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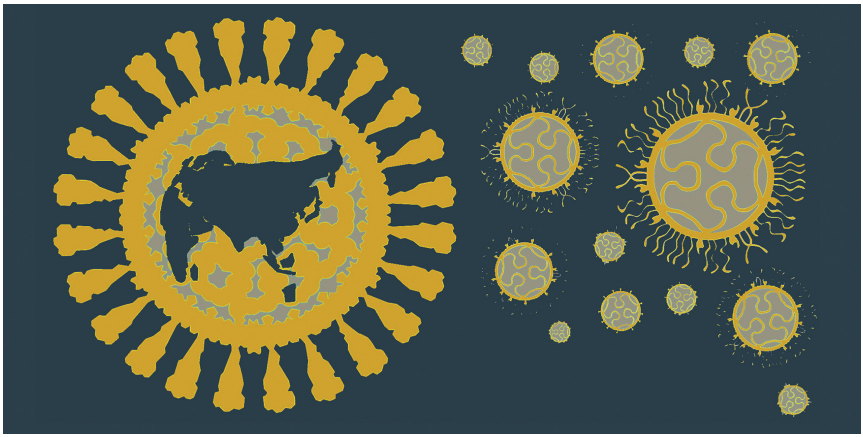
The COVID-19 Pandemic in Asia and Africa

Societal Implications, Narratives on Media, Political Issues

edited by

Giorgio Milanetti, Marina Miranda, Marina Morbiducci

VOLUME I – CULTURE, ART, MEDIA



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Introduction

Giorgio Milanetti, Marina Miranda, Marina Morbiducci

Forgetting is a tendency that not only appears to be inherent to human behaviour, but also, especially in distressing circumstances, can turn out to be particularly healthy: "Suppression of unwanted memories appears to be a critical ability to avoid their unintended influence, thus preserving mental health" (Costanzi et al. 2011). Well before modern studies of psychology and neurosciences, literature and philosophy have taken care of reminding us of the importance of forgetting, from the *Odyssey*'s sailors who, fleeing from the tragedy of the Trojan war, sought oblivion in the land of the lotus-eaters (Book IX, vv. 92-117), to Nietzsche's active forgetfulness, "which is a very sentinel and nurse of psychic order, repose, etiquette" (Nietzsche 1921, p. 41).

Yet the opposite tendency appears to be just as healthy. At the personal level, memory is a device that "involves complex *constructive* processes […]: when we remember, we piece together fragments of stored information under the influence of our current knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs" (Schacter 2012, p. 8, italics in the original), thus contributing to forge out, and give sense to, our identity. Within the societal domain, memory is a powerful tool to create or strengthen values, boundaries and, again, identities: remembering – also in ritual contexts such as celebrations, anniversaries, Days of Remembrance etc. – events as the Holocaust, the tragedies of migration, the victims of terrorism, contribute to shape our communities and to guide our daily life. For all these reasons, a balance between these two opposite tendencies must be negotiated, both in the private and in the societal dimension: on the one hand the psychological shelter of forgetting; on the other, the societal duty of memory; the personal right to forget, and the institutional value of memory. In the case of epidemics and

pandemics, the dynamics at work of remembering or of forgetting are the same, albeit – perhaps – exacerbated by the (private and collective) level of tragedy.

In the sphere of academia, the recent COVID-19 pandemic has brought about sudden and dramatic changes. In this case as well, scholars and researchers are called to the same choice between two antithetical directions: get back to work, as if nothing had happened. Or make room for a critical – we would even say, radical – reflection. Indeed, things to reflect upon are many. The pandemic has dramatically altered methods and practices of researching and teaching.

The pandemic has exposed multiple levels of inequalities that in higher education include differential treatment of students based on their background, closed access to knowledge and research results, unevenness in global patterns of research collaboration, and lack of access to the basic requirements of digitalized higher education such as devices, internet access, and electricity.

The urgency of addressing these inequities must be kept at the forefront as higher education begins to think ahead to create a more equitable post-pandemic world (UNESCO 2022).

This amounts to saying that, as far as universities are concerned, the choice between remembering and forgetting – between the burden of responsibility and the refusal to see – cannot be left to personal, or not-strategic decisions. Considering also that academic institutions and their activities fall within the societal sphere, any discussions end soon: there is no room for individual disengagement, no unease can be lifted as justification for silencing memories. A radical reflection which must be based precisely on the memories – and on the teachings – of the pandemic is needed.

Yet, what is under the eyes of those who are involved in this domain, is more or less the opposite. During the long months of the pandemic as well as nowadays, the "urgencies" that have been and are made present to researchers, students, and administrative staff – apart from health precautions – have been and are quite others: the improvement of productivity parameters, the completion of the course of study within the prescribed deadlines, the increase in the number of "research products" and the measurement of their scientific and social impact. In fact, while "[t]he neo-liberal university has pushed us relentlessly, […] [t]he metrification of academic work, which continued uninterrupted during the pandemic, 'placed new demands on academ-

ics to perform productively and reinvent the self' (Lipton 2020, p. 3). […] As De Gruyter's (2020, p. 18) report on the impact of the pandemic on academics and academic publishing concluded, 'the pandemic has [been], and continues to be, a time of great stress, insecurity and pressure. These are pressures that will cause career-defining damage that impacts the individual but will also have significant repercussions for scholarship, equality, diversity and research innovation'" (Shin et al. 2022, pp. 296-298).

At the same time, new opportunities have also emerged for a change in habits and practices in both research and teaching: "[t]he 'new normal' brought on by COVID-19 has shown the potential for positive developments in the academic community" (Ibid, p. 294). The exhortation not to waste a good crisis – attributed to Churchill and now in common use – should also be applied to the post-pandemic period. Among the most important shifts that have occurred during the pandemic period, the largely increased use of virtual communications (Neuwirth et al. 2021; Pregowska et al. 2021); the transfer of research results to open databases, not only in medical sciences (Willinsky 2020; Lane, Lifshitz-Assaf 2022); and the major role played by local scholars and key informants of the global South within international teams (see for instance the survey in IOM 2021), must be considered of particular importance.

We had a direct experience of these changes during the various phases of our project on "Health emergency in Asia and Africa", funded by Sapienza University, Rome, and supported also by the Albert Hirschman Centre on Democracy at the Geneva Graduate Institute, of which the present two volumes represent an output[1]. Conceived in the most critical period of the COVID-19 pandemic, this project was intended not only as an interdisciplinary survey on the social, institutional, and cultural impact of the plague, but also as a tool to keep alive the connections between researchers and institutions from different areas of the world, when various waves of the virus were forcing people from one country after another into lockdown and isolation. In retrospect, now that more than two years have elapsed since our first virtual meetings, we can affirm that this experience has been highly formative for all of us. In fact, it has highlighted not only how humans can effectively adapt to the occurrence of critical circumstances, but also how science itself evolves like a

[1] *The COVID-19 Pandemic in Asia and Africa: Societal Implications, Narratives on Media, Political Issues*. Vol. 1: *Culture, Art, Media;* Vol. 2: *Society and Institutions*.

living being, in that it is able to activate different operational circuits and systems once the usual ones are damaged or put out of use.

All the three mentioned major changes in research practices have characterized the development of our project, since its early stages. Initially, we activated a dedicated area within the platform Common Spaces, or CommonS, "an Erasmus+ project funded by the EU, aimed at experimenting new forms of co-learning, e-tutoring and e-mentoring"[2], of which Sapienza University, Rome, is a partner. We found it particularly suitable for our project, both for its free availability and for its educational dimension. We started uploading our materials (documents, drafts, data, presentations) and holding regular meetings with scholars, researchers, key informants from various countries of Asia and (albeit to a lesser extent) Africa, progressively expanding our research group. Interestingly enough, the virtual nature of these gatherings did not impact significantly on the quality of our discussions. On the contrary, the possibility of joining remotely has made the organization of our meetings more agile and flexible and the group of participants richer and more diverse.

When the materials uploaded on the platform – a part of which has been reworked within the contributions collected here – reached a fairly good level of precision, we held a first conference in June 2022. It proved particularly useful for the inputs and the inspiration it provided to the participants through in-depths discussion sessions, open also to students and colleagues from other disciplines – which strengthened both the inter-disciplinary dimension of the research and its comparative nature. A larger, widely attended conference was finally held in October 2022 at Sapienza University, Rome, on the basis of both the contributions presented in June and further research activities. The articles collected in the present two volumes represent a further elaboration of the materials that have been collectively tested and discussed on that occasion, during round tables and Q&A sessions that saw also a significant participation (in presence and remotely) of international students – whom we want to thank for their active contribution. We also want to express our sincere gratitude to the reviewers from universities around the world who accurately examined the articles and suggested decisive integrations to their contents. Now, those articles are here, offered to the readers both as Open Access digital content and

[2] The platform can be reached at: <https://health.commonspaces.eu/it/info/platform/>.

in two printed volumes: they represent a critical reflection, in different disciplinary fields, on the experiences lived during the pandemic. They are our contribution to remember those times of great difficulty and to make sense of the damages and the losses thereby suffered.

The two volumes in this collection are focused on two main directions pursued in the research: on the one hand, we concentrated on the variegated forms of narrative and narration that a traumatic event like the COVID-19 pandemic can originate having an impact on various cultural phenomena, fields of interest, artistic expressions and social media communication, in different lands. On the other hand, an overall scenario politically imprinted was presented to show how the historical event of the pandemic and its societal implications took shape in the targeted countries. In both cases, the results have been highly rewarding in terms of individual originality and joint forms of scientific collaboration, as previously pointed out.

Earlier in these pages we mentioned the possibility of the agency of oblivion triggered as a self-defence reaction in case of distress produced by highly traumatic circumstances; vice versa, when grappling with overwhelming events, we also invoked – and actually put into practice in the various steps of our research – the expedient of externalization through a varied range of expressive forms and means of inquiry. Sublimated memories, experiences filtered and elaborated anew in the positive side of their essence – shared in a scientific community – appeared more fruitful than just simple erasure and suppression of traumatic occurrences. In a way, that was the hidden agenda of the whole research, validated in both academic and pedagogical terms: to turn forgetfulness or repression of feelings into their diametrically opposite force, that is a deepened investigation of the facts actually occurred, leading to the transformation of negative realities turned into a springboard towards renewed and regenerated meanings.

Within the amplitude of scope of this research on the health emergency caused by the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, we could realize not only how an extended span of geographical areas were joined in the common thread of inquiry, but also how diversified disciplinary fields of study intersected, ingraining in one another, creating a sense of harmony, reciprocity and projective circularity.

Revolving around the three main inspiring tenets of the research which included: – memory vs oblivion, highlighting the constructive power of writing and tangible documentation; – changes in the re-

search forms of scientific inquiry, with the enhancement of the virtual potentialities brought about by the new social media resources applied in the academic fields; – the interdisciplinary quality of the scientific investigation, spanning through extended geographical spaces, but also involving expanded areas of knowledge, intertwining with one another, the traditionally assumed disciplinary boundaries were trespassed by the variety and richness of the materials collected. These were most of the times gained first-hand, through tailor-made questionnaires, surveys, one-to-one interviews, and the precious added value of local informants; and, in all this, despite the originality of each single contribution, we could identify crosscutting lines of convergence.

For instance, in the nineteen contributions of the two volumes, the emergence of feelings – in all their gamut, from fear to hope, from hate to love, from depression to exaltation – is coming to surface in full evidence. Irony and humour, at times even satire, have their space in the narratives collected. And the narrative themselves are diversified, being conveyed through various artistic forms – from storytelling to theatrical or verbal forms, from social media messaging to religious rituals, from the cathartic effect of narration in the lower social strata to the more sophisticated and elitist intellectuals' reappropriation of the themes at stake.

Let's consider, for instance, the vantage point suggested by Giorgio Milanetti's contribution[3], where the agency of narration itself becomes a balmy remedy and effective antidote to counterbalance the deeply negative consequences of the deadly illness; or, alternatively, think of the point of view presented by Fabio Mangraviti's essay[4], where humour and satire become the crucial resources to express and fight against the virus. Another intriguing form of narrative is tackled by Sanjukta Das Gupta[5], who investigates the highly inventive and renovated ways of expression taken by the production of *paṭacitras* during the pandemic in West Bengal. In the same line of inquiry, we can appreciate Mara Matta's investigation[6], referring to the photographic and

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[3] See, *infra*, vol. 1*: Tell a Story to End the Pandemic. COVID-19 and the Remedy of Narration: Instances from India and Italy*, by G. Milanetti.

[4] See, *infra*, vol. 1: Haṁso haṁsāo, Coronavirus ko dūr bhagāo: *Hindi Satire and Humour as Psychological and Ideological Resources During the COVID-19 Crisis*, by F. Mangraviti.

[5] See, *infra*, vol. 1*: Narrating the Pandemic:* Paṭacitras *of West Bengal, India,* by S. Das Gupta.

[6] See, *infra*, vol. 1*: Shooting Back: Photography and Videomaking to Confront the Silencing*

filmic artifacts produced by the Rohingya camps refugees in Bangladesh to counteract – via creativity through visual media – against the forced segregation of lockdown. Similarly, Zakir Hussain Raju, in his article[7] highlights the power of alternative forms of narration, showing once again how in this research the tools of investigation ranged from the traditional ones to the most innovative resources.

Furthermore, also the discursive forms through which the scientific data are presented in the two volumes are quite variegated: for instance, in volume 2, we witness primarily the adoption of the essayistic form or the presence of field reports, as in the case of Laura Guazzone analysis[8], which argues that the pandemic increased authoritarianism in the Arab Region; or as in Marina Miranda's contribution[9], which clearly shows how the handling of the pandemic has been strictly entangled with urgent political issues of the Chinese leadership, who went from successfully managing the outbreak in 2020 to provoking social unrest in 2022. Tonio Savina in his study[10] invokes a bottom-up approach to substitute the top-down one so far documented in the Chinese digital world; whereas Christine Lutringer[11] in her article explores the intersection of governance and welfare in order to understand the shifts that have been induced or revealed by the COVID-19 crisis in India, mapping the institutional responses driven by the central government's reaction to the health emergency. Jean-Luc Maurer[12], on his turn, illustrates the dynamics of the COVID-19 pandemic in Indonesia – severely hit by the infection – and the nature of its impact on democracy to draw lessons that can be useful for

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of Being Locked Up During the COVID-19 Lockdown in the Rohingya Refugee Camps of Bangladesh, by M. Matta.

7 See, *infra*, vol. 1*: Representation of COVID-19 in Bangladesh: from Mainstream Media to Alternative Visual Narratives*, by Z. H. Raju.

8 See, *infra*, vol. 2*: Authoritarianism Goes Pandemic? Symptoms from the Arab Region in the COVID-19 Era*, by L. Guazzone.

9 See, *infra*, vol. 2*: The Handling of the COVID-19 Crisis in the PRC: An Analysis of Its Political and Social Implications (2020-2022)*, by M. Miranda.

10 See, *infra*, vol. 2*: Pandemic Surveillance in China: An Interpretation Beyond the Top-Down Approach*, by T. Savina.

11 See, *infra*, vol. 2*: Recasting Welfare Politics in India at the Time of COVID-19*, by C. Lutringer.

12 See, *infra*, vol. 2*: The Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on Indonesian Democracy*, by J. L. Maurer.

comparison. Astrid Zei[13] adds to the perspective describing the relationship between Singapore's juridical system and the outbreak of the pandemic, highlighting the legal framework into which the restrictive measures against the infection were incorporated.

In this collection of essays, it is evident how the handling of the pandemic is strictly connected to the political scenarios of the countries where it impacted. See for instance also Rossana Tufaro's article[14], whose focus is to provide a first insight into the dynamics through which the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic in Lebanon influenced the trajectories of the process of reconfiguration of the country's socio-political order. The political issues, raised by the impact of the pandemic in so many different countries, often intersect also with societal or religious aspects as reported by Gianfranco Bria in his analysis[15], dealing with the joint fight of religious authorities, recognised by the government, against COVID-19, sharing the restrictive measures and promoting the WHO's anti-pandemic policy, or in Sudarshana Bhaumik's contribution[16], where health issues, societal implications and religious credos all mingle in one only container, that is, the single countries' reaction to an emergency.

Moving to Far East Asia, we witness Antonetta Bruno's report[17] on the attitude to wearing protection devices in Korea, where the use of facemasks during the pandemic somehow coincided with the local cultural *humus* of the place, or we can consider Matilde Mastrangelo's contribution[18], where she investigates the development of an ancient form of verbal art renovated with a new inspiratory impulse. Still in Japan are set the cases reported by Mika Omori and Yoko Yamazaki in their article[19], which deals with the psychosocial aspects of infection prevention, and is based on an empirical investigation in the field, as

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13 See, *infra*, vol. 2*: Singapore Constitutional Communitarianism and COVID-19*, by A. Zei.

14 See, *infra*, vol. 2*: Handling the Pandemic in Times of Crises and Revolution: COVID-19 and the Reconfiguration of Lebanon's Political Relations*, by R. Tufaro.

15 See*, infra*, vol. 2*: COVID-19, Public Narrations and Pilgrimages in Albania*, by G. Bria.

16 See*, infra*, vol. 2*: "Rituals", "Illness" and "Public Health": Social Implications of the COVID-19. A Case Study of West Bengal, India*, by S. Bhaumik.

17 See, *infra*, vol. 1*: The Culture of Wearing and Keeping on Facemasks in Korea: Beyond Confucianism*, by A. L. Bruno.

18 See, *infra*, vol. 1*: The Impact of the Coronavirus on the Japanese Verbal Arts (*wagei*)*, by M. Mastrangelo.

19 See, *infra*, vol. 2*: Psychosocial Perspectives on Preventive Behaviours of Infectious Disease: An Empirical Study in Japan*, by M. Omori and Y. Yamazaki.

well as the paper[20] by M. Montanari et al., which resorts to statistical data collected through online surveys and interviews. In a similar line of research is Marina Morbiducci's contribution[21], which adopted the corpus linguistics and sentiment analysis linguistic approach to investigate the affective reactions conveyed through metaphorical discourse by the ISO Dept. students at Sapienza, who constructively interacted via internet with their Oriental interlocutors during the health emergency period. So doing, they fought the virus and offered an example of re-edification, which was the whole research project's agenda.

In the last part of this Introduction, the reference to our students is not merely accidental. They represented, indeed, the propelling engine to all the international scholars involved in this wide project of research. During the pandemic, forced to teaching in remote modality with different devices, as academicians teaching our young interlocutors, but also as human beings, we still could perceive their attentive looks and ears. It was also their participatory attitude which fed our daring research, in a form of mutual nourishment, with jets of intellectual energy proceeding in virtuous circularity, spiral-wise, which made us all grow.

Finally, it is with great pleasure that we thank Fabio Mangraviti and Tonio Savina, who acted as editorial assistants and coordinated the first and the second volume respectively. We are indebted to them for their competence, patience and accuracy as editorial team. As previously mentioned, we would like to thank once again our invaluable colleagues, from national and international universities, who kindly accepted to act as peer reviewers, whose cooperation was essential for the scientific validation of the whole collection. A silent, unrewarded work which represents the axis around which the entire academic world revolves. Projects like ours, showing collaboration of different parties aiming all together to the same goal – the so-called "advancement of learning" – represent our vital lymph.

Rome, July 24, 2023

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[20] See, *infra*, vol. 1*: Same Issues, Different Perceptions: A Pilot Study of Pandemic-Related Issues among Italian and Japanese Populations*, by M. Montanari, S. Perone, M. Omori, A. Kayo, I. Barth.

[21] See, *infra*, vol. 1*: English as a Lingua Franca and the International Pandemic Discourse: Investigating the BA First-Year Students' Questionnaire Data Gained at Dept. of Oriental Studies, Sapienza University, Rome*, by M. Morbiducci.

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1. Tell a Story to End the Pandemic. COVID-19 and the Remedy of Narration: Instances from India and Italy

Giorgio Milanetti

Abstract

This paper argues that narration represents an essential tool for dealing with the visible and invisible damages produced by the recent COVID-19 pandemic. To support this argument, the paper briefly examines the concept of narrative structure, suggesting that pandemics also fall under the same pattern (Rosenberg 1989; Steel 1981), and analyses a few well-known fictional and non-fictional accounts of past epidemics. It then concentrates on narrative materials drawn from Indian and Western classical traditions, making evident how narration enacts dynamics that help overcome crises by inducing awareness and proposing alternative points of view. The second part of the study analyses a few stories produced during the recent health emergency in two of the most affected countries – India and Italy – bringing to light the healing and transforming power of narrative also in the event of epidemics. Converted into stories, the adversities experienced during the pandemic can in fact demonstrate "that hard times don't just break a person; they also can make a person" (Basu 2021), which is particularly true in the case of autobiographical narratives and collective articulations of the experiences lived during the crisis. At the societal level, these elaborations of the pandemic conflict with the mainstream narrative constructed by restricted groups of actors, characterized by a rigid conceptual framework and its dramatic vocabulary. This process of elaboration however is opposed by the tendency to forget, since "humans seem to forget about these tragic events quickly" (Perrino 2021, p. 7). It is between these two opposite tendencies, then – the temptation, or the need, to forget, and the duty to narrate in order to remember and to heal – that a way

out of the crisis must be found. We still have to ask ourselves what lessons – if any – have been learned: "Have the dead died in vain? Has a heedless society reverted to its accustomed ways of doing things as soon as denial became once more a plausible option?" (Rosenberg 1989, p. 9).

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic; Narratology; Healing power of narration; Narration of health emergency in India; Narration of health emergency in Italy.

1.1. Narration and Pandemics

The health crisis produced by COVID-19 profoundly affected our public and private life for two long years. Images of death, suffering, despair, misery that were never seen before, except in times of war, were reproduced and multiplied by the media. They have filled the eyes and hearts of people all over the world for what felt like endless months. The unpredictable and exceptional nature of the pandemic, characterized by worldwide diffusion, a succession of recurring waves, and the continuous mutation of the infectious agents, undermined the ability to rationally cope with the difficulties, both at the public and the private level. Three years after the beginning of the pandemic the worst seems to be over in spite of local recurrences of the infection. Yet even today, while it is perhaps possible to put those memories aside, it is not possible to forget. The burden of pain stays on, unchanged.

However, notwithstanding the enormous upheaval that the pandemic has caused for individuals and for entire societies, institutions, and economies, the public discourse about the two long years of the health crisis remains surprisingly deficient. Once the most dramatic period of the emergency has passed, with all the public and private debates and the controversies it stimulated regarding lockdowns, border patrols, vaccination, travel limitations, green pass etc., a deafening silence has taken over. This paper argues that narration represents an essential tool for dealing with the visible and invisible damages produced by the recent pandemic by COVID-19, in that it alone can make sense of the experiences lived in that period and contribute to finding a way out of the emergency. To support this hypothesis, I will first briefly explore the nature of narration and its relationship with the processes of giving sense, soothing, and healing.

According to structuralist criticism, from Barthes (1982 [1966], p. 7) onward, narrative represents a specific object of knowledge, distinguished by its discursive character. In fact:

> [w]hile composing a narrative may or may not involve inventing the sequence of events represented, it will always involve fabricating the discourse through which those events are represented, the act of narration being inseparable from the selection, organization, and verbalization of information. Moreover, since real events do not themselves take the form of a ready-made ''untold story'' (Mink 1978: 134), narrative production must involve turning events into a story by ''cutting out'' a coherent sequence with a beginning, middle, and end structure from the ''evenemential'' continuum. (Rigney 1992, p. 265)

This conception of a tripartite structure – with a beginning, middle and end part – has its roots in the deepest layers of philosophical investigation on narrative. As Aristotle puts it, referring to the connection of actions as represented in tragedy, "now a whole is that which has beginning, middle and end" (Aristotle 1966, 1450b, 26)[1]. Establishing a parallel between Aristotle's analysis and the fact that structuralism has made narrative a primary concern, Barthes and Duisit (1975) highlight the difficulty of identifying a common structure among the "infinite number of narratives and the many standpoints from which they can be considered (historical, psychological, sociological, ethnological, aesthetic, etc.)" (Ibid., p. 238). This notwithstanding, they convincingly concluded that any narrative "shares with other narratives a common structure, open to analysis, however delicate it is to formulate" (Ibid.). More recently, building on Labov and Waletzky's (1967) concept of narrative structure, Habermas (2018) proposed a more detailed tripartite sequence, where the middle part of the story – the one that makes things change – is characterized as a "complication" or a "complicating event". For Habermas, it is this complication that arouses the listener's interest, making the story tellable (Ibid., pp. 28-29). Yet, since the narration needs also to be credible to keep the listener interested, the exceptionality of the complicating element, which increases its attractiveness, must always come to terms with its credibility. It is keeping in mind this normative structure and applying to it the basic dynamics above described, then, that narrative production can be

[1] Greek text: ὅλον δέ ἐστιν τὸ ἔχον ἀρχὴν καὶ μέσον καὶ τελευτήν.

analysed, particularly as regards its process of "turning events into a story by 'cutting out' a coherent sequence [...] from the 'evenemential' continuum" (Rigney 1992, p. 265). As we have seen above, this pattern can be applied to any narrative, however delicate the analysis: interestingly, pandemics can be included as well.

Scholars such as Steel (1981) and Rosenberg (1989 etc.) have famously noted that epidemics have a structure that "mirrors literary conventions" (Hays 2007, p. 52): as a social phenomenon, they have in fact a dramaturgic form, since they "start at a moment in time, proceed on a stage limited in space and duration, follow a plot line of increasing and revelatory tension, move to a crisis of individual and collective character, then drift toward closure" (Rosenberg 1989, p. 2). The various literary descriptions of the epidemics of the past show many elements in common, which in turn fall within the normative framework described above. It can be assumed, for instance, that the causes to which the insurgence of the epidemic can be ascribed represent the trigger of the "complicating event" – the complication of which is further enhanced by the uncertainty and the disagreement that typically characterize the very etiology of the disease: "Etiological ambiguities have been the rule, not the exception, and those ambiguities have been reflected in the diverse and apparently contradictory responses of societies faced by epidemic" (Hays 2007, p. 34).

1.2. Narrations of Pandemics

The narrations of epidemics and pandemics of the past can be broadly divided in two categories – the fictional and the non-fictional – which however in many cases may overlap. Instances of the first kind are well known works such as Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year* (1722)[2], Manzoni's *I Promessi Sposi* (1827, 1842) Ainsworth's *Old Saint Paul's* (1841), and Camus' *La Peste* (1947). Non-fictional narratives of pandemics have their highest examples in the relevant passages of Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War* and Boccaccio's *Decameron*. Both accounts effectively highlight the condition of despair and helplessness engendered by the outbreak of the plague, describing an atmosphere of uncertainty and tragedy that closely reminds us of the recent pandemic. In Thucydides' words:

[2] The classification of Defoe's novel has been variously disputed. On the "nexus" between fiction and history in *A Journal of the Plague Year* see e.g. Mayer (1990).

> [T]here is no record of such a pestilence occurring elsewhere, or of so great a destruction of human life. For a while physicians, in ignorance of the nature of the disease, sought to apply remedies; but it was in vain, and they themselves were among the first victims, because they oftenest came into contact with it. […] I was myself attacked, and witnessed the sufferings of others. […] The general character of the malady no words can describe, and the fury with which it fastened upon each sufferer was too much for human nature to endure. (Thucydides 1881, II.48-50)

In the *Introduction* to the *Decameron*, Giovanni Boccaccio uses expressions that convey the same sense of extraordinariness and devastation:

> Almost at the beginning of springtime of the year in question [1348], the plague began to show its sorrowful effects in an extraordinary manner. […] Many ended their lives in the public streets, during the day or at night, while many others who died in their homes were discovered dead by their neighbors only by the smell of their decomposing bodies. The city was full of corpses… […] [M]ore than one hundred thousand human beings are believed to have lost their lives for certain inside the walls of the city of Florence – whereas before the deadly plague, one would not even have estimated there were actually that many people dwelling in the city. (Boccaccio 1982, pp. 3-4)

Interestingly, fictional accounts of the disease often highlight aspects that historical sources neglect or downsize. Manzoni, who based his masterful description of the great plague that ravaged Milan and Northern Italy after the passage of the Lansquenet army in 1630 on a rich collection of coeval sources, is explicit in denouncing the approximation, the reticence, and the uncertainty of those accounts. He therefore dedicates many pages of his novel to describing the disbelief and skepticism which accompanied the first alarms, as well as the negligence of the Spanish political authorities and the impatience of common people with doctors. Other authors of fictional narrations delve deep into the context within which the disease makes its first appearances, often lingering on apparently minor details that only in a later stage come to light as triggers of the tragedy. This is the case with the famous *La Peste* (The Plague), by Albert Camus, the initial pages of which highlight the failure to understand apparently insignificant clues in their gravity: epidemics always begin silently, as something that does not disturb too much our daily routine – due also to our unconscious desire to preserve it from change.

> When leaving his surgery on the morning of April 16, Dr. Bernard Rieux felt something soft under his foot. It was a dead rat lying in the middle of the landing. On the spur of the moment he kicked it to one side and, without giving it a further thought, continued on his way downstairs. […] That evening, when Dr. Rieux was standing in the entrance, feeling for the latchkey in his pocket before starting up the stairs to his apartment, he saw a big rat coming toward him from the dark end of the passage. It moved uncertainly, and its fur was sopping wet. The animal stopped and seemed to be trying to get its balance, moved forward again toward the doctor, halted again, then spun round on itself with a little squeal and fell on its side. Its mouth was slightly open and blood was spurting from it. After gazing at it for a moment, the doctor went upstairs. (Camus 1962, p. 3)

For Rosenberg, Camus' "narrative follows closely the archetypical pattern of historical plague epidemics", the events of which "succeed each other in predictable narrative sequence" (Rosenberg 1989, p. 3). And yet, despite the predictability of the sequence, "most communities are slow to accept and acknowledge an epidemic". The reason for this is both "a failure of imagination" and the will to protect "specific economic and institutional interests" together with "the emotional assurance and complacency of ordinary men and women" (Ibid., pp. 3-4).

Rosenberg's remarks point to the same need for a more detailed analysis than that which emerges from Manzoni's fictional account of the epidemic, since both highlight how in any health crisis there is much more than a natural agent at play. In fact, the very purely natural origin of the disease can be objected to, since – as the recent pandemic by COVID-19 has shown – the dramaturgy of epidemics must in turn be placed within a complex network of relations not only between humans, animals, and the environment, but also between the political and economic forces acting within a certain society. All this shifts the focus of research from the pandemic event in itself to its "prehistory and long aftermath" – to use the words by J. Livingston on COVID-19: "Any dramaturgy that begins in Wuhan", she argues, "takes the epidemic out of the larger flow of historical time" (Langstaff 2020). Indeed – going back to Camus – if "the plague might originate in a bacterium", it must be admitted that "its causes and effects are human" (Smith 2016, p. 194). This however does not necessarily support the opposite conclusion. Although we must agree with Smith about the French writer's ability "to see epidemic in its sociopolitical dimension"

and to lift the theme of his novel, beyond a single disease, "to a more fundamental kind of sickness" (Ibid., p. 195), we cannot conclude that this "more fundamental" kind of sickness would be distinct from its "natural" causes. Rather, this is one of the main points that Camus' (and other authors') narrative on epidemic brings to light: it makes us realize the hidden nature of the epidemic as something that equally affects human bodies and institutions. In fact, all major health crises, revealing the fragility of the entities affected, highlight the same need – and offer the same opportunity, both to individuals and societies – for a relentless review of established choices and habits and, in a word, for a radical change. And it is there that narrative, with its inherent transformative power, once more steps in.

1.3. The Healing Properties of Narrative

In fact, expanding the horizon beyond the narrations of diseases and epidemics, we can observe several examples of stories that clarify how narration enacts dynamics which effectively bring about change and overcome crises. In this perspective, its function is not limited to describing and accounting; rather, inducing awareness and proposing different points of view, it unlocks, soothes, and heals. To limit the analysis to the cultural domains that I have chosen to examine here, I will briefly refer to some passages from two texts belonging to Western and Indian classic literatures – Homer's *Odyssey* and Valmiki's *Rāmāyaṇa* – which I find particularly significant also because they are both placed in key moments of the plot development. At the end of Book VIII, Odysseus, disguised as an *unnamed* stranger, in the palace of the Phaeacian king Alcinous, invites the bard Demodocus to sing the making of the wooden horse and the sack of Troy. The bard, inspired by the god, describes the conquest of the city and how in that circumstance "Odysseus braved the most terrible fight" (Homer 1919, VIII.520). At this point Odysseus' heart melts, and "pitiful tears" fall "from beneath his brows" (Ibid., 532). Alcinous then invites Demodocus to stop singing, and requests Odysseus to reveal his *name*: "Tell me the name by which they were wont to call thee in thy home, even thy mother and thy father. […] And tell me thy country, thy people, and thy city, that our ships may convey thee thither" (Ibid., 551-556). It is now, and only now, that the proper narration of the *Odyssey* can begin – when Odysseus reveals his name and identity, at the beginning

of the book IX. A long flashback narrative then takes place, offering the reader two main clues: it is narration that gives sense and identity to our life; it is narration that puts an end to a state of crisis and immobility. Only after the long account of his own experiences, which spans more than four Books of the epic and highlights the liberating power of words, Odysseus may take leave from Alcinous and take the sea route to Ithaca.

A passage with similar content can be found in the last Book of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, the Sanskrit epic attributed to the *ṛṣi* Valmiki that sings the deeds of the king-god Rama. Rama finally realizes the identity of his twin sons Kusha and Lava[3] during a sacrificial rite, when he hears them singing his own deeds, enacting a sort of *Rāmāyaṇa* within the *Rāmāyaṇa*. It is a narrative artifice that strictly resembles the one outlined in the *Odyssey*, also in its consequences, since it is this episode that unlocks further major developments of the plot: "Rama listened during many days to the sublime and wonderful epic, and while the two sons of Sita, Kusha and Lava, were singing, he recognized them" (Valmiki 1952, VII.95.1). Soon after, he decides to summon Sita for the following day, asking her to come back from her exile and to swear on her own purity. For the first time in the poem, the family of Rama can thus reunite, like Odysseus with his wife and son in the last Books of Homer's epic. The heart of Rama is now open to reconciliation and tenderness: he is finally convinced of the faithfulness of his wife, to whom he even asks for forgiveness, and publicly announces that he recognizes the two boys as his sons: "I acknowledge these twins, Kusha and Lava, to be my sons! I desire to make my peace with the chaste Maithili [Sita] amidst the assembly" (Valmiki 1952, VII.97.5). The will of the gods will not allow Rama to live with his bride, since Sita will descend into the depth of her mother, the Earth, sitting on a "marvelous celestial throne" in recognition of her purity. Nevertheless, the narrative turn engendered by the song that mirrors Rama's "entire life with its vicissitudes" (Ibid., VII.94.27) remains as a vivid testimony of the power of storytelling on human soul: the love for Sita that has taken possession of Rama's heart is something entirely new in the poem. He is visibly shocked by the pain of her disappearance and explicitly

[3] According to the narration, Rama had never met them, since he had previously banished his pregnant wife Sita because of peoplÈs rumors about her behavior (Valmiki 1952, VII.45-46).

declares that "[b]eholding Sita […] vanish in my presence, my soul experiences an agony *hitherto unknown* (Ibid., VII.98.4, emphasis added). This is a point that perhaps has not received the proper attention by commentators and scholars alike: in fact, after hearing the masterful narration of his own life from his two sons, Rama undergoes a radical change, involving the entirety of his feelings and behavior.

The question to ask at this point is thus the following: can this healing and transforming power of narrative also manifest itself in the narration of epidemics? Anticipating the arguments that will be presented in the next paragraphs, my answer is: yes. And I would also add that narration is the *sole* remedy to the social and psychological (or public and private) crisis brought about by the pandemic, since it not only can give sense and perspective to the condition of utter uncertainty, danger, and suffering to which individual and societies are forced, but it also can help to find a way out of the emergency. Narration is the counter-offensive of the human genre.

1.4. Stories from the Last Pandemic

To better clarify these statements, I propose a brief analysis of a few stories created during the last pandemic in various domains – feature films, diaries, reports, documentaries, and mockumentaries – in two of the most affected countries: India and Italy.

The feature film *Drought* (Siccità, 2022) by the Italian film director Paolo Virzì imagines the city of Rome, after three years of drought, facing the first manifestations of a new epidemic brought by cockroaches. The spectacular images of the river Tiber reduced to a bed of sand and debris will remain for a long time in the visual memory of the spectators. The added value that Virzì is capable of giving to his narration of a deadly epidemic, lies in its relationship with the environmental crisis and climate change – which from this point of view represent the mentioned "prehistory and the aftermath" of the health crisis as outlined by Livingston. Yet the movie does not insist on attributing the responsibility of the two combined crises (their "causes and effects") to humankind or to specific dynamics of power or exploitation. All the characters are represented as equally affected by the unbearable difficulties produced by the new conditions of life and their consequences. What the spectators soon understand is that the temporal location of the story is not so much a dystopian future as a post-dystopian present. During the pandemic,

we have already experienced that feeling of strangeness that once familiar places transmit to us – deserted streets and squares, shops closed, parking places without any movements, even the elevator of our condominium that remains stationary. At the same time, we have experienced and in part are still experiencing the feeling of being close to strangers – those we met along the deserted streets or in faraway shops – due to facing the very same difficulties and restrictions. Estranged from our places and our time by the pandemic, we find ourselves strangely associated with strangers – which brings us closer to understanding how narration can give sense and name to inner unnamed dynamics.

7 Star Dinosor Entertainment (2021) is a dramatic short movie by the Indian film director Vaishali Naik that can be defined as a "mockumentary" – a fake documentary depicting fictional events. It is about two impoverished brothers, Sudhir and Vinod, who make ends meet by wearing dinosaur costumes and performing at weddings and parties. The spread of the COVID-19 pandemic and the suddenly imposed lockdown puts an abrupt end to their business. This leaves them blocked in their hut, without food and with the sole company of a cat and their dinosaur costumes. Their efforts to get something to eat are sometimes comical but result in nothing. A sense of impending tragedy lingers on until the final scene when the two starving brothers fight like dinosaurs for survival. As it has been written: "While this short may be difficult to digest, it serves as essential viewing; *it helps us understand the depth of the catastrophe the pandemic left in its wake*. This is particularly true for the working class who never received their due, even prior to the pandemic" (Dcosta 2022, emphasis added). Should we consider this story as a metaphor? In my opinion, metaphorizing always amount to subtracting a share of truth and impact to the story. Therefore, if on the one hand we can subscribe to the view that "[t]he movie also serves as a biting commentary on the migrant experience. It's an homage to those who persevere against earth-shaking events, despite simultaneously losing their identity and their rights" (Ibid.), on the other we should keep in mind the first impression received from watching the film and take it most seriously: this short movie is talking about ourselves; the depth of the catastrophe has strongly impacted on our psychological balance, revealing the presence of primordial, dinosaur-like forces hidden in our being and ready to surface perhaps not only in the event of major disasters.

Another narration that focuses on the abrupt loss of any means of subsistence after Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi imposed a nationwide lockdown on 24th March 2020, with only a four-hour notice, is entitled *1232km. Koronā kāl meṃ ek asambhav safar*, (literally: An Impossible Journey at the Time of Coronavirus, broadcasted with the English title of *The Long Journey Home*). This is both a documentary film and a reportage published as a book by the author Vinod Kapri. The film and the book do not entirely overlap in their communicative perspective – which offers abundant material for a comparative analysis. The present contribution is however limited to a brief illustration of the two works. With regard to the documentary, specific rules were laid down by Kapri to ensure the truth of the recording: "[N]othing would be created or staged for the camera, there would be no interference from his side unless an emergency, the ground reality would be filmed as a 10-minute spot recording every two hours" (Basu 2021). He thus joined a group of seven contract labourers and followed them while they pedaled back from Ghaziabad to their hometowns in Bihar on second-hand bicycles for seven days and seven nights, covering more than hundred kilometers each day, forced to do so by the loss of employment and the complete lack of food and money. That mass exodus of migrants, considered the largest displacement of people in India after the Partition of 1947, has been widely documented and has shown images of absolute despair and tragedy. Yet Kapri's documentary has a place of its own for fact that "while many journalists risked the outdoors by accompanying the labourers for a few kilometres, asking them for their story, and handing them a food packet to ease their conscience, Kapri chose to stick around with the group of labourers till they reached their hometown in Saharsa, almost 8 days later" (Mukherjee 2021). In addition to that, what the documentary manages to highlight better than other narrations is the extraordinary resilience of human beings when they resort to their ordinary virtues, even in the face of extreme difficulties and interminable suffering. The amplifier of these human virtues is, again, solidarity. The images recorded by Kapri clearly show how being in a group helps with sharing the burden of fatigue and fear; and how being helped by strangers clears the way to a brighter future. Thus, even though other dramatic elements of the story grab the attention and touch the hearth of the viewers, inducing them to realize, together with the seven protagonists, that "the virus of hunger, poverty and mistrust was deadlier than the coronavirus"

(Basu 2021), the final message that this work communicates is "that hard times don't just break a person; they also can make a person" (Ibid.). From this point of view, the message proposed by the documentary, though being apparently the opposite than that of *7 Star*, overlaps with the latter in that it confirms what most of the narrations of epidemics clearly show – and what the present contribution points to as well: no one can save oneself alone. There is no way out of the pandemic without a collective engagement and a shared narration.

In comparison to the documentary, the book is obviously richer in narrative details and less detailed in the rendering of the locations. At the same time, the presence of the author is more evident since the book often interprets, explains, and motivates actions and circumstances that the documentary merely shows. The author intersperses the dialogues of the protagonists with short comments and enriches the descriptions with a personal choice of verbs, adjectives, or adverbs. Thus, while the viewer is brought to follow less critically the story as it unfolds on the screen, the reader may want to stop reading and wonder why the "cut" of a scene should emphasize specific details regarding the social and economic conditions of the protagonists. Take for instance the conclusion of the sequence of the attempted robbery, when Rambabu, one of the seven cyclists, remarks: "*Ham garīb haiṃ, ye hamārā ap'rādh ho sak'tā hai. Lekin ham garīb hain, is'liye ap'rādhī nahīṃ ho sak'te*" ("We are poor, this may be our guilt. But we are poor, for this very reason we cannot be guilty", Kapri 2021, p. 147). The scene ends there, leaving the reader with Rambabu's words in mind, which amounts to an explicit paraphrase of the author's political positions. The introduction to Kapri's text by the former chief editor of "The Hindu", N. Ram, adds further elements to the political identity of the work, emphasizing the human virtues of the protagonists, "ordinary labourers" capable of acting with sincerity, freedom and morality even when they are pushed to the limit of their physical and mental endurance. "This book", concludes Ram, "fills us with a feeling of respect for the common sense, frankness, and lack of education of ordinary labourers. Those labourers who, despite their hardest efforts, never manage to free themselves from the eddy of poverty, debts, and all kinds of inequality handed down for generations and generations" (Kapri 2021, p. 18). Thus, despite the fabricated, perhaps biased character of this narrative inspired by a political stance, the reader of this book may prefer the consolatory remedy of a vaguely socialist happy

ending over the fabricated mainstream narratives on the pandemic elaborated by restricted groups of actors in power and imposed to the rest of the society.

In fact, as observed before, narration inherently has a "communicative character that calls for an analysis of the actors and the dynamics of the narrative act itself: […] We need to ask: Who is speaking? Who is seeing? Who is acting? But we also need to ask: Who is not speaking? Who does not have the right to speak in the text? […] What is 'naturally' omitted from it? What kinds of opinions are expressed and to what extent are they consistent with other (expressed or silenced) opinions?" (Schipper 1993, pp. 46-47). These questions are particularly relevant in the narration of the recent pandemic. Mainstream narrative about the COVID-19 pandemic has been constructed by restricted groups of actors, who have laid out not only rules, policies, and principles of public and private behavior, but also a rigid conceptual framework and its vocabulary, made of terms mostly expressing conflict, anxiety, confinement, emergency. This framework and this vocabulary only partially correspond to the personal and private narrations of the pandemic, which are relatively abundant but usually lack a social dimension. Much less frequent are organic counter-narratives produced during the health crisis for an alternative reading of the dynamics at stake. However, it is possible that some time is still needed for that and that in a next future deeper and more exhaustive analyses will be proposed, in the form of stories, novels, accounts, narrations of the past events. In this regard, it is encouraging that the Nobel Prize recipient Orhan Pamuk has recently published the novel *Nights of Plague* (Pamuk 2022), where the narration of a deadly disease that spreads in the Near East is the backdrop for themes of broad social scope, which touch religion, communalism, power, superstition, rebellion: "The art of novel", says one of Pamuk's characters, "is based on the ability to tell our stories as if they belonged to others, and to tell the stories of others as if they were ours" (Fiori 2022).

1.5. The Duty to Narrate and the Need to Forget

It is this same reversal of perspective – "to tell our stories as if they belonged to others" – that characterizes also most of the private testimonies produced during the pandemic, e.g. in the form of a personal diary, or of messages posted on social media. The healing properties

of storytelling are well known, not only in traditional cultures, where they often overlap with local medical knowledge, but also in modern medical and psychological practice, where "storytelling is viewed as a form of communication that can help people to successfully cope with and reframe illnesses" (Sunwolf 2005, p. 2). A few studies have been conducted on the chemical response of the brain when listening to captivating stories, a process in which the production of the hormones oxytocin and cortisol seems to play a key role in generating almost intoxicating effects and in "regulating physiological and psychological functions" (Brockington et al. 2021, p. 1). Laboratory tests have shown that since human beings are "social creatures who regularly affiliate with strangers, stories are an effective way to transmit important information and values from one individual or community to the next" (Zak 2013, p. 2). In addition to it, "stories that are personal and emotionally compelling engage more of the brain, and thus are better *remembered*, than simply stating a set of facts" (Ibid., emphasis added). It is the transformation – we could even say: the transubstantiation – of facts into memory produced by storytelling that represents the key factor in the process of giving sense to the events. This decisive change in the very substance of events when they become the subject of a story takes place in the fullest way if those events are part of the narrator's own life. In this case, the reversal of perspective not only enables the narrator to tell his/her stories "as if they belonged to others", but also to look from a distance at the trauma produced by illnesses, distress, physical and psychological challenges. This is the reason why practices of autobiographical writing, such as diaries, letters, and even messages posted on social media, have so much importance for the elaboration of experiences of crises. To this, it can be added that if "storytelling practices are key tools to navigate recurring challenging times, such as pandemics of unprecedented proportion" (Perrino 2022, p. 2), in the specific domain of autoethnography narrative and storytelling these are used "to give meaning to identities, relationships, and experiences, and to create relationships between past and present, researchers and participants, writers and readers, tellers and audiences" (Ibid.). The private testimonies produced in the form of a personal diary and collected during the pandemic in a book titled *Scrivere di sé ai tempi del Coronavirus* (Writing about oneself at the time of the Coronavirus, Capellino, Degasperi 2021) represent a clear example of this. I would quote just a few passages from this book, the realization of

which is due to the initiatives of Libera Università dell'Autobiografia (LUA, "Free University of Autobiograhy") of Anghiari (in the region of Tuscany, Italy):

> Both the soothing and reparative aspects of writing emerge here: in fact, by transferring the emotion to the page, I can see it outside of myself and objectify the emotion; I can reexamine a traumatic situation in a non-direct way, establishing a distance from it. (Capellino, Degasperi 2021, p. 21)

> Common features in the diaries received are the documentary aspects of what happens, but also the attempt at emotional self-containment (especially by those who write in solitude), seeking serenity in the written version of events. (Ibid., p. 59)

> "Everyone will remain what he/she is as a person but will carry within him/herself the traces of the elaboration of this harsh experience, as with a bereavement, a separation or, in any case, a significant change in life." (Ibid., p. 91)

The project "Writing about oneself at the time of the Coronavirus" was promoted by LUA in the immediate aftermath of the lockdown imposed on Italy due to the spread of COVID-19 pandemic. It intended to act as a tool to increase "trust in life and resilience" (Macario 2021, p. 16) during a period that for many people has been characterized by the most unfortunate circumstances of life, in the belief that autobiographical writing could help endure the hardships to which they were forced without succumbing to them. What I see as particularly remarkable in the conceptual framework of this project is its collective and intergenerational nature. As it is aptly highlighted in the *Introduction* by Macario, one of the main goals of this initiative has been to provide people with incentives not to feel alone (Ibid., p. 17) – which brings us back to one of the main themes of our analysis. Similar conclusions are reached by Anna Maria Selini, the author of a documentary and a book (Selini 2021) on her experiences in one of the most affected areas in Italy, the province of Bergamo. In an interview with the magazine "Altra economia" (Facchini 2021), questioned on what she thinks could be the remedy to the trauma, she observes: "I think the most effective response is the community, as psychologists also argue. Let's take Nembro [a small town in the province of Bergamo], the epicenter and the area most affected also for the effects on

mental health. It has a very strong and cohesive community tradition. Many people volunteer, there are many associations. Thanks to this strong social cohesion, the town has been able to react to the pandemic. Against the trauma, the sense of community has proved to be an effective protection" (Ibid.).

