemed like the entire neighbourhood had been taken over by migrants and Negroes since the war started, all of them looking for work in the shipyard and munitions factory." Bernice's behavior may be interpreted as exhibiting xenophobic tendencies in response to societal stress and crisis. Tajfel and Turner developed the 'Social Identity Theory' in an attempt to explain how individuals gain their identity and emotions derived from groups they belong to. If people have the feeling that their group is in some way endangered, for instance by economic rivalry or cultural change, they will attack the other group. Issues related to employment and financial matters lead to acrimony and resulted in the persecution of migrants and foreigners. George Borjas's work, such as "The Economic Consequences of Immigration," explores how economic anxieties can fuel anti-immigrant sentiments. They become even more obvious during the crisis period, therefore, the communication and social policies that put emphasis on both the economic and the social factors are vital. The narrative of Bernice in the novel illustrates a profound transformation of grief into xenophobia, reflecting broader historical and sociological themes regarding the scapegoating of immigrant populations during crises. Bernice's resentment towards immigrants, notably exemplified in her view of the German

family, echoes longstanding prejudicial attitudes that have characterized immigrant experiences in America. Such sentiments are consistent with the “blame the outsider” narrative that emerges in times of public health crises, a phenomenon well documented in historical accounts of pandemics and epidemics.

Unlike them, whose family for generations have settled in the city, these “foreigners” have invaded their place, stolen their resources and their jobs. She strongly resented these immigrants, especially the German family who lived in close quarters because she believed that Pia’s father, Mr. Lange, had replaced her old father at the factory. She even blamed the cause of his death to being heartbroken of losing his job to a “foreigner” an “outsider”. Bernice recalled her father’s impassioned hate speech exclaiming that “This is America. They need to learn our language or go back where they came from!” She also noted how the editor of the local newspaper had expressed his opposition to “the flood of undesirables from the darker sections of the Old World who are arriving in the United States with no conception of American ideas.” She detested the smell of their strong aromas of “their peculiar cuisine” that “stank up the hallways, boiled lamb, paprika, curry, and peppered cabbage, and children of all colors filled the alleys and streets, shouting and playing games in strange languages” (48). Her strong resentment and preconceived prejudices grew after the pandemic hit her home, her city, her life. She experienced a profound sense of disillusionment accompanied by heightened paranoia. Bernice’s fixation on the perceived failures of immigrants to assimilate evidenced by her disdain for their cultural practices and the different languages spoken by their children mirrors the findings of sociological studies that highlight how economic insecurity and public health crises exacerbate xenophobic attitudes. This narrative reinforces Edward Said’s concept of Orientalism, where “the other” is depicted in reductive ways that overlook the complexities of individual identity and cultural backgrounds. As Bernice embodies the archetype of the fearful American, her disdain for immigrant groups can be interpreted as a manifestation of broader societal anxieties around identity and belonging in the face of crisis, similar to the historical blaming of Irish immigrants for cholera and Jewish immigrants for tuberculosis. She and other women in her prayer group frequently talked about the

hygiene practices, unhealthy behaviors, and questionable morals of people born in other countries. They all agreed that the “Don’t Spit” signs should have been written in multiple languages and not only in English.

Bernice grappled with the loss of her only son and questioned why the children of immigrant families appeared to survive while her “true American” child succumbed to illness. She viewed this as fundamentally unjust, and although a wave of guilt followed these thoughts, she could not help but reflect on the presence of immigrant mothers at the hospital with their own suffering children. Despite acknowledging that maternal love and grief transcended nationality, race, and religion, she clung to the perception that immigrant families always seemed to have several children, as though they could replace those they lost. In contrast, she had only one son, and now he was gone. She recognized that illness spared no one, yet her sense of loss persisted (Wiseman 57). Bernice’s mourning became a critical lens through which her subsequent actions could be understood. Her personal grief and feelings of injustice contributed to a psychological framework in which she projected blame onto others. This emotional response illustrated how profound trauma can distort judgment and lead individuals to scapegoat marginalized groups as a means of coping with their suffering. This guilt-induced need to assign blame aligns with the concept of moral panic articulated by sociologists like Sander L. Gilman and Zhou Xun, who argue that societal anxieties often manifest in the stigmatization of marginalized groups. Bernice’s decision to abduct immigrant children and transform them into “legitimate” Americans underlines her internal conflict and the extent to which she is willing to go to alleviate her own suffering by enforcing a misguided sense of cultural superiority. This ingrained attitude further resulted in thwarted actions and questionable decisions. The title of the book points a finger at the antagonist of the novel, a twenty-year-old widow named Bernice Groves whose thwarted decision spirals to her abducting orphaned immigrant children and turning them into ‘legal’ Americans. She decided to steal Ollie and Max, the twin brothers of Pia while she left them to forage for food, by posing as a visiting nurse under a new identity of Nurse Wallis. She started abducting orphans and children of the immigrants and sold them to “real” American parents. In her ledger, she recorded,

“Piotr (renamed Peter)... Age 6 years... boy... sent by train to Michigan.” From there, the foreign names went on to the next page, every one changed into something more “American-sounding. Every one of them, boys and girls, had been sent away by train” (294). She made it her mission to collect these orphans and send them away, always justifying her actions along the way. “She reminded herself that the city’s problems were a direct result of too many immigrants; the overcrowded tenements filled with foreigners had contributed to the intensity of the flu epidemic, and ultimately the death of her son. She owed it to Wallis to do what she could to keep things from getting any worse” (145). The act of renaming immigrant children to more “American-sounding” names signifies the erasure of cultural identity, resonating with the colonial ethos discussed by scholars like Homi K. Bhabha, who examines how the colonial gaze seeks to impose identity upon the “other.” Bhabha contends that the colonial gaze enforces identity through repetition and difference, not by accurately reflecting the colonized subject but by producing a distorted image that serves colonial authority. This representation of the “other” is not a neutral act but one shaped by power, where identity is assigned rather than acknowledged (66–67). Bernice’s ledger serves as a metaphorical document of cultural appropriation and the stripping away of the very essence of identity under the guise of assimilation. Ultimately, Bernice’s narrative illustrates the intersection of personal grief, societal pressure, and the historical context of xenophobic beliefs that converge during times of crisis. The novel encapsulates a poignant commentary on how individuals and communities respond to suffering by seeking to reinforce cultural boundaries, often at the expense of compassion and shared humanity, revealing a tragic cycle of prejudice that persists across time.

During the second wave of the flu, the family of Dr. Hudson who returned home to open a clinic for patients after losing a limb in the war are mentioned. They are a kind and benevolent family who employed Pia and later helped her in finding news about her lost family. When Pia introduced herself to Mrs. Hudson, she falsely claimed Dutch heritage after learning during their conversation that Mrs. Hudson harbored strong resentment toward Germans. She had disclosed that her husband had sustained a lifelong injury during the war due to German forces and remarked that

she could accept people of any background “as long as it’s not German.” Pia Lange proved to be of great help in taking care of their children. She even had a suspicion that the initial symptoms of their son’s condition, who died from flu, began at this household, where Pia and Bernice crossed paths again, with the latter appearing as Nurse Wallis with a baby for adoption. The resolution took place and Bernice accused Pia of lying and attempted to take the bag of money, saying Pia was German and all Germans were thieves. The Hudsons knew Pia had been deceitful in regard to whom she was, but when Pia explained the circumstance, they decided to believe Pia. They also understood they should not have made such an assumption of a German person, they listened to her story, and pledged to help her locate the twins. In another passage, it read that Pia listened to Dr. Hudson read an article in the early morning newspaper about the new immigration act signed by Calvin Coolidge that limited the number of southern and eastern Europeans, Arabs, and Jews allowed into the country- “the purpose of which was to preserve the American ideal of homogeneity and stabilize the ethnic composition of the population- a feeling of sadness had come over her that she couldn’t seem to shake.” It was commented that Pia’s misery and sorrow comes from the reminder of how “they’d come here seeking a better life, only to find death instead. Or maybe it reminded her of Nurse Wallis’s hatred for Germans, which, of course, reminded her of her lost brothers, and how every clue over the last five years had led to more dead ends” (273). The climax of the story, where Bernice accused Pia of theft, highlights the theme of scapegoating that often emerges during crises. Bernice’s accusation, driven by a discriminatory narrative equating ethnicity with criminality, evidenced by her claim that “all Germans are thieves” reflects sociological theories on how marginalized groups become targets of blame during difficult times. Gilman and Xun note that public health crises frequently politicize such narratives, exacerbating communal divides. The Hudson family’s choice to support Pia, despite her initial misrepresentation, illustrates the potential for understanding and empathy when confronting biases. Their willingness to listen to Pia’s story reveals the importance of human connection in dismantling prejudices and aligns with Said’s assertion that literature can challenge preconceived notions of identity. Pia’s sorrow upon encountering the immigration act signed by Calvin Coolidge reflects the emotional burden of feeling

like an outsider in her adopted community. This legislation, which aimed to maintain a homogenous American identity, illustrates the systemic barriers immigrants face while seeking a better life reflecting a historical pattern of scapegoating and ongoing discrimination against immigrant populations.

In order to assess and situate the notion of bigotry and paranoia meted towards the migrants, the novel *Homebound* (2021) written by an award-winning journalist Puja Changoiwala has been selected for close reading. The novel focused on the challenges faced by migrants, highlighting their experiences of insecurity, the significance of belonging, and the deep-rooted desire to return 'home' when the sudden outbreak of COVID-19 disrupted their lives and livelihoods. At the age of 15, Meher went from the Rajasthani village of Balhaar to the slums of Dharavi in Mumbai looking for greater success. The epistolary novel started with a letter dated on April 16, 2020, where Meher recalled the accounts of what had transpired on the eve of a national lockdown. The sudden and unanticipated enforcement of a nationwide lockdown in India left citizens unprepared, resulting in widespread panic and confusion. When the COVID-19 pandemic reached the densely populated slum areas, where families lived in one-hundred-square-foot dwellings, the idea of social distancing became virtually impossible and almost paradoxical. For many, the threat of hunger and loss of income felt far more immediate and real than the fear of an unfamiliar disease. These precarious living conditions compelled individuals to make abrupt and impulsive decisions, such as attempting to return to their hometowns on foot in the absence of available transportation.

Four out of five people in this slum haven't received their March wages. Our boss has not answered his phone in ten days. I'm sure he does not intend to pay us, and with these lockdowns, I do not know when we'll start working again. Meanwhile, we're losing five grand on rent every month. The lockdown, however, stretched, turning into the void in Father's nightmares, bleak, boundless and ominous. (Changoiwala 14)

Meher's family and their neighbours were weighing upon the two unavoidable choices laid before them, to either stay behind or walk towards their home. It may be

noted that the title of the novel 'homebound' could either signify going homeward or being confined. It has been observed that for many people, the fear of containment, of restrictions being imposed upon, is much more substantial than the fear of contagion. Home cannot serve as a refuge when it is marked by physical deprivation, emotional distress, and violence. They came to the conclusion that if they stay, they will soon run out of cash, forcing them to be thrown to the streets for missing the rent where they may die either due to starvation or the virus. Charity was not an option for men in the family whose sense of dignity and integrity crave for respect and not sympathy. "We are not just migrants, we're migrant workers. We work and earn our meals," exclaimed her uncle. Balhaar, their village, on the other hand, "poses only one danger for now- loss of work" (pp. 15, 16). It was noted that when they ran out of money they will have to seek community shelters for bite-sized portions of food handed out and that too, the locals are always preferred over the migrants. Her mother lamented that "Staying in Dharavi would be like seeking shelter in a lion's den, drinking from the oasis in a mirage" (17). Her aunt also reminded them that they would always be "outsiders in this city." This is reinforced when the local warned these "filthy outsiders" that if they caught and spread the virus, no one will be spared and will be buried alive. This made them realize that Mumbai was never theirs. They do not belong here. It actually poses as the biggest delusion of their lives, "the greatest mirage" (48).

The pandemic prompted nation-states to adopt a clear pattern of implementing travel bans and border controls as strategies to manage COVID-19. These measures had significant implications for migrants and refugees. The struggles that migrants and refugees were going through have worsened because of the pandemic. The pandemic of COVID-19 had clearly affected international migration in a number of ways, for the most part because of strategies to manage virus spread and also partly due to overall concerns about migration itself. During the pandemic, the evolving travel rules meant that a large number of migrants and refugees required new pathways to relocate, in spite of ongoing lockdown measures. In their analysis of state responses to the pandemic, Wemyss and Yuval-Davis examined how bordering practices during the crisis reflected ongoing and interconnected political

agendas related to governance and the politics of belonging. They observed that only a small number of states recognized migrants as full members of society with equal rights during this period. Similarly, few governments acknowledged the right of all residents to a basic income throughout the pandemic. The authors emphasized that exclusionary policies and the marginalization of individuals living in both national and global zones of legal and social uncertainty placed the lives of millions at serious risk (15). On the national highway, thousands of migrants are moving “Dressed in all colours of the rainbow, the burdened beasts moved with a resolute purpose- to flee the city they built and reach the solace of their real homes, where their escaping could cease” (38). The media outlets reported and “told stories of millions like us, who had set out on foot for their villages- mowed down by tempos, killed by fatigue, massacred by heat, and murdered by hunger. Indian migrants are dying to get home, informed a news headline. India is walking home,” stated another (105). In her letters addressed to Ms. Farah, a journalist, Meher documented every detail of their harrowing journey and things they encountered on the road. “One woman gave birth on the road, and within hours, she was up on her feet again. Some conviction you have, wanting to go home.” She recalled a migrant, who was “pretending to be a madman, talking to himself and flinging stones, so cops wouldn’t stop him as he walked home”. They also rescued “workers who were locked up inside a warehouse without food and water” by their employer who do not want to lose labour. They encountered a sick person lying on the road, likely having the COVID-19 symptoms who was thrown out of the truck to which he had contributed the fare. They tried to persuade him to let them call an ambulance, but he vehemently opposed, saying that he will only die at home. He even started to fling mud and hurl stones at them, so they decided to just leave him alone.

The protagonist failed to fully comprehend the concept and longingness for home and would often ponder about these things. A survey revealed that while the lockdown significantly impacted the entire community and forced people to remain at home, migrants were deprived of the solace of being confined with their families. Instead, they found themselves stranded in unfamiliar territories without any means of survival. This situation made migrants more susceptible to various traumas across

social, psychological, and emotional dimensions. These traumas arose from fears of discrimination and neglect by the local population, as well as serious worries regarding the safety and well-being of their families back in their home regions. (Kumar et al., 2020)

At the state border, they were detained by the guards who doused them with chemicals in order to disinfect them. These chemicals caused allergy and negative reactions to their frail bodies. “These migrants are desperate to reach home. With great risks to their lives, they’ve set out on these perilous journeys, and yet, their expeditions are met with chemical baths and police brutality” (201). It is seen that in many cases, it is man and their actions, the ones in power that could be the real threat in comparison to the contagion itself. Borders are man-made; conflicts and tensions over borders, the despair of displacement are all brought about and unto ourselves. The worst victims are always people with the lowest foothold, the poor, the daily workers and the migrants. The protagonist reflected with sorrow that the mass displacement during the lockdown made her acutely aware of her community’s vulnerability, their perceived insignificance, and the painful realization that they had no true place in the world. When she asked her friend Sameera what wrongdoing their community had committed to deserve such treatment and social exclusion, Sameera replied that they had done nothing. She explained that in every tragedy, there are always those who are sacrificed, those at the lowest levels of the social structure. She felt that they were unseen and unheard by society. Sameera emphasized that hundreds of millions of individuals like their fathers were part of India’s informal labor force. Although they formed the foundation of the nation’s economy, they were denied legal protection. They labored in degrading conditions and often died under similarly inhumane circumstances, all while earning meagre and humiliating wages. Society, she observed, remained blind to their suffering, as if intentionally looking away. She described it as wearing a selective blindfold, likening their situation to speaking a language that others could not comprehend. Under such conditions, she questioned how anyone could be expected to help people they neither recognized nor understood (Changoiwala 202).

For an extended period, the hardships faced by marginalized communities remained largely invisible, as the broader world continued to disregard and exclude them from mainstream narratives. The protagonist of the novel expressed empathy for the people of Kashmir, particularly in the light of the extended curfews they endured (which were imposed even in the absence of a pandemic). Although she acknowledged that she was too young to fully understand the geopolitical and historical intricacies of the conflict, she recognized that the forced lockdowns which turned homes into places of confinement and transformed entire cities into ghost towns did not align with her understanding of democratic values. In their article “Rethinking Refuge in the Time of COVID-19,” Nasar Meer and et al. examined the longstanding association between migration and disease. They argued that this connection has a well-documented historical lineage. From the mid-nineteenth century onward, migrants across different social and legal categories were frequently subjected to medical discrimination. For instance, Irish refugees in Britain were associated with the spread of typhus, while Irish immigrants in the United States were stigmatized as carriers of cholera. In the late nineteenth century, tuberculosis was often labeled the “Jewish disease,” and in the early twentieth century, Chinese communities were blamed for the outbreak of the plague in San Francisco. This rhetoric persisted into the twentieth century and became formalized through legal measures such as the United Kingdom’s Aliens Order of 1920, which categorized refugees as “unsanitary aliens.” The legislation sought to restrict the entry of such individuals on the grounds that their presence posed a public health risk to the British population (Taylor 520). Meer and his co-authors observed that similar forms of discourse continued to surface in contemporary political rhetoric. Politicians frequently described displaced migrants using dehumanizing terms such as “swarms,” “swarming,” or “swamping,” which likened these individuals to insects or disease-bearing entities. These metaphors were commonly employed to justify tighter border restrictions and more exclusionary immigration policies (Meer et al. 487). The authors further emphasized that the metaphor of disease was not solely a response to public health fears during pandemics. Rather, it functioned as a political strategy aimed at portraying asylum seekers and refugees not only as carriers of illness but as embodiments of the disease itself. This framing, they argued, served to

legitimize exclusionary policies and perpetuate xenophobic attitudes within national discourses (Meer et al. 491).

Meher developed a brief yet profound bond with a woman named Saleha and her family, who were Muslims concealing their religious identity by presenting themselves as Hindus. This decision was influenced by the widespread misinformation and hostility directed at their community, which had been accused of spreading COVID-19. The family's tragic fate occurred when, after a long and exhausting journey, they fell asleep on a railway track and failed to hear an approaching luggage train, resulting in their deaths. During their interaction, both families introduced themselves using Hindu names or claimed their names were derived from Sanskrit in an effort to avoid discrimination and ensure equal treatment. Saleha's family had taken additional steps to conceal their identity. The male members, including the father and grandfather, shaved their beards, while Saleha, her mother, and grandmother packed away their burqas to avoid drawing attention. Saleha explained their actions by referencing the violence and hostility that members of their community had recently endured. "Mobs targeted members of our community in many towns and cities," she stated, with her expression marked more by disappointment than sadness. "Some were beaten up with fists and cricket bats; others were refused medical help at hospitals, while many others faced verbal abuse and discrimination. With this climate in the country, it was safer for us to lie about our faith on this already perilous journey" (Changoiwala 180). This marginalization of the Muslim community during the pandemic stemmed from early media narratives that associated the outbreak in Delhi with terms such as "Tablighi spread" and "Corona Jihad." Such language framed Muslims as intentional carriers of the virus, leading to increased stigmatization and targeting of the community. These portrayals not only reinforced communal divisions but also contributed to an atmosphere of fear and exclusion, further exacerbating the vulnerabilities of an already marginalized population. The leaders of the Islamic missionary movement called Tablighi Jamaat were subsequently booked on charges of culpable homicide not amounting to murder by the police on April 15 for violating the orders against mass gatherings and norms on social distancing. Around three thousand members gathered from different parts

of Delhi and they carry the disease with them on returning, thus emerging as a 'hotspot.' In an article, "The 'Labeled' Side of COVID-19 in India- Psychosocial Perspectives on Islamophobia During the Pandemic," by Kanika K. Ahuja and Debanjan Banerjee, it has been contended that on various dates that are within or even after the dates when the congregation took place, other faith communities are found to also organize the same large-scale gatherings. However, it has been found that most of the blame were directed towards the Muslims who they believed were "scapegoated." It was also mentioned that "the Tablighi Jamaat meeting in Delhi being singled as the main vector of the coronavirus, led to a significant increase in anti-Islamic sentiments, including boycotts of businesses of those from the Muslim community, separation of patients based on their religion, refusal to admit Muslims, resulting in the alleged deaths of two newborn babies after their mothers were denied admission, randomly quarantining Muslims, and subjecting Muslim healthcare and essential workers to violence and harassment." In the novel *Homebound*, Saleha lamented to Meher about the hostility and assaults targeted towards their communities. She states how, "Everyone, including those among the press, politicians and the public, accused Muslims of bioterrorism" or claimed that they were "weaponizing the virus to wage a holy war" (180).

