COVID-19 and Echoes of Divide: A Political Economy Study of the Coronavirus Crisis Through Puja Changoiwala's Homebound

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Abstract
The 'Coronavirus Pandemic' led to a worldwide lockdown that confined millions inside their homes. Among frontline workers like medical professionals, shopkeepers, and police, people who were forced out of their homes were informal migrant workers. Those who had left their homes to work in big cities for better prospects in life set out on a reverse journey to their rural homes. Puja Changoiwala's novel Homebound (2021) presents a heart-wrenching account of the displacement of a migrant family from their work land to homeland. Critical textual analysis of Changoiwala's novel with Marxist theoretical foundations lays bare the socio-economic inequality-based class division and its relation with the experiences of health and illness among the population. A close reading of characters using literary trauma theory and contemporary trauma concepts reveal the biting impact of the unforgiving coronavirus with the sudden lockdown and the personal trauma they experience, given their diaspora status within their own country. The study unveils the differences in patterns of disease, response to disease, and the eventuality of disease between people from lower socio-economic classes and those who are privileged with more favorable circumstances. The importance of the study lies in highlighting the representation of the struggle and pain of the 'citymakers' while navigating the risk of the virus and preventive policies during the COVID-19 pandemic. Through the political economy lens on the double displacement of migrant workers, the study also sheds light on the underpinnings of political and social dynamics during the crisis.
Keywords: COVID-19, Pandemic, Lockdown, Migrant Labourers, Displacement

Introduction

The WHO (World Health Organization) declared COVID-19 a global pandemic on March 11, 2020. A total of around 7 million lives has been claimed by the virus called SARS-CoV-2 causing the disease COVID-19. It is fair to say that the 2020 pandemic is one of the deadliest health crises that the world has seen in the last century. Considering the scale of loss and trauma caused by this colossal event, its remnants will inevitably haunt people who have lived through it for a long time. People across the globe have lost family, friends, jobs, savings, and even their sanity. People were barred from seeing their loved ones one last time, fathers carried their sons to the cremation grounds, doctors died saving patient lives, some were not the victims of the virus directly but the circumstances that arose due to the virus, and hardly anyone was left untouched by the trying times of the coronavirus crisis.

This paper focuses on a section of the Indian society that was certainly one of the worst hits of the pandemic known as internal migrants labourers. The internal migrants are people who moved from their native place to a relatively urban area in search of livelihood and better

prospects in life. These migrant labourers, although seemingly invisible to the authorities and the broad structure of the urban society, had made a space for themselves in their new urban spaces. However, the pandemic combined with the abrupt lockdown that was hurriedly imposed on the public completely broke the spine of the hand-to-mouth life that they were leading. The discourse of the COVID pandemic in India is incomplete without the mention of the plight of the migrant workers. The present paper aims to explore how people belonging to different socio-economic strata experienced the same pandemic differently through a political economy lens.

The World Health Organization (WHO) defines a pandemic as the worldwide spread of a new disease, often crossing international boundaries and affecting a large number of people. In recorded human history, a number of pandemics, including Black Death, the Spanish Influenza, and the most recent COVID-19 pandemic in recorded history have served as a brutal reminder of the fact that nature conquers all and nothing is above it, not even its most intelligent species. Pandemics reveal the vulnerability of human civilization. Even in this era of modernity and technological advancements, humans can still fall short and that too in front of a tiny virus invisible to the naked eye. This makes it only logical to learn and read about them and foster preparedness. As Virginia Woolf argued in her essay "On Being Ill", disease narratives and discourse deserve as much importance as love and war— if not more. It strengthens the argument in favour of illness discourse in literature and culture.

Like most countries of the world, the Indian government adopted quarantining and lockdown as the primary strategy against the rapid spread of the virus. In India, lockdown was implemented in phases, with phase 1 starting from March 23 to April 14, 2020 It was extended to May 17 2020 in phase 2. Phase 3 began with establishing red, orange, and green zones depending on the infection status, and phase 4 went on till May 31 2020 with relaxations in the rules. A crisis like a pandemic is more than a medical crisis. It inevitably exposes the structural integrity of institutions like community, religion, financial system, and the society as a whole in addition to the medical infrastructure and technology. The covid-19 pandemic was no different and it lay bare every crack and hole in the physical and social infrastructure of the country.