It is through dynamics similar to those described above, then, that a way out of the pandemic can be envisaged – provided that a convincing meaning of being "out of the pandemic" could be agreed upon. As the journalist and writer G. Kolata aptly summarizes, "[a]ccording to historians, pandemics typically have two types of endings: the medical, which occurs when the incidence and death rates plummet, and the social, when the epidemic of fear about the disease wanes" (Kolata 2020). To use the words of the historian Dora Vargha, endings "are very, very messy. […] Looking back, *we have a weak narrative*. For whom does the epidemic end, and who gets to say?" (Ibid., emphasis added). In fact, the social ending of the pandemic can be due not only to the waning of fears but also to the "simple temptation to forget" (Modolo 2022); it can occur "not because a disease has been vanquished but because people grow tired of panic mode and learn to live with a disease" (Kolata 2020) – which however contrasts with the "duty to be witnesses of an era: not to let the memory of individuals – and therefore the collective memory of a people – be lost" (Modolo 2022). During the first months of the health emergency by COVID-19 several studies that thoroughly analysed narratives about past pandemics were published. Among these, particular attention has been given to the influenza pandemic at the beginning of the last century, since over time many private and public testimonies have been collected on this subject. In fact, "[n]arratives recounting the hardships and traumatic realities of past pandemics such as the 1918-1920 flu have become more palpable and believable during the COVID-19 pandemic. Yet, humans seem to forget about these tragic events quickly. Many people don't talk about them; they remove them from their memories; they don't seem to remember death, trauma, and loss" (Perrino 2021, p. 7). It is between these two opposite tendencies, then – the temptation, or the need, to forget, declaring the emergency over, and the duty to narrate in order to remember and to heal – that a way out of the crisis must be found. If it is true that "[e]pidemics ordinarily end with a whimper, not a bang" (Rosenberg 1989, p. 8), we still have to ask ourselves what lessons – if any – have been

learned: "Have the dead died in vain? Has a heedless society reverted to its accustomed ways of doing things as soon as denial became once more a plausible option?" (Ibid., p. 9).

The answer that the narratives on epidemics help us to give is: no. We cannot waste the crisis we have lived. It is for this reason that we need stories: this is the most efficient tool to transform events into memories, to draw attention to the lessons to be learned; and, however paradoxical this may seem, to forget the loss by transforming it into new behavior. The stories on the health emergency, engendered and nurtured by personal and collective memories, will be recontextualized across time and space: "They will be reread; they will be recounted to children and grandchildren; they will become part of new tellings of dread and fear in other, future, uncertain times" (Perrino 2021, p. 7). Like all the other stories about the pandemics of the past, also these new narrations on COVID-19 will remind us both of micro- and macro-dynamics, will shed light on individual emotions and ultimate realities: "[H]uman beings will not so easily escape the immanence of evil and the anxiety of indeterminacy. Mortality is built into our bodies, into our modes of behavior, and into our place in the planet's ecology" (Rosenberg 1989, p. 14). And they will make clear, once more, the need for a collective – albeit not necessarily public – elaboration of the critical experiences lived during the emergency. The lesson to learn from them is that there is no alternative to participating in this collective elaboration. This is the remedy that can restore health, both at the personal and the societal level.

In the darkest days of the pandemic, pope Francis proposed an enlightening narrative key, hinting at the necessity of rowing together and comforting each other. This is the only way to make sense – and to find a way out – of even the most difficult experiences:

> We were caught off guard by an unexpected and raging storm. We realized that we were in the same boat – fragile and disoriented, but at the same time all important and necessary – called to row together, all in need of mutual comfort. We are all on this boat. Like those disciples, who speak with one voice and in anguish say: "We are lost", so we too have realized that we cannot go forward each on his own, but only together. (Francis 2020)

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2. *Haṁso haṁsāo, Coronavirus ko dūr bhagāo:* Hindi Satire and Humour as Psychological and Ideological Resources during the COVID-19 Crisis

Fabio Mangraviti

Abstract

This article presents the forms and functions pursued over the past years by satire and humour in the Hindi public sphere (Orsini 2002). The paper mainly focuses on the narratives concerning the COVID-19 pandemic and/or the policies implemented by the Indian government to manage the health crisis in India. Crucially, it is based on the results of an interdisciplinary investigation. Indeed, just like in other global contexts, humour and satire in the Hindi public sphere appeared through a multiplicity of channels. In March 2020, as the first lockdown was announced in India, there was an outburst of memes, videos, and vignettes on the COVID-19 pandemic in Hindi and other languages, many of which were uploaded and shared through social media platforms. Moreover, since the onset of the first lockdown, many well-acknowledged performing satirists (*vyaṅgyakār*) and humourists (*hāsyakār)* were forced to resort to new, digital ways to narrate the pandemic. Along with the digital forms of satire and humour, traditional media and literature also paved the way for the narrativisation of the health crisis. This study combines a qualitative content analysis of the elements drawn from the World Wide Web along with a more descriptive analysis. The last section of the article will also address the satirical responses to the pandemic by Hindi literary satirists. It explores two intertwined thematic issues: the first deals with the adaptive coping functions embodied by Hindi satire and humour during the pandemic; while the second copes with the ideological value of the narratives, especially with regard to the response offered by the authors to the

policies implemented by the Indian government to deal with the crisis in different phases of the pandemic.

Key Words: COVID-19; Hindi public sphere; Satire and humour; Indian new media; Hindi literature.

2.1. Theoretical Dimension of Humour and Satire during the Pandemic

Over the past three years, along with the outburst of the COVID-19 pandemic, new studies have been carried out on satire and humour, hitherto deemed as two communicative means (Weisgerber 1973), discursive practices (Simpson 2003, p. 69), and/or modes of expression (Harder 2012, p. 165) with an indisputably central role in shaping the contemporary public spheres. It must be clarified at the start of the article that, by simultaneously investigating these two "amorphous" (Davies, Illott 2018) and "formless" (Connery, Combe 1995, p. 5) modes or genres[1], the study draws on previous contributions which tend to link satire and humour to the common terrain of the comic[2] . Furthermore, it is necessary to outline that the article does not address these fields simply as mutually exclusive and directly opposed domains; rather, it starts from the assumption that humour often "overlaps" with satire (Phiddian 2019, p. 16), which generally

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1 The majority of ongoing studies tend to consider humour and satire not as proper genres, but rather as "modes" which, especially in the case of satire, establish a "mimetic" relationship with the literary and extra-literary fields they are associated with (Guilhamet 1987, pp. 1-20; Harder 2012, pp. 165–166). However, it must be considered that, recently, there have been some attempts at re-assessing these fields as genres (Declercq 2018).

2 This tendency, for instance, can be seen in McGowan's book *Only a Joke Can Save Us: A Theory of Comedy* (2017), where both humour and satire tend to be incorporated within the category of comedy. Similarly, Declercq, in *Satire, Comedy and Mental Health* (2021), by considering comedy as a field which is mostly related to the scope of creating "amusement", connects both satire and humour to this category. Indeed, in his conception, one of the main scopes of satire, alongside the production of criticism towards a certain sociocultural aspect, is that of entertaining the audience. Recently, the tendency to simultaneously explore the uses of satire and humour in the contemporary scenario has been followed by Zekavat, who authored the monographs *Satire, Humor and the Construction of Identities* (2017) and *Satire, Humor and Environmental Cases* (2023).

implies a "deliberate use of the comic for purposes of attack" (Berger 1997, p. 167)[3].

Recent studies have focused on the use of these means in different geographical contexts, while others have attempted to address the broader socio-cultural, psychological, and political forms embodied in the contemporary post-COVID-19 global scenario (Zekavat 2021; 2022). A relatively common theoretical perspective is to consider both satire and humour as instruments employed by authors to adopt coping strategies during the pandemic. This view is based on the relief theory. It has a long history, dating back to Freud's assumptions about the cathartic value of humour and implying an "economy in the expenditure of affect" (Freud 1974 [1905], p. 293). Such an approach has been broadly contested at the cognitive level. Nonetheless, in recent times, new theories based on less mechanical explanations have reassessed the coping function of satire and humour, especially at times characterised by the appearance of distressful events. A recent contribution to this theoretical approach was offered by Declercq, who investigated contemporary humour and satire by considering them as consciously, individually, and collectively pursued strategies aimed at deeply understanding "the limits of reason" in the present global society.

> […] good satire helps us cope with the limits of critique by avoiding the Scylla of political apathy and the Charybdis of mental health problems. Therefore, satire is a resource to negotiate the existential conflict between care for others and care of self. […] First, satire does not really cure a morally sick world, but helps to cope with it. This does not mean that satire cannot contribute to political change, but it only has a modest impact in the service of motivating more direct political action. Second, satire helps us deal with the limits of critique through the solace of pleasurable autotelic engrossment in entertainment, which reconnects

[3] The quite controversial relationship between satire and humour has been widely debated. Zekavat notes that, although it is not easy to find a watershed between satire and humour, it is even more difficult to establish their relationship. He also outlines that, in many ways, humour must be regarded as an integral and constitutive part of satire (Zekavat 2017, p. 27). A somewhat similar perspective has been recently expressed also by Phiddian, according to whom: "Even the darkest satire turns into wit (and very often humour) as well as mobilisation of harsh emotions. Without the wit, it becomes mere abuse or complaint" (Phiddian 2019, p. 59). Conversely, as outlined by Twark, certain ambits, such as black humour, that are usually associated with humour, do not necessarily produce laughter. From this Twark derives that "humour itself is not always humorous or funny." (Twark 2007, p. 13)

> us to an otherwise depressing absurd world, without ignoring the fact that we should alleviate suffering. Third, satire develops comic and ironic coping strategies that we can fruitfully adopt and adapt in the stories we tell about ourselves in a world that is sick beyond full recovery. (Declercq 2021, pp. 2–3)

Declercq's approach differs from previous claims built on the relief theory. The author does not consider satire and humour as two merely psychological valves; he rather deems both of them as means to develop – by triggering entertainment strategies – a better and more consolidated way to interpret a world which, in the author's words, appears "sick beyond full recovery". Such theory stands on the assumption that these are useful mechanisms to cope with mental health distress caused by the unstable socio-cultural, political, and health background. It also investigates the connection between the psychological value of the instruments which, in Foucauldian terms, can be deemed as "care of self" triggers (White 2014, p.489), and the following ideological and political outcomes produced by the adoption of these resources. Declercq remains quite sceptical about the 'revolutionary' power of comedy to mobilize political action. This does not mean that satire and humour – especially in times defined by deep socio-cultural instability – cannot play a political role in more subtle ways. Indeed, they are useful to reduce the otherwise unbridgeable distance between the "care of self" and the "care for others". By doing so, both satire and humour have also become part of the dynamics of creating old and new identities (Zekavat 2017). However, we could criticise this approach on the grounds that neither satire nor humour are the only communicative resources needed to adapt to changing historical circumstances. In his contribution to the present volume, Milanetti claims that the act of narrating/narrativising has always been considered an invaluable task for processing traumatic events and historical, political, and socio-cultural transitions in different geographical contexts and across language and literary boundaries[4]. It is important to note that many classic literary authors adopted satire to specifically address the sufferings and contradictions caused by the spread of pandemics within the communities they were part of. For instance, Boccaccio's *The Decameron,* apart from being a *locus classicus* of the literature produced

[4] See supra: *Tell a Story to End the Pandemic. COVID-19 and the Remedy of Narration: Instances from India and Italy,* by G. Milanetti.

during pandemics, also tangibly showcases the inextricable connection between satire, humour, and the task of narrativising pandemics during the early modern period (Metzger 2020). Another example is Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*.

These are just cursory examples, and they are not enough to historically explain the connection between the outburst of pandemics and the spread of satirical and humourist narratives in Europe. Nevertheless, they are both useful examples as they point to the fact that humourist and satirical narratives have often been adopted in different language and literary contexts to relocate the stressfulness produced by the outbursts of pandemics. It is also interesting to see that, in the contemporary, post-pandemic world, the role played by satirical literature, probably even more than mere humourist literature, in the narrativisation of COVID-19 has been quite peripheral. Why has satirical literature played such a marginal role? There is no simplistic answer to this question. One reason could plausibly be that, to this day and with few remarkable exceptions, the pandemic has not yet become part of the topics deemed worthy of being addressed in literature through satirical narratives. Another rationale is that contemporary literature could not contextualise the effects of the pandemic, especially at the outset of the first wave, within the given socio-cultural framework. Whatever the answer may be, we cannot dismiss the fact that, in the present context, most of the studies addressing the strategies of narrativisation of the pandemic do not consider satire and humour as merely literary fields. Moreover, nowadays satire is not investigated only through the lens of a literary critical approach, as was the case until the 1970s. Studies which deem satire only as a literary moral genre have been replaced by perspectives which emphasise the multidisciplinary character of this mode. The reasons behind this shift are well explained by Simpson, who reassesses the value of satire as a culturally situated discursive act and points to the mistakes made by literary critics in locating it only within the context of literary production (Simpson 2003, pp. 57-63). Similar observations have been made by Phiddian (2013, pp. 53–55), who presents the limits of formalist approaches to satire. He also tries to connect literary approaches to perspectives emphasising its rhetorical nature. Although rooted in different areas, both theoretical observations place the study of satire and humour within an interdisciplinary dimension, including the interconnection between the press, traditional, and new media. These

reflections are not just casually introduced in the discourse. Indeed, it is remarkable that, in spite of the paucity of literary satirical responses to the pandemic, a huge number of narratives on the COVID-19 health crisis were expressed on new media such as Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube (Philip 2021; Yang 2022). During the pandemic, many people uploaded their contents to these platforms, which became their way of sharing their most immediate responses to COVID-19. With their comments, they contributed to extending the rhetorical possibilities of these narratives. In addition to the contributions made by ordinary people on social media platforms, many satirist and humourist writers and vignettists enriched the repertoire of symbols and values linked to the pandemic by uploading their own ideas, videos, and performances on new media platforms. Eventually, more or less consciously, these were also readopted by authors narrating the pandemic in the press and in literature.

So far, we have highlighted the coping function of humour and satire, as well as the common scepticism about their potential to enact political mass mobilisation programmes. Nonetheless, it is imperative to note that, since 2020, these fields have covered a number of applications; although they have not directly triggered political action, on many occasions they contributed to orienting people towards developing their own political opinion. Moreover, they were adopted differently in many geographical contexts to help people cope with the restrictions imposed upon them during the pandemic, to maintain a social etiquette and, more generally, to overcome the sense of isolation forced upon the more marginalised groups of the population during the first phase of the pandemic (Zekavat 2022, pp. 523–524). As outlined by Zekavat when referring to the responses provided by ordinary people, during the first wave of the pandemic, "the politicization and unpreparedness of public officials caused unprecedented uncertainties among citizens. Humour served as a medium to express these concerns in a safe manner and discuss topics that were otherwise too embarrassing or incomprehensible for public debate" (Ibid., p. 524). However, with regard to the ideological dimension of these fields, it is interesting to outline that traditional and new media also showcased a rather direct political participation in the debates on the pandemic. For instance, in 2020, in the USA, some satirical shows played a major role in disseminating information on the measures to be adopted to prevent the spread of the virus. *The*

Late Show with Stephen Colbert, a renowned show hosted by Stephen Colbert, was highly appreciated for embodying a positive and politically-oriented kind of satirical activism (Caron 2016, pp. 160–167; Paroske 2016, p. 208). During the pandemic, Colbert's show became even more visible and influential in public debates in the USA. In January and February 2020, Donald Trump's administration was accused of sharing fake news about the pandemic and, more generally, of underestimating its negative effects. During that phase of political, social, and health uncertainty, "in the absence of strong leadership, many took upon themselves to 'be their own President' and take action to mitigate the raging crises, *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert* (TLS), for one, attempted to reprimand the government's response and at the same time appeal to its audiences to behave responsibly at the time of crisis" (Zekavat 2021, p. 284). This, however, was not an isolated case. Satire and humour were adopted in many other global contexts, even by well-acknowledged personalities, to provide information about the measures to be undertaken to mitigate the effects of the pandemic. Moreover, similar narratives were not only developed to fulfil an informative task but also to criticise governments for showing a "lack of responsibility" in a moment which called for practical and immediate responses to stop the spread of the virus. The political orientation of satire and humour has varied considerably during the last three years, also with regard to the timeline in which such narratives have been developed. From this point of view, we must outline that, at times, satirists and humourists realised opposite objectives to those pursued by Colbert's show. As seen in Colbert's example, in most cases and in many different realities, the first wave of the pandemic was characterised by the development of satires addressing the need to exercise strong political leadership. However, during the three years of COVID-19, and along with the rise of Colbert-like narratives, a conspicuous number of objections were also raised at administrations which were blamed of enacting authoritarian measures. A fresh example comes from the protests that spread across many cities in China against the reinforcement of the "Zero Covid Policy" in November 2022. On that occasion, many protesters started showing discontent about the way the health crisis was being managed, and subtly developed a satirical narrative against the limits to free speech in China by raising blank sheets of paper (Adlakha 2022). As reasonably expected, the adoption of

satire and humour in the Chinese context was quite limited. Given the strong restrictions on local press and media, citizens aiming to develop satirical and humourist views could only move, often in obliquus ways, behind the narrow spaces of free virtual speech. It is interesting to note that, even before the flare-up of the protests in China in 2022, some political and ideological views were expressed by Chinese netizens to blame "their multi-layered grievances against misogyny, state censorship, and censorship" (Yang 2022, p. 99). Outside China, satire and humour were adopted in countries where the government was being accused of mitigating the threatening effects of the pandemic by embracing exceptional measures which limited civil liberties. It would, however, be perilous to observe a Manichean division between countries which showcased a somewhat 'anti-authoritarian' use of comedy and others which used it to invoke stronger leadership. Both narratives coexisted in the USA, in many European countries (Cancelas Ouviña 2020; Vicari-Murru 2020), and in India, often during the same wave of the pandemic.

Moreover, it is important to reflect on the heterogeneous and polysemic nature of the narratives produced by the authors of satirical and humourist contents. Such contents raised concerns related to the pandemic as well as several intertwined socio-cultural issues. In India, for example, some Adivasi and Dalit activists used satire and humour as an instrument for raising counter-narratives against mainstream culture. Since 2020, these marginalised authors have been availing the opportunities granted by new media to make their claims more visible. Finally, we cannot dismiss the fact that xenophobic, sexist, and racial narratives were adopted ubiquitously in many global contexts, regardless of the political and ideological orientation of the aforementioned geographical areas. Given the complex nature of the satirical and humorous responses to the COVID-19 crisis, the present article suggests applying perspectives that build on the adaptive nature of satire, in combination with those stressing its ideological value, to study the Hindi public sphere.

2.2. Methodology

The present study seeks to research different satirical and humourist elements, collected from a broad range of sources. It aims to analyse them in-depth in three different sections. The first section consists of

a historical introduction to the dynamics characterising the use of satire and humour in the Hindi public sphere over the last years. Much attention will be paid to the juridical and political limitations faced by comedy in India; there will be much stress also on the new activist strategies pursued by Indian authors in order to mobilize their public about their claims. The second section, which engages with satirical and humoristic narratives in new media, adopts a conventional qualitative content analysis based on the Hsieh and Shannon (2005) model to carry out a survey of 131 items. The majority of the items investigated reveals a distinct overlapping of humourist and satirical narratives. Moreover, starting from previous assumption that humour and satire are equally part of the category of the 'comic', it was decided to also consider some humourist elements devoid of any satirical intent. It was established to manually identify, wherever necessary, more than one main topic in the investigated elements. The survey of vignettes and memes entailed the identification of one up to three main topics. Otherwise, given the length and complexity of the videos and cartoon videos, it was necessary to identify one up to four topics in order to assess them. Moreover, the survey analysed the materials by also identifying the number of items adopted to pursue specific psychological, political, and/or informative functions. Unlike other recent studies on the use of comedy in media during the pandemic, by focusing on these aspects the contribution provides some general reflections on the diachronic development of the comic narratives in the period between March 2020 and March 2022. Most of the memes have been selected from depositories of satirical and humourist items created by Indian users, such as *AhSeeit* and *Smileworld.* In addition, a huge number of vignettes and memes have been extracted from the online page of the Hindi journal "Dainik bhāskar" ("Dainik Bhaskar"*)* and from "Navbhārat ṭāims" ("Navbharat Times"). As for analysing the contents on YouTube, the study has primarily investigated items which included words such as *vyaṅgya* (satire) and/or *hāsya* (humour), alongside other words such as Coronavirus, Corona, and/or COVID-19, either in the title or in the videos description. The third part of the article shifts from analysing new media to investigating the narrativisation strategies of the pandemic as part of Hindi literature. Here, the research focuses on the strategies pursued by authors to enact adaptive coping strategies to analyse the pandemic. The study will attempt to establish some aesthetic ties between literary and extra-literary responses to the

health crisis. Furthermore, the political and ideological orientation of these strategies will be explored, especially with regard to the position taken by Hindi authors to the policies enacted by Indian government.

2.3. Coping Function, Digitalisation and Limitations on Satire and Humour in the Indian Context

India, 24 March 2020. This day will always be remembered as the day when the first nationwide lockdown was announced. This lockdown not only affected the way services and businesses worked across the country but, most importantly, impacted the life of every single citizen in India. It was certainly a crucial historical moment, which deeply shook the foundations of India's socio-cultural environment. However, as seen in some Hindi literary narration on the COVID-19 crisis, it seems that only after the start of the first lockdown was the pandemic perceived and narrated as an issue of national concern[5]. The many socio-cultural and political issues which arose in India due to the pandemic will not be presented here. Suffice it to say, the escalation of the pandemic and the following limitations imposed to prevent it from spreading, paradoxically, also provided fertile ground for artists, writers, and intellectuals to come up with innovative ways to respond to the crisis. With regard to responses to the pandemic in the Hindi public sphere, it is interesting to note that, even before the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, many Indian writers, literary critics, and performers deemed satire and humour as two powerful instruments to cope with stressful historic situations.

In the 1960s, in the literary essay titled *Nayī kahānī kī bhūmikā* (Introduction to the New Short Story, 1966), Kamleshvar Prasad Saksena – one of the torchbearers of the Nayī kahānī avant-garde literary movement – established the relevance of satire as an important way to detect all the socio-cultural and political contradictions (*visangati*) which had plagued the Indian society at the outset of the partition of India in 1947

[5] In many satirical writings, Hindi literary satirist Alok Saksena outlined that, just a few days before lockdown was announced, many people in India had celebrated Holi, one of the most relevant Hindu festivals (Saksena 2020, pp. 29-34). This festival, in Saksena's depiction, left society in a state of euphoria coupled with anxiety about the spread of the virus in India. Significantly, during that period, even outstanding Hindi journals, such as "Hindustān", started debating in a vigorous way about the pandemic just around the middle of March.

(Kamleshvar 1966, p. 16)[6]. According to Kamleshvar, the large-scale loss of lives and unprecedented migration between India and Pakistan opened the doors to a historical phase of ideological instability and feeling of disillusionment (*moh bhaṅg*) towards Indian institutions (Ibid.). Therefore, since the 1950s and 1960s, Hindi literature and, in particular, Hindi satirists narrativised, and at the same time psychologically faced this feeling, by developing narratives to cope with the uncertainties following India's independence. Remarkably, in spite of the attention attributed to other topics, only on a few occasions have satirists and humourists debated socio-cultural and political matters linked to the flare-up of pandemics in the Indian context. However, it is relevant to outline that, on many circumstances, medicine and doctors have been the subject of Hindi satirical writings. Quite often, satirists have made fun of the inconsistencies in Indian healthcare institutions[7]. Moreover, especially since the 1950s, apart from literature, some extra-literary fields have also contributed to developing satirical and humourist strategies to cope with the feeling of disillusionment presented by Kamleshvar in his essay. For instance, since the 1950s and even in the present time, *Muśāyrās* (gatherings of Urdu poets) and *Kavi sammelans* (gatherings of Hindi poets) have undoubtedly played a major role in developing such narratives[8]. In spite of the many criticisms levelled at these events by the Hindi intelligentsia for their alleged trivialisation of poetry, the *Hāsya kavi sammelans* (gatherings of humourist poets) played a major role in debating matters which were

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[6] The most relevant feature of Nayī kahānī, a Hindi literary movement which developed across the mid-1950s and mid-1960s, was the adoption of the short story (*kahānī*) as a preferred narrative mode to analyse the socio-cultural issues characterising post-colonial Indian society. Different from the earlier Hindi literary movements which emerged in the 1920s and 1930s, the writers associated with the Nayī kahānī movement attempted to portray a more realistic, and sometimes disenchanted, picture of Indian society, by focusing on the metropolitan or urban landscapes.

[7] A grotesque and satirical picture of Indian doctors was, for instance, crafted by Berhab Banarsi, who authored the short story *Cikitsā ka cakkar* (The Whirl of Medical Treatments). See Banarsi (1997, pp. 49-59).

[8] The socio-cultural relevance of these performative events has been recently unfolded by Mahmudabad (2020), who has, however, neglected the relevance of the satirical and humourist nature of many of the poems which have been historically recited during these events. Remarkably, Mahmudabad's analysis, which traces a diachronic investigation of *Muśāyrās* from the mid-19th century to mid-20th century, emphasises the role of these events in the development of counter-narratives concerning the concept of country (*vatan*), community (*qaum*), and Muslim global community (*millat*) in the contemporary Indian context.

perceived as problematic or controversial from a socio-cultural and political point of view[9]. Therefore, even before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, humour and satire played a central role in the narrativisation of tragic and shocking events in India. It is imperative, now, to introduce two crucial issues relating to the use of comedy in the contemporary Hindi public sphere. The first has to do with the dynamics of progressive digitalisation to which many traditional forms have been recently subjected. These dynamics have revealed themselves in different ways.

Primarily, it must be outlined that, even in the period which preceded the pandemic, although *Muśāyrās* and *Kavi sammelans* were generally staged behind an audience in a physical public space[10], a large number of these events began to be uploaded on YouTube and other media. Alongside performers who usually joined *Muśāyrās* and *Kavi sammelans*, also several Hindi stand-up comedians began uploading their private shows on new media to cope with and narrativise the pandemic. The role played by these videos during the 2020 lockdown will be further analysed in the following section. For now, suffice it to say that, given the absence of a physical audience, the relationship with a virtual, public audience deeply affected the uptake of satirical narratives. Moreover, it had a great impact on the nature of the responses provided by the public to the narratives exposed by satirists and humourists. Comments on YouTube and other platforms did, indeed, have the potential of expanding the narratives provided by these performers. Still, there were other digital forms through which narratives

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[9] At present, only a limited number of studies in the Hindi language have investigated the existence of these events. In the 1950s and 1960s, the performed lyrics were mostly inspired by heroic (*vīr*) feelings, while humour (*hāsya*) would have been more peripheral. On the contrary, according to the majority of the studies on this subject matter, in the 1970s and 1980s, during a period of "decadence" (*girāvaṭ*) of the *Kavi sammelans*, lyrics inspired by humourist and satirical feelings prevailed (Visheshlakshmi 1985, pp. 319–330).

[10] In the period preceding and following Indian independence, the majority of the gatherings were patronised by the Indian National Congress (INC) and/or by cultural associations such as the All-Indian Progressive Writers Association (AIPWA), which supported these events with the goal of voicing distinct ideological, political, and socio-cultural slogans and campaigns. In the contemporary context, similar events are organised especially for commemorating political anniversaries and celebrations as well as religious festivals. Many gatherings of poets are organised, for instance, during Holi, a festival which is deeply connected to the realm of joke and humour. Finally, it is interesting to note the diasporic nature of these events, which, over the last few years, have been often organised in many Asian countries, in Europe, and in the USA.

in Hindi and Hinglish manifested themselves. For instance, a multitude of memes or vignettes have been produced by 'ordinary' people and by recognised artists during the last years. An interesting and innovative element is the use of these narratives from a subaltern and marginal perspective. This is the case with numerous Instagram pages; at times, by adopting a caustic style, they have been, and still are, engaged in articulating the socio-cultural and political claims by Indian Dalit and – to a lesser degree – the Adivasi communities[11]. These digital narratives and their incidence in Indian "subaltern counter-public" (Fraser 1990, p. 70) should not be underestimated. They are part of a political programme, consciously developed by these communities[12]. It is also important to outline that, over the last few years, stand-up comedy has become crucially important in India particularly for the articulation of claims by women artists, which "could be contradictory to each other, but emerging from the standpoint of someone surviving within the Indian cultural contexts'' (Shivaprasad 2023, p. 169). Apart from the multi-fold dynamics linked to the digitalisation of satire and humour in the Hindi sphere, the subaltern perspective is another important factor not to be seen as incidental when addressing contemporary narratives on COVID-19. Satire, deemed in Phiddian's term as a rhetorical art (Phiddian 2013, p. 55), has often been addressed in history as a "Pharresian instrument" for witnessing the misconducts pursued by governments (Caron 2016, p. 157). In recent times, such an assessment has turned out to be quite partial since, in many historical circumstances, satire has been a male and elitist practice (Knight 2004, p. 6). In any case, however, it must be outlined that the directions and orientations of satire are not fixed, and the relationship between this field, the institutions and the subaltern public is subjected to ideological variations – not less than the position held by scholars who investigate this domain.

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[11] Instagram is, arguably, the main platform for the development of satirical narratives by activists who claim their ideological closeness to Adivasi and Dalit communities. Some Instagram groups, such as *dalitmemers3.0*, *bahujan_memes* and so on, have a clear-cut satirical attitude. However, it must be outlined that, so far, they have quite a limited audience. Other groups, with a less caustic satirical vein, adopt satire and humour only incidentally and with the specific scope of voicing specific sociocultural and political campaigns of the Adivasi, Dalit and LGBTQIA+ people and communities.

[12] This is well reflected in the words of Chandra Bhan Prasad, activist, writer, and journalist, associated with the Dalit Indian Chamber of Commerce, who has recently stated that: "For upper-caste people, Twitter is just another invention. For Dalits, it has the potential for a revolution… There is no barrier for Dalits." (Quot in Browarczyk 2021, p. 5).

Furthermore, while exploring the use of comedy in the Indian context during the pandemic, it is still important to also consider its controversial relationship with political power and censorship. It is commonly claimed that cultural productions in Indian *bhāshās* (local Indian languages) were generally not subjected to censorship (Chandran 2017, pp. 89-117). Indeed, compared to writers and performers who resort to using English as their linguistic means, authors using Indian languages appear to be more "conservative" in their approach to morality and religion (Ibid., p.89). The aim of the present study is not to question such an opinion by presenting a diachronic analysis of the many situations when authors using Indian languages developed strategies to circumvent censorship. Rather, what is remarkable here is that, especially in the last few years, satirical and humourist productions in Hindi and in other Indian languages have been harshly impacted by legal and extra-legal repercussions. For instance, Sanjay Rajoura, a member of the satirical theatre group (Aisī taisī ḍemokresī, "Democracy, Go to Hell") has been recently subjected to police enquiry for having raised some humourist comments on the Hindu God Ganesha (Sood 2020). A similar incident took place in 2021, when Kunal Kamra, another member of this group, responded to the Supreme Court with several tweets and expressed ideas which offended the apex Court (Ibid.). Even Vir Das, an Indian comedian, actor, musician, and author of the dark comedy series *Hasmukh*, was taken to court with the allegation of having raised defamatory comments on Indian lawyers. The tendency to bring satirists and humourists under the legal scanner has increased over the last few years and, notably, during the COVID-19 period. This not only affected Hindi or Hinglish authors, but all the artists associated with comedy. In 2021, Nalin Yadav, comedian, Munavar Faruqui, stand-up comedian, and Nilesh Sharma, journalist, were accused of producing offensive and blasphemous narratives about Hindu deities and/or about Indian institutions and political figures. In May 2020, an article titled *No Country for Political Satire: How Much Can Indian Comedy Really Push the Boundaries*, published on "Dead Ant", an Indian activist website committed to disseminating information about the socio-cultural and political campaigns promoted by satirists, stated that:

> Satire, in a perfect world, points a fun-house mirror at society. It says the things – in an exaggerated, sardonic way – that were too afraid to think. Behind the disarming jokes lies the ugly truth. But today, comedians,

> who play the role of the truth-telling court jesters of society, are faced with the constant, terrifying prospect of both legal and 'extra-legal' repercussions for their words. The impulse, naturally, is to self-censor. To limit all provocations. […] the legal framework of the freedom of speech and expression, as defined in Article 19 (1) (a) in our Constitution, is one thing. But what we have trouble reconciling with is the philosophical concept of free speech, of tolerating conflicting, uncomfortable ideas. Kneejerk outrage is evergreen, leading to increasingly bizarre outcomes. (Akhil Sood, 2020)

"Dead Ant", especially in the last few years, has been playing a crucial role in advocating for the rights of free speech in India. This is not the only strategy used by satirists for claiming their rights of free expression. In February 2020, for instance, just a month before the lockdown, many artists joined the *Stand Up for India* event, a fundraiser to ensure that Indian citizens could use Internet in accordance with the freedoms guaranteed by the Constitution (Rawal 2020). In light of the above, it is important to frame Hindi satirical and humourist narratives about COVID-19 – which will be addressed in the following sections – within the context of both the dynamics of digitalisation and partial or complete censorship/self-censorship to which, during the last three years, comedy in Hindi and in other languages have been subjected. Clearly, the aforementioned observations are neither exhaustive nor all-encompassing, but they do provide a context for understanding the multidisciplinary dimension of contemporary Hindi satire and humour.

2.4. Glimpses from the Web: From Adaptive Coping Strategies to Dark Narratives

While discussing the functions carried out by humour and satire, the previous sections also outlined the coping power of these instruments. These means provided us with a mechanism to adapt to the health, socio-cultural, and political dynamics triggered by the outbreak of the health crisis. If we look at the nature of the satirical and humorous responses during the COVID-19 period, especially during the first wave, it becomes clear that, occasionally, multimedia contents were directed towards facilitating psychological strategies to contain the negative effects of the health emergency. This tendency is well highlighted in Table 1: 18 of the investigated items revealed the presence

of words and concepts explicitly referring to the emotional sphere. The data becomes even more significant when we consider only the videos, since 14 out of the 22 items recall the sphere of the emotions. Moreover, most of the selected items were overtly characterised by a metanarrative reflection on the relevance of satire and humour as valves for facing the negative emotions resulting from the pandemic and, especially, the lockdown. The videos uploaded on YouTube from 25 March to 31 May 2020 played a major role in developing these strategies. It is remarkable that a large number of the videos uploaded during the lockdown portrayed the shows of the *Hāsya kavi sammelans* organised in 2017 and 2018, way before the start of the pandemic. Nevertheless, in the performances uploaded on YouTube in March 2020, right before the lockdown, and in 2021, authors made different references to the pandemic. A remarkable feature of the videos consists of elements found in the titles and in the comments suggesting they were intentionally uploaded – during the lockdown – with the specific aim of coping with the psychological distress caused by the latter. Many videos were labelled with the following sentence in the title: "*Haṁso haṁsāo, Coronavirus ko dūr bhagāo"* (Laugh, make others laugh, and destroy the Coronavirus)[13]. Other similar sentences were: "*Haṁsne se hāregā Corona"* (Corona will be erased by laughing!)[14] or even more well-articulated slogans, such as: "*Coronavirus kī khabreṃ sunkar pareśān ho cuke haiṃ to yah kavi sammelan suniye loṭpoṭ ho jāeṃge"* (If, by listening to the news on Coronavirus you have become extremely worried, then listen to the discussions of this gathering of poets and you will be delighted)[15]. Interestingly, during the lockdown and the period which followed, some Indian artists resorting to Hindi or Hinglish performed private shows which were promptly uploaded on YouTube and other media. Among them, an important example is that of Sunil Jogi, Indian author and humourist[16]. During a private show authored by the

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[13] See, among others, the video portraying a spectacle by the humourist Babulal Dingiya, uploaded on YouTube on 23 March 2020, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hFKtiSXK9G8>.

[14] See, for instance, the private show by Sunil Jogi, uploaded on YouTube on 26 April 2020, available at: <https://www.youtube.come/watch?v=P236o1ikg9c&t=665s>.

[15] See, for instance, the video of a humourist poets' meeting, uploaded on YouTube on 19 March 2020, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1kI2l-PAbRA&t=568s>.

[16] Until recently, he was the President of the Hindustani Academy (Hindustānī Ekeḍemī), a cultural organisation based in Prayagraj, which is responsible for the dissemination – through various cultural organisations – of cultural production in Hindi, Urdu, and

latter, broadcast on the television channel *News24* and then uploaded by the channel on YouTube on 26 April 2020,[17] the performer vividly expressed his commitment to 'cure the mental distress of the Indian audience through the therapeutic use of laughter:

> *Maiṃ hūṃ dakṭar Sunīl Jogī haṁsāne ke lie muskarāne ke lie āj hazīr hūṃ. Is Lockḍaun ke samay meṃ apne ghar se Lockḍaun kā pūrā pālan karte hue maiṃ āpke bic hūṃ. Hāsya ek vardān hai jo iśvar ne sirf insān ko diyā hai, samsār kā ek h prāṇī ro saktā hai […] lekin sirf insān hai jo haṁs saktā hai, muskarā saktā hai. To yah bahut zarūrī hai.*

> I am Dr. Sunil Jogi and I am here to make you laugh and smile today. I am in your midst, in these times of lockdown and supporting it in the most complete way by staying at home. Humour is a gift that God gave just to the human being; every sentient being is able to cry […] however, just the human being can laugh and smile. Therefore, this is certainly necessary. (Jogi, 2020a)

Sunil Jogi's words are significant for two reasons. First, they clearly reflect political and ideological acceptance of governmental policies on containing the pandemic during the first wave[18]. Compared to other global contexts where, since the earliest stages of the pandemic, comedy was also used for questioning lockdown-like measures, in the Hindi public sphere it seems like there was a consistent acceptance of this measure. Undoubtedly, certain humourist expressions, like the aforementioned slogan referring to the stress caused by the negative news broadcast by mainstream media, points to a 'hidden' feeling of discomfort towards Indian institutions. However, we should not underestimate that, during the entire lockdown period and especially in March and April 2020, many traditional and new media directly contributed to spreading tips and information for coping with the psychological tension (*tanāv*) and pressure (*dabāv*) caused by the pandemic[19]. Another remarkable feature of the

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other Indian languages. Sunil Jogi is also, significantly, an author with a long history of performance within the ranks of the *Hāsya kavis* (humourist poets).

17 See note 14.

18 The endorsement provided by the humourist is suggested by the adoption of the Hindi verb *pālan karnā*, which can be variously translated as "to perform" or "to obey", linked to the word *pūrā*, whose meaning is "wholly".

19 On 22 March 2020, "Hindustān fursat", a supplement of the Hindi newspaper "Hindustān", published an article named *Ḍar Karo-na*, whose title was a pun translatable as "Don't be Afraid" but also meaning "Corona Fear." Later, on 23

aforementioned video is the author's tendency to recast the therapeutic psychological functions embodied by humour and satire in a spiritually-oriented dimension. Against this backdrop, it is clear that Jogi's words were devoid of any marked religious connotation. Elsewhere, however, Jogi narrativised the pandemic also by adopting Hindu-oriented values and symbols. An example can be seen in the show uploaded on YouTube on 30 March 2020, wherein Jogi – taking a motif which was adopted, with different shapes, in many global public spheres, and reassessing it within the Indian context – drew an analogy between the war (*yuddh*) fought by people who persisted in accepting all restrictions and the one depicted in the *Mahābhārata*.[20] The tendency to re-adapt narratives drawn from India's past religious background and mythology was a common practice among humourist performers and, remarkably, it also impacted Hindi literary satirists during the pandemic. Interestingly, most of the performers who adopted these elements were authors usually joining the *sammelans.* Stand-up comedians were, to a larger extent, quite sceptical in using these elements. As shown in Table 1, memes and videos uploaded on YouTube during the pandemic also served a preventive informative function. Even in this case, a quite conspicuous number of the videos and cartoon videos – 7 out of 24 – show this dimension; conversely, this function appears to be less visible in the memes, where 9 out of the 107 elements have an informative value. Information on actions and social measures to be adopted to prevent the spread of the virus were, in some cases, directly provided by the performers; in other cases, they were added in the video description.

Before further and diachronically exploring how the ideological and political responses to the pandemic changed over time, it is worth investigating the most common topics presented during the pandemic. First of all, it is remarkable that most memes and vignettes produced during the first lockdown addressed the concepts of family and/or situations implying the relationship between two partners during the pandemic. As shown by Table 2, 20 of the investigated elements represented these topics. As for vignettes and memes, a large number of the representations were labelled as *Desi-memes* and focused mainly

March, "Hindustān" published a new article, named *Tanāv se kaise jīt pāeṃ* (How Could we Win against Stress), which enhanced newspaper's strategy of providing information to psychologically cope with the stress caused by the forthcoming lockdown.

[20] Video available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PBBnMUcBFTw&t=32s>.

on issues concerning the socio-cultural status of Indian women during the pandemic. The forms through which *Desi-memes* were represented varied considerably. In most instances, especially in the case of male authors, the main focus was to represent women as authoritarian and despotic housekeepers. These caricatures were not overtly characterised by sexist or deeply aggressive tones; nonetheless, they subtly represented masculine and patriarchal views concerning the status of Indian women. In a few cases, *Desi-memes* in Hindi and Hinglish were also adopted for popularising narratives about women's empowerment, particularly with regard to their right to self-determination and gender equality. Occasionally, however, clear-cut sexist representations of Indian women were also detected. Since the first wave of the pandemic, most of the elements with an informative function were characterised by references to masks and medicines; later, since 2021, reference was often made to the vaccine, generally with sceptical tones. Overall, as shown by Table 2, 16 of the elements investigated showcased the presence of references to masks, vaccines and medicines. The first wave of the pandemic was also characterised by the adoption of xenophobic, satirical narratives; these narratives, which were detected in 10 of the memes investigated, present in Table 2, concerned China and, to a lesser degree, Italy. Given this socio-cultural background, it is relevant to note that only on a few occasions was the administration of the Bharatiya Janata Party (Bhārtīy Janatā Parṭī, BJP) subjected to overt Hindi satirical criticisms about the way the Indian management dealt with the health crisis. Moreover, especially during the first wave of the pandemic, it seems that the Hindi public sphere was characterised by a 'normative' consistency with regard to the topics narrativised through the adoption of satire and humour. Most political criticisms were levelled by Indian stand-up comedians. This, for instance, was the case of the group of comedians Aisi taisi democracy, whose members, on the occasion of the celebration of workers' struggles on 1 May 2020, performed and uploaded an open satirical debate/performance called *Corona Virus Set for May Day* on YouTube[21]. This video, which mainly dealt with the COVID-19 crisis, also raised a number of local and international issues. The main objection raised by performers against the BJP, at the domestic level, and against Donald Trump, at the global level, was that these governments

[21] Video available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VI95g1ta2O4&t=1219s>.

had underestimated the virus. Moreover, governments were accused of negligence in trying to mitigate the crisis, especially in the period before the Indian lockdown. Another contentious issue was the role of the Indian administration in spreading fake news about the remedies that could help avoid contracting the virus. Within this larger ideological debate, there was also deep criticism against the reduced possibilities of free speech in India.

After the end of the lockdown, the Indian administration was heavily criticised for the way it managed the pandemic, and for the different responses provided by the government to face the health crisis. One major issue was the shortage of health and safety precautions and assistance to prevent the spread of the virus and to cure ill people. Moreover, a very common criticism against the BJP was that it allowed religious rallies and festivals, such as the 2021 Kumbh Mela, which facilitated the spread of the virus throughout the country (Venkataramanakrishnan 2021). During the second wave of the pandemic, the number of cases peaked by late April, when India reported 400,000 new cases and over 3,000 deaths in one day. At the time, the healthcare system was under a lot of pressure due to the lack of liquid medical oxygen and cryogenic tankers. It is beyond the scope of this article to investigate the reasons for the rapid spread of COVID-19 in India in 2021. It is, however, convenient to draw a diachronic intellectual trajectory of comedy in the period spanning between 2020 and 2021. The kind of informative and psychologically-oriented comedy that characterised the first wave in 2021 progressively disappeared in favour of a new approach that largely reflected dark narratives. After the pandemic reached its climax, in 2021, an illustrative satirical narrative of political dissent was unfolded by Aisi taisi Democracy, which published a cartoon video called *Super Spreader Anthem || Aisi Taisi Democracy || Rahul Ram + Varun Grover + Sanjay Rajoura #Covid19* on YouTube on 15 June 2021[22]. The protagonist and hero of this cartoon video, inspired by the game *Super Mario Bros,* is Narendra Modi, Prime Minister of India, depicted as an epigone of *Mario*. The anthem playing in the background of the video was performed by Rahul Ram, guitarist and singer of Aisi Taisi Democracy.

[22] Video available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yaqaNsizl0w>.

Modī jī, Modī jī
khīṁco deś kī bodhi jī
bhare śamśān dekhke
Bhārat māṃ bhī jī
Modī jī, Modī jī
Modī jī, Modī jī
āpne bolā COVID gone
mask bhī rakhā nahīṃ on
Kumbh Melā rally sab allow kar diyā [….]

Modi ji, Modi ji
You drag the corpse of the nation,
Looking at crowded crematoriums
Even Mother India cried
Modi ji, Modi ji
Modi ji, Modi ji
You had promised that COVID would have gone
You never even wore a mask
But you allowed Kumbh Mela and rallies […]
(Aisi Taisi Democracy, 2021)

As showcased by the presence of four indicators – lost lives, money, oxygen, and time – the aim of the hero and protagonist of the cartoon is to spread the virus in India in the quickest and most expensive way possible, by adopting a number of measures such as refusing support from other countries and allowing religious rallies and festivals which facilitate the spread of the virus. Interestingly, in spite of the ludic and captivating framework of the satire, the content of the video is deeply morbid. The passages referring to the burning funeral pyres of COVID-19 victims are particularly macabre. Indeed, especially in New Delhi, many people take the funeral pyres as a symbol of the government's inability to manage the situation. The cartoon video was also a way to express some general ideas about the Indian political and cultural mainstream and, in particular, the repression of the voices of political dissent and comments on Twitter and other sites[23]. Furthermore, there was strong criticism towards

[23] On some occasions over the last three years the Indian government was accused of restricting the power of tech companies in India and of policing "what is said online" (Singh, Conger 2022) on social networks and, especially, on Twitter. This tendency, according to the critics, started in 2020, in parallel with the rise of the Indian farmers' protest, and increased over the last two years. Recently, the former Twitter CEO

the tendency, even during the pandemic, of 'saffronising' the Indian political setting by promoting the therapeutic advantages of Hindu symbols and values. Based on the data collected, it is hard to gauge the online viewers' response to the satirical narratives developed during the pandemic. Nevertheless, some of the comments posted by users are useful to investigate the extent to which the uptake of the humourist and satirical contents actually worked. In the comments posted by users on the *Super Spreader Anthem* video, the will to extend the narrative of Aisi Taisi Democracy is evident, adding new elements to the political satire. For instance, one comment on *Mann ki baat* (Inner Thoughts), an Indian radio programme hosted by the Indian Prime Minister and aimed at addressing Indian citizens, states that: "This is mann ki baat of every citizen in this country". In another satirical appeal, equally mocking the statements made by the Indian Prime Minister, we read: "This song has the real things which nations want to say… Thank you so much".

As this satire shows, after the 'construction' of the Indian national symbols addressing the first wave of the crisis, a quite innovative phase, characterised by the partial deconstruction of these symbols, seemed to take hold in 2021 and 2022. This 'deconstructive' trajectory was pursued by authors, often engaged in new media, who spoke on behalf of the more marginalised individuals and communities of Indian society. Furthermore, even famous stand-up comedians, such as Ankita Shrivastav[24] and Rehman Khan,[25] by reflecting on biases and clichés which had emerged during the first wave of the pandemic, contributed problematising many issues, ranging from the role of religion and 'tradition' in a post-pandemic world to analysing the changes occurring in Indian contemporary families.

Jack Dorsey has alleged that the Indian government requested the removal of tweets and accounts linked to this protest; furthermore, Twitter, according to Dorsey, was also asked to censor journalists critical of the government (Mateen 2023). On its part, the Indian Government recently denied these allegations and, conversely, in 2020 accused the Twitter CEO of not respecting local norms and rules regulating the publication of contents on social networks.

[24] See the video *Main, Meri Family & Lockdown | Standup Comedy | Ankita Shrivastav*, published on YouTube on 1 February 2021 and available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IUZEll4AoVw>.

[25] See the videos *Indian People and Corona Virus| Stand up Comedy by Rehman Khan*, published on YouTube on 20 March 2020, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vCdIelHD7w0&t=91s>; *YouTube, Vaccine & Muslims | Stand up Comedy | Rehman Khan*, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RWEzIo59rXw>.

2.5. From New Media to Literary Satire

As mentioned in the introduction to this article, literary narratives imbued with satirical and humourist tendencies generally displayed a certain reticence in dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic. Nevertheless, Hindi literary production has offered some interesting examples of satirical narrativisation of the pandemic. It is important to note that most literary humourist and satirical writings on the pandemic were first published on the print and online editions of popular Hindi journals and magazines such as "Jansattā", "Purvācal Praharī", "Saritā", and others. After the end of the lockdown, many of the previously published satirical sketches were collected and included as part of literary anthologies published around the end of 2020 and 2021. It is also worth mentioning that many outstanding contemporary Hindi writers have not, to this day, displayed any specific commitment to the narrativisation of the COVID-19 pandemic. On the contrary, satirical writers such as Ajay Shukla, author of the column *Sattū jī ke fek nyūz* (Sattu ji's Fake News), published in the journal "Jansattā", and Alok Saksena, author of several sketches published in "Saritā"and "Purvācal Praharī", have prominently contributed to the process of satirical narrativisation of the pandemic. From a general analysis of these literary narratives, it can be ascertained that, on the one hand, a specific feature of the literary satirical narratives on the pandemic was that they displayed a continuity with literary tropes drawn from Hindi literature of the 1950s and 1960s, especially from the works of Harishankar Parsai[26]; on the other hand, they showed a deep thematic connection to some ideas and values produced, during the lockdown, on traditional and new media. With reference to the 'traditional' character of satires on COVID-19, on many occasions both the aforementioned literary satirists aimed to project contemporary symbolisms drawn from Indian history, mythology, and religion. Saksena's reassessment of the figure of Yamaraja, the Hindu God of Death, is particularly interesting. In the 1950s, Yamaraja had already been one of the main characters of Parsai's short story *Bholārām kā jīv* (Bholaram's Soul, 1954), and is now portrayed in the short story *Seniṭāijaryukt bāriś kā intazār* (Waiting for a Rain Filled with Sanitiser). In the latter,

[26] Parsai is usually deemed as the most outstanding literary satirist who authored many literary columns, novels, and short stories during the 1950s and 1960s. For a study see Mangraviti (2022).

