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Pandemic discourse and cultural healing

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Abstract---COVID-19 pandemic has brought new social and discursive contexts with the metaphorization and gothification of the virus for many purposes ranging from reporting to politics. This discursive reality is similar to Lawrence Buell's notion of toxic discourse. The discourse of the pandemic, like toxic discourse, is both useful and harmful in the 'risk society' that is exposed to both the infection and economic downslide. While on the one hand this discourse is integral in raising awareness and infection control measures, it also results in the monsterization of virus in press, social media and political rhetoric. This paper attempts to analyze various texts that have emerged in the backdrop of the pandemic to show how the social media humor, advertisement metaphors, masking and sanitizing of language and the serio-comic use of language have evolved as discursive strategies of the contemporary pandemic-hit society. The study also focuses on how literary/poetic use of language becomes a part of cultural healing. Linguistic and literary tropes that have mutated and evolved in the pandemic time are also analyzed.

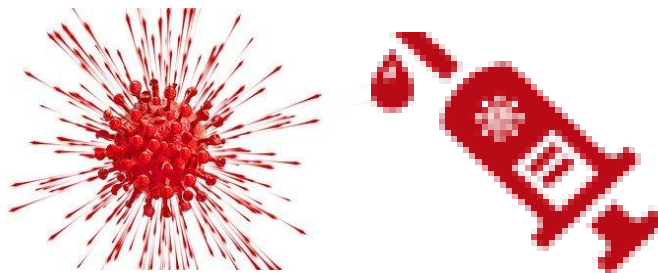
Keywords---toxic discourse, masking, sanitizing, metaphorization, gothification, tropes, healing culture, seriocomic.

Introduction

The discipline codes and restrictions imposed by the World Health Organization during COVID-19 pandemic brought about a lot of changes in the psychology of people. Online education system, work from home culture, unemployment problem for daily labourers have affected the lifestyles of all the age groups of people. Covid preventive measures like social distancing, lock down, quarantine have created imbalances in physical and psychological factors. Under these pandemic situations people have not only become conscious of their physical health but also about their mental well-being. They switched on to reading literature, watching television, listening to music and participating actively on social media.

Covid -19 crisis has put in currency a particular use of language that can be best termed as pandemic discourse which is characterized by peculiar use of metaphors and gothification of the virus. This discourse has also been instrumental in both spreading the awareness of the perils of the Coronavirus and in exaggerating to a horror-like proportion, its predicted apocalyptic potential. This discourse is similar to what Lawrence Buell identifies as toxic discourse – a discourse that at once generates awareness of environment disasters such as pollution and environmental hazards and make the language toxic and scary. Buell, while explaining the function of toxic discourse states that “toxic discourse may invoke a sense of place to call a localized collectivity into being or, if it is already self-consciously there, to raise it to a higher degree of self-consciousness (Buell,1998, p.653). He also points out that toxic discourse often results in gothification of environmental discourse: “The more toxic discourse focuses on specific cases, the more readily toxic discourse montages into gothic” (Buell 654). The fear of a poisoned world of language constructs that Buell discusses, is similar to the fear of an infected world of the pandemic-plagued society of the present times. Like in the case of toxic discourse the pandemic discourse too has its metaphoric hyperboles and gothification of the microbe that have percolated into the discourses of science, journalism, advertising and common parlance. These dimensions of the pandemic discourse have been both beneficial and detrimental to the society.

Background



The Domain of Pandemic

Title of the paper announces the contemporary significance of pandemic discourse. Pandemic is not merely a virus or a biological war or a bunch medical issues; it is also a matter of what people talk in contemporary society. By the term 'discourse' what one has in mind are its dictionary meanings, etymological sense and the evolution of its meaning in the context of Covid-19 crisis. It is also one of the objectives of this paper to produce some meanings of the term, pandemic. The word pandemic is of Greek origin in which 'pan' means all and 'demos' means people. It is an epidemic or an infectious disease that spreads worldwide. The word 'pandemic' evokes the democratic connotation in the present Covid scenario; given that it has infected people of all classes. It is connected widely with medical, political, religious, business and many more fields including law and order, and public welfare domains of the government.

Research question

How does language mutate like the pandemic virus?

