



Alienation and Isolation in the “Lockdown Literature” in Indian English: A Study of *The Day Before Today: Lockdown Stories*

Dr Satyajit T Patil
Associate Professor
Department of English
Pemraj Sarda College,
Ahmednagar.

Abstract

During the COVID - 19 pandemic, lockdown was implemented in every other nation. Millions of people were put under tight quarantine. This emergency strategy, nonetheless, seriously affected individuals at many levels - physical, emotional, mental, intellectual, moral, social, political, religious, economic, and educational. Due to the pandemic lockdown, every person was isolated from the other. The concept of “community” was shaken to the core. Alienation persisted everywhere. There was fear, frustration, tension, and anxiety. Literature produced during this period was not untouched by this all. In fact, it perceived and portrayed the mood of the moment fully as well as faithfully. Lockdown literature in English, as in other languages, is replete with touching versions of the sorrows and sufferings of the people falling prey to alienation, isolation, and fear. Notable authors have tackled the theme of alienation and isolation in their literature. Many less-known writers too tried their hands at poetry and short story writing dealing with the themes of lockdown and loneliness. While most of them look upon lockdown as synonymous to depression or frustration, for some, it is “like traveling in unchartered waters... a sabbatical to learn new things.” It is a kind of revisiting the earliest stage of existence and survival – that of homo sapiens. Thus, lockdown literature offers an exciting avenue for a researcher to peep into the psyche of the authors and know their perception of this global phenomenon. On this backdrop, the present article endeavours to analyse the concepts of alienation and isolation as reflected in “The Day Before Today: Lockdown Stories,” a debut collection of short fiction by Gayatri Gill. It is grounded on the assumption that the lockdown literature in English manifests – explicitly or implicitly – the spectrum of issues predominantly associated with alienation and isolation.

Keywords: alienation, isolation, lockdown literature, pandemic

The year 2020 witnessed an unforeseen onslaught of a disease hitherto unknown to the human race. It has been chronicled as one of the darkest phases in the history of the mankind. The Coronavirus outbreak appeared in Wuhan, the capital city of Hubei province in December 2019 in China, and affected almost all the nations in the world within the next few months. Millions of people have been infected by Coronavirus. Massive numbers of human have lost their lives due to this disease (COVID-19). This is an infectious disease transmitted from one individual to another, severely attacking the respiratory system that causes death. It has several mutations that have posed a huge challenge for the scientists all over the world. As of now, there is no time-tested diagnostic remedy on this disease. Thus, Lockdown is only preventive policy.

The term 'Lockdown' is used for emergency condition in which people are temporarily prevented from entering and leaving a restricted area. People need to stay indoors. It is imposed by the Government on different kinds of situations, such as the outbreak of an epidemic disease. During the Covid 19 pandemic, the first lockdown was implemented in Wuhan city in China on January 23, 2020. Some millions of people were put under tight quarantine. Use of face mask and social distancing become mandatory. After Wuhan, the same preventive measure was applied in many counties for controlling COVID-19. This emergency strategy, nonetheless, seriously affected individuals at many levels - physical, emotional, mental, intellectual, moral, social, political, religious, economic, and educational. Due to the pandemic lockdown, every person was isolated from the other. The concept of "community" was shaken to the core. Alienation persisted everywhere. There was fear, frustration, tension, and anxiety. Literature produced during this period was not untouched by this all. In fact, it perceived and portrayed the mood of the moment fully as well as faithfully.

Loneliness, when imposed on a person, is generally unbearable. Solitary confinement, therefore, was a major punishment given to the convicts. Sociology defines human being as a "social animal" who likes to live in a group. Psychology stresses the need to *share* as a means to *care* and *cure*. Lockdown literature in English, as in other languages, is replete with touching versions of the sorrows and sufferings of the people falling prey to alienation, isolation, and fear. Notable authors like Siddhartha Gigoo, Shobha De, Gayatri Gill, Vinoth Kumar N., Chandu Ratna etc. have tackled the theme of alienation and isolation in their literature. Many less-known writers too tried their hands at poetry and short story writing dealing with the themes of lockdown and loneliness. While most of them look upon lockdown as synonymous to depression or frustration, for some, it is "like traveling in unchartered waters... a sabbatical to learn new things" (Chinmay Tumble). It is a kind of revisiting the earliest stage of existence and survival – that of *homo sapiens*. Thus, lockdown literature offers an exciting avenue for a researcher to peep into the psyche of the authors and know their perception of this global phenomenon. At the same time, it is pertinent that the literary worth of this fiction be gauged.

On this backdrop, the present article endeavours to analyse the concepts of alienation and isolation as reflected in *The Day Before Today: Lockdown Stories*", a debut collection of short fiction by Gayatri Gill. It is grounded on the assumption that the lockdown literature in English manifests – explicitly or implicitly – the spectrum of issues predominantly associated with alienation and isolation. It is aimed at probing into the phenomenon of the Corona pandemic and its worldwide influence. It also studies the impact of Covid – 19 on

English literature. The author thinks it pertinent to comprehend the conceptual genesis of 'alienation' and 'isolation' in terms of psychology and sociology. It will be helpful to assess the selected authors' perception of alienation and isolation and review their strategies to cope with the same. Finally, an attempt has been made to gauge the literary worth of the literature produced during the lockdown period.

