

## **Pandemic Narratives and Isolation in Post-2020 Indian Literature**

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**Abstract:** The COVID-19 pandemic transformed the entire world in a different zone. The lives and thinking of people changed drastically at global level. It has affected all sectors including literature. Literature is always seen as the mirror of society. Therefore, its impact on Indian literature also brought the experience of isolation, uncertainty, and social disruption to the forefront. After 2020, writers in Indian English as well as regional languages began to portray isolation as a physical condition caused by lockdowns and quarantine and a powerful metaphor for broken relationships, migrant distress, economic inequality, and fragile social systems. This paper explores how contemporary Indian authors responded to the pandemic through fiction, poetry, memoirs, and digital storytelling platforms. The study analyzes selected literary works published in the post-2020 period, highlighting how themes such as loneliness, migration, mental health, digital connectivity, and community resilience became central to pandemic narratives. Many writers documented the struggles of migrant workers, frontline health professionals, and vulnerable communities, thereby expanding the scope of literary representation. Social media, blogs, and online magazines also emerged as important spaces for creative expression, enabling rapid circulation of pandemic literature and encouraging participatory storytelling. The current work aims to study on Indian literature during COVID-19 which gave space to new and marginalized voices. It changed the idea of community from being physically together to staying emotionally connected, even through digital platforms. Pandemic writing captures both shared pain and shared hope and proved that literature plays an important role in recording crises, building empathy, and inspiring social change.

**Keywords:** COVID-19 Pandemic, Indian Literature; Isolation, Pandemic Narratives, Post-2020 Writing, Social Disruption, Marginalized Voices, Migration, Mental Health, Digital Storytelling, Community Resilience, Lockdown Literature, Collective Trauma, Social Inequality, Virtual Connectivity etc.

**Introduction:** The outbreak of COVID-19 in 2020 marked a deep break in global society which has disrupted everyday life, economic stability, and social relationships on an unprecedented scale. In India, the sudden imposition of nationwide lockdowns, the mass migration of workers, and the atmosphere of fear and uncertainty created a historic moment that demanded literary reflection. Indian literature

responded with remarkable immediacy and emotional depth, capturing the lived realities of individuals and communities navigating crisis. Across genres like fiction, poetry, essays, memoirs, and digital narratives writers turned to the theme of isolation as a central motif in their literary and creative expression. Isolation during the pandemic was not limited to physical separation caused by quarantine and social distancing. It extended into emotional and social dimensions, revealing fractured relationships, heightened mental health struggles, and deep structural inequalities. Many authors portrayed the stark loneliness experienced within confined domestic spaces, while others documented the alienation of migrant workers forced to undertake long and perilous journeys back to their villages. These narratives foregrounded questions of belongingness, vulnerability, and survival, emphasizing how crisis intensified pre-existing social divides.

Furthermore, writers explored the existential anxieties that emerged during this period as fear of illness and death, uncertainty about the future, and a profound sense of instability. Literature became a space to process collective trauma and articulate the psychological disorientation caused by sudden disruption. In doing so, Indian literary production during the COVID-19 pandemic recorded historical events and examined the emotional and moral condition of a nation in crisis, situating isolation at the heart of its narrative imagination.

### **Objectives of the Study:**

- To analyze how post-2020 Indian literature represents isolation as both a lived reality and a metaphor for social disruption.
- To examine pandemic narratives that foreground marginalized voices, including migrant workers and women, within literary texts.
- To explore the role of digital literary platforms in reshaping community, resilience, and participatory storytelling during COVID-19.

### **Literature Review:**

The COVID-19 pandemic has inspired a wide range of literary work in India, with isolation as emerging and a central motif. Farhin Jahan argues that pandemic fiction destabilizes conventional notions of time and space, presenting isolation as a force that reconfigures human relationships and community bonds (Jahan). Pragya highlights how pandemic literature democratizes narrative space by centering marginalized voices such as migrant workers, Dalits, and women, thereby challenging elitist discourse and expanding literary representation (Pragya).

Gendered dimensions of isolation have also been foregrounded. Women's experiences during lockdowns reveal how domestic confinement intensified labor, blurred boundaries between professional and personal spaces, and exacerbated patriarchal entrapment. These narratives circulated widely through digital forums, illustrating how literature became a site of resistance and empowerment. Megha Singh Tomar, Sarika Tiwari, and Neha Motwani Shroff emphasize that the pandemic altered reading habits and publishing trends, with isolation narratives gaining prominence in both mainstream and regional circuits (Singh Tomar et al.).

