

Pandemic Narratives: The Creative Resilience and the Transformative Voices of Art and Literature During Pandemic Era

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Abstract

The pandemic has reshaped our lives in innumerable ways and has impacted societies worldwide altering their daily routine and reshaping human interactions. The lives of people have undergone a tremendous change, and the ways to adapt to the new normal have been a tough task. Amidst this crisis, art and literature emerged as vital tools for resilience, reflection, and connection. This article explores the multifaceted role of art and literature in helping human beings recuperate during the pandemic time. The article aims to analyze and review the part that art and literature played in helping people during the pandemic times to adapt to the new normal. Art and literature stands as an important aid during adverse times which underscores the importance of these two vital factors in navigating public and personal crises.

Keywords : Art, Literature, Pandemic, Healing, Changes, Helping.

Introduction:

Art is long, and life is short. To make life longer, the role of art is inevitable. The pandemic had brought the world to a halt. It appeared as if the world was not moving forward. Times became difficult both mentally and physically. When physical ailments receive attention, it is the mental health that individuals often forgo. The pandemic times have brought in a revival of the interest in art and literature.

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Art and literature are as old as human existence. The duo has helped mankind cope with adverse situations and fare better in times of crisis. This article aims at viewing the role of art and literature during the COVID-19 crisis and explores the transformative power of art and literature during the pandemic, examining how creative expression served as a source of emotional support, resilience, and reflection during a time of global crisis.

Pandemic

The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines a pandemic as “an outbreak of a disease that occurs over a wide geographic area such as multiple countries or continents and typically affects a significant proportion of the population: a pandemic outbreak of a disease” (*Merriam-Webster*). A pandemic, by its nature, transcends borders and impacts nearly all aspects of human life including health, economy, education, and societal structures.

The world has seen many such outbreaks throughout the history of time. Right from the Prehistoric Epidemic which wiped out an entire village in China, the Plague of Athens, which came after the war with the Spartans, and the Antonine Plague, called Plague of Galen, erupted in 165 CE, during Roman power, throughout the Mediterranean during the reign of Marcus Antoninus. The Justinian Plague during the reign of Justinian I (527-565 CE) was one of the worst outbreaks of the plague that took place, claiming the lives of millions of people. The Black Death, a devastating global epidemic of bubonic plague, struck during the mid-1300s. The plague killed more than 20 million people in Europe, almost one-third of the continent’s population.

Pandemic have been a recurring part of human history for centuries. Pandemic such as The American Plague, the Great Plague of London, the Great Plague of Marseilles, the Russian Plague, the Yellow Fever of Philadelphia, The Flu Pandemic, the Spanish Flu, the Asian Flu, and the Swine Flu Ebola (originated in bats, spreading since 1976, has no cure) Zika Virus (spreads through the mosquitoes and is lethal for the unborn child), have caused widespread mortality and societal disruption.

COVID-19

The first reported case of COVID-19 was recorded on December 31 in Wuhan, China. The novel Corona-virus disease (COVID-19) was declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO) on March 11, 2020 (World Health Organization, 2020b). Since its identification in a wet market in Wuhan, China, globally, as of 15 November 2021, there have been 253,163,330 confirmed cases of COVID-19, including 5,098,174 deaths, reported to WHO.

With each pandemic, human beings have been seen to emerge stronger than before. Human beings have adapted and also shown their capacity by being adept at the new circumstances and handling the situation at hand. The pandemic has had several deeply disturbing effects on the mental health of individuals, including heightened levels of anxiety, fear, depression, stress, and a profound sense of solitude.

The pandemic has rendered the individual anxious of what the future holds in store, the fear of the unknown lurking behind the stillness that has settled all over the world. Man is a social animal. The lockdown imposed by governments all over the world has kept human beings restricted to the four walls of their houses. There is not much of a social interaction that has kept man on the go, rendering him in a noiseless solitude. This solitude brings along a number of other mental illnesses due to the echoing emptiness, and it is a known fact that an idle mind is the devil's workshop. The uncertainty of the future instills in man an indecipherable fear. This fear, which looms over an extended period, has become the norm of day-to-day life.

The solitude and the imposed stillness all over the world have led the people to slowly deteriorate into depression. It is reported that compared with a global estimated prevalence of depression of 3.44% in 2017, the current report of 25% appears to be 7 times higher, thus suggesting an important impact of the COVID-19 outbreak on people's mental health.

The Therapeutic Nature of Art

Art, in simple terms, can be explained as a mode of expression. From time immemorial, art has been used as an inevitable medium of expression. Right from cave paintings to sculptures, from drawing to literature, from music to architecture, art has efficiently played the role of an essential companion to human beings when it comes to expression.

Later, during the technological advancements in the field of science and mental health after theorists like Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan, the role of art in mental health has found an inevitable place. Research has proven that art is a major stress relief, helps stimulate creative thinking, encourages positive self-esteem, and aids in self-introspection. Art is used as a therapy to regenerate the notion of life and life values.