The methodology of research employed throughout the article is qualitative and analytical in nature. For the analysis of the work chosen, the author has used the psychosocial point of view, combining Karl Marx's theory of alienation with Sigmund Freud's model of isolation. The Lockdown Literature in Indian English, published in the period of one year (March, 2020 to March, 2021) has been taken into consideration for drawing conclusions. The focus is primarily on the impact and treatment of alienation and isolation in the select work and also on the strategies deployed by the authors to cope with them.

A producer, scriptwriter and story editor, Gayatri Gill has over fifteen years of writing and production experience across television, digital, animation and documentary formats. *The Day Before Today: Lockdown Stories* is her debut collection of short fiction. With her five bold "dystopian" stories, Gayatri "serves the dark thoughts with a generous garnish of humour. Within one sentence, you will not know whether to think twice about the dystopia or to laugh at the situation she so vividly describes" (Shraddha Kamdar). The book also envisages "tomorrow" as one has never thought of earlier, a day with no school or office!

Engrossing and entertaining, each story brings out something new related to the world of "new normal" affected with COVID. In general, all the stories are occupied with the feeling of anxiety that surrounds us all, being stuck at home. This book includes both short and long stories, poems and rhymes even, that showcase "the shockingly suffocating feeling in each form" (Vandana Devi). Every piece precedes an illustration that is reflective and suggestive. Most of the stories are written from the first-person narrative and display a "self-fulfilling sense of apathy" (Ibid). This is especially noticeable in the first story titled "Day One".

"Green" is a macabre tale where a wife kills her husband. Apparently, it is quite nonchalant but it brims with unease, like "Red and Death of Videocon". These stories are truly breath-taking. In fact, they bring to light the darker and sinister corners of the psyche. The author suggests that violence and chaos may be the outcomes of boredom, which is regarded as the offshoot of inactivity.

Every narrative in the collection revolves round women characters. Very few men characters appear in the stories, and the few that are present have subordinate significance. Nonetheless, the role ascribed to most of them is that of a transgressor. Thus, we come across different versions of the woman in each piece in *The Day Before Today: Lockdown Stories*.

"Mummyji and Pammi" and "Pandemic Blanket" strongly gave off the vibe of popular Hindi TV serials. "There are very strong familial bonds that are written about in these stories which reflect the common tropes one can observe in soaps. But Gill is quite earnest in her storytelling, trying to make it more complex than your average mother-in-law and daughter-in-law feud" (Ibid).

“The Covid Cupboard” is perhaps the best one in this collection. It reflects a sarcastic stance on celebrities and Instagram influencers. Gill uses sardonic wit in this piece, which is quite remarkable. She unsparingly attacks the celebrities enjoying the lockdown period while the ordinary people were struggling for survival. The story reaches its climax, when Karishma Khanna, a luminary, takes a cold-blooded stance on the deaths during the pandemic and reacts: “There will always be orphans in the world, won’t there?”

Gill successfully weaves in the dystopian technological innovations and normal life practices that makes us one restless. As Vandana Devi rightly points it out, “She very cleverly utilises the anxiety of the present and mixes it with the total lack of clarity about the future and provides her readers with a cocktail of the world that may exist.” Another characteristic of the book is that “it explores familiar situations that most of us have been in, or at least heard of—but also goes many levels further. The author often puts into the words of her characters some of the deepest, darkest thoughts that human beings have in their minds but have never articulated loudly. These, at the first shot, seem downright spooky, but you do realise that it is not uncommon” (Shraddha Kamdar). The following passage bears testimony to this premise:

In a land far away, a bat stirs up a cauldron of trouble. In the sanitized new world that emerges, everything has changed. A midnight feast in the kitchen is par for the course when there is no school tomorrow – or any tomorrow to come. A ‘status update’ on Facebook is your only communication with a sibling in a containment zone. A young girl obsesses about the masked stranger in the aisles of a supermarket, while in a deserted guesthouse, a ghost falls in love with the mother of a new-born. Neighbourhood parties on Zoom become the new normal, as the children of a dystopian world invent strange new games. It is even possible to commit murder and get away with it, if you’re part of the ‘essential services’ brigade.

“... these dire stories for our times declare that the future has arrived,” remarks Namita Gokhale, Writer and Co-director of the Jaipur Literature Festival. Guneet Monga, the Academy Award winning producer observes: ‘Gayatri has a very special flair of storytelling. She grabs your attention from the very first page. Intense and unputdownable!’

All in all, the ominous, dark, and futuristic stories in *The Day Before Today: Lockdown Stories* potently pronounce the anxiety of alienation and isolation, which has been a salient feature of the “Lockdown Literature”.

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