

**Reading Rajinder Singh Bedi's *Quarantine* as a Pathographic Tale in the
Indian Cultural Context**

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ABSTRACT

Illness narratives have taken center stage since the late 20th century when writers started sharing their personal illness journeys with the reader. Rajinder Singh Bedi's Urdu short story translated to English titled "Quarantine" is set in India during the plague of the 1920s. The story is presented from a doctor's viewpoint and is juxtaposed with the character of a sanitation worker. The pathographic narration through a doctor's lens, covers the broad spectrum of how frontline workers dealt with the epidemic which took so many lives, with special emphasis on the Indian cultural backdrop. The characterization of the sanitation worker Bhagav, highlights the caste divide prevalent in India, where tasks were assigned basis a person's caste. This research also attempts to understand the perspective of a caregiver /doctor during an epidemic along with the dichotomy between his duty and personal fears. The narrator's happiness at the felicitation ends abruptly when his conscience prompts him to acknowledge the true hero - the sanitation worker.

Bedi's statement that the quarantine & the fear of this isolation killed more people than the plague itself stands in validation of the theory that illness is indeed a metaphor for death to a sick person. The scope of this study is also to prove that the innate fear of illness is more lethal than the illness itself. The study also is an attempt to analyze whether cultural conditioning contributes or hinders the recovery process whilst fanning the ostracization of ill people. The paper aims to understand how pathographies work as vehicles to externalize the traumatic experience, as it attempts to analyze the myths surrounding such epidemics. The scrutiny focuses on the Indian cultural context, while exploring the use of illness idioms as well as story-telling devices in the selected short story.

Keywords; *Illness narratives, pathography, myths, illness idioms*

Illness narratives have taken center stage since the late 20th century when writers started sharing their illness journeys with the reader. Rajinder Singh Bedi's Urdu short story translated to English titled "Quarantine" is set in India during the plague of the 1920s. As the world limps back from the aftermath of Covid 19 pandemic, many literary writings written previously about pandemics and endemics have become the focus for scrutiny. The short story by Bedi depicts the plague and highlights the precautions and treatment meted out then, which seem uncannily similar to those during the Covid 19 pandemic. This analysis therefore assumes immense relevance in the present situation. The researcher aims to analyze the short story as a pathographic tale with a focus on the Indian cultural backdrop.

The story under scrutiny is presented from a doctor's viewpoint and is juxtaposed with the character of a sanitation worker. The pathographic narration through a doctor's lens covers the broad spectrum of how frontline workers dealt with the epidemic which took so many lives. This research also attempts to understand the perspective of a caregiver /doctor during an epidemic, while studying the dichotomy between his duty and personal fears. The two main characters in the story are the doctor and the sanitation worker – perhaps to highlight the societal hierarchy.

Despite being far removed from each other in the social hierarchy, both have very important roles to play in the midst of the terrifying plague. Bedi highlights the stark difference in their perspectives towards their personal as well as social wellbeing. Where Bhagav, the sanitation worker goes about his duty with a carefree abandon, the doctor is full of self-doubt and fear, despite being a qualified medical professional. Bhagav tends to the ill patients fearlessly, whereas the narrator/doctor is hesitant to come in close contact with the patients for fear of getting sick himself. His words, "My mind and heart were overshadowed with the trepidation of plague" (Bedi, 2020, p. 32), highlight his fear despite being a doctor. He goes on to say "even a mild sore throat would make me think of being plague infectedand then quarantine" (Bedi, 2020, p. 32). These lines are perfect examples of the fear that capture the mental state of people during the plague. Anne Hawkins' in her book *Reconstructing Illness –Studies in Pathography* avers that illness narratives display a glimpse of life where the everyday order and coherence is missing. A pathography is an attempt to draw out the meaning of the author's experience and situate the illness experience within the author's life. Though Hawkins' initially describes pathographies to be autobiographical in nature, she later includes writings by physicians and doctors, who narrate their close encounters with the sick and dying; such medical caregivers go through the whole process in proxy along with

the patient. In this short story, Bedi's focus is not on the patient, but on the doctor/caregiver whose life has been put into total chaos during the plague.

