

Implications of Literature in Our Life: During Situations Like COVID-19

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ABSTRACT

There is no forked opinion about literature playing a significant role in our life; during the time period of lockdown/quarantine due to COVID-19, its implication became much more relevant for people from all walks of life. Thus, be it times of COVID-19 or any time, literature has its implications in various ways: reflective, motivational, cautionary and preventive, with endless possibilities which can be explained with some powerful examples – the immortal characters who left their prints in the world through their stories. The paper examines how Bertha Mason from Charlotte Bronte's Jane Eyre and the Monster from Mary Shelly's Frankenstein provide a cautionary note on seclusion/social isolation and detrimental effects of rejection from society, whereas Vilie from Easterine Kire's When the River Sleeps provides a contrast to it; Anne Frank in The Diary of A Young Girl makes known the impending threats in situations like confinement/lockdown and guides to combat real life situations.

KEY WORDS: *Lockdown, Motivational, Preventive, Literature, COVID-19, Importance of Reading*

Literature is an integral part of our life. A very interesting thing about literature is that it's not only the reflection of a society in a context as a product but also greatly affects, moderates and somehow shapes its consumers. In that light, literature is a multi-faceted agent that has been present in human society since time immemorial. There has been an ocean of literature and one life time is not possible for a mortal being to be able to cover up the entire literature that exists in the world. Moreover, in this globalised world, especially in 21st century where technology and internet has taken over the world, literature is not bound by and limitation in terms of linguistic medium or availability as translations and e-books/soft copies happen to be easily available even if it's not possible to get hold of a concrete copy.

Due to lockdown the majority of the people spent more of their time at reading (fiction in particular, in various forms such as novels, stories or comic strips) be it online or the hardcopy, or in watching movies/drama/shows on TV or phones. Amazon India conducted a survey and the statistics revealed that there was an incredible increase in the habit of reading in the new stay-at-home lifestyle as there was 25% increase in new consumers from non-metro cities besides the old ones who have a passion for reading. Considering it as a favorable hint for increasing readership, it's not wrong to say that "the 'new normal' includes a healthy habit of reading for many who hitherto rarely picked up a book. Also, according to a statistical report by Statista about the most common activities done by people in India during lockdown time period, watching movies/dramas/videos on OTT platforms held second place with 48% preceded by household chores with 59%. Under the heading "COVID-19 lockdown activities in India 2020" published by [Sanyukta Kanwal](#) on Oct 18, 2021, the results of a survey was shown to affirm an increase in the engagement of household chores as a result of the corona virus (COVID-19) lockdown across India during April 2020. Activities like watching movies and TV shows online, doing exercise at home and having face-time (video calls) with family and friends, were some other popular activities reported in the survey.

The enormous internet facility has enabled us to have an access to never exhausting sources and reading material. And, luckily for almost every prosaic text (be it a story, an essay, a myth or even scriptures), a **visual text** is available – either in the form of a video or animation or a movie or drama, not to mention the endless pictures/images available online for the same. The former explicitly comes under the category 'literature' whereas the latter also is an aspect of literature in a subtle and significant way since both the genera have tremendously collided and intermingled with each other. So, it will not be an exaggeration to say that these days more than reading, we are actually watching literature. Hence, we are constantly feeding ourselves with literature in different forms! And, we become what we read or what we watch or what we observe and learn from it. From time to time the world has witnessed such glorious as well as horrible events that have left a mark for centuries and will continue to do so. For instance, if 20th century was marked by two horrendous world wars which still can give a shiver to one in our so-called civil societies of every nation that exists, the 21st century has already been marked by the COVID-19 pandemic which broke out in 2020 from Wuhan (China) and gripped the whole world leading to an apocalypse kind of situation where there were lock-downs and almost everything had shut down at one point of time. The lockdown that was enforced on 25th of March, 2020 for 21 days is said to be the largest in the world that restricted 1.3 billion people, and later got extended until 3rd of May,

2020. Though afterwards the situation restored back to normal, and pandemic experience of life in lock-down became a nightmare like memory, the story isn't over and the virus keeps coming back and forth in forms of variants. Nevertheless the humans also have gradually developed a counter defence mechanism in the form of vaccines, it's not as scary as it was at first. Yet, again another variant of COVID is at surge as stated by WHO, since December 2022, and how the situation unfolds (or what happens in the distant future) is still a matter of uncertainty. But, how much we have known, witnessed, experienced, learned and have been cautious about various aspects of the situation is a matter of concern.