Yamaraj is represented as a benevolent God who suffers for the dead people brought to the underworld:

> *Abhī maiṃ Nidrādevī ke āgoś meṃ āyā hī thā ki sapne meṃ mujhe Citragupta dikhāī die. Cehare par cintā kā bhāv thā. Citragupta ko cintit hotā huā dekh kar Yamrāja prakaṭ hue aur bole: 'Kyā bāt hai Citragupta? Pṛthvīlok kī koī samasyā hai kyā?'; 'Jī, cintā kī bāt yah hai ki abhī tak to maiṃ apne yahāṃ āne vālī ātmāoṃ kā lekhājokhā āsānī se purā kar liyā kartā thā. Ab dhartī par Koronā nām kā jānlevā vāyras cāroṃ taraf tejī se phail rahā hai, jo hamāre yahāṃ āne vālī ātmāoṃ kī saṅkhyāoṃ ko kaī gunā baṛhā saktā hai. Mujhe cintā is bāt kī hai kī apne pās bahutāy meṃ ātmāoṃ ko rakhne ke lie itnā parisar kahāṃ hai?'* […] *Citragupta bole: 'Jī, maiṃne patā karvā liyā hai ki vahāṃ āisoleśan vārḍ banākar Koronā samkramit rogīyoṃ ko alag rakh kar ilāj karvāyā jā rahā hai. Māsk aur seniṭāijar phrī meṃ bāṁṭe jā rahe haiṃ. Tamām jagahoṃ ko seniṭāijar se dhoyā jā rahā hai.* […] *Turant hī Yamrāja jī bole: 'Viśeṣ prabandhā karvākar dhartī par jaldī se jaldī seniṭāijar kī jhamājham bāriś karvā do.*
>
> As soon as I was embraced by Nitradevi, Chitragupta appeared to me in a dream. There was a hint of concern on his face. Recognising that Chitragupta was in deep concern, Yamaraja revealed itself and said: 'Is everything ok, Chitragupta? Is there any problem on the Earth?'. 'Yes, the reason for my concern is that, so far, accounting for the number of souls who came here was not a big task. Nowadays, the deadly Coronavirus is spreading so rapidly, all over the Earth, that the number of the departed people has dramatically increased. I wonder if there are enough buildings to welcome souls in our area.' […] Chitragupta stated: 'Yes, I found out that an isolation ward is being made there and all the Corona-infected patients are being treated separately. All the places are being washed with sanitiser. […] Immediately Yamaraja said: 'By making special arrangements, get the sanitiser rained on the Earth as soon as possible.' (Saksena 2020, p. 41)

In this and in many other writings by Saksena, unlike the previous uses of comedy on new media during the first wave, the homeostatic and psychological function is much more marked than mere satirical criticism. It is clear that by trying to cope with the fear and distress caused by the pandemic, the author has humanised Yamaraja. This rather unconventional representation of Yamaraja, significantly, was not only crafted by literary authors; the tales concerning Yamaraja during COVID-19 times found a place also in the *The Kapil Sharma*

Show, a Hindi-language stand-up comedy and talk show broadcast by Sony Entertainment Television and hosted by Kapil Sharma, one of the torchbearers of stand-up in India[27]. Moreover, Yamaraja was not the only figure marked by spiritual significance whose representation was functional to the construction of psychological coping strategies. Quite common was the reference in Saksena's writings to the Coronasur (Corona-demon), a demon epitomizing the features of the Coronavirus whose iconography was progressively moulded by Indian performers and artists engaged in different fields[28]. Informative messages – still veined by satirical and humourist overtones about the pandemic – can be found in articles and satirical sketches such as *Lākḍāun hai to kyā kareṃ tāki āpkā jīvan sārthak ho jae* (Lockdown: What you Should Do in Order to Make Your Life Fruitful) and *Korona kāl meṃ yog aur khunpān se manovṛtti badlie* (Change your Mental Disposition during Coronavirus' Times with Yoga, Food, and Drink). In India and around the globe, sceptical narratives have been the object of many memes; Saksena's adherence to such narratives can be identified by analysing works such as *Rūpyā banā imyuniṭī kī pahcān* (Money Became the Identification Card of Immunity) and *Koronā vāirolajī andhviśvās ke cakkar meṃ* (In the Superstition's Grip of Corona Virologists). Both the sketches portrayed the malpractices in the Indian national health system as well as the "superstitious beliefs" (*andhviśvās*) of Indian virologists and doctors. Another thematic feature which connects the narratives found in new media with those present in some literary satires consists of remarks on marital life. For many reasons, the aesthetic and ideological orientation of Saksena's satirical narratives on the pandemic seem to follow the same trajectory of narrativising the pandemic as previously detected in Sunil Jogi's performances. It showcases the same tendency to completely and indisputably accept

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[27] Such representation of Yamarāja is present in many shows by Kapil Sharma and particularly in the episode *In Yamarāja ko lagtā hai Corona Virus se bahut zyādā ḍar | The Kapil Sharma Show | Kapil Ke Avatar*, published on YouTube on 9 June 2022. In this episode Yamaraja is represented as a character who is frightened of the spread of the Coronavirus. Interestingly, characters who are usually associated with Yamaraja, such as Chitragupta, the Hindu deity who serves as a registrar of the dead, are also represented as 'villains', engaged in realising grotesque and clumsy evil deeds such as robbing dead people of their possessions. The video is available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=reTxjxs32Xo>.

[28] For a study concerning the religious values attributed to Coronasur in India and in other Asian countries see Hertzman et al. (2023).

the measures taken by the ruling administration on how to manage the pandemic. Furthermore, a *fil rouge* connects the satirical narratives of both authors: it consists of the tendency to reassess values and symbols extracted from India's past and, particularly, from Hindu heritage, with the intention of turning them into useful ways to trigger psychological coping strategies. From this perspective, addressing recent reflections by Zekavat on the connection between satire and the construction of identities (2017)[29], it could be stated that the kind of comedy pursued by the above-mentioned authors was mostly aimed at establishing values and symbols circumventing a quite homogeneous and Hindu-oriented notion of the Indian national community. In this regard, we should mention that both authors have distanced themselves from a more radical and critical approach adopted by Ajay Shukla, as clearly seen in his articles published in the print and online editions of "Jansattā" during the lockdown in 2020. Like Saksena, even Shukla seems to reassess historical values and symbols by adopting satire and humour. Nevertheless, at first sight Shukla's approach to the narrativisation of the pandemic seems to be less spiritually and religiously oriented. It is, rather, much more rooted in the 'tradition' of Hindi leftist satire, which dates back to 1950s literary production and, generally – but not exclusively – intermingles historical and mythical themes with a reflection on specific sociocultural claims and demands. From this perspective, an original feature in Shukla's works is his reflection on ecological matters — an issue which connects his literary production to the eco-literary experiments of Hindi contemporary literature (Consolaro 2016, pp. 107-121)[30]. Finally, it is important to analyse the deep thematic continuity between the political, ecological, and economic criticisms levelled by this literary satirist and those previously detected in the performances of Aisi taisi democracy. By sati-

[29] In Zekavat's words, satire "has been used both to resist and subvert, and to reinforce the structures of power and social systems. In both ways, however, satire is a determinant of identity formation by distinguishing certain groups from others." (Zekavat 2017, p. 5).

[30] With reference to the incorporation of ecologist issues in Ajay Shukla's satirical columns, we could mention, for instance, the satire *Koronā ko bhagvān kī ciṭṭī, paṛhkar hil gaīṃ sabkī cūleṃ* (By Reading God's Letter to Corona the Joints of All Will Be Shaken), published in the journal "Jansattā" on June 1 2020. The satire focuses on God's bitter reflection on the damage to nature generated by the existence of human beings. In this satire, differently from other productions composed by the same author, it is easier to find ties to spiritual symbols and themes.

rically analysing the COVID-19 crisis, Shukla, like other performative satirical authors, is interested in witnessing the political processes of homogenisation and removal of the marginal voices of political and socio-cultural dissent within Indian society. This criticism is quite evident, for instance, in the satire *Koronā par kaibineṭ kī baṛī baiṭhak, JS ke sujhāv par baṛke PS* (Big Cabinet Meeting on Corona Issue: Senior Minister Flares up for Joint Minister's Suggestion), published on 29 May 2020, in which Shukla – portraying an imaginary Minister's cabinet meeting – hints that by closing universities the Indian government is actually trying to erase all forms of dissent produced by the most radical and revolutionary streams of Indian youth.

> *Viśvavidyālaya vihīntā kā aslī fāydā to maiṃ ab batāne jā rahā huṃ. Soco, kitnā mazā āegā, jab na Jeenyū hogā va Jādavpur. Alīgaṛh kī kirakirī nikal jaegī… samjhe āp log? Yūnivarsiṭī khatm hone par arban naksal bhī khatm ho jāeṁge. Ye sab saraṅḍā ke jaṅgal meṃ apne celoṃ ke sāth Lāl kitab kā punarpāṭh aur apne cain kī banśī bajāeṁge. Viśvavidyālaya khatm hone par kā cauthā fāydā yah hogā ki paṛhe likhe berozgār khatm ho jāeṁge. Na na na. Berozgār to raheṁge par unkī aukāt nyūnatam mazdūrī ki ho jaegī.*
>
> I am now going to tell you the real benefit coming from the absence from university. Think how much fun it will be, when there are neither JNU nor Jadavpur. The grit of Aligarh[31] will be removed.… did you understand guys? Urban Naxals[32] will also be eradicated when the university ends. All of them will endlessly recite the *Lāl kitab*[33] with their disciples in the forest of Saranda playing the flute of their inner peace. The fourth advantage of the abolition of the university is that there will be no educated unemployed people. No, no, no. They will not be unemployed but they will have the status of a worker with minimum wage. (Shukla 2020).

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31 Here, reference is made to three Indian universities that have been, especially over the last ten years, particularly critical towards BJP's administration.

32 The Naxals are Communist guerrilla groups, ideologically inspired by Maoist ideology. On many occasions, universities have been blamed for providing ideological support to these groups.

33 We decided to maintain the original words *Lāl kitab* since, in this satirical context, this definition could refer not only to Mao's *The Little Red Book* but also, subtly, a set of books on Vedic palmistry and astrology which were authored during the 1930s in Hindi and Urdu.

2.6. Conclusion

Over the past years, humour and satire have turned out to be important tools to psychologically manage the pandemic in the Hindi public sphere. Digitalising these approaches and adopting them to develop different narrativisation strategies on COVID-19 has also paved the way for the development of some counter-narratives by 'radical' authors belonging to marginal realities within the Hindi public sphere. At the same time, especially the authors associated with *Hāsya kavi sammelans,* have welcomed satire and humour as important tools to legitimise the policies enacted throughout the years by the BJP government. Through a multidisciplinary approach, the present work has traced two very distinct trajectories pursued by satire and humour in the Hindi language. On the one hand, these elements were used during the pandemic, especially during the first lockdown, to strengthen the symbolisms and values characterising the Indian community, often represented as a monolithic and homogeneous national identity; on the other, especially since the second wave of the pandemic, satire and humour were adopted to deconstruct symbols and values concerning this identity. In both cases, it is interesting to note that the pandemic, although being the main focus of the narratives, was also a 'pretext' for developing broader reflections on Indian democracy and on the relationship between 'mainstream culture' and marginalised groups and communities. The narratives produced by traditional and new media cannot be underestimated as they have deeply remoulded the imaginaries, symbols, and values delimiting the boundaries of Indian identity. Presumably, in the next few years, comedy will become an important political mobilisation instrument in the Indian context, resulting in satire and humour often being subjected to legal and extra-legal repercussions within the Hindi public sphere and, more generally, in the contemporary Indian political framework, as can clearly be seen in the controversies surrounding the *Stand Up for India* contest held in 2020.

Table 1

Sr. No.	Medium	Psychological Function	Informative Function	Politics/ Ideology	Investigated Items
	Videos	15	8	4	22
	Cartoon Videos	0	2	2	2
	Memes/ Vignettes	4	9	9	107

Table 2

Sr. No.	Topic	Medium		
		Videos	**Cartoon Videos**	**Memes**
	Family/Relationship/Love	5	0	15
	Vaccine/Mask/Medicines	3	2	11
	Xenophobic/Antixenophobic	0	0	13
	Faith/Religion/History	7	1	2
	Sport and Game	0	0	8
	News and Misinformation	3	1	4
	War and Violence	3	0	3
	Technology	2	0	4
	Misogyny/Sexism	0	0	5
	Need to relax	0	0	5
	Study	0	0	5
	Music and Movies	2	0	3
	Alcohol and Tobacco	0	0	4
	Businesses	0	0	4
	Job	1	0	4
	Housework	0	0	3
	Food	0	0	3
	Socialisation	0	0	2
	Social Inequality	1	0	2
	Activity and Inactivity	1	0	1

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3. Narrating the Pandemic: *Paṭacitras* of West Bengal, India

Sanjukta Das Gupta

Abstract

This article examines the impact of the novel Coronavirus pandemic on the traditional scroll painters, the *citrakars* or *paṭuyās* of Bengal, and analyses the representations of the Coronavirus in the *paṭacitra* art of Medinipur and Kalighat. It argues that the adaptation of the narrative performances in the digital space marked an important milestone in the long history of the transformation of Bengal *paṭacitras*. Since the last decade of the 20th century, the market for *paṭacitras* has become increasingly urban, and even global. By opening up *paṭuyā* art in the cyberspace and the social media, a direct contact was established between village-based scroll painters and a world-wide virtual audience during the first phase of the pandemic in India, a period which saw the creation of a series of pandemic related scroll paintings, reflecting shared universal concerns regarding human vulnerability. The initial optimism, however, was dissipated during the second, more virulent phase of the pandemic.

Keywords: *Paṭacitra*; Folk art; Narrative; Scroll painting; *Paṭuyā, Citrakar*.

3.1. Introduction

Epidemics and pandemics, as David Arnold reminds us, not only lead to death and destruction. These are also profound cultural episodes reflected in literature and visual imagery, which in turn become sites of memory for reimagining and revisiting the past (Arnold 2022, Introduction). Art, in fact, has always responded to societal challenges

and crises through its creative repertoire as well as through activism. Through their representations, artists question a crisis, while simultaneously promoting hope. Although epidemics in India have historically been reflected in literary and photographic representations, a remarkable feature of the COVID-19 pandemic lies in its depiction in the various traditional art forms of the subcontinent[1]. Such artistic representations convey the thoughts not only of the individual artist, but also of the community within which s/he is located. Furthermore, such art forms were also utilized by various agencies to spread awareness about the pandemic and to create a consensus regarding the adoption of health and safety measures.

A month after the COVID-19 lockdown was declared in India on 24 March 2020, Swarna Chitrakar, a scroll-painter and performer from Naya, a village in the Indian state of West Bengal famed for *paṭacitra*s, became a social media sensation in the country through a video recording of her scroll painting and accompanying song on the pandemic which outlined its origins in China and the havoc it created in countries around the world. The video which was uploaded by the non-governmental organization Banglanatak Dom Com soon attracted the attention of the national and international press. A number of reports and interviews of the artist followed, focusing on the plight of traditional artists and craftsmen under the lockdown and their attempts to earn a livelihood by creating artwork relevant to the times. While Swarna Chitrakar's performance was the most popular and visible, simultaneous posts on *paṭacitra* song narratives circulated in the social media which emphasized practical health directives much in the same way as governmental advisories and conveyed the necessity of maintaining the lockdown and practising sanitation and hygiene precautions.

* I would like to thank Ananya Bhattacharya, Anwar Chitrakar, Bhaskar Chitrakar, Manimala Chitrakar, Shreyashi Sircar, Sofie Magnusson, Sushama Chitrakar, Bahadur Chitrakar, Rani Chitrakar, Rupsona Chitrakar, Baharjan Chitrakar, banglanatok.com, Emami Art Gallery, and the Huseby Bruk Museum for sharing their time and information and for granting permission to use the photographs.

1 For instance, madhubanī artists of Bihar, kāvaḍ and phaṛ painters of Rajasthan produced artwork that stressed the importance of maintaining social distance, wearing facemasks and hand sanitizing, while *paṭṭacitra* artists of Raghurajpur, Odisha, showed characters from Indian mythology and Hindu gods wearing face masks (Tilak 2020).

This article explores the response of the *paṭacitra* art of Bengal, to the COVID-19 crisis and examines the adaptations of the Bengal *paṭacitra* to the pandemic with reference to two types of *paṭacitra*: those produced in Eastern Medinipur district of the state of West Bengal, centred around the village of Naya, and the Kalighat *paṭ*s of Kolkata. I argue that the *paṭuẏā*s or *citrakar*s, the 'picture-showmen' (Jain 1998), who had already transitioned into a 'rurban' community since the end of the 20th century, inhabiting a professional space that was partly rural and partly urban, became a 'glocal' community with an expanded sphere of activity in the virtual world during the first phase of the pandemic (2020-21). Not only was the art now exhibited before a global audience, digitalization with the help of non-governmental agencies, academic institutions and museums, also opened new income-earning avenues. This initial phase, thus, appeared to represent a milestone in the development of this art-form when the traditional artists or *paṭuẏā*s attempted to recreate their life as well as their art form by embracing the digital space. However, the second phase of the pandemic and the spread of the Delta variant brought in a phase of despondency, replacing the earlier optimistic period.

To evaluate the art of the pandemic, the article first provides an overview of the historical evolution of *paṭacitra* art in Bengal and its adaptation to changing social circumstances. The following section examines the *paṭacitra*s of Medinipur and Kalighat, tracing the ways in which *paṭacitra* art has been reinvented in the digital space, and investigates the impact of the pandemic on the livelihood of the *paṭuẏā*s, while the final section analyses the visual and oral tropes used to depict the pandemic and the lockdown.

3.2. *Paṭacitra* Art of Bengal: Changing Trajectories

There was, in fact, a long tradition of dissemination of information through the folk arts in India, in particular by using scroll paintings, the *paṭacitra*s or *paṭ*s. The latter typically consist of a series of pictures, painted vertically or horizontally on canvas[2] and attached to two wooden sticks at either end. The scrolls are unrolled frame by frame in accompaniment with a song narrating the events illustrated in the *paṭ*s.

[2] The name *paṭacitra* derives from the Sanskrit word *paṭṭa*, or cloth.

Variously known as *paṭuẏā*s or *citrakar*s[3], scroll painters come from both Hindu and Muslim communities. In the past, *paṭuẏā*s performed as itinerant picture-storytellers, who travelled from village to village within their locality[4]. Their repertoire largely consisted of stories from Hindu mythology, the *Rāmāyaṇa*, the *Mahābhārata*, the *Maṅgal'kābya*s, as well as stories of the miracles performed by Muslim saints, all of which were firmly anchored within the moral values of the rural communities. There is also a general belief among *paṭuẏā*s today, that in the past they had acted as envoys and negotiators for local power-wielders conveying secret messages encoded within the *paṭ*s, thanks to their access to their inner quarters of the local gentry[5].

With the growth and development of the British colonial city of Calcutta since the late 18th century, many *paṭuẏā*s migrated there in search of a livelihood. They settled near the famous Kālī temple in Kalighat where they performed their art before visiting pilgrims. In the process, the itinerant rural storytellers were transformed to a sedentary group performing before a mobile audience. Together with live performances, they also took to painting square or *cauka paṭ*s (Fig. 1) with single pictures, usually of deities, which were sold as souvenirs. In course of time their subject-matter also expanded to include contemporary news, scandals and satiric portrayals of the Calcutta gentry or *bābu*s. Since the late 19th century, however, both the rural and the urban *paṭ*s began to decline, confronted by availability of cheap, realistic photographic reproductions (Banerjee 1989, pp. 134-135) on the one hand, as well as the new taste of their patrons who gradually lost interest in the art-form under the growing influence of modern education and urban

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[3] While they are popularly referred to as *paṭuẏā*, the picture storytellers today identify themselves as *citrakar*, i.e. an artist. British colonial ethnographers distinguished between *paṭuẏā*s/ '*paṭidār*s' and *citrakar*s, believing they constituted distinct caste groups (Hunter 1876, pp. 169–70; Risley 1981, p. 206). The Indian folklorist Gurusaday Dutt, however, believed them to be identical (Dutt 1939). More recently, Beatrix Hauser reiterated that *paṭuẏā*s and *citrakar*s constitute two different categories (Hauser 2002, pp. 107-108).

[4] Roma Chatterjee has identified three distinct sub-regional schools of *paṭa* paintings, each with their own style: the Tamluk-Kalighat-Tribeni Samajik School, the Birbhum-Kandi-Katwa Samajik School and a third school at Behrampur-Murshidabad, which has died out (Chatterjee 2012, p. 43). In the Ādivāsī villages of Western Bengal, *paṭuẏā*s, known as the *jādupaṭiẏā*s (the *paṭuẏā*s dealing with magic) still play a significant role in the mortuary rituals of Santals. For details, see Hadders (2008); Sen Gupta (2012). For a discussion on the evolution of *paṭacitra*s since the 19th century, see Dutt (1939); Chatterjee (2000); Chatterji (2012), Ghosh (2000; 2003), Hauser (2002).

[5] Interview with Manimala Chitrakar at Naya, West Bengal, 21 April 2022.

lifestyles. By the 1930s, as the civil servant and folklorist Gurusaday Dutt discovered, *paṭacitra* art had practically disappeared in the countryside and most of the noted *paṭuẏā*s had taken to new occupations and wage labour to eke out a living. Dutt attempted to revive the craft by popularizing it among the urban elite as part of the contemporary intellectual movement which sought to reconstruct an authentic national identity based on an idealized rural world (Korom 1989, p. 76; Hauser 2002, p. 111). While the aim was to reinvigorate the national moral life through a reorientation towards its rural roots (Basu 2008, p. 268), the outcome was that the urban elite effectively became the principal patrons of rural art forms.

Elite association with *paṭuẏā* art was further strengthened in the 1970s through collaborative efforts of governmental and non-governmental agencies such as the West Bengal Crafts Council and the Daricha Foundation, which aimed at the revival and development of the traditional art-form through protective and promotional initiatives. The net result of such interventions is that *paṭacitra* art today has become an integral part of the elite urban culture where *paṭacitra*s are reified as 'authentic folk art', with the urban and global markets serving as the main clientele of the *paṭuẏā*s, and has little relevance within the rural milieu where entertainment is provided by cinema, television and *jātrā* or the traditional theatre. The urban turn in folk art, partly for aesthetic reasons, partly for survival and partly as the outcome of the search for a national identity, has heralded a new tradition especially in the context of the contemporary globalized space of free consumption. Hence, while folk traditions are necessarily embedded within the affective and moral world of a community, the redefinition of the community has resulted in the expansion of the sphere of the 'folk' to cover interests and expressive cultures which were previously outside it.

*Paṭacitra*s nowadays have come to reflect urban sensibilities and international events to a large extent, information for which is often provided by outside agents[6]. Thus a large section of *paṭacitra* artists inhabit a 'rurban' space today, situated between the rural and the urban.

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[6] See for instance, Moyna Chitrakar's *paṭ*s on the 9/11 bombing of the World Trade Center (Chatterji 2012; Korom 2006; Mukhopadhyay 2008), Rani and Jamuna Chitrakar's tsunami *paṭ*s of 2005, the *paṭacitra*s on the French Revolution (by Madhu Chitrakar, for instance) commissioned by the Alliance Francaise of Kolkata in 2009, and Manimala Chitrakar's Pinocchio *paṭacitra* performance organised by the Italian Consulate General in Kolkata in May 2022.

They have thus broadened their vision to encompass the moral universe beyond their immediate environment. Simultaneously, there are some artists who inhabit an exclusively urban space, notably Bhaskar Chitrakar who identifies himself as a practitioner of the distinctively urban Kalighat style. These transformations have led to experimentations in the modes of storytelling and expression. For instance, some contemporary folk arts have come to demonstrate the same self-reflexivity that is the characteristic of modern art (Chatterji 2012, pp. 30-31). Such changes became more pronounced when the folk-art form was exhibited in the virtual space during the pandemic. Digitalization of the *paṭacitra* has further emphasized the individualization of *paṭacitra* artists/performers who are now increasingly identified by their personal repute, rather than as a collective. Another inevitable change that occurred over the years was that from a performative art, *paṭacitra*s have effectively been transformed into a visual art form (Hauser 2002). Many within the *paṭuẏā* community are, however, vocal about the need to reclaim the performative oral tradition. For instance, the senior artist Dukhushyam Chitrakar[7], was dissatisfied with the selling of *paṭacitra* solely as an item of visual art which he feared would lead to the extinction of the age-old tradition of *paṭer gān* or *paṭuẏā saṅgīt*[8]. Despite this, the main function of *paṭuẏā* art has become largely decorative, restricted within the limited spheres of workshops, museums and exhibitions, often dictated by the sensibilities of a largely urban and often international clientele. The circulation of videos of the Coronavirus *paṭacitra*s in the social media thus constituted an important step in rejuvenating the narrative and performative tradition.

One of the major hubs of *paṭacitra* art today is the village of Naya in West Medinipur district, situated about 60 kilometres from Kolkata where the *paṭuẏā*s have increasingly taken a pro-active role in promoting their art. They have established several co-operatives including *Naya Paṭuẏā Mahilā Unnaẏan Samiti* (Naya Paṭuẏa Women's Self-Help Association, and more recently, the Chitrataru Cluster in the Pingla block of West Medinipur whose activities include the annual *paṭacitra* festival, Poṭ-Māẏā, which promotes, sustains and markets *paṭuẏā* art

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7 A master *paṭuẏā* at Nayā, Dukhushyam Chitrakar was one of the most respected *paṭacitra* artists of Medinipur. He held exhibitions in Italy, Australia, Bangladesh and all over India. He died on 9 March 2022.

8 See Fruzzetti, Östör (2007, quot. in Ponte 2015).

and thereby engenders the general development of their region. The Cluster also got a Geographical Indication (GI) tag for the art form in 2018. Although the rural audience no longer needs to look to *paṭuẏā*s for news, or information, *paṭacitra*s have been routinely commissioned by both governmental and non-governmental agencies on specific themes for propaganda and for spreading awareness on health, hygiene, family planning and women's education (Korom 2011). The fortunes of the *paṭuẏā*s, however, are largely tied up with cultural festivals and art fairs organised in various urban centres across the country and internationally. The COVID-19 lockdown which suddenly disconnected them from their urban clientele without any warning thus had serious repercussions on the *paṭuẏā*s.

3.3. Impact of the Pandemic on the *Paṭuẏā* Community

Although the urban patronage of *paṭacitra* art did reinvigorate the art and popularize it on a national and global scale, the condition of the *paṭuẏā* community remained precarious over the years. While *paṭacitra* art is an important source of income for both men and women in Naya, this is not in itself sufficient to sustain their families. In many cases, the male members of *paṭuẏā* families were forced to give up painting scrolls and take to other occupations such as masonry and driving trolley vans. Furthermore, since there is no local demand for the *paṭ*s, a division of labour has also developed in the village of Naya whereby the women paint the *paṭacitra* and do the housework within their village, while the men go out for work and for marketing the products (Chandra 2018, pp. 270-71). Nevertheless, the revival of *paṭacitra*s, also brought about socio-economic empowerment, particularly for the women who are encouraged to take up the art. There is a general awareness among the *paṭuẏā* community about the value of literacy, and the income generated from selling their art and related goods led to an increase in their living standards. Many have constructed their own houses with proper sanitation and almost every rural home today has electricity (Bhattacharya 2022).

As Duncan and Höglund emphasized, the pandemic affected different sections of society in diverse ways (Duncan, Höglund 2021, p. 115), with the marginalized people experiencing a disproportionate impact. The lockdown and the subsequent closure of the urban market, the absence of tourists in Pingla, as well as the absence of art fairs, domestic

and international exhibitions and workshops effectively rendered the rural artists incomeless and vulnerable. Zanetta and Gera Roy point out, their current precarity was primarily due to the economic instability caused by the severely diminished demand for *paṭ*s and live performances during the epidemic (2021, p. 61), which compounded their pre-existing socio-economic difficulties accruing from the irregular nature of patronage. While NGOs and private patrons made personal loans and donations during the first lockdown of 2020, these dried up during the second wave. In May 2020, the cyclone Amphan destroyed many of their houses and their artwork, creating further hardships. Although the West Bengal government provided some rations to low-income groups, these did not suffice for their entire families, and as a result *paṭuẏā*s were forced to borrow for their subsistence needs. Many of the poorer artists gave up painting and returned to farming in the hope of making ends meet (Belanus 2020).

It is in this context of an uncertain future that some *paṭacitra* artists created *paṭ*s depicting the origin and spread of the Coronavirus. The first artist to create the pandemic *paṭ*s and songs, Swarna Chitrakar[9] stated, "I know the lockdown is essential, but so many people have been left without jobs and are being pushed into poverty. So, I thought it was important to highlight why no one should die of hunger while already being scared of the disease" (Das 2020). Following Swarna Chitrakar's digitalized performance on the social media, the Coronavirus *paṭacitra* performances took off both in the social media as well as in presence at the ground level.

3.4. The Art of the Pandemic: Different Phases

Taking the period 2020-22 as a whole, it is possible to identify two broad phases of response to the pandemic on the part of the *paṭacitra* artists. The first period between March 2020 and March 2021 represented an initial phase of hope, despite the hardships caused by the lockdown. This was followed by a period of despondency since March 2021 during the second wave of the pandemic, the outcome of the outbreak of the Delta variant.

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[9] Born in 1974 to a family of *paṭuẏā*s from the village of Naya, Swarna Chitrakar learnt scroll painting and *paṭuẏā saṅgīt* from her father. An experienced artist, her work has received critical acclaim in India and abroad.

In a bold statement of possibilities, Arundhati Roy had pointed out that by forcing humans to "break with the past and imagine their world anew," pandemics historically have served as a portal, or "a gateway between one world and the next" (Roy 2020). Confronted with the lockdown, *paṭacitra* artists, in fact hopefully looked to the future, utilizing the new virtual space where they could perform, showcase and market their *paṭ*s. The digital media thus created an opportunity to recreate for a wider audience the performative aspect of *paṭacitra*s to the accompaniment of narrative songs, rather than exhibit them as examples of visual art. Following the example set by Swarna Chitrakar, her daughter Mamoni Chitrakar created her versions of the pandemic *paṭ*, with accompanying songs narrating the story of the spread of the pandemic. The novelty of such portrayals attracted the attention of both the local administration and academic and non-governmental organisations which utilized the artists to spread the message of the necessity of maintaining the lockdown, to spread awareness about COVID-19 and to promote the adoption of recommended health measures and hygiene habits among the local people of the region, as well as to create new income opportunities for *paṭuẏā*s.

A significant step in employment generation was undertaken by the department of Humanities and Social Sciences of the Indian Institute of Technology at Kharagpur through its outreach programme[10]. With the goal of creating an online exhibition, they commissioned 22 painted scrolls and 60 posters from *paṭuẏā*s of Naya, including Gurupada Chitrakar, Bahadur Chitrakar, Swarna Chitrakar and others. Other organizations such as West Bengal Housing Infrastructure Development Corporation Ltd (WBHIDCO), also commissioned these *paṭacitra*s in their bid to raise awareness against COVID-10 and encourage people to follow safety protocols. It was argued that it would be easier to connect with the local people and ensure their compliance if government regulations were presented in the local dialects by their social peers. How efficacious this was as a means of disseminating and promoting local awareness would seem questionable, given the fact that *paṭacitra* performances rarely have any rural audience today. However, it was seen that the *paṭacitra* performances were fairly successful in attracting

[10] The project entitled "Folk Artists in the Time of Coronavirus, 2020-2022", was led by principal investigator Anjali Gera Roy. Available at: <http:/www.dlb.iitkgp.ac.in/>.

the attention of local spectators and fellow community members who had gathered to collect relief materials. Gurupada Chitrakar observed:

> When we came to IIT Kharagpur and stood in a line arranging our *paṭ*s, people began to wonder what we were up to. But when we started singing, gradually people listened carefully and wanted to see the pictures and listen to the songs. Those standing in the queue began to pay attention to whether they were standing too close or lowering their masks even though they know about COVID-19 already[11].

The *paṭuẏā*s also started public awareness performances on their own initiative. Both Gurupada Chitrakar and Anwar Chitrakar[12] played a significant role in this respect. Initially, they displayed their scrolls, like banners, on either side of the neighbourhood streets to educate the local people about preventive measures. The local administration also became involved in these endeavours. With the permission and encouragement of the local police and the Block Development Officer of Pingla, Anwar organized small groups of 10 to 12 *paṭuẏā*s to stress on the necessity of maintaining social distancing and practicing hygiene by displaying social awareness *paṭacitra*s. The Chitrataru Cluster set up the *Koronā Mokābilā Sacetanatā Bartā* (Awareness Campaign to Combat the Coronavirus) which regularly arranged programmes at the marketplace at Naya to raise public consciousness.

In an attempt to increase the tourist footfall, the Chitrataru Cluster organised the Incredible India Weekend Getaway in Naya on 31 December 2020 when the lockdown restrictions were lifted. *Paṭuẏā*s conducted workshops and demonstrations on *paṭacitra* art and preparation of organic dyes and colours. Groups of *paṭuẏā*s narrated not only the story of the pandemic, but also the older, more traditional *Maṅgal'kābya* and *Krṣnalīlā* stories. Visitors included eminent personalities like the actors Arindam Ganguly and Kheyali Dastidar as well as tourists from cities like Kolkata, Kharagpur and Durgapur who participated in workshops and visited the community museum. The success

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11 Gurudpada Chitrakar's interview, quot. in Ghosh (2021).

12 The son of the *paṭuẏā* Amar Chitrakar, Anwar Chitrakar was born in 1980. He paints on diverse themes ranging from depictions of Radha and Krishna to contemporary concerns such as environmental degradation, political corruption, Maoist insurgency, HIV, child marriage, and surrogate motherhood. He has held exhibitions in Kolkata, Delhi, Mumbai and Chennai. He is the recipient of the West Bengal State Award (2002) and the National Award (2006).

of the weekend campaign appeared to infuse the village of Naya with a new energy and vigour. Thus, till March 2021 at any rate, despite hardships experienced by individual families, the *paṭuẏā* community of Naya could look forward to future possibilities and could also earn national and international recognition of their performative art using social media platforms like Facebook, Whatsapp and YouTube[13]. The works of some of the *paṭuẏā*s, like Swarna, Mamoni and Anwar Chitrakar, were displayed in virtual exhibitions in national and international art galleries and museums[14] .

The second wave of the pandemic, however, put a sudden end to this spirit of optimism. The virulence of the Delta variant of the Coronavirus, together with governmental ineptitude in handling the crisis, the scale of mortality and the extent of socio-economic dislocation led to a situation in which neither the performing artists, nor their audience had the leisure nor the inclination to appreciate their creative output. Many of the *paṭuẏā*s and their family members contracted the disease. Since the outbreak of the pandemic, many of the chronic ailments of patients had been neglected because of the medical concentration on treatment of COVID-19 patients. As hospital beds and oxygen supplies ran out, many succumbed to 'co-morbidities.' For instance, the renowned *paṭacitra* artist Gurupada Chitrakar died on 29 June 2021 as a result of COVID-19 complications[15]. Faced with an unprecedented medical calamity and an economic crisis brought about by the lockdown, the government also stopped the stipends to the *paṭacitra* artists which added to the precarity of their daily lives.

Following the second wave, their financial woes were compounded by the fact that almost every *paṭuẏā* had become indebted to moneylenders. "Almost every artist has taken debt from moneylenders or have bought things on loan. I have a debt of Rs 20,000 … We have to buy vegetables, oil, sugar, fruits so we have to take a loan," said Rahim Chitrakar, who has to support a five-member household (Tripathi 2021). Furthermore, once the second wave gradually came under

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13 See 7th Appeal. Patua Artists, West Bengal, put up by the Asian Heritage Foundation, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zvl0_RfnyJo>.

14 For instance, Swarna and Mamoni Chitrakar's scrolls were exhibited in the Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, while Anwar Chitrakar's paintings were displayed in the digital exhibition organised by Emami Art Gallery.

15 For an insightful analysis of Gurupada Chitrakar's life and works, see Korom (2021).

control, there was a general fatigue with the virtual media, which also put an end to the performative aspect of the art which only a year ago had sought to reach out to a global audience on an issue of universal concern. When I visited Naya on a field trip in April 2022, I found a pervasive atmosphere of despondency and desperation, a far cry from the frenetic activity of the weekend getaway of December 2020.

3.5. Storytelling through Songs

How did the *paṭuẏā*s narrate the story of the pandemic? To analyze their representations, we shall examine both the music and the artwork of the *paṭacitra* artists. The *paṭacitra*s dealt with two principal themes: narratives of the origin and spread of the Coronavirus, the efforts to combat the crisis, and its impact on the lives of the people, and secondly, practical information regarding the need to maintain the lockdown and the health and hygiene measures to be followed. Sometimes these two themes were addressed in the same scroll painting, like those of Swarna and Mamoni Chitrakar. Others, like that of Rahim Chitrakar's, appear to have been commissioned by the district authorities and were purely informative in nature.

Swarna Chitrakar's song, which lasts over 7 minutes, begins with a traditional lament invoking divinity and highlights the fact that while the virus originated in China, it caused suffering throughout the world, binding together all mankind through a shared universal pain[16].

Listen [to me], oh merciful one
How do I narrate the story of Coronavirus?
It breaks my heart, what can I say?
Grief has overshadowed the earth
It is there in every household
A father cries, so does a mother
A son is there abroad
Grandmothers cry and ask how they can live
The virus came from China to the human body
It spreads from person to person
Or so I hear again and again
How could you give birth to such a poisonous virus[17]?

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[16] Swarna Chitrakar's performance is available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lJZvJY6J4BY>.

[17] All translations of the *paṭuẏā* songs from Bengali are the author's.

The second part of her performance draws attention to the precautionary measures that people needed to adopt, the different initiatives taken by the government to flatten the curve, and the selfless work by medical professionals, effectively weaving together the shared global and local concerns.

Swarna's daughter, Mamoni Chitrakar, likewise depicts the Coronavirus as a demon and her painting is accompanied with the song, *Koronābhāirās kathā śune, cokhe dhārā bahe yāy*. Together with the lamentations, she advises the audience not to ignore the symptoms, but to seek immediate medical help.

On hearing the story of the Coronavirus
Tears flow from the eyes
The shadow of sorrow has spread across the world
The heart aches.
The virus has come from China
Listen everyone
Very speedily it enters
The bodies of humans.
Those of you affected by the virus
Please go to the doctor, all of you.
Lakhs of people have lost their lives
From this virus …
If you have fever, coughs or breathing problems
Take the advice of your doctor.
There will be no loss[18].

Other composers created songs which were informative in tone and made an earnest appeal to people to follow government norms. The following song by Rahim Chitrakar set the leitmotif which reappeared in various forms in subsequent performances:

We must together be aware, oh people
We must together be aware
India government has announced
A 21-day lockdown is necessary
The virus will then not spread
We will then defeat it, oh people.
So we have to be careful

[18] Patachitra Song on COVID-19 by Mamoni Chitrakar', available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iBx12Jgd5SA>.

All the time, oh people
The government doesn't want us to be harmed
Give your consent to the lockdown
Follow the government's words, oh people …
We will all be locked at home
No public meetings
We will live ourselves, and let others live
Take this oath.

Another version, composed by Gurupada Chitrakar, called upon people to obey the lockdown rules and advice of doctors, as there was no effective treatment against the disease[19].

Listen [to me] everyone, listen attentively
To maintain the lockdown, is necessary for all
If you follow the lockdown, oh listen [to me] brothers
To save oneself, we have to practice safety
This virus has such power, I'm telling you all
From one person to four hundred, there is no escape
Let's all of us stay at home together, not create problems for others
In case of coughs and fever, we'll go to the hospital
And seek the advice of the doctor-babus
The doctor-babus say, oh listen [to me] brothers
Repeatedly with soap, we must wash our hands.
Conducting tests many times, the learned ones say
There is no cure at the moment
So do take precautions now, oh friends.

Unlike Swarna Chitrakar's compositions, both Rahim and Gurupada Chitrakar's songs are direct in nature and shorn of the customary invocation to divinity, or lamentations on the fate of the hapless man. According to Anwar Chitrakar, this turn towards the creation of instructive *paṭ*s was in keeping with his calling, since *paṭuẏā*s had traditionally performed the task of disseminating news and information among people, especially during times of crisis. Like Rahim and Gurupada Chitrakar, Anwar dispenses with conventional invocations and appeals directly to the people: "Listen to me everyone, listen to me with attention, I will narrate the tale of this epidemic disease"[20].

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[19] 'Gurupada Chitrakar', available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xk-PG0Oea7U>.

[20] Anwar Chitrakar's interview, available at: <https://www youtube. com/ watch?v= ay73TG665vE>.

Rahim Chitrakar also composed other songs which gave an account of the countries affected by Coronavirus, tracing the spread of the virus from China to America and to India. While the virus itself is portrayed as a foreign contagion, the suffering is shown to be universal[21].

> Corona took birth in the land of China, oh listen everyone,
> The game started in China and Corona spread everywhere in the country
> So many people died in China, oh listen everyone.
> Corona killed people in America, the government was perturbed
> Alas, hundreds and hundreds were infected, oh listen everyone
> The American government worried about when the cure for corona would be found
> Both doctors and the government worried continuously, oh listen everyone
> The Coronavirus reached India and first attacked people of Kerala …
> Mamatadidi is thinking, if this lockdown continues
> How will village people earn their living?
> Didi announced on tv and the internet that everyone will get rations of rice and flour
> It will be given free to all people.

The song quoted above, drives home the point that the Chief Minister of the state of West Bengal, Mamata Banerjee, popularly referred to as 'Didi' (elder sister) was doing all she could to ameliorate the living conditions of those affected by the lockdown, in particular the rural poor, through provisions of free food rations. This is an indication that the *paṭuẏā* programme of mass information was not entirely free of political patronage.

A number of *paṭer gān* or songs were composed specifically for public performances organised by the Chitrataru Cluster at Naya marketplace. Most of these songs began with the traditional lamentation, reiterating, for instance, that ''A silent torment is going on throughout the world/ [one's] heart breaks, but there are no words/ such is the sorrow.'' These, moreover, appear to be variations on earlier compositions and are inferior in artistic merit. Some of the songs were in fact set to the music of popular folk songs recorded by well-known professional urban artistes, probably to attract the attention of the passers-by. Gradually, less care was taken in composing the songs as the theme had become stale, with little scope for innovation, and failed

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[21] The performance is available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VhNgsQO6OC4>.

to hold the attention of the audience. By the following year, in 2022, most of the *paṭuẏā*s dispensed altogether with singing the songs of the Coronavirus.[22] Instead, they simply narrated the events, explaining the significance of each panel. Thus, the performative aspect of the scroll paintings seems to have once again been relegated to the background, with the focus again on the visual aspect.

3.6. Storytelling through Images

The visual imageries of the Coronavirus *paṭacitra*s reveal two tropes – that of pathos, and of humour. While the Naya scroll-paintings largely drew upon pathos, the Kalighat-style *cauka paṭ*s were more humorous in tone.

It had taken Swarna fifteen days to write the lyrics, compose the music and paint the Coronavirus *paṭ* (Das 2020). An elaborate seven-frame scroll, it shows the Coronavirus in the form of a demon, an *asura* or *rākṣasa* attacking mankind (Fig. 2). This is repeated in the scrolls painted by Mamoni Chitrakar and others like Sushama Chitrakar, Rupsona Chitrakar, Suman Chitrakar and Jamuna Chitrakar.

The idea of equating the Coronavirus as an *asura* attacking mankind is common in the different traditions of folk art across the Indian subcontinent. For instance, this was a recurrent motif in the temporary pandals put up during the Durgā Pūjā festivities in the city of Kolkata. Usually decorated by rural artisans to promote folk art among an urban population, many of these pandals sported the theme of the slaying of Koronāsura, i.e. Coronavirus imagined in the form of a demon or *asura*. In some popular Durgā Pūjā venues, Koronāsura replaced the idol of the traditional Mahiṣāsura, the buffalo demon slain by goddess Durgā[23]. The Yakṣagaṇa Bombeyātā puppet-show videos of the Kasaragod region of northern Kerala, showed the slaying of Koronāsura by Dhanvantarī, the god of medicine (Poikayil 2020). In Bangladesh too, the artist Sambhu Acharya depicted the Coronavirus as an archetypal mythological demon with the usual iconographic characteristics of "long fangs, sharp claws bull-like horns, bulging eyeballs, and a remarkable moustache" in

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[22] During my field trip in April 2022, I found the *paṭuẏā*s preferred to explain the meanings of each panel, rather than sing the lyrics composed on the theme.

[23] The Koronāsura has been depicted in various forms. In some pandals, the head was made to resemble the Sars-CoV-2 particle, while in others the demon was depicted in green (Ellis-Petersen 2020).

his painting *Koronāsura badh* (the Slaying of the Koronāsura) (Hertzman et al. 2023, 1). In a similar way, the Naya scroll artists typically portrayed the Coronavirus as an *asura*, a malignant demon capable of shifting shapes and consuming human beings. Manimala Chitrakar, for instance stated, ''the virus has destroyed both lives and livelihoods and it is constantly changing its shape through new strains like the *asura*s of the past and their shape-shifting abilities[24].

Calamities like epidemics are traditionally interpreted as the outcome of an imbalance in the cosmic order, and as David Arnold points out, their destructive and uncontrollable nature make them appear as manifestations of divine wrath (Arnold 1986, pp. 128-113), or as the machinations of a demonic 'other', exemplified, for instance by the Jwarāsura or the demon of fever. Long considered to be a folk deity of lower-class, lower-caste people, Jwarāsura, as Projit Bihari Mukharji argues, has a long history wherein the fever demon was constantly re-embedded into ''multiple heterogenous traditions of religio-moral practice,'' both folk and classical (Mukharji 2013, pp. 261-262). Such longstanding beliefs lent themselves to the conceptualization of the novel Coronavirus as Koronāsura. At the same time, the motif of the demon or *rākṣasa* had earlier been used to depict different natural calamities as well as disease afflicting humankind. Swarna Chitrakar herself had previously used it in her scrolls on HIV-AIDS and tuberculosis[25], while Rani and Jamuna Chitrakar had depicted similar demons in their *paṭ*s on the tsunami of 2004 (Fig. 3).

Swarna Chitrakar's scroll portrayed the Koronāsura as a demon with long fingernails and horns. The painting, which is predominantly red in colour, appears to suggest that the virus, like a demon, feasts on the blood of its victims. Mamoni Chitrakar added a long pair of curved canine teeth protruding from the mouth of the Koronāsura in keeping with the age-old description of *rākṣasa*s in Bengali folk tales (Fig. 4). She eschews the tradition of painting foliage in the scroll margins and chooses instead to fill in the decorative margin with faces and wings of bats as a reminder of the origin of the virus. Sushama Chitrakar's uses warm earth tints to depict a Koronāsura, with several men and women within its wide mouth (Fig. 5). The figure appears all the more

[24] Interview with Manimala Chitrakar, 21 April 2022.

[25] Swarna Chitrakar's interview published in "The Indian Express", 25 April 2020 (Das 2020).

terrifying because it apparently seems benign, with the figure bearing a close resemblance to a Vaishanite mendicant with holy marks on the forehead. In contrast, Baharjan Chitrakar's Koronāsura is blue in colour and bears a strong resemblance to Goddess Kāli (Fig. 6), while Bahadur Chitrakar's *paṭacitra* depicts a pair of fierce brooding black eyes of the Koronāsura looking down on the globe (Fig. 7).

If the Coronavirus is portrayed as a malignant demon, the medical personnel are depicted as the new divinity engaged in the task of vanquishing the Koronāsura. Despite the invocations and lamentations, none of the *paṭ*s prescribe any supernatural remedies nor recommend any rituals practices to combat the Coronavirus, but strongly advise people to seek modern medicine. The construction of binary opposites is a common trope used by the scroll painters, as Ratnabali Chatterjee shows in her study of gender roles in *Maṅgal'kābya paṭ*s where the *devi* (goddess) and the *sati* (chaste woman) are cast in opposition to the *rākṣasi*s (she-demons) and the *alakshmi* (fallen woman) (Chatterjee 2000, p. 13). In most of the Coronavirus scrolls, the medical personnel occupy the central part of the narrative. A *cauka paṭ* painted in the Kalighat style by Anwar Chitrakar, entitled *Śakti rūpe* (Goddess of power), makes this correlation clear with its depiction of a nurse in the form of goddess Durgā vanquishing the Coronavirus demon (Fig. 8). This formed part of a series of 13 *paṭ*s on the lockdown which were displayed in the online solo exhibition *Tales of our Times* at the Emami Art Gallery website in July 2020.

In contrast to the Naya scroll paintings, the Kalighat-style *paṭ*s are notable for their humorous tone and for their particular style of amalgamating tradition with modernity. In one *paṭacitra* entitled *Mukhor dhārī* (Muzzle-clad), Anwar transposes cow heads on to human bodies and vice versa. Cow-headed humans wearing muzzles look at the human-headed cows, indicating altered perspectives (Fig. 9). Yet another satirical *paṭ* shows a Bengali *bābu* dancing with a wine bottle which served a dual purpose as a hand-sanitiser.

Unlike Naya, *paṭacitra* artists are rarely to be found in Kalighat and most have given up their traditional craft to pursue other occupations. Bhaskar Chitrakar claims to be the sole surviving Kalighat *paṭuẏā* who over the years experimented with the traditional Kalighat *paṭacitra* to create a distinctive style of his own[26]. His *paṭ*s feature the symbols of

[26] Bhaskar and Anwar Chitrakar are among the few *paṭuẏā*s who add their signature to

modernity, but true to tradition, his subject matter remains the Bengali *bābu*. Bhaskar has painted a series of *cauka paṭ*s on the *bābu's* domestic life during lockdown. However, in contrast to the 19th century *bābu paṭs*, where satire was expressed through the reversal of the moral code whereby men were portrayed as servile before women (Chatterjee 2000, p. 16), he depicts the *bābu* and the *bibi* on the same footing, offering a flower to the Coronavirus in the form of a child amid the two (Fig. 10). The Coronavirus, moreover, is shown to mutate in shape and colour and grow in size with the progression of the quarantine. In one of the *paṭ*s, the goddess Kālī destroys the fully developed Coronavirus with her divine light (Fig. 11). Unlike the *paṭacitra*s of Naya, Bhaskar injects gentle satire and a sense of frolic in his *paṭ*s instead of focusing on tragedy and human suffering.