1. Metaphorization of Pandemic Discourse

Metaphors are a part of this pandemic discourse. The phrases 'killer virus,' and 'war on corona' convey the essence of emergency which makes one feel that people are all probably soldiers in the war though the enemy is invisible. 'Single day spike' evokes many connotations like, the spikes of the virus and the spike in number of cases which create an alarming sense of precarity in the society. The term 'cases' no longer represent legal cases; they clearly indicate Corona cases. Another interesting phrase is 'Chinese virus' which was used by the then American President Donald Trump. This term is toxic in its nature and sense, exuding racism. On the other hand, many poets are coming up with their poignant verses on electronic media, using the pandemic as a trope. People gifted with creative sensibility are using language in a different way to indicate trans-pandemic experience during the moments of lockdown. A good instance of such sensibility is a poem titled "Lockdown in Spring" which unfolds the arrival of spring amidst the lockdown. The poet has used the words 'spring' and 'pandemic' as two different tropes which overlap and within the framework; what is very important is the return of the nature in the context of environment, " I peer, transfixed, at your / sensual, spring-heralding eyes / Thinking of the flowers that you bear / Your eyes, they invite with the seasonal thrill / And their night-like depth enchant / You lock me down again in countless, magical ways / With the promises of soft textures, fragrances and delight" (Nair, Dinesh; Unpublished). The poet here has done deftly a kind of metaphorization of one with another. The season is metaphorized into the theme of love in which love itself is metaphorized with the season. Most importantly, the whole poem is like graffiti. One is reminded of the kind of art that was common among the Jewish concentration camps during World War II. Wall, bits of papers and handy surfaces had scribbling and sketches of the Jewish prisoners. Graffiti of the dire times expresses a discourse that would help someone to survive, evoking the healing aspect of art and poetry. Culture represented by such expressions, like many other things, also heals.

Toxic Discourse

The key term 'toxic discourse' remains a little elusive because Lawrence Buell, Professor of Harvard University and one of the pioneers of ecocriticism has envisioned the concept with a touch of ambiguity. His essay spells out the features and limits of toxic discourse. Buell says that it is all about the fear of a poisoned world. He maintains that this fear is in a way integral in raising environmental and ecological consciousness. In case if this semiotics of fear exceeds, it becomes dangerous and language amplifies the already gothified sense of disaster. There is every need to mobilize this kind of discourse in the context of Coronavirus infection across the races and continents. The pandemic has given rise to racist slurs. To give a recent example, Manipuri nurses of West Bengal were the victims of racial slur, identifying them with Chine ethnicity.

Toxic discourse has mutated into pandemic discourse like the virus itself. One can extend the scope of toxic discourse to the Buell's notion of the fear of poisoned world which impacts the fields of medicine, politics, ecology, sociology, and ethics. It is highly relevant to the contemporary situation to implicate the discourse, articulating the fear of infection in a world with an awakened sense of toxic consciousness. The term 'Toxic consciousness' is slightly different from toxic discourse. Toxic consciousness also implicates the efforts to consciously make the world polluted or toxic, particularly which happens in the context of the business consciousness. A classic example of toxic rhetoric is what one can find in many speeches of Donald Trump, especially when he speaks about the immigrants, about Mexican immigrants and much recently when he started speaking about the Coronavirus as Chinese virus. What one runs into is the question of ethics of metaphors. This leads to question oneself if one is ethically correct while using metaphors about the pandemics, about the victims of pandemics, about the infected groups and so on. The purview of such a discussion is to extend this template of toxic discourse or the pandemic discourse. The anthropocentric concern about the pandemic too has to put under a scanner. It seems that humanity, (though ironically) is in a way celebrating the return of the nature with ozone layers repairing themselves on the planet. At the same time, the return of the Anthropocene focused on human beings is once again committed to the collective survival of human beings and what is to be kept in mind is that humanity is forced to maintain social distancing to check the spread of microbial species.

Viral Words in the Viral World.