LOCKDOWN, which is almost synonymous to 'forced seclusion or isolation' has been a situation which we all witnessed and which greatly affected our lives. As per the definitions of the word in the Merriam Webster dictionary, lockdown is "an emergency measure or condition in which people are temporarily prevented from entering or leaving a restricted area or building during a threat of danger" or/and "a temporary condition imposed by governmental authorities (as during the outbreak of an epidemic disease) in which most people are required to refrain from or limit activities outside the home involving public contract (such as dining out or attending large gatherings)" (Merriam-Webster Dictionary). What we faced in 2020 during COVID-19 was the last mentioned case in which lockdown was put as a safety measure in case of pandemic that the world was facing at that time. Suddenly the whole world was shut, the public places and the streets and roads were deserted as everyone was confined within their four-walls. It wasn't forced one, it wasn't volunteered one, it was something that was the only thing to do at that time as nobody had any idea what else can be done at that time. The world had only two options: either follow lock-down, or, the infection is inevitable and so is the death. Because people fear the unknown the most and Corona virus was unknown at that time, so, people were in lockdown. But that's not as simple as said. There were different conditions and situations. Whereas many people were in lockdown inside their houses along with their families, at the same time some were in lockdown away from their homes and families and had no idea whether they would ever be able to return to their homes and see their loved ones or not because the situation as well as lockdown was indefinite. At the same time there were many of the people who were not only away from their dear ones but also were confined in their apartments alone, away from their kin and having no such connections for which anybody would risk their safety or life and would accompany them. Sadly it was a time when people were apprehensive even of their relatives. So much fear was there that if it's not own family-member then nobody else is worth risking their life for, no matter how near or dear a relative or friend might be, a neighbor was a far thing to take such a great risk for.

Now why the lockdown becomes crucial is due to various factors - you are confined within the four walls, no social life, excessive screen time as there are very limited resources of entertainment or passing the time. No mental simulation or satisfaction that our social life gives us. Moreover, if one got confined in an apartment alone, due to various factors, especially the working professionals, staying alone, far from their families and any other relatives and not having many friends or associates in their personal life, far from their hometowns, in a distant different city/locality, for them the experience was again totally different and more risky. A social animal, completely deprived of that minimum social dose,

absolutely secluded and desolated, happens to be at a greater risk to lose the mental wellbeing and become a victim of various psychological, mental and physiological disorders.

When we turn to literature as a guide to get some instances to know, to understand and to apply in life as safety measures, like to have preventive or remedial options to have optimum control over the situation, the literature doesn't fail us. Bertha Mason (the mad woman in the novel *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Bronte) presents to us the undesired picture of what a person might turn into if they slightly ignore and underestimate the impact of isolation and being cut off from social surroundings as it was the case during those days when social-distancing was of utmost urgency (during surge of Corona); especially those stranded individuals stuck alone on their own who were away from their families and kin. Much vulnerable in case of students or the young budding minds, afraid how would they cope up with this forced isolation mentally, emotionally and physically. Same warning is given by the Monster of *Frankenstein* (by Mary Shelley). This one applies more to the people who in the beginning of pandemic tested positive for COVID-19 and were struggling for acceptance by others which was as unlikely to happen as in the Monster's case. So, the stigma, rejection and mental suffering that came along in such circumstances, can be understood better, and we can be less cruel to such victims only if we become a bit more conscious and empathetic. Then we have the character of Vilie from Easterine Kire's *When the River Sleeps* who himself chose a life of seclusion by staying in the forest and calling 'forest as his wife' but he also faced times when the loneliness haunted him and how he overcomes it. Lastly, learning from the first-hand account of the same circumstances by Anne Frank, which she recorded in *The Diary of A Young Girl*, if we do not be careful about how we deal with such situation and preserve the present resources for future, then quite soon we might find ourselves in a condition of starving, economic bankruptcy and struggling for essential necessities.