The fear surrounding the coronavirus in India became closely intertwined with existing patterns of Islamophobia. Infectious diseases have historically generated widespread public anxiety, and such fear has often been manipulated to justify discrimination and violence against marginalized communities. In their analytical review titled *Placing Blame for Devastating Disease*, Dorothy Nelkin and Sander Gilman argued that the process of assigning blame for illness often revealed deep-rooted class prejudices. Disease, they noted, was frequently associated with poverty and used to legitimize existing social inequalities. They also contended that blaming served both psychological and social purposes. On an individual level, blame functioned as a psychological mechanism to establish a boundary between the self and the infected, thereby offering a form of emotional relief from fear and uncertainty. However, this act of assigning risk based on generalized or stereotypical characteristics was a form of social fantasy. Disease was routinely associated with an

“other”, whether defined by race, class, or ethnicity. According to them, the practice of placing blame was not arbitrary but was closely tied to the prevailing ideological, political, and social climate. It reflected the dominant worldviews, cultural stereotypes, and political agendas of a particular period. In this sense, blame was not simply a reaction to illness but a socially constructed response shaped by broader societal narratives and power structures (Gilman and Nelkin 363).

As she undertook the arduous journey home, Meher sought to understand the deeper significance of the idea of ‘home,’ its emotional appeal, its symbolic meaning, and why people are willing to sacrifice everything for a few familiar walls. Although she initially searched within herself for answers, she ultimately found them in observing the resilience and despair of those around her. These reflections led her to conclude that home is not merely a physical space but a sanctuary where fear dissolves, where compassion resides, and where love fosters more love. It is a place marked by sincerity, care, and empathy, a space where one is nurtured and protected, where others’ pain is felt as one’s own. Home, she believed, was a space where mercy is never absent and emotional warmth remains alive. It is the origin and the endpoint of all journeys, a space of belonging that offers both the freedom to soar and the safety to fall. Yet, with this understanding, she questioned whether the country she lived in, or even the world at large, could truly be considered her home, as neither offered such belonging (Changoiwala 224). These words marked Meher’s final written thoughts before she succumbed to illness in a migrant camp while in transit. Her journey spanned hundreds of miles, during which she witnessed and endured immense suffering, yet she never arrived at a place she could truly call home. For many other migrants, the physical return to their native villages did not restore a sense of belonging either. They were often rejected upon arrival, denied entry into their communities due to fears that they might carry the virus from urban centers. This painful reality resonated with the ideas expressed by Avtar Brah in *Cartographies of Diaspora*. Brah suggested that for many in diaspora, the notion of home becomes an imagined or mythologized space, a symbolic place of desire that exists in the diasporic consciousness. Although the geographical site associated with origin may be physically reachable, it becomes, in emotional and cultural terms, a

place of no return (Brah 192). The encounter of Meher, and countless others, emphasised the distance between the aspirational ideal of home and the often brutal realities that many face on return.

The influence of background assumptions in scientific research significantly impacts our understanding of vulnerability in the context of COVID-19. Such partial understandings, can be marginalizing and have been evident in the initial simplistic categorizations of populations deemed “at risk” (Brown). The omission of racial and ethnic data in many countries’ early data collection processes exemplifies this issue. For instance, anecdotal evidence, including disproportionate deaths among ethnic minority doctors in the UK, reveals how these oversights challenge prevailing scientific narratives (Khunti et al.). Data analysis shows stark disparities, with U.S. counties having Black majorities experiencing significantly higher rates of COVID-19 cases and deaths rather than predominantly white counties (Khunti et al.) Racism and stigma likely play critical roles in influencing COVID-19 outcomes, with ongoing discrimination undermining health over time and prejudices encountered in healthcare affecting the quality of care received. Trust (or lack thereof) also significantly influences vulnerability management; in Italy, assumptions about inadequate care led some to delay or avoid treatment, potentially worsening health outcomes. This complex interplay revealed the multifaceted nature of vulnerability during the pandemic, highlighting the necessity for nuanced, intersectional approaches to understanding and addressing health disparities. Furthermore, pandemic narratives can perpetuate harmful stereotypes and stigmatize marginalized communities.

To deconstruct racism and bigotry in pandemic narratives, it is essential to interrogate the underlying power dynamics and structural inequalities at play. This requires centering the voices and experiences of marginalized communities in storytelling and representation while challenging dominant narratives that perpetuate stereotypes. It also entails holding media outlets accountable for the narratives they propagate and advocating for more diverse and inclusive representations in pandemic discourse. Amplifying marginalized voices and challenging dominant narratives can

contribute to creating a more just and equitable society that confronts racism and bigotry in all its forms. For writers who are interested in exploring the subject of pandemics, it is necessary to address both the subject matter and the source material with clarity and compassion. It is of the utmost importance for them to navigate portrayals with caution, making certain that they do not unintentionally reinforce prejudices or apply narrative methods that might potentially misconstrue the facts of pandemics. It is the job of these authors to make use of their authority and experience in order to not only avoid concealing or distorting facts, but also to repair and expose the actual truths that have been veiled by disinformation, manipulation, and fabrication. On the contrary, rather than undermining or disregarding their ability to alter perceptions and understanding, it is important to appreciate and respect their potential.

In all our preparations for the coming pandemic, then, we would be wise not to give short shrift to metaphor and language, and the way they shape not just our thinking, but also our actions. Perhaps then we would pay more attention to the stories we tell and the consequences that follow. (Davis 178)

When Mary Shelley published *The Last Man* in 1826, she could not have anticipated that the societal divisions and worldview presented through her characters would, nearly two centuries later, reflect a dominant paradigm for interpreting disease threats within international politics. As Alexandre White noted in the introduction to *Epidemic Orientalism*, Shelley's fictional narrative prefigured several key aspects of what he termed "epidemic orientalism." This concept referred to the manner in which the West has historically understood infectious disease threats through its own perceived relationship with the rest of the world, often marked by a sense of superiority and distance (2). White further argued that the COVID-19 pandemic exposed the deeply political nature of global health governance. He contended that pandemics should not be viewed solely as biological crises; rather, they also represent economic and political events that produce cascading effects. These include heightened xenophobia, rising nationalism, racial injustice, and economic rivalries. The early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic

resulted in the deaths of millions, which White attributed to a combination of deliberate inaction, limited preparedness, and systemic indifference, particularly in the Western nations of the United States and the United Kingdom. In the preface to *Epidemic Orientalism*, White reflected on how the naming of COVID-19 diverged from earlier disease designations that were more closely tied to geographic locations, such as Ebola, Zika, or Middle East Respiratory Syndrome, or to historical timeframes, such as cholera or yellow fever. He argued that COVID-19 served as a stark reminder that the West had not, in fact, moved beyond the age of pandemic vulnerability. Contrary to assumptions of civilizational progress, the pandemic revealed that Western nations were not inherently more capable of managing such global health emergencies than the rest of the world (xi). Adam Dunbar and Nicole E. Jones revealed that social distancing was frequently used as strategy by cities and states to reduce the impact of the Coronavirus disease 2019. In order to promote social distancing, law enforcement officers intervene in gatherings of a significant number of individuals, and in certain instances, they even resort to issuing citations and making arrests. The emergence of the role of “public health policing” in law enforcement raises concerns regarding the potential influence of race on the enforcement of social distancing measures. The question they posed for investigation was- “To what extent does race influence the approach to public health enforcement, in a manner comparable to the approach to crime enforcement?” They concluded that given “the extensive research on racial disparities in criminal justice outcomes, research needs to explore the relationship between race and efforts aimed at stemming the spread of COVID-19” (221). It is also crucial to acknowledge that certain individuals, based on their race, have the advantage of being able to maintain a safe distance from the pandemic and avoid being subjected to police surveillance in general. Thus, within the framework of public health enforcement during the COVID-19 pandemic, the existence of racially unequal social distancing guidelines can be attributed to the wider racial dynamics that are present in our legal institutions (237).

One prominent feature of pandemic narratives is the portrayal of “the other” as the source of contagion and threat. This xenophobic rhetoric, rooted in historical

prejudices and stereotypes, scapegoats marginalized groups, particularly immigrants, refugees, and people of colour. The loss of trust and human connections, the vicious and perpetual cycle of racism, bigotry, hate crimes and xenophobia that are directed mostly towards the minorities of society are addressed in this chapter. Such narratives not only fuel fear and division but also obscure the systemic factors driving the spread of disease, such as inadequate healthcare access and socioeconomic inequality. By tracing patterns of racial and stereotypical discourses in the selected pandemic narratives, the representation of the “othered” especially the East Asian, the Muslim, the gay, the migrants, the German communities in the selected primary texts. It is identified that they have subscribed to the dominant ideologies. The authors, in their depiction of the stigmatization, racial subjugation, the bigotry and paranoia towards these communities, may have inadvertently or purposely revealed the discourse of “othering” that has permeated the domain of culture, power and knowledge in almost every pandemic outbreak.

Pandemic literature offers a critical lens through which to examine these societal responses, highlighting the destructive consequences of paranoia, bigotry, racism, xenophobia, and othering. In addressing these issues, writers get readers to engage with their biases and prejudices, encouraging empathy, understanding, and a renewed commitment to inclusivity and togetherness through the adversity of the time. Pandemic literature is, in the end, a profound site of reflection, asking to examine the darkness of humanity, while also cultivating hope in a compassionate and equitable tomorrow. A comprehensive analysis of pandemic narratives reveals the complex manner in which societal fears and prejudices shape responses to health crises. Historically, pandemics have often acted as catalysts for xenophobia and scapegoating, leading to the unjust blaming of marginalized groups for the spread of disease. This form of bigotry intensifies social divisions and informs public health policies and practices in ways that can further marginalize certain communities. A critical examination of these narratives highlights how paranoia-fuelled bigotry perpetuates harmful stereotypes and stigmas. These narratives often mirror broader societal anxieties that are exploited by those in power in order to maintain control or redirect accountability during crises. As a result, essential public health challenges,

such as inadequate infrastructure and lack of access to healthcare, are overshadowed by misplaced blame. Additionally, pandemic narratives often reveal the underlying power dynamics that shape which voices are amplified and which are silenced. This selective storytelling further marginalizes already vulnerable groups, distorting public perception and understanding of the crisis. The intensified fear of the “other” resulted in reactionary policies that prioritize the safety and interests of dominant groups while neglecting or even harming minority populations.

Pandemics are not merely biological events but discursive spaces where fear is weaponized and the “other” is constructed. Racism and bigotry are embedded in these narratives, as disease becomes racialized and immigrant or minority communities are scapegoated, blamed, and excluded. The persistent association of certain groups with contagion fuels paranoia, reinforces societal divisions, and legitimizes discriminatory practices under the guise of public safety. By unmasking these patterns, the chapter compels a reckoning with the historical and ongoing role of racial prejudice in shaping public health discourse and policy. It demonstrates how fear, when left unexamined, mutates into social exclusion and structural violence. The emphasis on paranoia is particularly significant, as it shows how public health crises are often co-opted by nationalist and xenophobic agendas, leading to stigmatization rather than solidarity. The chapter ultimately calls for a transformative reimagining of public health that resists reductive and prejudiced framings. It advocates for a shift toward narratives rooted in empathy and shared humanity—narratives that acknowledge the lived realities of those disproportionately impacted. In doing so, it offers a path toward dismantling the systemic racism, bigotry, and fear-driven responses that too often define global health crises. This reframing is not only essential for ethical and equitable health interventions but also for fostering a more just and inclusive society in the face of future pandemics.

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Chapter IV: Chronicling Pandemic Narratives

This chapter examines the manner in which pandemic narratives have been chronicled. It seeks to focus upon three interrelated processes—writing, reading, and remembering, that define the role of pandemic literature in mediating crisis. Writing is analyzed as both testimonial and interventionist, foregrounding textual strategies that render invisible suffering ethically legible. Reading is approached as an affective and interpretive act that situates literature within frameworks of cultural reception and empathetic engagement. Remembering is explored as a narrative and collective process, one that transforms private grief into public historical understanding. Together, these processes illuminate how literature becomes not merely a chronicle of events, but an agent that reconfigures perception, ethics, and memory. Authors writing during the pandemic faced the challenge of representing trauma that was simultaneously hyper-visible and experienced in isolation. Cathy Caruth’s theory of belated experience remains relevant to the narrative forms that emerged. According to Caruth, trauma becomes knowable only in retrospect, through repetition and narrative structure (58). This temporal deferral informed the aesthetic strategies of pandemic fiction, which employed fragmentation, retrospection, and reiteration to convey irreconcilable loss and narrative instability. Such texts often served as counterpoints to statistical abstraction and institutional silence, grounding catastrophe in specific lives and social contexts. Equally central was the role of the reader. Drawing on Hans Robert Jauss’s concept of the “horizon of expectations,” this chapter considers how literary meaning is shaped by cultural and historical circumstances of reception. In the context of COVID-19, the horizon expanded dramatically. Texts previously deemed speculative acquired immediate urgency, and reading became a dialogic process, one defined by interpretive participation and ethical engagement. Readers were no longer passive consumers but co-creators of memory and interpreters of trauma. Of course, reception was uneven. While some individuals found space for literary reflection, others were burdened by caregiving and survival demands. Leah Price observed that reading acquired moral connotations, becoming a socially sanctioned retreat in contrast to the visibility of frontline labor (qtd. in Guren et al. 3). These disparities reveal that literary access and the emotional bandwidth for reading are unevenly distributed. Reading pandemic literature thus becomes a politically inflected act, one shaped by privilege, power,

and unequal narrative attention. The third process, remembering, engages directly with the challenges of cultural memory. Literary representations of pandemics must contend with a historical tendency toward forgetting. Elizabeth Outka and Laura Spinney have shown how the 1918 influenza pandemic, despite its immense death toll, largely escaped literary and public memory. Outka attributes the erasure of the 1918 influenza pandemic from cultural memory to its diffuse impact and anticlimactic narrative character. She notes that the pandemic's lack of a clear enemy or dramatic conclusion made it less compelling as a subject for literary and historical focus, especially when compared to the more narratively rich and symbolically potent First World War (Outka 1). Similarly, literary scholar Astrid Erll emphasizes the absence of closure and the competition with more narratively compelling events, such as war, as factors contributing to the pandemic's marginalization in cultural memory. She argues that the pandemic's diffuse impact and lack of a clear narrative arc made it less memorable and less likely to be commemorated in literature and public memory (Erll 389).

The COVID-19 pandemic, one of the most disruptive and far-reaching global crises in recent history, provoked a profound literary response that sought not only to document but also to interrogate the altered human condition under collective strain. This chapter marks a critical shift in the thesis, transitioning from a thematic study of pandemic depictions to an examination of the epistemological and ethical functions of literature in times of crisis. Pandemic literature emerged as more than a representation of catastrophe. It became an active site of writing, reading, and remembering, through which individual and collective experiences of trauma, resilience, and memory were both shaped and expressed. As authors confronted disease, institutional breakdown, and psychological distress, and as readers encountered these texts in real time or retrospectively, literature evolved into a vessel of cultural memory and ethical reckoning. Historically, literature has responded to collective upheaval by reflecting and shaping social consciousness. As Erll observes, literature anticipates cultural memory by shaping not only how societies remember but also how they expect to remember (867). Contemporary literary responses continue a tradition that links past pandemics such as the Black Death, the 1918

influenza, and the AIDS crisis to current experiences, while also confronting the representational limits of trauma.

Although the COVID-19 pandemic achieved higher visibility, it too risks oversaturation and eventual neglect. Literature, in this context, serves as a resistance to forgetting, offering symbolic framing and ethical mediation to counteract institutional disregard and psychological numbness. Together, the interwoven acts of writing, reading, and remembering establish pandemic literature as an imaginative and ethical practice. Writing testifies to trauma; reading interprets and responds; remembering embeds experience into collective understanding. Through this structure, literature not only preserves but interrogates the experience of catastrophe. Pandemic literature thus emerges as a repository of emotion, a site of critique, and a framework for cultural memory. It articulates vulnerability, contests dominant narratives, and affirms human dignity. This chapter draws on trauma theory, reception aesthetics, and memory studies to punctuate literature's capacity to preserve, interpret, and critique. The pandemic disrupted lives but also activated literary forms that continue to shape how that disruption is understood. Writing becomes an act of moral responsibility; reading, a space of empathetic engagement; remembering, a mode of historical preservation. The paradigm shift in contemporary epistemology is closely tied to the humanist imperative of addressing social injustice, moral crises, and silenced voices. Literature, inherently responsive to its cultural and historical context, enacts this interplay between the historicity of the text and the textuality of history. As a distinct but enduring genre, pandemic literature arises from humanity's recurring confrontation with mass contagion and collective suffering. Across eras and cultures, literary works have captured the horror, despair, and existential anguish that accompany pandemics. Gazala Khan and Sazzad Parwez stress the importance of preserving pandemic narratives, noting how societies often ignore the historical gravity of such crises until confronted anew (29).

Pandemics generate existential uncertainty, prompting individuals and societies toward reflection. Shanti Jones in "Literature: A Useful Tool for the Philosophical Counselor During a Pandemic," argues that literature, particularly the

contemporary novel, often engages with existential questions more compellingly than philosophical texts, especially during crises when survival is paramount (2534). Literature becomes a mirror for collective emotions such as trauma, alienation, and endurance. It is anticipated that future writers will continue to grapple with the pandemic's socio-cultural and moral complexities, creating narratives that address inequity, helplessness, and shared introspection. Pandemic literature thus transcends description, becoming a form of ethical intervention and testimony. Writers have redefined literary production as a means of preserving lived realities and contesting truths that might otherwise be silenced or forgotten. In moments of historical rupture, writing assumes the mantle of moral responsibility, trauma registration, and political critique. Michel Foucault's theory of the author function, articulated in his essay "What is an Author?," offers a critical framework for understanding the reconfiguration of literary production during the COVID-19 pandemic. Foucault challenged traditional conceptions of authorship that equate the author with the origin of meaning, arguing instead that "the author is not an indefinite source of significations which fill a work; the author does not precede the works" (Foucault 118). This principle of limitation positions the author as a regulator of discourse, a function embedded in systems of classification and knowledge. In the context of pandemic literature, this theoretical model becomes salient as authors were called upon not merely to invent stories but to interpret the epistemological and emotional disorder produced by the crisis. Their texts functioned as mechanisms for organizing collective experiences, ethical reflection, and public memory. As Foucault observed, "The author's function is therefore characteristic of the mode of existence, circulation, and functioning of certain discourses within a society" (108). Pandemic authors thus emerged less as autonomous creators than as mediators of truth within particular regimes of knowledge.

Saleema Nawaz's *Songs for the End of the World* exemplifies this dynamic. Conceived and drafted prior to the COVID-19 outbreak, her novel eerily anticipated many features of the pandemic. This prescience stemmed not from speculative fantasy but from empirical research since Nawaz studied the Spanish Flu, Ebola, epidemiological models, and legal frameworks governing quarantine. "I looked into

how pandemics were handled historically and how public health infrastructure operates,” she noted (qtd. in Murison). Her process affirms Foucault’s assertion that the author “is not simply the ‘source’ of a text, but a function of discourse that works to classify and legitimate knowledge” (Foucault 113). Nawaz’s polyphonic structure amplifies this function. The narrative unfolds through seven interconnected characters, each negotiating the psychological and moral fallout of an unfolding pandemic. This multiplicity resists unitary meaning and mirrors Foucault’s rejection of the author as a singular figure of authority. As he maintained, “The author is not simply the speaker of a discourse... but a certain functional principle by which, in our culture, one limits, excludes and chooses” (118). Nawaz disperses this authority, allowing meaning to emerge from a constellation of perspectives. A protagonist, Owen Grant, who is a novelist himself, functions as a metafictional proxy for the author under duress. His writing project, *How to Avoid the Plague*, becomes both a coping mechanism and an ethical engagement with uncertainty. In a pivotal exchange, a publishing agent tells him, “I want to read your book... Not as someone in publishing. As someone who wants to survive” (Nawaz 232). This line encapsulates the expectation that pandemic literature transcends aesthetic form to become a medium of moral utility and affective solidarity. Owen illustrates not just personal crisis but the structural role of the writer as interpreter and classifier during emergencies.

Nawaz has explicitly commented on the ethical dimensions of her storytelling. Rejecting dystopian tropes, she sought to portray the pandemic not as societal collapse but as an opportunity for relational and moral reflection. “I wanted to write a disaster story that was realistic and hopeful,” she stated. “We’ve inherited all these ideas from Hollywood and dystopian fiction about how people behave in crisis. But that’s not what I imagined” (Nawaz, *CBC Books*). Her characters, though physically isolated, remain emotionally tethered, foregrounding questions of ethical responsibility and mutual care. These thematic concerns position Nawaz as a cultural interlocutor engaged in public dialogue about values during states of exception. Foucault also noted that the author function varies across historical and cultural contexts, stating that “it does not operate in a uniform manner in all discourses, at all

times, and in every culture” (108). The pandemic created a distinctive discursive moment in which the author’s function intensified. Literary production during this time was marked by fragmentation, urgency, and ethical stakes. Authors like Nawaz intervened not merely to describe crisis, but to narrate its social, emotional, and political textures with immediacy and foresight.

Songs for the End of the World also functions as an archive of speculative realism. Its depiction of a viral outbreak in 2020 nearly matches the real-world timeline and raises questions about governance, media, and social responsibility. A central narrative thread involving a woman linked to the outbreak allows Nawaz to explore contagion as both biological and metaphorical—a figure of emotional and social entanglement. Her attention to how individuals interpret trauma situates the novel within testimonial and historiographic modes. As Foucault suggests, the author becomes the conduit through which “truth” is circulated and made meaningful amid competing discourses (113). In writing against dystopian fatalism, Nawaz proposed an alternative model of pandemic storytelling. Rather than representing breakdown and despair, her narrative imagined the possibility of moral coherence and collective care. This reframing enacted the author function as a mode of cultural organization. As she explained, “I don’t like to be prescriptive when it comes to readers... but I do hope that these characters can become real for a little while, and that the book... might provide a moment of respite, insight, or hope” (424). Her authorial labor thus reaffirms Foucault’s claim that authorship entails more than creation as it involves the production of relations between knowledge, discourse, and meaning that shape how societies understand and remember crisis.