Significantly, none of the *paṭacitra*s manifest any overt political critique regarding the government handling of the pandemic. This is not surprising, given the fact that the *paṭuẏā* community depends upon government patronage. Moreover, the state of West Bengal witnessed a particularly contentious elections in March 2021 with clear divides along party lines, a situation in which most *paṭuẏā*s were wary of discussing their political stance openly. Some of the scrolls, like those painted by Mamoni, depicted the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi announcing the lockdown, with the police with loudspeakers, proffering aid to the needy. Yet a covert political critique could be seen in the choice of the events which the artists opted to portray. For instance, Sushama Chitrakar *paṭ* shows how migrant labour who were forced to walk across the country on foot after the sudden announcement of the lockdown in March 2020 found no respite on their return as they were not permitted to enter the village because of the fear of contagion (Fig. 12). The critique, however, remains understated.

3.7. Conclusion

The digital turn during the first phase of the pandemic and the resultant publicity widened the customer base of the *paṭuẏā*s, many of whom were invited to conduct online workshops and performances. Whereas earlier they had been resistant to the idea of performing on digital platforms, the lockdown induced them to turn to it for survival.

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their art. Author's interview with Bhaskar Chitrakar, 23 August 2021.

The Coronavirus pandemic and the ensuing lockdowns had forced *paṭuẏā*s to adopt innovative measures through which they could widen the audience base for their performative art. Although digitized performances bear the incipient danger of erasure of spontaneity and reification of their narrations, their innovative skills enabled *paṭuẏā*s to adapt and adjust their art to the new technologies. On the one hand, they regained a local relevance through their propagation of precautionary health and hygiene measures. On the other, through their reinvention in the digital space they could reach out to the larger global community on the universal issues of shared suffering. This phase, however, proved to be short-lived and over time the market reverted to the traditional channels. As a result, the *paṭacitra*s once again are displayed primarily as decorative objects, prized for their visual art. Despite this, *paṭuẏā*s in general, have become adept at using the new technology for their material concerns, displaying their items online through YouTube, sharing contact information and taking orders by WhatsApp and receiving payment using Google Pay.

Significantly, the pandemic *paṭacitra*s convey a contemporary moral message much in the same way as the older pre-modern *paṭacitra*s reflected the moral universe of their times. The parameters of the *paṭuẏā*s' community identity today have widened to embrace not only regional, but also national, and sometimes global dimensions. By overcoming the restrictions of distance, digitalization had widened the *paṭuẏā*s' sense of belonging to a wider global community, and also imparted a degree of longevity to their performance. All the Coronavirus *paṭacitra*s underlined the fact that the pandemic was a devastating episode, not only for the local community, but for all of humankind. By anchoring global concerns within local sensibilities and folk metaphors the Coronavirus *paṭacitra*s constitute a milestone in the evolution of this art form.

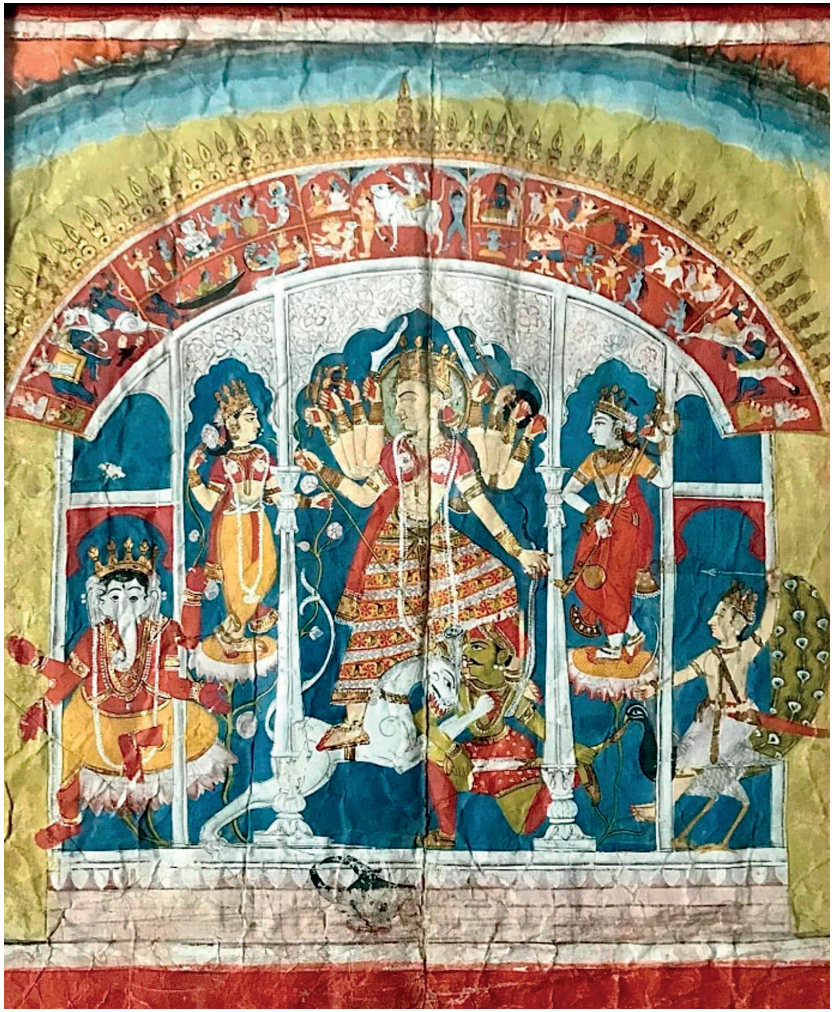
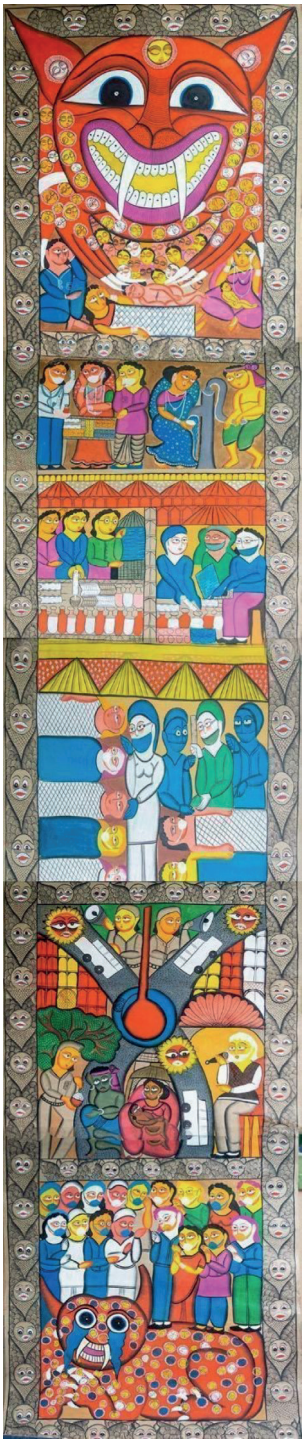


Fig. 1. *Cauka paṭ* depicting Goddess Durga, mid. 19th century, John Stevens Collection, Huseby Bruk Museum, Sweden.

Fig. 2. Swarna Chitrakar with her Coronavirus *paṭ*. Photo credit: bengalpatachitra.com.

Fig. 3. Rani Chitrakar and the tsunami *paṭ,* 2007. Photo credit: Sanjukta Das Gupta.



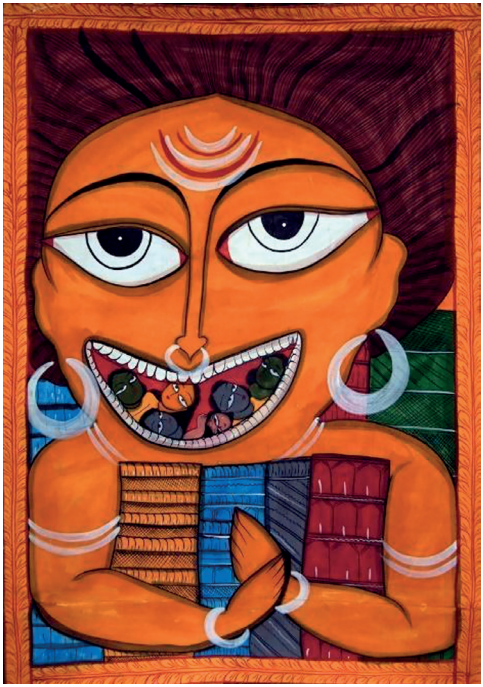


Fig. 4. Mamoni Chitrakar's Coronavirus *paṭ*. Photo credit: bengalpatachitra.com

Fig. 5. Detail from Sushama Chitrakar's Coronavirus *paṭ*. Photo credit: Sanjukta Das Gupta.

Fig. 6. Detail from Baharjan Chitrakar's Coronavirus *paṭ*. Photo credit: Sanjukta Das Gupta.

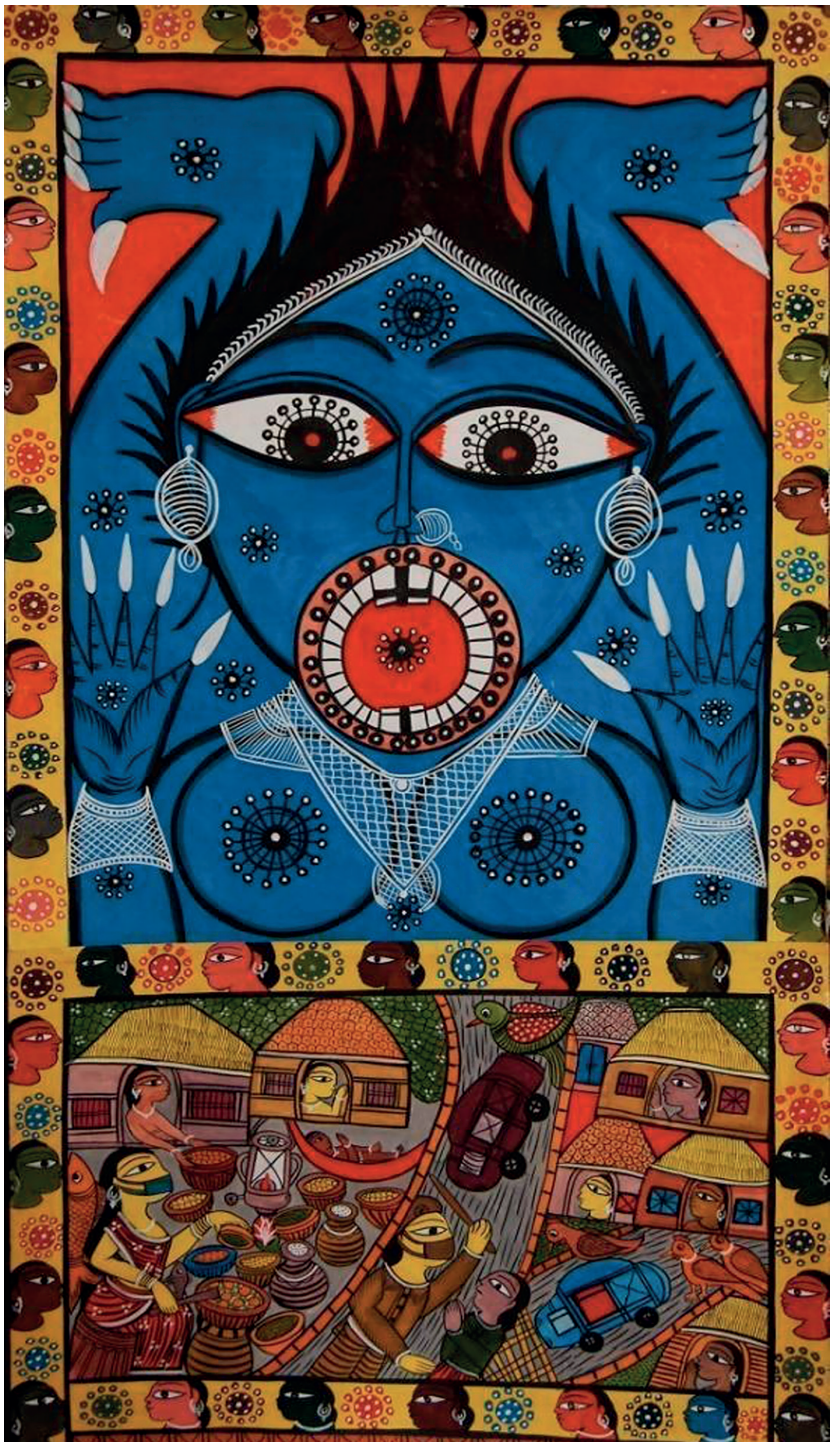


Fig. 7. Detail from Bahadur Chitrakar's Coronavirus *paṭ*. Photo credit: Sanjukta Das Gupta.

Fig. 8. *Śakti Rūpe.* Photo credit: Anwar Chitrakar and Emami Art Gallery.

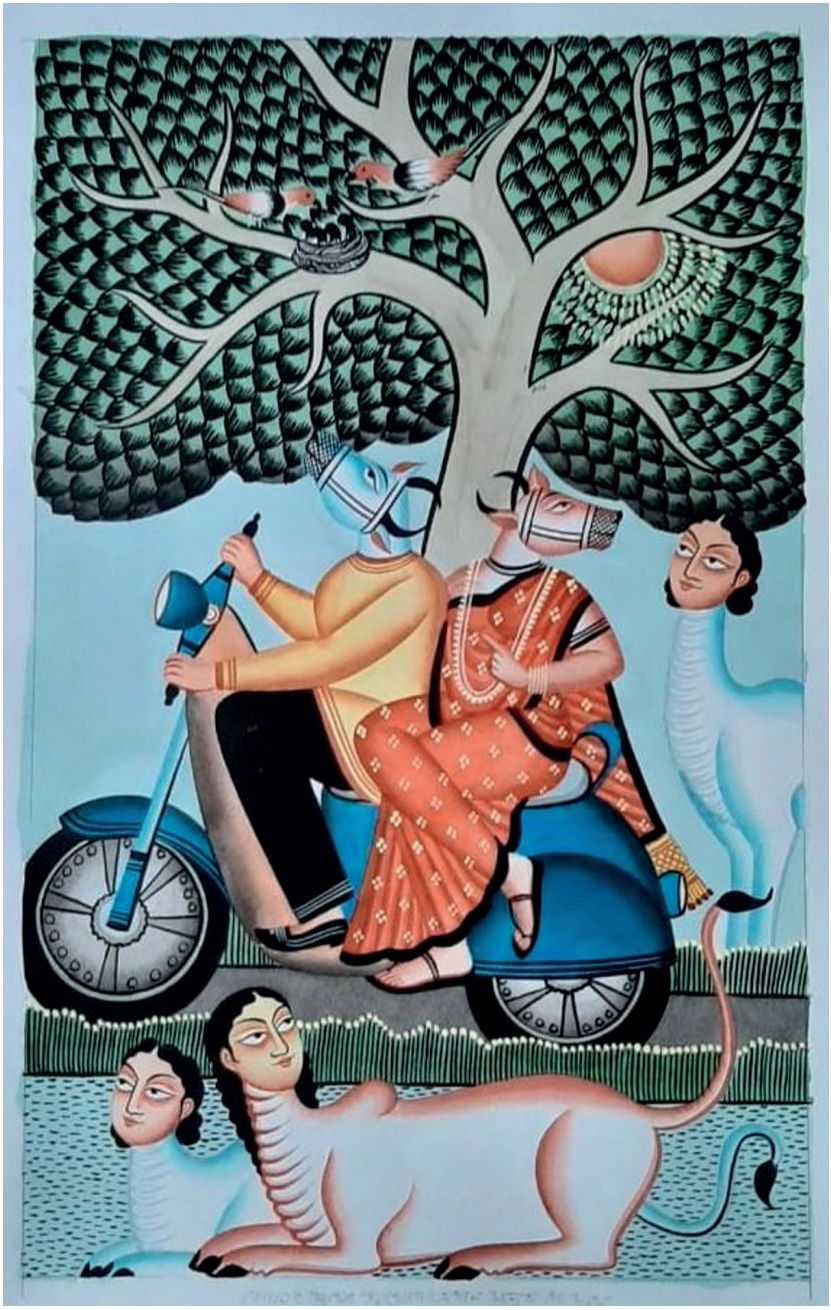


Fig. 9. *Mukhor dhārī.* Photo credit: Anwar Chitrakar and Emami Art Gallery.

Fig. 10. The *bābu*, the *bibi* and the Coronavirus. Photo credit: Bhaskar Chitrakar

Fig. 11. Goddess Kālī vanquishing the Coronavirus. Photo credit: Bhaskar Chitrakar.

Fig. 12. Detail from Baharjan Chitrakar's Coronavirus *paṭ* showing people seeking refuge in the forest. Photo credit: Sanjukta Das Gupta.

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4. Representation of COVID-19 in Bangladesh: From Mainstream Media to Alternative Visual Narratives

Zakir Hossain Raju

Abstract

This chapter investigates how COVID-19 was represented through the media in Bangladesh. It outlines the textualising process of COVID-19 through different media. As COVID-19 hit Bangladesh in March 2020, the news media, especially television news channels and print newspapers started airing daily bulletins. Examining the media portrayal of the pandemic and how it has influenced public perception during 2020-21, we find a linear narration actively produced by the State and the mainstream media. In the circumstances, the alternative modes of screen media played important role in fulfilling such gaps in the understanding of COVID-19 in Bangladesh. In this paper, I analyse an alternative narrative form of/in Bangladesh audiovisual media — 'films produced within the four walls'. This mode of 'Quarantine' filmmaking developed within the particular situation of pandemic — during the Lockdown of 2020 — when the citizens were barred from going outside of their homes. These audiovisual fictional media closely observed the life within Lockdown and represented the lives of citizens at their homes. The process of long waiting, anxiety and frustration as well as how the fear can be turned into hope and aspirations, that we locate in these narratives. Opposing the 'objective' portrayal of COVID-19 in mainstream media, the digital screen media cared to create some alternative constructions of the pandemic here. Thus, these bring forth an alternative representational mode of COVID-19 in Bangladesh.

Keywords: Bangladesh Media; COVID-19 in Bangladesh; Quarantine Films; Fear of COVID-19; Representation of COVID-19.

4.1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted almost every aspect of human life across the globe, and South Asia is no exception. Bangladesh, being one of the most densely populated countries in South Asia, has faced numerous challenges due to the pandemic. The health sector, economy, and social structures have been severely affected by the COVID-19 outbreak in Bangladesh. In this chapter, I aim to explore the impacts of COVID-19 in Bangladesh as represented in and through the media, especially in the visual narratives. This is one of the very first step to bring up and analyse the media and cultural responses of Bangladesh towards the management of a very sudden health emergency, that is COVID-19 pandemic.

This paper is thus an attempt to find out the connections and contentions between various modes of COVID narratives in Bangladesh as told through the media. I wish to investigate here the textualising process of COVID-19 through opposing modes and channels by different media producers. I wish to identify the differences in the forms and approach of differing modes in constructing media narratives of COVID-19 in Bangladesh when it comes to putting the pandemic in some kind of narration. For example, while news media is supposed to be objective and factual, and the fictional audiovisual media to be 'fictional', I find the differences between facts and fiction as narrativised on these media are quite blurring and confusing, to say the least. Therefore, I question such demarcations between fact and fiction in the COVID-19 narratives of Bangladesh media as well as analyse the relationship between such 'objectivity' and 'subjectivity' claimed by different media and their genres here in the circumstances. The mainstream media has played a crucial role in disseminating information and raising awareness about the pandemic. After COVID-19 hit Bangladesh along with most of the world in March-April 2020, the news media, especially television news channels and print newspapers started airing daily bulletins, with the support of the relevant government departments. However, it goes without saying that the portrayal of COVID-19 in Bangladesh public media has not always been accurate and as objective as the media and the State always demanded. Therefore, when we examine the media portrayal of the pandemic and how it has influenced public perception during 2020-21, we mostly find a linear narration that was actively produced by the State and their extended

arms at large — formal, public media. In the circumstances, the alternative modes of/in various media played important role in fulfilling such gaps and holes in the understanding of COVID-19 in Bangladesh. In this paper, I specifically analyse an alternative narrative form of/in Bangladesh audiovisual media that I call 'quarantine films'. These mode of television and filmmaking actually developed within the particular situation of pandemic — that is during the lockdown period of 2020 — when the citizens were barred from going outside of their homes by the decree of the state in order to minimise the circulation of COVID-19. The audiovisual fictional media like feature films and television drama came to a sudden halt in March-April 2020. However, within couple of months, such screen media industry stoke back, and started producing audiovisual 'lockdown narratives' — that is films/dramas about the life within the household, from the household! Many television producers and film activists put their attention to produce such 'quarantine films' during next two years.

Below I present a journey through the mainstream and alternative media modes of Bangladesh during 2020-21. Here I first outline the mediascape of Bangladesh and how the mainstream news media here portrayed COVID-19, that I call the Objective mode. In later part of chapter, I move to the alternative narrative mode of COVID-19 in Bangladesh. Here I unearth the digital screen media texts that cared to create some alternative constructions of the pandemic here. In the end of the chapter, I conclude by remarking on ways to match and/or mix these two modes of media narrations on pandemic in/of Bangladesh.

4.2. Bangladesh Mediascape: The Mainstream Media and the Objective Mode

Bangladesh media may be understood as two different groups of media. The first group represent the mass media like News Television, Newspaper, Film Industry, Radio etc. These all, along with the state serve as formal messaging outlets that impart objective news and information to the public. In that way, these can be termed as public media too.

The other group of media is the unofficial conglomerate of digital platforms encompassing the new media and social media. These include Facebook, Instagram, YouTube and various local and transnational streaming platforms. Comparing with the mainstream media which are losing the audiences and followers rapidly in Bangladesh —

these digital media avenues are more segregated and addressing niche audiences with somewhat individualistic and private messages. These media platforms, many of which are audiovisual in nature, are also utilised within a private realm. While I focus on these screen media formats in next section in details, here let us consider the strengths and weaknesses of the mainstream mass media first.

The mainstream media like Newspaper, Television, Film and Radio work as national media networks which are aimed at the civil society (read the educated middle classes) and their concerns. These media regularly provide 'news of the nation' and thus tend to serve as vehicle for objective presentation of hard data and information about the problems and prospects of Bangladesh and its citizens (again, mostly the middle classes).

During the pandemic period of 2020-21, these media continued their Objective mode by presenting National news in different formats ranging from the print to the sound and images. Thus, they presented some kind of factual narrative on COVID-19 on a daily basis in Bangladesh. They constructed a macro picture of COVID-19 in Bangladesh quite successfully, which diligently portrayed the 'official' version of pandemic in the Country. These media fed the readers and audiences everyday with regular doses of data presentation (graphs, charts, numbers) on the death rates and infection rates due to COVID-19. and quite often the data presented were Global in scale (eg. comparing Bangladesh situation with world statistics on the pandemic). Surbhi Sharma, a journalist of India TV outlines the emerging global practices of these kind of Objective representation of COVID-19 worldwide:

> Thomson Reuters Foundation observes that 'the pandemic has offered an opportunity to embrace new tools, skills and storytelling techniques.'The World Association of Newspapers … found that various media outlets launched coronavirus-themed podcasts, alerts and newsletters designed to cater to this demand. Infographics and explainer videos became highly popular. …journalism.co.uk says, 'these efforts reflect the ability of journalists to creatively communicate vital public health messages…. (Sharma, 2022, p. 190).

Following these global trends, Bangladeshi media outlets started constructing such public narratives of COVID-19 in March-April 2020. These mainstream mass media of the country thus bonded

formal relations with COVID-19 in the national Public sphere. However, one cannot but note that these media by presenting COVID-19 narratives only as and through 'objective' information, created an 'illusion of objectivity' through one single, grand narrative about/on COVID-19. Such illusion of objectivity presented through mainstream media narratives also proved ineffective during prolonged lockdown of the country.

The government of Bangladesh implemented a lockdown regime in April 2020 to control the spread of the COVID-19 virus. However, the lockdown lasted for only two to three weeks before it was abandoned as unworkable due to the precariousness and poverty of the majority of the population. Ali et al. (2021) notes the inability to produce a transparent and accountable relief regime as the key area of failure. Despite substantial growth in state capacity over the past decade and a powerful set of political incentives to demonstrate its legitimacy through good policy performance, the Bangladesh state has been unable to enforce lockdown policies and a fair and effective relief program. The failed response to COVID-19 reveals several features of state capacity that have evolved through the political history of Bangladesh, as citizens and political actors have struggled and negotiated over the responsibilities of the state when faced with disasters and economic crises (Ibid.). The failed response of Bangladesh to COVID-19 highlights the institutional weaknesses of the Bangladeshi state and the contingency of citizen compliance with policies seen as both unfair and infeasible. The mainstream media, despite their utmost effort to construct an 'objective' fact-based narrative of COVID-19 in the country did not appease the citizens in any positive manner.

For example, researchers Yasir Arafat et al. (2021) provided an in-depth exploration of the phenomenon of panic buying during the COVID-19 pandemic in Bangladesh that was largely induced by the 'objective' representation of the pandemic in the mass media. They note that this behavior has been observed in at least 93 countries around the world during the pandemic (Ibid. p. 1). To prevent panic buying, the authors suggest that ''Responsible media reporting can reduce panic buying by providing accurate information about the availability of essential goods'' (Ibid. pp. 6-7). This can be cited as an example of failure of Bangladesh mainstream media in providing 'objective' narrations on COVID-19.

4.3. Alternative Media Narratives of/on Covid Lockdown: Films within the Four Walls

The formal film and television production came to a sudden halt when Bangladesh government announced the first phase of 'general holiday' on 17 March 2020. This, eventually went on for two months till June, and can be marked as the first lockdown period in the country. However, such lockdown was again called in during 2021 which also lasted around two months.

The lockdown imposed by the government on Bangladesh population twice during the 2020-21 pandemic period, slowed everyday activities of the majority of people. A research highlighting the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on air pollution, particularly PM2.5 concentration, in Dhaka shows that the lockdown period led to a decrease in PM2.5 concentration due to community behavioral changes and shutdown of pollutant sources. The researchers Sarkar and Khan (2021, pp. 2339-42) found that the mean concentration of PM2.5 declined during the lockdown period by 11.31%, but stayed almost the same in the post-lockdown period. The median value of PM2.5 concentration declined at a higher rate during the lockdown period, decreasing by 17% with respect to the historical median (2017-2019).

In the same vein, the filmmakers in Dhaka when stuck in their household environments became out of work instantly in March-April 2020. However, within a short spell of few months, they developed innovative ways to bypass the claustrophobic world imposed by the pandemic, and went on creating what I am calling here 'Quarantine films'.

Veteran film and television storytellers of the country — Giasuddin Selim, Nurul Alam Atique, Animesh Aich and Shihab Shahin came forward to make these films within the given constraints. Younger film-authors such as Najmus Sakib, Mahmud Hasan Kayesh, Kajal Arefin Ome and Shahrear Polock also joined the bandwagon to bring a new visual rhetoric within the pandemic-posed circumstances. These films mostly produced within the four walls of a house, many a times shot by a non-professional cameraperson, held up the subjective experiences of survival in 2020 Bangladesh. Closely studying such a group of quarantine films and their narratives, here I investigate personal and familial aspirations of ordinary people caught in Bangladesh under COVID-19 during 2020. These screen media texts then become tools for comparison with the public news media narratives presented in

objective mode. Below I then present these cinematic textual narratives of COVID-19 that I call 'Films within the four walls'.

These screen narratives range from television drama and web film to documentary and experimental films. Because of the constraints of covid lockdown imposed on Bangladeshi citizens, many of these were shot by non-professional crew at the protagonists' own homes. Some of these were also shot on phone camera, thus defying the odds that came with corona pandemic in 2020.

4.4. *Lockdown* (Web Short Film, 2020)

Web film *Lockdown* (2020) by veteran Shihab Shahin and produced by Alpha-i, a leading production house of Dhaka centres around a couple confined to their apartment during the first COVID-19 Lockdown in Bangladesh during 2020. They both struggle to deal with their respective worries and anxieties during the pandemic. The central theme is the couple's struggle to cope with a miscarriage and the grief and loss that follows. The film portrays the different ways in which the husband and wife deal with their pain. The film's portrayal of their struggles is therefore raw, intimate, and deeply emotional. This whole short film presenting a two-person drama happens within the four walls of a middle class household in Dhaka. Audio and visuals of television news on COVID-19 and lockdown decision of Bangladesh government were made part of it, which directly sets it within the pandemic scenario of 2020. The film was shot mostly by the actors themselves within the household, as professional camera crew were not allowed to move in Dhaka at that time. Similar to *House of Lights*, which was shot by the director himself in his own household, this film also stays almost the whole time within indoors — bedrooms, kitchen and living area of a household. Two characters once share the balcony, and in the ending on the rooftop wearing surgical masks when they look forward to a corona-free world. These two scenes provide openness of the outdoor on screen and thus presents a view of the surroundings of a Dhaka suburb.

The wife here is portrayed as being consumed by her grief and struggling to cope with the loss. She feels disconnected from her husband and is unable to come to terms with their shared tragedy. Her pain and isolation manifest in her desire to separate from her husband. The lockdown situation further adds to their stress, as they find themselves confined to their apartment, unable to escape from their

problems. The film uses this setting to create a sense of claustrophobia, emphasizing the couple's entrapment in their own feelings and relationship. The couple's inability to communicate effectively leads to a breakdown in their relationship, with both partners feeling isolated and disconnected. The film highlights the challenges faced by individuals who are confined to their homes during the pandemic, including the sense of loneliness, anxiety, and uncertainty.

The film also touches upon the societal expectations placed on men and women when dealing with grief and loss. The husband is shown as being emotionally vulnerable and trying his best to connect with his wife, while the wife is portrayed as being consumed by her grief and struggling to cope. The film challenges traditional gender roles and highlights the need for individuals to be able to express their emotions and seek support without fear of judgment. The husband's efforts to be there for his wife, even in the face of her resistance, show the importance of showing empathy and understanding towards loved ones.

Lockdown thus presents a drama that explores the complexities of relationships and the struggles of separation. It depicts the couple's emotional journey as they come to the difficult decision to end their relationship. Shihab Shahin uses a range of techniques to convey the couple's emotional journey, such as dialogue, visual symbolism, and music. The cinematography plays a key role in creating a mood that complements the story, such as through the use of lighting and camera angles. The cinematography in *Lockdown* is notable for its naturalistic and intimate style. The episode's lighting is soft and muted, emphasizing the emotional depth of the story. The use of close-up shots and handheld camera work creates a sense of immediacy and intimacy, drawing the viewer into the characters' experiences.

4.5. *Bachelor Quarantine* (Television SitCom, 2020)

Bachelor Quarantine (2020) is an episode of *Bachelor Point*, a Bangladeshi comedy drama series with currently four seasons, that aired on Television. *Bachelor Point* explores the different aspects of young bachelors living on their own in Dhaka. They all hail from different parts of Bangladesh and encounter different challenges. Falling under the genre of situational comedy, Bachelor Quarantine stars some well known TV starts of the country: Ziaul Hoque Polash, Mishu Sabbir, Mahbub Alam Chashi, Sabila Nur among an ensemble cast.

Bachelor Quarantine thus focuses on the challenging life of quarantine from the perspective of the five bachelors, with a mix of comedy and drama. This television drama was produced during the first lockdown Bangladesh went through during April 2020. This was also the celebration period for most important festival of Muslims, that is Eid ul fitr, so this drama was released as a 'Eid festival drama'. During 2020 quarantine period in Bangladesh. During 2020 quarantine period in Bangladesh, this television drama was therefore shot in eight different homes — that is the homes of the actors themselves. The protagonists themselves arranged the shooting by someone nearby and it was shot on phone camera only. So, two of the actors were never seen together on screen (or on set, for that matter). The relations between the shots and scenes were only created through the editing of sound and visuals as done later. Kabila, Habu, Shuvo, Arefeen, and Nihal are the names of the five central characters who are all bachelors and living together in an apartment. We observe these characters as they live their lives throughout the film. Talking on the phone with their partner is an everyday occurrence, and references to COVID-19 are made, such as hand sanitization, lockdown, etc. The protagonists also argue with one another, which emphasizes the negative repercussions of spending a lot of time alone in a house with someone. The characters also talk using their native dialects; Kabila, for instance, has a distinct Noakhali accent. This illustrates how the male bachelors come to Dhaka from various regions of Bangladesh.

In addition to the five main protagonists, there is another resident of the home, Pasha, who is a hooligan. They don't feel secure or at ease around Pasha, so Kabila devises a plot to get him out of the house. Kabila spreads the rumor that Nihal has the disease. All of them, with the exception of Habu, act unwell by sneezing and coughing, which, as intended, frightens Pasha and forces him to leave the house. Also, this mockingly depicts the anxiety about COVID-19. In the meantime, Habu is still trying to find a maid but ends up getting thrashed by a police officer for violating Lockdown rules.

The TV comedy ends emotionally with the bachelors deciding to give all of their Eid Savings to Habu's family, instead of buying new clothes for themselves. This sends a message to help those in need during a hard time of Pandemic. The short comedic film concludes saying, "In this disastrous situation of the country, let us stand for our close ones" in Bangla.

4.6. *Waiting* (Short Fiction Film, 2022)

Waiting is a short film directed by Kajal Arefin Ome. It was shot in COVID-19 quarantine period and completely within indoors by no cameraperson, rather by people present around the protagonists in their homes. The director has crafted the story as well as written the screenplay. The nearly 14 minute short film stars two prominent Bangladeshi Actors, Afran Nisho and Mehazabin Chowdhury in the leading roles as well as Ziaul Hoque Polash playing the male lead's friend, as a supporting role. The executive Producer was J. I. Khan Ariyan under the label of Silver Screen Productions. The film starts with a phone conversation between the male lead and female lead. They have been talking over the Internet or the phone for a while but have never met. Just before the Lockdown has been executed, the two would like to meet up. The male lead named Amit is longing to meet the girl with the intention of proposing to her. However, with the lockdown, their plans are put to a stop. This symbolizes how COVID-19 Lockdown came to Bangladesh all of a sudden, putting a disruption in all of our plans. Schools, colleges, Universities, workplaces, everything shut down abruptly, without much warning. This is followed by scenes of empty roads that were once busy and bustling with noise. Now the only noise that can be heard is the drops of rain. The film places a great deal of emphasis on the need to prioritize COVID-19 Lockdown over our personal desires. Personal matters are important, but the pandemic, which took everyone by the storm, must be given utmost importance. At the same time, people were also impatient to leave home (behavior that was displayed by the male lead but frowned upon by the romantic interest and the friend) because it is natural to yearn for human connection in the time of social distancing.

The movie features two amorous couples, one of the leading characters and one of the friends and his girlfriend. The two couples are contrasting. While the leading characters are in love, the friend's romantic relationship is deteriorating very quickly. This shows that while COVID-19, with the help of technology, has helped strengthen bonds, the pandemic has also created fights and conflicts, leading to the end of relationships. The reason for this happening is the lack of meeting physically, causing chemistry in bonds to be lost. Plus, it is easier for misunderstandings and miscommunication to be created via virtual conversations.

The film ends with the leading characters finally seeing each other, albeit maintaining social distance, on their rooftop. The film *Waiting*, as its title suggests, does a good job exploring the feelings of waiting and longing, during lockdown, where everything felt uncertain and lonely in 2020 Bangladesh.

4.7. *Kagojer pakhi* (Paper Bird; Experimental Short, 2020)

Kagojer pakhi is a short film that tells the story of a young boy named Bhubon, who is left alone on Eid day as his parents are living in different countries. The film, directed by well-known actor Sumon Anowar, takes a poignant look at the challenges faced by a child during the pandemic. *Kagojer pakhi* is a powerful and deeply moving film that explores the themes of loneliness, isolation, resilience, empathy, human connection, hope, and imagination. The film's striking visuals and powerful storytelling makes it a strong subjective portrayal for anyone who has been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic or has experienced feelings of loneliness and isolation.

As the film begins, we see Bhubon alone and bored on Eid day, which is a significant festival for Muslims. He insists on speaking to his mother, who is unfortunately suffering from COVID-19 and living in another country. His grandmother tries to console him, but Bhubon is inconsolable, and his loneliness and sadness are palpable.

Throughout the film, we see Bhubon's fascination with birds, which he sees as a symbol of ultimate freedom. He spends much of his time observing them and dreaming of flying away with them to a better place. However, as his mother's condition worsens and he becomes increasingly lonely, Bhubon's dreams and aspirations seem further out of reach.

As Bhubon's mother's condition deteriorates, he becomes increasingly upset and cries on Eid day, feeling abandoned and alone. A kind neighbour child notices his distress and gives him a gift of several paper birds, which she has made herself. Bhubon is delighted with the gift and starts to play with the paper birds, hence the title *Kagojer pakhi*, which translates to "Paper Bird" in English. The film's visuals and cinematography are striking, with the use of color and light adding depth and emotion to the story. The use of natural light and soft focus also gives the film a sense of intimacy and authenticity, and the sound design effectively evokes a sense of mood and atmosphere.

The film's themes explore the feelings of loneliness and abandonment experienced by children during the pandemic, as well as the need for empathy, kindness, and human connection during these difficult times. The film also highlights the power of imagination and creativity in helping people cope with adversity.

Overall, *Kagojer pakhi* is a heartwarming film that captures the essence of childhood innocence and the resilience of the human spirit in the face of adversity. The film's messages of hope and empathy are particularly relevant in the context of the ongoing pandemic, where many people were struggling to cope with isolation and loneliness.

The film depicts the devastating effects of loneliness and isolation on individuals, especially children. Bhubon, the central character of the film, is left alone on Eid day while his parents are in different countries, and his mother is quarantined due to COVID-19. He is forced to cope with his fears and anxieties by himself, which leads to a sense of loneliness and isolation. The use of muted colours and natural light creates an atmosphere of melancholy, which reflects Bhubon's emotional state.

Bhubon's fascination with birds serves as a metaphor for his longing to escape his current situation and find a better life. He spends much of his time observing them and dreaming of flying away with them to a place where he can be free. The paper birds given to him by his neighbour represent his hope and imagination, as he uses them to create a world of his own. The film showcases the power of hope and imagination to help people overcome adversity and find meaning in difficult situations.

The cinematography and visuals of *Kagojer pakhi* are an integral part of the film's storytelling and contribute to its emotional impact. The film's visual language is primarily characterized by the use of natural light, muted colors, and close-ups.

Throughout the film, natural light is used to create a sense of intimacy and warmth, particularly in the scenes where Bhubon is alone in his room. The soft, diffused light creates a gentle atmosphere that complements the child's innocence and vulnerability. Additionally, the use of muted colors in the film, particularly in Bhubon's surroundings, adds to the sense of melancholy and loneliness that permeates the film. Close-ups are also used effectively in the film to convey Bhubon's emotions and experiences. The camera often zooms in on Bhubon's face, showing his reactions to the world around him. This technique

allows the audience to see the world from his perspective and to empathize with his feelings of loneliness and isolation.

The use of bird imagery in the film is notable. Birds serve as a powerful symbol of freedom and escape, and their presence throughout the film underscores Bhubon's desire to escape his current situation. The paper birds given to him by his neighbour also serve as a visual representation of his hope and imagination, as he uses them to create a world of his own.

The cinematography and visuals of *Kagojer pakhi* are understated yet powerful, creating an emotional resonance that lingers long after the film ends. The use of natural light, muted colors, and close-ups, as well as the incorporation of bird imagery, contribute to the film's themes of loneliness, resilience, empathy, human connection, hope, and imagination.

4.8. *Quarantine* (Television Drama, 2020)

Quarantine is a Bangladeshi film directed by Giasuddin Selim, a notable Bangladeshi film director, depicts the story of a family of four during the COVID-19 pandemic. The film begins with the family, consisting of the father, mother, son, and daughter, living together in their house. The father is portrayed as a hot-headed and frustrated individual who often takes out his anger on his son. One day, after getting into an argument with the mother, he is kicked out of the house.

The husband goes to live with his parents, where he is quarantined in a room for 14 days due to possible exposure to the virus. During this time, he tries to call his family multiple times, but his calls are ignored. He is left to suffer in utter isolation, without any human interaction. This isolation takes a toll on him, and he becomes increasingly desperate for some form of contact.

After the 14-day quarantine period ends, even his parents kick him out, forcing him to return home. However, instead of admitting to his mistakes, the husband comes up with excuses like feeling ill, having a sore throat, and fever. He hopes to gain sympathy from his family and escape punishment for his behavior.

However, his plan backfires when he is quarantined in his own home for 14 more days, much to his dismay. During this time, he begins to reflect on his actions and the impact they have on his family.

His isolation forces him to confront his own shortcomings, and he realizes the importance of human connection and empathy.

After the quarantine period ends, there is a noticeable change in his behavioral patterns. He becomes more understanding, caring, and supportive of his family, and the film ends with a happy family scene. The film *Quarantine* explores several themes, including family dynamics, isolation, empathy, and personal growth. The film is shot in a naturalistic style, with a focus on close-ups of characters' faces, which heightens the emotional intensity of the film. The use of natural light and muted colors creates a sense of claustrophobia and confinement, emphasizing the sense of isolation that the characters experience.

The theme of isolation is central to the film. The husband's quarantine in a room at his parents' home highlights the impact of isolation on an individual's mental and emotional well-being. The film portrays the psychological toll that isolation can have on a person and how it can lead to a range of negative emotions, such as desperation and loneliness. The lighting in the film is also notable, with many scenes using low-key lighting to create a sense of unease and tension. The use of shadow and darkness creates a feeling of confinement and isolation, emphasizing the emotional and physical confinement of the husband's quarantine experience.

The camera movement in the film is generally understated, with little use of camera pans or tilts. Instead, the camera remains stationary, allowing the characters' movements and actions to take center stage. The camera does occasionally move in closer to a character, emphasizing their emotional state or reaction to a situation.

Overall, the cinematography of *Quarantine* is understated and naturalistic, emphasizing the emotional and psychological toll of isolation and confinement. The use of close-ups, low-key lighting, muted colors, and minimal sound design all work together to create a sense of tension and unease, drawing the audience into the emotional journey of the characters.

4.9. *Quarantine 2* (Television Drama, 2020)

Quarantine 2 is another gripping television drama directed by Giasuddin Selim that explores the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on, again, a family of four. The story centers around a father, mother, son, and daughter who are stuck at home due to the Lockdown. The film

starts on a positive note with the son's birthday, but things quickly turn sour when he asks for a bicycle, and the father begins to act suspiciously. The mother grows increasingly suspicious of her husband's behavior, especially when he is caught talking on the phone multiple times and smiling. When asked where the money she deposited in his account went, he admits to spending it on a girl to whom he gave it as a loan. The wife calls the number, and a girl answers, using words of endearment to greet the husband, which intensifies the wife's suspicion.

As the film progresses, the audience sees the husband's true motives, and the mother's suspicions are confirmed when she demands to meet the girl. A beautiful woman appears and claims to be just a good friend of her husband. She agrees to return the money and promises never to call him again. However, before leaving, the girl reveals that she talks to men on the phone and charges them for it, making the wife realize that her husband was paying for such a special service.

The film offers a nuanced portrayal of the loneliness and desperation experienced during the pandemic. The husband, feeling trapped and bored in his household, found a temporary solution in the girl's phone service.

Quarantine 2 is a thought-provoking and well-executed television drama that underscores the importance of communication and trust in a relationship, especially during challenging times like a pandemic. The family dynamics play a significant role in the drama here. The father's actions not only affect his relationship with his wife but also his children. The son's birthday and his demand for a bicycle highlights the family's financial struggles, which the father's actions only exacerbate.

Overall, *Quarantine 2* tackles several complex themes with nuance and sensitivity, making it a compelling watch for anyone interested in exploring the effects of the pandemic on relationships and family dynamics. The film also makes use of unconventional camera angles to add visual interest and variety. For example, the camera is positioned at an angle in some of the scenes, creating a sense of disorientation and unease. This technique is particularly effective during the scenes where the wife is suspicious of her husband's behavior, adding to the film's sense of mystery and tension.

The use of natural light and shadows, close-ups, handheld camera techniques, unconventional angles, and symbolism all combine to create a visually striking and emotionally resonant film.

4.10. *The Lost Souls* (Experimental Short Film, 2020)

The *Lost Souls* is an experimental short film written, directed and acted by Najmus Saaqib, which tells the tale of a mysterious protagonist who struggles with the feeling of detachment and loneliness. The protagonist's search for a sense of self and purpose is central theme of the story.

The story starts with the protagonist watching the rain, lost in his own thoughts, while another version of him is captivated by the Internet, exploring the world through a rectangular screen. The protagonist is tormented by the fact that despite living under the same roof and sleeping in the same bed, he and his other self are alone. The protagonist is consumed by this isolation, and his thoughts turn to violence as he grabs a knife to kill the person on the other end of the Internet. However, he finds no one there, leading him to question his own sanity.

The film within its very short duration explores the theme of detachment and the concept of loneliness that plagued Bangladeshi middle class during pandemic lockdown during 2020-21. The protagonist here is not only detached from others but also from his own multiple personalities. One appears while the other is suppressed, leaving him feeling fragmented and lost. The protagonist's struggle with his other self is symbolic of the internal conflict that many people experienced in this digital age when COVID-19 hit us badly. *The Lost Souls* is a deeply moving story that captures the essence of the human isolation. It explored the profound sense of loneliness and detachment that afflicted us all when we lived in quarantine due to covid-19. More importantly, the protagonist's such struggle to reconcile his various selves raises questions about the nature of identity and how it is formed. The film suggests that our identity is not fixed and can be shaped by the experiences we have and the people we interact with.

The cinematography of *The Lost Souls* utilizes a desaturated color palette. The protagonist here is filmed in a small, sparsely furnished apartment, a modern, minimalist home with minimal decor, emphasizing the character's detachment from the world around him and his lack of connection to others. A stationary camera is used to emphasize the character's isolation and detachment from the world, while dynamic camera movements are used to create a sense of disorientation and to convey the character's internal conflict. Dim lighting suggests

the character's unease and inner turmoil, while bright, harsh lighting is used to convey the impact of technology on the character's life. A sparse, minimalistic score is used to create a sense of emptiness and detachment. The use of desaturated colors, empty spaces, dynamic camera movements, lighting, and music effectively conveys the character's inner conflict and detachment, creating a haunting visual experience for the audience. The *Lost Souls* thus stands out as a powerful and thought-provoking screen text that delves into the complexities of the human condition under COVID-19 in Bangladesh. The film's use of symbolism and imagery captures the protagonist's struggle to find connection and meaning in the pandemic-stricken world.

4.11. *House of Lights* (Documentary, 2020)

House of Lights is a Bangladeshi documentary film released in 2020, directed and filmed by Mahmud Hasan Kayesh on his mobile phone, with the executive producer being Nick Higgins from Scotland. It is unlike a traditional documentary film that feeds a lot of information via voice overs. While we frequently associate pandemics with death and sickness, this short film adopts a different tact by highlighting the closeness of family life.

Around March of 2020, COVID-19 struck Bangladesh and the rest of the world, causing everything to stop. A couple of months later was the month of Ramadan, fasting month for Muslims around the world. The film is set in this time period and shows a middle-class Bangladeshi family during the pandemic. The film depicts the daily life of this family, which was confined within the four walls of our home but nonetheless manages to thrive. Various scenes and especially audio tracks such as call for Sehri/Prayers, praying namaz, vacant streets of Dhaka City, mother feeding her children, beggars on the street, Iftar, etc, showcases the COVID-19 life that became usual in the Ramadan of 2020.

The film thus explores the aspects of Quarantine life of a family of four, in which there is a father, a mother, and two kids of different ages. The Father, as in a typical Bengali Muslim Household, is the bread earner. We can see him performing his prayers regularly from dawn to dusk. Since COVID-19 was a time of crisis, many people turned to their faith for solace. Prayers helped people around the world cope up with the difficult situation.

As for the mother, who seems like a stay-at-home Mom, may seem to not have gone through many changes but only had extra responsibilities. The mother is shown making Iftar, watching after the children, and maintaining the home. It can be challenging to manage the stress that comes with caring for two children around-the-clock, as is depicted in the film. Because a stay-at-home parent's life is typically relatively confined to four walls, the pandemic also made us more aware of what a typical stay-at-home parent's life entails. Coming to the two children, the elder one looks about the age of going to primary school. Soon the act of going to school diminished and things changed to behind a screen. The world changed for them back-to-back, and these sorts of changes are more difficult for young minds to bear. As for the younger kid, his world is anyway limited to the four walls. It is his playground, through which he navigates and learns as he grows. He is not aware of any danger that lies outside at the comfort of his home.

Though the film's stand out point is showing the close knitted affinity that exists inside a home, we get glimpses of the outside world through the window or the balcony. The balcony divides the house from the outside while also providing the last remaining connection to the world outside the four walls. Except for a few vendors and beggars, the lanes in a once-bustling city like Dhaka are now quiet and empty. We can see the mother being able to purchase vegetables, regularly haggling from her balcony, without having to go out. While there is an urge to go outside among the characters of the film as we can feel, the comfort of their home was keeping them secure. There is a difference in the shots taken inside home and outside. While danger lurks outside in the form of practically deserted streets and unnerving silence, the home radiates warmth. Yet, even a major pandemic like COVID-19, however, cannot stop nature, as the wind blows the leaves and the birds sing. Some things remain unchanged.