Art therapy is the use of artistic expressions like drawing, painting, coloring, writing, or sculpting to express oneself and is used to decode the psychological and emotional state of the individual through the nonverbal expressions. Art therapy is used widely for children, adolescents, and adults to explore their inner selves and express themselves to treat issues of self-esteem, stress, anxiety, and depression. In simple words, art therapy is the application of visual arts in therapeutic contexts.

According to Braus and Morton, art therapy has been shown to improve mental health outcomes for people coping with addictions, anxiety, attention disorders, grief and loss, dementia, depression, eating disorders, physical illness, PTSD, trauma, relationship issues, and more (Braus and Morton).

Like art, art therapy focuses on the process of creating art and not the product thereof. The aim of art therapy is not to train an artist; rather, it aims at bringing about the inner feelings of an individual, which often feels as excruciating as talking about grief and loss. The advantages of art therapies in the context of developing mental health include self-discovery, self-esteem, emotional release, and stress relief.

Art therapy can be a tool for individuals to use as a healthy coping method of self-care and self-expression. Art therapy offers a multiplicity of benefits, including the ability to reduce feelings of isolation and alienation. It honors the inherent need of individuals to have autonomy in their expressions, creates an outlet for such expressions for individuals in times of high stress without damage to one's self, and provides deep introspection for the participant (Ceausu 209).

Role of Art and Literature during Pandemic Times

A survey was conducted in this regard by the author through Google Forms titled "The Role of Art and Literature during the Pandemic Times." Students from across the city colleges responded to questions as to how the pandemic time gave them the opportunity to reconnect with their lost connection to art. The Google form was aimed at understanding the diverse effect art and literature had on people who were artists and non-artists during this time of crisis. The questionnaire used in this study is provided at the end of the article.

When asked, Has your view of art forms changed after the pandemic?

The responses were that about 40.3% responded yes, giving a positive response, while 30.3% responded no, and 29.4% responded maybe, saying that they started seeing art and literature in a new form as an escape from reality.

Survey Responses

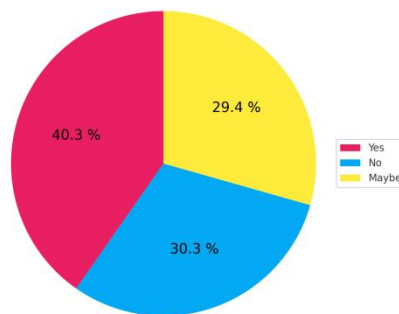


Chart 1: Has your view of art forms changed after the pandemic?

In response to the next question, participants shared that art during the pandemic served as a meaningful distraction and helped them manage stress and anxiety. When asked how much time on average you spend on art forms, about 40.7% have responded. Occasionally, about 29.6% responded as 'sometimes', 14.8% responded as 'often', and 7.4% responded 'never', and an equal percentage responded 'always'.

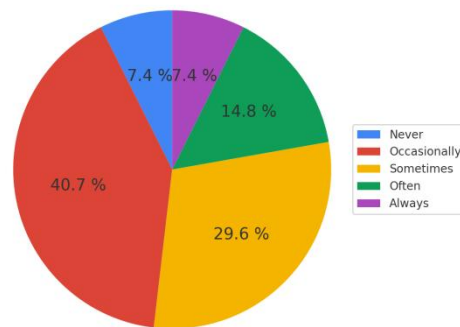


Chart 2: How much time on average you spend on art forms?

In response to the question, “How did art help you rejuvenate during the recent tough times?”, participants offered heartfelt examples illustrating the profound impact of art on their emotional well-being. Some of the responses are give below:

1. It made me relaxed and kept all the hardship out of my mind.
2. Art made me stronger. The way I expressed myself made me even more relaxed.
3. Calming down the anxiety gave me some inner peace.
4. I found both singing my heart out and writing my heart out to be therapeutic. It was such a great relief.
5. During my tough times, the art of music revived me to come out of laziness and made me a happy and active person.
6. While writing poems I feel so relaxed, and I can see my inner self, and being engaged in writing poems is one of the best parts of my life.

The respondents of this survey conducted by the author are mostly individuals from diverse fields, who are neither majoring in any art forms nor professional art practitioners. However, the responses recorded highlight how various art forms have served as powerful coping mechanisms for these amateur individuals. Art has provided them with a sense of purpose and belonging, offering emotional relief and rescuing many from the brink of depression triggered by stress and anxiety.

This survey stands as a clear evidence that the therapeutic value of art transcends professional status. Art plays a vital role in mental well-being. It acts as a stress reliever, helping individuals navigate emotional turbulence, steer clear of anxiety, fear, and negativity, and find moments of peace and clarity. During unprecedented challenges such as the COVID-19 pandemic, art has proven to be more than just a pastime but a lifeline for many. It has not only allowed people to express their emotions but also helped them process their experiences and reconnect with a deeper sense of self. This universal healing potential of art underscores its importance in times of crisis, regardless of one's background or artistic expertise.