Bedi's statement right at the beginning that "plague was terrifying indeed but quarantine was rather fatal" (Bedi, 2020, p. 31), stands in validation of the theory that illness is indeed a metaphor for death to a sick person. The story has many such statements which clearly portray the terror caused by the isolation rather than the plague itself, proving that the innate fear of illness is more lethal than the illness itself. Susan Sontag, in her book, *Illness as a Metaphor*, writes about how "the mention of the very word 'cancer' is said to kill some patients who would perhaps have not succumbed so quickly to the malignancy" (Sontag, 1978, p. 6). This resonates perfectly with Bedi's "it so happened many a time that a patient who wasn't critical at all, died due to the general atmosphere of fear all around" (Bedi, 2020, p. 31). In another instance, Bhagav, the sweeper tells the doctor/narrator that "one ambulance took twenty-one patients to the konteen (quarantine). The poor souls will never return now?" (Bedi, 2020, p. 32). With this rhetorical question from Bhagav, Bedi reiterates the underlying thread of fear and death that pervades the short story. Though quarantine has been in practice for a long time, to curtail spread of infectious diseases – during the plague of 1920, it seemed to assume demonic status to an ill person, as many seemed to never return alive from the quarantine. This fear, in turn, prompted people to hide their symptoms at the early stage and refrain from medical consultation. Such a response triggered by fear, is a phenomenon that seems to transcend generations and eras. A similar response was witnessed during the recent Covid 19 pandemic too, proving that human nature essentially remains fairly constant during periods of trauma. Cultural conditioning too, many a time, hinders the recovery process whilst fanning the ostracization of ill people. The narrator's angst, fears and insecurities are expressed effectively and help us understand how pathographies work as vehicles to externalize the traumatic experience. The narrator's ritual cleansing of himself to the point of obsession and his constant fear of being infected by the plague, help to highlight the caregiver's plight and mental state during such epidemics. This short story about the 1920 plague and its trauma has been written in such a powerful manner that it could well be mistaken for a description of the recent Covid 19 pandemic, as some of the situations, symptoms and treatments described are extremely similar to that of the Covid 19 pandemic. Bedi's caliber as an astute writer, who understood the pulse of human nature and behaviour, is evident throughout the story.

The cultural context is highlighted in the stark contrast between the description of narrator's demeanor and that of the sanitation worker Bhagav, pointing to the caste divide prevalent in India, where tasks were assigned based on a person's caste. Right at the bottom of the social hierarchy, Bhagav is assigned jobs that are not only menial in nature, but also highly risky in the given plague infested town. From dawn to dusk, he is at work, killing the rats, disinfecting the roads, carrying the dead bodies to the cremation ground, helping those in quarantine whilst counselling their families waiting at home in fear. His unusual grit and resolve seem to belie the air of doom and death that pervades the town. Bedi introduces his character as a neo-Christian, perhaps alluding to his recent conversion to Christianity – which again points to a cultural landscape, where the people from the lowest rung in society were targeted/lured into conversion by the various religious organizations. Though it is not mentioned by Bedi in the story – that Bhagav indeed belonged to the dalit caste, as the tasks he performed was assigned to that particular section of people, where the baton was handed down from one generation to another – is an assumption one cannot escape making. Bhagav's stoic resilience in the face of such trauma, again points to a person who has actually nothing much to lose. He continues consuming alcohol and even prescribes it to others. He willingly tends to the sick without any fear, while the doctor, despite being a medical professional, succumbs to mortal fears and is very reluctant to come in close contact with the severely ill people. He wonders how Bhagav is able to mingle so freely amongst the infected, and at one point seems to be motivated by the fearless Bhagav. When questioned by the doctor, Bhagav replies "Jesus Christ teaches to help the sick, even at the risk of one's own life I understand that" (Bedi, 2020, p. 33). These words not only highlight Bhagav's personal resolve and strength but also the immense faith in the religious preaching of bade paadri -Rev. Mont L Abe. The cultural conditioning is highlighted here by Bedi wherein the reader is able to appreciate the differences in the mindset of the educated doctor and the sanitation worker. Time and again, throughout the story, Bedi uses many instances to highlight the difference between the two protagonists and their diverse responses to the traumatic situation caused by the plague. The cultural and caste divide between them have been expertly juxtaposed by Bedi to showcase the differences. There also is an incident, where the educated doctor is inspired by the sanitation worker to keep his fears at bay and help treat the sick people. Despite Bhagav, the sanitation worker having done most of the intense work during the blackest period of the plague, he is the unsung and the unrecognized warrior. The doctor is honored and awarded for his efforts and even earns a promotion, whereas there is no mention

whatsoever of the sanitation worker who did the lion's share of the work during the endemic. The narrator's happiness at the felicitation ends abruptly when his conscience prompts him to acknowledge the true hero - the sanitation worker.