The lack of verbal dialogues and music made the film stand out even more with the unsettling silence that reminds us what it was like to be a part of the pandemic. The movie ends with a quote by Jalāl al-Dīn Muḥammad Rūmī: "I will never leave this house of light, I will never leave this blessed town, for here I have found my love and here I will stay for the rest of my life." which, implies that despite all the hardships we have endured in the pandemic, we have had a house to ourselves that we are able to call home. The home that acted as a beacon of light and a shelter that protected us from the perilous outside

world at that time. The short film manages to instill gratitude for the comfort and security that our homes have brought us during the pandemic — all homes thus turned into *House of Lights.*

4.12. Contextualising the Quarantine Films of 2020 Bangladesh: Personal Introspections on COVID-19

The 'Quarantine films' made by established filmmakers as well as film activists as analysed above may be termed as audiovisual narratives of/on 'Lockdown' — is a unique group of films that got made in a unique situation which may not be repeated again anytime soon. However, I find these groups of films are important to understand the notions of life under the pandemic in a postcolonial, developing national society such as Bangladesh. I dissected these audiovisual mode of media 'narratives' of COVID-19 here to investigate the ways they visualise as well as address the key concerns of 2020 Bangladesh under the pandemic. When doing textual analysis of many of these 'quarantine films', I identified different, sometimes conflicting, themes and emotions that were recorded in these alternative visual narratives.

I wish to raise the question here: how to generalise such subjective experiences of these 'Quarantine films' that we find in 2020 Bangladesh under COVID pandemic? As we see — in the above analyses of selected screen media texts — many of the television drama, sitcom, skits and short films made under/about lockdown in 2020 Bangladesh mostly weaves personal and/or familial narratives of existence. These film texts therefore brought up issues and themes ranging from fear to hope — two opposing poles of human emotions as well as portrayed not only the private spheres, but also the public spheres, to some extents, during the high pandemic.

According to Figen Unal Colak's research (2022), social media users have conceptualized COVID-19 through various categories of metaphors including a "disaster." In the "disaster" category, COVID-19 has been conceptualized as a sudden and unexpected situation that may cause fear and anxiety. The most frequently used metaphors in this category are curse, natural disaster, rain, traffic accident, serial killer, and apocalypse. The curse metaphor has been used to compare COVID-19 to a punishment that society cannot rid itself of. The natural disaster, hurricane, and rain metaphors have been used due to their sudden appearance and global impact. The traffic accident metaphor has been used to emphasize how COVID-19 can happen

to anyone suddenly, and the serial killer metaphor has been used to describe how COVID-19 can be invisible and deadly. The apocalypse metaphor has also been used to describe the current situation of sick people isolated at home or in the hospital. The recurring concerns of the quarantine films I analysed above can be connected to these metaphors of Colak as outlined above. These filmic themes therefore may be grouped in two major human emotions — from negative and dark thoughts like loneliness, fear and panic to hopes and more optimistic insights. The first aspect of course encompasses feelings ranging from fear and claustrophobia to isolation and loneliness. The other aspect — everlasting human positivity has been transpired through family and individual relationships as well as, empathy and human connections. Within such bi-polar emotive concerns, the gender and class dynamics of Bangladesh society were also always embedded in these films. Ultimately, these digital screen texts offer us quite pluralistic and subjective portrayals of people's lives under 'lock down' in Bangladesh, that is not available on what I termed as 'public' media in the earlier section of the chapter. An alternative narrative mode is palpable in these digital audiovisual screen fictions I call 'Quarantine films' here. These provide a bottom-up approach by putting together multiple micro pictures of COVID-19 in Bangladesh. This of course creates an opposition to the grand, objective mode of covid narrative as presented and established by the mainstream 'national' media industries prevalent in Bangladesh. By portraying everyday life of ordinary people under and within the constraints of lockdown/quarantine imposed by the State, the 'indoor' lives of the citizens through various narrative strands are displayed here. We also see plenty of 'window shots' from inside the house, sometimes peeking outside, sometimes meeting on the rooftop of a house. Such places like windows, rooftops and balconies were used as 'intermediate spaces' in between indoor and outdoor, and thus blurring the differentiation between public and private spheres. In some television and film texts here Black and White Vs. Color differences were used to move from inside to outside world.

In this way, these alternative screen texts create and permeate some kind of informal relations with COVID-19 in private sphere — by lodging a number of private narratives of COVID-19. They do not pact together to construct an undeniable grand narrative of COVID-19 in Bangladesh. Rather, sharing so many stories with many different voices and through multiple narratives—sometimes opposing each other —

these provide us with invaluable but somewhat chaotic representation of COVID-19 in the world and in Bangladesh as such.

4.13. Conclusion

In the end, I tend to call the quarantine films also some kind of illusions of 'subjectivity'. As these personal films also attempt to propose their bits in a larger objective reporting of/on COVID-19, they also participate in creating not only a national but also a global narrative of the pandemic and pandemic-induced lockdown regimes. The macro picture of COVID-19 prescribed by the mainstream media and micro pictures of the pandemic presented through various palettes and puzzles need to be read through a bi-focal lens. This will only help making our ways through illusions of 'objectivity' and illusions of 'subjectivity' available in different narratives of corona pandemic.

Here I wish to share insights of Figen Unal Colak (2022) who discusses how social media users have conceptualized COVID-19 through various metaphors. Colak categorizes the metaphors into four categories: COVID-19 as an "illness," COVID-19 as a "human relationship," COVID-19 as an "object," and COVID-19 as an "intangible concept." Talking about COVID-19 as an ''intangible concept," Colak notes that "the metaphor of gossip was identified due to its ability to spread very quickly." (Colak 2021, p. 207) She explains that the metaphor of hatred has also been used to compare COVID-19 in terms of spreading through contact as well as harming the person from the start. Colak also writes that the metaphor of the stone of Sisyphus has been used to describe the situation in which the success of COVID-19 could be reversed, and it might be necessary to start over again.

In order to make a final summary of the visual tales of COVID-19 of Bangladesh that I analysed above, I borrow here what Vidya Balan, the noted Indian film actress said: "This pandemic has been a long waiting game. And waiting is a loaded act, one that demands metamorphosis. From fear and anxiety, the act of waiting transforms into an uneasy calm… [I]t eventually transforms into frustration, but somehow reclaims the ability to revive hope." (Balan, 2022, p. 2-3) Therefore, the learnings from these local COVID-19 narratives — how waiting and anxiety turned into hopes and new aspirations for all citizens of the world — are here to stay, and we need to be vigilant for future as this is certainly not the very last pandemic the humanity had to go through.

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5. Shooting Back: Photography and Videomaking to Confront the Silencing of Being Locked Up During the COVID-19 Lockdown in the Rohingya Refugee Camps of Bangladesh

Mara Matta

> The right to have rights, or the right of every individual to belong to humanity, should be guaranteed by humanity itself.
> Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951, p. 44)

Abstract

Bangladesh hosts the world's largest refugee camp in the Ukhiya district of Cox's Bazar, a very beautiful but geopolitically sensitive and environmentally fragile coastal area. Kutupalong Camp is 'home' to almost one million Rohingyas who have fled Myanmar – their country – after various waves of violence. As UNHCR recently reported, in Cox's Bazar "the COVID-19 pandemic has made life even harder for some 880,000 Rohingya refugees living in camps as well as for thousands of impoverished Bangladeshis living in nearby communities" (2021). This article is part of an ongoing research study on the strategies of material and symbolic survival and the ways images and narratives – together with silences and absences – are employed to create another public sphere where Rohingya refugees can talk as *citizens of the world*. Starting from the political and philosophical considerations drawn from Hannah Arendt (1943; 1973) and Giorgio Agamben (1995; 1998) works on refugees, this preliminary contribution looks at the artistic and visual strategies that Rohingyas have begun devising during the unfolding of the COVID-19 pandemic to cope with the increasingly daunting outcomes of forced displacement in the Bangladeshi camps of Cox's Bazar.

Keywords: COVID-19; Rohingya refugees; Cox's Bazar; Kutupalong Camp; photography; cinema; regimes of visuality.

5.1. Introduction*

The Rohingyas are often described as one of the most persecuted people in the world[1]. Their right to live in Myanmar as legal citizens has been repeatedly denied by the government, which refuses to include them among the 135 ethnic groups of the country[2]. Deprived of legal recognition and citizenship rights, the Rohingyas are considered as *enemy aliens*[3] and the Burmese government sees them as "illegal Bengali migrants" from neighbouring Bangladesh (Kipgen 2013, pp. 1–14). Bangladesh, on the other side, has accommodated them in temporary shelters and considers them "Forcibly Displaced Myanmar Nationals" (FDMN)[4]. Every effort at proving that Rohingyas are Myanmar nationals has triggered more violence and hostility among the Burmese people. Despite their praised resilience and efforts at coping with calamities, fires, and all kind of diseases, among which we also count COVID-19, Rohingyas are still far from achieving what they have been asking for since the 1960s, that is, the recognition of their "right to have rights" (Arendt 1973, p. 298) and the reinstatement of their citizenship in Myanmar.

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1 See, among others, Islam (2021, pp. 14-40).

2 As Patrick Hein has pointed out, "The post-2011 electoral competition and struggle for power and state control reached unprecedented ethnicisation levels as Rohingyas were totally delegitimised by having their resident status converted from quasi-citizens (NRCs) via proxy permanent residents (white cardholders) to undocumented, *de facto* nonresidents." (2018, p. 379)

3 The concept of 'enemy alien' has a long history and has been attracting renown attention in the last decades. As the recent book *War and Citizenship* (2021) by Daniela Caglioti highlights, such concept changed during time and can be considered the outcome of changes that occurred during the XIX and XX centuries, together with the development of the ideas of nation-state, nationality, and citizenship. Therefore, the definition of 'enemy alien' is never just applied to foreigners who enter a territory and appear to be in the wrong place at the wrong time, but it is a more complex concept that needs to be unpacked in different ways in different geopolitical spaces and historical times. See Caglioti (2021).

4 On 28 September 2017, the Foreign Affairs Secretary of Bangladesh, Minister M Shahidul Haque declared that the government had decided to call Rohingya people "forcibly displaced Myanmar nationals" instead of "refugees". He also affirmed that, despite the controversy such label might create, Bangladesh was intentioned to raise the matter at the United Nations. See <https://www.thedailystar.net/city/forcibly-displaced-myanmar-nationals-1469374>.

In the last ten years, starting from June 2012, new waves of violence have struck the Rakhine State of Myanmar (Burma). The Burmese Army, supported by part of the Bamar Buddhists – the majoritarian ethnic and religious group – have targeted Rohingyas, causing the fleeing of thousands of people and leaving hundreds injured, internally dispersed, or dead.[5] Many of those who managed to escape to other countries found shelter in Bangladesh. After the horrific attacks of 2017, Bangladesh witnessed an unprecedented inflow of Rohingya refugees, with the camps around Cox's Bazar swelling up to one million people. At the time, the local population and the Bangladeshi government showed a positive response towards the asylum seekers, with media displaying a supportive attitude and calling for attention to the plight of the Rohingyas. In less than three years, however, and with COVID-19 hitting the shores of Cox's Bazar, the narrative changed and the Rohingyas became a *threat* to Bangladesh's national security and its public health system.

In the aftermath of the 2017 massacres and the new exodus of Rohingyas towards Bangladesh, Michael W. Charney addressed again this sensitive subject, trying to clarify the misunderstandings surrounding the origins of ethnic identities in the Rakhine state, once known as Arakan[6]. Arguing against the idea that these identities are "fixed and biological" and claiming that such misinterpretation has led to "to policy errors by the Government of Myanmar and NGOs on the ground in Rakhine[7], Charney stated that, since 1962, the military junta and the government of Myanmar, including the current one, has been supporting an extreme form of ethno-nationalism that privileges the Buddhist Bamars "along unscientific, nineteenth century Orientalist notions of race." (Ibid.) On such biased and false assumptions, he affirmed, "the 1982 citizenship laws […] did not include Rohingya as a *Taingyintha* (national race)" (Ibid.), and the Rohingya have been denied their legitimate rights to citizenship.

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[5] On the Bumese politics regarding ethnicities and 'minorities', see, among others Burke (2016, pp. 258-283), Thawnghmung (2016, pp. 527-547).

[6] In the last few decades, various studies have been published on the history of Arakan and the origin of a Muslim enclave in what is nowadays the northern part of the Rakhine State. See, among others Chan (2005, pp. 396-420), Mohajan (2018, pp. 19-46), Haque (2017, pp. 454-469).

[7] See Charney (2018). Available online at: <https://eprints.soas.ac.uk>.

The rigid labelling that characterized British colonial praxis translated into a progressive essentialising of local communities along the lines of ethnicity and religious belonging. Stripping Rakhine Muslims and Hindus, namely Rohingyas, of their citizenship and making them stateless in their own country, contributed to the impunity and the condoned violence against this ethnic group. Human Rights Watch (2013) has claimed that the horrible attacks perpetrated in June and October 2012 against the Rohingyas "were organized, incited, and committed by local Arakanese political party operatives, the Buddhist monkhood, and ordinary Arakanese, at times directly supported by state security forces[8]." They concluded that the atrocities "committed against the Rohingya and Kaman Muslim communities in Arakan State beginning in June 2012 amount to crimes against humanity carried out as part of a campaign of ethnic cleansing". (Ibid.)

Ian Holliday has also pointed out that "as Buddhist chauvinism develops among the Bamar majority, other Muslim groups are finding their citizenship status increasingly challenged. While not reduced to the level of the broadly stateless Rohingya, their rights are certainly being degraded." (2014, pp. 409-10) This degradation continues, almost uninterrupted, since many decades, and it is reproduced, sometimes even reinforced, inside the camps. Kutupalong, which epitomizes the everlasting memory and the continuous absurdity of the camp as the "*nomos* of the modern world" (Agamben 1998), was set up in 1992, in the immediate aftermath of the Myanmar government's *Operation Pyi Thaya* (Operation Clean up and Beautiful Nation) that unleashed the Burmese Army against the Rohingyas living in the northern part of the Rakhine state[9]. Once crossed the Naf River, the natural water border between Bangladesh and Myanmar, Rohingya refugees were divided and dispatched to different camps. Kutupalong quickly became the largest one, located along the coastline, prone to floods and landslides, and yet close enough to Myanmar to maintain alive some hope to return. The shelters are made of bamboo and tarpaulin, providing little protection during the winter and even less during the rainy and hot monsoon season. Fires, cyclones, scarcity of clean water,

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[8] See *Human Rights Watch Report on Burma* (2013), available online at: <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2013/country- chapters/burma>.

[9] On the atrocities of *Operation Pyi Thaya* and other crimes against humanity committed by the Burmese State against the Rohingyas, see Dussich (2018, pp. 4-24).

and the precarity of daily life make it difficult to envision a better future, especially for the majority of Kutupalong's residents, made up of children and young people.

The restrictions imposed by the Bangladesh government on Rohingya refugees, such as the prohibition of marriage between a Rohingya and a local Bangladeshi national, the interdiction for children to access the national school system, and other measures which are meant to keep Rohingyas in a state of precarity, have created a pervasive sense of alienation as they are enforced to discourage asylum seekers from pursuing permanent settlement in Bangladesh[10] .

5.2. COVID, Camps, Citizenship: Disease, Degradation, Denial

It has been three years since 11 March 2020, when the Director-General of WHO declared COVID-19 a global pandemic[11], driving countries worldwide to take drastic measures to curtail the virus and limit its

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[10] The present government, led by PM Sheikh Hasina and her Awami League Party, has been unendingly praised for her support to the Rohingya people. However, as it is clear from the paucity of studies which address this issue, there is no attention or concern by the international community regarding the precariousness of life and the repeated abuses inflicted on ethnic and religious 'minorities' in Bangladesh by gangs belonging to the majority (Bengali Sunni Muslims, constituting almost 90% of the total population), often with the support of the Bangladeshi security forces (police personnel, army soldiers, members of special battalions, etc.). Suppressing those voices that called for a recognition, inside the newly written Constitution of 1972, of the rights of the people which did not identify themselves as Bengali and/or Sunni Muslims, *Bongobondhu* Sheikh Mujibur Rahman affirmed the birth of a nation where those who were not Bangla-speaking Bengalis were *de facto* marginalized and *de jure* relegated to the status of 'ethnic minorities', 'sub-nationals' and 'small tribes' in their own territory. This form of ethnic and religious hypernationalism closely mirrors the one adopted by Myanmar, although Bangladesh – so far – has not modified its citizenship act in such draconian manners. India, however, did so in 2019, giving way to a sort of witch-hunting in its Northeastern regions to find and detain (in newly built 'detention camps' like the one in Assam) all the residents who were not entitled to citizenship. The majority of them appear to be Bengali speaking Muslims, labelled as 'infiltrators' and scrapped of any civic right. For more details on the question of indigeneity and minority rights in Bangladesh, see, among others, Brandt (2019, pp. 150-170), Zobaida (2017). For a brief discussion of the same issue in India, see Shleiter, de Maaker (2010, pp. 16-17). On the amendment of India Citizenship Act 2019, see, among others, Jayal (2019, pp. 33-50), Srivastava, Tiwari (2022, pp. 303-332).

[11] See *WHO Director-General's opening remarks at the media briefing on COVID-19 – 11 March 2020,* available at: <https://www.who.int/director-general/speeches/detail/who-director-general-s-opening-remarks-at-the-media-briefing-on-covid-19---11-march-2020>.

spread among the population. However, in refugee camps around the world, COVID-19 has often been perceived as *just* another of the multiple challenges that people face, sometimes not even the most threatening one. Although certainly an aggravating element of a life already made *bare* (Agamben 1998) by the situation that refugees and displaced people are forced to endure on a daily basis[12], the fear elicited by an invisible menace haunting their already precarious lives can be associated with the claustrophobic feeling that often embodies life spent in a camp. Locked inside fenced shelters, with army patrolling the area and officers monitoring their movements, refugees live in a sort of permanent lockdown, a limbo where they have to come to terms with all kinds of diseases, ailments and miseries. In this sense, as Agamben highlights, the concept of biopolitics emerges as coterminous with the norm of a "sovereign exception" (1998, p. 6), where biological life is located at the centre of the calculations of the modern State. (Ibid.) These power dynamics and "the original fiction of sovereignty" (Agamben 1995, p. 117) are thrown into crisis by the refugee, who is the only "imaginable figure" of our time that can break up the alleged "identity between man and citizen, between nativity and nationality" (Ibid.).

Giorgio Agamben (1995) and Hannah Arendt (1943) before him posit that refugees represent a disquieting issue for the nation-state because they challenge its system to the core, while also representing "the vanguard of their peoples […]" (Arendt 1943, p. 274).

In her powerful essay *We Refugees*, Arendt lamented the fact that refugees actually "don't like to be called refugees." (1943, p. 3). In her ironic, almost sarcastic tone, she elaborated on what is to be a refugee and the pain that comes from the realization of one's loss of identity and, sometimes, self-dignity. Arendt described the feeling of being *dis-placed* and the constant urge (that she despised but many felt necessary) towards 'assimilation', a strategy that, in certain conditions,

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[12] The concept of *bare life* was developed by the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben in his book *Homo Sacer*: *Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (originally published as *Homo sacer. Il potere sovrano e la nuda vita*, 1995), following insights into biopolitics by Foucault and the nexus between sovereign power, life 'stripped bare, and totalitarian regimes in the works by Walter Benjamin and Hannah Arendt. Agamben claims that his inquiry into such concepts "concerns precisely this hidden point of intersection between the juridico-institutional and the biopolitical models of power." (1998, p. 6) He concludes that "the two analyses cannot be separated, and that the inclusion of bare life in the political realm constitutes the original – if concealed – nucleus of sovereign power. *It can even be said that the production of a biopolitical body is the original activity of sovereign power*." (Ibid., *emphasis in the original*)

appears as *the way* to not be suspected of unloyalty by the host country. However, no matter how much one tried to fit in, the haunting sense of being always out of place – and perhaps even out of rhythm, almost *asynchronous* – created much despair and an unbearable feeling of alienation to the point that, as Arendt denounced, those same refugees who displayed great levels of 'optimism' while in public were the ones who would then go home to kill themselves[13].

Giorgio Agamben, reading through Arendt's essay after more than 50 years (1995), has pointed out how her concerns are still valid today and has solicited renewed attention to some of her propositions, especially the one that the refugee is to be considered the "vanguard" of all the others, all of us, to come. Perceived as a threat from within by the nation-state that engenders such tragedy, and from without by others that have to tackle the consequent 'human flows', the statistics tell us that there are approximately 80 million people around the world who are either internally displaced (IDPs) or looking for asylum in other countries. Of these, 26 million are labelled 'refugees'. These are numbers worth of a pandemic of abysmal proportions, of which Arendt warned us long before other global pandemics could be foreseen. This is not to say that refugees are equal to a public health threat. What I mean to subscribe to are Arendt's and Agamben's warnings regarding the failure of the nation-state to guarantee protection and ensure the recognition of rights to human beings for the simple fact that they are human and not, more specifically, citizens of some country.

Citizenship rights, bestowed on some and denied to others, have become a game of flipping coins and various countries got the terrible habit of scrapping people of their legal and civic rights to the point that *this* has become a viral threat, a weapon increasingly used to dehumanize and turn millions of people into "noncitizen residents" (Agamben 1995, p. 118), or, using Hammar's terminology, "'*denizens*'[14] — which, as Agamben highlights, has the merit of showing that the

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[13] Arendt underlines how suicidal rates had exponentially gone up among the Jewish refugees. She repeatedly denounced such abnormal insistence on the necessity of being optimistic and performing optimism in every public occasion.

[14] According to Tomas Hammar's trichotomy model, there are three "entrance gates into the country" and three corresponding statuses for people who happen to be *aliens*, *denizens*, and *citizens*. Foreign citizens are labelled *aliens* if they have entered a new country without residence rights. In this case, their status is regulated by the government. *Denizens* are, instead, those foreign citizens who do acquire permanent

concept *citizen* is no longer adequate to describe the socio-political reality of modern states." (Ibid.) Such failure of the nation-state as a system of governance is brought even more under the spotlight when it turns human beings into refugees. Thus, Agamben invites us to start with this "unique figure" and imagine a new political space where we all occupy the place of a refugee, because it is through such figure that we can come "to perceive the forms and limits of a political community to come" (Ibid., p. 114).

The space of the refugee, though, is a peculiar one, as Arendt had pointed out, as "[h]istory has forced the status of outlaws […]" (1943, p. 274) upon them. These outlaws, who speak the truth "even to the point of 'indecency'" (Ibid.), nurture the awareness that their story is "tied up with that of all other nations", no matter how much effort is put into silencing, persecuting, and forcefully disappearing them.

As outlawed avant-gardists, many refugees received the news of the COVID-19 pandemic as yet another absurd element of their tragic play and saw it almost like a mockery of their fate. Already looked down and locked up in most of the countries that build camps to accommodate them, many refugees were at first suspicious, and then utterly afraid, of the strategies that governments were devising to 'protect' them from the virus. In the Ukhiya District of Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, inside the world's largest refugee camp, the news that a viral and potentially deadly illness was fast spreading solicited the government to enforce drastic measures on the already limited freedom of movement of the Rohingyas. The news about COVID-19, therefore, was often received by the refugees locked in the camps with dismissal, doubt, concern, and even amusement. The camp was fenced by barbed iron wire and the access to internet connection had been completely cut off since a few months when more restrictive measures were put into place and enforced at gun point. The feelings of disconcerted disbelief turned into fear, panic, and anxiety about the *real* danger that refugees were facing. In a time when life vulnerability is further exacerbated by what Judith Butler calls an "accelerating condition of precarity" (2015, p. 10), photography, videomaking, music, and poetry, became venues for escaping (without escapism) the harsh reality of everyday life, where the lockdown

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residence but do not undergo a form of naturalisation process. For more details, see Hammar (1990).

plunged Rohingyas into an increasingly dreadful state of misery and silencing. Among the narratives emerging from the Rohingya camps, documented in the book edited by Imtiaz A. Hussain (2022), scholar Raisa Rasheeka looked at those related to the time of the spreading of COVID-19 in Bangladesh. Rasheeka highlights the fact that, while Bangladesh was enforcing a nationwide lockdown that "brought with it an all-too-familiar economic shock to the already underprivileged populations" (2022, p. 191), for Rohingyas these measures, such as "the call to stay home has been causing anxiety that has little to do with COVID-19 itself." (Ibid.) For refugee women, this was an even more daunting situation to cope with, as it added new violence to an already dramatic situation. As Rasheeka concludes:

> The Rohingya women are not vulnerable because they live in camps. They are not vulnerable because they have no place to go. They are not weak because they are locked up in the same house with their abusers due to COVID-19. They are vulnerable because they have been made vulnerable through social, legal, religious and political structure since their birth. One true COVID- 19 consequence: these already vulnerable women have become even more vulnerable by taking away the illusion of security they were blanketed under. (2022, pp. 202-203)

To confront this gloomy scenario and also involve young women in the process of overcoming further disenfranchisement and potential new violence, art became a site for channelling creative energies and deploy what Barbara Mizstal calls 'civic creativity', a form of creativity that "provides us with ideas on how to democratize and humanize the workings of modern societies" (2007, p. 64, also quot. in Mendes 2023, p. 2). Using imagination to act upon the imposed silence and invisibilization of everyday existence, Rohingya youths turned into artists, activists and public intellectuals who refused to let the lockdown imposed by COVID-19 become another tragic act in their unfolding drama.

Engaging "civic imagination" (Jenkins et al. 2020) to speak up and break the silence, they have begun fashioning new artistic venues for nurturing some *optimism* about their future. And although we need to be wary of such optimism, in the same way Arendt was distrustful of the kind displayed by her fellow Jews, it is crucial to listen to it and make all possible efforts to lift the curtain of silence that nation-states have been trying to lower on refugees, including the Rohingyas.

5.3. Of Images and Imagination during COVID-19: Present Absences and Haunting Silences

In a time of crisis like the one engendered by COVID-19, when citizens of every country appeared to be coming together under a renowned sense of community and global citizenship, the images and the tales emerging from Cox's Bazar refugee camps contradict simplistic narratives, forcing the spectators to leave their comfort zone and listen to dissonant and discordant microhistories. The role that images and imagination play in shaping histories from the camps are of particular interest in the frame of their civic engagement. Arjun Appadurai defines imagination as a very important "social force" (1996; 2000) in the context of globalization. As he clarifies:

> If globalization is characterised by disjunctive flows that generate acute problems of social well-being, one positive force that encourages an emancipatory politics of globalization is the role of the imagination in social life (Appadurai 1996). The imagination is no longer a matter of individual genius, escapism from ordinary life, or just a dimension of aesthetics. It is a faculty that informs the daily lives of ordinary people in myriad ways: It allows people to consider migration, resist state violence, seek social redress, and design new forms of civic association and collaboration, often across national boundaries. (Appadurai 2000, p. 6)

This "role of the imagination as a popular, social, collective fact in the era of globalization" (Ibid.) and the importance that Appadurai acknowledges to "its split character" (Ibid.) – as a force that can both discipline and control modern citizens, but also support and nurture "collective patterns of dissent and new designs for collective life" (Ibid.) – is also essential in creating a new regime of visuality and "countervisuality", defined by Nicholas Mirzoeff as "the right to look", a Derridean expression pointing to "the terms on which reality is to be understood" (2011, p. 28), in opposition to forms of visuality imposed by the state, the media, the international organizations and other systems of power.

The Arendtian "right to have rights" gets extended here to "the right to look" as a fundamental one in reclaiming a space for agency and a time for 'being real': it is, in fact, the core issue of what gets to be mediated and represented that is questioned and reassessed in the works made by the Rohingyas, as they are constantly subjected to forms of "to-be-looked-at-ness" (Mulvey 1975). In her classic essay on *Visual*

Pleasure and Narrative Cinema, Laura Mulvey applied a psychoanalytical concept firstly developed by Freud to discuss the representation of women in classic cinema. The mainstream cinematic gaze was, according to her, modelling women as objects "to be looked at" by a (usually) male, patriarchal gaze. Such gaze could be *voyeuristic* or *fetishist*, projecting women in a twisted way, either in a negative or in an idealized form. This theoretical framework of the "to-be-looked-at-ness" affects in similar ways – patronizing and moralistic – the regimes of portrayal and surveillance that regard and come to define the refugee, where their *refugeesness* becomes naturalized, essentialized, and almost the only identity that sticks to people forced to flee their country.

This naturalization conflated into victimizing images of the Rohingyas and has disempowered them and silenced their voices to the point that they appear in some recent documentaries like *Rohingya* (2020), directed by the renowned Chinese artist Ai Weiwei, and the award-winning *Wandering: A Rohingya Story*, by Canadian filmmakers Olivier Higgins and Mélanie Carrier (2020), as ghost-like figures who walk into camera and off camera, leaving behind some sort of spectral aura.

The emergence of COVID-19 in March 2020, while these documentaries were in post-production and ready to hit festivals around the world, turned into an opportunity for some Rohingya youths. Occupying the space left vacant by the NGOs and mainstream media, all barred from the camps at the beginning of the pandemic, and making the most of the haunting silence that fell upon the camps, Rohingya youths organized themselves into art collectives and began to fill the vacuum and confront the plight of the *double pandemic* afflicting them: the *voicelessness* that often accompanies statelessness, and the unfolding drama of the COVID-19, with its curtain of silences and absences amplifying the sense of suspended life that people endure when forced into exile.

5.3.1. Spectral Figurantes in 'Our' Eyes. Documentaries on the Rohingyas

At the crossroads of statelessness and citizenship, at the borders between South and Southeast Asia, various marginalized communities struggle to reclaim their rightful place. Despite some positive efforts at limiting the damages in the refugee camps, Hussain and the contributors to *Rohingya Camp Narratives: Tales From the 'Lesser Roads' Traveled,*

poignantly highlight that there are "tales less told" and "pathways less traveled" (2022) that demand attention beyond the issues of bare survival. Rohingya refugees live side by side with other minoritized groups like the Buddhist Rakhines and the Marmas, for instance, but also share the space with millions of local Bangladeshis whose lives have been made more difficult by the presence of the camps. The solidarity and the efforts shown by the local community have slowly waned out after 2017's new inflows and resentment and conflict have started to emerge.

When COVID-19 hit Bangladesh, Rohingyas found themselves escaping this double threat hunting and haunting their lives: the pandemic and the military. The latter has always been a pervasive presence in their life, albeit often *invisibilized*. What remains perceptible and clear even today is the tightening net of power that imposes surveillance and restricts people's mobility, finding strong social consensus not just among the Burmese Buddhist population, but also among the Bangladeshi Muslims who have been presented with the agenda of necessary 'securitization' of citizens. Fencing the shelters, enforcing relocations towards unescapable floating sites, preventing refugees to go out from the camps to work, or simply access internet cafés, are all systems of control that have been affecting the lives of millions of Rohingyas living at the limits of such dehumanizing system – the nation-state – no matter if their own country or a hosting one.

While the world was caught off guard by the COVID-19 pandemic, slowly plunging into various waves of lockdowns and staring at the macabre performance of anonymous coffins being carried away from hospitals in a procession of unending mourning, in Kutupalong Camp things were beginning to change from surreal to hyperreal. After the attacks of August 2017, which had called new attention to the Rohingya camps in Bangladesh – where international organizations, photographers, and filmmakers had immediately flocked to record 'a Rohingya story' for the world to witness –, in March 2020 things suddenly fell creepily quiet. The staff of the various organizations operating in the camps were thrown out. The Wi-Fi had been cut off (and stayed off for months) and a spectral silence had engulfed Kutupalong. However, the crews of famous documentaries such as the one directed by the Chinese dissident Ai Weiwei, *Rohingya* (2020), and the one jointly co-directed by the Canadian filmmakers Mélanie Carrier and Olivier Higgins, *Wandering: A Rohingya Story* (2020), were in post-production and ready to hit the international film festivals.

Wandering, shot "with the invaluable participation of refugees from the Kutupalong camp", as the Vimeo version of the film underlines, was going to be released worldwide to much acclaim. This documentary, recipient of numerous international awards, was inspired by the photo project of Canadian documentary photographer Renaud Philippe and edited following the words of the Rohingya refugee poet Kala Miya (Kalam). The filmmakers, in their own words, wished to "dare to use art and cinema to reach out to people and bring witness to this reality"[15]. Following this statement, we see two kids reversed on a bamboo mat, inside what we assume to be one of the shelters in Kutupalong Camp. Concurrently one hears a boy whose voice pans slowly over the bodies of the children, hovering on them as if it were a disembodied sound, *the voice of a ghost*. As a matter of fact, he is saying: "As a kid, I believed in ghosts. I was told some are good. Some are bad." The sequence cuts to another photogram of another reversed body of a child, half covered by a *lungi*, in a dark room whose grey concrete floor occupies most of the space. The voice appears haunting them and conveys to the spectator an uncanny feeling, as the viewer is not sure whether the children are actually asleep or dead.

These words dictate the pace of the entire film, as we wander around the maze that is Kutupalong, silently following the lives of people who might feel they are *already dead*. In an interview, Renaud Philippe affirms that the film did not want to go into the politics of the Rohingya issue, but rather "show their beauty despite the context in which they are living, hoping you'll feel the humans behind the problem." (Ibid.) The director Mélanie Carrier adds that "The story and poetry of Rohingya refugee Kala Mia, who was an important collaborator in the field, became a carrying element of the film's narrative framework. His poems and story are carried by the voice of our friend Mohammed Shofi." We then see Mohammed Shofi, also a poet, introducing himself from a snowing site that we discover is Québec, Canada, where he has relocated after spending 18 years of his life in Kutupalong. Mélanie Carrier ends her presentation by saying: "We hope that this film, which focuses first and foremost on the human condition, will bring to you meaning, reflections, and encounters." (Ibid.) This last word – 'encounters' – is a delivered promise, although in a rather complicated manner.

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[15] Available at: <https://vimeo.com/ondemand/wanderingfilm/552732497?autoplay=1>.

Rohingya, the third film of Ai Weiwei's trilogy on human mobilities, also appears to have the wish to *re-humanize* his subjects, following them in their daily lives without ever intervening in the scenes with dialogues or filmed interviews. His silent camera-eye observes, looking and being looked-at, sometimes even disrupting the human flow of people who pass by, running errands, playing, cooking, taking showers, burying their dead, or simply walking around. Ai Weiwei's camera intrudes and creates ruptures in the everyday of the Rohingyas in Cox's Bazar. We assume the refugees know what Ai Weiwei and his crew are doing and *why*, but nobody talks straight into camera, except for one little girl who sings a song without any subtitles to tell us what the lyrics mean. To make sense of what we are watching through verbal explanations or subtitled dialogues does not seem to be the aim of Ai's documentary. There are no dialogues throughout the two hours film and the only *noise* is that of children cheerfully playing in the muddy fields, jumping around, and sometimes mocking the filmmakers. There is no moment of 'real' silence; we always either hear the sound of the busy camp's life or some off-screen music, with the *Ave Maria* of Schubert being the most allusive and evocative one – almost conveying the idea of the camp as a giant nativity populated by many Madonnas with child. Silence is a presence in the ponds, the alleys, the huts, the mosques, and the graveyards that dot Kutupalong. Ai Weiwei never uses voice-over or other strategies to inform the viewers of the *special* status of the people in the film. Only at the very end of the documentary we are told that the Rohingyas are persecuted and considered victims of an ongoing genocide in Myanmar.

The "everydayness of silence" (Good 2021; Weller 2021) is the most resonant feature, occupying the soundscape of the documentary and framing the Rohingyas in the refugee camp as *just humans*. If these moving images are also 'moving' in a subtler sense, as images that inspire empathy and feelings of compassionate solidarity, this is something that needs to be established. They are polished and craftily beautiful, in their stark simplicity. And yet, as Susan Sontag (1967) has highlighted, this use of silence as a modern feature of art is not devoid of what can be conceived as 'deceitfulness'. Sontag, writing about the silence of artists, argues that it can be seen as "a zone of meditation, preparation for spiritual ripening, an ordeal that ends in gaining the right to speak[16]." Silence as an absence of speech becomes meaningful

[16] See Sontag (1967), *The Aesthetics of Silence*, in "Aspen". In 1969, the essay was published

when self-inflicted: it is, in its absence, a powerful speech. However, silence can also de-historicize those people that the artist wished to re-humanize by silencing them. We must also posit, as Robert Weller has done, that verbalized narratives are not always the best way to overcome violence or trauma. The relevance of silence as a constitutive element of the everyday is something we need to acknowledge. Byron J. Good, taking into account Weller's work in China and Taiwan, and applying Sadeq Rahimi's concepts on the *hauntology of everyday life*, explains this "everydayness of silence" as necessary to make it possible to see, like in a *chiaroscuro*:

> the rhythms of everyday village life, including cycles of rituals, and efforts at repair through partial re-establishment of rhythms of ritual life in sequestered sites of the new, massive housing structures. Ghosts there are, and some haunt, while others suffer from being torn from temples and buried. But the focus here is on quite a different understanding of silences as constitutive of the everyday.

Quoting from Rahimi, he adds:

> What *The Hauntology of Everyday Life* is meant to put forward is that the very space of everyday life is so filled with ghosts that nobody can avoid them – in fact, that the very experience of everyday life is built around a process that we can call hauntological, and whose major by-product is a steady stream of ghosts. (Good 2021, p. 521)

In Ai Weiwei's documentary, then, we are positioned at the threshold of an un/speakability, with all its ambiguous signification: silence forces – rather uncomfortably as the film lasts more than two hours – the spectator into a voyeuristic consumption of the *normalcy* of the Rohingyas' lives, and yet it also raises the question of the dynamics of power and the imposed silencing on people who (we know) are persecuted and locked in a refugee camp. There is nothing normal about this normalcy. Or, as Weller puts it, "the absence of speech" does not represent "a blank slate […]". Silence "is filled with the multitudes of potential meanings, but refuses to resolve, simplify, and unify those meanings" (Weller 2021, p. 485, also quot. in Good 2021, p. 521). We do not witness obvious signs of crimes or violence against the refugees,

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again, in its extended version, in a collection of essays titled *Styles of Radical Will*, 1969. I consulted the original version published on the journal "Aspen" (1967).

who appear to go by their daily chores as many others in Bangladesh. If we did not know that these people were asylum seekers escaping genocide, we would not immediately make sense of this condition. They *happen to be* Rohingyas, asylum seekers from Myanmar who are fleeing from genocidal violence at the hands of the Burmese regime. But Ai Weiwei does nothing to delve into this aspect of their history, to the point that their silence appears as an embedded and constitutive part of some form of ritual process (Weller 2021).

In the same way, that silence underlies special moments within a rite and dictates the rhythm of the whole ritual, in Ai Weiwei's *Rohingya*, one confronts this nativity's scenes, anticipating the mourning that the ancient story thought us to expect: the torture and the death of the son of God. The quality of the 'haunting' of everydayness emerges in this spectacle of daily life, with this "steady stream of ghosts" that ceaselessly provoke our gaze into searching for something more particular, more spectral (or saintlier?) than *just* their humanness. If Ai Weiwei's intention was to present us with a 'stream of ghosts' and imply that Rohingyas only *appear* to be living, but in a liminal space which is similar to the lives of a walking dead, we cannot be sure. Interpretation of art, as Sontag has taught us, is a shallow and philistine act that "poisons our sensibilities" (Sontag 1966, p. 7). In her own words:

> In a culture whose already classical dilemma is the hypertrophy of the intellect at the expense of energy and sensual capability, interpretation is the revenge of the intellect upon art.
>
> Even more. It is the revenge of the intellect upon the world. To interpret is to impoverish, to deplete the world—in order to set up a shadow world of "meanings." It is to turn the world into this world. ("This world"! As if there were any other.) The world, our world, is depleted, impoverished enough. Away with all duplicates of it, until we again experience more immediately what we have. (Sontag 1966, p. 7)

Ai's documentary, if anything, has the capacity of making us truly "nervous", as real art should do. (Ibid.). Trying to interpret it would equate, if we were to follow Sontag, to an act of taming his art, in order to make it "manageable, comformable" (1966, p. 8). Ai Weiwei's *Rohigya* presents, without actually aspiring to *represent*, shows without truly *exposing*, narrates without resorting to speech, the ambiguity and indeterminacy of human lives of people who are (although we do not

immediately realize it unless we are aware of it) locked inside a camp and barely surviving at the outskirts of civic rights and legal entitlements. Forcing us into their lives, into an almost unbearable flow of non-verbal sounds filled only by the rumour of the everyday – and the everydayness of silence –, we increasingly feel a disquieting sense of alienation and end up overwhelmed by this normalcy, which is all but tolerable. We feel haunted by the images, nervous at the countergazes that look at us through the camera, questioning our passive interest in voyeuristically watching 'them' without taking any particular stance, rather inane or indolent.

Ai Weiwei composes a challenging work of art, but, as Sontag would argue "so far as any audience consists of sentient beings in a situation, there can be no such thing as having no response at all." (Sontag 1969, *online version*) However, response and responsibility do not equate. The audience is left admiring these evocative, even visionary, works by accomplished filmmakers without realizing that: COVID-19 has been percolating through the fences and wandering along the lanes of Kutupalong; the Bangladesh government has constructed a floating jail on Bhasan Char to confine thousands of refugees; the killing fields of Myanmar have not gone silent and we need to shake off our acquiescence looking at less "comformable" and comfortable art.

5.3.2. Bangladeshi Artists Frame the Rohingyas: Escaping the Humanitarian Perspective

At the break of COVID-19 in Cox's Bazar, Kutupalong Camp became truly a site of *spectral encounters*, where many photographers and filmmakers converged with the intention of digging out the beauty and the dignity of the human condition of the Rohingyas. The refugees, reclused in the camps and forced into an even more disconnected life of *present absentees*, had to endure enormous difficulties imposed by the lockdown. Without any clear information or proper measures to contrast the spread of the virus, Rohingyas experienced both a sense of abandonment (as the NGOs and media were leaving the camps) and a feeling of claustrophobia, with communication cut off and fences up.

During the months that preceded the official declaration that the global pandemic had also reached the camps, the Bangladeshi filmmaker Rafiqul Anwar Russell shot and released the documentary *A Mandolin in Exile* (2020), where he followed the daily survival of a

Rohingya refugee who endures a difficult life by playing his beloved mandolin. Self-taught and incapable of reading or writing, music and songs are his only surviving strategy to navigate life at the threshold of death. His melodies and lyrics, infused with nostalgia for what has been lost and the distressful memories of the people murdered by the Burmese Army, are shared and appreciated by other Rohingyas, who invite him to perform on special occasions despite the dissenting opinion of some religious people who consider his actions to be against Islamic precepts. When a *huzur* confiscates his mandolin and tells him to live without it for a month and then come back to retrieve it, the musician replies asking the religious man to explain the difference between a dead and a living person. The *huzur* is perplexed but the musician anticipates his answer and tells him that the mandolin is what makes him feel alive. Music is the only thing that stands in between a hopeless existence and a somehow purposeful life. The film takes us around the camp but, notwithstanding the fact that Rafiqul Anwar Russell also strives for an artistic rendition of the atypical and somehow eccentric figure of the 'man-with-the-mandolin', his documentary offers a portrayal of refugees which is some shots away from the problematic beautification of tragedy that appears as the idiosyncratic characteristic of other films on the Rohingyas.

Although we are also forced into wandering around the camp, as Russell's camera follows the mandolin's peregrinations, we are not as overwhelmed as by the lyrical entrapment of the words of the Rohingya poet Kalam. In Higgins and Carrier's *Wandering*, for instance, one is so emotionally entranced by the voice-over of Shofi, which hovers on the human figures and haunts their bodies to the point of shadowing their existence, that we are caught in the poetic emplotment and cannot give meaning to what we see. The feeling is, paradoxically, alienating: the beauty appears to reinforce the emotion of consuming a voyeuristic spectacle of life and death, so interwoven that it is difficult to say where one begins and the other ends. The vivaciousness of children, bathing at a well or running down makeshift bridges, is counterposed by the slow wandering of a woman whose face has signs of burns; the flying of kites in the sky is followed by the sad eyes of a teenager who has been permanently crippled; and the ancient face of a man who walks on crutches, struggling to go up and down the sloping hills, is contrasted by the peaceful sleep of a baby in a swinging cradle. All of them, though, share this equally precarious life in a place where we are

all *flâneurs* following one million silent beings who live crammed in a maze of 13 square kilometres.

In Russell's *A Mandolin in Exile*, the Bangladeshi filmmaker is forced to carry his camera around and forsake the perfect framing of the scenes for the sake of running after the life of the mandolin and his player. A wobbling camera wanders around the lanes and catches glimpses of life in Kutupalong just before COVID-19 strikes it. They walk by graveyards and talk about the frequent deaths of children, the burial of corpses, and memories. In the process of editing the film, Russell certainly left many sequences and many stories out of the frame. And yet, we are made to believe that there is some degree of 'authenticity' in this story, as it is seemingly less crafted or polished than the others. We all know that this is an illusionary effect and that, as Anjali Gera Roy writes when looking at studies on Partition's survivors, "[their] memories exhibit not a spontaneous recall but an emplotment of a cluster of events in a narrative structure." (2020, p. 10) Rohingya refugees, like other survivors, have learned to retell their stories over and over again, not just during the hearings with the security forces at the border, but also for humanitarian and media agencies that get to sell their narratives and images around the world. They engage in a process of scripting and, as Roy warns us, "[t]his scripting of their lives into coherent narratives casts doubt on the elevation of survivor testimonies as pure, real, and authentic and places them on the same level as literary and historical texts." (Ibid.)

What concerns us here is exactly the mastering of this process of appropriating the right to this process of emplotment and scripting. Once we accept that there is no such a thing as an authentic and real narrative of the violent experiences Rohingyas live through, as these remain virtually unconveyable in their traumatic reality, and once we come to terms with the fact that survivors of violence often need to leave aside such narration "to emphasize tropes of courage, resourcefulness, fortitude and resilience that enabled their overcoming of personal trauma" (Ibid.), we can strive to understand the ways Rohingya refugees themselves embraced photography, film, music, and storytelling to narrate their stories in their own voices. This does not amount to a rejection of what other documentaries or photo exhibitions have shown of 'their world'. Sontag would laugh at such expression, in the acknowledgement that there is not such a thing as 'their world', 'this world' or any other world as a given beyond interpretation. We are

always caught in regimes of visuality and countervisuality. In Kutupalong, when COVID-19 hit its premises, Rohingyas' *worlds* were affected in their representation: the virus seemed to explode the narratives from a dimension of surreal, spectral lives into one of hyperreal existences, as beings reclaiming a right to be, a right to speak, a "right to have rights" in the midst of a global pandemic where nothing and nobody was safe.

Precarity had entered everyone's home, and the refugees decided it was time to talk for themselves as part of a community of global citizens – as humanity appeared to be the only collective where they could aspire to be entitled to full citizenship.

5.4. Countervisuality and COVID-19. Rohingyas Reclaim their Right to Their Own Images and Imagination

> In the middle of misery in Myanmar's Northern Rakhine State, I delivered the soul of poetry. That's the resource I find within me. Through writing poetry, I find hope on the edge of the sword, I find courage under the rain of bullets and I find strength in the ocean of fire[17]. (Mayyu Ali)

On 28th March 2023, after three years of pandemic, the Bangladeshi blogger Rezwan, who covers and bridge-blog Bangladesh and South Asia on *Global Voices* in both English and Bangla languages, published a piece titled "Photos stolen, compensation denied: The plight of Rohingya Photographers. International media and non-profits have used photos by Rohingyas without credit[18]."

In this article, Rezwan interviews the British-Bangladeshi photographer Shafiur Rahman, who has been actively campaigning for years on behalf of the Rohingyas and, during the breakout of the COVID-19 pandemic, launched the Rohingya Photography Competition to offer a platform to Rohingyas for showcasing their photos and images from the camps[19]. After three years the competition began, Rahman reported that thousands of photos were uploaded and shared by Rohingya youths living in camps in Bangladesh. Sadly, though,

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17 See <https://rohingya-voice.com/poetry/>.

18 See <https://globalvoices.org/2023/03/28/photos-stolen-compensation-denied-plights-of-rohingya-photographers/>.

19 See <https://rohingyaphoto.com>.

even after the display of much interest and talent among the refugees, various international media agencies, and even humanitarian organizations, still feel entitled to steel Rohingyas' images and publish them without either consent or compensation:

> These Rohingya refugees don't have a voice in general; for decades, some of their voices were highlighted by visiting journalists and were sometimes filtered before they reached the outside world of the camps. Nevertheless, a number of young Rohingya refugees are using their phone cameras or professional cameras to document their lives in the refugee camps and tell their own stories using social media.
>
> […] In recent years there have been a number of incidents where some of these Rohingya photographers found that their photos were used by international non-profits, and media houses without consent or paying for them. This runs counter to the fundamental values of journalistic integrity and ethical behaviour that underpin the notion of accountable journalism and professionalism. Moreover, the struggles of these photographers to claim their rights remain often unheard[20].

In the interview carried out by Rezwan with photographer and journalist Shafiur Rahman, the latter further elaborates:

> In recent years, Oxfam has been running "Oxfam's Rohingya Arts Campaign." It grandly claims to have "created the space for Rohingya artists and activists to share their perspectives through poetry, painting, photography, film, creative writing or any other artistic medium." This is of course an empty boast, a classic NGO tactic of bigging up small projects to an unrecognisable level. But imagine my disappointment when I discovered that Oxfam, which has been claiming to provide this art platform, had used photographs by Rohingya refugees without permission or compensation and without any acknowledgement. The fact that Oxfam has used the work of Rohingya photographers for their own benefit, and again I repeat, without consultation and without considering their rights and interests, is antithetical to the very idea of providing an arts platform. It is unacceptable for any organisation, especially one with a mission to alleviate poverty and injustice, to exploit refugees for their own gain like this. (Ibid.)

It is in this scenario of overt and covert exploitations, where also conscious artists-activists like Rahman intervened to open up spaces for

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[20] See note 21.

voicing dissent and expressing refugees' concerns, fears, aspirations, and hopes, that the Rohingyas have begun exploring their possibilities to tell their own stories. COVID-19 seemingly opened up a Pandora Box and set loose all kinds of repressed feelings, concealed emotions, and latent imaginings. The silence of the media and the absence of NGO's workers – both banned from the camps at the beginning of the pandemic outbreak – provided an unforeseen space and set a different rhythm to Rohingyas' lives, abandoned and yet 'set free to explore their imagination and employ their own narratives.