The character of Bertha Mason, from Charlotte Bronte's famous novel *Jane Eyre* (1847) is an apt example of repercussions of social isolation. In the novel, Bertha Antoinette Mason is a mysterious character about whom the protagonist Jane Eyre gets to know about Bertha Mason from Edward Rochester only, after the incidents of Bertha putting the wedding veil on fire. Turns out that the violently insane mad woman, who was kept locked in the attic on third floor in Thornfield Hall, due to "intellectual disability that ran in (Mason) family" (Bertha Mason, Wikipedia), who's quite violent, aggressive and thus, 'dangerous', was none other than Mr. Rochester's first wife. Nonetheless in the novel the mad woman is taken care of by making her disappeared from the life of other characters as she dies after throwing herself off the roof, which enables her husband to remarry whomever he likes to since as long as she was alive, her husband Edward Rochester was not able to divorce her on account of her insanity. After Bertha's death Rochester got married with Jane and there's a 'happy ever after' ending. The character of Bertha Mason has always drawn the attention of intellectuals who don't believe in how things look at the surface as the account of the mad woman's story was given by her husband only which surely is subjective and partial, as she got no voice in the novel many attempts have been done on part of others to bring justice to the character, such as the parallel novel *Wide Sargasso Sea* by Jean Rhys (1966) which tells Antoinette's side of the story to account for how she ended up in the attic, and serves as a prequel to Bronte's novel *Jane Eyre*. The main question is whether Bertha Mason was mad, violent, aggressive and dangerous that made others to confine her to the attic- secluded, completely

cut off from the world OR was it other way round, i.e. to say if she had become mad violent and aggressive because she was kept in sole confinement and deprived of least of human needs of company? Because, according to the novel *'Wide Sargasso Sea'*, Antoinette's insanity and drunkenness are the result of Rochester's misguided belief that madness is in her blood and that she was part of the scheme to have him married blindly...as Mason family wanted her off their hands as quickly as possible. Years (almost a decade) of violence, confinement in the attic and insanity completely deteriorate Bertha's looks, making her look 'savage'.

Upon the probability if it is assumed that she was forcibly thrust into seclusion which ended up in her turning into an aggressive, angry, violent and impulsive persona who by people was termed as 'mad', as per psychological studies the deprivation from minimum social interaction/exposure can lead a person to have animalistic like characteristics as "Social isolation is a known stressor that negatively impacts the well-being of social species" (Gilles and Polston, 2017). Individuals "who are isolated from social support are more likely to develop mental illness and live shorter lives." (Cacioppo et al. 2006)

It is obvious that in absence of fulfilment of essential needs, a person might suffer from severe mental percussions which not only affect their mental and psychological well-being but also can cause physical as well as physiological distortions often resulting in aggressive and hyperactive responses. As Abraham Maslow argues that "the failure to have needs met at various stages of the hierarchy could lead to...psychiatric illness or mental health issues" (Maslow's Hierarchy, GoodTherapy). People whose physiological needs are not met show dangerous signs to their wellbeing as they may succumb to death or become extremely sick. Those individuals who do not feel loved or lack of belonging often develop depression or anxiety. Even the lack of self-esteem also may "contribute to depression and anxiety"(Maslow's Hierarchy, GoodTherapy).

Why the character of Bertha Mason is important, relevant and crucial for us in the present context is to warn us against the utmost atrocities a person can face if met with same circumstances like hers, especially what was experienced in situation like lockdown.

In the same manner the another example to cover another aspect of life during COVID times can be found in Mary Shelley's novel *'Frankenstein'*. The novel uses the theme of isolation and the characters' emotions throughout the novel develop the message of friendship being important and social isolation having drastic effects on one. In the novel, the character of 'Monster' faces abandonment from his creator (who created him out of an experiment), and the main cause for his abandonment was his 'scary appearance' where the monster was so ugly to look at that Frankenstein abhorred his existence. Same happens with others as whoever had a glance at the monster, either ran away screaming or attacked him by hurling whatever object came to hand. Now the heart rendering issue is the Monster's plea and complaint where he asks why he's subject to such a mistreatment; his looks are not even in his hand. Within the hideous and gigantic body of him was a heart that wanted to be loved and live amicably with others just like any normal living-creature or human being. So, the hate and mistreatment the Monster faced at the hands of other characters in the story points to the issue of social rejection where others do not include a particular individual due to some stigma (horror) but nonetheless there's no fault of that individual at all nor it's in their control to do anything about it. The same thing could be seen in case of those people who