The Role of Literature in Pandemic

Pandemic has increased the crave for literature among people. The year 2020 was the zenith of the COVID-19 crisis, with lockdowns imposed by governments across the world. The themes of most of the conferences around the world, following this period, was on the pandemic literature. Variety of papers presented during this period reflects the role of literature during this period. Right from Boccaccio's *Decameron*, *The Journal of the Plague Year* by Daniel Defoe, *The Plague* by Albert Camus, *Love in the Time of Cholera* by Gabriel Garcia Marquez, *Beauty Salon* by Maria Bellatin, *Fever 1793* by Laurie Halse Anderson, *Blindness* by Jose Saramago, *Until Oryx and Crake* by Margaret Atwood, literature has a great deal of works to offer the mankind on the pandemic literature.

The pandemic teaches mankind a lesson each time. When one reads through various works in literature that deal with pandemic time and the crisis as a whole, one understands that it is almost like a cycle, the evolution from one pandemic towards another. While reading the written records of earlier pandemics, it instills in us a sense of belonging and comfort that this shall pass away. Literature also acts as a guide to inform the readers how to handle such a situation, not necessarily the precautions but a general notion for life.

In an interview with Kanishka Gupta and Neelini Sarkar, leading psychiatrist Shyam Bhat talks about the importance of books and reading during the pandemic. When asked about the benefits of reading on the mind, he responded:

In one research study, people who read long fiction (not short fiction) had better tolerance of ambiguity and uncertainty, and an improved ability to think creatively. In an uncertain time like this, reading can help cope with the stress and also help think of creative solutions to life challenges. Reading also helps deal with isolation, by making the reader feel connected with other worlds. (Gupta)

When asked how the reading habits during the pandemic scenario are, Shyam Bhatt responds:

Significant exceptions to this: for instance, a work of nonfiction that offers relevant information about an issue that people are facing today will find resonance, such as accounts of previous pandemics, narratives of challenging times such as wars and economic uncertainty (Gupta)

Books as Medicine: The Practice of Bibliotherapy

Bibliotherapy or Reading Therapy is a therapeutic approach where a therapist prescribes books to overcome a crisis like pandemic. The word 'bibliotherapy' is derived from Greek *biblion* meaning 'Book' and *oepatteid* meaning 'Healing'. Alternative names are "biblioguidance, literary therapy, biblio-counseling and library therapeutics" (Rubin 6).

The use of literature as a healing method dates back to ancient Greece, where libraries were considered sacred spaces with curative powers. In the early

nineteenth century, physicians like Benjamin Rush and Minson Galt II began to use Bibliotherapy as an intervention technique in rehabilitation and the treatment of mental health conditions. During World Wars I and II, Bibliotherapy was also employed to help returning soldiers cope with both physical injuries and emotional trauma.

Many therapists believe that incorporating books into treatment enhances participation in therapy and may reduce recovery time, providing opportunities for deeper insight, behavioral change, and increased personal responsibility in therapy work. Research supports its effectiveness, showing positive results for those experiencing depression, anxiety, and substance dependency. Cherry in "The Ontology of a Self-Help Book" says that the Bibliotherapy creates thought patterns that are directed to transform a reader from "the negative to the positive by saying out loud dictums rather than just reading them, such as 'I am a positive person' 'I am an excellent mother/father/son etc'" (344). Reading can benefit people of all ages by increasing self-awareness, boosting self-esteem, and helping them navigate developmental crises. It has proven useful in treating depression, mild alcohol abuse, anxiety, eating disorders, and communication difficulties. Individuals dealing with family issues, post-traumatic stress, or grief may also benefit from bibliotherapy.

Conclusion:

Art and literature during the pandemic have become an inevitable part of human life. The pandemic has reinforced the idea of finding solace in art and literature, which has been the norm of the world. As art is as old as life on earth, so is its relationship with man and his mental health. Art and literature during the pandemic time have provided relief from stress, anxiety, and fear. It has played the role of a guardian, deviating the mind from falling sick during the physically testing times. It has comforted mankind with the knowledge that this has been and will be. It gives one a sense of belonging during times of isolation. Thus, art and literature have been the glimmer of hope during the dark days of the pandemic.

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Questionnaire: Google Form

<https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1TCH4ZSgyApl2UjVNis3mHi8yJCTUWVRgp1z77tmgGwI/edit?chromeless=1#responses>

Questions from the Google Forms

1. Name
2. Age
3. Gender
4. Mention your field of study or profession
5. Was your family affected with Coronavirus?
6. What is your general perspective on art forms?
7. How much time on average do you spend on creating or relishing artforms?
8. Are you an artist? If yes, which form of art is your niche?
9. How did the pandemic and the lockdown affect your relationship with art?
10. How did art help you rejuvenate during the recent tough times ?
11. How did lockdown reestablish your connection with art?