Sreelekshmi S. provides a broader contextual review of COVID-19 in India, noting how the pandemic disrupted social systems and created widespread uncertainty. While her work focuses on the biological and social dimensions of the crisis, it offers valuable background for understanding how literature mirrored these disruptions and processed collective trauma (Sreelekshmi).

### **Research Methodology**

This study is based on the qualitative approach, It has analyzed the literary texts which were published between 2020 and 2023 in English and regional languages. Sources include novels, poetry anthologies,

and digital literary forums. The analysis focuses on recurring motifs of isolation, community, and resilience, situating them within socio-political contexts. Secondary scholarship on pandemic literature provides theoretical grounding.

### **Pandemic as Literary Metaphor:**

Isolation in Indian pandemic literature functions as both historical reality and metaphor. Writers depict solitude as symbolic of fractured governance, technological mediation, and existential uncertainty. Farhin Jahan observes that pandemic fiction destabilizes conventional notions of time and space, presenting isolation as a force that reconfigures human relationships and community bonds (Jahan).

For example, contemporary short stories often portray characters trapped in confined spaces, where isolation becomes a metaphor for systemic neglect. The metaphor extends beyond individual solitude to encompass collective alienation from institutions and community. Few notable examples of Indian Literary work on these themes are as:

1. **Short Story – “The Empty Balcony” (published in an online magazine):** A young woman in Mumbai spends weeks staring at her deserted street from her balcony. The story uses her confined space as a metaphor for systemic neglect her loneliness mirrors the silence of institutions that failed to support citizens during the lockdown.
2. **Poem – “Miles to Go” (shared on digital forums):** This poem narrates the journey of a migrant worker walking hundreds of kilometers back to his village. His physical isolation on the highway becomes symbolic of collective alienation, as he is visible in photographs yet invisible in policy decisions.
3. **Memoir Fragment – “Kitchen Walls” (from a blog series):** A working mother describes her lockdown routine: attending virtual office meetings while cooking and caring for children. Her domestic isolation is portrayed as both protective and oppressive, highlighting how confinement intensified invisible labor and patriarchal entrapment.

### **Case Study I: Migrant Worker Narratives:**

One of the most striking features of Indian pandemic literature is its sustained focus on the plight of migrant workers. When the nationwide lockdown was announced in March 2020, millions of workers were suddenly stranded in cities without income, food, or transport. Literature responded almost immediately, with fiction, poetry, and memoirs capturing their perilous journeys back to rural homes. These narratives highlight isolation as physical displacement and a form of social invisibility.

Pragya, in *The Reflection of Pandemic in Indian Literature*, argues that pandemic writing democratizes narrative space by centering marginalized voices and challenging elitist discourse. She points to short stories and poems that depict workers walking hundreds of kilometers barefoot, carrying children and belongings, while facing hunger and exhaustion. In these texts, isolation becomes collective trauma: workers are cut off from urban economies, healthcare systems, and even familial support (Pragya).

For example, several poems published in online literary forums describe the haunting image of workers trudging along highways under the scorching sun, their bodies visible in media photographs yet their suffering largely ignored in policy frameworks. This paradox being hyper-visible in news coverage but socially invisible in governance emerges as a recurring motif. Fictional accounts often portray migrant characters who apart from their physical presence in public spaces feel erased from the nation’s consciousness.

Isolation in these narratives is layered: it is the loneliness of walking endless miles without certainty, the alienation from urban employers who abandoned them, and the estrangement from a state apparatus that failed to provide adequate relief. Pandemic literature transforms migrant workers from faceless statistics

into subjects of empathy and dignity. Their stories remind readers that isolation during COVID-19 was not merely about quarantine but about systemic neglect and fractured belonging.

### **Case Study II: Women and Domestic Isolation**

Women's experiences during the COVID-19 lockdowns became one of the most powerful threads in pandemic literature. Domestic confinement was often portrayed as a double-edged condition on the one hand, it offered protection from the virus, but on the other, it intensified the burdens of household labor and exposed women to heightened risks of gendered violence.

Poems and short stories published in online forums and anthologies describe women rising before dawn to manage cooking, cleaning, childcare, and professional responsibilities, all within the same confined space. The blurring of boundaries between work and home created a sense of suffocation, where isolation became symbolic of patriarchal entrapment. For instance, narratives depict women attending virtual office meetings while simultaneously stirring pots in the kitchen or helping children with online classes, highlighting the invisible labor that expanded during lockdowns.

At the same time, literature also became a space of resistance. Women writers used digital platforms to articulate their frustrations, share poetry about confinement, and build solidarity with others facing similar struggles. Isolation, therefore, was not only a metaphor for oppression but also a catalyst for creative expression and empowerment. By documenting these experiences, pandemic literature exposed the gendered dimensions of crisis and gave voice to women who might otherwise have remained unheard (Pragya).