were found to be COVID positive and the kind of treatment of being discarded and put into hospitals like in herd was meted to them, is still one of the ugliest example of people's frenzy in general where they turn so insensitive to other beings that they forget everything else and only remember that they should stay safe, no matter what. There was a viral video by a couple who were put in hospital as they tested positive, and they talked about the inhumane conditions like no drinking water, no proper food, nobody to listen to their complains, as if they were just left out there to meet their end irrespective of how normal or fine they were feeling. It was same like "he (Adam) was allowed to converse with and acquire knowledge from beings of superior nature; but I was wretched, helpless and alone" (Shelly, p. 105). The fear of being stigmatised on being COVID positive echoes in the remark made by the Monster where he states- "these amiable people to whom I go, have never seen me and know little of me. I am full of fears, for if I fail there, I am an outcast in the world forever." (Shelly, chapter-15)

Monster is forced into isolation due to the hate and resistance and fear he gets from the human he comes in contact with. He begins to hate himself and feels that he will never fit into society because of his horrible appearance.

The kind of stigma that got attached with testing positive to COVID-19, especially in the initial phases, gave rise to the same feeling of isolation and desertion to those who got filtered by COVID test. Even in future there might be some other circumstances or different causes due to which one might go through the same feeling of 'left out' or 'deserted'. Because no matter what, who why or how, but, the emotions and feeling those emotions in same way is what makes human beings human despite all the differences. "When I looked around, I saw and heard none like me. Was I then a monster, a blot upon the earth, from which all men fled, and whom all men disowned?" (Shelly, p. 95)

It might be due to some accident or some disease or some incident or some natural infirmity but there are times when it's common to feel what Victor felt - "This state of mind preyed upon my health...I shunned the face of man; all sound of joy or complacency was torture to me; solitude was my only consolation...deep, dark, deathlike solitude". (Shelly, p. 61) Isolation or the feeling of isolation can be caused by a variety of factors. it can be due to mental/physical disabilities, ageing, health problems or cultural differences. But, instead of being judgmental, one ought to be empathetic towards the victim as well as one for his/her own sanity needs to ensure to fall prey to circumstances or thoughts which may harm their sanity, and do their best to keep their mental health intact.

In contrast the literature provides us examples of motivation also to fight against the odds and do not become the victims to the negative forces that try to overpower us. Vilie from Kire's *When the River Sleeps* (2014) presents the example of the same.

Vilie is the protagonist of the novel who 'had spent twenty-five of his forty-eight years' (Ch.1) in the forest. Even despite his mother's constant requests (when she was alive) to marry and have children, he didn't settle down, in fact he chose to stay as he was: having a shed in the forest where he had constructed an additional room to it in case there were extra guests (groups of hunters), being guardian of the *gwi* (the great mithuns) in the region (appointed by his clan), official protector of the rare tragopan (appointed by The Forest Department). He never felt the need to settle down to an ordinary life of having a wife and kids and stay in the village like it's common. The forest was his home and "the forest was no

place for a woman and children" (Ch.1). He had firmly chose his way of life and even his aunts who always persisted him to get married had already given up on idea of him marrying because they had understood that even dying without having an heir to carry forward his name to next generations wouldn't make him change his decision. This was the kind of determinism Vilie had. He was content with his life.

Though, back in time when he was in his teens he liked the girl Mhechuseno (Seno) who liked him back and cared for him, even the villagers were sure they would be a suitable match to each other, but unfortunately when he was eighteen, Seno died an *atopia* (ominous) death. When she had come to forest to gather herbs with her two friends, a spirit from an orchid tree followed her home making her fall sick. Finally that "tall, dark man" (the spirit) which couldn't be seen by others overpowered her and she died. She couldn't be buried in the village as per *Angami* custom, belief and tradition. Her family members and villagers noticed "someone had been leaving flowers at the lonely little grave" (Ch.1) for many months until Vilie started making forest as his home by spending more and more time and left village. So, his inclination to the forest and his decision not to get married is quite understandable.

