

Narratives of Isolation and Pessimism: A Barthesian Reading of Selected Pakistani Short Stories written during COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract: *Pandemic fiction is generally regarded as the representation of individuals' responses to crisis and the restructuring of societal norms. In this respect, the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on people's lives have been depicted in various ways across the world. The writings of Pakistani authors during COVID-19 pandemic are informed by the themes of isolation, uncertainty, and pessimism. The Stained-Glass Window (2020) is one of the literary works written during the early lockdown, portraying the anxiety and stress that the authors experience. This article critically analyzes three selected short stories from the anthology through the lens of Barthes' Theory of Five Codes (1974) to argue that the texts of the stories about the pandemic are rich with these themes of isolation, fear and hopelessness. The codes highlight the said themes embedded in multiple ways within the text which are illustrated through proairetic, hermeneutic, semantic, symbolic and cultural codes. Its significance lies in the investigation of a phenomenon of authorial perspectives that holds prominence in the field of qualitative literary analysis. The approach and findings both contribute to the field of humanities in the sense that the latter supports the amalgamation of literature with science while the former extends the scope of narrative theory.*

Introduction

The word pandemic originates from the Greek words "Pan" means all and "demos" means people (Merriam-Webster). Historically pandemics have been presented as transformative experience that entirely reshapes societies, cultural practices and individual lives (Szafranski, 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic can be viewed in comparison with the previous global pandemics commencing from the 12th century to date. The COVID-19 lockdown has profoundly affected the process of literary production and themes of the works produced during pandemic. There is a visible increase in pandemic-related narratives, adaptation of digital and self-Publishing platforms and re-conceptualization of the role of literary works in times of crisis (Smith, 2020). There is diversity of themes found in the literary works authored during COVID-19 where the pandemic is used as a lens to explore human emotions of dejection, fear as well as their resilience to the unprecedented situation. The year 2020 holds a historical significance in the history of pandemic narratives from Pakistan with the publication of a noteworthy work: *The Stained-Glass Window* (2020), promulgated by Liberty Books. This anthology of short stories presents a realistic depiction of pandemic and its multifaceted features, rendering assorted and contemporary perspectives on human existence in times of contingency. This study identifies themes of isolation, uncertainty, and pessimism in these short stories from *The Stained-Glass Window* to evaluate how the narrative structure of the

pandemic chronicles reinforces the emotional and psychological responses to isolation and pessimism in the milieu of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Research Objectives

1. To examine the themes of isolation, dejection, and pessimism in selected Pakistani short stories written during the COVID-19 pandemic through Barthes' narrative codes
2. To explore how the narrative structure of the selected short stories reinforces the emotional and psychological responses to isolation and pessimism in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic

Research Questions

1. How are the themes of isolation, dejection, and pessimism represented in the selected stories written during the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. How do the narrative codes reflect the emotional and psychological state of the characters facing isolation during the pandemic?

Literature Review

The phenomenon of pandemic is happening since ancient times (Paulus, 2023). However, the recent COVID-19 pandemic has taken place in a greatly substantial manner across the world (Davies, 2020). As an area of scholastic inquiries it makes provision for the current global health situation and progress in the domain of medical sciences. It presents the updated knowledge regarding the socioeconomic impact of pandemic on the lives of individuals. The way pandemics have affected humans varies from age to age and community to community similarly humans' response to it is not a uniform one (Arthi & Parman, 2021).

The way pandemics have occurred throughout the history similarly they have been represented in literary works offering a wealth of fictional works as a subject of interest to researchers. There is a huge body of literature available on pandemics as human race has experienced several epidemics across history. Literary scholars have always shown keen interest in pandemic fiction and the same exploration of human condition we see during COVID-19 pandemic as well. Scholars through their researches have been investigating how pandemics are represented, interpreted and contextualized in fictional narratives.

Sen and Chawla (2023) anticipating the Greek sources define pandemic as "all people disease". With the critical lens of literary analysis they argue that from the time of inception of civilization, malady, inflection and death have remained the important aspects of human life and that pandemics are a specific form of this fatal manifestation that has been seen millennium after millennium, efficaciously tormenting vulnerable human race. Pandemics have taken place across the history in diverse forms and with innumerable repercussions. The 14th century Bubonic Plague of Europe is considered one of the deadliest recorded plagues in the history of epidemics. The Spanish Influenza and HIV/Aids also contrived the enormous populace ensuing thousands of deaths across the globe (Langum, 2023).