These cracks and holes become strikingly clear when the fate of migrant workers during the COVID-19 lockdown is analysed critically. The migration in case of these workers can be inter- as well as intra-state. In India, some states with the greatest number of internal migrants are Maharashtra, Rajasthan, Delhi, and Haryana. Most of these migrants are from an agrarian background without any significant landholding and not many people can be fed off of the produce from their land and make enough to lead a respectable life. With no savings and no support from either their employers or the authorities, they were compelled to undertake the journey back to their homes by any means available—even on foot. This pedestrian journey of the internal migrants is being regarded as big a mass migration as any other in the history of the country. However, an arguably positive aspect of this unnecessarily painful migration is that for the first time in history, this invisible migrant workforce gained visibility as the "city makers" (Chatterjee and Chatterjee 72).

Homebound by Puja Changoiwala is a timely and poignant account of the exodus-like displacement of a migrant family from their workland to homeland. Amanda Grimsbo Roswall, in her paper "Plague Fiction: Reading About Epidemics During Covid-19" writes that during the upheaval that came with the COVID-19 pandemic, people found comfort, solace, and reassurance in pandemic fiction as indicated by the enormous rise in the sale of

books with pandemic themes, particularly, The Plague by Camus. According to a Europe PMC article, fiction and imagination help reduce anxiety, diminish anxiety, and establish resemblance and identification with characters in similar situations (van Mulukom and Clasen). These findings underscore the importance of writing and studying accounts of the pandemic as they possess in themselves the knowledge, relatability, and therapeutic potential that future generations might seek in times like these. If history is any indication, covid-19 is unlikely to be the last pandemic to afflict humanity. When we look at pandemics from the lens of human agency, their occurrence is closely tied with human activities, "We became their unwitting allies, and they came back, again and again." (Shah XV).

DISCUSSION

Although a work of fiction, the novel Homebound is strikingly similar to the disheartening fate of the migrant workers during COVID lockdown. A close reading tells us how often position and class in the society can dictate one's condition- even life and death. The migrant family in the novel goes through a miserable time full of suffering during their journey and it speaks volumes about the kind of society revealed by the pandemic. The concept of historical materialism propounded by Karl Marx and Fredrick Engels says that the economic structure and its impact on culture and politics must be studied to understand a society. The novel Homebound shows how the economic condition corresponds to the status of the lives of people from different strata of the society.

The Hungarian Marxist philosopher Georg Lukacs' concept of Reification was first introduced in his work History and Class Consciousness in 1923. It is closely related to Marx's concepts of Alienation and Commodity Fetishism and refers to the phenomenon of human social relations turning into attributes of objects being produced as a result of those social relations. Social relations are perceived as properties of objects and, consequently, alienates individuals from their labour and one another.

In the novel, Meher, a 15-year-old girl and her family are walking from Mumbai to Rajasthan with her family. In a conversation between Meher and Saleha, a fellow migrant pedestrian, it is revealed that those who stayed back had nothing but salt and water left to even feed their children. Little kids were so deprived that they had to scoop milk off the road when a milk van overturned, competing with the street dogs. So, this answers why staying back was not an option. We see a similar scene in a docu-novel, 1232 km: The Long Journey Home written by Vinod Kapri. The novel follows seven migrant workers as they travel the long journey from Ghaziabad, Uttar Pradesh to Saharsa, Bihar on their bicycles. When asked why they would step out in such stressful conditions of a countrywide lockdown, one of them said, "What if we die of hunger before the Corona pandemic gets us?" (Kapri, 7).

The reification of the labour and vulnerable status of the migrant workers in these narratives is writ large. The migrant workers readily accept their dispensability as soon as the lockdown is announced and their employers ask them not to come to work. They do not question their employers or the authorities on their neglect that drags them into such a vulnerable position. As explained by Marmot and Wilkinson in Social Determinants of Health, social factors like poverty, malnutrition, and poor housing conditions significantly contribute to poor health conditions and more deaths. The migrant populations in India fall victim to almost all of these conditions in addition to other social discriminations based on caste, creed, and occupation.

