

COMPASSION AND THE ARTS IN THE TIME OF THE PANDEMIC: A DIGITAL JOURNEY

Mala PANDURANG¹

Abstract

This paper will examine the important role that the Arts have played in helping to cope with drastic changes in all aspects of life brought about the COVID-19 pandemic declared by W.H.O. on March 11th 2020, which resulted in an unprecedented lockdown across the globe. The paper will focus on two vital functions of the Arts especially relevant in these difficult times – first the redemptive aspect of the Arts, and equally, its importance as a tool to critique the fault lines around us that have come to the fore because of this national/global crisis. The paper will stress upon the compassionate aspect of the Arts in the newly defined digital world.

Keywords: Compassion; Arts; COVID; narratives; pedagogy.

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Ever since the World Health Organisation declared a worldwide pandemic on March 11th 2020 on account of the alarming spread of the COVID -19 disease, all eyes have been on the community of scientists and immunologists which has been racing against time to discover an effective means of combatting the coronavirus. The announcement of a breakthrough in record time of possible effective vaccines is commended globally as a significant milestone in medical research. Likewise, the information- communication- technology industry is being acknowledged for its digital ingenuity in evolving ‘disruptive’ techno-innovations that enhance connectivity in almost every sector of commercial, professional and personal interactions, given the stringent social distancing norms enforced by the lockdown. While we may laud the concerted efforts of the scientific fraternity, we should not under emphasize the role that the arts have played in countering the psychological effects of the pandemic which have resulted in an all- pervading sense of anxiety and uncertainty about the present, as well as the post-pandemic world of the near future. In the context of this paper, I draw upon the definition of the arts “as encompassing painting, sculpture, music, theater and, literature done by people with skill and imagination” (The Merriam Webster Dictionary). The modes of expression that come under the gamut of the arts play a crucial role in the development and sustenance of our emotional quotient, and yet the structured study of such manifestations of creativity remains a much-underrated discipline in our education system .

On 16th March 2020, the Government of India declared a complete closure of schools, colleges and all other educational facilities compelling faculty and students

¹ Mala Pandurang, Dr. BMN College, Mumbai, India, mpandu@yahoo.com

to migrate from conventional face-to-face interaction to virtual teaching-learning modes. As a faculty of the humanities, I turned to cyberspace on a quest for material that could help me to navigate this hitherto unfamiliar medium of instruction. The more I explored the virtual realm, the more I discovered a compassionate side to digital spaces in times of an unprecedented crisis that have severely impacted education the globe over. I entered the libraries of Ivy League universities offering free access to digitalized archival data, sound bites, images and videos; visited art collections and galleries of museums through free virtual tours; and gained access to resources for the teaching and learning of poetry on websites such as poetryfoundation.org. Indeed, I came to realise that the scope and range of what is available online to facilitate the teaching of the arts is unfathomable. Describing a whole range of ‘a brave new genre of e-literature’ including hypertext fiction collaborative narratives, kinetic poetry and chronomosaic novels, Randy Malamud reiterates that

the measure of these texts, the boundaries of these texts, will be at the same time microscopic and immeasurable ... as vast as a terabyte and as compact as the digital compression that allows us to read the world's longest novel on the world's smallest reading device. (Malamud, 2014)

As I travelled the internet, I was struck by the number of initiatives undertaken by musicians, painters and writers the world over to connect with each other, share their compositions, offer comfort and engage on universal human concerns arising from unsettling and intense experiences of the pandemic. This act of collective connectivity allowed for the democratised access to performances by acclaimed artists which otherwise might have remained exclusive and expensive. An example of an opportunity to avail of a feast of Indian poetry was the collaborative series of live readings hosted by Indian Novels Collective hosted between March 31st 2020 and April 14th 2020 on Instagram. The festival which was curated by poet Ashwani Kumar had seventy-one poets from different regions and linguistic backgrounds. Arundhati Subramaniam who inaugurated the series aptly described the project as “an act of faith in poetry in troubling times”. (qtd. in Jha, 2020)

As weeks grew into months, the nature of my engagement with my students moved from academic instruction to the exploring of creative and philosophical resources that could offer comfort, hope and strength to young adults who were grappling with the predicament of a world that had been turned upside down as they faced the unsettling experience of prolonged isolation from peer groups and friends; restrictions on mobility which particularly impacted female students from conventional homes; financial hardships due to loss of one or more sources of family income; quarantine due to infection by the virus, and often the death of loved ones. Nigerian novelist Ben Okri describes the fear of COVID-19 as a ‘mental contagion’ pointing out that “ever since the virus entered our mental culture, it has become omnipresent. We have been engulfed in its world, in its fearsome power” (Okri,

2020). I could relate to Avijit Pathak's appeal to the teaching community 'to establish the spirit of rhythmic communication with them (*students*), understand their worries and doubts, and work together to redefine the relationship between the self and the world at a time when fear is normal'. Pathak points out that this difficult period requires for teachers to become more "experimental, imaginative and sensitive" and in doing so make education - meaningful (Pathak, 2020).