Whenever there has been a pandemic, the authors have contributed by writing about the acuteness of the disease and the adaptation of presumed safety measures to remain safe. Social distancing and timely medical help has been demonstrated as the only to reduce the possibility of getting contaminated. According to humanistic psychology when communities and societies undergo extreme structural strain, literature containing spatiotemporal and relational features should be considered in order to comprehend the actions of individuals as historical agents (Alexander & Brown, 2021).

The collection of poems Davis (2012) has been perused for conducting analytical inquiry to investigate the shift in the thematic patterns of poem composed during the time of urgency and chaos. Uyheng (2020) analyzes selected poems from the anthology to recuperate themes of isolation and the need for love and companionship in the time of dejection. Theme of exile in home embedded in the narrative structure of the poems hints toward ordinariness of life surrounded by disaster.

According to Milanetti (2023) narrative is a significant tool for highlighting both the perceptible and inconspicuous injury incited by the current COVID-19 pandemic. Wicke & Bolognesi,

2020 in their study explore the narrative structure of the fictional and non-fictional works based on the previous pandemics and draw the comparison between the past epidemics and the current COVID-19 epidemic. The essays and stories from Western and Indian classical traditions are juxtaposed to demonstrate diverse perspective of individuals as stated by their corresponding milieu. As India and Italy got severely affected by the Corona Virus Disease and encountered health emergency, selected stories written by Indian and Italian authors are also examined. The insistence is on the regenerating and remedial power of literature throughout the time of crisis.

The narratives of the challenging times not only showcase the pain and misery but they also stimulate motivation and encouragement to make the survival possible (Basu et al., 2021). These narratives of sufferings by the victims act as a source of inspiration for multitude of people. Although these unmediated accounts collide with the commanding contrived and aggrandized exhibition of the disaster even then it reserves its value. However, subsequently "humans seem to forget about these tragic events quickly," this process of embellished presentation elaboration process is hindered by the wish to disregard (Piret, 2021). The search for the explication to the problem therefore needs equilibrium in these two contradictory notions: the desire to neglect and the compulsion to inform the people through stories to help them recall and restore. Rosenberg, Schooler & Schoenbach, 1989 argue that remembering the ones who lose the lives in pandemic is common practice worldwide. It makes no difference how much people try to disregard the reality; the epidemics affect the lives and memories in a lasting way.

Al-Shamsi (2022) treats the theme of pandemic through memoir of her own observations and reflections of Karachi city during COVID-19. Along with that she mentions the time from her childhood when her parents and grandparents witnessed the typhoid and tuberculosis outbreak in pre-partition India. She revisits the works written during the pre-partition era such as *Padamsee* (2011) and *The Pull of the Stars* by (Donoghue, 2020) where she depicts the Spanish Flu being mentioned by the authors and the unidentified infections in Ghalib's letters, Jamil Jan Kochai's *99 Nights in Logar* (2019) and epigrammatically analyzes *The Stained-Glass Window* (2020). Further she looks at traces of pandemic and its unforgettable consequences on the life of South Asians afore and after partition.

Dr. Langah (2021) applies Kate Millet's concept of internal colonization and gender-based power dynamics Dida and Devos (2006) on the selected stories from *The Stained Glass-Window* (2020) to explore cultural taboos of patriarchy and marginalization of women in the context of Pakistani society. Her research article primarily deals with the resistance of Pakistani writers against sexual politics through their presentation of strong and dynamic fictional female characters (Salam-Salmaoui, Salam, & Hassan, 2024).

The Stained-Glass Window (2020) as an anthology and selected stories from the book have been studied and explored with various perspectives but no research is available on the narrative structure of the stories. This paper explores the selected stories from *The Stained-Glass Window* (2020) with the lens of Barthes' Theory of Five Codes to highlight the themes of isolation and pessimism embedded in the text.