Adrienne Rich analysed the way silence can offer a creative space for allowing people to speak *their truth*, to create their own poetry which otherwise remains in the space of the unspeakable. She wrote that "Silence […] can be fertilizing, it can bathe the imagination, it can […] be the nimbus of a way of life, a condition of vision." (Rich 1997, p. 322) Acknowledging, though, that silence can also be a strategy of oppression, Rich also emphasized how poetry and, we might add, other forms of lyrical visions, can be rendered through the calculated use of silence and absence. Things resurface and float as if reinvigorated from this silencing of the noise of violence, the rumour of daily existence inside this anthill-like refugee camp, crammed with people whose lives are made redundant and marginal by oppressive systems of power. In similar situations, the poet can use silence to work on "what *is there* to be absorbed and worked on," but also, as Rich stated, poetry can adopt as its material "what is missing, *desaparecido*, rendered unspeakable, thus unthinkable." In her own words:

> It is through these invisible holes in reality that poetry makes its way — certainly for women and other marginalized subjects and for disempowered and colonized peoples generally, but ultimately for all who practice any art at its deeper levels. The impulse to create begins — often terribly and fearfully — in a tunnel of silence. Every real poem is the breaking of an existing silence, and the first question we might ask any poem is, *What kind of voice is breaking silence, and what kind of silence is being broken?* (Rich 1997, p. 322)

These are also the questions that the Rohingya Photography Competition appeared to raise when its initiator Shafiur Rahman (with whom I got the chance to speak over the phone during two semi-structured interviews) decided to launch it. The most interesting thing, Rahman recounted, was the fact that before COVID-19, Rohingyas would

respond to every question raised by an interviewer with an urge to retell their story of the violence, the plight, and the tragedy of being a persecuted people. They would show an "organic impulse to take photos", says Rahman, but it was obviously "affected by organizations and their needs of 'specific retellings' of their narratives".

Authorities and agencies either needed happy-clappy folks to support their humanitarian interventions or wished to portray the tragedy of the refugees to campaign for donors. And this is actually what Rohingyas learned to narrate. When Rahman visited the camps for the first time in 2016, his impression was that Rohingyas were insistent in showing the circumstances they faced: "When I first went there in 2016, people just wanted to tell their own story. Here comes a journalist: this is *the* story. There was a passionate insistence on telling what they had experienced." (*personal interview*, 2 March 2023). "During Covid," though, Rahman explained:

> Rohingya kids were the ones taking the interviews and recording the complaints about insufficient testing, restrictions on accessing markets, and other matters of concern for their daily lives. They seemed to act upon the realization that 'None is here, so we need to tell the world what's happening in the camps.' It was not a process of *reflecting on* their life, but more an *advocating* for support. (*emphasis added*)

The situation, between March and May 2020, escalated this feeling of the necessity to find their own voice, because COVID-19 was, by then, a reality also for the refugees locked in Kutupalong. Things went from bad to worse: "[…] the camps were really congested; food was bad; health care was hardly suitable. It became truly important to get messages out. […] Because, of course, these refugees do not have a written language, so it was crucial to communicate by using visuals." (Ibid.)

Rahman had visited the camps 34 times since 2016 and knew very well the abysmal conditions of refugees' lives. He had taken photographs of them, written articles to denounce the violence, advocated for the betterment of life in the camps, and listened to countless Rohingyas' stories of loss and survival. Yet, at the beginning of the pandemic, the scenario suddenly changed. There was another kind of fear in the camps, related not so much to the fact that Bangladesh had begun to transfer refugees to the jail-island of Bhasan Char or had already cut down internet 'for security reasons' and reinforced the iron

barbed fences all around Kutupalong. As Rahman explained to me, there was a constant anxiety regarding these issues, but the fear now was linked more to the tragic stories around "the quarantine of the Malay ship"[21], which created a surreal state of terror as the times seemed really "apocalyptic, as if they were at the end of time":

> The main fear was: if you go to a quarantine, you'd never come back. And if you wore a mask, you were labelled a 'Covid carrier'. It was so difficult to get to the front of a queue, and many people could not get their food rations. And you needed to have a mask to queue; and if you had a mask then people will think you were infected! So, it was very complicated. (Ibid.)

Such time-space needed to be navigated in alternative manners – and perhaps could only be navigated by creating a hyperreality where to finally find a space to articulate concerns and aspirations alike. As some Rohingya activists have pointed out in an article titled *Voice and power at the intersection of art, technology and advocacy*, published on the "Forced Migration Review" in 2022, "in many places, the COVID-19 pandemic and ensuing access restrictions for international actors accelerated the shift towards increased leadership roles for local organisations and community members." (Hero et al. 2022, p. 16) The role played by digital technology was also crucial in spreading information about COVID-19 and guiding the response by Rohingyas: "Social media in particular has become a space where Rohingya activists interact without their voices being filtered or constrained." (Ibid.) Twitter, Facebook and Instagram, together with TikTok and other platforms, helped Rohingya refugees to share "daily

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[21] Despite the appeal of many international organizations, Malaysia turned away some Rohingyas' boats trying to reach the country in April 2020. As Amnesty International's website reported:
On 16 April, the Royal Malaysian Navy turned back a boat carrying about 200 Rohingya women, men and children, while reportedly providing food to those on board. The Malaysian government has cited COVID-19 measures as justification for turning boats away from their coast. On 15 April, the Bangladesh Coast Guard rescued 396 Rohingya people from a large boat. The boat had been turned back by the Malaysian authorities and is believed to have been at sea for two months.
Early reports stated that 32 people on the boat died at sea, but the figure is now thought to be almost double that. UNHCR – the UN refugee agency – says that the survivors are severely malnourished and dehydrated.
See Amnesty International, COVID-19 no excuse to sacrifice Rohingya lives at sea, available at: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/04/covid-no-excuse-sacrifice-lives-more-rohingya-seek-safety-boat/>.

insights into the fear, boredom and deprivation of refugees' lives as well as their joys, aspirations and wish to return one day to their homes and homeland." (Ibid.)

While Sahat Zia Hero and his collaborators carefully stress the importance of the activities linked to advocacy and the use of digital media to support such campaigns, they also clarify that COVID-19 ushered in a time for experimenting with artistic projects:

> The last few years have seen the emergence of a range of arts-based initiatives, including *Artolution*, the *Rohingya Photography Competition*, and *IOM's Rohingya Cultural Memory Centre*, plus exciting Rohingya-led initiatives such as *Omar's Film School*, the *Art Garden Rohingya*, and *Rohingyatographer Magazine*.
>
> Such efforts are helping to open up more spaces where Rohingya can reflect upon past traumas, critically engage with current issues and directly articulate their aspirations while exercising agency over narratives and representation. (Hero et al. 2022, p. 17)

Like Rahman, also Hero is aware of the pitfalls that are endangered by an imagination stifled by the requirements of international organizations and mainstream media. Rohingyas got used to being narrated in specific manners and portrayed in a certain light. However, COVID-19 now presented a chance to work around these possible setbacks. Not simply because the camps had become an off-limit zone, but also because the pandemic was a global plight, not something peculiar to the Rohingyas. Refugees were affected as others around the world, beyond class lines, citizenship rights, and national boundaries. COVID-19 was affecting millions around the world, also in countries where big donors were based. In its global spreading, it created a sense of humanity being *truly* interconnected, despite the fenced camps pointing to the "state of exception" (Agamben 1998) that its residents were forced to endure.

With people living under the duress of quarantines and lockdowns, there was a chance to connect and reclaim the status of humans among humans, rather than projecting the specialness of the refugee. COVID-19 offered a space of silence and a time of absence where to recast themselves. And what better way to partake of humanity than using art?

5.4.1. The Art Garden Rohingya: the Art of Being 'Human'

Rohingyas' Lives are always Lockdown and Shutdown.

So, another pandemic, named COVID-19 come door to door every corner in the world.
It is another option to make us Lockdown again. It's kept us Lockdown now.
Also, during this COVID-19's operation time came another Ampham Cyclone, which also kept us Lockdown and Shutdown from all communication.
Where can we give our information, and who save us, by giving their life?

Rohingyas' Lives are always Lockdown and Shutdown.

Ya Allah please save all humans from the pandemic and give understanding skills,
that you can do everything in the world, what you want, without any doubt.
We hope you will not keep us in Lockdown and Shutdown for long time in the future.
Thanks to Allah and keep peacefulness all the living things in the world.1

— Syedul Mostafa[22]

Photography and photojournalism, but also poetry and videomaking, became the main areas where Rohingyas felt they could actively intervene "increasingly taking a leading role in framing their lives and narratives." (Ibid.) Refugees could speak of their own lives and dreams, striving to break free from a certain stereotypical and fixed frame of victimhood. They began hoping that people around the world could go beyond their contingent tragedy and see that they were as human as all the others. As much as the others could now feel as vulnerable as a refugee to surreal, sudden, situations of 'suspension of

[22] The verses of this poem were penned by the Rohingya poet Syedul Mostafa. It appears in its entirety at the beginning of a White Paper published online in 2020 by a collective of three civil society organizations: Athan; The Peace and Development Initiative – Kintha; and Rohingya Youth Association; and the Cyberlaw Clinic and the International Human Rights Clinic at Harvard Law School. See *Lockdown and Shutdown. Exposing the Impacts of Recent Network Disruptions in Myanmar and Bangladesh,* available online at: <https://clinic.cyber.harvard.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/13/2021/01/Lockdowns-and-Shutdowns.pdf>

normalcy' in their everydayness, precipitated by the inhumane conditions of COVID-19's threat pending on the whole humanity.

Some Rohingya youths, especially among those who had always tried to explore and support arts as a suitable and important venue for identity expression and cultural protection, saw this as an important break to finally talk about their 'truth'. The Art Garden Rohingya, which had begun its activities one year before the pandemic started, was created by the Rohingya author, human rights activist, and photographer Mayyu Ali and his friends to raise concerns about the dangerous state of their language and their cultural practices. As Ali himself explains:

> On March 21, 2019, my friends and I established *Art Garden Rohingya*, an online platform that has been documenting and reviving Rohingya culture, language, literature, and art. We have hundreds of budding Rohingya artists, including several women, who write poetry, draw paintings, and sing songs in Rohingya. (Ali 2021)[23]

Looking at their cultural heritage and the traditional modes of artistic expression, Ali explains the importance of orality and folk songs in Rohingya's experience of preserving their history throughout the centuries:

> Once upon a time, when there was no pen and paper in Arakan, our Rohingya ancestors recorded the memories of wars, battles, kings, kingdoms, love, tragedy, and disasters by composing folk songs, folktales, riddles, and proverbs.
>
> In this way they left lessons and morals to be passed to their children and grandchildren. Collectively, they represent a saga that began with the ancient Rohingya culture and flows through our heritage, connecting our language to our land and carrying the values and wisdom of our ancestors who came before us in Arakan. (Ibid.)

When plunged into the tragedy of COVID-19, the Rohingya poets of this collective, already very active on social media – where they present themselves (on Twitter, for instance) as the "[f]irst Rohingya commu-

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[23] These excerpts are taken from a paper published online titled *A Language in Crisis: Rohingya*, written by Mayyu Ali for the online blog "Cultural Survival" (7th December 2021, accessed on the 21st March 2023). Available online at: <https://www.culturalsurvival.org/publications/cultural-survival-quarterly/language-crisis-rohingya>.

nity-led online art website. We #revive and #promote Rohingya art and culture. We #empower and #encourage Rohingya writers and artists[24]" began directly addressing the fear of the pandemic and supporting the world battle to raise awareness. This youth wished to show that they could act as a conscious and responsible global citizen, but also yearned to make themselves heard and seen for their artistic interventions. The "civic creativity" that they exercised amidst the refugee community in the camps was, perhaps, also aimed at getting them outside the physical and symbolic barriers of the fences. As Giorgio Agamben had argued, taking the insight from Hannah Arendt, the camp represents the principle according to which everything is possible and permitted: "If this particular juridico-political structure of the camps—whose task is precisely to create a stable exception—is not understood, the incredible things that happened there remain completely unintelligible." (1998, p. 170) If this "zone of indistinction" (Ibid.) is a borderland where the threshold between "outside and inside, exception and rule, licit and illicit" (Ibid.) is nullified or blurred to the point of invisibility, the camp becomes a space where every atrocity is acceptable, since its inhabitants do not possess any rights. And yet, conscious of this possibility of everything, the young poets of the Art Garden Rohingya collective decided to look at this dreadful situation with the hope that exactly the suspension of their abnormal everydayness could provide a chance to be considered not just the recipients of care, but the caring and conscious young citizens of a larger, interdependent, global family.

In June 2020, when the virus had already reached Cox's Bazar and the Rohingya camps[25], one of the few female poets of the collective, Jamalida Rafique, published online her poem *A Child Amid COVID-19*:

I'm a child, worried, scared,
a world of uncertainty
I feel alarmed, fearful of this virus,
spreading everywhere.
This virus is not a joke,

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[24] The *Art Garden Rohingya*'s work can be followed online on various platforms. On Twitter, they are to be found at the hashtag *@ArtRohingya.* They are also active on Facebook and have a website platform at: <www.theartgardenrohingya.com>.

[25] COVID-19 was firstly reported in the Rohingya Camps in May 2020. Media covered the news and international agencies warned the Bangladeshi authorities of potential disaster inside the camps. Available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/5/15/first-coronavirus-case-found-in-bangladesh-rohingya-refugee-camps>.

it kills anyone, at anytime and anywhere. Judging by looks of things,
social distancing has saved
so have our health-workers
been risking their lives
working restlessy
every day and night.

PLEASE STAY AT HOME,
SO YOU CAN LIVE UP ANOTHER DAY
AND SLEEP ANOTHER NIGHT[26].

The poem, which came up their website <www.theartgardenrohingya.com/a-child-amid-covid-19> on the 9th of June 2020, carries also the hashtag, by now viral as COVID itself, of: *#StayAtHomeStaySafe*[27]. The fact that her poem begins with a personal statement regarding her own feelings of fear, her own anguished state of being a fragile child is, in the second stanza, followed by a broadening focus on the fact that "[t]his virus is not a joke, it kills anyone, at anytime and anywhere." She thinks of the health-workers risking their lives, she advocates for social distancing and adds, in capital letters, a plead to her readers to "please stay home". She is not the only one who calls upon her followers to stay safe. Nur Sadek, another young Rohingya poet and humanitarian worker living in Kutupalong who also contributes articles and poetry for the online journal "The Rohingya Post"[28], wrote on a short piece:

As Rohingya refugees fled the genocide in Myanmar, now we are stuck in the pandemic. And we are losing hope, the hope of being safe in the

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[26] Many Rohingya youths used social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook and Instagram to publish online their writings and post photos and videos from of life inside the camps. Jamalida Rafique has a Twitter account that can be accessed here: < https://twitter.com/i/flow/login?redirect_after_login=%2FJamalidaIRL>.

[27] Available at: <http://www.theartgardenrohingya.com/a-child-amid-covid-19/>.

[28] "The inspiration behind the launching of www.thestateless.com, now "The Rohingya Post" (www.rohingyapost.com) came in June 2012 when the Burmese government and Rakhine extremist groups instigated the campaigns genocide against the Rohingya people in Arakan (Rakhine State). It was extremely important time to disseminate the truth behind the scenes of the atrocities to the global audience who has very limited information on the persecution of Rohingya in Myanmar (Burma)." This online journal has been running since 2012 and is accessed on different platforms. See <https://www.rohingyapost.com/about/>.

> camp and the hope of returning to our birthplace in Myanmar with human rights, justice and dignity.
>
> Now I am in the camp trying to abide instructions in order to combat Covid-19 by wearing mask and practising hand-washing, etc.
>
> I am also keeping my hope through the poetry. Today I am here with a poem On Covid-19 for you All…

Nur Sadek talks of practicing handwashing and wearing a mask as a sort of rites shared by all the people around the world, a form of global war against COVID where, as the title of his poem suggests, the "mask is the best weapon". He also presents the pride of the Rohingyas who, when everyone was struggling to curtail the spread of the pandemic, can proudly say that "Covid-19 couldn't infect 5 per cent of Rohingya so Covid-19 is powerless." Sadek wishes to affirm the strength of the Rohingyas, rather than their assumed vulnerability. His poem concludes with the same plea of Rafique, "Take it easy, Abide instructions/ Stay at home and save your lives", but first he reaffirms that refugees have been born to face these difficulties and are overcoming them:

> We were born to face challenges.
> And yes it's an exam for all of us,
> Pass the exam with a pen and chase the coronavirus with a mask away.
>
> The virus is just like rain,
> When the rain comes we take an umbrella.
> Now Covid-19 came, take a mask like you took umbrella for the rain.
> The life is just like a circle, we may need to face many challenges to wander this circle[29].

The poem by Sadek, despite his short introduction on his feelings of hopelessness, actually stresses the resilience and the almost casual manner of looking at COVID-19 *as if* it were a natural event, like a rainy day in the life of a Rohingya. You protect yourself from the rains, but you don't make a big fuss about such an event, as "life is just like a circle" and Rohingyas have learned to "wander this circle". The idea of *wandering*, of being forced into a peripatetic existence where they have to "face many challenges" – COVID being simply one of them and

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[29] Available at: <https://www.rohingyapost.com/mask-is-the-best-weapon-genocide-made-us-refugees-and-covid-19-making-us-hopeless/>.

nothing more – presents the reader with a sense of powerful agency by the youth who is giving voice to this emotion. COVID is, for him, "powerless." It can be easily managed and defeated abiding by a few rules and rituals. In Kutupalong, like in other sort of camp, "politics becomes biopolitics" (Ibid.) and Nur Sadek is probably right to feel that COVID-19 is not what he should fear as "powerful" in stripping him of his rights or even rob him of his life. As a stateless Rohingya kept in precarious and guarded shelters, we may agree with Agamben that

> it would be more honest and, above all, more useful carefully to investigate the juridical procedures and deployments of power by which human beings could be so completely deprived of their rights and prerogatives that no act committed against them could appear any longer as a crime. (At this point, in fact, everything had truly become possible.) (Agamben 1998, p. 171)

From this palpable fear of real atrocities, it derives the necessity felt by other Rohingya youths to break the silence, to avoid being turned into ghosts, invisible and affected by *unspeakability*, a worse disease than COVID-19 for those infected and affected by it.

5.4.2. Of Dreams and Death, Films and Fantasies

As Shafiur Rahman has aptly pointed out during one of our phone conversations, "the plight of 'authenticity', of being caught in between images that either sensationalize or victimize the Rohingya" is an issue that can be hardly overlooked. We might want to see it as a threat in itself, a form of violence, and we might hazard to say that these misrepresentations also push refugees into a state of *hyperreality*. In post-modern societies, Jean Baudrillard posited, reality is hypermediated and people are confronted with the death of the real[30], because whatever comes to us exists as a simulation of reality. What is disquieting, though, is the fact that our consciousness becomes increasingly incapable of making a distinction between what is out there and they way is represented. Fiction and reality overlap: when both fade away to the point of leaving only an imaginary map of a certain landscape

[30] Baudrillard insists on this concept in many of his publications. In his famous work *Simulacra and Simulation*, he points out that "[t]he great event of this period, the great trauma, is this decline of strong referentials, these death pangs of the real and of the rational that open onto an age of simulation." See Baudrillard (1994, p. 43).

or soundscape, or *sensoryscape*, then we are left facing the hyperreal. A world haunted by what was and what might be, but it is nor the former nor the latter.

The risk of perpetrating the misleading image of a "happy-clappy version of the camp", as Rahman underlined, is a real one. These camps become populated by smiling children and brave refugees ready to share their "positive narratives" of resilience and hope. However, even hope turns into a shadowing presence, a present absence that haunts rather than sustains Rohingyas' lives. The beautification of their lives, the *hero fiction* of the heroification Rohingyas, the romanticizing of the tragedy which unfolds in front of our eyes – these are all interventions that raise issues that are not at all new to those who work on images. And yet, discarding aesthetics in favour of a supposed 'authenticity' is equally problematic. As Susan Sontag maintained:

> Pictures of hellish events seem more authentic when they don't have the look that comes from being "properly" lighted and composed, because the photographer either is an amateur or—just as serviceable— has adopted one of several familiar anti-art styles. By flying low, artistically speaking, such pictures are thought to be less manipulative—all widely distributed images of suffering now stand under that suspicion—and less likely to arouse facile compassion or identification. (Sontag 2003, pp. 26-27)

What Sontag underscored is the fact that photos taken by amateurish photographers and images shot by people who are not fully trained in images-capturing technology might sell well on the market of authenticity, as the relative lack of craftsmanship or polishness can be subjected to the interpretation (another word Sontag was suspicious of) of being endowed with a degree of *genuineness*. These images, like the ones stolen from the media agencies by Rohingya photographers operating in the camps, appeared to acquire great value during COVID-19. When the agencies realized that they could not access these zones anymore, they asked their 'men in the camp' to send out photographs and stories, bestowing on them the right to speak also for others, and simultaneously engendering a more compassionate reaction from viewers and spectators, who were duly informed that Rohingya refugees had turned into photographers and filmmakers and had begun sharing *their own stories*. What this meant for many young refugees in the camp was a jostling exercise of taking up responsibility

for the camps' narratives, while making sure to save the face of the donors, on one side, and the expectations of their elders, on the other. A negotiation that might lock them up in this threatening hyperreality made of 'virtual Rohingya's lives'.

Among the first Rohingyas to pick up this challenge and get down to business were Omar Faruque and Saidul Huq, who began hunting for news during the pandemic lockdown and the Internet shutdown in 2020, finally ending up with the aspiration of creating the first film school inside the Kutupalong Camp. As their Facebook page states:

> @RohingyaFilmSchool has transformed to Omar's Film School in memorial of our founder Omar Faruque who tragically died earlier this year. Please 'FOLLOW' us for the LATEST NEWS from the #Rohingya #Refugee camps
>
> Omar's Film School has established in 2020 with some Rohingya emerging youth to train youth on photography and videography.
>
> Omar's Film School objectives are -
> 1) To train Youth on Photography and Videography.
> 2) To make awareness video in Rohingya Camp.
> 3)To make documentary video on Rohingya Tradition and History.
> 4) To make interactive educational videos to ease the barrier of access to education.
> 5) To show NGO's activities in Rohingya Camp.
>
> Among the one million Rohingyas, there are many different life stories of different people, from those stories we want to bring out some courageous and inspiring story of Rohingya refugees.
> OFS also recording and documenting camp news and making some informative videos on the coronavirus in the Rohingya language[31].

In December 2022, during an interview published on the Bangladeshi newspaper "The Daily Star", Saidul Huq briefly retold the story behind this enterprise, affirming that "Our world is our camp. We could not even dream of anything beyond it[32]." He then sets to elucidate how the Rohingya Film School, renamed Omar's Film School after the sad and

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[31] See <https://www.facebook.com/OFS2020/>.

[32] Available at: <https://www.thedailystar.net/supplements/oxfam-human-rights-day-special-magazine-2022/news/three-generations-stateless-3193491>. [Online edition without page numbers]

unforeseen demise of the young Omar in May 2020, came into being. The "School", as the journal reports, is meant to train young Rohingyas in the arts of photography and videography, "to produce awareness videos around the Rohingya camps and produce documentaries on Rohingya Tradition and History." In Saiful's recorded words:

> There are tens of thousands of Rohingyas in the camp. These stories need to be told before the global audience and preserved […].
>
> But what haunts me is that, like me, my children are also stateless. When I think of it, I cannot sleep. […]
>
> My dreams would be fulfilled if I were in my country. What scares me is that the global community seems to be forgetting about it with every passing day. The Rohingya issue is fading away. […]
>
> A person without a country is like a body without a heart.

The journalist concludes that, despite the fact that Saidul states so "with misty eyes as his voice chokes", however "Saidul is hopeful." One cannot avoid being presented with a Sisyphean image, but also to be reminded of the flaunted optimism that Arendt saw in her fellow Jews, who perhaps also spoke to their sympathetic audience with misty eyes, albeit in a different climate. Arendt scorned this pretence and frowned upon the optimism expected from the refugees who, sometimes, ended their own lives after reassuring everyone that they were "very optimistic". Saidul's heart, as the journalist describes, "bleeds when he ponders over the fact that it is now three generations that are stateless." Just a few lines before, the article reports the anguished words of Saidul, who does not depict him in such optimistic and hopeful tones: "There is no escape, it seems. And when I think of that, I feel like ending my life. It is devastating to see that my children's world is also confined to the camp."

The camp and its rules appear to suffocate the aspirations of Rohingya youths. To be creative and resourceful in such a gloomy scenario is something that is difficult to imagine, especially with COVID-19 descending upon Kutupalong. And yet Saidul, like Omar and his brother, became committed to telling the 'truth' of their existence. In the words of Omar's brother, Faruk, who spoke to me over the phone during one of the interviews in February 2023, they decided to do whatever they could to support their community exactly when COVID-19 further

doomed their hopes. At that time, Faruk told me, they felt as if they had been "left behind." Everyone left the camps, and the Internet shutdown amplified the feeling of isolation. Faruk explained to me how Omar, pretending to be a Bangladeshi, would go out and collect information to share on social media. They used offline sharing applications, like AirDrop for iPhones and SHAREit for Android mobiles. These apps allowed them to send messages and even videos to family and friends for them to watch and learn about the virus and the measures to adopt to protect themselves from it. Rohingyas, he further explained to me, "can climb up the hills or even climb on some tall trees: from there they could get the signals and listen or send messages, videos, pictures, etc.". By the time things got established, though, Omar suddenly died aged 19. He was declared dead for a heart failure, but the circumstances of his death cannot be clarified. His dream of creating a film school was fulfilled by his brother and other friends, with the support from agencies like UNHCR: *World [*sic*] must not to forget the daily struggles of Rohingya who remain inside Myanmar. They're still facing discrimination, horrifying violence and intensifying conflict every day*." (Omar's Film School, emphasis in the original)

To carry forward this manifesto of preventing forgetfulness and silencing, the school's founders realized that they needed better training and professional equipment. Their wish to create something 'useful' brought into the spotlight also the interplay between the aesthetics and the ethics of *visibility*. Playing on this idea of the amateur refugee who strives to use art to find his/her own voice can pose some setbacks, as the ones evidenced by Chatzipanagiotidou and Murphy (2021) in their study of Syrian refugees in Turkey. While many humanitarian organizations support such efforts with the goal of breaking silence and conveying the 'authentic' voices of refugees to the public and promote a sympathetic response, these same projects might also "force artists to conform and identify with this category [refugee], silencing more complex processes of identification and subjectivity, communal historical continuities and personal loss, as well as artistic endeavours and labour demands." (Chatzipanagiotidou, Murphy 2021, p. 464)

It is in the interplay between visibility and invisibility, where silence becomes a life-saving strategy for the refugees who navigate its depths, that the COVID-19 pandemic surfaced and set loose certain rules, forcing Rohingyas to take a stance and choose between the total 'unspeakability'

and unknowability (Weller 2017) that their condition of suffering imposed, and the necessity of reclaiming a voice and visibility.

Rollywood, another Rohingya Film Production Team established in February 2020[33] also realized a 13 minutes short film on COVID-19, broadcasted on YouTube simply as "A Rohingya short film on Corona virus"[34]. Introducing the film on their Facebook page, on the 6th April 2020 the Rollywood team stated:

> Guys, here is our latest piece on Corona virus.
> We are so sorry for low quality of the video.
> We will do with high quality next time.
> Keep in touch with us.
> Wash your hands
> Wear face mask
> Keep social distance
> Stay home
> Stay safe
> Safe [*sic*] your community by following the rules[35] .

The film shows a group of young Rohingyas who endure the mockery of some peers and other challenges until they prove that the virus is real and everyone needs to take the measures prescribed. The message is kept simple and yet there is a lot of attention to plot and storyline, showing that Rohingya youths are aware of the power of the visual media and wish to exploit it to the full.

5.5. Conclusion

There is an increasing number of young Rohingya artists who, equipped with their skills and a lot of determination, are capitalizing on their talent (and sometimes the support of some professionals) to develop their interest in the arts of photography, filmmaking and storytelling. Using the space left vacant by agencies, journalists and NGOs, Rohingyas are exploring art venues and create film schools, photo magazines and archives of memories and histories. How the conditions of a global pandemic stimulated such creativity inside the

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33 Available at: <https://www.facebook.com/RollywoodRohingyaFilm/>.

34 Available at: <https://youtu.be/-68lEBiaqGo>.

35 Available at: <https://www.facebook.com/RollywoodRohingyaFilm/>.

world's largest refugee camp is a story that deserves to be told, not least because it brings to the forefront the questions of the humanitarian noise and crippled agency, especially when refugees' voices are constantly mediated and interpreted by others who have a vested interest in refugees *performing their role right*, to paraphrase Judith Butler.

As Dilpreet Bhullar highlighted, "[m]ore often than not, in public discourse, the refugees are reduced to a 'threat from the other'." (2022, p. 257) To counterpose such widespread notion, refugees have taken to social media platforms in order to find a free space and an empowering site where to "create, produce and disseminate refugee voice" (Ibid., p. 266). Looking at the way Butler has addressed human precarity and the "global obligation imposed upon us to find political and economic forms that minimize precarity and establish economic political equality" (2012, p. 150), Bhullar warns that this perceived obligation might engender "a political sympathy that is punctuated by the dependency syndrome instead of political solidarity shared among the equals". (2022, p. 266). In his thought-provoking essay on "The Vulnerability of Visual Vocabulary on Refugee Representation: The Voyage of Boatwo/men Rohingya", Bhullar posits that there is a real danger that certain images of "subservience" might override "depoliticization crescendos".

Along Susan Sontag's argument exposed in her book *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003) that viewers who see some photos and media portrayals of suffering people (but are located at a distance from them) might develop a sense of disconnection, even of relief, from the tragic reality they are witnessing in a mediated manner, Bhullar is keen to look into the possibility of finding spaces "for art inventions to restore the faith in humanity and subvert the conventional gaze of looking at the portrayals of the refugees." (2022, p. 257)

Lynda Mannik, whilst rejecting Sontag's idea that media photographs end up haunting the spectator rather than providing the viewer with some information, agrees with Judith Butler (2005, p. 824) that the images provided by media give some evidence but are always framed in order to construct and confirm specific "political ideologies" (Mannik 2012, p. 262). In general, she adds:

> media representations and other visual portrayals of refugees replace personal expression, individualised political perspectives or any other sign of subjectivity or intelligence on the part of the individuals involved with standardised, internationally recognised depictions. (Ibid.)

Both Bhullar and Mannik seem to follow Floya Anthias' proposition that it is not possible to present a linear narrative of the tribulations of migrants and refugees, either during their journeys or when they finally (without certainty) land in a new place to seek refuge. All these stories, Anthias would maintain, are necessarily "produced in relation to socially available and hegemonic discourses and practices" (Anthias 2002, p. 511, also quot. in Bhullar 2022, p. 266).

These narrative practices, though, seem to have favoured more invisibility and the ambiguity of silence and did nothing to debunk stereotypes and spectral representations of Rohingya's lives in the camps. On the contrary, much as "invisibility is damning," (Mannik 2012, p. 264), "misrepresentation can be just as damaging." (Ibid.) In time of crisis, as the one globally unleashed by the COVID-19 pandemic, national governments reacted to curtail the damages and made an effort to reduce the social and economic impacts that such events produced on the population. However, in Kutupalong, the news of COVID-19 were received without much panic from the local residents. The news about the global pandemic of COVID-19 arrived as a suspicious, but the Rohingya refugees firstly dismissed them as untrue, and secondly came to suspect the virus to be a lie, another strategy to entrap them or dislodge them from their shelters.

In this volatile atmosphere of fear and distrust, the fencing of the Kutupalong Camp and the cutting down of Internet connection plunged the Kutupalong residents in an exacerbated state of anxiety where all the suggested measures to prevent people from contracting the virus were dismissed as bogus and considered yet another mechanism of surveillance to restrict the mobility of the already confined and semi-reclused Rohingyas. It was this deafening silence, this uncanny scenario, that might have fuelled such an explosion of "creative imagination".

For young Rohingyas, it could be impossible to leave that space where every form of tragedy is made possible. It might even be unlikely to leave or permanently go out of the camps. However, it was possible and plausible to resort to photography, poetry, music, and films to recover a voice, fight against the haunting images projected on them, and present alternative, perhaps even powerful (if not totally empowering) ways to make their voices heard. This, in due time and with more access to media, training and technical equipment, might help to contrast both the negative representations of Rohingya refugees that were spread after 2017 and also contribute to Rohingyas' struggle for achieving their rights.

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6. The Culture of Wearing and Keeping on Facemasks in Korea: Beyond Confucianism

Antonetta L. Bruno

Abstract

Much has been written about regional strategies in confronting COVID-19 and the narrative about regional differences and similarities which is predominant in the media and in essays by experts is comparative in nature. Nevertheless, some scholars have argued that competitive discourses are hidden between the lines in these descriptions of regional specificities (Chekar, Kim 2022). From a cultural point of view, the literature focuses on comparativeness by positing a dichotomy between a collectivist approach (namely, Asian values) in antithesis to those of individualist (namely, Western values) societies as distinguishing key elements in dealing with the pandemic in both the East and West. This article sheds light on how the Korean population responded to the pandemic and the government's facemask mandates. It begins with the fact that the Korean government announced that from 1 May 2022, wearing masks outdoors would no longer be required; nevertheless, in August, most Koreans are continuing to wear masks outdoors up to the time of writing. This behaviour raises questions, including why Koreans have difficulties in taking off their facemasks. This article then argues that facemasks are nonetheless reservoirs of meaning according to how, who, where, and when they are worn, and that they are open to future signification in a continuous bricolage, re-semantization, and translation. It aims to suggest that besides 'Confucian' values, lookism and social pressure have not been carefully considered as determinant parts of Korean culture in the use of facemasks. To support this argument, I

analyse the results of a survey that we conducted in 2021.[1] Between the results of this survey and an examination of the media's narratives, the figurative dimension of meanings lies at the heart of these dynamics, transforming the idea that there is an ideology based on collectivism and Confucianism into discovering the crucial role of individual self-care during COVID-19.

Keywords: Mask; Lookism; East; West; Semiotics.

6.1. West vs East

If we divide the globe according to the ways COVID-19 was and is managed, the general but simplistic picture we get from most media is that of two methods, one of which are the 'draconian' policies practiced by paternalistic and authoritarian governments in East Asia (South Korea, Japan, China, Taiwan, Hong Kong), and the other being the policies of 'democratic' governments in the West (the United States and Europe). Such characterisations of government policy are rejected by Ho Hang Kei, who prefers to distinguish between "using an ideology to solve a medical problem: East Asian Scientific State vs. Western Democracy" (Ho 2020). These narratives are comparative in nature, but are not free from hidden competitive discourses in describing regional specificities (Chekar, Kim 2022). From this point of view, specificities or diversities in management and results become a political type of ideological propaganda and rough judgments that reinforce the boundaries between East and West. One of the consequences of this is that more attention has been given to diversity and less to similarities. According to most scholars in studies pertaining to this area, the former has been summarily de-emphasised for being too specific. Comparison between Eastern and Western approaches could and would in fact provide a further basis for mutual enrichment in improving strategy to face the pandemic. The main common and salient aspects of policy which led to East Asia being judged as having better managed COVID-19 than the West are summarized below.

First, the governments of East Asian countries such as Hong Kong, South Korea, Japan, and China have been praised for having taken a scientific approach in the management of COVID-19 (Cowling et al. 2020).

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[1] The present paper uses the McCune-Reischauer romanization system to transliterate Korean words into Latin script.

In the case of Hong Kong, the low number of deaths is significant, as it has the third-highest population density in the world (7,140 per km^2). Hong Kong and South Korea managed to reduce and control the spread of COVID-19 without lockdowns by instead influencing public behaviour, putting tracing strategies in place, and encouraging the proper wearing of facemasks (Lee, Lee 2020).

Second, public behaviour is another important distinguishing factor concerning the management of COVID-19 which calls attention to how individuals react to COVID-19 and how this in turn impacts its spread among the population, as I will discuss later in this paper.

6.2. South Korean Case

South Korea's 'success' is a good example that demonstrates yet another understanding of the Other in Western media, going from initial curiosity to a superficial and sometimes mistaken reading of events. In other words, in attempting to keep their analyses more objective, such narratives have been interpreted by observers of the Asian Other as a means of measuring a different approach that cannot be applied in the West because of its democratic values. The sharp demarcation between the West and East Asia (specifically South Korea, henceforth Korea) is reified in terms of the type of governance applied in the management of COVID-19; specifically, between the Other's authoritarian and paternalistic governance and that of Western governance, being the cradle of originator of democracy. Neither can it be ignored that even in Korea itself, most of the narratives about the reasons for their success fall into the trap of particularism and nationalism, however.

Most of the narratives have pointed to a combination of social and cultural factors behind Asia's 'success' in dealing with the pandemic. With a more emic approach, the research tends to stress how one of the reasons for this 'success' lies in the Korean government's making good use of the experience of SARS and MERS, when it entrusted the responses direction to professors of medicine, and it also enjoyed an advantage in enacting social control measures, such as mandating the use of facemasks and issuing instructions on hygienic behaviour to the population.

On the other hand, the narratives of Asian 'Otherness' betray a wide and diffuse assumption that East Asian populations are oriented towards a Confucian approach, culturally speaking, with their societies supposedly being undemocratic and hierarchical, meaning that

the people tend to be more obedient to rules. This is a common evaluation of Korea as well.

Once again we are faced with a method of thinking in terms of a dichotomy that divides rather than unites, whether we are speaking of geopolitical or socio-cultural perspectives. The opposing of 'collectivist' to 'individualist' societies is a rigid theoretical scheme which interprets nations as if they were a stable body, immobile and rigid, unchanged by the dynamics of globalization and of contact with other cultures. Defining and analysing a society as either 'collectivist' or 'individualistic' ignores the fact that a society is composed of 'fluid' individuals who may more or less fit into one or both categories to some extent, but who also may change according to context and the times. The same goes for applying the conceptual definition of Confucian society, which incorporates many countries in Asia while underestimating the extent to which each region has adopted Confucian values and ethics differently, moulding them to local religious and ideological beliefs over centuries. Much emphasis is placed on the significance of communities (respect for family and society) (Tu 1996) in Confucianism, stressing the subordination of the individual good to a feeling of belonging and solidarity with the local community, and then society.

Nevertheless, the 'heavy' weight placed on the 'cultural' explanation for the 'successful' response to COVID-19 in South Korea is challenged by Chekar and Kim (2022). They identify the Koreans' 'success' in terms of the three distinctive elements of pandemic preparedness: 1) the Korean "culture" that has normalized face-covering, 2) Korean citizens' consensus that public health should be prioritized over privacy, and 3) Korea's IT infrastructure, which enables efficient digital contact tracing.

These three 'strengths' are defined as 'myths' by the authors, and they demystify them by pointing to their contradictions and weaknesses, and especially to the inordinate importance attached to culture seen as a static and perennial thing rather than as something in a state of continuous transformation.

6.3. Face-Masking and Face Un-Masking: East vs West

The conflict about wearing facemasks was another division between East and West, becoming one of the most prominent, contentious, and deeply divided issues. The whole world has experienced

issues related to misinformation concerning the benefits and risks of mask-wearing, as in for example how in the early stage of COVID-19 information on which type of masks to wear, who had to wear them and how, and where to wear and not wear them was conflicting and confusing. Then difficulties arose due to a shortage of masks during the pandemic's peak, as well as their rising prices. Apart from these, there are nevertheless regional differences in people's response and attitude towards the mask as it became incorporated into their everyday discourses. A general scepticism dominated in the West, reflecting its particular cultural backgrounds. In the United States mask-wearing became a partisan issue: a question of personal freedoms and the violation of civil rights; the people felt that by wearing it they were submitting to authority, and some viewed it as infringing on their personal freedom (Duncan, 2020, quoted in Schneider, 2022, p. 98). ''A facemask is a kind of facial covering'', ''a mandatory order to wearing medical faceguards violates individual freedom, as the face is part of an individual's body" (Liu, Chuang 2021).

In Italy, conflictual emotional and rational refrains were heard due to how masks were semiotically represented before COVID-19. Protective medical masks were only used by a special category of people (dentists, dental assistants, surgeons, and their staff) and in a specific context, in circumstances which were circumscribed by medical treatment, mostly in situations involving emergency medical intervention and invasive procedures. In other non–medical contexts, it was worn by workers in toxic environments, such as miners and construction workers. Therefore, as Leone (2021) suggests, the semiotics of the mask on one's face has contrarily communicated a sign that there is danger of contagion, presented by the environment in which the person wearing it is standing, and not as a sign that one's surrounding environment could potentially be contaminated by the person wearing the mask. As in Italy, we see that across the world, people's first reaction towards a person wearing a mask is to move away from that person. And in the case of a person who coughs while wearing a mask, the conscious or unconscious reaction tends towards further distancing.

The mask (including the rituals surrounding it and its meanings) is a device imbued with specific languages expressed semiotically which differ across countries. The modalities through which Italian or Koreans deal with them, and the sense they give to it in their daily practices,

determine the differences across the social and political domains in relation to the response to the spread of the virus.

In Korea, social distancing measures were completely lifted on 18 April 2022, and from 1 May 2022, wearing a mask outdoors was compulsory only for outdoor events involving 50 or more people. Nevertheless, most Koreans were continuing to wear it outdoors at the end of August, even in high temperatures. This behaviour raises questions about why Koreans have a problem in taking their facemasks off, what the biographical story of the facemask (in terms of social life) is, how its material meaning is subjected to transformation in relation to the immaterial (e.g., emotions, behaviour, lookism, social pressure) and other forms of materiality (e.g., dust, skin, body), and what is the intersemiotic procedure that the facemask undergoes in the process of dematerialization and re-materialization. How is the facemask – a non-human material – related to the body; specifically, part of the face?

6.4. The Face Mask's Biography: Its Social Role and Status

Sanitary masks were born in 1836 thanks to the development of what is known as the 'respirator' (Hyun 2022, pp. 181-220)[2]. Its inventor was the British surgeon Julius Jeffreys. The respirator migrated to East Asia, and is first recorded in *Yŏnghwajajŏn* (1869), the first English-Chinese dictionary compiled by the German missionary, Wilhelm Lobscheid. It was introduced to the Oriental face by a Japanese-made respirator that first appeared in the 1870s and was ennobled to the status of 'hygienic modernity', becoming highly popular with Tokyo residents regardless of whether there was a quarantine or not (Ibid. 2022, pp. 71-72)[3].

It migrated to Korea around 1919~1920, under Japanese colonialism: this was quite late in comparison to neighbouring countries. This colonialism can also be seen in the timing of the name's coinage, which reflects the power of knowledge. The term 'respirator', which had been introduced in Japanese and Chinese dictionaries from the 1860s and '70s, first appears in the Korean dictionary *Sŏnyŏngjajŏn*, published in 1928 by Kim Tongsŏng. In the 1934 *Shinŏ Dictionary*, published by

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[2] The respirator was invented in 1836 by the British surgeon Julius Jeffreys to help patients with lung illness to breathe by adjusting the air temperature and humidity.

[3] Other types of respirators were also known and used by intellectuals in the Qing Dynasty, as well as Meiji Japan. In particular, see Rogasaki et al. as quot. in Hyun (2002, p. 182).

Ch'ŏngnyŏnjosŏnsa, the English word (*masŭk'ŭ*) 'mask' is introduced, transliterated into the Korean alphabet, and is defined as "something that covers part or all of the face". For the first time this provided a definition of its social function that was close to what we know today. It is by the winter of 1919, near the end of the Spanish influenza epidemic, that the facemask was used as a device for protecting from infectious diseases, and was worn in public whenever there was a respiratory-related disease pandemic, especially in the winter (Hyun 2022, pp. 191-192).

The mask's social life and function was enriched and transformed during those years beyond its medical or hygienic functions. Since forecasts of regarding fine dust and air pollution began in 2016, facemasks bearing the KF (Korean Filter) label, which have been approved by the Ministry of Food and Drug Safety since 2008, have been commercialized[4]. Years later, facemasks were subjected to further semiotic transformation in relation to the immaterial, as well as other forms of materiality. It is in this process of dematerialization and re-materialization that the facemask becomes more of a subject and less of an object, as part of the body and the human face. Leone quotes Goffman's work *The Presentation of Self, 1959:* "[…] had already spread the scholarly conviction that the face itself is indeed a sort of mask" (Leone 2020, p. 44). The transformation of the facemask into an actual part of the face to hide a person's identity, replacing and empowering it by identifying it with a social and political role, as well as becoming a political weapon, is observed during the political and labour union demonstrations from the 1970s onwards. To cite an example of a recent demonstration, they appeared in a women's rally in Gangnam in 2017 to protest the murders of women. In this context, it is quite functional, able to hide the wearer's identity, protect him or her from tear gas, and obscure one's gender. In the cases of those who have undergone facial plastic surgery, it can become a second facial skin to conceal surgical scars or even serve to protect against the sun, replacing sunblock for all those who continue to wear it despite the hot temperatures in summer.

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[4] According to a survey of 1,000 people nationwide (Korea Gallup 2019), 45% of 496 men and 61% of 504 women answered that they tend to wear a mask when the forecast says that fine will be at a high level. Interestingly, compared with the MERS outbreak in 2015, the rate of implementation of personal precautions to prevent COVID-19 infection has significantly improved. The mask-wearing rate was 15.5% during MERS, while it soared to 78.8% during COVID-19 (Jang et al. 2020).

It is in fact seen as such an indispensable accessory that it is considered to be an aesthetic cover for the face that is unchanging when compared to one's own face, which betrays emotions or physical imperfections.

Katie Yoon (2022, p. 7) informs us that before COVID-19, Korean female students were wearing masks to hide their physical imperfections. The trend to conceal one's face began among K-pop stars, who would wear "fashion masks" to the airport. This was done so that they could remain incognito, and also relieved them of the "constant obligation to look "presentable" at all times; when not wearing a cosmetic mask, apart from staying at home, wearing an actual mask was the next best alternative".

6.5. Survey

To understand the multiple layers of meanings hidden beneath the facemask, we conducted a survey consisting of 17 questions. This survey aimed to offer a quantitative overview of both emotional and rational perceptions and behaviours surrounding the use of the facemask. Its aim was to understand, as far as possible, the mask's communicative function among Koreans. We interviewed a total of 212 people ranging from ten to 70 years of age. To make the survey representative of the population as a whole, we took into account various metrics, including age, gender, place of residence, and job. 65.9% of those interviewed were women (137 subjects), while the remaining 34.1% were men (71). The most represented age group was 40-49 years at 35.8%, followed by those 30-39 with 27.4%; those aged 50-59 came in with 19.8%.

Among the survey questions, question 14 will be considered as highlighting the cultural and sociopolitical aspects related to the facemask's personal and social meanings in Korea. This question invites the respondents to narrate their own experiences. Among the 212 respondents, 141 replied to this. Below are the answers, grouped by topic according to the main argument provided by the respondents.

6.5.1. Communication and Emotions

Above all, the responders noted changes in the mode of communication as a result of wearing facemasks. "Wearing a mask and having a conversation is uncomfortable, and you have to talk in a loud voice, so conversation is somewhat reduced," one reported.

The responders stressed their need to find other verbal and non-verbal strategies to improve their communication, which depends heavily on the use of other senses: speaking loudly, talking with the eyes, saying each word clearly, using concise expressions, and only saying essential things. When interpersonal communication becomes less natural, the physical distance becomes a social distance: "His voice grew louder and he avoided people who didn't wear masks," one responder observed. The facemask also influences intelligibility in reciprocal understanding: "You often don't understand what others are saying. You'll speak in a louder voice because you couldn't hear what someone else is saying, and would ask them many times to say it again", said another respondent. The fear of closed space has also to be taken into account: "I was reluctant to speak in the elevator even when wearing a mask".

Emotions, especially feelings related to health, the body, and the mind are also influenced by masks. Some responders reported a sense of frustration when efforts at spoken communication were followed by long silences: "You will only say what you really need to say"; "It is impossible to grasp one's meaning from the lips"; "not hearing will induce people to avoid talking". Facemasks have both positive and negative effects on body: they contribute to skin dryness and other skin problems, and can hurt the ears. One respondent reported that it felt like the mask had simply become a part of ordinary life (many of these episodes are grouped under 'behaviour', and they describe how the mask is felt to be a part of one's own body).

Facemasks alter cultural and social activities, such as dating: "From the first date, we wore a mask, but when he took it off, I felt awkward and strange". There are also other factors related to wearing facemask: respondents reported wearing the mask to avoid feeling cold in their faces; others commented that it made dozing off while riding on public transportation less embarrassing.

6.5.2. Behavioural Changes and Social Distance

"Take off your mask and look for a place where no one is present, or for a remote place to breath or drink water, and then look at the reactions of the people around you. If you forget your mask and don't wear it, you will feel and notice others' gazes (*nunch'i*)." These are part of the social pressures that are strongly felt.

The following behavioural descriptions depict the mask as being seen as part of one's own body, and as belonging to one's personal private space and body (although it remains a sign of social and physical distance):

> "I experience confusion in remembering whether or not to put on or to take off the mask; on one day when the air was fresh, I forgot to wear my mask and went out. I'm getting used to wearing the mask and it is more awkward to take it off. It feels weird if you don't use it for even a day. If you don't wear a mask, you feel like you've taken your clothes off. On many occasions I didn't take off my mask and put it on my chin. There are occasions when you're wearing a mask before going out and yet are looking for a mask somewhere, such as when you're on a call and looking for your phone. Sometimes you touch the mask to create a space between it and your face because you're afraid you'll forget it when going out. It's the same feeling of responsibility as taking care of your mobile".

Finally, the facemask produces both inconvenience and convenience, making it difficult to wipe a runny nose, causing itchiness around the mouth, and eliminating bad breath. It also produces the habit of sticking the mask to your nose, exploring a new mask style, cupping your ears when you don't hear the other person very well.

6.6. Analysis: Make-Up, Lookism

The surveys mentioned above present interesting insights that allow us to more deeply investigate Korean's social and cultural behaviours in being reluctant to remove their facemasks, which is one of the questions posed at the beginning of this article. Skincare and lookism are among the more common concerns expressed by our interviewees in the survey. People have become more concerned with makeup in general, but in particular with makeup in the area of the eyes.