Bedi's use of many Hindi words which are very culture specific, helps identify interesting aspects. The use of Hindi/Urdu words like *mundasa*, *babuji*, *paadri*, *hakeem*, *charpoy*, *chuna* and the like, throughout the story convey the Indianness effectively. The cultural elements of the Indian subcontinent are evident in these subtle nuances and make the story ideal for the current scrutiny. Moreover, the illness idioms which arise out of the synthesis between bodily processes and cultural categories, are interesting indicators to the symbiotic relationship between experience and meaning. The researcher further attempts to analyze the myths surrounding such epidemics, especially within the Indian cultural context, while exploring the use of illness idioms as well as storytelling devices in the selected short story. Bhagav's words "this konteen is hell Paadri Laabe often sketched such pictures of hell in his sermons" (Bedi, 2020, p. 34) – the word konteen for quarantine and its connotations of hell is a classic example of how certain words and images get concocted to highlight a myth. Phrases like "scary graveyards, wailing and moaning mothers and deadly cries of people piercing the silence of night" (Bedi, 2020, p. 35), work in tandem to paint a picture of hell – one that has been taught since childhood. Bedi says "even the healthy people carried a sense of heavy weight in their heart..... The patients in quarantine could see beyond their gloom... they could see Yamraj coming for them" (Bedi, 2020, p. 35). Yamraj is the Indian mythological name for the God of death. Evoking his name fills even the bravest with the fear of losing one's life. Bedi effectively paints a stark picture of the fear of death and the pandemonium caused by the quarantine. One can't but help compare the visual image of burning in hell with these torrid descriptions of pain and death in the quarantine centers.

Myths, according to Hawkins, have two contradictory meanings – "one where the classic, more common definition of illusion holds good and the second, which refers to a deeper profound truth" (Hawkins, 1999, p. 18). In pathographies, the latter definition comes to play where the myths seem to "embody significant patterns of human thought and behaviour, which have evolved from cultural practices and beliefs" (Hawkins, 1999, p. 19). The myths of battle and journey are an integral part of pathographies. Illness narratives abound in allusions to the battle, fight, taking charge, second life, deadly outbreaks, rival, opponent, secret weapon and the like. Idioms and classic myths of a battle are seen when Bedi writes "I saw my hidden opponent use its secret weapons..... my

hidden rival, whose victory percentage was soaring, got the better of me again” (Bedi, 2020, p. 36). For generations, these classic battle idioms and myths have been associated with tackling a disease. One is said to be fighting a disease – both in a physical sense, as one’s immune system tries to ward off the alien virus and in the psychological sense, where one is encouraged to fight and win the mental battle against a disease. A human body during ailment is likened to a battlefield with the infection being the enemy that has to be fought and won against.

During illness and death, the philosophic and heroic aspect also constitutes a myth. This is evident when Bhagav is asked “aren’t you afraid of the plague?” and answers “no Sir, till God decides, no one can harm me” (Bedi, 2020, p. 33). This stoic philosophic stance from a sweeper captures the essence of the myth and how they hold a strong sway over people who believe in them. The war metaphor, according to Hawkins invariably alludes to an ambivalence; it stokes both the glory of heroism as well as the horrifying trauma of suffering, pain and death. In Bedi’s *Quarantine*, the heroism is visible more in the caregivers; namely the doctor/narrator and the sanitation worker, while the suffering and pain is mainly amongst the patients inflicted by the plague while the two main protagonists are experiencing them through the patients as well as their surroundings and not themselves directly. It would be logical to aver that pathographies situate such myths within the illness narrative and help understand their role during illness. It is like a double-edged sword, at times helping the narrator cope with illness and death, and at others, hindering the same coping mechanism from working effectively. Pathographies however, have the ability to present such myths as it is experienced “for better or for worse” (Hawkins, 1999, p. 24).

Furthermore, pathographies which have vivid characters and definite closures seem to appeal more to the readers. In this instance too, Bedi has painted very vivid protagonists who instantly appeal to the reader as their fears, insecurities and beliefs are very relatable and not beyond one’s imagination. Bedi has also used the very common structural device of dual narratives in his short story. The tales of the doctor/ narrator and the sanitation worker run parallel throughout the tale with instances where both merge together. This duality adds pith to the narration and helps to convey a more holistic chronicle of the trauma caused by the plague. For many, if not most, writing their tale of illness trauma, is a very cathartic and healing experience. In this story too, one finds the evolution of the mental state of the narrator from one riddled with fear and insecurities to a state of equanimity – a striking transformation. Expressing one’s fears and insecurities has always been regarded as an appropriate way to purge oneself of them.

To conclude this discourse, it would be apt to say that the selected short story by Bedi illustrates all the aspects of an illness narrative. The externalization of trauma in the form of the narration by the doctor stands testimony to the tenet that pathographies help in the recovery process. Furthermore, the short story also effectively establishes the cultural aspects which are intricately woven into the tapestry of the story. The various myths associated with illnesses have been deftly handled within the framework of the pathography and help the reader appreciate their importance and understand their purport as cultural markers. Pathographies are no longer a novelty as it is now a robust and established genre of writing.

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