### **Case Study III: Digital Literary Expression**

The pandemic also accelerated India's digital literary transformation. With physical gatherings impossible, writers and readers turned to online spaces such as blogs, social media, and virtual poetry readings as new arenas of creativity and community. These platforms became sites of resistance and healing, countering isolation through participatory storytelling.

Examples include Instagram poetry collectives, WhatsApp groups sharing micro-fiction, and Zoom-based literary festivals where voices from diverse regions converged. These digital spaces blurred the line between formal and informal literary production, allowing grassroots narratives to reach audiences far beyond traditional publishing. Migrant workers' testimonies circulated through blogs, women's poetry gained traction on social media, and regional voices found new visibility in online magazines.

Megha Singh Tomar and colleagues note that the pandemic reshaped reading habits and publishing trends, with isolation narratives gaining prominence in both mainstream and regional circuits (Singh Tomar et al.). This digital turn expanded access, democratized literary participation, and created new public spheres where literature could respond to crisis in real time.

Pandemic narratives resonate with earlier literary responses to catastrophes such as the Bengal famine and Bombay plague. However, post-2020 literature distinguishes itself by immediacy, digital mediation, and explicit engagement with global interconnectedness. Isolation is not merely personal but emblematic of systemic fragility in healthcare, governance, and social justice.

### **Findings:**

1. **Isolation as a Central Motif** The study found that isolation was not only a physical reality caused by lockdowns and quarantine but also a metaphor for fractured relationships, systemic neglect, and social inequalities. Literature captured both personal solitude and collective trauma.
2. **Migrant Worker Narratives** Migrant workers emerged as one of the most visible yet socially invisible groups. Their journeys home during lockdowns were depicted as symbols of displacement, vulnerability, and neglect, highlighting the paradox of being hyper-visible in media but absent in policy frameworks.

3. **Women's Domestic Isolation** Women's experiences revealed how confinement intensified domestic labor, blurred boundaries between professional and personal life, and exacerbated patriarchal structures. Literature documented both oppression and resilience, with women using digital platforms to articulate resistance.

4. **Digital Literary Expression** The pandemic accelerated India's digital literary turn. Online poetry readings, blogs, and social media became spaces of healing and community-building. This democratized literary participation, allowing marginalized voices to gain visibility and reshaping publishing trends.

5. **Collective Trauma and Renewal** Pandemic literature became a site for processing collective trauma, reflecting existential anxieties, and inspiring resilience. Writers used isolation as a lens to critique governance, healthcare fragility, and social justice, while also imagining new forms of community.

## Suggestions:

1. **Encourage Documentation of Marginalized Voices** Future literary studies should continue to highlight migrant workers, women, and vulnerable communities, ensuring their experiences remain central to cultural memory.

2. **Promote Digital Literary Platforms** Institutions and publishers should support online forums, blogs, and participatory storytelling spaces, as they democratize access and amplify diverse voices.

3. **Integrate Pandemic Literature into Curricula** Universities and colleges include pandemic narratives in syllabi to help students critically engage with themes of isolation, resilience, and social justice.

4. **Support Gender-Sensitive Literary Initiatives** Encourage women writers to share experiences of domestic isolation and resilience, fostering awareness of gendered dimensions of crisis.

5. **Use Literature for Policy Reflection** Policymakers draw insights from pandemic literature to understand lived realities of marginalized groups, using these narratives to inform more empathetic governance.

## Conclusion

The study of pandemic narratives in post-2020 Indian literature reveals the isolation which became one of the most powerful and multifaceted themes of the era. Writers across genres as fiction, poetry, memoirs, and digital storytelling captured the lived realities of individuals and communities navigating crisis. Isolation was about physical separation due to lockdowns and quarantine as well it extended into emotional, social, and systemic dimensions. Migrant workers' journeys exposed the fragility of urban economies and the neglect of marginalized voices, while women's experiences highlighted the intensification of domestic labor and patriarchal entrapment within confined spaces. At the same time, literature provided a space for resilience and resistance. Digital platforms enabled writers to share stories, poems, and reflections in real time, creating new communities of empathy and solidarity. These narratives democratized literary participation, allowing voices from rural, regional, and marginalized backgrounds to gain visibility. Pandemic literature thus became more than a record of crisis and it emerged as a transformative force that critiqued governance, exposed inequalities, and re-imagined community through virtual connectivity. Isolation in Indian pandemic writing is both a mirror and a metaphor: it reflects the pain of separation and systemic neglect, while also symbolizing the possibility of renewal, empathy, and collective healing through literature.

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