89.1% of respondents report feeling safe while wearing a mask, while 75.9% don't feel pretty or handsome while wearing it. Nevertheless, 82% choose a mask according to their mood, and 31% said that they are concerned about the quality of their makeup and put more effort into mascara for their eyebrows. 72.1% chose a particular type of mask because they liked how it looked; 12.8% because the mask matches their face colour well and thus made it less visible; 7% according to

the colour of their clothes; 5.5% because of a low price; 5% because they found it visually appealing; 4% for a change of mood; and 3% because it they felt it revealed their uniqueness. Two respondents (1%) said that a coloured mask better blocks ultraviolet light as opposed to white ones, while two others (1%) said that they choose their masks for no particular reason.

We then tried to understand if wearing a mask every day caused the interviewees to become more concerned about their appearance (they were allowed to select multiple responses). 87.6% that it did not, 8.1% that they become more concerned about their eyes' expressions or makeup, 5.3% that they became more concerned about whether their mask and clothes matched, 0.5% that they became more concerned about makeup, and another 0.5% simply answered "yes". To understand what facemasks meant before COVID-19, 46.4% said that they had used one before COVID-19; 27% reported doing so when they had caught a cold or for other medical purposes, 10% to keep themselves warm, 4.7% because a mask was required to perform their job, 4.3% simply to cover the face, and finally, 0.9% to protect from the sun (this last response is quite interesting when comparing it to the percentage of people who continued to wear one as an alternative to sun cream).

Responses concerning the facemask in relation to skin and makeup were as follows: "I've had skin problems and have been to dermatologists; I rarely put on makeup while wearing a facemask; lipstick is very inconvenient; there is dryness of the mouth and skin; skin troubles become more frequent; the skin becomes sensitive; the cost of cosmetics such as foundations and lipsticks has decreased; I am more concerned about good skin; I put a facemask in each bag; it's useful for hiding facial wrinkles; it's useful for hiding my facial expressions when they reflect my internal feelings; I choose makeup which is rather darker and more decisive; the skin in the area where the mask comes into contact with my skin has deteriorated; I have frequent skin troubles; I must frequently use greasy paper; I get dirty skin; I put on less makeup when you go out, you pay less attention to your appearance".

Concern about K-beauty is not only repeatedly expressed by interviewees in the survey or in the media, but it is also one of the topics most studied by scholars working in the cosmetics industry, specifically on the individuation of skin symptoms during COVID-19 and in identifying marketing strategies for new products in the cosmetic market (Lee, Kwon 2022a, pp. 1-11).

Their study indicates that the changing behaviour in relation to women's use of cosmetics is due to environmental problems, infectious diseases, or use of facemasks. These changes also include the medium through which cosmetics are purchased. One of these is the increase in mobile shopping, i.e., the recent rise of the service known as 'untact'. The word means 'no contact' and is a combination of 'un' and 'contact'. It is not English, however, but rather Konglish. It refers to a service that provides information in a virtual format that minimises human contact (Kim et al. 2017, mentioned by Lee, Kwon 2022a, p. 2). Some examples are live commerce, an online channel that sells products through real-time video streaming. Its main target customers are digital natives: the so-called Millennials and Generation Z (Generation MZ). Millennials (born between 1981 and 1996) and Generation Z (born between 1997 and 2010) are the 'digital generation' who have a preference for consuming video and media content.

The questions posed above nevertheless demand more attention. In my opinion, much has been written about lookism in general, but not much about the relationship between lookism (looking good, both aesthetically and in relation to health) and the cultural phenomenon of K-wave, *hallyu*, during COVID-19. These two elements, which have been well assimilated and consolidated over the course of several years, are closely connected to the development of 'new' cultural patterns that have found new niches as elements of self-expression during COVID-19 and mask-wearing (Lee, Kwon 2022b).

It appears from the literature that lookism is a cultural and social phenomenon that incites women to change their outward appearance (being slim and beautiful), responding to the patriarchal ideology of the virtuous woman of the pre-modern period (Park 2007). Others have analysed South Korea's transformation of South Korea into a mecca of plastic surgery (Park 2015); still other sociological medical research focused on extreme diets, which are one of the causes of anorexia and obesity among young people (Lee 2021, pp. 167-177), and on how lookism manifests in social life (e.g., in job interviews and modes of socialization such as dating and marriage).

One had to face new challenges and obstacles during the COVID-19 period as a result of facemasks, becoming more conscious of one's own health and aesthetics in order to preserve oneself in the best possible way. Thus, *hallyu* has greatly contributed towards positively improving Koreans' self-perception, both individually and collectively, thanks

to the well-known success achieved internationally and its affirmation as an integral part of Korean identity. On the basis of this inheritance, a new model not only of the nation's self-image but also that of the Korean people took shape during COVID-19: a commitment to take care of oneself and others by wearing the facemask led people to develop a concern for their facial skin, as shown in searches on how to work toward "eternal youth" and to improve one's physical and health condition. This came to be seen as a demonstration of one's own capacity for endurance, self-control, and ability to work on oneself. As part of this, the cosmetics industries engaged in inventing new products that were certainly useful in evolving a 'new' consciousness of one's well-being. The survey's emphasis on skin care reflects the respondents' social concerns and points to a long chain of social and emotional factors that failing to take care of one's skin entails: more time and money spent on caring for damaged skin, as well as a decrease in self-esteem, just to mention a few.

Nevertheless, during the COVID-19 pandemic, lookism worked in tandem with social and medical pressures in another way as well. Lookism is bypassed via the facemask: it allowed for the preservation of the wearer's 'anonymity', causing the act of taking off the mask to be considered rather inconvenient. If lookism means to be evaluated either positively or negatively, then the Korean people have exhibited a high cultural preference for anonymity, because they are burdened by other people's gazes, with a subsequent judgment inherent in the concept of *nunch'i*. Thus, wearing a mask becomes a comfortable contrivance to avoid expressing one's emotions, allowing one to choose between hiding or revealing them.

6.7. Social Pressure

The survey indicates how and what kind of social pressures are behind wearing or not wearing a facemask. To the question of how the interviewees feel when they are not wearing a mask outdoors (they were allowed to select multiple choices), 39 of them (42.8%) answered that they feel comfortable, 28 (31.5%) said that they feel anxious, 22 (24.7%) said that they are afraid someone else will show up, 11 (12.4%) said that they feel afraid that someone else might see them, 9 (10.1%) said they feel good, 6 (6.7%) said they feel guilty, and 4 (4.5%) said that

they don't have any particular feelings about it. In brief, the majority experience negative emotions when not wearing a facemask outdoors.

After that, we asked the interviewees about their mask-wearing habits on a daily basis (they were allowed to select multiple choices), and 96 (45.5%) said that if they see someone who is not wearing a mask, they quickly try to avoid them; 82 (38.9%) said they frequently touch the mask to keep it close to their face; 68 (32.2%) answered by saying they had not developed any particular habits; 21 (10%) said that they touch the mask when they don't have something to say or during the awkward moments in a conversation; and two (1%) said they don't use makeup as a result. In this case as well, the majority have developed new behaviours related to their fear of the virus.

"Social pressure" is defined as a binding force that compels individuals not to deviate from a group's behaviour. What we notice in the survey is that social pressure in Korea is more of an invisible phenomenon that people feel which results from a fear of the virus, but also a fear of being judged for not behaving within social norms. Social pressure to continue wearing a facemask outdoors works in two ways. First, wearing a facemask outdoors has received social consensus, and thus the person who continues wearing it is communicating to others that he or she is behaving correctly by showing that he or she is afraid of infectious diseases and does not want 'to harm others'. In other words, such a person follows the rules dictated by social norms, displaying moral virtue. Second, the fear of taking the face mask off results not only from the risk of infection, but from being judged as someone who is not conforming to the group's norms or is not capable to aligning his or her own behaviours with those of the people around them.

Social norms during COVID-19 required that people conform to certain expected behaviours, including wearing a facemask. In the case of Koreans, the wish to be seen as virtuous and to be appreciated and positively evaluated may be stronger factors than the above-mentioned aspects of social pressure. The individual-personal evaluation of one's self, desiring to be appreciated as an informed and civic-minded person, adds a deeper meaning to the more 'collectivistic' attitude which is manifested in feelings like a fear of being judged as not a part of a group, and to undergo the psychological mechanism that induces one to conform his or her own behaviour to that of others, and to sympathize with others by noticing their actions.

6.8. Media

Internet news reports have published comments such as that "it's embarrassing to take it off," or that "it's uncomfortable to wear it and then take it off". A "strong sense of public responsibility" among the people wearing it has also been mentioned[5].

Searching Korean Internet news sites from the last days of April 2022 until the early days of July 2022 indicate that Koreans' perception of COVID-19 is reflected in the multiple meanings expressed in their attitude toward masks. In April, the content of most Internet news sites was similar enough: announcing the imminent freedom from having to wear the mask outdoors; offering detailed instructions of when and where to use or not use the mask; and warning of the continuing danger from the virus. But optimism was soon mostly replaced by pessimism, which in many cases had become synonymous with wisdom, social consciousness, civic feeling, etc.

Internet news surveys from the end of April through the beginning of June indicate that 70% of Koreans were saying that they would continue to wear the mask after May 1 versus 30% who said they would not[6]. On June 28, "Business Post" published an interesting survey conducted by Lotte Card on whether Koreans would continue to wear masks outdoors and travel abroad; 72.1% answered that they would still wear masks outdoors[7]. The daily routines adopted during the period of social distancing measures seem to have continued as well. Regarding the question of whether they would continue to return home before 10 p.m., 47.4% of respondents said that they would. Among those in their 50s and older, 57.5% said they would continue to return home by 10 p.m., accounting for more than half. I noticed this myself during my visit to Korea in mid-May. With surprise, I noted that my colleagues would start to talk about needing to return home at around 10 p.m.,

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5 For further references see P'ihae chugi shilt'a" masŭk'ŭ an pŏnnŭn iyu kŭgŏn ttaemunmanŭn anida? ("I don't want to hurt you" Is the reason for not taking off the mask not only because of this?), available at: <https://m.hankookilbo.com/News/Read/A2022050913450004616> (last accessed 15 July 2023).

6 For further references see Masŭk'ŭ haeje 3chuch'aedo kyesong ssŭndat'ttongsŏyang inshing ch'ainŭn? ("I continue to use it even after the 3rd week of mask removal... What is the difference between Eastern and Western perceptions?"), available at: <https://kormedi.com/1398463/> (last accessed 15 July 2023).

7 For further references see <https://www.businesspost.co.kr/BP?command=article_view&num=285194> (last accessed 15 July 2023).

which was quite different from before COVID-19, when these same colleagues would stay out until later. On July 2, *KBS News* reported people enjoying the beach at Pusan and Chejudo, and you could see many of them wearing masks even there. In other news reports recorded in cities during the sweltering summer heat, you could see everyone wearing a mask, even in workers' demonstrations and among the police.

In brief, it appears that masks have established a strong and deep bond with the individual in Korea to the point that it has become particularly difficult for people to take it off outdoors. New social behaviours have developed, reinforced by the long tradition of mask-wearing that was present from the outset.

6.9. Conclusion

Generally speaking, the survey confirms that the mask is a device imbued with specific language codes that are expressed differently across cultures and countries. Moreover, the mask as a communicative tool embodies meanings that vary according to countries, cultures, and political contexts.

During COVID-19, when the facemask was obligatory, people's behaviour in relation to it was part of everyday rituals that became enriched with new meanings and a powerful communicative symbol. This survey and the media narratives indicate that the social life of the facemask – its functional meaning and transformation from the material (object) to the immaterial (emotions, behaviour) – assume new meanings in relation to the human body and to political and cultural significances. The survey confirms that there are multiple semantics hidden in 'distancing' from others when the facemask is involved. Wearing it communicates social cohesion (a sense of solidarity, and of a group sharing the same thoughts and feelings), but also 'social distance (avoiding gatherings and the celebration of holidays) and 'physical distance (which implies concepts of space); it is not necessarily only a 'medical, sanitary distance ("a measure to protect myself and others from infection"). Nevertheless, the act of wearing it can produce the paradox of a sense of 'false protection', or even a desire to maintain distance from people wearing it who are thus perceived as 'dangerous', therefore transforming physical distance into subversion or the deconstructing of social ties. In brief, in Korea's case, the survey suggests that Koreans are under social pressures to keep wearing the facemask outdoors.

Similar to other narratives regarding the effects of facemask mandates around the world, the survey suggests that for these interviewees, wearing a mask every day and for long periods unconsciously alters the senses, not only of the mouth (sound, silence, speech), ears (louder speaking, greater attentiveness in listening and hearing), and eyes (serving as a substitute for expressing the emotions), but also leads to the development of the sense of sight. Moreover, the facemask has its own biography that COVID-19 in turn moulded into becoming a semi-permanent accessory of our face; in effect, an alter ego.

In the case of Korea, I suggest that behind the wearing of and refusal to take off the facemask, there is 1) lookism culture (*nunch'i*; other people's criticisms in non-verbal language); and 2) social pressures and the remnants of 'Confucian' moral values. These two aspects transform an ideology based on collectivism into a heavy compulsion for individual self-care during COVID-19.

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Glossary of Korean Terms

Korean transliteration	Characters	English translation
Masŭk'ŭ	마스크:	mask
Nunch'i	눈치	subtle art and ability to listen and gauge others
Hallyu	한류	Korean wave
Sŏnyŏngjajŏn	鮮英字典	English-Korean Dictionary
Pŏnbwardoelju	新語事典	New Words Dictionary
Yŏnghwajajŏn	英华字典	Chinese-English Dictionary

7. The Impact of the Coronavirus on the Japanese Verbal Arts (*wagei*)

Matilde Mastrangelo

Abstract

The performing arts have been one of the fields most severely hit by the spread of COVID-19. In my essay I analyze the measures taken by the Japanese theater world to cope with the crisis, in particular my research focuses on the verbal performing arts (*wagei*). My investigation moves in two directions: one follows the changes and the new regulations introduced over the last three years from February 2020. The data is obtained from textual and video sources; the second involves more in-depth research using a questionnaire I distributed to *wagei* performers in August 2022 and my fieldwork in Japan in September 2022. The positive and resilient reaction of artists in dealing with the crisis caused by the pandemic shows how art can be important in finding creative ways out.

Keywords: Wagei; yose; Kōdan kawaraban; Nihon kōdan kyōkai; Kōdan kyōkai.

7.1. Introduction

The spread of the Coronavirus in February 2020, the Four State of Emergency Declarations up to October 2021, and the Government recommendations concerning events held before an audience changed people's lives and habits concerning entertainment in general and had a huge impact on Japanese performing arts, with many events being cancelled or postponed, or else presented in a different form. My research focuses on *wagei*, verbal arts, or theatrical narrations, a genre

forming part of the *dentō geinō* (traditional performing arts) performed in small theatres called *yose*. In particular, I analyse *kōdan* (historical narration), *rakugo* (comical stories), and *rōkyoku* (sentimental stories with the accompaniment of *shamisen* music). Just to share some numbers, Tokyo has six *yose* specialised in *wagei* with daytime and evening shows, about 400 *rakugo* performers, 100 *kōdan* artists, and 50 *rōkyoku* storytellers (plus 17 *shamisen* players). Other theatres, such as the Kokuritsu engeijō (National performance theatre, part of the National Theatre) has also scheduled *wagei* events. It is a small world compared with the lavish *kabuki*, *nō* or *jōruri* productions, but it has a wide audience, having been the most popular form of entertainment until War II[1]. My investigation moves in two directions: one follows the changes and the new regulations introduced over the last three years from February 2020. The data is obtained from textual and video sources; the second involves more in-depth research using a questionnaire I distributed to *wagei* performers in August 2022 and my fieldwork in Japan in September 2022.

As some scholars have remarked, the Coronavirus epidemic was not the first time that theatre had to face a pandemic crisis; some of Shakespeare's masterpieces were written during the plague, and many stage dramas were written during the Spanish fever epidemic and other pandemics, but the one we have experienced has some specific elements, as well as great potential to see a positive side of the problem – some of which I would like to analyse.

One of the most prestigious Japanese centres of theatre studies at Waseda University, Waseda Enpaku bijitsukan, organised a very interesting exhibition and, in June 2021, published *Lost in Pandemic – Theatre Adrift, Expression's New Horizons* (*Lost in Pandemic,* 2021), bringing together, along with some essays, all the flyers and the posters of the performances that have been "lost", unrealised, since winter 2020. The research group stated that in 2020 alone, the number of events never performed rose to 800. Unlike in Italy, there was no lockdown, but there was very strict international regulation, severely limiting entry from foreign countries, with restrictions on evening activities such as dining in restaurants and other leisure time activities. However, as in Italy, the theatre was considered *fuyō fukyū,* "not necessary, not urgent" and therefore postponable.

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1 On *wagei*: (Mastrangelo 2010; 2012; 2020; 2023).

As for *yose*, with the First State of Emergency Declaration, in place from April to May 2020, activities were suspended, and performers twice received 500,000 yen in compensation from the Government; from June to December 2020, the admission rate was reduced by 50%, and some *yose* chose to shut down. The second state of emergency declaration limited the times for performances and suspended, for the first time in *wagei* history, evening shows from January to March 2021; the Government provided no more compensation. The third state of emergency declaration lasted until summer, and the fourth ran from September 2021 until the end of the state of emergency on October 1st (*State of Emergency*, 2021). During these months, the night programmes were cancelled and the audience reduced to 50%, with a request to also consider having no audience at all. In reality, with the first and third Declarations, rather than imposing strict legal regulation, the government proposed to the *yose* a *jishuku no yōsei*, "request for self-restraint". Under the third State of Emergency Declaration, on May 18, the two *rakugo* associations, Rakugo kyōkai and the Rakugo geijutsu kyōkai (joined by artists of many genres, not only *rakugo*), started a fundraising campaign through the Japanese crowdfunding platform *Ready for* to support *yose* culture, providing funding for five *yose* in Tokyo. These two associations managed to collect a considerable amount of money: 103.770.000 yen by the end of June 2021 (*Ready for*, 2021). The end of the state of emergency did not coincide with the conclusion of the vaccination campaign, and the return of *yose* audiences was quite slow, although there were no limitations on audience numbers. The Bunka geijutsu suishin fōramu (Arts and Culture Forum), which operates inside the Geidankyō (Japan Council of Performers Rights and Performing Arts Organisation, a public interest incorporated association), monitored the situation in theatres through questionnaires, to help artists apply for Government funds. As it summarised in its questionnaire, it is estimated that at the end of October 2020, live performances were down by 80%. However, examining the activities of the theatres does not show the phenomenon as a whole, since – as we will see also from the questionnaire I made – invitations from schools, for example, have also decreased (Art and Culture Forum 2021, p. 3, p. 35).

Analysing the state of *wagei* from 2020, it is important to point out that to stop or limit the number of shows inevitably means falling earnings, but also another problem concerning hierarchy. In order to become a professional performer, in fact, a *kōdan* and *rakugo* artist has to

complete three steps in the hierarchy: *zenza*, *futatsume* and *shin'uchi*. The last step, entitling a performer to have disciples and start one's own "school" of artists, is celebrated with a special event at a *yose*. To suspend or postpone this kind of celebration has a huge influence on the work and career of an artist.

The first solution to the pandemic crisis that many artists adopted was to upload their performances on YouTube. Some opened a YouTube channel, sometimes with old stories or new ones about the pandemic, and all the artists updated their home page or the blog they already ran more frequently. The *kōdan* artist Takarai Umeyu uploaded four brief instalments on YouTube presenting the state of crisis caused by the pandemic as an old-style historical period of war and riot, during which the artists must prepare to fight with their instruments, their stage props, showing how to make a *hariogi*[2]. He thus came up with the very original idea of performing without recourse to a plot (Takarai Umeyu, 2020).

An important source, "Tōkyōkawaraban", a monthly publication on all the shows scheduled in Tokyo's *yose*, with interviews and short essays on the artists' activities, made it possible to make some interesting observations.

First of all, as of the May and June issues of 2020, "Tōkyōkawaraban" has published the schedules of performances and the list of cancelled or postponed ones, but also, for the first time, the YouTube links of many artists, some with live performance channels (*nama haishin engei*). Master Ichiryūsai Teisui (1939-2020), declared a "Human Treasure" (*ningen kokuhō*) in 2002, had his own YouTube channel, which goes to show that appearing on YouTube is not strictly related to the age of the artists. The phrase that advertises the YouTube channels is: "You can watch comfortably from your own home" (''Tōkyōkawaraban" 2020, 5, p. 57; 6, p. 83), which is an interesting way of avoiding any alarming reference to the pandemic. Notwithstanding the *yose* have gradually resumed normal activity, a list of live YouTube performances, free and otherwise, was published until December 2021 (''Tōkyōkawaraban" 2021, 12, p. 57).

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[2] The *hariogi* is a paper covered bamboo stick; together with the *hyōshiki*, a wooden clapper, and a fan, these are the instruments the performers beat on the *shakudai*, the little desk on front of him, to accompany the rhythm of the story.

7.2. Surveys Carried Out by "Tōkyōkawaraban"

I present here two surveys carried out by the editorial board of ''Tōkyōkawaraban''; the first was submitted in June 2020 to the Directors and Committees of the main *wagei* associations, 60 artists in all (''Tōkyōkawaraban'' 2020, 6, pp. 28-49); the second was submitted to *yose* and entertainment managers, 20 in all, in August of the same year (''Tōkyōkawaraban'' 2020, 8, pp. 50-61).

The five points of the "emergency questionnaire" (*kinkyū ankēto*), as they called it, which was submitted to performers are as follows:

1. How do you spend your time every day? What kind of leisure time do you have?
2. Please make some suggestions for young artists on how to spend their time in this period.
3. Please give a message to your fans who cannot enjoy a live performance in a *yose.*
4. Can you suggest a good film, book, or CD to enjoy in this period, saying why?
5. What would you like to eat at this time, when it is difficult to go out?

The answers, most of them encouraging, are very revealing. In general, the masters suggest practising, reading, learning about ancient history, and relaxing. Some of the more interesting answers are given here, and in particular, those to question number 2:

- Review topics that you have already done rather than work on new ideas (Irifunetei Sen'yū, *rakugoka*);
- Do something that does not cost you money: rehearse your show; write down your ambitions and what you would like to do in the period after the Covid crisis; be careful to take all possible measures against the Coronavirus (Katsura Konan, *rakugoka*);
- Look at it as a chance to gain good experience. Please, do your best; as for me, I'll pray God not to become a befuddled old man (Kokontei Jusuke, *rakugoka*);
- Try once again to go back to being a fan (Yanagiya Kyōtarō, *rakugoka*);
- Use your time to imagine your vision for the future (Kanda Aguri, *kōdanshi*);
- Eat malt, fermented soybeans, and brown rice: good health will

enable you to rise again (Takarai Kinsei, *kōdanshi*);
- You're all practising, aren't you? In *rōkyoku*, part of the training must be done together with the shamisen player, so I suggest my disciples meet others, but always taking precautions. Then, we all have to reflect deeply on what events and theatres will be like in the post-corona period (Tamagawa Nanafuku, *rōkyokuka*).

Some answers are not so encouraging:

- Take this chance to think well about being or not being a storyteller (Sanshōtei Charaku, *rakugoka*);
- I am so afflicted that I am not able to give suggestions; I can just say that I'm suffering with you (Yanagiya Gontarō, *rakugoka*).

The four points of the questionnaire submitted to managers of performance venues were analysed. The questions were the following:

1. When did your activity start? What kinds of entertainment have been performed?
2. What kind of policy or precautions do you have regarding performances?
3. How are you handling the Corona crisis? What kind of approach are you thinking of adopting from now on?
4. Please write a message for fans who are currently unable to enjoy a live performance.

The answers to question number 4 would appear to be particularly illuminating, even if they are perhaps the most predictable. The message shared by almost all the respondents is that YouTube live performances are a good support during the pandemic crisis, or the Corona strife (*sōdō*), as they call it, but they cannot represent the future of *wagei* because "what makes the professional growth of an artist is the presence of the audience in a theatre" (Suzumoto engeijō); or again, "If you don't enjoy a live performance in a *yose*, it's impossible to understand its real quality," (Asakusa engei hōru); or "the *yose* consists of live performers and a live audience (Ikebukuro engeijō); "The words 'social distancing' and *yose* are at opposite ends of the spectrum" (Office emuzu); while others stress that it's hard to run the venue with just half of the spectators, but hearing the enthusiastic comments of the audience repays all the effort (Office Zōi).

During an interview in December 2021, *rakugoka* Yanagiya Gontarō said how wonderful it was to be back on stage and have an audience to perform for, and to hear people burst into laughter (*bakushō*) in a crowded *yose*, although he still worried about having so many people in one place sometimes. Perhaps the masks the audience are wearing absorb part of the laughter and make it more difficult for the storyteller to observe full facial expressions, but a performer must "read the atmosphere/air" (*kūki o yomu*) in all cases (Yanagiya Gontarō 2021, pp. 8-13). In this sense, for the performers, the challenge of attracting audiences is even harder than before, albeit more interesting and stimulating. From the audience's point of view, being able to sit in a *yose* once again is a way to appreciate more than before the fascination of a story told in a precise moment, in a unique and unrepeatable way, and only for those in front of the stage at that moment: in a word, it means to enjoy the fascination of theatre again.

7.3. My Questionnaire

Since 2022, issues of ''Tōkyōkawaraban'' have no longer been publishing a list of live YouTube performances, but to date (March 2023), the recommendation to use sanitisers and wear masks inside theatres to prevent the spread of the Coronavirus is still there. In addition to analysing the material, I designed my own questionnaire with the precious collaboration of Professor Sonoda Midori, and I obtained some very interesting answers, although, as something of a self-disclaimer, it must be said that I had the impression that artists were not particularly keen to talk about the problems connected with the pandemic. I present the five points below, and in commenting on the answers, we will offer some remarks on the present situation regarding *wagei*, in particular the world of *kōdan*, after almost three years of health emergency.

1. Have you performed on YouTube at some time from March 2020 to the present? If so, could you please specify how often?
2. Some scholars have said that only people really interested in *wagei* attended performances during the time when the State of Emergency Declarations were in place. Do you agree? Do you think this was a good result?

3. Do you think that the wagei situation has returned to pre-pandemic conditions?
4. Have you ever introduced a topic related to the pandemic in your performances?
5. What are the most important changes in your activity brought about by the COVID-19 crisis?

Regarding question 1, all the respondents stated that even a live YouTube performance can never recreate the atmosphere of a theatre, but it is a way of keeping in touch with the audience and presenting other content, not just the story itself. Some artists became very active on YouTube, although not all performers had their own channels, and those who chose not to open channels of their own performed as guests on those of other colleagues. The *kōdan* artist Takarai Kinkaku, for example, is very active on social media; she performed once or twice a week at the start of the pandemic, but then, when *yose* activity started to take off again, she did slightly fewer performances. She organised a *jitaku yose*, a stage in her own home, from April 2020, where different artists, such as her master Takarai Kinsei, also performed (Takarai Kinkaku, 2020).

Other artists only streamed their performances a few times as they had to ask a company to do it and pay the theatre where they made the recording a fee. Some others chose not to perform on YouTube, thinking that the kind of audience interested in *yose* was too different from YouTube viewers. To quote some other cases, master San'yūtei Ryūraku did a kind of documentary on Japanese sweets on his YouTube channel rather than a *rakugo* performance (San'yūtei Ryūraku, 2021). Some artists' associations, such as the Kōdan kyōkai, completely renewed its official websites, adding columns like *Kōdan kawaraban* with lots of interviews, such as *xx ni kiitemita* (Questions to the masters) starting with an interview with the President of the Association, master Takarai Kinbai (Kōdan kyōkai, 2022 a), or *Wakate ni kiitemita* (Questions to young performers) where the performers interview each other sharing anecdotes about their teachers or the early days of their careers, a way of bringing artists closer to the audience, at precisely a time when they were physically further apart (Kōdan kyōkai, 2022 b). On the other hand, another association, the Nihon kōdan kyōkai, chose to show more archive materials on their site. In April 2020, the Rakugo geijutsu kyōkai added a link to their YouTube channel. So there have been several approaches and many solutions.

Regarding point 2, master Takarai Kinsei, like many others, said that since *wagei* is a popular art, not a classical one like *kabuki*, it must maintain its character as a genre for all, not just for some; even someone who only pops into a *yose* just to get out of the rain.

Wagei must not lose its identity as a popular performing art. In other words, the *yose* must continue to be a place where people can come and go at their own convenience, like the cinema in Italy many years ago, when you could go in whenever you wanted, even halfway through the show, and watch the rest if you missed the initial part. Scholar Kondō wrote that although performances are closely linked to the architectural structure or the cultural history of a theatre, "as the expression of art changed from the 'place' of murals to painting in a frame that can be carried by hand, theatre can show its essence regardless of the 'place' in Internet space" (Kondō 2021, p.8), but performers do not share this view. In fact, it may be no coincidence that the "Tōkyōjin" review ran a special number on *yose* in September 2022. Although the actors interviewed make no specific reference to the pandemic, some of them remark that the *yose* theatre is'a castle that educates artists and creates a link to culture and that 'breaching the castle means harming culture' (Kanda Hakuzan 2022, p. 22). Unfortunately, during the pandemic, the presence of the artists backstage was also reduced, so the artists had less chance to talk to each other or to meet and talk with old and famous masters: in other words, the "castle", for almost three years, was unable to fulfil its function as before.

Regarding point 3, all respondents agree that the situation is not yet back to normal, although it is getting better, but perhaps it never will be as many social and economic dynamics will not change. Audiences are coming back, young people more than older ones, but only in the second half of 2022 have evening shows been scheduled in addition to the daytime performances. What is also of significant impact on *wagei* life is that, as I said, the time the artists can spend backstage is limited, and this means that they cannot meet their fans as they used to. What is more, invitations from theatres outside Tokyo are fewer than before, and even when the performers are invited, they do not meet the fans after the show. While it is true that theatre invitations have recovered a little, there are fewer invitations to perform outside theatres, such as at private parties or other celebrations.

As for point 4, the artists took the pandemic as a topic at the beginning of the crisis, especially the youngest female performers, but they

were always attentive to audience reactions. Most of them think that audiences want to put their worries behind them when they enter a *yose* and that it is better to avoid talking about the pandemic as there is such a variety of opinions about vaccines and how the pandemic has been handled. In the case of *rakugo*, this is hardly surprising as it is made up of amusing stories with unreal characters, but *kōdan* often touches on political satire and, in its long tradition it has always had a documentary function or served as a source of news (Takiguchi 2023, pp. 24-25). Hence, I was a little surprised to hear a particular joke at a performance I attended in Japan in September 2022. It centred on the bizarre connection that emerged, after past Prime Minister Abe's murder, between Japanese politicians and the association called Tōitsukyōkai, but there were no allusions to the pandemic.

Regarding point 5, what changed most is the relationship with fans and the sharp fall in performances outside Tokyo. Takarai Kinkaku said that perhaps reducing the number of drinking parties with fans leads artists to concentrate more on their arts, and if it is true that she feels better eating out less and cooking more at home, she is not sure which life is better for an artist, and I think this answer is at the same time extremely ironic as well as interesting and serious. For other artists, the change of routine relating, for example, to regular work groups and the formation of new ones, suggests an idea of renewal.

7.4. Conclusion

Looking at the world of *wagei*, I have concentrated in particular on *kōdan* for two reasons, apart from personal research interest. The first is that since *rakugo* is more visible, thanks to the tv, radio, and even the audio programmes broadcast by Japan Airlines, so *rakugo* might have a greater chance of bringing audiences back to the theatre than *kōdan* will. The second one is that after almost three years of pandemic, *kōdan* artistic reaction has been unexpectedly one of the strongest in the world of *wagei*, increasing its popularity. On the positive side, indeed, the impact of the Coronavirus has sparked a will to recover, as well as many ideas and initiatives. For instance, the two *kōdan* associations have decided to hold a joint event once a month in order to have more collaborative activities. Another plus is that the economic crisis has induced more people to start careers as storytellers. Master Takarai Kinsei said that the Kōdan Association has 12 students, a number rarely seen before. Attending a *yose* in

September 2022 I noticed that there were numerous flyers for incoming shows, all products of new ideas for new initiatives. Programmes by numerous artists from different schools, one-man shows, duos, or women-only shows were scheduled, offering a particularly rich Panorama. When I met master Takarai Kinsei (the regulations prevented us from talking backstage, so we met in the little foyer), I asked him about the incredible number of shows to come, and he said that after these years of pandemic, artists and audiences share more than ever before the desire to try new performances and meet once again. For example, one of the most interesting new initiatives, begun in July 2022, is the one organised by the *Kōdan botanical* group, "strong as the grass and colourful as the flowers", composed by women storytellers, each one named after a flower. They organised events, also inviting other artists, to promote the spread of Japanese culture and to spread "all over Japan the seeds of this ancient art of storytelling" (Kōdan kyōkai, 2022 c). The February 2023 issue of "Tōkyōjin" was dedicated to the new popularity of *kōdan*, celebrating not only the famous master Kanda Hakuzan, whose popularity, celebrated also in a soirée at the great Kabukiza theatre and sold out for the occasion, brought new attention to the genre but also to the numbers of publications regarding it ("Tōkyōjin" 2023, pp. 62-65). One of these is the title *Hiraba no hito* (The kōdan storyteller) (Kuze 2021), the first manga series dedicated to *kōdan* with Kanda Hakuzan's supervision.

Like the September issue of "Tōkyōjin" on *yose*, the February issue on *kōdan* also makes no clear reference to the pandemic, showing the desire the look ahead and avoid dwelling too much on recent problems.

I am of the opinion that the crisis caused by the pandemic – also in the light of the situation outside the theatre – is not over yet, but the positive and resilient reaction of the artists is the best way to demonstrate that art can find several – and creative – ways out, even in the darkest moments.

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8. Same Issues, Different Perceptions: A Pilot Study of Pandemic-Related Issues among Italian and Japanese Populations

Marco Montanari, Simona Perone, Mika Omori, Ayano Kayo, Ingrid Barth

Abstract

The pandemic influenced several aspects of everyday life for most of the world's population, stressing the importance of understanding why different populations show different perceptions about the same issue as COVID-19. The hypothesis is that individual religious attitude and school background can be considered as independent variables more suitable than mere linguistic affiliation to explain why people had different perceptions of COVID-19 and its effects. In this presentation, we will investigate the differences and/or similarities between Italy and Japan on these aspects, basing this analysis on the 507 answers (210 from Italians and 297 from Japanese) gathered through an online survey. It was made with 15 questions in national languages, and it was distributed from May to September 2022.

Keyword: Linguistic background; Attitude toward COVID-19 policies; Education; Religiosity; Comparative studies; Italian population; Japanese population.

8.1. Introduction

In the early spring of 2023, the COVID-19 emergency was already far from people's lives in most countries, and we could even start to consider it has ended (Ioannidis 2022). The sharp decrease in the death toll in developed countries and the extensive media coverage of new emergencies, such as the war in Ukraine, may partially explain the dramatic shift in the narration of the pandemics in mass media. Finally, on the

5th of May 2023, the World Health Organization officially declared the end of the global emergency status due to the COVID-19 crisis (Rigby et al. 2023). As the world emerges from this recent global emergency, a wide range of unanswered questions remains regarding, for example, how similar pandemic-related issues were perceived among different populations worldwide.

This question of how cultural background can drive different attitudes toward health-related issues (Hirst et al. 2012) is common in medical anthropology studies, and understanding the importance of the variance regarding how people have perceived the COVID-19 emergency has been a central theme in several studies because of the degree to which this influenced the success of vaccination processes in worldwide countries (Cipolletta et al. 2022). National culture is a fundamental key to interpreting the world and relates to the attitude in the Self-Efficacy theory (Bandura 1978a; 1978b). Since Bandura introduced this concept in 1978, self-efficacy has been critical in predicting individual and group behavior within the Social Learning Theory (Rumjaun, Narod 2020). According to Bandura, self-efficacy refers to a person's beliefs that determine how well one can execute a plan of action in prospective situations. Since the 1980s, this concept has been used in many studies as a lens that can contribute towards explaining behavior among different sectors in the same population, for example as teachers' resistance to change (Charalambous, Philippou 2010) and students' levels of resilience in the face of difficulties (Garza et al. 2014), as well as across different cultures (Klassen 2004).

One common theme that runs through many of the accumulated studies on self-efficacy is the search for a linear relationship between behavior and attitude. Studying their correlation can help decision-makers make the best choices in their work. A more recent evolution of the Social Learning Theory is Ajzen's theory of planned behavior, which adopts a similar variable and is one of the most appreciated theories in this field (Ajzen 1991; Hagger et al. 2022).

8.2. Italy and Japan

In this study, we will compare two different populations in terms of culture and geographical belonging to examine which variables might influence the perception of a specific event, resulting in attitudes toward it and, as a last step, individual behavior. To explore this process,

we considered samples from the Italian and Japanese populations in this research. These countries were selected because both countries belong to the OECD and enjoy a similar level of quality of life but, at the same time, cannot influence each other for geographical and political reasons: they are very far from each other, and both of them are, from the media's point of view, countries with a low influence power in political terms in comparison, for example, with USA or France that are often shown in the news as examples to follow in several fields.

A fundamental difference between these two countries is their religion: Italy, especially its capital Rome, is the central place for all Catholic Christians from an institutional point of view, and the influence of the Vatican is profound in Italian social life or, at least, it should be. In Japan, there is a specific situation from a religious point of view with an intimate relationship among believers and religious institutions less structured than the Catholic Christian institution in Italy. As a matter of fact, there is not single dominant religion to which most of the Japanese population declares to belong in an exclusive way; instead, several religious beliefs coexist side by side: Shintoism, Buddhism, Christianity, and new religious groups (Gagné 2017). It is the result of the syncretistic nature of the Japanese religiousness that helps to explain why exclusive religious affiliation is uncommon in Japan (Roemer 2009). The working assumption in this paper is that social elements such as the influence of religion on the individual plan have influenced the individual perception of COVID-19 more than linguistic identity does. Education is a powerful way to reinforce national identity, especially from a linguistic point of view, even if, in today's globalized world, people worldwide who have completed university studies tend to act similarly. We expect that Japanese and Italian populations will show different types of answers following the differences in educational level and individual attitudes toward their religion. We hypothesize that religious belief will be more meaningful than education in explaining the different attitudes among Japanese and Italian populations toward Pandemics. We identified especially on three possible aspects to describe attitudes toward the pandemics emergency:

- Why have Pandemics happened?
- Will Pandemics trigger social changes? Have government and politics used the excuse of the Pandemics to exploit citizens worldwide?

Our central hypothesis in this study is that religious attitude and education influence the differences between answers provided between the Italian and the Japanese samples. Significant differences in answers between linguistic belonging and the other two variables (religious belonging and education) will provide evidence for this hypothesis. Alternatively, a high rate of answers directly related to a high rate in a variable should prove a possible relation.

8.3. Methodology

This research was intended as a pilot study; its results are expected to suggest new studies. The research was based on an online questionnaire comprising fifteen items that covered independent variables (linguistic belonging, religious attitude, education) and the three kinds of attitudes we described above.

Participants were recruited in Japan and Italy by the Japanese and the Italian team respectively. The Italian team moved through already existing recipients lists from previous research. The Japanese team used the online crowdsourcing platform Lancers for the recruitment of participants. They publicized the survey and the study information. Those who agreed to participate completed the questionnaires and then received JPY 50 as compensation. The survey was anonymous, and all respondents had to be more than 18 years old. The survey was distributed in Japanese and Italian via the web in the period July-September 2022. Five hundred-seven answers were collected, 210 from Italian-speaking people and 297 from Japanese-speaking people.

The first four items of the survey were designed to examine demographic and background factors related to respondents; item 5 was specific for the source of information. Linguistic affiliation was an implicit question because, initially, the respondents were asked to choose their language. The question was: ''Which language would you use to fill the test?''. Items 6 and 7 explored individual self-opinion using a Likert scale, while Items 8 to 14 explored the respondents' perception of COVID-19 using a Likert scale. The last item was an open question that asked respondents to write a word that best describes the pandemic from their point of view.

Among the items of the survey, the ones used in this paper to measure the individual variables related to the research question, apart from the implicit one ("Which language do you want to use?"), are

only question 4, which allows the respondents to choose between four levels (self-taught, mandatory or primary education, high school or secondary education, university or tertiary education), and question 7 which is a Likert scale-based question, allowing the respondents to declare themselves as agreeing or disagreeing on a scale from 1 to 5. The texts of the original items are the following:

"4. Which is the last school you attended/you are attending?"

"7. From 1 to 5, to what extent do you agree with the statement, "My religious faith deeply influences my everyday life."

In addition to the two questions above, which are strongly related to the independent variables already described, the other questions we used to explore the three possible aspects that may be used to describe individual attitudes toward the COVID-19 emergency appear in Table 1:

Tab. 1. Scheme of the relationship among variables and questions.

Aspects	**Question**
Why have Pandemics happened?	8. From 1 to 5, to what extent do you agree with the statement "The pandemic is the struggle of mankind against nature"?
	10. From 1 to 5, to what extent do you agree with the statement "Humankind and this technological madness caused the pandemic"?
	12. From 1 to 5, to what extent do you agree with the statement "Through the pandemic, nature reminds man of his fragility"?
Will Pandemics trigger social changes?	9. From 1 to 5, to what extent do you agree with the statement "When the pandemic is over, everything will return as it was before"?
	14. From 1 to 5, to what extent do you agree with the statement "When the pandemic is over, everything will be radically different"?
Have government and politics used the excuse of the Pandemics to lie and exploit us?	11. From 1 to 5, to what extent do you agree with the statement "COVID-19 vaccines are useless, and they are only necessary because governments use them to control citizens."
	13. From 1 to 5, to what extent do you agree with the statement "The pandemic emergency is an excuse for richer countries to control poorer countries."

Questions 8, 10, and 12 investigate a common theme: the relationship between humankind and nature and how the respondent sees the pandemics within this framework. The attitude toward religion should be strongly related to these items because of its social role: to

make acceptable the unacceptable. In particular, questions 8 and 10 are similar in content but with a different nuance. Question 8 suggests the existence of a struggle between humans and nature, envisaging the pandemics as a phase of this struggle. Question 9 instead stresses a war-like approach to the human-nature relationship, underlining technology's importance for humankind to win against nature, breaking a natural equilibrium between humankind and nature.

Questions 11 and 13 explore the possible existence of a suspicious approach toward governments and mass media. In fact, during the COVID-19-related emergency, several people protested the policies realized by the governments accusing them of manipulating reality for their own goals. The most well-known of such movements was the so-called no-vax protesters who refused to vaccinate against COVID-19 for ideological reasons.

The results of questions 8 to 13 will be related to the independent variables described in questions 4 and 7 to check for relations.

The survey was made using Google Modules and distributed via mail. All answers were anonymous. The original survey was in English and translated into Italian and Japanese. Each translation was supervised by two mother-tongue speakers of Italian and Japanese, respectively.

8.4. Results

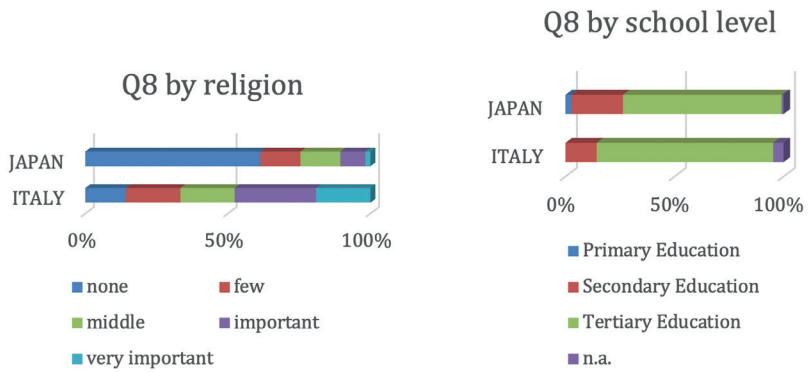
Regarding the first variable (education), the two samples show similar results: 84% of the Italian respondents had a university degree versus 74% of the Japanese.

The attitude toward religion measured by item 7 was quite different between the two samples when declaring that religion has no practical effects on individual life, choosing the value 1 or 2 on the Likert scale: 63% of Italians declared there is no relation between religious belief and behavior versus the 77% of Japanese. A more significant difference is visible when declaring the opposite, that religion is essential, choosing 4 or 5 on the Likert scale: 20% of Italians declared it is important versus 7% of the Japanese.

In this paper, we will focus on the respondents who chose 4 or 5 points on the Likert scale for the dependent variables (from question 8 to question 14), taking into consideration what they declared about their attitude toward religion (question 7) and their level of education (question 4).

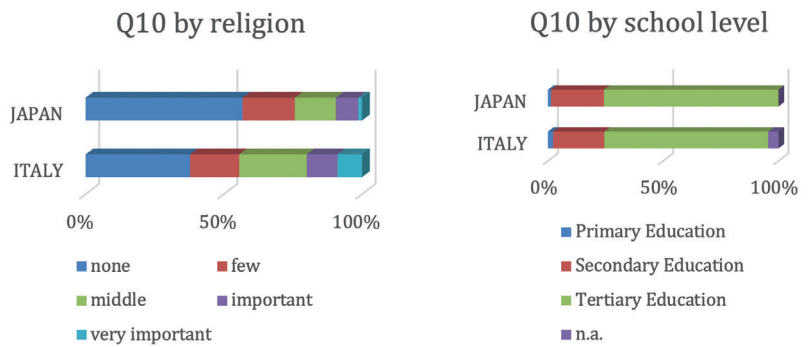
Considering the question "Why did Pandemics happen?" and the three related questions we have for question 8 (From 1 to 5, to what extent do you agree with the statement "The pandemic is the struggle of mankind against nature"?) only 10% of Italians agree versus the 38% of Japanese. More specifically, we can analyze the respondents who chose 4 or 5 on the Likert scale in the following way concerning their attitude toward religion and their education as shown in Figure 1:

Fig. 1. Respondents to Q8 by religion and school level.



For question 10 (From 1 to 5, to what extent do you agree with the statement "Humankind and this technological madness caused the pandemic"?), 21% of Italians agreed with 35% of Japanese. When considering religion and education, the data are represented in Figure 2:

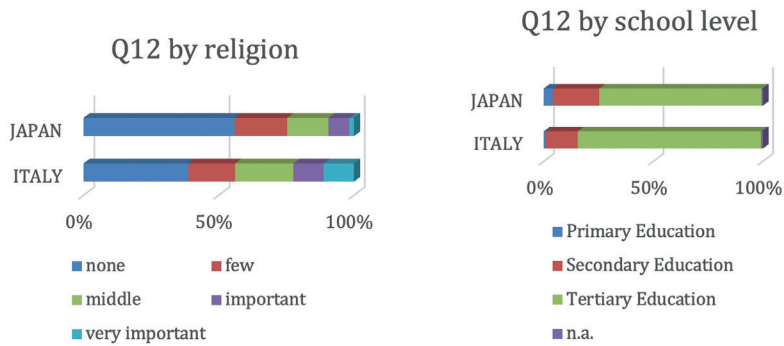
Fig. 2. Respondents to Q10 by religion and school level.



For question 12 (From 1 to 5, to what extent do you agree with the statement "Through the pandemic, nature reminds man of his fragility"?),

the percentages are very similar: 55% of Italians versus 57% of Japanese. More in detail, the sample can be analyzed as shown in Figure 3:

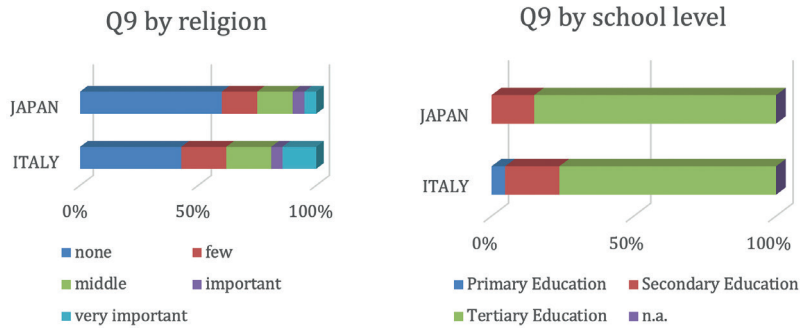
Fig. 3. Respondents to Q12 by religion and school level.



When analyzing this attitude, we can say that: more than 50% of the Japanese-speaking respondents who answered that religion is not essential at all in their life agreed about the idea that the COVID-19 emergency was part of a struggle between humankind vs nature, that humans being is fragile against nature, and that human progress caused the COVID-19. Data for Italian-speaking respondents vary from question to question, so we cannot identify a possible trend. Regarding education, it is impossible to identify any trend to confirm that there was not a dramatically different percentage of answers from a specific education class.