The global outbreak of COVID-19 posed a fundamental challenge to literary production, reshaping both the conditions of writing and the ethics of representation. Writers were caught between documenting an unprecedented disruption and respecting the emotional saturation of a readership already burdened by ongoing trauma. Many expressed ambivalence, some feared direct engagement with pandemic themes would alienate audiences seeking refuge in literature, while others worried that avoiding the subject could render their work disconnected from contemporary

reality. This tension was compounded by what some termed the “boring apocalypse,” a crisis marked not by spectacle, but by inertia and isolation, complicating conventional narrative arcs. In a *Los Angeles Times* column, author Tom Bissell captured this unease, “The PTSD we’re all going to have is not only going to affect how it’s written about, but whether or not anyone will want to read about it. When you have a horrible global experience in which millions of people have died, what is there to explore artistically other than the fact that it was terrible?” (qtd. in Kellogg). This reflection crystallizes the central dilemma on how to ethically and artistically engage with a catastrophe that is both globally visible and deeply personal. Despite these concerns, many writers confronted the pandemic through fiction, recognizing literature as a vital means of processing trauma, imagining alternatives, and bearing witness. Lawrence Wright exemplifies this trajectory. Known for *The Looming Tower: Al-Qaeda and the Road to 9/11*, Wright turned to fiction in *The End of October* to explore the systemic implications of a fictional pandemic. Grounded in rigorous research spanning virology, epidemiology, and intelligence archives, his narrative mirrored many of the structural realities of COVID-19. Begun in 2017 and completed before the real-world outbreak, *The End of October* was released in April 2020, drawing public attention for its eerie prescience. Wright remarked, “Whenever I open the paper it feels like I’m reading my own book. It’s weird” (qtd. in Horton). The novel’s depiction of a coronavirus spreading from Asia, straining health systems, and triggering political instability anticipated real developments. Among the predicted phenomena were ventilator shortages, governmental misinformation, and targeted xenophobia. The novel reflects both Wright’s journalistic instincts and his capacity for speculative extrapolation. Through protagonist Henry Parsons, an epidemiologist and former CDC official, the narrative explores institutional failure, moral uncertainty, and international conflict. Parsons’s global trajectory mirrors the virus’s path, while his internal reflections illuminate the ethical dilemmas of global health governance. Wright’s focus on geopolitics over apocalyptic spectacle signals a deliberate intervention in pandemic storytelling. Rather than imagining societal collapse, it extrapolates from preexisting global tensions such as political fragmentation, public mistrust, and health inequity. “I tried to imagine the most likely cause of the next global catastrophe,” Wright explained, “and then looked at

the geopolitical world as it is... and imagined what would happen if you add a pandemic stress to that system” (qtd. in Horton). This approach places the novel within the tradition of speculative realism, where fiction amplifies rather than escapes reality. The title itself which is a reference to October 1918, the deadliest month of the 1918 influenza pandemic serves as a historical anchor. Wright uses this parallel to emphasize the continuity of human vulnerability and decision-making. His narrative adopts what Paul Ricoeur terms a “hermeneutics of suspicion,” reinterpreting historical memory through a morally attuned lens (33). The novel thus emerges as testimonial fiction, confronting a future shaped by avoidable failures. While informed by journalistic expertise, Wright’s novel also reflects the evolving demands of literary production during crisis. By embedding scientific knowledge within narrative, the novel blurs boundaries between reportage and fiction, offering speculative inquiry and public pedagogy. In eschewing sensationalism for analytical depth, it contributes to a literary response that reframes catastrophe as structural reckoning.

The recurrence of pandemics across history has shaped human responses in ways that transcend specific temporal or cultural contexts. As Smitakshi Choudhary observes, “despite occurring at different points of human history, the range of responses have been captured within existential paradigms at various levels” (12). Literature has long served as a space where these concepts- mortality, displacement and social rupture are explored and reimagined. In analyzing literary echoes of the 1918 influenza, Choudhary further notes the tension between existential dread and irrational behavior, underscoring the interplay between agency and systemic collapse (16). Outka extends this analysis by highlighting the affective registers of pandemic literature. She argues that literature captures sensory, emotional, and atmospheric dimensions which are often absent from formal historical accounts, “these realms of experience... are often precisely the realms left out of written histories but infused into memories, poems and novels” (*How Pandemics Seep into Literature* 6). Literature thus preserves embodied perceptions, archiving how pandemics are lived and remembered.

Ellen Marie Wiseman's *The Orphan Collector* functions as one such archive. Set during the 1918 pandemic, the novel centers on Pia Lange, a German immigrant navigating illness, fear, and xenophobia. The intersecting narrative of Bernice Groves, a grieving mother whose prejudice intensifies during the crisis, constructs a moral landscape shaped by both compassion and exclusion. Although written before COVID-19, the novel gained renewed relevance during the 2020 lockdowns, as readers recognized its thematic resonance with contemporary anxieties. In reflecting on her work in an interview with *Vanity Fair*, Wiseman expressed awareness of its broader implications, "Will they admire our willingness to rise to the occasion... or that we were destined to repeat it?" Her questions project a historical consciousness shaped by both retrospective insight and speculative imagination. The novel thus embodies the temporal layering characteristic of pandemic literature, refracting past trauma through the lens of present fears and future judgments. The novel's testimonial strength lies in its ability to bridge individual narrative and collective memory. Wiseman explained that she hoped readers would be inspired by Pia's resilience and reminded, through Bernice's story, of the ethical imperative of empathy "regardless of their colour, ethnicity, or religion" (Wiseman). Though originally focused on themes of immigration and discrimination, the novel's reception in 2020 shifted toward its pandemic relevance, revealing how literary meaning adapts in response to context. At the level of form and affect, the novel exemplifies what Outka identifies as the sensory dimensions of catastrophe. Its vivid depictions of fever, fear, and urban desolation evoke a pandemic atmosphere charged with grief and uncertainty. These descriptions transcend historical reconstruction, offering readers a visceral sense of lived experience that often eludes statistical or policy-driven accounts. In Wiseman's novel, these concerns animate Pia's journey, which becomes both literal and symbolic, a search for meaning in a disordered world. *The Orphan Collector*, in this light, is not only a historical narrative but also a text reanimated by contemporary trauma. Its testimonial character resides not in factual accuracy, but in its transmission of ethical and affective truth.

Puja Changoiwala's *Homebound* represents a contemporary engagement with testimonial literature that bridges fiction and journalism. Drawing from interviews

with migrant workers affected by India's sudden COVID-19 lockdown in March 2020, the novel constructs a fictional account rooted in authentic experience. Structured in the epistolary mode, the narrative adopts the voice of Meher, a young girl documenting her family's arduous journey on foot from Mumbai to Rajasthan. This form preserves immediacy and emotional realism while protecting the anonymity of sources. The layering of fictional voice and historical event creates a hybrid testimonial structure, what Giorgio Agamben terms the transformation of "the unsayable into the sayable" (26). Within this framework, the novel is not merely descriptive but performative, actively participating in the act of bearing witness. The letter format aligns *Homebound* with older literary traditions while addressing contemporary concerns. The emotionally charged letters traverse registers of fear, hope, and despair, offering an intimate account of the migrant experience. Changoiwala's background in investigative journalism informs the careful construction of this affective terrain. She explains that the format enabled access to Meher's inner world without the mediation of an omniscient narrator. This narrative strategy serves both aesthetic and ethical ends by foregrounding the subjectivity of a child situated at the intersection of economic displacement and state neglect voices frequently omitted from policy discourse and media coverage.

Changoiwala's reflection on her motivations reveals an acute awareness of the tension between visibility and erasure in public discourse. Her declaration that "to forget them again would be treason" (230), situates the novel within a broader ethical imperative to preserve memory. *Homebound* functions as literary resistance against institutional amnesia. The novel echoes what David Tollerton describes as a cultural "refusal to forget," serving as an intervention in the face of collective neglect. The pandemic's disproportionate impact on migrant laborers exposed long-standing structural inequalities in India's urban economy. The novel positions itself within a tradition of socially committed literature by rendering these workers not as faceless statistics but as individuals with emotional and aspirational depth. As Changoiwala affirms, "although the government may deny the fragility of the migrants' lives ... it is their truth" (232). This emphasis on narrative ownership challenges reductive or dismissive state narratives. For her, fiction becomes a

medium for articulating truths that are inaccessible through conventional journalism. She notes, “Fiction despises the creative censorship that walks in with truth, yet demands its reason” (230). The novel thus offers a space for suppressed or politically inconvenient narratives to be expressed with emotional fidelity. *Homebound* exemplifies what Leigh Gilmore calls “limit-case testimony,” narratives that navigate the boundary between factual truth and imaginative construction to resist silencing and simplification. As both journalist and fiction writer, Changoiwala joins a growing body of pandemic authors who blur the lines between reportage and narrative storytelling. “The greatest privilege we have is that of documenting this history, of being the storytellers, not the stories,” she stated in an interview. Her concern over the erasure of migrant narratives from public memory bring out the ephemeral nature of media attention. By transforming lived experience into literary form, *Homebound* counters this forgetting with a durable narrative that invites continued reflection beyond the immediate crisis. Changoiwala’s aesthetic choices echo earlier literary responses to pandemics. Daniel Defoe’s *A Journal of the Plague Year*, composed decades after the 1665 plague, blends factual observation with fictional narrative to convey the chaos of its time. Similarly, *Homebound* draws on journalistic research while employing fiction to probe subjective experience. Defoe’s use of mortality statistics and anecdotal detail parallels Changoiwala’s incorporation of personal testimonies and affective texture. Though grounded in the 2020 lockdown, it continues to accrue new meanings as audiences revisit it in light of ongoing pandemic repercussions. The shifting horizon of reception highlights the text’s capacity to function not merely as historical document but as an enduring site of ethical reflection. By giving literary voice to the marginalized, *Homebound* participates in a tradition of counter-memory. Its portrayal of migrant workers resists the flattening effects of official narratives and mass media, insisting on complexity, individuality, and human dignity. Filtered through Meher’s letters, their stories become part of a literary archive that challenges forgetting and compels responsibility.

The ethical and aesthetic dimensions of writing during a pandemic intensified under the dual pressures of immediate human suffering and volatile historical

consciousness. In this context, literary writing, particularly fiction informed by testimonial practices became an urgent mode of cultural engagement. It countered the reductive tendencies of media cycles and epidemiological statistics, offering affective coherence amid social and existential disarray. Narrative emerged as a tool to articulate trauma, bear witness to injustice, and preserve memory, casting authors not as neutral chroniclers but as ethical interlocutors. The emergence of pandemic fiction provoked mixed cultural responses. A common concern among early commentators was whether literature created in close proximity to crisis could achieve lasting aesthetic value. Sam Sacks, writing for *The Wall Street Journal*, confessed his apprehension, “I am a little fearful of the onslaught of Covid-19 fiction heading towards us in the coming years.” His unease reflected a broader skepticism toward “topical” fiction and its capacity to transcend immediate context. Critics worried that rapid literary responses might trivialize trauma or commodify suffering. Yet pandemic fiction persisted; not despite discomfort, but because of it. The rupture demanded imaginative figuring, and fiction responded by exploring emotional terrains absent from official discourses. Fiction’s distinct temporal register allowed it to process crisis differently than journalism or historiography. Unlike reportage, which prioritized speed and verification, fiction offered interpretive depth and emotional resonance. In a moment defined by uncertainty and overload, readers often turned to novels for insight and catharsis. Fiction enabled slower, more reflective engagement with themes such as loss, isolation, and precarity. This function was not merely therapeutic, it was political. As Arundhati Roy noted in “The Pandemic is a Portal,” the crisis exposed structural inequalities, and storytelling became a means to envision transformation. Writers of pandemic fiction constructed narratives that, though often set in speculative near-futures, closely resembled their present moment. These works examined the collapse of public health systems, the vulnerabilities of marginalized communities, and the psychological effects of prolonged isolation. Some authors used metaphor and allegory to encode pandemic realities; others addressed them directly, understanding that avoidance risked another kind of erasure. The overwhelming presence of COVID-19 shaped narrative strategies, themes, and ethical orientations in fundamental ways. The urgency to write was experienced unevenly. Some writers hesitated, wary of aestheticizing ongoing trauma; others

found themselves compelled to respond precisely because of the crisis's immediacy. For many, fiction was not escapist but necessary, an attempt to work through grief and disorientation. This sense of urgency, however, also highlighted the privileges of those able to write. Tabish Khair, in his essay "Inside the Tortoise," reflected on this disparity:

Perhaps significant literature will come from those who walked miles to reach 'home,' or lost jobs or had their homes repossessed... if they ever get the chance to write. Perhaps it will come when we, the relatively safe, begin to meet the millions who could not retract their heads, like we did, into the carapace of a lockdown. (Khair)

Khair's remarks foreground a critical tension in pandemic literature, between the narrators and the narrated. Literature is not produced from neutral ground; it is shaped by access, safety, and voice. Fictional representations that claim to bear witness must confront the ethics of speaking on behalf of others, particularly in a crisis where exposure and mortality followed lines of inequality.

Amitav Ghosh, reflecting on the pandemic's literary implications, predicted "a huge wave of novels about the pandemic" (Ghosh). His comment aligns with his broader concerns about literature's role in registering large-scale disruptions such as climate change, colonialism, and now contagion. In his view, COVID-19 constituted a civilizational rupture demanding narrative responses that interrogate not only the virus but also the structures that shaped its effects. Argha Kumar Banerjee similarly emphasized the emotional complexity captured in pandemic fiction. She argued that literature "celebrates the enduring range of human responses, the gamut of feelings that rage against the onslaught of disease and death." Her claim positions literature as emotional historiography, an archive of grief, resilience, rage, and solidarity. Such works extend beyond recording suffering to mapping the affective contours of a collective event. As pandemic literature evolves, questions of temporality remain central. Will works written during the crisis age differently than those produced later? Can immediacy coexist with enduring relevance? These questions remain open. Yet the early body of pandemic fiction reveals literature's capacity not only to

document but also to interrogate. It asks how societies remember, who gets to narrate, and what responsibilities storytelling carries in times of shared vulnerability. Writers, in transforming pain into narrative, have undertaken a task that is simultaneously artistic and archival, political and philosophical.

The study of pandemic literature must account not only for the act of writing but also for the act of reading, which positions the reader as an agent in the production of literary meaning. This perspective marks a shift from traditional literary models privileging authorial intent or textual autonomy. In his foundational essay “Introduction to Reception Aesthetics,” Hohendahl notes that the turn to the reader and away from representational aesthetics is “contingent on complex causes of a theoretical, ideological and socio-historical nature” (8). Reception, then, is not passive but shaped by the social frameworks and historical context within which reading occurs. Reception theory, as developed by Jauss, offers a historically grounded model for understanding the dynamic between texts and audiences. In *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*, he argues that a literary work does not offer “the same view to each reader in each period” but evolves through interaction with readers’ ‘horizons of expectation’” (21). These horizons, formed by prior reading experiences, cultural norms, and social contexts are subject to confirmation, revision, or transformation during engagement with a text (23). This model helps explain the reception of pandemic fiction during COVID-19, when genre conventions like contagion and quarantine were refracted through lived experience. The collapse of boundaries between representation and reality made reading both an interpretive and ethically charged process. As Jauss observes, literary experience is shaped by “the reader’s concrete social situation and the historical moment in which reading takes place” (22).

Texts once perceived as speculative were re-evaluated through the lens of collective trauma. Reading became a form of witnessing and reflection, extending beyond aesthetic pleasure. Robert C. Holub reinforces this in *Reception Theory: A Critical Introduction*, stating that literature is “received and evaluated against the background of other art forms as well as... everyday experience” (68). Pandemic

narratives thereby took on dual functions—artistic expression and socio-political critique enabling readers to contest dominant discourses and imagine alternative histories. Wolfgang Iser complements Jauss’s historicism with a phenomenological approach. In *The Act of Reading*, Iser asserts that texts contain “gaps” requiring reader participation to generate meaning (112). This is particularly evident in pandemic fiction, where fragmented narratives and temporal disjunctions mirror the disarray of crisis and intensify reader involvement. The ethics of reading pandemic literature thus emerge not only from content but also from narrative form. Fragmentation, multiplicity of perspectives, and ambiguity invite readers to engage with vulnerability and injustice, prompting critical empathy. As Holub notes, literature may “call into question and alter social conventions through both content and form” (68). This interpretive process aligns with Gadamer’s notion of the “fusion of horizons,” which Jauss adapted to describe how meaning emerges through the negotiation between the text’s context and the reader’s evolving worldview. During the pandemic, this fusion was intensified, as older interpretive frameworks proved inadequate, compelling readers to revise their understanding of both literature and lived reality. Reading became not just emotionally resonant but a site of cultural memory and ethical engagement. As Jauss contends, literature competes “with other arts and social forces in the emancipation of mankind from its natural, religious, and social bonds,” and readers play a central role in realizing this potential (39).

In contemporary pandemic fiction, reading becomes a socially and politically inflected act. Saleema Nawaz’s *Songs for the End of the World* employs a polyphonic structure to portray varied experiences of risk and resilience. Characters like Elliot, who maintains routines during the ARAMIS outbreak, contrast with Keelan, whose psychological decline underlines systemic vulnerabilities. These disparities are framed as structural rather than incidental, encouraging readers to move between empathy and critical reflection. Similarly, in *The Orphan Collector*, Ellen Marie Wiseman’s protagonist Pia Lange, a German immigrant in 1918 Philadelphia grapples with xenophobia and loss. Her marginalization intensifies the narrative’s ethical stakes and urges readers to confront how pandemics exacerbate social exclusion. Wiseman’s aim to elicit empathy “regardless of colour, ethnicity, or

religion” positions reading as a civic and moral act. Holub’s emphasis on the role of everyday experience (68) emphasizes that literary reception is inseparable from real-world inequality. These dynamics are evident in Leah Price’s *Reading in the Age of Covid-19*, where she notes how readers were contrasted with essential workers and framed as morally secure in their isolation (qtd. in Guren et al. 3). This dichotomy rendered reading a symbol of privilege. Researchers like Guren found that reading time increased among affluent, child-free individuals, while others faced caregiving burdens and economic instability. These findings highlight that access to literature and interpretive bandwidth is unevenly distributed. The reception of pandemic fiction is thus shaped by the historical and material conditions of its readership.

In *The End of October*, Lawrence Wright narrates the global unravelling through epidemiologist Henry Parsons, blending logistical detail with institutional critique. For readers enduring similar disruptions, the novel became a mirror of collective anxiety and systemic breakdown. Its meaning emerged through the convergence of its narrative strategies with the reader’s historical moment, exemplifying how literature, in Jauss’s terms, becomes an evolving experience contingent upon changing horizons. Ed Simon echoes this view, asserting in an essay on reading during crisis that “the preservation of narrative is itself an act of moral resistance.” Literature, he argues, serves as testimony and defiance. Reading, especially in the context of pandemic fiction, becomes a practice of witnessing- a way of asserting, “we were here” (Simon). The reader is transformed from passive consumer into custodian of collective memory. Erll’s concept of mnemonic premediation deepens this analysis. She suggests that literature often anticipates how events will be remembered by offering symbolic frameworks through which trauma can be later interpreted. In her work on the 1918 influenza pandemic, she notes that the absence of coherent narratives contributed to its marginalization in cultural memory. Outka, in *Viral Modernism*, expands on this by showing how the pandemic’s dispersed temporality and lack of “heroic” resolution made it resistant to conventional literary forms. Fiction, by contrast, enables affective framing and retrospective coherence, equipping readers with tools to process and retain experiences that formal histories often overlook. This transformation of the reader

into an ethical participant is reinforced by the authors' reflections. Ellen Marie Wiseman, discussing the shifting reception of *The Orphan Collector*, noted how public attention moved from the novel's critique of anti-immigrant sentiment to its pandemic themes. "We have not learnt anything," she observed, lamenting recurring patterns of xenophobia. Her novel, which follows Pia Lange through the devastation of the 1918 pandemic, prompts readers to confront how marginalization compounds vulnerability. Pia's suffering, intensified by her German immigrant background compels not just empathy but critical attention to the societal failures that produce such suffering. The novel becomes a mirror reflecting both past and present, its meaning shaped as much by reader response as by authorial design. Changoiwala's *Homebound* similarly enacts literature's capacity to preserve suppressed histories. Through Meher's letters chronicling her family's migration during India's lockdown, the novel stages a confrontation with bureaucratic violence and infrastructural failure. The epistolary form grounds abstract policy critique in the tangible reality of lived suffering. Readers are compelled to witness rather than merely observe. The act of reading becomes an ethical exercise, challenging audiences to hold space for stories often erased by state narratives or drowned out by dominant media. Wright also acknowledged the moral implications of literary reception during a crisis. Aware of the risk that his novel might appear exploitative, he clarified that *The End of October* was intended as a tribute to "the courage and ingenuity of the people who are fighting disease" (Horton). His statement reframes the text as recognition rather than spectacle, urging readers to shift from detachment to solidarity. Pandemic fiction prompts a recalibration of the reader's role. Interpretation is never neutral. It is shaped by historical moment, cultural position, and ethical stance. Through narrative form and reception, literature engages readers as agents of memory and critique. The act of reading becomes a site of moral inquiry, through which literature transcends aesthetic boundaries and enters the realm of cultural responsibility.