Methodology

The research follows qualitative literary analysis and it is an addition to the interpretivist paradigm that follows the philosophy of phenomenology by Edmund Husserl and the philosophy of hermeneutics by German philosopher Wilhelm Dithery (Eichelberger, 1989) and favors the point of view there are as many intangible realities as there are individuals who create them, and reality is socially created (Mertens, 2013). Barthes' Theory of Five Codes (1974) presented in *Sarrasine* provides the theoretical perspective with which the text has been explored. The five codes determine meaning within the narrative and add to the multiplicity of the text. The proairetic code highlights the theme through the actions and dialogues of the characters; enigma surrounding characters and their actions is depicted through the hermeneutic code, and semantic code underscores explicit and implicit meanings in the narration. The dichotomies and binary divisions within the narrative are investigated through the symbolic code, whereas cultural code is a referential code that enables the researcher to place the text within its context (Barry, 2020). All five

codes form a network of meaning that reinforces the theme (Pandey, 2021). The tool selected to analyze the texts of the selected stories is Catherine Belsey's (2013) textual analysis method. The texts of the selected stories, *The Fourth Day*, *Pandemic* and *Motorcycle* have been analyzed by the application of Barthes' codes. The primary source of the data is the text of the stories and Barthes' Narrative Theory of Five Codes (1974). The latter is used to interpret, analyze and explain the former. The latest research in the field of pandemic fiction and literary theory serves as the secondary sources for data collection.

Discussion

Navid Shehzad's *The Fourth Day* (2020) is a story written during COVID-19 pandemic centered on the life of a woman living an isolated life during the lockdown. The story deals with the physical and psychological effects of loneliness and what significance love has in the lives of those who yearn for it. The action and events of the story are all wrapped in mystery with a touch of surrealism and phantasmagoria.

Barthesian Analysis of the Fourth Day

The Proairetic Code:

According to Barthes actions within any text are determined by the sequence in which those events take place and the characters response to those events. The actions and reactions of the characters to the happening events inside the narration decide their identity as well as their role inside the story (Barthes, 1974). The action of the story is completed within a single day; that is why very little action takes place in the story. With the help of third person narration with limited point of view the author presents the routine of a woman who lives alone in her apartment but constantly feels the presence of her partner around her. Her partner, the unknown male character is exposed only through the recalling of a woman. The action of the story starts with the early morning flocking of mynas outside the woman's apartment window. Her neighbors notice it and show their apprehension regarding the presence of the mynas. "By the fourth day of the lockdown, the neighbors began to feel uneasy" (Shehzad, 2020). The action in the plot is accelerated when in the afternoon rain starts and the woman returns to her house with shopping bags in her hands. "By the time she reached home, it had started to come down in broad, silvery sheets" (Shehzad, 2020). The action rises when the woman enjoys her cup of tea while watching rain outside the window of her apartment. The manner in which the woman corresponds with her surrounding is significant component of the plot. She constantly, feels the presence of another person in the apartment but in reality she is all alone. When the evening falls she looks outside the window down into the street. In the spotlight of the street lamp she discerns the silhouette of her lover standing by the pole. She tries to communicate the message through her gestures; he stays there for some time, smiles at her and then leaves. She makes an unsuccessful attempt to stop him but he vanishes away. The disappearance of the man makes her feel gloomy and dejected. In the same state she leans by the window pane, becomes unconscious and dies. On the fourth day of her death her dead body is found by her neighbors, upon entering the apartment lying near the window. "They found her like that, slumped against the window, eyes open, staring at something, someone below, with a little smile frozen on her ashen lips" (Shehzad, 2020).

The Hermeneutic Code:

The enigma regarding the female protagonist, her lifestyle, her actions and her imaginary partner develops from the start and continues until the end of the text. Even at the end of the text the enigma created does not get resolved. The very title of the story *The Fourth Day* suggests multiple meanings. The story begins with "By the fourth day of the lockdown" and towards the end it is "on the fourth day." The enigmatic woman living all alone, the relationship that she has with the physically absent man whose accessories are found in the apartment and the man in the street with whom the protagonist wants to communicate all generate a sense of enigma in the text of the story. The readers get informed about the presence of man in her life through the descriptions like smell of tobacco and leather and "the sight of his silhouette" (Shehzad, 2020) but with innumerable unanswered questions like: What is the relationship between the protagonist and the man she imagines and the one standing in the street? Are both the men same? Why the man abandons her?