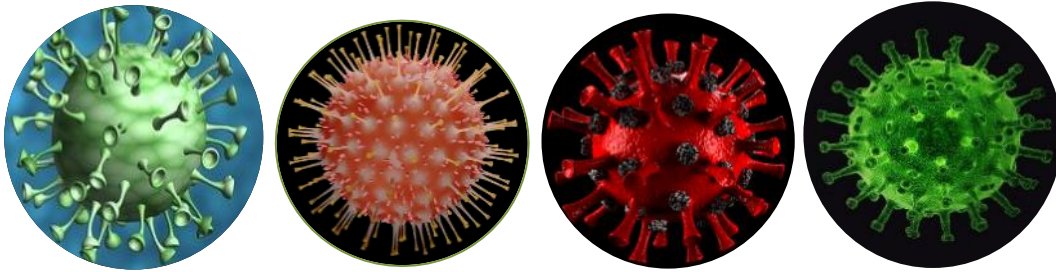
Interestingly, the contemporary world is the world of viral words as much it is the world of virus. For the last two years, what one finds is the evolution and mutation of words with new semantic contexts. A classic example is the word 'positive'. In the medical history, the word 'positive' has mutated many times. In the history of human evolution, the context of a situation like pregnancy test turning positive, has a different connotation, especially for the person who receives the result. Much later, in the wake of HIV, the word 'positive' reflected the stigma. The word 'positive' in the current situation of Covid-19 is very alarming and is a sure sign for getting quarantined. The meanings of the words in the present scenario also jump across the disciplines and domains like the virus. One

can find many similarities between the language and the virus. For instance, the word, 'zones' has been used in many disciplines. Conventionally, one finds that in geography and in related disciplines and today people use it in the context of disease control, and there are color codes set as green, orange and red zones. Similar is the case of the word 'cases.' This word too has evolved over a period of time; currently the word means the cases of Corona virus in which the infection, quarantine and recovery are all implicated by the term cases. When one considers the primary term 'toxic discourse' in the context of the Coronavirus pandemic, one might have to assess whether it is an era where the language really matters because some argue that discourse becomes less effective when health and economy are often jeopardized. On the other hand, it can also be maintained that the discourse really matters because the words have healing power. Words are also important in an era where one finds misrepresentation of people who are infected. Misinformed discourses about Covid-19 vaccines are going rounds. It is also to be noted that the pandemic discourse has also given humanity the scope to think about planetary apocalyptic vision triggered by a microbial episode. Virus is very often exaggerated of the public health issues. Exaggeration in terms of the news and the voice-over about the shortage of hospital beds, isolation wards and medicine testifies this point. In this sense pandemic discourse is very similar to what the holocaust discourse was. Perhaps it is the fear or the anxiety of survival that reminds one of the German Sociologist Ulrich Beck who coined the term 'Risk society'. Beck in his analysis of modern life says whether one lives in poverty or with a lot of amenities, one shares the same risk in the modern world. He also talks about this immiseration, the economic impoverishment of the world that has happened because of many mindless interventions with nature. Beck's term can be invoked in the discussion on pandemic discourse or toxic discourse. Beck points out that poverty is hierarchical but smog, which stands for pollution, is democratic. It is pertinent to examine whether the pandemic is democratic or hierarchical. Humanity is also in a way threatened at this pandemic-induced toxic discourse, largely by the sense of helplessness. The world of scientific knowledge has been largely unable to estimate the lethal consequences of the virus and these consequences include forced migration and even death. Toxic discourse also gets extended in the media, not merely in the social media but also the visual media.

Mask has emerged as an important trope in pandemic discourse. Masks filter all kinds of viruses so is the use of humor of mask that filters the alarms. Toxic discourse gets refracted through media, through a bit of visuals, the toxicity and the alarm get a little diluted but nonetheless they remain. It is also generally accepted that a healthy environment is necessarily for the healthy economy. The current economic crisis is the result of human intervention with the environment. People have understood that for the malls to run, movies to continue, to have a very good shopping experience, a healthy environment is mandatory. So this is the positive side of pandemic discourse, that is underlines the need for a healthy environment. What one also finds in the society in the language communities is this toxic discourse or pandemic discourse mounting into gothic. Toxic discourse recognizes the physical environment of human beings as not holistic, spiritual or biotic but as a network of many networks. This very idea that everything is connected to everything else gains more significance in it. Barry Commoner's idea gains currency in the pandemic context. Today, one needs to look at the role of

language in creating the toxic or viral anxiety, assuming that language can alleviate the crisis, that language has healing power.