The COVID-19 pandemic was not merely a biological crisis; it revealed deeper cultural, ecological, and epistemological fractures embedded in modern societies. Scholars like Estok and Roth, in their examination of pandemic literature, mention the "surprise" of global unpreparedness as symptomatic of both material and

imaginative failures. Despite decades of fiction warning of viral outbreaks and ecological collapse, the world responded as if COVID-19 were without precedent. As Marchesini noted, such events necessitate a “system reboot” (14), reframing the pandemic as a moment of ontological rupture, a call to reconsider what constitutes a liveable world. In this context, literature functioned as both memorial and critique. Ian Watt’s insight that “not an author but a society... metamorphoses a story into a myth” (97) underlines the collective nature of narrative transformation. These frameworks challenge traditional notions of authorship, emphasizing instead the broader cultural forces through which texts acquire meaning. Yet the renewed cultural interest in literature during the pandemic was significant. Historical works such as Camus’s *La Peste*, Defoe’s *A Journal of the Plague Year*, Boccaccio’s *Decameron*, and Spinney’s *Pale Rider* re-entered public discourse, offering symbolic frameworks for understanding the present. Erll remarked that this return to fiction reflects “the power of literary stories as both a form of framing harrowing experience and archiving cultural memory” (867). Literature provided both emotional proximity and temporal perspective, helping readers process chaos through structured narratives. This revival of literature’s imaginative and memorial capacity was echoed by contemporary writers. Arundhati Roy, in “The Pandemic is a Portal,” urged readers to see the crisis as an opportunity for moral and societal transformation. Her call to walk “lightly, with little luggage” emphasized the possibility of collective renewal. In contrast, Salman Rushdie offered a more skeptical stance, dismissing utopian hopes for post-pandemic enlightenment. He warned against instrumentalizing suffering into narratives of redemption, cautioning that such interpretations risk aestheticizing or erasing pain. These tensions extended into literary form. Ricoeur’s concept of narrative identity in *Time and Narrative* illustrates how storytelling helps structure disoriented experience: identity is continuously “refigured” through the act of narrative (246). Amid the collapse of ordinary temporal markers, literature served as a scaffold for meaning-making, offering coherence without closure. Reading, in this context, became an ethical act. Ricoeur, in *Oneself as Another*, observed that to follow a story is “already to reflect ethically on the events and the agents of action” (114). Pandemic fiction asked readers not simply to empathize but to confront silences, omissions, and systemic

failures. It demanded critical attention to whose stories were told, and whose were ignored. The reader thus became a participant in cultural labor, charged with remembrance, interpretation, and critique. Rather than retreating into aesthetic distance, literature during the pandemic engaged directly with political, ethical, and existential questions. It allowed readers to bear witness to unfolding trauma, re-evaluate neglected histories, and envision uncertain futures. As a dialogic and interpretive practice, reading did not offer resolution but invited sustained engagement with complexity. The reader, far from being a passive recipient, emerged as a co-creator of meaning, sharing in the responsibility of understanding and imagining amid global rupture.

A critical lens for assessing the cultural, ethical, and emotional consequences of the pandemic lies in the intersection between remembering and forgetting. This intersection is neither stable nor neutral but shaped by the frameworks through which experiences are narrated, archived, or elided. Memory, particularly during global crises, is often curated to emphasize endurance and altruism while minimizing loss, ambiguity, and institutional failure. The selective nature of remembrance becomes especially pronounced when the impulse to “move on” eclipses the imperative to bear witness. The categorization of experience, what is remembered and what is marginalized, hinges on modes of cultural mediation. Erll’s concept of “mnemonic premediation” is instructive in this regard. In “Literature, Film, and the Mediality of Cultural Memory,” she argues that cultural forms such as literature shape “the very modes of their future remembrance” (396). Literature, therefore, does not merely record events retrospectively but anticipates how crises will be narrativized and understood. Narrative features such as temporal distortion, fragmentation, or polyvocality act as mnemonic devices, structuring how pandemics are recalled both individually and collectively. This anticipatory role raises ethical questions about representation: whose memories are preserved and whose are excluded? Literature, in serving as a repository of cultural memory, inevitably participates in these politics of visibility. The frequent valorization of healthcare and essential workers often coincides with the erasure of undocumented laborers, migrants, and others whose

suffering resists heroic framing. Thus, narrative form itself becomes a political instrument, determining whose experiences resonate in public memory.

Puja Changoiwala's *Homebound* directly engages this dynamic by transforming journalistic interviews into epistolary fiction. Through Meher's letters, the novel preserves the voices of migrant workers often omitted from institutional histories. Her goal "to seal their cold realities in ink" emphasizes not only documentation but resistance against erasure. By embedding memory within narrative, her work challenges the mechanisms that facilitate forgetting. These strategies once again align with Slovic's critique of "psychic numbing," where large-scale suffering, when conveyed through statistics, diminishes empathy and moral urgency. Changoiwala counters this effect through individualized portrayals rooted in emotional specificity. Her fiction enables intimate encounters with trauma that resist abstraction, reinforcing literature's capacity to engage readers affectively and ethically. David Tollerton's work further illuminates why some pandemics fade from collective memory. The 1918 influenza, despite its global impact, lacked what he calls a "memorial logic," a symbolic framework of heroism or sacrifice that facilitates commemoration. Without narrative closure, its victims became less "tellable" in public discourse. Pandemic literature thus faces the challenge of constructing meaning around events that resist resolution, requiring new forms of remembrance that do not depend on triumphalism.

Wiseman's *The Orphan Collector* addresses this challenge by focusing on the resilience of Pia Lange, a German immigrant girl navigating xenophobia and loss during the 1918 pandemic. Her personal grief is juxtaposed with the ideological distortions of Bernice Groves, who represents memory shaped by fear and exclusion. The writer constructs a polarized memory landscape, where ethical remembrance contends with repression. The novel reinforces how cultural memory is shaped not only by what is told, but by who does the telling. Maurice Halbwachs's foundational theory of collective memory supports this understanding. Memory, he argued, is not a private act but a socially mediated one, filtered through institutional and symbolic frameworks. Literature participates in this process by offering narrative structures

through which individual experiences are woven into cultural history. In doing so, it converts private trauma into shared symbols that endure across generations. Outka also reinforces this point in her study of modernist responses to the 1918 pandemic. She contends that official histories often omit the sensory and affective dimensions of illness, while literature preserves the atmospheres of dread, temporal dislocation, and physical deterioration that marked daily life. These narrative textures form part of a “sensory archive,” enabling remembrance through embodied experience rather than detached chronology. Caruth’s trauma theory further clarifies literature’s role in shaping how trauma is remembered. She argues that trauma resists immediate understanding and only becomes legible through narrative repetition and displacement. Accordingly, literary features such as non-linear timelines, recurring imagery, and delayed revelations simulate the cognitive processes through which traumatic memory is accessed. Through these techniques, authors both witness and re-narrate trauma, enabling readers to engage with its lingering effects. This is not merely archival but ontological: the act of narration becomes a form of survival. By reclaiming subjectivity for those silenced by catastrophe, literature affirms presence where absence might otherwise prevail. Authors like Changoiwala and Wiseman do more than depict pandemics; they shape the frameworks through which these events are remembered. Their narratives serve as mnemonic agents, encoding grief, inequity, and endurance into cultural memory. As future generations engage with these texts, they will not encounter pandemics as historical footnotes but as ethically significant, emotionally resonant, and structurally remembered episodes in collective life.

Literary representations of pandemics portray remembering not as passive recall but as an active, contested process. Literature becomes a space where memory is negotiated and reshaped, rather than merely archived. This is particularly evident in the historical reception of the 1918 influenza pandemic, whose enormous toll estimated at 50 to 100 million deaths failed to yield a lasting cultural imprint. Despite its magnitude, the pandemic remains marginal in collective memory, especially when compared to contemporaneous events like World War I. Several factors contributed to this erasure. The pandemic’s indistinct contours, its rapid global spread, uncertain

etymology, and overlap with other diseases resisted coherent narrative construction. Unlike war, it offered few elements conducive to dramatization: no clear antagonist, no victorious resolution, and no heroic framing. The deaths were anonymous, the suffering unframed by moral clarity, and the institutional responses fragmented and inadequate. As a result, the event lacked the “tellability” necessary for entry into public commemorative practice. Archival silence further contributed to this marginalization. Scientific ambiguity, wartime censorship, and stigma around illness and death limited documentation. Unlike wars, which generated memoirs, state records, and rituals of remembrance, the influenza pandemic produced relatively few narrative or material traces. The absence of dedicated memorials, survivor communities, or literary canonization perpetuated its invisibility. This “under-imagining” was not only structural but also psychological, shaped by survivors’ reluctance to narrativize traumatic loss in public discourse. In contrast, the COVID-19 pandemic has unfolded under conditions of hyper documentation. Digital platforms, global media, and networked testimony have produced a deluge of real-time data and personal narratives. This visibility offers unprecedented opportunities for collective memory formation, but also risks narrative saturation and fragmentation. As competing perspectives proliferate, the coherence and durability of future pandemic memory will depend less on quantity and more on meaning-making: the ability to craft narratives that confer agency, recognize injustice, and foster communal engagement.

Historical comparisons with 1918 reflected that cultural remembrance requires more than documentation. Without narrative structures that articulate causality, assign ethical value, or evoke affective response, even profound catastrophes may fade. COVID-19’s legacy in cultural memory will be shaped not only by the abundance of its records, but by the stories that societies choose to elevate, circulate, and preserve. Trauma theory and memory studies offer further insight into how literature engages these challenges. As articulated in *Trauma in Contemporary Literature* (Nadal and Calvo), narrative is not just a medium of recollection but a critical space where trauma is ethically confronted. Cathy Caruth famously described traumatic memory as oscillating between “remembrance and

erasure,” inscribing itself through belated recognition and narrative rupture (20). Trauma’s nonlinearity, its gaps, repetitions, and silences challenges conventional historiography and necessitates alternative narrative forms. Nina Schmidt’s *The Wounded Self* extends this discussion by examining how illness disrupts narrative coherence. She observes that literature destabilizes normative representations of the body, time, and identity, reflecting the cognitive and sensory disorientation of sickness. In pandemic fiction, such formal disruptions parallel broader societal breakdowns, making literary fragmentation a structural analog to experiential fracture. The disjunction between lived experience and public recognition is also illuminated by Slovic who argues that empathy declines as scale increases, a paradox where the abstraction of large numbers hinders moral response. He advocates for “slow thinking,” where individualized storytelling can restore emotional engagement with mass suffering (9). In this regard, literature’s affective specificity counters statistical dehumanization, enabling readers to connect with what is otherwise incomprehensible.

Fiction becomes a medium through which erased or silenced experiences re-enter public consciousness. *Homebound*, for instance, uses the epistolary form to embed the pandemic’s human cost into cultural memory. By fictionalizing the letters of Meher, a child migrant, Changoiwala reclaims marginalized voices and transforms them into enduring testimony. Her claim that “fiction emboldens truth and hands it a megaphone” illustrates the genre’s power to amplify otherwise inaccessible experiences. Agamben’s reflections on testimony further support this reading. He emphasizes that literature gives voice to the unsayable, converting silence into narrative form. *Homebound* exemplifies this transformation, turning bureaucratically invisible suffering into legible, emotionally charged accounts. In doing so, it reframes narrative as a political and ethical act. A similar intervention occurs in Ellen Marie Wiseman’s *The Orphan Collector*, which revisits the 1918 pandemic through the lens of Pia Lange, a young immigrant navigating xenophobia and personal loss. Wiseman’s novel not only reconstructs a neglected historical moment but anticipates how the COVID-19 crisis might be remembered. By mapping past and present forms of exclusion, her work contributes to literature’s evolving archive of speculative

memory, narratives that do not just memorialize but shape how futures will remember. Literature preserves dread, longing, and temporal dislocation, elements central to crisis experience but resistant to empirical capture. These embodied effects form a vital part of collective memory, offering access to dimensions of experience that historical documentation often overlooks. Nawaz's *Songs for the End of the World* exemplifies the affective register of memory in pandemic literature. In the novel's closing moments, the character Elliot reflects that life seems both "extraordinary and completely typical," evoking a sense of continuity refracted through the trauma of catastrophe (Nawaz 213). Rather than framing memory as rupture, Nawaz suggests that the post-pandemic world resumes familiar rhythms while still bearing the invisible weight of crisis. Her intention to write a "realistic and hopeful" pandemic narrative showcases literature's capacity to mediate between despair and resilience.

Across pandemic literature, narrative form, psychological theory, and cultural critique intersect to create layered representations of trauma and memory. Whether through testimonial articulation, atmospheric rendering, or speculative anticipation, literature serves as a repository of ethical witnessing. It does not merely record past events but actively shapes how they are remembered, contested, and reimagined. The interplay between forgetting and remembrance, specificity and abstraction, repetition and rupture reflects the complexity of memorial work in the wake of collective trauma. As such, literature functions not only as a cultural mirror but as a participant in historical transmission. Despite its cultural importance, pandemic literature has historically received less scholarly attention than literature on war, colonization, or genocide. While postwar narratives are widely acknowledged for their role in shaping memory and identity, literature addressing pandemics is only beginning to be recognized for its contribution to cultural consciousness. Its significance lies not just in documenting biological disruption, but in interrogating the ethical, ideological, and psychological dimensions of crisis. Pandemic fiction operates as both testimony and heuristic. It preserves emotional residues, challenges dominant narratives, and invites reflection on mourning, memory, and narrative construction. As Simon writes in "On Pandemic and Literature," pandemic narratives "preserve

and remake the world as it falls apart,” offering a discursive space where meaning is renegotiated through literary imagination. Memory, in such contexts, becomes a means of witnessing, making sense, and resisting oblivion. Simon suggests that pandemic fiction is not simply about survival, but about preserving truths that are at risk of erasure. Fictional representations of pandemics also reconfigure relationships to microbial life, personal liberty, and collective responsibility. Literature does not merely provide escapism; it reframes these issues to promote ethical engagement. Nawaz reinforces this in *Songs for the End of the World* when a character reflects, “We look to art to show us how we can survive the pain of this world” (291). Here, literature is positioned as both sanctuary and provocation, offering solace while demanding critical reflection. David Tollerton’s research also helps explain why pandemics have often eluded the commemorative attention given to wars or revolutions. Without clear antagonists, heroic figures, or narrative closure, pandemics pose challenges for memory formation. Tollerton notes that memorial initiatives like the UK’s “National Day of Remembrance,” anchored to the first lockdown date, attempt to resolve this by memorializing disruption itself. These gestures highlight the need for what will be called ‘symbolic scaffolding,’ through which cultural remembrance is constituted. This memory work is shaped not only by narrative form but also by systems of power. Priscilla Wald’s concept of the “outbreak narrative” illustrates how disease stories regulate perceptions of risk, blame, and social behavior. She writes:

As outbreak narratives disseminate information, they affect survival rates and contagion routes. They promote or mitigate the stigmatizing of individuals, groups, populations, locales... and they change economies (3).

Wald’s intervention emphasizes that narratives of illness are embedded within discursive structures that can humanize or dehumanize, stigmatize or normalize. Literature, by disrupting these dominant scripts, enables more nuanced and ethical engagements with public health and social vulnerability.

Cultural memory depends not only on individual recollection but also on institutional mechanisms that either support or suppress remembrance. William Hirst

highlights this fragility in “Remembering COVID-19,” where he observes that “forgetting may be more common than one realizes in the midst of a crisis” and that it “takes a huge societal effort to ensure that a memory persists” (251). His point reinforces literature’s critical function in maintaining memory amid the accelerating pace of crisis and erasure. This struggle is poignantly captured in Milan Kundera’s claim that “the struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting” (3). Narratives that resist simplification or closure help counter the forces of historical amnesia. Her novel *Homebound*, through its epistolary form, transforms private grief into public testimony. By fictionalizing the voices of migrant workers, Changoiwala confronts systemic invisibility and resists the silencing mechanisms of political discourse. As Agamben has argued, testimony involves the transformation of the unsayable into a speakable form. *Homebound* exemplifies this ethical labor, bearing witness to experiences often reduced to abstraction. In doing so, it reframes narrative as a space of resistance and recognition. Ellen Marie Wiseman’s *The Orphan Collector* similarly functions as an archive of overlooked trauma. By reconstructing the 1918 influenza pandemic through the perspective of Pia Lange, an immigrant navigating xenophobia and grief, the novel links personal and collective memory. Wiseman’s reflections about how future generations might remember COVID-19 emphasize literature’s anticipatory power: it not only documents the past but shapes the contours of future recollection. In pandemic literature, remembering is not merely a process of documenting events; it involves constructing meaning through formal and affective choices. Trauma theory, especially the work of Caruth and Freud has illustrated how traumatic memory defies linearity, often manifesting through repetition, latency, and symbolic displacement. Though traditionally applied to war or genocide, these frameworks offer critical insights for understanding pandemic fiction, which similarly engages with disrupted temporality and fragmented recollection. Authors frequently adopt non-linear narratives, polyphonic structures, and temporal breaks to mirror the recursive and destabilizing nature of pandemic experience.

The literary response to COVID-19 marked a departure from historical precedent. Whereas the 1918 influenza pandemic generated limited immediate

cultural response, COVID-19 prompted an outpouring of fiction, memoir, and hybrid forms within months. This urgency was fueled by the global scale of disruption and the convergence of isolation, grief, and digital connectivity. Yet as Tom Bissell noted in *The Los Angeles Times*, this immediate creativity raised aesthetic concerns: “The PTSD we’re all going to have is not only going to affect how it’s written about, but whether or not anyone will want to read about it.” His comment reflects the early ambivalence that greeted pandemic fiction- marked by simultaneous saturation and necessity. Despite this unease, literature became a means of psychological processing. The act of transforming disorder into narrative offered writers and readers a form of control and catharsis. For many, narrativizing crisis was a way to endure it, and literature became a vehicle for reimagining disrupted lives. Public appreciation for literary imagination grew, with readers turning to fiction not simply for escapism but for contextualizing the emotional and existential challenges of lockdown and illness. L.G. More contextualizes this emergent corpus within a broader literary tradition. He argues that pandemics have historically provided fertile ground for philosophical and ethical inquiry. Drawing on works like Defoe’s *A Journal of the Plague Year*, More emphasizes literature’s ability to blend reportage with imaginative intervention, creating a deeply humane understanding of crisis (3858). Such narratives offer not just historical reflection but interpretive frameworks for enduring contemporary trauma. This anticipatory function is further elaborated by Gazala Khan and Sazzad Parwez in *A Historical Narrative on Pandemic Patterns of Behavior and Belief*. They argue that society routinely neglects the significance of pandemic histories “till another health challenge is met” (29). Their assertion situates pandemic literature as both archive and prophecy- a genre that documents past trauma while alerting future readers to its cyclical nature. Shanti Jones, adopting a more existential perspective, suggests that pandemic fiction often succeeds where philosophical discourse falters. She notes that the genre effectively explores “the ceaseless sorrow caused by the unseen power of nature,” revealing the limitations of human rationality and control. This existential turn deepens the literary response, transforming it into both cultural critique and metaphysical meditation.