This brings to the fore two central metaphors used by M.H Abrams in *The Mirror and the Lamp* (1953) to define the function of literature wherein Abrams suggests that the writer may use his craft to reflect upon the 'real' world, or to illuminate that reality from the perspective of the writer. In this paper I hope to demonstrate how metaphors can be applied to understand how writers have responded to the difficult circumstances of the pandemic, particularly in the context of their focus on the redemptive aspect of creative expression and belief in the power of the word to heal in times of crises. From time immemorial, narratives have helped individuals to draw upon an inner strength, build resilience and seek inspiration. Indeed, the poetic has always been vital to the survival of the spirit of human beings in the most difficult and traumatic of circumstances, as is often expressed through prison writings. Words can act as a balm to heal deep emotional wounds and provide for an outlet for the individual to respond to heightened stressful circumstances and Sneha Burha therefore compares poems to "lifesaving drugs whose intake in isolation has proven restorative powers" (Burha, 2020). According to South African activist Kathleen Ebersohn "we map the trajectory of our lives through art. We turn and return, to music, the page, films, images, textiles and inanimate objects to understand the world we live in – and ourselves within that world". (Ebersohn, 2020) On the other hand, Faith-Marie Zamblé accepts art's spiritual properties but also suggests that the greatest function of the arts can be defined as "its capacity for expanding our conception of reality and not simply acting as moralistic propaganda" (Zamblé, 2020).

Social media platforms such as WhatsApp, Instagram, Twitter Facebook and YouTube abound with hashtags to poems related to experiences of the pandemic which have compelled us to re-contemplate constructs of time and space. This has resulted, for many, in a connection with the environment that had been missing in our single focused march for technology. In particular, many poets have resorted to creative expression during the lockdown to remind us of aspects of nature and our environment that we have thus far taken for granted. Rosalind Morris brings the themes of isolation and deriving solace from nature together in *The Astronaut in Isolation*. The poem was written after she came across an interview of astronaut Scott Kelly who described how he managed to endure isolation while on a space mission by cultivating flowers:

In vaulted dark/directionless, day less/the astronaut thinks of flowers/grows toward green/longs for birdsong/the sound of leaf storm/dreams of turning his face/to the sun. (qtd. in de Kok, 2020)

Referring to his poem *Lockdown* written just as the United Kingdom was on the verge of declaring a nationwide lockdown, Poet Laureate Simon Armitage reflects:

it's unlikely that there's going to be a book of poems that are consolation against catastrophe, but just in poetry's nature, in the way it asks us to be considerate of language, it also asks us to be considerate of each other and the world. In the relationship with thoughtful language, something more thoughtful occurs. (Flood, 2020)

Lines by Lyn Ungar that went viral on social media attribute a powerful role to the arts in helping us to understand “how do we become closer through becoming more distant”:

Know that our lives/ are in one another's hands/ Do not reach out your hands/ Reach out your heart/ Reach out your words/Reach out all the tendrils/ of compassion that move, invisibly, where we cannot touch

Asked as to why she felt the poem was widely accepted, Ungar responds that “Staying away from one another didn't only have to mean that we were less connected, but that it was, in itself, a loving choice that acknowledged our responsibility to one another” (Ungar, 2020). Drawing from the belief that art can indeed play a crucial role in building up much needed solidarity in times of physical isolation, *The Daily Maverick* ran a series on its webpage from March 2020 titled *Days of Corona Virus. Unlocked: Poems for Critical Times* which included more than 50 poems by South African poets often accompanied by the visual images of many artists. The series was curated by poet Ingrid de Kok who defined the need for such an initiative as follows:

People have always turned to poetry at critical times, whether in periods of personal sorrow and stress or at times of great public upheaval, disquiet and dread. Perhaps this is because, at its finest, poetic language provides unique insights into shared human experience.

A poem can disrupt standard habits of attention, alert us to new connections, reshape how we think and refresh our sense of community with others and with nature. It can confront, cajole and console. And it offers us inestimable pleasure in the play of language itself, its rhythms, image-building and metaphorical capacity. (de Kok, 2020)

In addition to sharing the therapeutic aspect of the arts, writers have also played an important role in debating upon the ‘realities’ of reality of life under the pandemic.

