

Book Reviews

Simi Malhotra, Ruchi Nagpal, Steven S. George and Sananda Roy (Eds.), *Panorama of the Pandemic: A Phenomenological Inquiry*. Routledge, 2025, 223 pp., Rs. 3,840, ISBN: 978-1-032-96673-1.

Reviewed by Zahra Rizvi

The edited collection titled *Panorama of the Pandemic: A Phenomenological Inquiry* presents a deeply involved and fascinating response to the pandemic and its aftermath through twelve diverse chapters woven together into a rich tapestry of scholarly intervention. In this, the volume invites the readers to reconsider the world as we knew *and* know it, a world pockmarked by individual and collective responses to a global phenomenon that brought with its effects an unprecedented paradigm shift. The editors and contributors of this book seek to make sense of the overflow of responses and information that became so typical of the pandemic, each novel and yet interconnected. In doing so, this book is a valuable academic resource for studying and understanding how we aspire to make sense in and of a world rendered otherwise in-sensible by our traditional and predictable systems.

The Foreword written by Prof. James S. Baumlin, Distinguished Professor of English, Missouri State University, details the background to this collection which stemmed from the Young Researchers Conference organized by the Department of English, Jamia Millia Islamia, December 17-18, 2022. This Foreword details the collaborative strength of the volume and its dedication to platforming young researches in a post-pandemic world. Using a metaphor of crisis from Yeats, Baumlin outlines that at its core, this book is about making sense through a resilient species' storytelling. The Introduction picks this strand further by contextualizing theoretical and contemporary perspectives on the pandemic before launching into a novel discussion of the panoramic nature of the editors' motivation in presenting the pandemic as a phenomenological phenomenon. This ambitious project takes shape early on, and is able to have an animated conversation on a global issue through what the editors call the 'intersubjectivities' of the chapters that comprise the collection.

The collection is tastefully organized into four interconnected sections that build upon each other to fittingly create a panoramic image of the area under study. The first titled "Pandemic Panoramas: Narratives in the Time of Contagion" gathers stories of plagues, epidemics and pandemics, ranging from Maiti's exploration of Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* as a dire premonition of things to come, to Sharma's study of the metaphysics of graphic narratives spun around pandemics, to Das Gupta's discussion of post-apocalyptic futurism through a reading of Emily St. John Mandel's novel *Station Eleven*. Put together, these chapters build a concrete and concise history of pandemic narratives, preparing the reader for a further focalized dimension of the book's critical underpinnings which come to the fore in the second section titled "Philosophizing the Pandemic: Affect, Critique, and Language". This section presents creative experiments with pandemic storytelling by starting off with Balhara mapping out linguistic responses to epidemics and their documentations. Parial's chapter is a contemporary mirror to Balhara's and updates the documentations of the pandemic by questioning the racialized responses to the pandemic disseminated through algorithmic mass media. Kumar takes this even further by grappling with social media and ludology in the time of the pandemic through a sharp commentary on the logic of play and party in Udayan Mukherjee's "The Party".

This section's movement towards the virtual seamlessly makes space for the third section on "Pandemic Transitions: From Physical to Virtual" reminding us of the pandemic as a time and space of many transitions and breaking of boundaries, one of the most invasive and pervasive ones being that of the physical and the virtual. It is not surprising that this section, then, is also a reflection of and into loss and lamentation. Baumlín's chapter places the classroom at the core of this crisis and oscillates between reflections on presence and loss within this space. Ahuja zooms in further by individualizing experience within an increasingly virtual space and studies the digitization of the self through an analysis of Mahima Bhayana's art exhibition, "16,108 Conversations between Krishna, Alexa and I". George takes up the baton and zooms out to incorporate the personal with the social and the political by displaying the complexities of the digital theatre during the pandemic, using Mallika Taneja's *Allegedly*, Anuja Ghoshalkar's *The Lonely Hearts Club*, Amitesh Grover's *The Last Poet*, and Sunita Singh and Steven S.

George's (El Pueblo) *No Country for Women*, as illustrative examples. This strategy of zooming in and out alternatively marks another transition, that of loss to improvisation, of lament to experiment, moving towards themes of the succeeding section.

The final section on "Punctuating the Pandemic: The Audio-Visual Expressions in Covid-19" discusses the complexities of pandemic narratives, selecting texts specifically from South Asia. Biswas's chapter on caste and pandemic in Nagraj Manjule's *Vaikunth* posits a Dalit aesthetics in film, exploring new mediums of visual resistance and hope. Bhattacharya's chapter explores the new mediality afforded by the pandemic by looking at yet another visual artefact of the pandemic—family portraits—and an examination of Khemka and Kokiloo's photo essay "Shared Solitude" to put together novel ways of framing the pandemic. The final chapter is a study of Haryanvi folk songs on the pandemic sung by women on digital platforms and Gautam provides a side-by-side picture of lived experience and the mediatized possibilities of creative expression during a time of immense change and transformation.

The pandemic remains one of the most harrowing and difficult times in recent memory to theorize about, to make sense of, and to contemplate on. A traumatizing event of loss, lack and death, the pandemic, however, is overrun by narratives that continue to attempt to theorize, to make sense of it, to offer spaces for critical contemplation. This web becomes thicker every day and in parsing through the staggering size of available information, this collection works as a handbook for studying the pandemic through a rich panoramic image that has been carefully put together as a tool to not just aid further phenomenological inquiry but also to present various ways of doing so.

Zahra Rizvi is Assistant Professor at the Department of English, St. Stephen's College, University of Delhi. Her work looks at gamified dystopias, youth activism and decolonial game studies. She is the co-founder and Executive Board member of DiGRA (Digital Games Research Association) India.