Formally, the genre has responded to the narrative challenges posed by monotony, fragmentation, and uncertainty. Lockdown life defied the arc of conventional storytelling, prompting writers to experiment with epistolary formats, disrupted chronologies, and polyphonic perspectives. These structural innovations reflect both the stagnation and psychological looping that characterized the pandemic, accentuating the inadequacy of linear narrative to capture such lived experience. Ethical concerns also shaped the production and reception of early pandemic literature. Writers wrestled with whether immediate representation risked trivializing suffering or aestheticizing trauma. There was apprehension that fiction might inadvertently reproduce dominant narratives or marginalize communities whose voices remained unheard. These tensions made pandemic literature a contested space, simultaneously a site of comfort, critique, and ethical interrogation. Pandemic literature occupies a critical intersection of aesthetics, ethics, and memory. It does more than document- it interrogates, reframes, and bears witness. By drawing from trauma theory, memory studies, philosophy, and narratology, the genre affirms literature's enduring relevance in confronting human vulnerability and resilience. As both testimonial and imaginative practice, it shapes how societies process collective trauma and how such crises will be remembered. Khair offered a sobering perspective on the limitations of literary production during crisis. In his essay "Will the Coronavirus Change Fiction?" he observed that those most affected by the pandemic such as the poor, the migrant, the disenfranchised, were often the least likely to leave behind literary records of their experience. For Khair, the pandemic did not just expose vulnerability; it magnified the disparities embedded in cultural production, where the ability to narrate trauma remains bound to access, literacy, and audience. These reflections foreground questions that persist across the corpus of pandemic literature: Who gets to tell the story of catastrophe? Which narratives are elevated, and which remain marginalized or omitted? While many authors composed pandemic fiction from relative safety, others endured physical and economic precarity. As such, the genre risks being shaped by privilege even as it purports to capture a shared global crisis. Khair's intervention is a critical reminder that literary memory is not neutral. It reflects the infrastructures of class, geography, and institutional access. Despite these constraints, the ethical ambition of pandemic

fiction often reached beyond its privileged origins. *Homebound*, for instance, used fiction to amplify the voices of India's migrant laborers during lockdown. Drawing from interviews, Changoiwala adopted an epistolary form that preserved anonymity while maintaining emotional fidelity. She described fiction as a "more secure means to express the truth," enabling narratives that were otherwise suppressed by political and media frameworks. Her work exemplifies how literature can function as a vehicle for testimonial resistance and narrative reclamation. Similarly, Lawrence Wright's *The End of October* blurred the boundary between fiction and journalism. Published early in the pandemic, the novel drew on Wright's background in epidemiology and geopolitics to construct a fictional pandemic that closely mirrored unfolding global realities. Rather than sensationalizing the crisis, Wright used the form to critique institutional dysfunction and imagine systemic responses. His approach demonstrated that pandemic fiction could be both timely and reflective, functioning as sociopolitical commentary as well as speculative inquiry. As Smitakshi Choudhary has noted, pandemic narratives frequently engage with "existential paradigms" that cut across time and geography. Such stories reveal recurring concerns with mortality, isolation, endurance, and the limits of human control. Literature's role, then, extends beyond aesthetic representation. It becomes a philosophical and ethical response to crisis. The proliferation of pandemic fiction was not merely a glut of narratives but a reassertion of literature's evolving function in moments of rupture. It tested the boundaries of genre, interrogated ethical questions of voice and representation, and experimented with form to mirror disrupted realities. Rather than dismissing this body of work as opportunistic or ephemeral, it should be regarded as a vital cultural archive; one that documents, critiques, and reimagines the memory of a global event. In bearing witness, pandemic literature affirms the necessity of storytelling not only as reflection but as intervention. As the volume of pandemic literature grew rapidly, readers and scholars began to register a phenomenon of narrative exhaustion, often described as "pandemic literary fatigue." Unlike political or medical fatigue, this form of exhaustion reflected a unique intersection of narrative saturation, emotional overexposure, and aesthetic repetition. J. Sorensen et al. note that the "proliferation of COVID-19 fiction paradoxically exhausts the literary medium's capacity to render

trauma intelligible” (916). Stories of confinement, digital funerals, masked encounters, and disrupted rituals, though grounded in reality, became overly familiar tropes. Their recurrence contributed not to catharsis but to emotional detachment. This response aligns with Paul Slovic’s foundational theory of “psychic numbing,” which describes the human tendency to become desensitized to mass suffering as numbers increase. Slovic contends that “the more who die, the less we care,” emphasizing the paradoxical collapse of empathy in response to statistical scale (Slovic 3). Pandemic fiction, with its repeated representations of illness, death, and disruption, risked reinforcing this phenomenon. K.W. Chu expands on this in a literary context, arguing that “psychic numbing can also be caused by an over-saturation of traumatic imagery and narrative repetition” (Chu 584). Rather than evoking renewed grief or moral urgency, pandemic literature often replicated emotional registers already exhausted by news media, social media, and lived experience. Digital hyperconnectivity further complicated literature’s function. Rather than offering critical distance, many pandemic texts echoed the very emotional registers present in daily news and social media feeds. The imaginative space of fiction, as Vigdis Broch-Due warns, risks collapse under the weight of aestheticized suffering: “Trauma, in becoming saturated with the most brutal content, risks aestheticizing violence and depersonalizing memory” (28). As trauma aesthetics become commodified, the ethical stakes of literary witnessing increase. This concern is echoed by P.K. Nayar, who critiques trauma literature’s tendency to veer into spectacle. He writes, “Aestheticized suffering, especially in pandemic contexts, walks the fine line between ethical witnessing and commodified trauma” (77). Such narratives, while emotionally potent, risk reducing crisis to a consumable genre. Readers began to disengage, not due to apathy but because of affective exhaustion and ethical ambivalence. The speed of literary production during the pandemic facilitated by online platforms, digital journals, and market responsiveness intensified this fatigue. Mario Di Paolantonio cautions against such acceleration, emphasizing that “true reckoning demands temporal patience” (112). His call for “slow literature” insists on the need for delayed and reflective writing that resists the impulse for immediacy. Instead of fast responses, scholars like Di Paolantonio advocate for literature that emerges from contemplation rather than reaction.

Nevertheless, some texts responded productively to this fatigue by shifting focus. Works centering caregivers, children, migrants, and disabled individuals disrupted the dominant tropes of isolated professionals and grieving families. These alternative positionalities, as Sorensen et al. suggest, “reactivated reader attention” and reminded audiences that the pandemic was not monolithic (925). By expanding the imagined and ethical horizons of the genre, these works resisted homogenization through their narrative particularity. The pandemic literary fatigue of the moment demonstrated both the possibilities and limits of narrative in crisis. It showed the danger of dragging the same tropes around from one text to the next while simultaneously reaffirming literature’s power to document memory, hold space for empathy, and demand responsibility when crafted with care, patience, and ethical clarity.

As an extension of both the acts of writing and remembering, the literary narration of the aftermath of a pandemic operates as a vital discursive and affective site. It reveals the psychological, social, and institutional debris left in the wake of catastrophe. The shift from immediate crisis to post-pandemic existence marks a transition not toward resolution but toward a fragile, often incomplete attempt to reassemble personal and collective meaning. In this liminal phase, literature becomes a medium through which fractured experiences are reconstituted into narrative form. The novels by Ellen Marie Wiseman, Lawrence Wright, Saleema Nawaz, and Puja Changoiwala do not treat the end of contagion as a point of narrative closure; instead, they foreground the emotional residue, socioeconomic disparities, and cultural disruptions that persist long after official declarations of recovery. A central motif in post-pandemic fiction is the destabilization of temporal and spatial structures. In *Songs for the End of the World*, Nawaz captures this disorientation through disrupted rhythms of everyday life. Lockdowns erase the distinctions between work and leisure, weekdays and weekends, routine and rupture. As one narrator observes: “Regular life is on hiatus for millions... The only places that are still bustling are the hospitals, many of which are full to overflowing” (Nawaz 213). The world she depicts is suspended in a state of protracted liminality. The novel also illustrates how mourning rituals are reconfigured by pandemic constraints. A funeral director’s

remark, “Really, it’s just about respect for our loved ones” (213) stresses the ethical tension between safety and remembrance. Technology-mediated farewells replace communal grieving, transforming loss into a solitary act and disrupting the social fabric of mourning. Material precarity continues to shape the post-crisis landscape. Nawaz’s portrayal of “creepers” those scavenging through refuse during curfews—reflects how survival becomes stratified. These figures inhabit a city defined by biohazard and bureaucratic neglect. Their presence, silently tolerated by law enforcement, exposes the normalization of systemic inequality. Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory of heteroglossia in *The Dialogic Imagination* further illuminated how novels register ideological plurality. The pandemic’s multiplicity of voices—health workers, migrants, patients and bureaucrats resisted synthesis and demanded space within narrative. Literature preserved this polyphony, resisting totalization. In Saleema Nawaz’s *Songs for the End of the World*, fragmented narrative strands resist univocal interpretation, reflecting the diversity of pandemic experience. Each character’s trajectory unfolds within overlapping emotional, ethical, and social registers, honoring the multiplicity of memory without reducing it to a single commemorative frame. Nawaz’s ethical commitment to marginalized voices aligns with Bakhtin’s concept of heteroglossia: her narrative features “a plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses” (263). Scientific discourse, political rhetoric, and personal testimony coexist, reinforcing fiction’s role as a site of social polyphony. The novel further critiques commercial opportunism. Hotel owners, for instance, market their properties as pandemic retreats while disregarding safety protocols. These depictions reveal how crises become entangled with profit-making, commodifying both vulnerability and refuge. As Wald argues in *Contagious*, outbreak narratives often naturalize systemic inequities, turning bodies into “sites of speculation” under the guise of containment (Wald 38). Amid this fractured reality, Nawaz gestures toward cautious optimism. In the final chapter, Elliot reflects on a tentative reconnection with the world:

Everyone was carrying on, living their lives with a persistence that was at once extraordinary and completely typical. Elliot felt like an animal returned to its natural habitat, with an animal’s surer sense of rhythm and purpose.

Relief flooded his limbs and he wanted to take off in a sprint, a doggy lap of joy. He was where he needed to be, his certainty born out of a hope he'd thought extinguished now (Nawaz 213).

This moment does not mark closure but signals narrative persistence. Elliot's embodied relief represents not triumph over crisis but adaptation within its aftermath. In the book, Nawaz resists the impulse to narrate the pandemic as a finite event. Instead, she constructs an aftermath that is ethically charged and narratively open-ended. Her representation of disrupted time, fragmented mourning, stratified survival, and moral ambiguity offers a textured account of pandemic continuity. Literature, in this form, does not merely reflect recovery but also participates in its reconstruction.

In *The End of October*, Lawrence Wright constructs a vivid and unsettling portrayal of a post-pandemic world, focusing on the psychological fragmentation, infrastructural collapse, and geopolitical volatility that follow the initial viral catastrophe. Unlike narratives that gesture toward narrative closure through survival alone, Wright's depiction of the aftermath foregrounds a deep ontological rupture. His protagonist, Henry Parsons, does not emerge triumphant from the chaos but rather burdened by loss, grief, and a sharpened awareness of systemic vulnerability. The novel stages the post-pandemic moment not as recovery but as reckoning. One of the first acts Henry performs after returning home is the burial of bodies, including that of his neighbor Mrs. Hernández and an unidentified deceased man. These actions transform his backyard into a private necropolis. The process of restoring his home becomes a futile ritual of ordering a world that no longer obeys coherent patterns. His movements through the house echo a desire for control, even as he realizes its impossibility: "He swept and organized, trying to restore order...the one thing his life would never have again...as he whirled from room to another" (Wright 404). Here, the pandemic aftermath is narrated through domestic spaces repurposed as sites of mourning, reflecting the intimate scale at which global events are ultimately registered. Wright also interrogates the illusion of return to normalcy. Henry observes passersby with guarded optimism, noting their "contagious" smiles

and the unspoken belief that the worst had passed. However, his internal skepticism disrupts this fantasy.

The worst is over. We're back. We've suffered, but everything is going to be okay now. We survived. Henry would have liked to believe that, but he knew what they were dealing with. Influenza never made just a single visit (404).

This reflection introduces one of the novel's central tensions: the cyclicity of pandemic events and the human tendency to forget past devastations. Rather than being an exception, the pandemic becomes part of a historical pattern of biological and political crises, each threatening to recur with amplified consequences. In the post-pandemic city, Wright's narrative renders the absence of institutional structures with acute clarity. Henry wanders through a degraded urban landscape, observing the "missing" posters plastered on public walls and the absence of police or military personnel. The lack of governance fosters not chaos but a subdued anomie. The novel resists depicting riotous collapse; instead, it shows a quiet, unsettling disintegration: "Henry believed that this was what anarchy appeared to be... everyone was in shock" (Wright 408). In this formulation, anarchy is not defined by violence but by the erosion of meaning and the dispersion of responsibility. Wright complicates the representation of aftermath further through the unresolved origins of the Kongoli virus. Although Henry continues to investigate whether the pathogen was a product of zoonotic transmission or biotechnological manipulation, the ambiguity itself becomes part of the trauma. This uncertainty generates not only epidemiological anxiety but also ethical paralysis. He reflects on the futility of attributing moral agency to a virus but cannot abandon the need to "find a reason to excuse himself." The desire for narrative accountability is thus portrayed as both necessary and impossible. Eventually, the novel delivers an answer that many real-world pandemic narratives cannot: the revelation that Kongoli was genetically engineered by Jurgen, a former colleague. This conclusion repositions the pandemic from natural disaster to human-inflicted catastrophe, and in doing so, it shifts the ethical burden from fate to agency. Yet the comfort of narrative closure is quickly

unsettled by a broader indictment. When Henry is asked what history will record, he replies with brutal finality:

How inadequate we are in our attempts to bring nature under our control, Henry thought. How careless of us to believe that we can manipulate diseases to kill, rather than to cure. We're like school children playing with matches. One day we'll burn the house down.

"Well, doc, what are we going to tell history?" Cooksey asked.

"We're going to say that we did this to ourselves." (Wright 487)

This admission encapsulates the novel's broader critique. The pandemic becomes not only a biological event but a moral parable about humanity's hubris and technological overreach. The metaphor of children with fire frames modern scientific progress as dangerously naive and ethically unmoored. The novel thus transforms its thriller narrative into a dystopian cautionary tale about the fragility of civilization and the consequences of unchecked human ambition. Through its rendering of aftermath, *The End of October* destabilizes conventional temporal and moral structures. The narrative does not end with a return to equilibrium but with an intensified awareness of risk, systemic decay, and the self-destructive tendencies of modernity. In doing so, Wright's text contributes to a pandemic literary tradition that is as much about memory and accountability as it is about biological survival. The aftermath becomes a domain not of healing but of haunted introspection.

In *The Orphan Collector*, Ellen Marie Wiseman foregrounds the ethical aftermath of the 1918 influenza pandemic by situating personal loss and systemic neglect at the heart of her narrative. Set in post-pandemic Philadelphia, the novel engages with the fragmentation of families, bureaucratic failure, and the moral ambiguities of public health interventions. As the third wave of influenza subsides in the summer of 1919, the city is marked not by relief but by confusion and residual trauma. The pandemic's receding presence leaves a landscape haunted by absences, missing children, displaced families, and fractured communities. The disarray in the

city's administrative and welfare systems is deepened through widespread lapses in record-keeping and accountability. Wiseman writes that "record-keeping had been a complete mess, with families either entirely destroyed or split up and children going missing." This breakdown is not merely bureaucratic; it becomes the narrative terrain upon which exploitation, displacement, and moral failure are enacted. The pandemic's aftermath, rather than restoring social coherence, intensifies structural disorder and personal grief. The figure of Nurse Wallis, whose actions during the height of the pandemic involved the abduction and trafficking of orphaned children, embodies the collapse of institutional ethics. Pia, the protagonist, reflects with increasing suspicion on the nurse's role, pondering "how many other individuals, like Pia, were searching for lost children and siblings," raising the spectre of a broader systemic failure that allowed vulnerable populations to be appropriated under the guise of care.

The trauma of the aftermath is made more acute by the lack of closure. Pia's ongoing search for her younger twin brothers, Ollie and Max, illustrates the protracted temporalities of grief and longing that follow crisis. Her desperation is situated within a historical context in which orphan trains carried displaced children across state lines, often without consent or documentation. The fear that her brothers may have been "transported to another state on an orphan train" speaks to a historical practice that, while framed as benevolent social reform, frequently severed familial bonds and erased identities. The novel resists the notion of clean resolution by dramatizing Pia's obsessive pursuit across alleys, markets, trolleys, and tenements, where the city becomes a fragmented cartography of lost childhoods and dislocated memories. Yet within this landscape of uncertainty, the novel stages narrative acts of reclamation and hope. Embedded among the stories of disappearance are tales of improbable reunion. One such story concerns a mother who, after falling ill, returned to find her children missing, only to open her door two years later and find "one standing in the hallway and holding to a Red Cross worker's hand." This anecdote operates as a counter-narrative to despair, offering not sentimental closure but a tempered optimism grounded in resilience and restorative justice. Such moments demonstrate how the aftermath of a pandemic includes not only devastation but the

capacity for narrative reconstitution. The eventual reunion between Pia and her brothers does not erase the trauma endured but reframes it through the lens of moral perseverance and familial loyalty. Having been cared for by a kind elderly couple, Ollie and Max are not rescued by the state or by institutions, but by the endurance of relational bonds outside official structures. The affective labor performed by Pia throughout the novel culminates in an ethical vindication that contrasts sharply with the exploitative practices personified by Nurse Wallis. Through this resolution, Wiseman's narrative implies that recovery in the aftermath of a pandemic is not merely institutional or medical. It is emotional, ethical, and relational. *The Orphan Collector* thus contributes to the literature of pandemic aftermath by interrogating the ambiguities of caregiving, the failures of public health infrastructures, and the long temporal arc of loss and search. Its narrative is situated not at the threshold of a return to normalcy but within the enduring repercussions of familial disruption and moral abandonment. The aftermath, in this case, is not a footnote to the pandemic but a sustained domain of struggle where the acts of remembering, searching, and narrating converge.

Puja Changoiwala's *Homebound* offers a searing portrayal of India's COVID-19 lockdown aftermath through the epistolary testimony of Meher, a teenage girl writing letters that are never sent. These letters function as records of despair and acts of dissent, challenging institutional violence and systemic abandonment. Composed within the confinement of a quarantine facility, Meher's voice transforms the post-pandemic moment from a point of recovery into a terrain of emotional residue and ethical rupture. The epistolary form intensifies the immediacy of Meher's perspective while exposing her estrangement. Her letters, addressed yet unread, evoke a consciousness marked by silence and dispossession. "I'm tired of the infinite nature of its finite roads," she writes, collapsing the geography of migrant displacement into an image of existential exhaustion. Her indictment "I was a daughter and they took my father away. I was a student and I might never go to school again. I was a dreamer and they've shown me my place. Well done, world. Brava," maps the systematic erosion of identity and futurity (Changoiwala 165). Unlike many pandemic narratives that gesture toward healing, *Homebound*

dismantles hope as a redemptive force. Meher's refusal is unambiguous: "There is no room for hope, ma'am. No crack big enough for light" (169). This is not rhetorical despair but structural critique where hope becomes a marker of privilege, inaccessible to those whose suffering is ignored. Her declaration that "hope is a phantom" rebukes the resilience discourse often mobilized to mask institutional negligence.

The violence Meher documents is not only emotional but infrastructural. Her question, "Where do we go looking for them? The police station, the prison, the hospital, or the morgue?" underscores the collapse of state care into a system of disappearance and uncertainty (172). Meher also redefines "home" as an ethical construct rather than a national or spatial one: "Home is where fear dies, ma'am, where solidarity dwells, and where love begets love" (Changoiwala 174). Her closing question, "Is this country, this world, my home?" is not a plea but a judgment, revealing the exclusions embedded in state and global narratives of belonging. The novel's afterword stages the irreversible silence following Meher's death, even as she was buried in a mass grave; her final act unrecorded and unarchived. Her mother's decision to bury the notebook with her becomes an intimate act of defiance. This erasure evokes Jacques Derrida's concept of "archive fever," where the very impulse to preserve is haunted by the inevitability of forgetting: "the archive...always works to forget" (Derrida 54). The buried letters stand as both lost testimony and commentary on the disposability of marginalized lives. *Homebound* thus situates narration between visibility and erasure. Meher's voice survives not through institutional record but through literary memory. Her letters, though unarchived, circulate as affective fragments, asserting the dignity of undocumented grief. Changoiwala refuses closure or redemption, instead foregrounding loss as a political and narrative condition. As Michael Rothberg contends, memory is always "multidirectional," never singular or resolved (Rothberg 5). In narrating Meher's disappearance, *Homebound* insists on the right to grieve, to accuse, and to be remembered even without recovery.

The COVID-19 pandemic, as explored in this chapter, provoked a literary response that transcended mere documentation, becoming an active site of ethical, epistemological, and mnemonic engagement. Through the intertwined processes of writing, reading, and remembering, pandemic literature has chronicled collective trauma, interrogated systemic inequities, and resisted cultural forgetting. Authors like Nawaz, Wright, Wiseman, and Changoiwala employed narrative strategies such as polyphony, speculative realism, epistolary testimony, and historical allegory to render invisible suffering legible, contest dominant discourses, and archive marginalized voices. Their works exemplify literature's dual role as witness and intervenor, grounding catastrophe in intimate human experiences while critiquing institutional failures. The act of reading, framed by reception theory, emerged as a participatory and politically inflected practice, where audiences co-constructed meaning amid shifting horizons of expectation. Meanwhile, memory studies and trauma theory illuminated literature's capacity to shape cultural remembrance, countering the erasure of past pandemics like the 1918 influenza through affective specificity and narrative form. Despite challenges like narrative fatigue, ethical dilemmas of representation, and disparities in literary access, pandemic fiction affirmed storytelling as a vital tool for processing disruption, fostering empathy, and envisioning futures. In bridging individual and collective experience, this corpus documents the social-historical contours of the pandemic while also re-conceptualizing literature as a kind of moral reckoning, where the act of narration itself provided a kind of resistance to oblivion. In conclusion, the chapter highlights the lasting significance of pandemic literature as the site of mourning and survival, the critique of structural violence, and reminder of the human obligation to make meaning in the midst of chaos.

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Chapter V- Conclusion

Literature has always been influenced by the depths and turmoil of human emotions at certain times in history. A feeling of purpose or the creation of an explanation demonstrated in literature throughout the tumultuous course of pandemics in history has unquestionably resonated within the paradigms of humanity. Literature that overlooks the profound effects of humanitarian catastrophes on individuals risks existing in a temporal vacuum, detached from the realities of widespread suffering and devastation. The pandemic, possibly one of the worst natural disasters in modern history, has had a nearly irreversible impact on how people view the world, use their imaginations, and think. It will unquestionably have an impact on contemporary literary dialogue. The interactions that occur during a crisis of this magnitude, the numerous texts and practises, and the socioeconomic and political effects have a lasting influence on how the literature of that era is distributed since literature is an efficient way to capture society and its moods generally. The modern world is all about surviving, with death looming over everything, and this idea permeates literature as well. This can be determined by reflecting on both past and present pandemic literature, and the goal of this research is to examine how frequently these motifs appear in pandemic literature. Clearly the historical occurrences of disease outbreaks suggest that literatures on pandemics have existed for a very long time. The attempt to try and make sense of the experiences of living in pandemic times, of the panic, terror, and hopelessness that characterises these times, is ultimately what has recognised the literary works that have pandemics as themes. The object of pandemic literature is not to explore the causality of the disease, but rather as a reminder that there is always a sense to be made of the surrounding world, despite all the quarantine, physical distance, separation, isolation, and fear; if not in the world, at least in the stories whispered, told, and written.

