



Trauma Narratives and Resilience in Post-Pandemic World Literature

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Article information

Received: 11th January 2026

Received in revised form: 12th February 2026

Accepted: 10th March 2026

Available online: 7th April 2026

Volume: 2

Issue: 2

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.63090/IJLL/3049.3242.0031>

Abstract

This paper examines the emergence of post-pandemic literature as a significant corpus within contemporary world literature, analyzing how novelists, poets, and essayists have deployed narrative and linguistic strategies to represent the collective trauma of the COVID-19 pandemic. Drawing upon trauma theory, narrative psychology, and comparative literary analysis, the study investigates works from diverse linguistic and cultural traditions to identify common patterns and culturally specific variations in literary responses to the pandemic. The paper argues that post-pandemic literature functions both as a mode of cultural testimony and as a resource for building individual and collective resilience through narrative meaning-making.

Keywords:- Trauma Narrative, Pandemic Literature, Resilience, COVID-19, Collective Trauma, World Literature

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic, which began in late 2019 and profoundly disrupted global societies through 2022 and beyond, constitutes one of the most significant collective trauma events of the twenty-first century. With over six million confirmed deaths worldwide, hundreds of millions of infections, and incalculable economic, psychological, and social consequences, the pandemic has generated an urgent need for cultural forms capable of processing, memorializing, and making meaning from unprecedented suffering and disruption.

Literature has historically served as a crucial medium for the cultural processing of collective trauma. From the plague narratives of Boccaccio and Defoe to the Holocaust literature of Primo Levi and Paul Celan, from the post-9/11 fiction of Don DeLillo and Mohsin Hamid to the HIV/AIDS writing of Tony Kushner and Sarah Schulman, literary works have provided frameworks for understanding, mourning, and ultimately transcending the psychological devastation of catastrophic events (Caruth 11). The COVID-19 pandemic has already generated a substantial body of literary response, and the critical examination of this emerging corpus is both timely and essential.

This paper examines post-pandemic literature through the dual lenses of trauma theory and resilience studies, analyzing how writers from diverse cultural traditions have represented

the psychological, social, and existential dimensions of the pandemic experience. The study focuses on four thematic areas: the representation of isolation and confinement, the narration of grief and loss, the critique of systemic inequalities exposed by the pandemic, and the articulation of hope and resilience in the aftermath of crisis.

Theoretical Framework: Trauma, Narrative, and Resilience

Trauma theory, as developed by Caruth, Herman, and LaCapra, provides essential conceptual tools for analyzing literary responses to the pandemic. Caruth's influential formulation of trauma as an experience that is "not fully assimilated as it occurs" but returns belatedly through flashbacks, nightmares, and repetitive behaviours emphasizes the temporal complexity of traumatic experience: trauma is always, in some sense, belated, experienced fully only in its aftermath and through its representations (Caruth 4). This belatedness has important implications for post-pandemic literature, suggesting that the full literary reckoning with COVID-19 may be a process that unfolds over years and decades rather than emerging immediately.

Herman's concept of "recovery" through narrative provides a complementary framework. Herman argues that the reconstruction of a coherent narrative of traumatic experience is a crucial stage in the process of psychological recovery, enabling survivors to integrate the traumatic event into their life story and regain a sense of agency and meaning (Herman 175). This insight suggests that post-pandemic literature may serve a therapeutic function not only for individual authors but for the broader culture, providing narrative frameworks through which societies can collectively process and integrate the pandemic experience.

Resilience studies, drawing on the work of Masten and Ungar, shift the focus from the pathological effects of trauma to the processes through which individuals and communities adapt, recover, and even grow in the aftermath of adversity. Resilience, in this framework, is not a fixed trait but a dynamic process shaped by individual, relational, and systemic factors (Ungar 255). Post-pandemic literature, viewed through this lens, is not merely a record of suffering but a creative resource for imagining and enacting resilience.

Isolation and Confinement: The Literature of Lockdown

The experience of lockdown, characterized by physical confinement, social isolation, and the collapse of the distinction between domestic and public space, has been one of the most widely represented aspects of the pandemic in literary fiction. Lockdown narratives draw upon and transform a long literary tradition of confinement literature, from the prison writings of Boethius and Gramsci to the domestic novels of the Victorian era, but the specific conditions of pandemic lockdown, including its global simultaneity, its indefinite duration, and its mediation through digital technology, give these narratives a distinctive character.