Monsterization of COVID-19



Monetization of COVID-19 is another discursive reality; one would rather say that Coronavirus is term with spikes and spikes being another trope in this whole discourse. Spikes to get attached, sharp spikes that can hurt, and spikes that would not let go – Coronavirus is there to stay for some time and what is happening in a number of memes and number of social media messages is that the words get associated with the visual allegories of death and doom in plentiful and some of them are used in a serio-comic way though not as black humor. Very often the gothification of virus happens with the exaggeration of the public health issues. Gothification in the news is about shortage ICUs, insufficient oxygen dispensers, cramped mortuaries and queues in crematoriums. Metaphorization amplifies the death deal. Death-dealing is the power of the virus. Death-dealing power is in terms of that at one stage one would feel that a brand like Lifebuoy does not make hand wash anymore but produces virus killers, virus fighters; that is how the gothification has happened in the world of commercials. While on one hand one feels threatened by the pandemic discourse on the other hand one is also involved in sanitizing the language because language, to some extent, can heal and cure.

Hyper sanitized Language

The whole disease control lexicon that goes around human beings has hyper-sanitized approach. For instance, the term 'social distancing' is better and less hurtful than the word 'isolation'. The affected patients are isolated and the unaffected are into social distancing. Covid-19 crisis has sensitized people to language more judiciously. A classic example is the term 'guest workers' for 'migrant workers' as it gives agency for the workers along with respect, while 'migrant workers' is a term that evacuates the agency, selfhood and self-respect of the workers. Ideally one should also be cleaning and disinfecting the language of sexism, species, and racism. Racism need not be a prejudice practiced across countries or continents; it can be felt within a nation. A few months there was a report of a group of Manipuri nurses who decided to leave West Bengal because they were victims of racial prejudice, of being called chinks and accused of as the carriers of Coronavirus

One of the tropes that one can refer here is mask. Language is also masked which

is more about the filtering one's expressions. It is more that it filters out than filters in. It is more about filtering the virus or hurtful expressions. To cite an example of filtered language are the expressions of W.H.O ever since the outbreak of this pandemic. Dr. Tedros Ghebreyesus, W.H.O. chief, has been very categorical and mindful in the use of language. Even when there was outbreak as early as November 2019 in China, he was not in a hurry to name this outbreak as a pandemic. He, in fact delayed the use of the keyword 'pandemic' for quite some time because he knew that it would trigger the panic. Instead, he kept on using terms such as 'threat' and 'potential' until 11th March 2020. This strategy shows how a responsible official international health organization should be using the language and sanitizing it keep toxic alarm away.

Serio-Comic Discourse of the Pandemic

One also finds a serio-comic use of language in abundance and this is not definitely the conventional black humour that one associates with existentialism and post-world war pessimism. This is more of serio-comic metaphorization where there is more fun in using the metaphors and figures of speech, particularly so are the words and the expressions that one finds in the memes and boards on the pandemic. A board was displayed at Grace Bretheren church in Virginia which might apparently look like a bit of black humour. The text goes like this, "Six feet apart today is better than six feet under tomorrow". The very popularity of this board is that subsequently this was taken up by many churches and they had put up this board at many different places for public to understand that even religion can wait and that one need not rush to show one's allegiance to God. Covid-19 memes too have this serio-comic catharsis. They make people feel less burdened by the toxic discourse. This kind of humorous leads to some interesting questions: What is the core of humour? What is the core of this laughter? Is it that we laugh at what we cannot endure, or do we laugh our way back to Samaritan life? These are some questions which come up in one's while the netizens are involved in immense amount of creative humor with a large number of memes that have emerged – anything from toilet paper crisis (not in India) human-animal role reversals. Number of these memes and humorous messages that have come up went viral and they helped people in many ways. Some of the memes which are in essence, the serio-comic metaphorization, also in many ways, helped to think of their own situations in a less toxic way.

Metaphors in an Era of Pandemic



Visual and verbal metaphors have also been used abundantly. A meme comes up in seriocomic tone. It is in the form of a health tip: 'Spread chili powder on your hands, it does nothing against but you learn fast not to touch you face'. It is to be noted that people do alarmed with the amplified image of red chilies which symbolize danger.