This thesis has attempted to illuminate the importance of literature in times of crisis, such as pandemics, by demonstrating how literature can provide a record of lived experiences, articulate collective trauma, and foster understanding and empathy. This thesis has demonstrated that pandemic literature acts as a witness to history, allowing individuals and societies to communicate the experience of living

through as pandemic. The interplay between memory and forgetting regards our understandings of pandemics, and this thesis contends that society needs to restore this transparency and forgetfulness so that we can preserve these experiences in history. It examined power discourses that are relevant to authority, dominance, and control, along with their impact on the representations and interpretations of pandemics. This thesis provided rich understandings of how belief, inhibition, conspiracy, xenophobia, and paranoia unfolded based on group identities, as individuals sought to make sense of the broader societal concerns around anxiety and the prejudices exacerbated by crisis. Following the end of the pandemic, it is argued that literature has seen a significant growth in pandemic literature, especially in terms of the social, cultural, and political realities of epidemic experiences. The new works include pandemic literature that acknowledged the immediate effects of pandemics and sought to understand future impacts of pandemics as a social concern around power, injustice and resilience. By addressing people's lived experience of the pandemic, these works allow us insight into the varied ways that people behave, respond, and behave as a society during crises. Overall, this thesis engaged in a meaningful way with pandemic literature, considering the ways that our cultural, social, and political realities shape our narrative representations. In doing so, it has deepened our understanding of the far-reaching and lasting impact of pandemics on collective memory and human consciousness.

In the introductory chapter an exploration is made on the multifaceted nature of pandemic literature, while establishing the theoretical framework for analyzing select narratives within the broader context of literary history and cultural understanding. It has highlighted upon how these narratives engage with different themes ranging from individual to social, cultural and global responses, thus contributing to a growing body of work that captures the human experience of pandemics. While the study of pandemics has long been dominated by scientific perspectives, this chapter has argued that the humanities play a crucial role in understanding that the pandemics are not just biological phenomena but have deeply impacted social, cultural, and political landscapes. The chapter began by unpacking the etymology of "pandemic," and continues to reveal how beyond its clinical

implications, the word encompasses broader societal disruptions, economic downturns, political unrest, and the breakdown of social order, all of which contribute to a collective crisis. Further, it acknowledged the shift in perception of the term “pandemic” in recent years. While once thought of as an esoteric technical term, pandemic has morphed into possibly the most utilized word of the 21st century, as the world dealt with the effects of everything from the COVID-19 epidemic to natural disasters. The proliferation of pandemic reflects growing awareness of how interrelated the world is and why cultural and social reactions to pandemics are important.

Pandemic narratives reflect various perspectives and approaches, and are tools for examining complexities of the event itself. Some narratives are not as obvious in the type of narrative used, but each has value. Investigative narratives examine aspects of scientific processes, including where the pandemic originated, how the pandemic spread and how it could develop a potential cure, often with scientists and medical professionals trying to determine how best to control the disease. Scientific narratives use technical terminology to help explain how the disease spreads and timing of the properties of the pathogen, and vaccine, and aid in understanding research methodologies for the public. Personal narratives offer first-person perspectives told by individuals, and illustrate emotional responses to fear, isolation and disruption with different avenues to humanize the impact of a pandemic. Historical narratives include representations of historical pandemics to highlight societal reactions and cultural apprehensions and discuss shifts public health practises. Factual narratives offer neutral representation and level of objectivity of what is happening in a chronological order, often times based on the use of article reporting and historical records, relating statistics and social implications. Frustration grows when it feels that little to nothing has changed in learning from past pandemic experience. Fictional narratives use imaginative storytelling to explore the human condition during pandemics, employing allegory and metaphor to comment on societal issues and psychological impacts. Together, these diverse narrative approaches offer a comprehensive understanding of pandemics and their far-reaching effects on individuals and societies.

The role of empathy in understanding and navigating pandemic experiences is emphasized, with fiction being particularly noted for its ability to foster connections between readers and the human stories behind these events. By presenting relatable characters with authentic emotions, fears, and struggles, fictional narratives enable readers to better comprehend the impact of pandemics on individuals and communities. The importance of accurate and diverse representation in pandemic narratives is also acknowledged, highlighting the need to avoid perpetuating harmful stereotypes and misconceptions, especially those related to race, ethnicity, and social status. A call is made for greater emphasis on narratives that celebrate the resilience, diversity, and contributions of marginalized communities during these crises. The significance of studying pandemic narratives across various literary traditions and historical periods is considered, as these narratives hold unique potential to foster empathy, offer insights into the human condition, and contribute to a broader understanding of recurring global crises. The continued literary exploration of these events is deemed crucial for navigating future pandemics and building more resilient communities. This comprehensive analysis served as a foundation for further exploration of selected texts in subsequent chapters, setting the stage for a deeper understanding of how these narratives grapple with themes of power, cultural anxieties, individual and collective responses, and the enduring human struggle against disease outbreaks. Martha C. Nussbaum, a philosopher and professor of law and ethics, argues that fiction plays a crucial role in developing what she calls “narrative imagination.” This is the ability to put oneself in another’s shoes, to understand their emotions, desires, and complex situations. She contends that this skill is essential for responsible citizenship in an increasingly diverse and interconnected world. In the context of her book *Cultivating Humanity*, Nussbaum wrote-

Narrative art has the power to make us see the lives of the different with more than a casual tourist’s interest-with involvement and sympathetic understanding, with anger at our society’s refusals of visibility. We come to see how circumstances shape the lives of those who share with us some general goals and projects; and we see that circumstances shape not only

people's possibilities for action, but also their aspirations and desires, hopes and fears (88).

She further elaborated that literature can challenge our preconceptions and broaden our moral horizons, by stating that good literature unsettles readers in ways that historical and social scientific texts often don't. It evoked strong emotions, causing confusion and bewilderment. Such writing challenges accepted truths and demands an uncomfortable examination of one's own beliefs and motivations (5). Her ideas about the power of fiction to cultivate empathy and understanding have been influential in both literary studies and moral philosophy. Her work suggested that engaging with fictional narratives is not just a passive form of entertainment, but an active process of moral and emotional development that can have real-world implications for how we understand and interact with others. In the context of pandemic narratives, Nussbaum's insights suggested that fictional accounts of disease outbreaks can play a vital role in helping readers understand the personal, emotional, and ethical complexities of these events, potentially fostering more empathetic and nuanced responses to real-world health crises.

John Green's *Everything Is Tuberculosis* (2025) foregrounds the ethical obligation of proximity in the context of global suffering, particularly in relation to infectious disease. Reflecting on the human capacity for compassion during crises, Green writes, "It reminded me that when we know about suffering, when we are proximal to it, we are capable of extraordinary generosity. We can do and be so much for each other, but only when we see one another in our full humanity, not as statistics or problems, but as people who deserve to be alive in the world" (Green). This linguistic gesture embodies the ethical difference between abstractness from afar and actual acknowledging of real persons. In this strategic move, Green challenges the reality of inhumanity that is implicit in the disconnection of public-health facts and figures, which often reduce individual people to numbers and dry epidemiological data, and create a relationally based and ethically justified understanding of and response to how people experience the relation of dignity and suffering. Falling in line with Nussbaum's concept of "narrative imagination," Green is also affirming the capacity of literature (and thereby testimony) to imagine seeing

the full personhood of another, and calls readers to acknowledge emphatical responsibility as a civic duty. That is to say that in terms of pandemic literature, Green's consideration points to the usefulness of narrative, in developing a moral consciousness that calls for imagining the possibility of connectedness across time and space and resist non-being- a consciousness that demands acknowledging the points of view of other people and assumes that those people matter - both in memory and care.

The concept of memories is contested by the very nature of storytelling and shared experiences. These memories-both private and public-are what make their way into written works. Sharing memories is crucial to the development and maintenance of social identity, according to Jan Assman. Without a collective memory to bind the survivors together due to the rules that the pandemic entails, individual experiences of pandemics and epidemics become isolated and individualised. This can be seen in narratives that attempt to bring epidemics and pandemics to the forefront by incorporating shared and private memories and experiences to forge a connection between the past and present. As Belling has stated in "Overwhelming the Medium," despite the challenge, "The medium that carries and communicates the burdens and lessons of past suffering" like the pandemic, "is narrative" (56). Nishi Pulugurtha argued that narratives are important not only because they convey stories but also because they occasionally act as a form of healing and of coping with pain and suffering. In her words again, "Narratives that deal with epidemics and pandemics provide a sociological and historical lens through which to view the present pandemic" (6). By imposing narratives on otherwise chaotic events, narrative allows us "to make sense of why things happen" while, at times, still allowing the mystery and ambiguity to be retained. This may be how narrative frameworks help to provide crucial order to diseases. The research is based on the pedagogical tension that the pandemic, despite appearing to have disappeared, has left traces in literature and culture all throughout history. Literary portrayals of the pandemic are fundamentally influenced by the cultural studies and theories used. "The pandemic literature embraces this tension- it often eschews clear plots in ways

that reflect the narrative challenges of the outbreak while also developing new strategies to grant some sense of structure” (Outka 113).

Ryan A. Davis explores how narrative structures influenced the way people talked about the flu pandemic. He points out that historical fiction authors used storytelling to help readers grasp the meaning of the epidemic rather than confuse or overwhelm them. Remarkably, the public conversation during the first two waves of the pandemic followed a familiar story arc, complete with a clear beginning, middle, and end. While it might appear that public discussions were just a mix of articles, data, and opinions, they actually shaped the pandemic into a unified story about human experience. Central to this narrative were common elements of heroic tales, such as dividing the world into “us” and “them,” portraying an external danger to the nation, labelling the actions of outsiders as morally wrong, and emotionally uplifting stories of individual bravery. These features highlight how deeply storytelling is tied to human thinking. Davis notes that at the present time there is wide agreement that understanding how people interpret the world requires close attention to the stories they tell. In the case of the flu, the heroic narrative logic was further reinforced by microbiological advances in the twentieth century, which supported a particular social perspective that shaped the response to the health crisis (Davis 175). In terms of the narrative framework, Gilmore drew comparisons between monster stories and pandemic stories. According to David D. Gilmore, the “narrative component” of monster stories begins with the monster unexpectedly emerging from the darkness into a serene unaware world, with initial reports being denied, explained away, or ignored. Then there is destruction and robbery, which brings about awakening. Finally, the neighbourhood reacts, comes together, and faces the beast by marshalling its resources around a hero-saint. Great joy then follows as things return to normal. Having been temporarily stopped by this setback, the monster (or its kin) eventually reappears, and the cycle continues. The dialectic is formulaic and overly foreseeably to the point of ritualism (14). Similar to what Charles Rosenberg wrote, pandemics have an episodic structure that begins at a particular moment, develops over a space and time-limited stage, follows a plot line of increasing and revelatory tension, leads to a crisis of individual and societal character, and then drifts towards

closure (279). Rosenberg observed that epidemics “mobiliz[e] communities to act out propitiatory rituals that incorporate and reaffirm fundamental social values and modes of understanding,” similar to the responses of the community reported by Gilmore in response to monsters. He went on to say that each author not only views epidemics, monster stories, and sexual development as narratively-dramatically structured, but also contends that conflict is of utmost importance. Further, because conflict “provides a way for a culture to be able to talk to itself about, and perhaps resolve, conflicts that might threaten to fracture it,” wrote Wald, “the outbreak narrative follows a formulaic plot that begins with the identification of an emerging infection, attends to the global networks through which it travels, and concludes with an account of the epidemiological work that brings it to an end” in its scientific, journalistic, and fictional forms. Such accounts imply that outbreaks may be comprehensible and even avoidable in the future. He also observes how the outbreak narrative also serves “like the epidemiological map and the electron microscope, [as] a tool for making the invisible appear”(Wald 31). Disease, medicine, health, and epidemics are all a component of any society’s historical change and growth, according to Snowden “Infectious diseases... are as important to understanding societal development as economic crises, wars, revolutions, and demographic change,” he writes. He continues by saying that

every society produces its own specific vulnerabilities. To study them is to understand that society’s structure, its standard of living, and its political priorities. Epidemic diseases... have always been signifiers, and the challenge of medical history is to decipher the meanings embedded in them (9).

The second chapter begins by exploring the multifaceted nature of pandemic discourses, highlighting the diverse viewpoints and interpretations that emerge from individuals, societies, and governments. The range of responses, from strict lockdowns to resistance to public health measures reflects the complex nature of human behavior and the challenges in navigating such a global crisis. The chapter then turned to Michel Foucault’s theories on power dynamics and biopolitics, arguing that his perspectives offer valuable insights for examining pandemic narratives. Foucault’s work underscored how power operates through systems of

surveillance, discipline, and control, shaping individual autonomy and societal management. The pandemic, as a global health emergency, exposes the complexities of power dynamics, revealing the limitations of healthcare systems, the spread of misinformation, and the potential for abuse of authority. Giorgio Agamben's concept of the "state of exception" and "bare life" are presented as critical lenses for understanding pandemic responses. Agamben's work highlighted how governments can invoke emergency powers to suspend civil liberties and prioritize public health, potentially leading to the devaluation of individual rights and the subjugation of human beings to the will of the state. This concept raises crucial questions about the balance between security and freedom, particularly in the context of pandemics where emergency measures can be justified in the name of public safety. It has examined how literary narratives contribute to our understanding of human responses to pandemics. It explored how authors like Saleema Nawaz, Ellen Marie Wiseman, Puja Changoiwala and Lawrence Wright use their stories to portray individuals grappling with fear, uncertainty, grief, and the disruption of daily life. These narratives highlight the importance of empathy, demonstrating the human cost of pandemic outbreaks and the resilience shown by those affected. Hannah Arendt's concept of the "banality of evil" is also introduced as a relevant lens for understanding how ordinary individuals can participate in acts of cruelty and inhumanity within the framework of bureaucratic systems. This concept challenges us to consider how power structures can contribute to a detachment from personal responsibility, leading to the execution of harmful actions in the name of the greater good. Arendt's analysis, while focusing on the Holocaust, offers crucial insights for understanding how individuals navigating pandemic responses might be confronted with moral dilemmas and the limitations of human judgment during times of crisis. The importance of studying pandemic narratives within a broader context of literary history, social theory, and cultural understanding is emphasized. It argues that these narratives hold unique potential for fostering empathy, providing critical insights into the human condition, and contributing to a deeper understanding of these recurring global crises. The chapter encourages further exploration of pandemic narratives, as they offer invaluable lessons for navigating future pandemics and building more resilient communities.

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During the outbreak of a pandemic, a host of sociopolitical and psychological factors such as denial, concealment, governmental ill-preparedness, and the proliferation of conspiracy theories often emerge as dominant narrative threads. These dynamics are not only observable in real-world epidemiological crises but are also richly rendered in literary depictions of pandemics. Literature becomes a site for exploring how power is wielded or misused, how fear is cultivated or contested, and how conspiracy, whether as state propaganda or grassroots paranoia, molds public and private behavior. The transmission and management of fear often become mechanisms through which institutional control is legitimized or resisted, as exemplified in Wright's *The End of October* (2020). This scientifically grounded political thriller explores the rapid descent into chaos following the outbreak of a

deadly virus named Kongoli, showcasing a governmental apparatus paralyzed by misinformation, nationalism, and a crisis of authority. Wright portrays how scientific warnings are sidelined in favor of bureaucratic inertia and global rivalries, thus illustrating the catastrophic consequences of ill-preparedness and geopolitical denial. Similarly, Nawaz's *Songs for the End of the World* (2020), written presciently before the COVID-19 outbreak, presents a multi-perspective narrative in which characters struggle to navigate a world altered by a fictional pandemic. The novel dissects the interplay between public fear, media sensationalism, and personal moral choices. Denial and concealment figure heavily in the lives of key characters, particularly those in institutional roles, such as a police officer suppressing critical information, or a novelist being targeted for having eerily predicted the pandemic. Nawaz masterfully constructs a tapestry of human responses, from panic and suspicion to resilience and compassion, revealing the emotional and ethical tensions that define life under contagion. The novel probes not only societal vulnerability but also illuminates acts of kindness, empathy, and love that persist despite the surrounding disarray. Wiseman's *The Orphan Collector* (2020), set during the 1918 Spanish Flu pandemic, foregrounds the human cost of xenophobia and governmental negligence. The novel centers on Pia Lange, a thirteen-year-old German immigrant girl whose family becomes a casualty of both the virus and American nativist hostility. Through Pia's journey, the novel critiques the exploitation of the pandemic for nationalistic and supremacist agendas, highlighting how illness is used as a pretext for systemic discrimination. Concealment is shown to be not only a personal instinct but also a structural mandate; children vanish, truths are buried, and vulnerable populations are vilified. The narrative evokes deep humanist concerns, loss, longing, familial bonds, and positions love and moral courage as counterforces to the institutional callousness surrounding the young protagonist. Changoiwala's *Homebound* (2022) transports the pandemic narrative into the Indian socio-economic context, focusing on the plight of migrant workers during COVID-19's national lockdown. Through a journalistic-literary lens, the novel unveils the devastating effects of state negligence and denial on the most marginalized populations. She highlights how conspiracy theories, often fuelled by poor information dissemination and class-based scapegoating, further endanger vulnerable lives. Yet amidst the chaos, *Homebound* also attends to quiet,

often overlooked forms of resistance and solidarity- the will to survive, the yearning to return home, and the persistence of human connection despite systemic breakdown. The book becomes a narrative of dignity reclaimed under duress, and it accentuates how pandemics exacerbate existing inequities while also surfacing pockets of shared humanity.

Together, these texts illustrate that the pandemic is not only a biological event but also a deeply social and political phenomenon. The transmission of fear often parallels the spread of the virus itself, weaponized through the channels of media, politics, and social prejudice. Yet each novel also resists nihilism, offering glimpses of ethical clarity and human warmth amid the wreckage. Whether it is a sister's desperate search for her brothers in *The Orphan Collector*, a novelist's contemplation with prophetic guilt in *Songs for the End of the World*, a virologist navigating the geopolitics of extinction in *The End of October*, or a migrant's journey of survival in *Homebound*, the literary pandemic landscape becomes a canvas for the interrogation of power, the endurance of the spirit, and the redemptive potential of empathy. These narratives ultimately serve to remind readers that pandemics do not just test infrastructures, but also moral architectures, compelling readers to reimagine freedom, responsibility, and collective care. Wu Yilong examines the many political responses to the Covid-19 pandemic while significantly using Michel Foucault's writings. She examines the Chinese government's response to Covid-19 in the first section of this article and discusses the connection between biopower and the political ideal of societies, making the case that technology has also entered the world of biopolitics and has assisted society in realising its political ideal of mobility, productivity, and security. In the second section of the paper, she makes the argument that Covid-19 changed the way societies distribute power and that this could lead to the emergence of new types of power in the future. She further states how, "The pandemic not only allowed us to witness the actual operations of biopower and biopolitical tactics but also allowed us to witness the collapse/decline of disciplinary societies" (38).

The idea of biopolitics put out by Michel Foucault provides a significant explanatory framework through which the Covid-19 pandemic can be examined. Foucault used the term “biopolitics” to refer to the statistical, population-level controls used to manage people. Governments and other systems of authority no longer have to restrict themselves to punishing certain entities. Managing factors like the mortality rate or the average life expectancy are only a few examples. Everyone is individually subjected to processes of subjectivity that include this way of viewing life since society uses biopolitical methods of population control, which results in the creation of each as individuals. J.J. Sylvia IV focuses on identifying unauthorised movement and controlling circulation in her paper which examines social distance through the theoretical framework of Michel Foucault’s biopolitics. Governments were already implementing new measures like geofencing and AI-based facial recognition to make it easier to enforce social distancing, despite the fact that reporting and widely disseminated data visualisations about Covid-19 had made a lot of people more aware than before that their movements were being tracked and monitored. According to her, the monitoring of Covid-19 spread and public social withdrawal behaviours have made biopolitical practises became better known, but this also created new potential for even more monitoring and control. She also notes that there is a chance to change how the public views data collection, technology control, and the differences in bio power by race. “How we collectively respond to these biopolitical processes will, in part, determine how such power relations are articulated in the future” (15). The presence of bigotry and paranoia within pandemic narratives is examined in the third chapter, with the argument that these intertwined themes reflect not just the fear of contagion, but also deeper societal anxieties, prejudices, and the abuse of power. By analyzing these themes in selected novels, the aim is to highlight how they contribute to a cycle of othering, scapegoating, and misinformation during times of crisis. Bigotry is defined as a form of prejudice rooted in historical inequalities and sociopolitical structures. The fear of contagion and how it can exacerbate existing prejudices, leading to the scapegoating of marginalized groups, such as ethnic minorities and immigrants is explored here. Historical examples, like the persecution of Jews during the Black Death, the scapegoating of Irish immigrants during cholera outbreaks, and the anti-Asian

sentiment surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic, demonstrate the enduring nature of this phenomenon. The role of paranoia in pandemic narratives is then explored, emphasizing its connection to the fear of the “other.” Paranoia, depicted as an emotion, that thrives in the face of uncertainty and limited information, leading to the creation and spread of conspiracy theories and disbelief. This paranoia, fueled by fear and ignorance, can contribute to social division, hinder collective efforts to address the crisis, and exacerbate the cycle of othering.