Combined with the mysterious elements, the text is full of surrealistic features Carr (2000) where the objects, in the house blend with the thoughts and actions of the woman in a dream like situation, it becomes difficult to distinguish between real happenings and the imagination of the woman concerning her relationship with the missing man. The ways his clothes and other possessions are placed in the apartment give an impression as if the man lived in the house for more than ten years period. The utensils, the tea mugs and the grocery that the woman does on regular basis hints toward the existence of another person in her life but the accounts of the neighbors regarding her lifestyle and her death at the end of the story and leave the readers in a labyrinth.

The Semantic Code:

Since very little action takes place in the text, effect is created through the use of language and internal monologues to highlight the theme of the story. The use of monologues renders spatial as well as temporal setting to the story. The phrases like “thirsty city”, “a dry, sun-bleached, pitiless sky”, create an overall sense of depression and nostalgia that is not only experienced by humans but all living beings “Stray dogs, their tongues lolling with each panting breath, sprawled on baking pavements” (Shehzad, 2020) and this hollowness and gloom does not persist in the external world but has touched the souls of all living creatures during the time of COVID-19. The sense of isolation, social distancing and lack of companionship lead to severe emotional, psychological and mental issues. Shehzad (2020) writes “squeezing the breath out of everything that lived” the detachment of nature from the sufferings of mankind is at one hand but what adds in existential crisis is the uncertainty in terms of future life. The imagery of mynas encroaching the protagonist’s balcony is symbolic of the isolation experienced during pandemic lockdown. It symbolizes the eternal bond that exists between humans and other living beings that are a part of nature to which mankind has become ignorant. But this bond re-strengthens during the lockdown as humans show their resilience for nature “As if only birds were witnessed to her solitary existence” (Shehzad, 2020).

Furthermore, it suggests the protagonist’s disengagement with the society which intensifies during the time of pandemic induced lockdown. Various symbols contribute in comprehending the psychological state of the protagonist. For instance, the rain drops initially give her relief from the scorching heat and she becomes hopeful but later on the same rain metamorphoses into storm and destroys everything outside, shattering her inner peace and eventually leading to her nervous breakdown or cardiac failure. This rain can be compared with the corona virus, that in the preliminary stages is viewed as one of the type of viral infection but in the course of the events its intensity multiplies and it completely transforms the structure of individual and societal life. The reveries of the protagonist are so perceivable and tangible that the reader can see everything happening in front of them in the present. The protagonist’s memories of the past life and relations symbolize that she has lived a joyful life but in state of detachment and segregation she first loses her psychological balance and then her life. Her desire for companionship highlights the negative impact of isolation resulting in emotional and mental breakdown. Moreover, her neighbors’ suppositions about her strange lifestyle reflect the deep sense of inquisitiveness and precariousness that permeates the society. This dream like setting and occurrences make one scrutinize the mutual feeling of anxiousness and unpredictability encountered by the characters as they withstand the problems of pandemic.

The Symbolic Code:

The text contains binaries in the sense that they appear to be different than what actually they are. The protagonist’s expectations regarding her lovers’ coming and spending time with her is just what she imagines. Her hallucinations make her believe the presence of her partner. Maintaining a life style as if she has a huge household is the indication of her deteriorating mental health. Her lifestyle is antithesis to what her life actually is. The man standing in the street under the lamp pole is her illusion. Her desire to refrain him from leaving the place is the last attempt on her part to hold life which was slipping out of her hand. She dies in extreme pessimistic state when she sees her lover departing. Hopeless and broken she leaves this material world for the spiritual one, disease free and well connected. Her soul finds liberation when her body dies as her body has got fixated in the time

when she lived with her partner. Consequently imagines him in each and every object and shadow of her apartment.

The Cultural Code:

The story is written with the backdrop of COVID-19 lockdown. The illustration of the city and the depiction of its ambience correspond with the collective experiences of people globally. The story begins with reference to lockdown and by not confining to any place or nation or group of people the author intends to portray it as a worldwide experience. The protagonist is not given any identity regionally or nationally in order to keep the focus on lockdown and its repercussions. It is a depiction of human condition without being specified to any region, country or nation. Whenever and wherever humanity suffers due to natural catastrophe the results are similar. Matabos et al. (2022) write there is always a strong similarity in not only germs and diseases, but the people's response is also the same.