Ali Smith's *Summer*, the final volume of her seasonal quartet, captures the disorienting temporality of lockdown through a narrative structure that juxtaposes the COVID-19 pandemic with historical moments of crisis, including the Second World War and the refugee crisis of 2015. Smith's linguistic strategy of accumulation, her long, unpunctuated sentences that pile clause upon clause, mimics the experience of time during lockdown: simultaneously static and overwhelming, emptied of external event yet saturated with anxiety and information (Smith 128).

The Decameron-inspired anthology *The Decameron Project*, published by The New York Times Magazine, brought together twenty-nine short stories by international writers including Margaret Atwood, Edwidge Danticat, and Kamila Shamsie. The collection's framing device, echoing Boccaccio's fourteenth-century response to the Black Death, positions storytelling itself as a survival strategy: a way of maintaining human connection, imaginative

freedom, and narrative coherence in the face of plague. The diversity of the collection's contributors and settings underscores the pandemic's status as a global event that is nevertheless experienced through locally specific cultural and linguistic frameworks.

Grief, Loss, and the Limits of Language

The representation of pandemic grief poses particular challenges for literary language. The scale of death, the isolation of dying patients from their families, the impossibility of traditional mourning rituals, and the often-anonymous, statistical quality of pandemic mortality all strain conventional literary forms of elegy and lament. Poets have been at the forefront of attempts to develop linguistic forms adequate to pandemic grief.

In the Indian context, poets writing in multiple languages have responded to the devastating second wave of 2021 with works that seek to name and mourn the dead while acknowledging the impossibility of fully representing such massive loss. Tishani Doshi's *A God at the Door* includes poems written during the pandemic that employ a spare, incantatory style to evoke the simultaneous intimacy and anonymity of pandemic death: individual bodies burning on ghats alongside thousands of others, personal grief dissolved in collective catastrophe (Doshi 37).

The challenge of representing pandemic grief is, at its core, a linguistic challenge: how to find words adequate to an experience that overwhelms conventional frameworks of meaning. This challenge echoes what Adorno described, in the context of the Holocaust, as the question of whether poetry is possible after Auschwitz. Post-pandemic poets and novelists have responded not by abandoning language but by pushing it to its limits: deploying fragmentation, silence, repetition, and formal disruption to gesture toward the unspeakable dimensions of pandemic loss.

Inequality, Injustice, and the Pandemic's Unequal Burdens

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed and exacerbated existing social inequalities along lines of race, class, gender, caste, and nationality. Literary responses to the pandemic have been attentive to these differential impacts, producing works that situate the pandemic not as a natural disaster affecting all equally but as a social catastrophe whose burdens fell disproportionately on the already marginalized.

The representation of migrant workers' suffering during India's sudden lockdown in March 2020, when millions of internal migrants were stranded without food, shelter, or transportation, has generated a significant body of literary response. Deepa Anappara and Taymour Soomro's edited collection *The Lockdown*, featuring stories by Indian, Pakistani, and Sri Lankan writers, foregrounds the class and caste dimensions of the pandemic experience in South Asia. These narratives reveal how the privilege of lockdown, the ability to stay safely at home, depended on structures of domestic labour, caste-based service relationships, and economic inequality that the pandemic made starkly visible.

In the United States, the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on Black and Hispanic communities prompted literary responses that situate the pandemic within longer histories of racial health disparities and structural violence. Jesmyn Ward's essay "On Witness and Repair," written during the convergence of the pandemic and the Black Lives Matter protests of 2020, weaves together personal grief, political analysis, and literary meditation to argue that the pandemic revealed the lethal consequences of systemic racism with an urgency that could no longer be ignored (Ward).

Conclusion

Post-pandemic literature, though still in its early stages, has already demonstrated the capacity of literary language to represent, process, and transform the collective trauma of the

COVID-19 pandemic. The works examined in this paper deploy a range of linguistic and narrative strategies, from the accumulative temporality of Smith's lockdown prose to the incantatory elegy of Doshi's pandemic poetry to the structural analysis of inequality in Ward's pandemic essays, to address different dimensions of the pandemic experience.

The critical study of post-pandemic literature is not merely an academic exercise but a contribution to the broader cultural project of pandemic recovery. As trauma theory suggests, the construction of coherent narratives is a crucial component of individual and collective healing. By providing narrative frameworks through which societies can understand, mourn, and ultimately transcend the pandemic experience, post-pandemic literature serves as both testimony and resource for resilience. Future research should attend to the expanding body of pandemic literature in non-English languages, the role of digital platforms in the production and circulation of pandemic writing, and the long-term evolution of literary responses to COVID-19 as temporal distance provides new perspectives on this defining crisis of the twenty-first century.

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