The novel *Songs for the End of the World* by Saleema Nawaz showcased how an Asian server, mistakenly identified as Patient Zero, became a target of xenophobia and hate crimes. The narrative highlighted how online rumors and conspiracy theories fueled by misinformation can lead to the scapegoating of individuals and entire communities. In *The End of October* by Lawrence Wright, the spread of a new virus called “Kongoli” is connected to the Muslim community, prompting a wave of Islamophobia. The story underscored how pre-existing prejudices and anxieties can be exploited during a pandemic, leading to the creation of harmful stereotypes and the targeting of minority groups. The novel *The Orphan Collector* by Ellen Marie Wiseman centered on the experiences of a German immigrant family during the 1918 influenza pandemic. The protagonist, Pia, witnessed the emergence of anti-German sentiment, the scapegoating of German Americans, and the resulting prejudice and discrimination they face. The narrative emphasized how fear and misinformation can contribute to the marginalization and suffering of vulnerable groups. The story *Homebound* by Puja Changoiwala focused on the experiences of migrant workers during the COVID-19 pandemic in India. The narrative highlighted the exploitation of migrants, the lack of resources and support provided to them, and the resulting social inequalities and injustices. It underscored how anxieties surrounding pandemics can exacerbate existing power structures and contribute to the vulnerability and marginalization of migrant communities. The chapter reflected the need to critically engage with pandemic narratives, recognizing their potential to perpetuate harmful prejudices and exacerbate existing inequalities. It calls for a more nuanced and empathetic approach to understanding these events, one that acknowledges the complex interplay of power, societal anxieties, and individual

experiences. By challenging prevailing narratives and fostering empathy and solidarity, the chapter suggested that a more just and equitable world can be created, one that is better equipped to manage future pandemics. This approach calls for a scholarly engagement with pandemic representations, recognizing their potential to perpetuate or disrupt harmful prejudices and societal inequalities.

This chapter also narrates about the erosion of human connections and trust as well as the never-ending cycle of racism, bigotry, hate crimes, and xenophobia, which are primarily directed towards members of society's minorities. By identifying patterns of "Othering" in the chosen pandemic tales, an observation is made on how the communities of East Asians, Muslims, homosexuals, migrants, and Germans are portrayed as the "othered" in the chosen texts. They have been found to have adopted mainstream philosophies. The authors may have unintentionally or intentionally disclosed the discourse of "othering" that has pervaded the sphere of culture, power, and knowledge in practically every pandemic outbreak by depicting the stigmatisation, racial subjugation, intolerance, and paranoia towards them. In his book Alexandre I. R. White discussed race, money, and the control of infectious diseases demonstrating that the previous centuries displayed instances where the colonies of European and American empires feared disease, not only for its effects on their people's health and economies, but also because of how closely their territories would be linked to the Middle East and Asia. According to him, as colonial expansion spread throughout the world, in particular across the Atlantic, imperial actors in the nineteenth century realised that diseases carried by the colonised posed a threat to the colonial order by bridging the "boundary between coloniser and colonised, afflicting colonial actors while also disturbing the economic objectives of empire" (78).

Chimnay Tumbe described how myth-making and notions of the "super spreader" are common during pandemics. He described how the onset of the plague had been blamed on merchants and tailors, cholera on pilgrims and soldiers, and postal workers for the typhus, service agents and soldiers for influenza. He stated, "In the blame games, identities such as race, caste and religion would invariably crop up as attested in numerous reports littered across the nineteenth century" (161). He

described how, during the current pandemic, groups associated with the Shincheonji Church of Jesus in South Korea and the Tablighi Jamaat in India came under close investigation. He stated that “Both groups attracted outsized blame for weeks, amplified by the media, and exposed classic pandemic fears” and continued by saying that “this behaviour was reminiscent of the British colonial authorities blaming Hindu and Muslim pilgrims and merchants for spreading diseases a century ago.” Fortunately, he pointed out how the blame game in India came to an end when several political figures emphasised that the coronavirus does not take the victim’s religion into account (162). The pandemic is a warning of agentless anarchy, a reminder that one’s susceptibility can lie beyond all control, and this was, curiously, perhaps its scariest hidden aspect. The global outbreak is, in fact, subject to regulation and human judgement. This particular anxiety is at the root of the literatures under consideration as well as a factor in the pandemic’s erasure from the cultural record. Attention must be paid to the tension present throughout the book, as well as the ways in which human actions have contributed to the spread of virus, despite it being perceived, to some extent, as a non-human, agentless threat. Tumbé suggests that one method to always be vigilant is to cultivate collective memory. For Europe, the fourteenth-century plague persisted in people’s minds over time through a variety of mechanisms, and responses to illnesses for several centuries after the fact (175). The shocking lack of knowledge about pandemics outside of Europe, especially in India, was evident when Covid-19 first emerged in early 2020. The lack of first-person stories in the ‘Age of Pandemics’ consistently astounded him as he was writing the book. According to him,

Oral histories and archives should be started because of this time period’s relevance...The memory of previous pandemics also means that we should thoroughly document the current pandemic so that the errors we make now are not repeated in the future (175,176).

The fourth chapter has delved into the multifaceted role of literature in navigating the pandemic experience, analyzing the processes of reading, writing, and remembering, and exploring how pandemic literature shapes both an understanding of the crisis and the responses to it. The power of literature in times of crisis is

established, highlighting its ability to document experiences, process collective trauma, and foster understanding. Pandemic literature, in particular, served as a powerful tool for capturing the complexities of human suffering, resilience, and societal change, acting as a witness to history and vividly chronicling the daily realities and emotional landscapes shaped by the crisis. The motivations and creative choices of writers who engage with the theme of pandemics are emphasized, as they draw inspiration from their own experiences, observations, and research, while seeking to capture the nuances of the crisis with authenticity and empathy. Writers often use their narratives to critique governmental responses, societal inequalities, and the erosion of collective values, providing insights into the broader cultural, political, and ethical dimensions of the pandemic. The dynamic interplay between pandemic literature, readers, and the broader social and cultural context is highlighted, with reader reception being a crucial element as individuals interpret narratives based on their personal experiences, cultural backgrounds, and ideological perspectives.

Fiction conveys the ability to reconsider individual beliefs about how they are related to a disease and how a balance may be struck between individual freedom and social responsibility. Literature on pandemics prompts a reassessment of our understanding of microbial interactions and the delicate balance between personal freedom and societal responsibility. These themes, which may have appeared novel in light of the coronavirus pandemic, emerge as recurring concerns in such works. They compel readers to reflect upon the complexities of individual choices in the context of broader social obligations, offering insights into the enduring tensions between autonomy and collective well-being. As one of the authors Nawaz highlighted in her book said, “We look to art to show us how we can survive the pain of this world.” (291) The author’s intentions, and the reader’s response and reception, are based upon the specific historical and cultural contexts in which the texts were written. The chapter has made an effort to understand the polarising attitudes and responses of survivors of the pandemic. Literature that addresses pandemics can provide a useful lens through which we can understand how society responds and how individuals react to adversity. By discussing literature surrounding

pandemics, we can access examples of previous pandemics from a case study framework, which can be used to unpack the complexities surrounding pandemics. The stories told in these works often mirror current lived experience, and allow opportunities for readers to consider how they responded as a society and individually as it related to their response in the context of crisis. Revisiting these imaginative works allows the reader to consider their pertinence in contemporary realities, see similarities, and learn from the past, as well as notice what aspects are no longer valid. Furthermore, these texts offer suggestions for possible reorganisation of society after pandemics, examples and other ways to think about how to rebuild institutions and communities with new relationships. Through the characters and settings in these works, readers can learn about different aspects of human behaviour as humans during times of trauma- from altruism, to despair, and everything in between such literature provides a nuanced understanding of the human condition under duress, shedding light on both the resilience and vulnerabilities of individuals and communities. In essence, literary works addressing pandemics offer a rich tapestry of narratives that not only document past experiences but also serve as guides for navigating the complexities of our present circumstances and envisioning possible futures.

In a concise study by Perciaccante et al. the authors considered the role of literature in informing perceptions and understandings of public reactions to pandemics. They described a series of discussions in their analysis of literary texts that identified the stages of pandemic evolution or progression, which remain infinitely relevant and recognizable in modern social contexts. These stages are often characterized by denial, or the minimization of risk, and the authors indicates that they are contributors to the pandemic's inability to be contained. The study highlighted that the factors of isolation and social distancing remain relevant and are still the best way to decrease transmission. The authors identified that social distancing has been, and continues to be, difficult for many people to accept. The authors highlighted that the "infodemia", the excess information, comprised of misinformation, is often a companion to pandemics, contributing to public confusion and anxiety. They contended the importance of challenging and conquering fear of

the unknown by suggesting that the public engage in credible, science based knowledge about the disease and how it can spread. Despite the availability of reliable information and appeals to collective responsibility, Perciaccante and his colleagues noted that individuals often acted out of fear or self-interest. This point was further reinforced by philosopher Michael Peters, who argued that such behaviours such as panic buying and hoarding, were rational from the perspective of the individual, yet harmful when viewed through the lens of communal well-being. Peters wrote, “This is an example of cumulative collective irrationality, either based on an extreme version of competitive individualism... rather than a form of collective community responsibility and care for the other... where it is sane and rational from an individual viewpoint but weird, crazy, irrational from the community, public, collective often also long-term viewpoint” (755). His critique illuminated the tension between personal survival strategies and the ethical demands of social solidarity during public health emergencies. Analysing how our presumptions and interpretations change when we take into account the damage caused by the pandemic, an examination has been conducted into conspicuous literary and critical dialogue. The chapter has also provided a case study on how some mass fatalities, in Judith Butler’s words, become less “grievable” than others because deaths in the pandemic are repeatedly viewed as being less significant or politically useful, which results in psychic numbing and temporary or permanent erasure from memory. The ‘dialogic’ structure of the literary works chosen for the study is examined in terms of how they represent various socioeconomic strata and interests. They are located in order to make an accurate assessment of the pandemic’s consequences. Most literary interpretation and analysis are dependent on the prevailing ideology, the writers’ experiences, and their cultural context. These books have been examined from a variety of angles, including the fundamental workings of power, the reactions of the state apparatus, society, and people, as well as the racism that persists alongside the idea of reading and writing

Slavoj Žižek, in his reflections on the COVID-19 pandemic, drew on Elisabeth Kübler-Ross’s well-known psychological model of grief outlined in *On Death and Dying* where she identified five emotional stages that individuals may

undergo following the diagnosis of a terminal illness- denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. She clarified that these stages do not necessarily occur in a fixed order, nor are all of them experienced by every individual. Žižek applied this framework to analyze public and individual responses to the global health crisis, identifying parallels on how societies processed the unfolding pandemic. He noted that the initial stage was denial, characterized by widespread disbelief and minimization. During this phase, many dismissed the severity of the situation, claiming that “nothing serious is going on,” and accused alarmists of spreading unnecessary panic. This was followed by anger, often expressed in xenophobic or anti-governmental forms, such as blaming China for the outbreak or criticizing state authorities for inefficiency. The third stage, bargaining, emerged in rationalizations that attempted to downplay the threat, with individuals insisting that although there were casualties, the situation was less serious than past outbreaks like SARS and that the damage could be contained. When such reassurances proved ineffective, depression set in, manifesting in widespread despair and anxiety over what began to feel like an inescapable fate. What Žižek found most intellectually compelling, however, was the final stage-acceptance. He argued that true acceptance required coming to terms not just with the pandemic itself but with the broader existential implications that it revealed. As he explained, “what we should accept and reconcile ourselves to, is that there is a sub-layer of life, the undead, stupidly repetitive, pre-sexual life of viruses, which has always been there and which will always be with us as a dark shadow, posing a threat to our very survival, exploding when we least expect it” (52). As an example of societal adaptation and symbolic transformation, Žižek pointed to the evolving cultural perception of masks. Initially seen as intrusive and emblematic of lost individuality, masks gradually came to be accepted, even embraced as offering a form of welcome anonymity. They provided a reprieve from the constant pressure of public recognition and performance, thus illustrating a subtle yet profound shift in how people reconciled themselves to new norms under the conditions of the pandemic. On a deeper level, he posited that viral outbreaks remind humanity of its fragility and the ultimate contingency of life. Despite the grandeur of human civilization and cultural achievement, events as seemingly random as a viral mutation or asteroid impact could bring it all to an abrupt end. He further argued that

ecological awareness demands that we also confront the uncomfortable truth that humanity may itself play a role in hastening such destruction (52).

In Astrid Eril's work it is noted that individuals with the means to indulge in intellectual pursuits found their interest in the history of pandemics reignited by the COVID-19 pandemic as they endeavoured to comprehend the present circumstances. *Pale Rider* by Laura Spinney, a book that delves into the history of the Spanish flu pandemic, has become increasingly sought after, highlighting a growing interest in understanding past pandemics and their societal impacts. This surge in curiosity extends to other historical pandemics as well, with renewed attention on how diseases like AIDS spread during the 1980s and a plethora of new releases focusing on the medieval plague. Among the classics experiencing a resurgence in readership are Daniel Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year* (1772), offering a vivid firsthand account of the Great Plague of London, and Albert Camus' *La Peste* (1947), which explores the existential and societal implications of an outbreak in the Algerian city of Oran. These timeless works not only provide historical context but also provoked reflections on human resilience, fear, and the fragility of civilization in the face of epidemic threats. Furthermore, Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron* served as a poignant reminder of how communities throughout history have grappled with the challenges of social isolation during epidemics. Set against the backdrop of the Black Death in Florence, Boccaccio's masterpiece depicted a group of individuals retreating to a countryside villa, where they passed the time by sharing stories. This narrative device not only showcased the power of storytelling as a means of coping and connecting but also underscores the timeless human desire for companionship and solace amidst crisis. Overall, the resurgence of interest in these literary works reflected a collective desire to glean insights from the past, draw parallels to the present, and contemplate the enduring complexities of human existence in the face of pandemics.

All these disparate examples (and there are a myriad more) show that current crises tend to work like retrieval cues for collective memory, from consciously drawn historical analogies all the way to non-consciously emerging stereotypes. (Eril 867)

Pandemic literature emerges not only as a genre of crisis but also as a genre of continuity and transformation. It bridges past and present, testimony and fiction, individual and collective. It serves as a site of remembrance, a mode of resistance, and a space for imaginative world-making. As this thesis has argued, pandemic literature is indispensable not only for what it records but for what it enables, critical empathy, ethical engagement, and cultural introspection. In a world where the recurrence of pandemics remains a stark reality, literature will continue to offer a vital means through which human beings make sense of catastrophe, reclaim agency, and articulate visions of hope amid uncertainty.

The thesis has comprehensively analyzed pandemic narratives, situating them within broader cultural, racial, and power-related contexts while applying various literary theories. Central to this examination is the exploration of power dynamics embedded in these narratives, highlighting how authority, control, and influence shaped the representation and interpretation of pandemics. The roles of conspiracy theories within selected narratives, revealing their impact on public discourse and perceptions during pandemics were examined. The thesis also identified instances of xenophobia and paranoia directed towards specific racial, socioeconomic, and marginalized groups, which reflected wider societal anxieties and prejudices intensified by the crisis. Following the recent pandemic, there was a significant increase in pandemic-related literature, indicating greater recognition of the social, cultural, and political dimensions associated with epidemic experiences. This expanding body of literature addressed both the immediate effects of pandemics and their lasting societal implications, critically examining issues such as power structures, inequality, and resilience. The growing emphasis on the broader social consequences of pandemics underscored the importance of understanding how individuals and communities navigated and interpreted these crises.

In concluding the analysis of pandemic narratives, it must be acknowledged that literature served as an essential tool for understanding and managing the complex human and societal experiences provoked by global crises. The thesis highlighted literature's enduring capacity to reflect, interpret, and shape responses to pandemics, offering deep insights into how individuals and societies dealt with fear,

uncertainty, and broader social challenges. The study demonstrated that pandemics were deeply embedded within the human experience, significantly influencing perceptions of the world. Although COVID-19 was a recent event, the themes and anxieties it revealed were not unprecedented. Historically, pandemics elicited diverse reactions from individuals, societies, and governments, often connected to concerns about power, social structures, and human behaviour, illustrating humanity's intricate relationship with such events. Pandemic narratives went beyond being mere historical accounts. They functioned as active texts that continuously shaped comprehension and informed future actions. As pandemics continued to present complex realities, literature remained crucial for processing trauma, fostering empathy, and advocating for justice and equity globally. To reinforce this conclusion, the thesis encouraged readers to engage actively with pandemic narratives, challenge negative stereotypes, and cultivate empathy and understanding.

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ABSTRACT

**SITUATING PANDEMIC LITERATURE: A STUDY OF SELECT
NARRATIVES**

**AN ABSTRACT SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF
THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF
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DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH & CULTURE STUDIES

SCHOOL OF HUMANITIES & LANGUAGES

JULY 2025

**SITUATING PANDEMIC LITERATURE: A STUDY OF SELECT
NARRATIVES**

By

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Submitted

**In partial fulfillment of the requirement of the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in
English and Culture Studies of Mizoram University, Aizawl**

The global disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic fostered renewed interest in literary responses to infectious disease, and the persistence and adaptability of pandemic narratives. This thesis situates four contemporary novels: Saleema Nawaz's *Songs for the End of the World* (2020), Lawrence Wright's *The End of October* (2020), Ellen Marie Wiseman's *The Orphan Collector* (2020), and Puja Changoiwala's *Homebound* (2021), as literary works that reflect and critique the social, political, and emotional contours of crisis. The selection of these texts is based on the narrative complexity of their stories and themes, as well as their direct and indirect engagements with different dimensions of pandemic experiences. These narratives do not simply function as fictional accounts of contagion; instead, they are part of a literary lineage, an evolving genre and mode of literary response that connects and updates understandings of pandemics vis-à-vis historical, biological events and cultural phenomena. They occupy both the literary realm of affliction and the world of lived experience, and each asserts fiction's potential to engage with catastrophe as documents of the moment and as critiques of society. The purpose of pandemic literature is not to analyse the causes of the disease, but rather to serve as a reminder that despite all the chaos and disruption, there is still sense to be found in the world around us, if not elsewhere, then at least in the stories that are told and written.

Pandemic literature provides clues to an intricate, complex yet enduring relationship between crisis and culture. For centuries, pandemics have informed not only public health discourses, but have also delivered the aesthetic, ethical, and political frameworks that shape the recognition of human vulnerability. Literature

serves an irreplaceable role categorizing, representing, remembering, and inhabiting pandemic crisis experiences. As COVID-19 unfolded, literature responded not merely with documentation, but as crucial memory work, disrupting silences from the aftermath of disaster. This genre of literature constituted more than modes of representing illness and public health, they provided ongoing instructions for ethical consideration, emotional reckoning, and social critique. They invited readers to confront uncertainty, reckon with collective vulnerability, and consider the new contours of solidarity and care.

In literary history, pandemics serve as metaphors for literature's ability to articulate the precariousness of the human condition. From Thucydides' account of the Plague of Athens and the allegorical plague in Sophocles *Oedipus Rex*, to the narrative response to the Black Death in Boccaccio's *The Decameron* or the existential meditations in Albert Camus' *The Plague*, pandemics have consistently shaped literature's engagement with fear, loss, and moral reckoning. Nevertheless, as Elizabeth Outka points out in *Viral Modernism*, pandemics such as the 1918 influenza resisted straightforward representation in literature given its diffuse, "invisible" nature. This absence of writing would take the form of gaps within narratives, silences, and an atmosphere of dread, rather than a traditional plot (3). This relates to Caruth's positioning of trauma as an "event experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known" (4). Pandemic literature, therefore, reveals both the narratives that can be articulated and the silences that resist expression.

Reading the letters and stories told by the survivors of the pandemic and the literary representations that simultaneously revealed and hid these very

stories- launch us into new narrative streams, allowing us to hear voices long ignored in part because the viral, dust-like form at the heart of the story was itself invisible and silent. (Outka 37)

The historical evolution of the term “pandemic” underscores this complexity. It is derived from the Greek *pan* (“all”) and *demos* (“people”), but historically, the word contained more expansive, metaphorical meanings than direct medical definitions. As Mark Harrison notes, before the 19th century, “pandemic” barely existed in either medical or literary lexicon, and only acquired some meaning with stability during the influenza outbreak of 1918 (12). The developments of modern communication technologies, expanding literacy, and mass media, have made pandemics into identifiable cultural events. Jackson made the convincing case that modern pandemics function in a “space of flows,” mediated as much through symbolic and emotional exchange as through biological transmission (23). Given this dual reality, literature has made a crucial contribution in attempting to engage with the epistemological and affective complexities associated with global contagion.

