

Literature, Language and Technology in the Time of COVID-19

COVID-19 has assumed the character of much more than a medical crisis since it was declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization earlier this year. It has been described as a social, political and economic crisis. Likewise, the scale of the pandemic has also invited reflections on culture and literature, and the related fields of language and technology. In literature, for example, what has been highlighted is how writing about plagues – plague literature – is not a new phenomenon and plagues’ themes have attracted some of the best writers in both the Western and Urdu canons. In the Western canon from the classic *The Decameron* by Boccaccio and *A Journal of the Plague Year* (1722) written by Daniel Defoe about the Black Death in London to lesser-known works like Alessandro Manzoni’s Italian classic *The Betrothed* (182); and the modern plague fictions like Camus’ *The Plague* (1947) and Saramago’s *Blindness* (1995). In the subcontinent’s literature, there is a rich treasure of writings beginning from Urdu classics like Deputy Nazeer Ahmad’s *Taubatun-Nusooh* [The Penitence of Nusooh], with cholera-infested Delhi as the backdrop and those in Punjabi with the background of the Spanish flu epidemic a hundred years ago, to more modern depictions of epidemics like Hasan Manzar’s novella *Vabaa* (Epidemic) and literature (mostly poetry) regarding the Coronavirus, writers have wrestled and are wrestling with the question of social and moral order and how literature can help better imagine and anticipate a post-COVID-19 world.

Like literature, the question of language is also fundamental to thinking and responding to the challenges of COVID-19. More specifically how the preservation of mother languages and their literatures will be affected by the onslaught of COVID-19. Related to the question of preservation or mother languages is the issue of technology since this will be necessary if one is to mull the question of the future of mother languages amidst a pandemic. Experiences and comparisons from the past and present will be utilized to reflect on this question. Two presentations would cover the past world/Urdu fiction, while two other presentations would deal with the literary responses and impact of technology in the time of COVID-19.

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