But why Vilie's character is relevant to us in this context because his character portrayal is not unrealistic. Vilie made a tough decision and spent twenty-five years of his life in the forest but during that period there were times "when nothing could touch him except that great loneliness" (Ch. 2). There even moments of trial when this loneliness was hard to bear and "(t)he sense of isolation was almost enough to make him abandon his life in the forest and return to the village."(Ch. 2)

He terribly missed the life back in village, the simple and ordinary things like children playing, fetching water in their little water-pitchers, women cooking evening meals in their traditional hearths, the farmers chanting melodious songs in traditional way to lighten their toilsome labour, and people joyously heading towards home from work to have their meals and rest. He even faced existential crisis and questioned himself whether he was choosing this terrible loneliness for the rest of his life and if so, then why? He could always go back to the village and live a normal life, nobody would stop him then why doesn't he go back and why he still is living in the forest having a wretched life? He had no obligation to stay in the forest, he was 'not indispensable' from his duties of protecting gwi and tragopans as somebody else could be appointed for the same, but what stopped him was his own conscience. When again the feeling of loneliness crept in, he thought to himself:

"The forest is my wife, and perhaps this is what marriage is like; with periods when a chasm of loneliness separates the partners leaving each one alone with their own thoughts groping for answers". (Ch.2)

These thoughts calmed his mind and he felt at peace and clear in his head. This self-realisation of Vilie is what makes his character so relevant to us that we can look up to him and find courage to overcome our disturbing thoughts and moments of self-doubt. The motivational words go like-

"Perhaps the answer lies not in striving, but in being. In simply accepting that the loneliness would never be eliminated fully, but one could deal with it by learning to treat it like a companion and no longer an adversary. ...it was not a hankering after her (Seno's death) that brought on this loneliness. It was just a part of being human." (Ch.2)

It was after this realisation that he became wiser and more spiritually mature. Not that after this also the feeling or attacks of loneliness disappeared, but he had found a way. The next day when the same feeling of loneliness was creeping in his mind, he gathered his item he needed for a long journey and set out for his epic enterprise - the mission to find 'the sleeping river' which the novel depicts in next chapters. so, this is how when stuck with the same negative thoughts and feeling which might be quite upsetting and detrimental for our mental wellbeing, we should try to calm our mind with reasonable thoughts like Vilie did, and still if it persists then we have to choose our enterprise that would give us a goal, an aim, an ambition for which we are born. We need to find that and utilise our creative powers in realising that purpose. Whether in normal times or in situation like COVID or lockdown or anything, we must get ourselves positively engaged in some pursuit so that unnecessary negative emotions don't creep in because "idle hands are the devil's workshop" (Wiktionary) - says a famous proverb.

Another role that literature play is as 'the mirror to the past' where it can be seen as referential to look at present to have a better solution/strategy to deal with the situation at hand. *'The Diary of A Young Girl'* by Anne Frank needs no introduction as it's a celebrated text- the account of a young girl while she was in hiding for two years with her family during the Nazi occupation of the Netherlands, and noted down her experiences in her diary without even a hint that later it would get published and not only will be read by millions of people but also will become a part of the syllabi in various educational institutes. The backdrop of the Nazi environment and its predicaments that the Jews had to face, and how the 14 year old girl describes the horrific conditions of life in hiding (to escape being brutally killed by Nazis) is not only about a specific period of time, but, quite universal and beyond-time as the suffering, emotions, actions, reactions, circumstances and experiences are 'human' in nature, beyond any age, identity or any demarcation that may divide human beings from one another. The book is not only a subjective and objective description of concrete and abstract life around, but also the impressions and remarks catering to the wisdom that human beings hold in themselves naturally, irrespective of age, make it relevant in all times of past, present and even future also.

From time to time human beings in history have witnessed the phases where people have suffered man-made or natural disasters from time to time, where it takes place on a large scale as far as the people being affected is concerned. Just like the world-wars was such a case, the pandemic of COVID-19 also was the similar case where the whole world on a global level faced and felt the heart-wrenching scenario of mass deaths, lockdown and what not.