The text of the story is covered by mystery and suspense but one aspect obvious the presentation of the theme of isolation and pessimism. The actions of the protagonist analyzed with the Proairetic code exhibit the isolation personified in the character of protagonist. The journey of loneliness and hopelessness gets its meaning from the semantic code. These codes help comprehend the embedded themes within the text.

Pandemic by Ilona Yusuf

Pandemic (2020) is a short story written by Ilona Yusuf in a flash fiction genre. In very limited number of words the author very beautifully depicts the problems of the most vulnerable segment, the transgender of our society. The survival problems of the trans gender community that intensify during COVID-19 pandemic. The focal point of the narration is the social and economic insecurity that they face during lockdown. Extreme poverty, marginalized existence and the systemic injustice is what they find themselves victim to all the time. The story highlights a grim reality of our so called equality based society, in a thought provoking manner. The projection of a transgender, against the background of deserted and lifeless market, asking for alms to make his living possible is a true but very sad demonstration of the marginalized in our society.

Barthesian Analysis of *Pandemic*

The Proairetic Code:

The story starts with a couple on a drive toward city market, their noticing the deserted market and shops and the closure of once thriving businesses of the city. The action is triggered by the transgender's entry into the text. The past light-heartedness and informality of the transgender is contrasted with his current grim and desolate condition that personalizes the larger level of loss and transformation. The action generates when the couple try to communicate with the transgender cum beggar who moves like a spectre in a ghostly city. Although the couple's initial intention is to come out of the confines of their home and to breath the open and jovial air of the city but they find themselves in desertedness and barrenness of physical and psychological nature. They yearn for normalcy of life completely shattered and tattered during COVID-19 lockdown.

The Symbolic Code:

The symbolic code and the semantic code overlap throughout the text of the story. The gloomy description of the city's deserted streets; beggars roaming for the sake of alms underscore the nostalgia associated with the city's past life, full of life and liveliness. Now few people are seen in the market area and that is also to buy medicines. This all symbolizes the crisis in its worst form. Throughout the text there is use of "Then and "Now" that shows the striking contrast between the liveliness of the past and the hopelessness of the present.

The hustle bustle of the shops area, the restaurants offering their savory foods and the buyers roaming in the streets for shopping all comes to end paving way for the socio-economic crisis. The description of one transgender is symbolic of the condition of the whole community. With zero source of income they find their survival impossible. "They look around and among them is the 'tired mass of a masked figure in a dotted *Shalwar Kameez*. Head bowed, elbows resting on knees spread wide, hands hanging loose between them" (Yusuf, 2020). The couple sitting in the car recalls him as a jovial performer in the past but now they find him pessimistic and depressed "This same *hijra*,

bowed, despondent on the step” (Yusuf, 2020). As most of them either beg, perform in social and family gatherings or work as sex workers. Kirmani in her interview with one of the representative transgender writes that because of the restrictions of pandemic they cannot go out in *Tolis* or *Vadhais* to sing in weddings and communities which has really affected their income (Kirmani, 2021). The constant alternating narration of the story to then and now foregrounds the dissimilitude between the city’s present slumber and apparitions like figures with past “bustling commerce of beggars”. This is just one story out of those millions that how life in most of the big cities for the underprivileged and vulnerable, in Pakistan has transformed during pandemic.

The Cultural Code:

Cultural allusions like *Hollywood Kay star jaisay* and *Harry Potter jaisa*, used in the dialogues of the transgender character determine the cultural setting of the story (Yusuf, 2020). The places and characters alluded are well known universally. To make the narrative a common and shared experience these places and characters are alluded. Additionally, the references emphasize how the pandemic as a global incident has exerted influence on widespread communities and cultures. The way street sellers and peddlers are shown selling their goods even at night to earn some money for their families are a very specific of Pakistani lower working class. This showcases the theme of huge economic disruptions caused by the epidemic entwined into the story’s text. The depiction of street hawker and transgender ridiculing the passer byes in the hope to get some money out of their pockets is an integral element of our culture. These are the intimate stories of individuals that can be interpreted at broader level. Overall, this story is a blend of psychological strain, social disturbance and genuine pain experienced by the society in the time of crisis.