Virginia Woolf’s 1926 essay “On Being Ill” contemplates why literature had historically neglected illness, wondering why bodily vulnerability had not received the same thematic solemnity as love, or conflict. Woolf noted that while illness changes human consciousness in significant ways, it lacked representation in conventional forms of narrative (317). In an attempt to address this historical omission, pandemic literature has attempted to place illness, fragility, and disruption at the forefront of literary inquiry. Across traditions, pandemic literature and illness narratives have employed diverse formal strategies to grapple with the disruptive

force of disease. Ryan A. Davis writes that as fragmented media messages and disjointed responses played out in the first waves of the 1918 influenza pandemic, they coalesced into narratives with definable beginnings, climaxes, and endings. This structuring of narratives gave people a sense of meaning during a time of uncertainty. These narratives share a logic of “us-versus-them” that positioned the pandemic as a selected threat by outsiders. In conjunction with the microbiological discourse of the time, this binary not only collected the anxiety of the public, but shaped expressions of the public’s reaction, permitting communities to assign blame and reaffirm borders. So, beyond a coping mechanism for a fractured reality, it was a powerful mechanism of attention and identity that shaped how people understand and respond to pandemic (175). He also stresses:

In all our preparations for the coming pandemic, then, we would be wise not to give short shrift to metaphor and language, and the way they shape not just our thinking, but also our actions. Perhaps then we would pay more attention to the stories we tell and the consequences that follow. (Davis 178)

The four novels selected for study embody similar, broader patterns of responses and at the same time present distinct perspectives. *Songs for the End of the World* utilizes a nonlinear, multi-character narrative to depict pandemic fear as experienced both publicly and privately, thereby elaborating the intimate crises of parenthood, partnership, and professional responsibility. In a media-saturated global context, Nawaz places her fictional virus ARAMIS not only as an experiment in the contagiousness of ‘panic’, but also to demonstrate how the simultaneous deluge of information, the paranoia and surveillance of the digital era act to amplify the public

experiences that come with illnesses, infections, and pandemics. Wright's *The End of October* constructs an idea of infectious geopolitical unraveling by using the Kongoli virus through the lens of his protagonist, an epidemiologist and government health official, to critique governmental denialism, religious extremism, and the military discourse surrounding epidemiology. Wiseman's *The Orphan Collector* chronicles the experience of a young German immigrant girl, confronted with losing family, pathetic conditions of orphanage homes and racial scapegoating, ultimately representing the 1918 outbreak. Changoiwala's *Homebound* details the displacement of migrant workers during India's COVID-19 lockdown through a young girl who recounts her family's experience, making it another counter archival project of pandemic memory. Together, the four primary texts reveal that literature, rather than a passive mirror of biological reality, participates in the sociopolitical discourses of pandemics, and shapes the response to pandemics.

Edward Said's theorization of textuality in *Culture and Imperialism* suggests that texts may legitimize, sustain, or challenge dominant historical narratives. In this way, literature transforms culture as a site of ideological contestation, rather than a neutral space (Said xviii). Pandemic fiction is a critical space to contest the racialization of disease, the abstraction of vulnerable populations, as well as the epistemic authority of science. Foucault's notion of "biopower" is relevant here as he notes that the modern state is aware of "the ephemeral character of the crisis" so they capitalize the opportunity to enhance state surveillance and control (198). The sustained investigation into literature on pandemics demonstrates dimensions of the pandemic that reinforce existing power structures and dynamics of biopower. The

authors of the primary texts interrogate the valuing of lives, a critical question under crisis governance, or the management of a population using an emergency response. The social invisibility of the migrant worker is dramatized in the work. The notion of “bare life,” as articulated by Agamben, captures how emergency conditions reduce political subjects to pure biological life (187). Mbembe’s theoretical idea of “necropolitics” assists in further interrogating how power decides which lives are protected and which lives are left to die.

The novels provide further evidence of how pandemics reveal, and magnify, the existing structures of racism, bigotry, and exclusion. Therefore, Nussbaum’s concept of “narrative imagination” in this case makes sense, highlighting the ethical responsibility of literature to promote empathy and visibility across societal divisions. She stated how “Narrative art has the power to make us see the lives of the different with more than a casual tourist’s interest, with involvement and sympathetic understanding, with anger at our society’s refusals of visibility” (88). This empathetic approach is present in all the primary texts specifically in how the suppressed narratives of the ‘others,’ such as migrant workers, who are largely absent from formal documentation, demand to be acknowledged. Spivak’s criticisms of subaltern representation can be heard here, reflected in this type of literature allowing some parts of communities who have been “denied voices to find their own narratives again” (284). In a parallel vein, Wiseman’s *The Orphan Collector* works to recover undocumented immigrant stories. In this regard, the effect of racism during the 1918 influenza exacerbated the vulnerabilities of the already marginalized and displaced communities. These fictional accounts exemplify Tumbé’s assertion

that pandemics often resurface latent prejudices, revealing how disease becomes a catalyst for reigniting existing societal fractures. Changoiwala reflects on the need to acknowledge these stories and those voices.

Humans have inspired *Homebound*. I wanted to seal their cold realities in ink, ensure that we never drown them into oblivion again. This book, thus, is my attempt at documenting their story. To forget them again would be treason. (Changoiwala 230)

Embedding personal histories within fictional frameworks reassert literature's enduring power to resist erasure, remap trauma, and create counter-memories that refute cultural amnesia. Caruth's trauma theory helps make sense of pandemic literature, which often captures trauma not through direct recollection but through delayed recognition and fragmented narrative, illustrating how the experience of crisis frequently escapes immediate articulation (4). In tandem, Erll's theory of cultural memory asserts that literature both archives and provides collective memories that are shaped and transmitted through generations, allowing public memories to be continually told and revisited (Erll 139). Catherine Belling reinforces the message, arguing that, "despite narrative challenges, it is literature that carries and communicates the burdens and lessons of past suffering" (56). By narrating deferred trauma and shaping public memories, literature positions itself as a site for cultural witnessing. Pandemic fiction does not just capture suffering, but it persistently clarifies the forms crises take and how they will be remembered and retold, while making sure the emotional and historical legacies of the past remain current and active in the cultural consciousness.

The ongoing global context through which pandemic literature is consumed adds more complications. Hans Robert Jauss's reception theory posits that literary meaning is never 'fixed' as the historical contexts and expectations of readers 'normalize' (Jauss 22). Therefore, when it comes to fiction about pandemics, it is not merely a representation of biological devastation, it becomes exemplar of a vibrant site of cultural testimony where narratives of grief, survival, and the fortitude of humanity can be developed, documented, challenged, and re-imagined. Outka notes that as the immediate threat of pandemics recedes and collective fear starts to dissipate, writers are more willing to revisit the crises to understand and work through the damage, as well as the lingering emotional and cultural effects (Outka 4). In this way, literary documentation of pandemics becomes a necessary way of keeping track of the effects of crisis so that the lessons are not lost, or repeated. As Tumbe states, remembering previous pandemics through oral histories and written memory is an important step to prevent mistakes made in that time from being repeated, and ensure that societies can learn from these crises of collective trauma (176). The broader philosophical stakes of pandemic experience transcend mere epidemiology, as Peter suggests.

The philosophy of pandemic is truly a philosophy for all people. It reflects not only the human significance of pestilence and plague, or the rise of modern viruses like COVID-19 that show the transition across species but also themes of individual/community: self-interest and collective responsibility, the sacrifice of first-contact health workers, and all of those who in the ethic of the other,

provide a level of care in a neoliberal age less bound by duty or ethos of service and more by market values. (Peter 755)

As indicated earlier, the COVID-19 pandemic has fundamentally changed literary production and shaped how writers work in terms of their understanding of systems of vulnerability, isolation and systematic collapse. Arundhati Roy's essay "The Pandemic is a Portal" outlines the pandemic as "a portal...a gateway between one world and the next" (214), urging writers and societies in a broader sense, to imagine anew rather than rush to restore broken systems. Roy emphasizes that the rupture caused by COVID-19 was not just a medical crisis, but instead highlighted how the pandemic made visible the existing inequalities, and the need for radical structural rethinking. In *The Nutmeg's Curse* and in his essays written during COVID-19, Amitav Ghosh warned against the dangers of a return to "business as usual," explaining that global crises such as pandemics are often rooted in histories of colonialism, decolonization, ecological biodiversity loss, and structural violence. Ghosh argues that contemporary fiction has often failed to denote through collective crises, because it often privileges bourgeois individualism, and suggested that pandemic literature needs to expand its imaginative ability. Consistent with this idea, many literary works produced post-COVID-19 have emphasized collective narratives, speculative futures, and eco-catastrophic themes. Writers not only began to critique the public health emergency, but also began to think about more expansive questions of what human interdependence and responsibility looked like, especially in the context of survival. Like Roy stated "nothing could be worse than a return to normality" (214), there are emerging forms of literature that resist simply

returning to pre-pandemic values, and instead consider possibilities of reimagining the future. Pandemic literature published post-COVID-19, therefore, serves a significant purpose for thinking through rupture, witnessing grief, and imagining more just and sustainable worlds.

Through these narratives, it becomes evident that pandemic literature is not a static genre but an evolving, multifaceted discourse that continually interrogates, resists, and re-imagines moments of crisis. Fictional representations of pandemics simultaneously remember the human cost of disaster and offer critical spaces to reconsider how societies define care, justice, and resilience. In conducting a close reading of Nawaz, Wright, Wiseman, and Changoiwala's novels, this thesis foregrounds literature's enduring capacity to memorialize suffering, critique systemic injustice, and envision modes of collective resilience. These narratives demonstrate that while literature faithfully bears witness to the trauma of pandemics as living histories, it also acts as a way to imagine future possibilities of recovery, solidarity, and ethical renewal. Writing, reading, and remembering pandemics are crucial processes through which literature resists forgetting and cultivates critical memory, while affirming story-telling as a vital site where vulnerability, memory, and social transformation converge.

Chapter I: Introduction: Situating Pandemic Narratives in Literature

The introductory chapter presents and traces the emergence of pandemic literature as a genre that documents societal responses to disease, disturbance, and disruption. The chapter represents pandemic literature as a long-standing literary tradition aligning with myth, epic, sacred texts, to modern narrative forms. From La

Fontaine's fable *Les Animaux malades de la peste* to the divine plagues in Homer's *Iliad* or the Bible, pandemics have long been depicted as curses, divine retaliation, or sacred punishment. These early depictions emphasize that the literary imagination has always engaged with illness as both a material and symbolic crisis.

Rene Girard's reading of plague narratives illustrates how these stories traverse the entire spectrum of literary expression "from pure fantasy to the most positive and scientific accounts" arguing that the pandemic story predates literature itself, rooted in global myth and ritual. Within this framework, pandemic literature becomes a mirror of social disorder, revealing how disease unravels the normative structures of life. Plague narratives often depict moments of "undifferentiation," in which cultural and social boundaries collapse, and individual identities are destabilized. This narrative logic not only dramatizes the fragility of order but also foregrounds the search for meaning amidst chaos. They question the suspension of normative life, ethical disorientation, and the emotional burden of a collective crisis. Pandemic fiction is often understood as a balance between realism and speculation. The genre employs a mix of testimonial detail and imagined reconstruction. It is clear that pandemic narratives can shed light on the instability that individuals or communities are experiencing during a crisis. This chapter draws on humanistic, or philosophical, approaches to reading illness. Dilthey believed that arts and literature communicate the "inner life" of society and subjective experience is available for collective interpretation (223). Habermas argues that emotions have a narrative and chronological context, which provide narrative borders that allow meaning to arise and shift through time or story. Empathizing with a crisis or narrative, even

historically, allows one to remap and understand their predicament (2). Pandemic literature interrogates the distinction between medicine and culture. As Boddice and Hitzer argue, “illness can only be understood as a physical and interpretative process pivoting on language, emotion, and historical context” (11). Fiction can serve as a mode of inquiry that acknowledges pain and suffering, and at the same time, supplement, or be a mode of inquiry, that claims to witness, and restore absent perspectives on suffering. Pandemic literature is defined by reflection rather than reaction. It offers stories that reclaim silenced history, making visible structural fragilities, and propose new ways of approaching human response and resilience in the face of global threat.

Chapter II: Navigating Discourses and Responses within the Pandemic

In this chapter, attempt has been made to examine literary constructions of institutional, emotional, and collective responses at the early stages of pandemics in four of the primary texts. Uniting these texts with theoretical approaches, the chapter investigates how fiction points at the discursive fields through which early-stage pandemics are conceived, enacted, and experienced. Foucault’s concept of biopower grounds a critical analysis of the coupling of medical regulation and political sovereignty. In his book *Discipline and Punish*, he conveys that modern states established sovereignty as a power that effectively “regulates a population through techniques of surveillance, distribution, and control”(184). Nawaz’s depiction of a fractured communication network along with institutional hesitancy, provides a clear instance of this context in which ambivalence is as potent as the contagion itself. The novel traces the character’s attempts to navigate through rapidly changing guidelines

and chaos. It also illustrates how a crisis response became entangled in a politics of information, fear, and responsibility. Wright's novel expands this analysis globally by exploring the breakdown of global coordination and the expansion of state sovereignty, predominantly through border enforcement and medical militarization. The text offers a striking illustration of Agamben's worry in *Homo Sacer* that the state of exception becomes normalised under emergency and political subjects become "bare life," vulnerable to disposable governance (1). Through Dr. Henry Parsons dramatic action, Wright provides an illustration of the ethical ambiguity and geopolitical implications of early pandemic action and inaction. Wiseman's novel serves as a historical representation of a pandemic moment in the context of institutional responses to the 1918 influenza represented in quarantine, isolation, mask mandates, and breakdown of civic interaction. Wald's suggestion of the "outbreak narrative" offers a useful reference in that outbreak narratives illustrate how stories of contagion "impose order on the experience of emerging infections" while also revealing the cracks in social relations (Wald 12). In the narrative, the Liberty Loan parade is paradoxically both an image of patriotic togetherness and a vector of the viral transmission; which illustrates the entanglement of institutional failure with national spectacle. Wald has noted that outbreak narratives connect "disease emergence with the circulation of information and people" thereby framing any illness as simultaneously a medical and cultural catastrophe (2). Wiseman's text engages this structure to reveal how misinformation and systemic negligence establish the contours of the public response early on. Changoiwala's *Homebound* situates the outbreak in terms of mobility and infrastructure. The bureaucratic uncertainties and logistical paralysis of Meher's journey across a locked-down India

galvanize institutional responses to public health orders. Hannah Arendt's claim in *The Human Condition*, that power becomes impersonal through institutional abstraction, is particularly salient in the text that critique the erosion of agency that accompanies disaster (45).

Together, these narratives articulate a complex portrait of how societies perceive, tell stories about, and respond to emergent diseases. These texts do not simply recount events, but instead, they engage critically with the structure, language, and emotions through which societies are reconceived through the experience of pandemics.

Chapter III: Bigotry, Paranoia and “Othering” in Pandemic Narratives

This chapter explores the critical representation of racial, religious, and class anxieties during pandemics through pandemic fiction. With a focus on the four primary texts, this chapter assesses how each narrative demonstrates that pandemics can function as moments of moral panic in which fear, exclusion, and a conditioning of suspicions are sustained and intensified against groups who are already marginalized.

Nawaz's novel stages the public vilification of a Chinese-descent character alleged to be the very source of the fictional ARAMIS virus. When she becomes a viral scapegoat, it illustrates how pandemic paranoia latches onto visible markers of differences in a culture. As Edward Said notes, there is often a defining moment in constructing identity, in understanding that identity is the accumulation of everything that is excluded or feared, and that, “Each age and society re-creates its ‘Other’”

(332). The narrative of the ‘ARAMIS girl’ is shrunk into a form of shorthand for a xenophobic threat. This is particularly amplified by the velocity and scale of digital circulation. Zhang Yunpeng and Fang Xu contend that in the global discourse on COVID-19, both orientalist frameworks and racialized ignorance have worked together to reinforce typical sinophobic tropes depicting China as an epistemic and epidemiological threat (6). They argue that pandemic-induced racism is produced and sustained not merely by fear of contagion, but also through entrenched Orientalist discourses, whereby Asia is imagined as an unrelenting site of disease and danger in the West (Zhang and Xu 20). In *The End of October*, the viral infection is traced back to a gay Muslim camp in Indonesia and mass contagion starting from a religious pilgrimage in Mecca. This identification demonstrates a familiar set of Orientalist tropes whereby religious and sexual otherness becomes conflated with disease and deviance. In Said’s view, ‘Orientalism’ has constructed the East through a paradigm of “difference, inferiority and danger.” Pandemic fiction often reanimates this trope through characters marked as epidemiological threats (287). In a similar way, Pramod K. Nayar frames the process of ‘Othering’ as a construction of an “epidemic subject”, where pathologies are mapped onto identity through existing cultural biases (166). Wiseman’s representation of Pia Lange, a young German immigrant during the 1918 influenza pandemic, exemplifies that ethnic suspicion is a process that can be turned inwards to create objects of distrust from immigrant communities. The systemic and institutional means through which Pia is rendered voiceless is framed through Spivak, who explains the subaltern as a phenomenon whose “voice is erased or effaced in the process of representation” (308). In *Homebound*, Changoiwala chronicles the institutional abandonment of migrant

workers during India's national lockdown of the COVID-19 pandemic. Patrick Brown observes that "vulnerability is a condition and exists not only as exposure, but by the absence of acknowledgement and support" (114), which Meher's precarious journey captures and dramatizes. These texts expose the ways pandemics might amplify pre-existing prejudice, interrogating the fear-laden mechanisms of racism, bigotry, and paranoia in moments of collective crisis.

Chapter IV: Chronicling Pandemic Narratives

The chapter examines how contemporary pandemic literature chronicles writing, reading, and remembering as intertwined responses and interconnected practices shaped by collective crisis. Through a comparative reading of the four main texts by Nawaz, Wright, Wiseman, and Changoiwala, the chapter analyses how literature has mediated collective trauma, authorship, narrative, and cultural memory. The chapter draws upon trauma theory, reception aesthetics, and memory studies, as it advances the argument that pandemic fiction exemplifies an exercise of ethical and epistemological labor.

The act of writing in crisis may be seen as both a testimony and an act of intervention. Although Nawaz's narrative was written before COVID-19, it bats with eerie clarity, predicting pandemic realities. Consistent with her character Owen Grant, a writer who wrote the prophetic text, *How to Avoid the Plague* before the real threat happened. Nawaz is able to return to the ethical question of authorship in the pervasive light of catastrophe. Foucault provides a provocative frame to demarcate this shift, as these authors function not simply as makers of fiction, but as mediators of public meaning. Foucault writes that the author "serves to characterize the

existence, circulation, and operation of certain discourses within a society” (“What is an Author?” 108). In Wright’s novel, the phrase “we’re going to say that we did this to ourselves” (487), illustrates literature’s unique capacity to bear witness and point a critical finger at the systemic collapse.

The act of reading is regarded to be dialogic and situated in history. Like Hans Robert Jauss’s reception theory, pandemic literature is not consumed in some abstract void but read in the context of the “horizon of expectations” of the reader, which has been reshaped by recent events of crisis. In Wiseman’s book, Pia’s survival in a world falling apart resonated with readers who are facing the crushing despair of their own institutional failure. Changoiwala’s novel, framed through epistolary letters, requires readers to see and engage with the silences and omissions present in mainstream narratives, while showcasing class-based and caste-based disparities. This chapter is also concerned with the condition of pandemic fatigue, where repeated exposure to the suffering and crisis generates a condition of being numb to certain aspects of feelings. It explores how literature has contended with this fatigue, by working to resensitize and restore empathic engagement through narrative form.

Astrid Erll’s notion of “mnemonic premediation” explains how literature anticipates cultural memory in a future moment, and contributes as to how events are remembered. As Caruth foregrounds, remembering “entails a narrative delay,” that renders trauma accessible and legible. In these fictions, the testimonies work to remember the endangered histories of marginalised people and fight against institutional erasure. These texts function less as mere witnesses in history, and more

as participants in the production of memory. In writing, reading, and remembering, the chapter concludes that pandemic literature is not only artistic reflection but participatory reading towards a future paradigm of ethics and history.

Chapter V: Conclusion

The final chapter recapitulates the ethical, political, historical and cultural discourses explored throughout the thesis while reasserting the significant role played by pandemic literature in communicating collective and personal experiences, unmasking systematic inequalities, and shaping memories. Literary representations of disease and outbreaks extend beyond the domain of biological crisis to engage with the emotional and discursive conditions that define societal response. As Pamuk observes, pandemics lay bare “not just microbes but entire social orders,” revealing the structures that organize fear, marginalization, and authority (6). Erll also explains that moments of crisis act as “retrieval cues for collective memory” (867), giving literature the capacity to shape both retrospective understanding and future discourse. Through its capacity to bear witness, question dominant perspectives, and preserve silenced histories, pandemic fiction emerges as a critical space for cultural and ethical engagement.

The chapter considers how pandemic literature emerges not only as a genre of crisis but also as a genre of continuity and transformation. It bridges past and present, testimony and fiction, individual and collective. It serves as a site of remembrance, a mode of resistance, and a space for imaginative world-making. As this thesis has argued, pandemic literature is indispensable not only for what it records but for what

it enables, critical empathy, ethical engagement, and cultural introspection. In a world where the recurrence of pandemics remains a stark reality, literature will continue to offer a vital means through which human beings make sense of catastrophe, reclaim agency, and articulate visions of hope amid uncertainty.

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