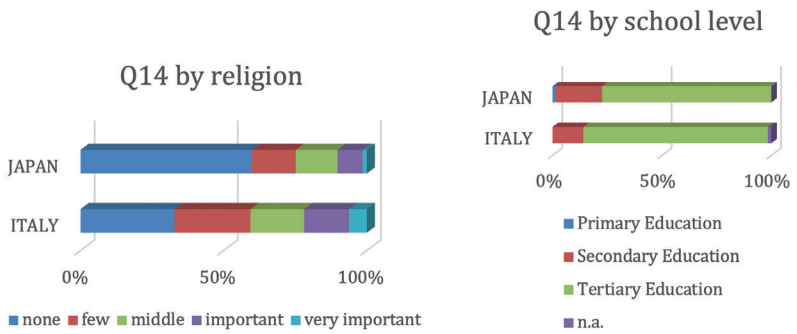
For the question "Will Pandemic trigger social changes" the two related questions had the following results. For item 9 (From 1 to 5, to what extent do you agree with the statement "When the pandemic is over, everything will return as it was before"?), the respondents who agreed were the 10% in Italy and the 6% in Japan. More details are better described in Figure 4:

Fig. 4. Respondents to Q9 by religion and school level



For item 14, "From 1 to 5, to what extent do you agree with the statement "When the pandemic is over, everything will be radically different"?" 30% of Italians agreed, as well as 46% of Japanese. More in detail, the results are shown in Figure 5:

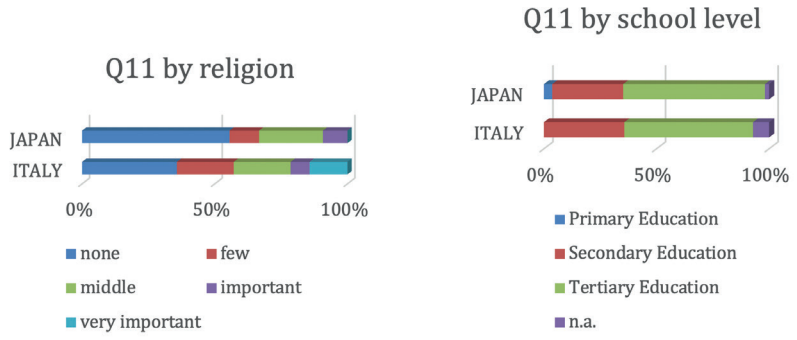
Fig. 5. Respondents to Q14 by religion and school level.



This aspect does not show dramatic relations among the different variables.

For the third and last considered aspect, "Have government and politics used the excuse of the Pandemics to lie and exploit us?" in connection with the related items, the results are the following: for item 11, "From 1 to 5, to what extent do you agree with the statement "COVID-19 vaccines are useless, and they are only necessary because governments use them to control citizens." are 6% for Italian speaking respondents and 18% for Japanese speaking ones. Differentiation by religion and by school is shown in Figure 6:

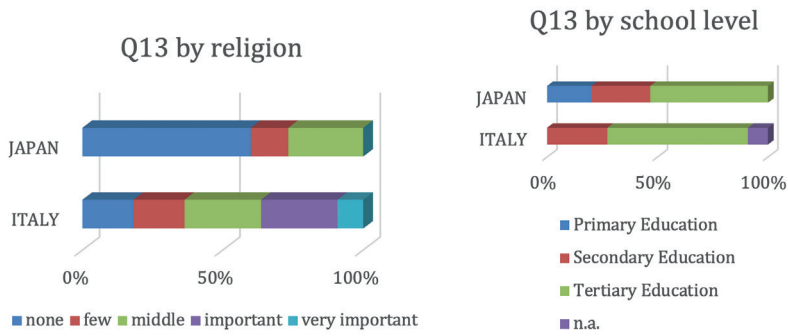
Fig. 6. Respondents to Q11 by religion and school level.



For item 13, "From 1 to 5, to what extent do you agree with the statement "The pandemic emergency is an excuse for richer countries to control

poorer countries." The "I agree" rate is the same, 5% for both populations. More in detail, the responses can be analyzed as represented in Figure 7:

Fig. 7. Respondents to Q13 by religion and school level.



For this last aspect, apparent relations do not appear between respondents' contents and the hypothesized variabilities. However, it is interesting to observe that, on the education aspect, the percentage of respondents who chose 4 or 5 on the Likert scale agree and who do not attend tertiary education is higher than it should be: in the Italian and Japanese samples than 20% of the total did not attend the university, but among the respondents who chose 4 or 5 points in the Likert scale they represent more than 40% of the respondents. More precisely: for both samples, the percentage of people without a university education is almost 40% for question 11; for Japanese-speaking people, the percentage is almost 45%, and for Italian-speaking people, almost 35% for question 13. These data suggest that a lower education level can be considered connected with a tendency in people to mistrust decision-makers.

Regarding question 8, ("From 1 to 5, to what extent do you agree with the statement "The pandemic is the struggle of humankind against nature?") some other useful data can be included to reinforce conclusions. At this question, most Italians (52.4% of the interviewees) agree NOT to consider the pandemic as the struggle of the human species against nature. In the combined question, i.e., whether humanity caused the pandemic (not being in stark contrast to the first, it admits the possibility of "variations on the theme"), the result is once again negative: the Italians interviewed appear not to consider man to be directly responsible for the emergence of the pandemic.

The situation is more varied for the group of Japanese who responded to the interview, as there is no clear preponderance of one group over another in considering the pandemic a fight against nature: on the one hand, it is possible to detect a greater concentration on not holding man responsible for the pandemic (respectively and 33.7% of the interviewees), but, at the same time (unlike the Italy sample), there is a majority of positive responses among those who think that there is a struggle between man and nature (29.6%).

Considering the gender of respondents, the distribution of the answers to question 8 between Italian men and women seems relatively uniform: 57.3% of the men interviewed and 49.6% of the women do not believe there is this struggle between humankind and nature. Similarly, most interviewed do not consider humankind responsible for the pandemic (45.7% of women and 32.9% of men). Regarding Japan's sample surveyed, most women (29.3%) settled on the intermediate answer. In comparison, more men (34.1%) believe the existence of the struggle is possible. On the other hand, there is a certain uniformity between men and women (35% and 33.5% of the interviewees) in not holding men responsible.

Focusing on the importance of religion in onÈs life, in Italy and Japan, most groups observed do not believe that religion influences their life (41.4% in Italy and 59.3% in Japan). It is possible to observe that on the question of the struggle for both Italians and Japanese, the majority of answers are consistent for all groups (from the most religious to the least religious), even if the small group of Japanese who declared greater attention to religion almost half (40%) tend to move towards greater human responsibility for the pandemic.

Even the distribution by the age of the answers to question 8 continues to be perfectly consistent with the others: where one might perhaps expect a diversity of views due to the age difference, it is possible to observe on the contrary that even in single groupings such as most Italians respondents chose to answer 1, the majority of Japanese preferred 4.

Finally, considering the distribution by educational qualification, we can observe it is asymmetrical between the Italian and Japanese interviewees (the vast majority reached tertiary level). However, it may still be intriguing to observe how those who achieved only the lowest level deviate from the prevailing answer, considering it possible the existence of struggle (rated with a three on the Likert scale) and dividing over man's responsibility for the pandemic.

8.5. Conclusion

As described previously, we set three possible aspects of the perception of the Italian and Japanese populations toward the COVID-19 pandemic that represent the dependent variables of this research:

1. Why has COVID-19 Pandemics happened?
2. Will Pandemics trigger social changes?
3. Have government and politics used the excuse of the Pandemics to exploit us and the world?

We hypothesized that religious attitude and level of education could be considered independent variables that influence the above attitudes independently from the linguistic appurtenance of the respondents. The results show that it is impossible to confirm the hypothesis: the data collected do not show any link between attitudes and independent variables. On the contrary, linguistic identity seems essential in explaining the difference in answers between the Italian and Japanese respondents.

Regarding the third aspect, "Have government and politics used the excuse of the Pandemics to exploit us and the world?" it was impossible to find a relation between the answers and the religious attitude. Instead, it is possible to observe a relation between the class of education and the mistrust toward the institutions, and additional studies are needed to confirm this trend.

Studying the two samples separately and comparing the results for question 8 about the influence of religion on individual life is possible to observe the existence of a substantial difference between the two groups that national background can explain.

In sum, this research did not confirm that religious attitudes or educational backgrounds, independent of linguistic identity, are crucial in determining self-efficacy. Collected data suggest only that the respondent's level of education might influence their attitude in interpreting reality using "conspiracy theories" style schemes in which decision-makers aim to deceive citizens. This attitude can play a crucial role in determining citizens' self-efficacy in specific situations like, for example, the vaccination campaigns during the COVID-19 emergency. However, more studies are needed to say that the level of education can be considered an independent variable with no connection with citizens' linguistic background in analyzing attitudes following the

Social Learning Theory. Hopefully, more data will be soon available thanks to other projects based on comparing different national attitudes toward the COVID-19 related emergency in different fields such as the ErasmusPlus project Scaffolding Online University Learning: Support Systems (SOULSS) that focuses on what happened in Higher Education during and after the Pandemic.

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9. English as a Lingua Franca and the International Pandemic Discourse: Investigating the BA First-Year Students' Questionnaire Data Gained at Dept. of Oriental Studies, Sapienza University, Rome

Marina Morbiducci

Abstract

This article reports on the results of a tailor-made mixed-approach questionnaire (Creswell 2014) inspired by the use of ELF communication occurring between BA first-year students at the Department of Oriental Studies, Sapienza University, Rome, and their international friends during the COVID-19 pandemic (May 2020-June 2022). The rationale behind the research is to acquire, collect and investigate the dominant feelings aroused and evoked during the lockdown due to COVID-19 restrictions, as expressed in the participants' international exchanges via social media. Starting from the assumption that prolonged periods of isolation and social distancing can create difficult emotional states with a negative impact on mental wellbeing – as well as on learning processes – our goal is to inquire how international students experienced the quarantine and distancing phase sharing their feelings mediated through ELF. As a second step, the focus of our analysis is on the creative use and variation of idioms in ELF written interactions on social media, according to M.-L. Pitzl's frame of ELF seen as a form of language contact and multilingual creativity (Pitzl 2009; 2012) in the TIGs' ("Transient International Groups") condition (Pitzl 2018; 2022). A third vantage point in this study is provided by Kurt Kohn's "MY English" model (2018; 2020; 2022), through which we observe the empowerment of the ELF competence using linguistic-communicative strategies shaping non-native speaker's identity in authentic circumstances of communication, resulting in a non-native repertoire. Finally, the data gained are examined integrating the quantitative analysis with the explorative qualitative research for the

open-ended questions, investigating the participants' dominant feelings in relation to the global pandemic conveyed through their ELF communicative resources.

Keywords: ELF; Pandemic discourse; ISO students survey; Metaphorical discourse; Sentiment analysis.

9.1. Introduction

This contribution draws on a two-year span ethnographic study on ELF and the Pandemic Discourse, research that was started in May 2020 and concluded in July 2022[1].

The results shared in this present paper are primarily related to the 2021-2022 investigation, that is, the second year of the study[2]. They report about the data gained by way of a questionnaire submitted to BA first year students attending the degree course in Oriental Languages and Cultures, at the Department of Oriental Studies, Sapienza University, Rome. These students (with a supposedly overall linguistic competence in the range of the B1+/B2- levels according to the CEFR, as entry prerequisite) are enrolled in the diversified Oriental curricula of the degree course, but do have English 1 (Language and Linguistics) as compulsory subject; however, their feedback here documented was provided on a volunteer basis. Since the replies in the two years of the research are almost identical in number (121 replies for the 2021-'22 academic year, and 135 replies for the 2020-'21), we can consider the data collected in the two-year period comparable.

As was described in the abstract, this study is based on a qualitative and quantitative analysis according to Creswell's definition (2014), and the data gained are examined adopting a Mixed Methods procedure which integrates the quantitative analysis with the explorative qualitative research. More specifically, in this study the close-ended questions are

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[1] Over the two years, Dr. Valeria Fiasco, Dr. Luca Valleriani (contract professors at the Dept. of Oriental Studies in my parallel course) and Dr. Alexandra Smit (Language Expert at Centro Linguistico – CLA, Sapienza University, Rome) collaborated with me, collecting the data gained from the students who participated in the survey, and I thank them for their commitment and engagement in this research.

[2] The 2021-22 edition of the questionnaire, titled "English as a Lingua Franca at Sapienza ISO Dept. and the International Pandemic Discourse", is retrievable at the following link: <https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSfyYl_O0dMuoQe2iWtriTbZmoa3DzC13y2C_sAkXn9_OrmVNw/viewform>.

analysed quantitatively, whilst the data from the open-ended questions are collected so as to create two small corpora apt to investigate the participants' dominant feelings in relation to the global pandemic individual experience and their ELF communicative resources attached to that.

Therefore, as it is evident from the title above quoted, the questionnaire revolves around two main focuses. On the one hand, it takes the point of view of an applied linguistics frame of reference, assuming the sociolinguistic dimension of English as a Lingua Franca (from now on referred with the acronym "ELF") as a contact language (Seidlhofer 2011) and often as the only communicative resource available to speakers (Guido 2019; Maurenen 2009; Seidlhofer 2011): from this perspective, the study researches the use of ELF as a shared language chosen among non-native speakers of English, like the students of ISO Dept. and their international interlocutors can be considered. On the other hand, the study investigates the use of ELF when it is adopted specifically to deal with the topic of COVID-19, generating an *ad hoc* pandemic discourse observed in its multifaceted impact, a vantage point that has already paved the way to a considerable amount of research in these last two years (see Garzone 2021; Guido 2020, 2021, 2022; Prazmo and Augustyn 2022, just to quote a few).

9.2. Research Background

It is worth mentioning the study I carried over in the years 2014-'15 dealing with a similar research methodology (Morbiducci 2016). The rationale behind that specific research at that time was to investigate the amount and kind of ELF creativity of our BA 1st year students at ISO when interacting with international friends via internet and social media. We must specify that considering the "fast acceleration" (Mauranen 2009) of ELF, and the "unprecedented" situation of the spread of English worldwide (Seidlhofer 2011) – obviously due to globalization and other communicative technological factors – in recent years the proportion of interaction via social media has increased enormously, and is still growing at a rate which is really difficult to predict with precise figures. In addition to this, the online resources made available for distant or remote contact during the pandemic period have deeply modified the interactional behaviour of our youngest generation of English users; for all these reasons, we will try to circumscribe our analysis to the agentive and discursive resources actually investigated locally by way of the submitted questionnaire.

In truth, the pandemic emergency itself has represented a turning point in the overall didactic system, pedagogical outlook and actual way of investigation in the world of English language learning and teaching (hence the recent coinage of the label "disruptive innovation"). Simultaneously, the pandemic emergence has activated a proliferation of scientific studies in the field of ESL (English Second Language), SLA (Second Language Acquisition), Bilingualism/Multilingualism, EIL (English as an International Language), ELF, Sociolinguistics, Sociopragmatics, Discourse Pragmatics, Intercultural Pragmatics and so on. For all linguists and applied linguists, particularly, the gains and findings of the newly oriented research have represented an incredible jet of energy leading to a form of enthusiastic engagement.

Notably, we can mention the special issue #47 (2020) of the journal "Lingue e Linguaggi", edited by Massimiliano Demata, Natalia Knoblock, Marianna Lya Zummo, titled *The Languages and Anti-Languages of Health Communication in the Age of Conspiracy Theories, Mis/Disinformation and Hate Speech,* thoroughly focused on the language of "health communication", where we can actually see how widely the topic of the pandemic discourse has been investigated scientifically in terms of communication, information and also specific "hate speech". In this issue, we are particularly interested in the contribution provided by Ewelina Prazmo and Rafal Augustyn who, in their article titled *The Racist Pandemic. A Semantico-Pragmatic Study of Anti-Asian Overtones in COVID-19-related Twitter Discourse* (2022, pp. 225-243)[3], describe how the very name of "SARS-CoV-2" and "COVID-19" "expose the Asian origin of the virus. These ways of reference – although discouraged by the scientific community – still remain in frequent use in various COVID-19-related discourses" (Prazmo, Augustyn 2022, p. 225): pointing "explicitly" "to the geographical place of origin of the virus", "[they] are likely to provoke associations and solidify pre-existing stereotypes about Asians as well as strengthen misconceptions about the virus itself" (Ibid.). In this article, the two authors continue developing the concept of solidification of pre-existing stereotypes, while arguing that "[t]he intention of the use of terms such as Chinese virus may be pure-

[3] The whole issue #47 2022 of "Lingue e Linguaggi" is extremely rich in contributions from different countries, perspectives and authors, and is fully available in pdf format at: <http://siba-ese.unisalento.it/index.php/linguelinguaggi/issue/view/1891> whereas the article by Prazmo and Augustyn is retrievable at: <http://siba ese.unisalento.it/index.php/linguelinguaggi/article/view/25620>.

ly referential, but they are, nonetheless, marked with accusatory or downright racist overtones" (Ibid.). We would like to specify that the frame of reference offered by this paper is within the Critical Discourse Analysis framework (CDA as postulated by van Dijk in 1993), "as CDA aims specifically to examine the ways in which discourses shape power relations, maintain social stigmas, perpetuate stereotypes and widen inequalities" (Ibid.): "CDA [is used] as a framework for conducting a semantic analysis of expressions such as Asian virus, Chinese virus, Sinovirus or Wuhan virus used on Twitter" (Ibid.). Such sort of "polarized discourse", present in the Prazmo and Augustyn research, was totally absent in the replies of the ISO students' open questions of the questionnaire we submitted, and we are particularly glad to appreciate the non-prejudicial stances showed by our students, as gathered in our survey dealing with the pandemic discourse.

However, the analysis carried over by Prazmo and Augustyn in terms of CDA focused on potential hate speech and polarized discourse also inspired us in the identification and classification of feelings which were visible in the replies collected in our survey. Furthermore, the scientific literature of sentiment analysis which Prazmo and Augustyn quote in their paper was illuminating in amplifying the scope of our investigation. Articles referred in their paper, such as the ones by Al-Afnan (2020) on media bias and ideology, or by Ascher and Noble unmasking hate on Twitter (2019), or even the cognitive semantic analysis Prazmo and Augustyn themselves carried over observing the internet discourse (2020), were all highly inspiring.

Similarly, we could notice how the analytical focalization on the Twitter social medium allowed us to identify in clear terms the diversified areas of investigation and classification in the different social media platforms. In other words, the analysis of CDA applied to social media, from that point on (that is, since the massive and impressive production of discourse created by the pandemic emergence), in all probability, will not be any longer generically assumed; on the contrary, it will demand for clear-cut specialized grounds of investigation according to the social medium providing the discursive data.

Within this frame of reference of discourse analysis, we would like to consider also the article published in a previous issue of the same journal above mentioned, namely "Lingue e Linguaggi" #39 (2020), by Maria Grazia Guido, titled *The Influence of Covid-19 Pandemic Emergency on the Economy Principle Applied to Nigerian Migrants' ELF-mediated Online Inter-*

actions (Guido 2020, pp. 179-200), or again, by M. G. Guido, the article *Relexicalisation and Decategorialisation Processes in Migrants' ELF-Mediated Online Narratives in the Disembodied Time of the Covid-19 Pandemic* (Guido 2021, pp. 87-102). In the same line of investigation, we are indebted to Maria Grazia Guido also for her contribution, titled *ELF-Mediated Modal Metaphors of 'Inclusion', 'Exclusion' and 'Seclusion' in an Online Discussion on Covid-19 Fake News: A Case Study in Cross-Cultural Cognitive Linguistics* (2022), article we will refer again in the dedicated section of this paper[4].

Finally, in our brief survey of the previous literature regarding the study of emotions and metaphorical speech during the pandemic, we would like to mention the article by Giuliana Elena Garzone, titled *Rethinking Metaphors in Covid-19 Communication* (Garzone 2021) where the author claims that "the most conspicuous aspect of COVID-19 communication is the systematic recourse to metaphors, which has been so pervasive and intensive that it has attracted most scholarly attention by anthropologists, sociologists, communication experts, researchers in cultural studies, linguists and discourse analysts" (Garzone 2021, p. 161). With such assumption Garzone reinforces the initial hypothesis underlying the research questions which constituted the backbone and goal of our study.

9.3. The Questionnaire: Research Questions, Rationale and Hypothesis

This study moves from the following research questions:

1. Is English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) an effective means of communication among international university students using social media?
2. In the students' interactional exchanges through social media, is the pandemic discourse active, participative and diffuse?
3. Is any idiomatic of metaphorical speech used in the pandemic discourse? If so, for what purpose and conveying which sort of feelings?

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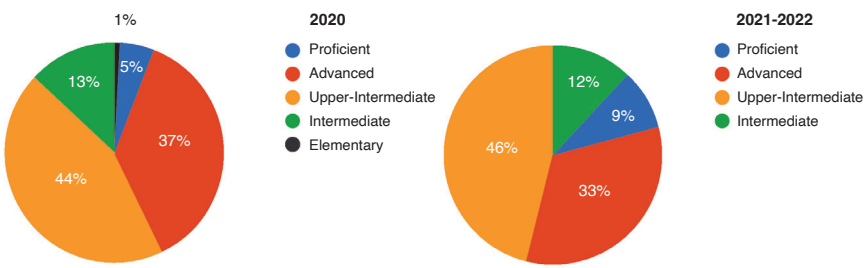
[4] In this article Maria Grazia Guido proposes the analysis of the pandemic discourse in a cross-cultural Cognitive Linguistics framework, that is, a focalization on the use of English modal verbs in "Covid-triggered experiential metaphors" (Guido 2021, p. 1). Notably, here she analyses the "metaphors conceived by a focus group of multicultural participants in online discussion" (Ibid.). The group was composed of non-native speakers of English, therefore communicating in ELF, and the analysis aimed at investigating the pragmatic use of modals.

To put it in a nutshell, the three research questions above quoted generated the questionnaire titled: *English as a Lingua Franca at Sapienza ISO Dept. and the International Pandemic Discourse, 2021-2022.* It comprises 30 questions, precisely 26 multiple-choice structured questions and 4 open questions, organized in five subsets: demographics (1-6); language competence and use (7-11); use of social media (12-15); type of linguistic use (including idiomatic speech and/or metaphors) (16-24); pandemic discourse (24-30). It collected 121 replies in the 2021-'22 administration; the research methodology was based on the quantitative and qualitative analysis, according to the Mixed Methods procedure (Creswell 2014), and the qualitative analysis regarded three focuses: metaphorical discourse analysis, sentiment analysis and socio-pragmatic impact[5].

The data gained can be read from diversified vantage points: Demographics; Language learning → didactics, pedagogy; Sociolinguistics → ELF; Psycholinguistics → motivation; Discourse analysis; Metaphorical discourse; Cognitive linguistics; Social media studies.

As a preamble, you can notice that the second subset of questions (#7-#11) regards the degree of linguistic self-confidence and self-perceived competence of the respondents who used ELF in filling the questionnaire. This element was interesting to us since, even comparing the data sets collected in the two academic years, around an average of 45% (44% in 2020 and 46% in 2021-'22) declared that their self-perceived competence and sense of confidence was in the range of a B2 level (upper intermediate, or above – which is in fact the expected exit level at secondary school), as shown in Figure 1 reporting the data of question #7:

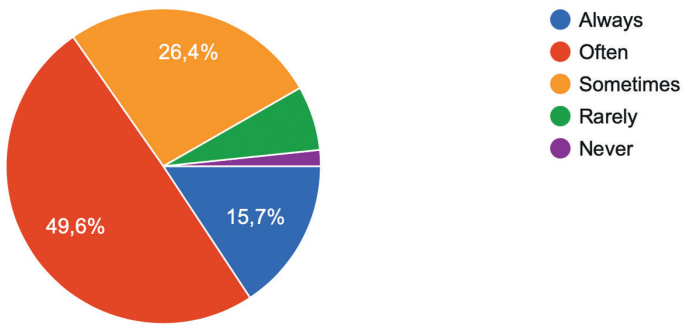
Fig. 1. How would you define your English competence?



[5] The questionnaire is retrievable at: <https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSfyYl_O0dMuoQe2iWtriTbZmoa3DzC13y2C_sAkXn9_OrmVNw/viewform>.

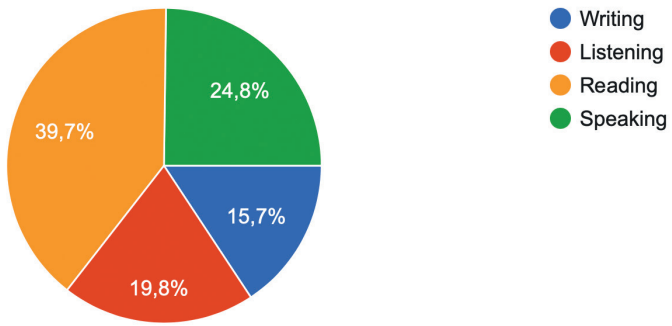
This aspect of self-perceived competence seems also to be re-echoed in question #23 which looks at how comfortable and "at ease" students felt with their level of competence when interacting with their international friends using English (both written and spoken). Here a majority of students (60% in 2020 which increases to 76% in the 2021-'22 academic year) responded that they always, or any way often, felt quite confident, as shown in Figure 2:

Fig. 2. When you chat (both in spoken and written modality) with your international friends using English, do you feel at ease with your language competance?



If we move on to the skills that students feel most confident with, the two data sets are quite similar. Both in 2020 and 2021-2022 reading and speaking dominate, as it is evident in Figure 3, reporting the data of question #11:

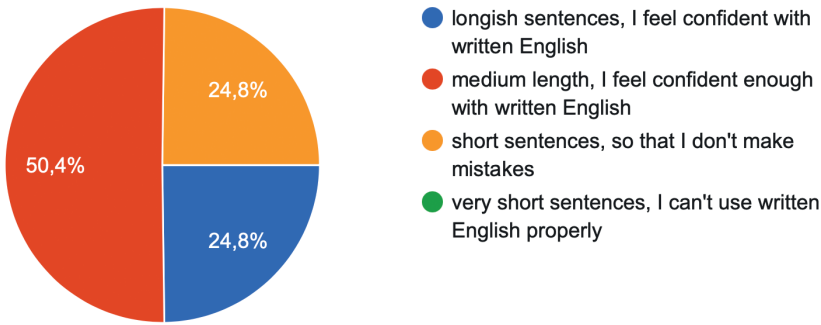
Fig. 3. In English, do you feel most proficient at…?



Finally, when considering the students' written interactions on social media, we could notice that a higher percentage in the 2021-'22 academic year felt quite confident with "longish sentences" (24,8%)

(the section in blue in the pie) compared to the 8% of the previous data set, as shown in figure 4 reporting the data of question #16:

Fig. 4. When you chat in written modality with your international friends, do you prefer long or short sentenses?



In addition to this, it was interesting to detect the degree of awareness with which the participants used English in the ELF dimension, as proved in the replies to question #28, where 33,9% of the respondents state they are aware of using English as a Lingua Franca. This stance is fundamental, since one of the aims of the survey was also to verify the sociolinguistic validity of English as a contact language.

9.4. Findings

Once the demographic elements and the results concerning the self-perceived linguistic competence as ELF users are gathered in the survey, we get into the very core of the research, which is twofold: on the one hand, the realisation of the actual use of idiomatic speech and metaphorical discourse in the online and social media interactions between our respondents and their international peers; on the other, the description of their variegated feelings, impressions and perceptions, as emerging through the filter of the sentiment analysis procedure.

The respondents of the 2021-'22 survey presented the following features: at question #8, it is shown how 92,6% use English to communicate with international peers; at question #9, 51,2% state that they use English outside university, that is in their free time; at question #10, 70,2% say they use English with non-native speakers of English; at question #12, 54,5% say that they "always" regularly use social media, and that the most used platform is Instagram (53,7%) (question #13).

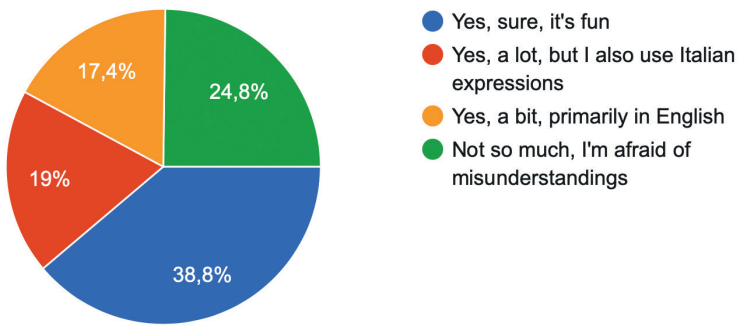
At question #15, when asked about the reasons why they use social media, which was an open question, we noticed replies such as:

> I can travel with one click or tap, I can also meet new people or new cultures/trends.
>
> Social media is one of the only ways for me to communicate with people from other countries and it makes it easier to expand my knowledge in social and cultural issues that people face around the world.
>
> Because I can share my daily experiences and communicate with other people around the world, gaining more points of views.
>
> It's entertaining. I also use it to communicate with friends met abroad who live on the other side of the earth: it's the only way to keep in touch and I consider it quite important to cultivate the relationship with them.
>
> They connect me with people physically distant and also I can keep up with my interests through social media such as Twitter, Instagram and YouTube.
>
> Share my passions and discover new things that I can't find online in Italian language.
>
> I like using social media because I can learn more about people around the world.
>
> I love using social media platforms because they provide me the opportunity to communicate with my friends from all over the world (for example from Spain and the USA) and to be informed about everything that goes on in the world.
>
> I mainly use social media to express myself.
>
> I like to stay updated.
>
> They help me stay in touch with the people I care about.
>
> They make me happy.
>
> *Etc.*
>
> […]

As we can see, the replies are all positive and seem to be highly appreciative of the communicative potentialities inherent in the use of social media, in addition to this we notice the expression of feelings

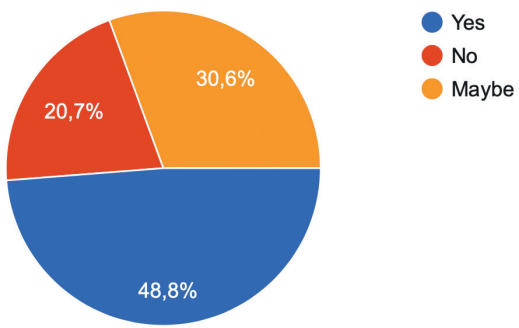
of self-satisfaction, self-fulfilment, mutual involvement and genuine engagement in peer communication. Then, when it comes to the favourite length of the sentences in social media exchanges, as we saw earlier at question #16, 50,4% of the respondents feel more comfortable with "medium-length" sentences, such option shows a good degree of self-confidence, and also provides the ground for longish expressions where also the metaphorical discourse can take place. As a matter of fact, at question #17 which recites: "When you chat in written modality with your international friends, do you ever use metaphors and/or idioms?", the replies were as following in Figure 5:

Fig. 5. When you chat in written modality with your international friends, do you ever use metaphors and/or idioms?



Here we notice that 38,8% of the respondents replied that it is "fun" to use metaphors and idioms in their chatting, and they also add that their interlocutors adopt metaphorical or idiomatic speech, too, as shown in question #18, reported in Figure 6:

Fig. 6. When you chat in written modality with your international friends, do you ever notice if THEY use metaphors and/or idioms?



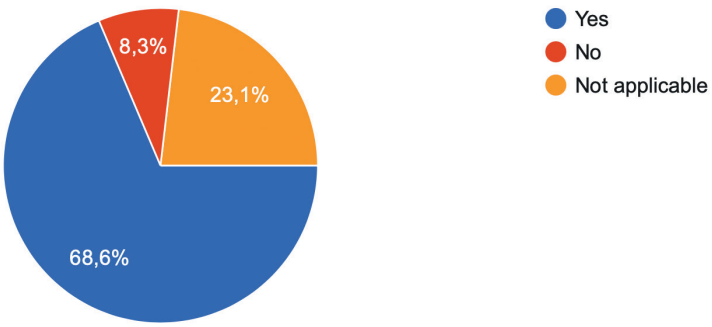
Moving on, in question #19, the respondents provide examples of the metaphors and/or idioms used, they seem to belong to a stock repertoire, ready-made and available, which they feel comfortable and confident using. Here follows a short selection of the cases reported:

> "It's a piece of cake" "the pot calling the kettle black" "the elephant in the room".
>
> Call it a day, Beat around the bush, Get out of hand, Pull someone's leg, Pull yourself together.
>
> The most common that I get is "break a leg".
>
> Raining cats and dogs.
>
> We'll cross that bridge when we come to it.
>
> Call it a day, break a leg, hang in there, break the ice, don't cry over spilt milk, ignorance is bliss, it's a piece of cake, on thin ice, the elephant in the room.
>
> If the shoe fits, wear it.
>
> Piece of cake, get out of hand, long story short, pull yourself together, spill some tea, etc.
>
> No pain, no gain.
>
> I often use "it hit me like a truck", "to sweat buckets", etc.
>
> Expressions like "that is clown behaviour", "pop off" or other young people slang are very common.
>
> Eg. It was not a friend but an American relative of mine: she used "to kick the bucket" and therefore we discussed about idioms.
>
> […]

From this short and partial selection at a glance we notice that the "standard idioms" are possessed and used by the majority of the respondents, even with a good degree of confidence; what is interesting, though, is that the last three examples reported seem to introduce also the possibility of more creative forms of idiomatic speech, playing on similes and metaphors, like in "it hit me like a truck", "sweat buckets", "clown behaviour". At the same time, in the last example quoted, we realise that the respondent is also ex-

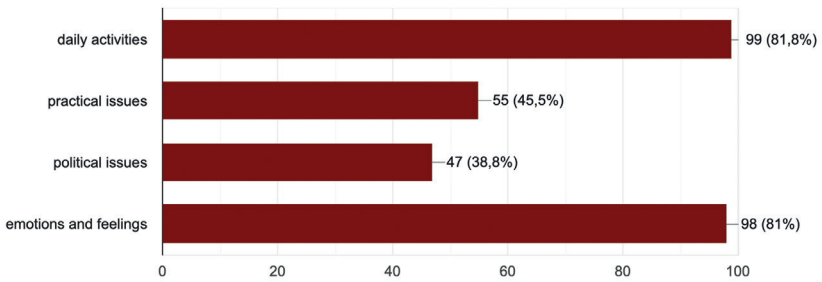
pressing awareness of the metalinguistic topic for discussion: "[A]n American relative of mine: she used "to kick the bucket" and therefore ***we discussed about idioms***" (italics mine). Analysing question #21, it is also striking the fact that the majority of respondents express their awareness of the "culturally connotated" aspect of the idiomatic expressions used, as shown in Figure 7, where 68,6% of the respondents think they are such:

Fig. 7. In your opinion, are the idiomatic expressions you use 'culturally connotated'?



Finally, in relation to the expression of personal feelings and emotions, we can show Figure 8, which reports about the replies to question #26:

Fig. 8. When communicating with your international friends about Covid-19 restrictions, did you metion…



As we can notice, the reference to "emotions and feelings" raised by the COVID-19 restrictions occupy the second highest rate of replies, that is 81%. We consider this aspect very interesting, it somehow confirms our research hypothesis, and therefore it necessitates further comments which will be done in the following specific section.

9.5. Analysis of the Data Gained against a Metaphorical Discourse Backdrop

We mentioned earlier the study carried on by Garzone (2021) regarding metaphorical discourse during the pandemic period, and also the range of feelings perceived by interviewed participants involved in M. G. Guido's study *ELF-Mediated Modal Metaphors of 'Inclusion', 'Exclusion' and 'Seclusion' in an Online Discussion on Covid-19 Fake News: A Case Study in Cross-Cultural Cognitive Linguistics*. The latter presents "a case study in cross-cultural Cognitive Linguistics focused on the variable use of English modal verbs conveying new Covid-triggered experiential metaphors conceived by a focus group of multicultural participants in online discussion" (Guido 2021, p. 1). Here the group was composed of Italians, Greeks and migrants from Nigeria, Morocco and Yemen, therefore the language used was ELF, and their communication took place "in a computer-mediated dimension of a virtual university classroom" (Ibid.). As Guido clearly explains, her case study intended "to determine whether the group's pragmatic use of modals introducing novel metaphors actually diverged from habitual high/low-context schemata related to the multicultural participants' different native sociolinguistic communities" (Ibid.). According to Guido, the "[s]chema divergence was assumed to be prompted by the particular 'emotion-raising' topic chosen for the case study – namely, the probable fake news on the causes of the COVID-19 pandemic, as they were conveyed by three journalistic texts submitted for discussion" (Ibid.). Guido continues specifying that "the case study explored the new cognitive metaphors of 'inclusion', 'exclusion', and 'seclusion' developed by the participants in relation to their social and psychological involvement with the topic" (Ibid.), therefore investigating the degree of creativity in these newly-forged expressions. Guido's study showed how such kind of inventive metaphorical discourse encompassed "the positive and negative consequences of pandemic, including the obligation to stay at home and communicate exclusively online, with the related issues of gender and ethnic discrimination, or rather empowerment" (Ibid.). Guido makes us notice that "the more the participants were emotionally involved in such a topic, the more markedly their specific ELF variations emerged in the discussion" (Ibid.). According to Guido, "these ELF variations allowed the conveyance of the new metaphors for the expression of the participants'

unprecedented experience of forced lockdown and online communication through the so-called 'metaverse' replacing reality" (Ibid.). This interesting study confirms the validity of an exploration of feelings, conveyed by brand new metaphors in ELF, produced by non-native speakers interacting online.

Similarly, Garzone's research, investigating metaphorical discourse, showed how "the most conspicuous aspect of COVID-19 communication is the systematic recourse to metaphors, which has been so pervasive and intensive that it has attracted most scholarly attention by anthropologists, sociologists, communication experts, researchers in cultural studies, linguists and discourse analysists, and has also been an object of public debate" (Garzone 2021, p. 161). According to Garzone, metaphor is central in disseminating knowledge to the general public in the literature on popularization (for this purpose Garzone quotes studies such as Calsamiglia, van Dijk 2004, pp. 376-377; Garzone 2020, pp. 151-218). Metaphor is here assumed as "a matter of crossdomain mappings in conceptual structure which are expressed in language" (Steen et al. 2010, p. 21, quot. by Garzone, Ibid.). In the frame of reference of the Conceptual Metaphor Theory, Garzone claims that not only are metaphors "cognitively organized" (Ibid.), but also that they possess "more strategic functions" in highlighting or viceversa obfuscating aspects of the source and/or target domain in the framing process, "to reflect and activate different ways of understanding and reasoning about things" (Semino et al 2018, quot. by Garzone 2021, p. 161). "[T]he linguistic framing of an abstract concept through recourse to metaphorical expressions" (Ibid.) is therefore quite justified in discourses "on such sensitive issues as illness and disease, not only because of the popularizing function it serves, but more aptly on account of the framing effect it may have on the way people perceive and think about certain health problems" (Garzone 2021, pp. 161-162). Garzone continues, "[a]fter Sontag, various other studies have explored the use of metaphors in talking or writing about cancer (Hommerberg et al. 2020; Semino et al. 2015; Semino et al. 2018), with a special propensity to rely on 'martial' metaphors (Reisfield, Wilson 2004), a propensity that has been noticed and considered critically not only by linguists and discourse analysts, but also by doctors (Miller 2010; Reisfield, Wilson 2004) and psychologists (Hauser, Schwarz 2015; 2020)" (quot. in Garzone 2021, p. 162). Then, in this same study, Garzone reports about a corpus-based study carried

in a UK-based website for people with cancer where the "recourse to conceptual metaphors involving WAR as a source domain is most frequent, followed by JOURNEY metaphors" (Ibid.). Garzone concludes that WAR metaphors have also characterised the Covid-19 communication, generating the negative effects of feelings of disempowerment and acquiescence to fatal events, which cannot be fought nor won. This is the reason why, Garzone reports, in April 2020 an initiative was started by some linguists (including Paula Pérez-Sobrino, Inés Olza, Elena Semino and Veronica Koller at Lancaster University), in order to promote non-war-related language on COVID-19 discourse (Ibid.). The recourse to war imagery can lead to anxiety, panic and aggression, and foster fatalism (Garzone 2020, p. 163), also inducing to a sense of "loss of control" (Levenson 2020; Serhan 2020, quot. by Garzone 2020, p. 163). Alternative metaphors "recommended for COVID-19 communication […] are FOOTBALL GAME, TANKER and GREEN SHOOT […] [and] MONSTER, STORM and TSUNAMI" (ibid.). Finally, "[i] n her 2021 study Semino proposes FIRE as the most suitable replacement metaphor, and at the same time recommends the use of a diversified range of other metaphors relating to various domains, instead of the military ones" (Garzone 2021, p. 164).

Against this scientific background, let's now consider more in detail the data collected from the survey conducted at our ISO Dept., with students whose interactional exchanges via social media were investigated. As we saw, in question #17 the students confirm that they use metaphors and idioms to interact with their peers, and also that these latter ones, too, adopt metaphorical discourse in their dialogue with them. Almost 40% of the local respondents consider it "fun", and enjoy using this colourful, imaginative, highly connotative and non-referential kind of discourse, constituting a form of creativity and linguistic vividness particularly appropriate to the age and type of higher education they are pursuing (with a curriculum in Oriental languages). In addition to this aspect, we must add that the respondents are fully aware of the cultural connotations of the idiomatic and metaphorical expressions used by their interlocutors.

As for the range of feelings manifested in the survey, in reply to question #27, as first communicated during the Health Emergency pre-conference held on June 9, 2022, we decided to split them in the two diverging areas of positive and negative feelings, as shown in Figure 9:

Fig. 9. When you communicated with your international friends about the lockdown, how did you describe your own experience?

Negative	Positive
• I describe it as a sad and lonely experience • It was hard for me dealing with the pandemic • I described it as the expression of my boring and sorrowful existence • I described it as a very hard moment • I mostly described it as stressful and tiring • It was confused even to me and in my own language • During the lockdown I felt more sad and depressed. Time would never have passed without the help of my family and friends. • I couldn't stand it any more! I wanna breath the fresh air, but I just can't... • Bad. Very bad. • Exhausting • I was honestly terrified, i felt like i was getting bombarded with horrible news every day and i was feeling overwhelmed • I felt free but also sad, my house seemed like a cage to me • Sad, boring, scary, worrying • I described our political situation, the numbers of infected people and the way we dealt with the lockdown in Italy and I compared them with my Korean friend in English • I wrote to them that I didn't like this situation and that I hoped it would change as soon as possible, mostly because my parents couldn't work due to the restrictions. • I described it as one of the worst experiences of my entire life, I felt very bad about living my everyday life with such restrictions and strict rules • As if I lost a year of my life • I felt depressed and taken down for almost the whole time the pandemic lasted. I didn't feel like doing anything and I just wanted to rest in my bed	• Comfortable, I did what i like at home • I was bored and a bit anxious, but it mostly helped me organising my life in a more efficient way • I enjoy being alone *a lot*, and social interactions have always made me anxious, so the lockdown, at least for me, was kind of a break from everyday's stress • I didn't feel so bad personally, i used the moment to study • I was pretty stressed about it, but in the end I started working out and baking, so I tried to had a good time in a bad situation in the end • It wasn't really a problem for me staying inside since It was almost what I used to do in "normal" situation • We also compared the different ways in which our countries were dealing with the situation and shared our opinions about it • Talk to other people and learn about their experience it makes you feel less alone • As a bad but also stimulating experience • My experience wasn't too bad, I have a dog, so during the Pandemic I could walk my dog daily and get some fresh air. • I described my experience as both overwhelming and relaxing. It was overwhelming to be always at home but also relaxing since I could enjoy more time with my family. • It felt good having someone that even though they were living far away, still could understand the situation and being there for each other. • I mostly played game or chatted with my friends and I felt in my ease at home. I met really nice people! Still today I'm happy, in a certain way, that the covid-19 gave us those opportunities but even so bad things...

- I was really stressed and sometimes anxious
- Overall a terribly monotonous experience, obviously restrictive and both physically and mentally tiring.
- I mainly engaged with a few friends that I met in a videogame I started playing during quarantine. Can't really recall the whole conversations but pretty sure I complained a lot about how the Italian government dealt with containment measures. Also getting my bachelor's during quara tine has been a pain.
- I describe my own experience as negative, frustrating and stressful
- Time felt strange, as if days were dilated to eternity, but at the end of the week they all just mushed together.

- Not that bad, I used The time doing something good for me and also for my mental and physical health. All the day was totally full of activities: studying, reading, training, watching tv series, calling friends etc.
- I felt curious to know about the situation in other countries
- We could actually write each other more often than we did before and we create a new bond between us.
- The language Is very important, so we discussed about the bad situation of Covid. But language helped us to communicate and support each other
- I talked about my personal situation but also I noticed that many of my feelings were shared by other people, such as worries.
- I often shared lyrics of song about the lockdown.

As you can see, the polarization of feelings (represented by the two fields in the slide: blue = negative feelings; orange = positive feelings) in is in accordance with the most used classification in the literature of sentiment analysis[6]; however, there is much more to classify in addition to the mere tripartition of positive/negative/neutral, which is usually adopted in the analysis of textual discourse. We could resort to "advanced" analysis, that is "beyond polarity" classification, and identify a wider range of feelings, stills analysable in the negative/positive spectrum, but with more nuances in the progression from one pole to the other. For instance, we can find a difference in the negative ranking between "exhausting" and "inconvenient"; similarly, there is a different degree of "gravity" and also different kind of feeling between the two pairs "sad and depressed"

[6] In particular, we have in mind VADER (Valence Aware Dictionary and sEntiment Reasoner) which is a lexicon and rule-based sentiment analysis tool specifically attuned to sentiments expressed in social media. The literature on the VADER procedure applied to the analysis of Twitters and other types of social media texts is rapidly growing, and this is attracting the interest of applied linguists (in addition to the marketing professionals who first adopted the tool). Regarding the application of VADER to linguistic analysis of Twitters, it is interesting to mention two studies, one by Elbagir, S., Yang. J., (2019), *Twitter Sentiment Analysis Using Natural Language Toolkit and VADER Sentiment*, in *Proceedings of the International MultiConference of Engineers and Computer Scientists, 2019 IMECS 2019*, March 13-15, 2019, Hong Kong; the other one by Liu, S. e Liu, J. (2021) *Public attitudes toward COVID-19 vaccines on English-language Twitter: A sentiment analysis*, in "Vaccine", 39, pp. 5499–5505.

and "frustrating and stressful". In conclusion, the quantity of replies we got from the questionnaire is worth being further investigated to allow for a more precise and detailed categorization of feelings. Certainly it is interesting to note how emotional states which range in progression from anger→ sadness→ fear→ anxiety→ perplexity // to // resilience→ acceptance→ surprise and so on, are discernible in the replies. From a pedagogical and didactic point of view, the comments in the "orange" side would deserve further exploitation, since the agents/respondents who provided them are the ones who best reacted to the negative emergency, showing personal and emotional resources, and these could exactly become a spendable antidote also for their peers, in a sort of cooperative learning environment, the situation which can exist in a class group (even online), or even in TIGs (according to M.-L. Pitzl's acquisition of the term[7]). The person who reacted to the pandemic negativity baking cakes or making music, socializing more and with a different degree of passion – compared to the other who exclusively experienced loneliness or stress, passive recipient of harshness – can represent an example to follow, even for other emergencies or hard moments in the future.

Let me reiterate that we can describe the interactions occurring between speakers/internet users of our local Italian community at university and their international interlocutors as TIGs (Pitzl 2018), since their contact is evidently impermanent and transient, taking place in the virtual space of social media communication. However, these users still represent a "community" connecting through ELF (Morbiducci 2021), giving also way to their specific repertoire, in this case the expression of the range of feelings and emotions perceived during the lockdown period. For the analysis of these communicative exchanges we advocate Kurt Kohn's vision, as expressed in his ground-breaking article *MY English: A Social Constructivist Perspective on ELF* (2018) where he convincingly postulates the possibility of the creation of an ELF repertoire based on the users' communicative potential powers, capable of shaping language according to their dominant feelings, needs and intentions. It is in such virtual space that language conforms and adapts to the speakers' urgencies and demands, as Kohn develops further in his articulate pedagogical view (Kohn 2020; 2022).

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[7] By the term TIGs (Transient International Groups), we refer to communities of learners who – differently from "communities of practice" – constitute a group only for a short period of time, since they are in "transition" as international users of the ELF variant in their shared learning experiences. For a deeper description see Pitzl (2018).

9.6. Conclusion

In sum, we can conclude that the research started during the pandemic period had the twofold purpose: – reacting in a constructive way to the hardship caused by social isolation and deviance from the normal course of events, even at university level, due to the COVID-19 emergency; – collecting brand new material to investigate the linguistic, discursive and interactional behaviour of our students at BA first year, on social media, using the ELF frame of reference also investigating their ELF creativity in metaphorical discourse. These two goals, in the end – we dare say – met the challenge. The quantity and quality of the replies gathered in the survey prove that the respondents reacted with a vivid sense of cooperation and awareness in a critical period. Through the data collected in the questionnaires we could find that: – ELF appears to be a very useful form of English as contact language to communicate among native and non-native speakers; – the use of social media for the linguistic production of informal written discourse is impressively functional; – the use of ELF on social media outnumbers the use of English in all other circumstances, including academic settings; – the resorting to metaphorical and idiomatic speech is considered functional, user-friendly and culturally loaded by the respondents; – the affective connotation of metaphorical and idiomatic speech is considered relevant in the expression and construction of the pandemic discourse.

The data so far collected provide also profitable ground for further research, particularly: – in the qualitative analysis level, to create the occasion for a deeper and more detailed classification in the Sentiment analysis protocol, to investigate better all the range, ranking and intensity of individual feelings, far beyond the polarization divide; – in Critical Discourse Analysis, to analyse more in depth polarized discourse, identifying the presence of hate speech and exploiting more the hybridity of social media linguistic forms; – in Sociopragmatics, to pursue a further investigation in the verbal forms presented in order to discern a sense of inclusion, exclusion, and/or seclusion, *après* M. G. Guido's previous research and model of analysis. Finally, in the field of Cognitive Linguistics, an investigation like the one we carried on in this study could also lead to an expansion of the research in the area of Metaphorical Discourse, whereas in the field of ELF it could encourage researchers towards an advancement in the realm of language creativity, according to the directions already envisaged by ELF authorities such as M.-L. Pitzl and K. Kohn.

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Volume I – Culture, Art, Media

The present publication has been conceived as a critical reflection, in different disciplinary fields, on the social, institutional, and cultural impact of the recent COVID-19 pandemic in Asia and Africa. The issues presented here were first discussed as part of a larger research project at two conferences, held in Rome in June and October 2022. After extensive revision, these results have now been collected as fully developed articles in the current two volumes: the first focuses on the cultural, artistic, and media-related facets of the pandemic; the second on its social and institutional implications.

This Volume I examines the effects of the traumatic events brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic on various cultural phenomena, artistic expressions, and social media communication, analysing among other themes the creation of new narratives and the modalities of personal and collective responses. The articles cover vast geographical areas, spanning from the Middle East to the Indian Subcontinent and East Asia, and aim at making their multiple visions converge in one compact perspective of empathic connection.

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