Motorcycle by Safina Danish Elahi

Motorcycle is a short story by Safina Danish Elahi that got published in 2020. It is one of the most intriguing tales in the anthology *The Stained-Glass Window*. The way it highlights the unequal distribution of privileges and the plight of the poverty stricken people is an experience of life itself. The economic problems faced by the poor in Pakistani society and the lack of resources are the backdrop of this story. It is a sorrowful depiction of a helpless mother who fails to provide timely medical assistance to her daughter and when her daughter passes away she cannot afford her burial and leaves her to the hospital administration as a COVID-19 patient to be buried as an orphan. The theme centers on the exploitation of the poor by the rich, which culminates during COVID-19 lockdown. The systemic injustice is under critique which fails to provide any relief to the needy ones in the time of financial crisis.

Barthesian Analysis of Motorcycle

The Proairetic Code:

The action within the plot is generated with the help of internal monologues and conversations. *Shaheen* who works as a house maid at *Farzana Baji*’s house faces financial problems during COVID-19 lockdown as *Farzana* in order to follow safety measures stops her from work. The plot moves forward through the dialogues between the major character *Shaheen*, her husband *Peeru* and her employer *Farzana Baji* and we get an insight into the psychological state of the characters as well. The details of *Shaheen*’s unemployed status and her struggles to arrange money for the family’s needs and her daughter’s treatment trigger the main plot of the story highlighting the theme of hopelessness on the part of the major character. The broken wheel of *Peeru*’s motorcycle and his futile attempts predicts the upcoming events. The motorcycle holds significant place in their life but it has become dysfunctional. Similarly, *Shaheen*’s life becomes dependent on the money for which she visits her employer’s house but returns hopeless. The conversation that takes place between *Shaheen* and *Farzana* is all related to COVID-19, the safety measures, social distancing and the virus control showing that life will move on only when the pandemic will subside as if virus has taken everything in its control and it dominates the discourses and the practices. The story gains momentum with *Faiqa*, *Shaheen*’s daughter’s increasing illness and her attempts to provide her comfort for which she tries all the home remedies, when they all fail, she takes her to the hospital *Peeru*’s action of leaving the dead body of his daughter at the hospital as the only option left to him at the end of the text underscore that that how the epidemic has multiplied the stress and troubles

of the lower classes of our society as this stratum of our society is the most vulnerable one (Jones, 2020b).

The Hermeneutic Code:

There are few enigmatic moments in the text that raise certain questions in the minds of the readers. Though they get resolved in the end but they add to the curiosity of the readers. The broken wheel of *Peeru's* motorcycle creates suspense that what is going to happen to it in future. *Shaheen's* description of her *niqab*, purse and running out mobile battery establish suspense about the nature of her work. The actual disease of *Faiqa* that is the reason behind her death remains undisclosed till the very end of the text.

The Semantic Code:

The title of the story *Motorcycle* conveys multiple meanings. It is the metaphor for *Shaheen* and *Peeru's* life. The wheel of the motorcycle symbolizes life. The way vehicle goes through several problems in the very same way their life has become crippled because of the scarcity of the resources. The unpredictability of life is highlighted through the multiple problems the vehicles has and the jamming of the engine symbolizes the stagnation in their life due to meager income. They can neither live according to their wishes nor can they die by choice. They cannot live and cannot die, for living they do not have resources, and death is beyond their control. The couple's constant discussions regarding the debts that they have to return, and their inability to provide ample food, enough clothing and good education to their kids depict the problems constantly faced by the poverty stricken class of our country. Their incapacity to purchase masks and medicines for *Faiqa* further elaborates the repetitive motif of pandemic and its impacts. Due to the closure of *madrassa* all the kids stay at home and providing three times meal to six people is difficult for *Shaheen* so mostly her kids sleep unfed. This is the regrettable circumstances engendered by the pandemic, presenting an obvious meaning that how the spread of the virus preceding monetary problems become more severe (Wilder-Smith, 2021).