During their strenuous journey in the novel Homebound, when the family came across a charity distributing food packets at the roadside, Meher expected her father to protest against this display of their poverty and helplessness. She assumed that her father would refuse the handouts saying, "I'm too proud for handouts; I won't pose for pictures with the free food; I won't become the poster boy of Hungry India, Poor India" (166). To her surprise, the father joined the line.

Later, when a pervert passed some lewd comments on her and her friend, Meher wanted to throw her slipper at them in retaliation. But she had to restrain herself as she had learned, "how invaluable footwear was. Like bread, like diamonds." In Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, they couldn't surpass the first stage of basic physiological needs.

Ruppel and colleagues write that people who have no home cannot quarantine themselves, and hygiene cannot be maintained in the lack of clean water (Ruppel et al.). This makes the migrant workers among the most vulnerable to infection. Being a part of the informal labour force, they also don't even have proper public health services or any laws to protect them against unfair means or exploitation. To add to the poorly executed containment strategies, the delay in government responses and frugality in relief measures further exacerbated their misery (Ghosh 521).

With his concept of Alienation that he introduced in his work Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844, Marxs argues that the capitalist regime estranges human beings from their sense of humanness as people who don't own the products they produce do not feel connected to their product of labour or others. The system treats them as a step in the process of production and it eventually dehumanizes them. They lose their individuality, creativity and value in the process.

In the novel, the vehicle arranged by the workers to reach home was referred to as "another human consignment" when caught by police, reducing their humanity to cargo. The protagonist of the novel, Meher, writes in her diary that when police officers drenched them with chemicals, she felt like a sugar ant. She writes, "The chemical had instant consequences. I broke into one of my coughing fits, while many others, including children, had started vomiting, their stomachs in pain, their eyes burning, and their skin inflamed. Some migrants scratched their bodies like monkeys, but I knew we were not that close to humans in the evolutionary process" (110). At that moment, she was dispensable and reduced to a mere body that may carry the germs the world was fighting against.

A voice from the crowd rightly questioned, "Are you disinfecting rich people?" (110), a rhetorical inquiry that needs no answer. The chemical bath was less about protecting the migrants than the officers and the politician who came to click pictures with them, showing his generosity. Later when a journalist asked a man how he felt after the chemical incident, he said he was not surprised. When asked why he said, "Because animals do not fuss over being like animals. We might bite back at times, but we don't fuss" (115).

These instances are reflective of the dehumanization of the workers that occurs in a capitalist society in the eyes of others as well as oneself. The moment the workers are unable to participate in the mode of production, their value becomes zero and they turn into a liability rather than an asset.

CONCLUSION

The novel Homebound reveals that in a crisis situation, especially for people belonging to the socio-economically lower class, basic needs take precedence over other important aspects of human dignity, such as respect, pride, and emotions. The critical analysis of the novel further explains how people lower in the political and economic hierarchy found themselves in situations where they had to make this seemingly impractical decision of walking back to their homelands. The political standing of the migrant workers reduces them to less than human—something that can be exploited and then disposed of. They were in this situation because they could no longer participate in the modes of production and had nothing to offer at the current moment to the capitalistic structure of the society. Ironically, they were immediately called back to the cities as soon as the restrictions were lifted but, during the time of lockdown, they were left with nothing in the city after giving years of their lives to urban development. It bears noting that the impact of this traumatic journey has left a lasting impact on the memory, minds, and bodies of the migrants who had undergone it. They faced hunger, disease, exhaustion, and even death—just to remain alive. For people who are regularly made aware of their marginalized status in the society, this excruciating journey only deepened the scars. The story of Mehr and her family, nevertheless in fiction, records the pain and helplessness of thousands of migrant workers during the lockdown. It is imperative to study and bring light to such narratives to preserve them as a sharp reminder to never forget our humanity in the face of a crisis.

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