What one finds in the pandemic discourse is a huge spectrum of metaphors on one hand and on the other hand the celebration of new heroes in the society. Surprisingly, cricketers and film stars are not the heroes but the health workers, the police and the Municipal staff are the heroes and soldiers. To be specific, the doctors and nurses working round the clock are at higher risk and hence celebrated. Police in disciplining the people on the roads and in enforcing mask in public places have gained heroic status. Municipal employees in conducting the Covid tests by collaborating with the health center, in providing the statistical data to the government, sending the positive cases to quarantine centres, and spraying disinfectants on the roads have gained hero-like status. Municipal workers also take the responsibility of cremation of the mortal remains accumulated in the mortuaries. Doctors, nurses, police and Municipal workers metaphorically represent the Demi Gods. On the other hand, the people who break the social distancing rules are termed as 'traitors'. It is also interesting to see, for instance, car manufacturers implicating social distancing; the circles in Audi logo are spaced out to indicate this message. However, this metaphor-laden discourse is not without politics; it impacts international relations and human rights along other Covid related issues. So many politicians in India, in the US and the Western world have been calling for unconditional compliance and patriotism. Trump's very coinage that it is 'Chinese virus' is an indication of his expectation of a pandemic based polarization of the world.

Cultural Healing

The aesthetic sense, Nature and native culture have shown great healing power, promoting positive attitude. Cultural production, cultural texts, films, poetry, drama, and narratives are proving largely helpful in healing process. Infection and cure will lead to literary focus on trauma and rehabilitation – trauma not merely caused by the virus but the trauma of the migrant workers, of amazing stories of them travelling more than 1500 kms and also of the grave diggers,(these grave

diggers are not the grave diggers of Hamlet) the ones who have the responsibility of burying or cremating, on an average 150 corpses, on a single day under pressure. It can strongly be believed that art and humor are more like normalizing gestures during such a time.

One of the interesting literary exercises is to go back to archives to see whether one can read certain texts to make the present pandemic situation more bearable so that one use literature in tiding over the crisis. *Cure at Troy* is a play by the great Irish poet and writer Seamus Heaney which has an interesting contextual relation to the pandemic. *Cure at Troy* is a re-rendering of Sophocles' Greek tragedy on Philoctetes who was a disabled archer who was in a way forced to fight on behalf of Grecians against Trojans. He gets miraculously healed. The whole context is about war and the miraculous healing that is possible, "History says don't hope / On this side of the grave / But then, once in a lifetime / The longed for tidal wave / Of justice can rise up / And hope and history rhyme / So hope for a great sea-change / on the far side of revenge / Believe that a further shore / is reachable from here / Believe in miracles / and cures and healing wells" (Heaney, 1990). The extract is an instance of interesting use of metaphors; it rolls many metaphors into one – one that of poetry which cures all. The water imagery that one finds in the first part too is concerned with healing. Joe Biden, in a similar way, in his election campaign vowed to heal the country crippled by deadly pandemic and spoke about Donald Trump's 'Season of Darkness'. Biden reflects Seamus Heaney's optimistic vision in his speech when he says, "This is our moment to make hope and history rhyme. (Biden, 2020)"

Another poem, a contemporary cultural expression, is by David Simon, first published on 29th April 2020. David Simon is an Anglo Jewish poet extensively involved in writing all kinds of poetry including the digital versions. It is a very interesting poem that has meta-linguistic device of bearing a figure of speech that mutates from one to another, making boundaries and identities fluid. Interestingly the poem that explores the trope of mask is titled "Masking the Question" and it is about creating the mask to a question and also creating the question for the mask. The very idea the mask is a part of an outfit in the public domain also gets played out. This is also a piece of current social discourse that highlights the stigma of appearing in public without a mask. The poem unravels the semantic layers of mask. It is like the poem asking the question – what are we masking out and what are we masking in. The poem is also about the eventuality of coughing and whether the mask in a way saves one that situation or not and what kind of an identity that one will eventually have. The poem bombards the readers with a barrage of questions, "Will you soon be wearing / a mask on your face? / If you decide it looks out of place will you choose a design / worn with fashion and grace / or should it be considered To wear one or not // but consider the question / we have to embrace / yes, no or maybe.../ wear a mask on our face? (Simon, www.econlib.org). The poem begins with a question and ends with a question. Interestingly the syntactic question of the poem is that of interrogation. Interrogative question is one of the main features of pandemic discourse as it captures the inexplicable virus-like reality of language.

Conclusion

Pandemic discourse is a socio-linguistic reality necessitated by the Covid-19 crisis and its features include metaphorization of virus and disease, monsterization of microbes, nervous yet redemptive humour, dire poetics and the use of tropes such as mask, sanitization and contacts. Once the world is out of the pandemic situation there might emerge interdisciplinary Covid studies, pandemic studies and so on. Academia will also initiate the study of poetry and narratives and there is also a possibility of new genres coming in literature which will open huge number of interdisciplinary research in infection, cure and survival.

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