The connotative code helps the reader discern the implicit theme of class distinction in the instances where *Shaheen* interacts with her employer. *Farzana's* response to *Shaheen's* pleas highlights the lack of sympathy and social cohesion that exists in Pakistani society. These already existing gaps in the society become more wide during the COVID-19 pandemic where the lower class of Pakistani society bears the economic burden with very little or no help at all (Peñalba, 2021). The urge for helping the needy completely finishes during the lockdown as everyone lives in their own sphere fearing and dreading the disease and its consequences (Alexander & Brown, 2021).

The Symbolic Code:

There is a use of striking disparities on apparent level and in the contemplation process of the characters which gets further highlighted during the time of exceptional calamity. The scorching heat and hot summer weather depicted in the story's initial part symbolizes the impoverish condition of the poor that never comes to an end and during the time of any natural calamity it multiplies in its intensity. *Farzana's* thirst and *Nasreen's* refusal to give her a glass of *Rooh Afza* to quench her thirst symbolize the neglectful and dehumanizing attitude towards the working class on a larger level. *Farzana's* insensitivity to her employee's problems and unsympathetic handling symbolizes how money and social superiority makes person cruel and selfish. It is the absence of decency in her character that she relies on *Shaheen's* services but at the same time does not consider her a human being. *Peeru's* employers are not different; they call him to work during lockdown for extra hours than the salary they pay him. Though they have six drivers on their payroll but since *Peeru* is in debt to them cause of which they exploit him. The riches of one class are constantly contrasted with the poverty of the other throughout the text. The clean and tidy home of *Farzana baji* in contrast to the hospital where *Shaheen* takes her sick daughter is an obvious illustration of the health care system available in our country for the marginalized. *Elahi* writes, "The hospital was small, and its once-white walls were dappled with stains and cracks. The mere sights of the dusty, dilapidated furniture made me cringe" (*Elahi*, 2020).

The Cultural Code:

The whole text of the narrative is deeply rooted in the cultural context. There is repeated reference to the economic issues aggravated by the unequal distribution of resources and inequality prevailing among the classes. There is a critique on discrete cultural and religious practices like *Zakat* giving which again has become a matter of personal choice. There is also a reference to Shaheen's dependency on community's support system. The practice of giving *Zakat* is not followed properly in our society. Rich give *Zakat* to poor as a favor not as a religious obligation and for that favor then the poor are exploited at the hands of the rich. Reference is towards the bias and prejudiced behavior of the rich toward the poor in our so called religious society.

With the application of Barthes codes on the narrative one finds an interlacing network of connotations that underscore how life becomes a challenge for the indigent during pandemic. The different levels of interpretation show the human condition, the intolerable behaviors and extreme hopeless socio-economic state of mankind throughout the chaotic time.

Conclusion

The analysis of the pandemic stories with the lens of Barthes' narrative codes reveals the distress and anxiety of the individuals experiencing the disease and the associated fear in the selected stories from the anthology *The Stained-Glass Window* by the Pakistani authors. The codes underscore the multiplicity of the texts that depicts the psychological and mental states of the people going through the crisis. The fear of getting infected or losing life intensifies due to isolation and uncertainty regarding the future and is visible through the actions of the characters. The yearning for connectivity and revival of the previous life patterns is evident in the characters extreme sense of loss that they undergo in the present. The texts of the stories reflect the pessimism felt by people across the globe. In the context of Pakistan this sense of isolation and helplessness is seen at its maximal level when it combines with poverty and un-resourcefulness. The enigma associated with the nature of the disease and its time period is evident in the narratives of pandemic. The cultural code highlights the issues encountered by the marginalized and underprivileged segments of the Pakistani society. The life of the poor and transgender individuals become challenging as their sources of income reduce due to social distancing and lockdown, thus making their survival difficult. Three of the stories analyzed convey themes of isolation and pessimism as they were written during the initial lockdown when social structures in terms of health and hygiene practices and social distancing had suddenly transformed leading to uncertainty and chaos. When we look at pandemic narratives, we also learn how people in this period have reacted to the pandemic and how imaginative writers have illustrated and described it giving it a new dimension and perception. That brings us to inquire how do narrators, storytellers and pandemic literature address these issues. Pandemic fiction is an attempt to make us realize that this is not something that has come out of nowhere, but it is something which has been a part of our living experience, a part of how we try to grapple with the contextual space in which we find our self.

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