The artist has the power to evoke deep sensitivity while simultaneously equipping her audience with the tools to critique the fault lines that develop whenever a disaster or crisis impacts upon the less privileged and marginalised, especially in terms of political and economic hardships. In doing so, the artist garners support against what she perceives is unjust and wrong in our world. Throughout the ages, the medium of poetry, fiction, theatre, music and dance have been used to create an understanding of political and social contexts other than our own and in doing so, it fosters greater empathy for the less privileged. In the digital age, narratives continue to play an active role in interrogating and challenging power hierarchies, thereby producing counter-hegemonies of class, race, gender, ethnicities. Artists and writers have turned to digital platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, blogs and YouTube to engage with photo essays, poems, and other such tools of creative expression to challenge political dispensations. The powerful intervention of artistic expressions in constructing counter-hegemonies over social media has been demonstrated time and again as in the pro – democracy ‘Arab Spring’ uprising in countries such as Tunisia, Morocco, Egypt, Syria and Libya in 2011; nationwide protests against the brutal Nirbhaya gang rape incident in New Delhi in 2012; the Syrian refugee crisis and reactions across Europe that peaked in 2015; and the Black Lives Matter movement in 2020. It was a photo essay on the lifeless body of Alan Kurdi, a young boy washed upon a beach in Greece half in sand and half in the water taken by Turkish photographer Nilufer Demir, and which went viral instantly, that became the symbol of the plight of the refugees fleeing to safety to Europe.

As teachers of the text, it is essential that we demonstrate to our students how the narrative can play a power role to enable the process of humanising the self in relation to the other. We may be argued that only those who in privileged places have the luxury of time and space to draw upon the arts as they introspect upon existential questions and debate on the impact of the virus on the world beyond the comfort of gated communities. Therefore it is all the more important to emphasise that while the arts may engage us in contemplating change from a philosophical angle, creative expression can also be used to draw our attention to plight of thousands who suffered socio-economic consequence due to the prolonged lockdown during the COVID-19 pandemic including essential service providers, daily wage earners, menial work labourers, urban migrants and also victims of domestic abuse restricted within homes that are shut off to external contact. Poignant songs in different languages have captured the pain and the plight of dispossessed migrants from across different states of India as they trekked homeward (Damodaran, 2020). In an essay titled *The Pandemic is a Portal*, Arundhati Roy suggests that over the ages pandemics have acted as a ‘portal’ which has compelled “humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew”. She adds that the COVID-19 pandemic has been no different – “It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next”. Roy makes an urgent plea to reconsider what we have so far accepted as the norm in terms of the uneven political- social and economic structures of our society:

Whatever it is, Coronavirus has made the mighty kneel and brought the world to a halt like nothing else could. Our minds are still racing back and forth, longing for a return to 'normality', trying to stitch our future to our past and refusing to acknowledge the rupture. But the rupture exists. And in the midst of this terrible despair, it offers us a chance to rethink the doomsday machine we have built for ourselves. Nothing could be worse than a return to normality. (Roy, 2020)

As we slowly nudge towards what will hopefully be the final phase of “unlocking” and a gradual move from a state of pandemic to that of an epidemic, it is crucial that we reflect on our interpretations of evolving notions of normality, the ‘new normal’, ‘next normal’ and the ‘abnormal’. While contemplating on what life was like before the pandemic makes us nostalgic for a ‘lost near- past’, it is also an opportune moment to consider whether we really should return to what was acceptable as the status quo, by the economically secure and privileged classes. Describing the coronavirus as an ‘inequality virus’, a report published by Oxfam warns that the pandemic has the “potential to lead to an increase in inequality in almost every country at once” (Berkhou et al., 2021: 2). In a year, over two million people have died and there have been hundreds of millions who have been forced into poverty. On the other hand, richest individuals and corporations are thriving leading to the description of a K-shaped economic recovery wherein different sections of the economy recover at starkly different rates. Ben Okri accurately summarizes the imperative need for us to take cognizance of alternated realities when he states that “the real tragedy would be if we come through this pandemic without changing for the better. It would be as if all those deaths, all that suffering, all the deaths to come, all the suffering to come, would mean nothing”. It is imperative that we take heed of his invaluable counsel:

While we will survive this pandemic, we will be judged by how we survived it, by what we become afterwards. We will either be transformed by what we did or damaged by how we failed to live up to our potential for goodness. We are making ourselves all the time, but never so much as when we are faced with an existential crisis. (Okri, 2020)

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The author

Dr. **Mala Pandurang** is a Professor/ Principal at Dr. BMN College of Home Science (Autonomous), Mumbai, India. She is a postdoctoral fellow of the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation (Germany) and has been nominated as ‘Ambassador Scientist to India’ for 2019-2022. Her research grants include: Fulbright Visiting Professor at the University of Texas at Austin; recipient of the Charles Wallace In-UK Research grant; 1 Major research grant and 3 Minor research grants from the University Grants Commission (New Delhi); Dr Aroon Tikekar Annual REsearch Fellowship from the Asiatic Society of Mumbai; the Inlaks Fellowship in Social Sciences from the Asiatic Society; Associateship at the Indian Institute of Advanced Studies (Shimla); and National Education Testing/Junior Research Fellowship from the University Grants Commission of India. Dr Pandurang’s areas of research include postcolonial writing, diaspora theory and gender studies. She has published 8 books and 47 research papers. In 2012 she received the SNTD Women’s University “Maharshi Karve Utkarshta Shikshak Puraskar” (Best Teacher Award) from the Governor of Maharashtra.