The Phases of Lockdown also can be described consisting of 3 stages much similar to the life described by Anne Frank in hiding. STAGE – 1 can be described as the phase of excitement and fun as the idea itself of being secluded to four-walls, cut-off from outside world happens to be so off-the-routine that it seems to be a kind of adventure. As Anne describes their arrival at the "Secret Annex." The entry in the diary dated 11 July 1942 states that their rooms were overcrowded with boxes and all of their stuff. She and her dad cleaned the place up and improved the blackout curtains so nobody would get to know that they were there at night.

The second stage, i.e. STAGE – 2, can be called as moderate one with gradual severity when the excitement of the beginning sets aside and boredom starts to set in. On economic front,

since the access/reach to goods, products and services was not like before the lockdown, the decreasing provisions, in many cases, presented the scenario of hardships to people. As mentioned by Anne Frank in her diary, "everybody is sick of eating beans, which is *all* they've been eating" (The Diary of Anne Frank, 12 March 1943).

Besides on financial or economic aspect, as per the human tendencies, even interpersonal issues start surfacing out in such conditions. Like described in the book, "predictably, when eight people are cramped into a small space, they stop getting along. And pretty quickly, too. For example, Mrs. van Daan is angry that *her* dishes have to be used instead of Mrs. Frank's" (The Diary of Anne Frank, 2 September 1942).

The final stage or the STAGE – 3 would be of CRISIS (the End), but fortunately situation didn't reach to that point, at least for all the people and all the places that faced the lockdown. After some months of complete lockdown there were times when situation was made relaxed as it was also necessary otherwise people would have succumbed to dying of scarcity of provisions and deprivation of necessities than the Corona Virus. It's not hard to imagine a situation where "the food situation is getting worse. They're eating spinach or lettuce for lunch and rotting potatoes" (The Diary of Anne Frank, 27 April 1943) or in worst scenarios "food is so scarce that the Secret Annex members are now resorting to eating rotten food" (The Diary of Anne Frank, 14 March 1944). Nonetheless there could have been a stage where "everything (and everyone) is dirty. Clothes are falling apart, sheets go unwashed, and clothes are too small" (The Diary of Anne Frank, 2 May 1943). So, this could have been the situation at present or might be in future, because it has been in past. What we can do is-being aware of the past, we can stay ready and best prepared in the best manner for any such unwanted calls where the normalcy of life is halted and hard times grip us in some confinement like lockdown.

One must learn from the history (fictional in this context but reflecting real life situations that we face) and do something to prevent ourselves or others from falling into depression – the biggest threat to our sanity or mental health, caused by CORONA Virus or any other calamity. One must be more sensitive and empathize with people feeling rejected, locked in/out, and forsaken, to let them feel that they're not alone in the hard times. And, one must be more careful about how we act at present, to preserve for future and survive with our best capabilities. This acquisition of knowledge, understanding and wisdom is the gift of the literature that it has got to bestow on us.

What literature does is broadens our horizon of knowledge and opens up to us the various worlds, lives and experiences that we may not have experienced firsthand. As one life is not sufficient to know everything and experience everything by oneself, learning from various examples of instructions, warnings, mistakes, solutions which are given to us by various characters in different literary pieces, is the privilege that we miss out due to ignorance. Learning from what we have known, all we can do is - be more humane in our present while living the life, more sympathetic, empathetic and sensitive with other living being as we have no idea what one is going through mentally or emotionally in a world where almost everyone is struggling with something that they may not speak about; and lastly, let us be more wise and intelligent in dealing with the issues especially in the times when the human beings are suffering on a large scale as a larger community. What we explored in this paper is just a few

examples, a few characters from selected works, but we can see that they have got a lot of incredible life-lessons to offer, that if we can learn from them, then we can acquire an amazing insight to look into things in a much broader perspective and surely can handle tough situations in life in a better way. There's much more out there in the literary world which is full of ample potential to bring out significant changes in our life, only if we explore, grasp their significance and allow ourselves to be wisely taught and be moulded by the invaluable life-lessons they propose. This is the ever present and ever relevant larger-than-life implication of literature in our lives ever and forever.

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