

Rewriting Pandemic: Chronicling Fear, Survival Challenges, and Emergent Meanings amidst Crisis

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Abstract

The global pandemic has reshaped human lives in unprecedented ways, challenging the understanding of fear, survival, and the very essence of one's existence. The crisis brings forth several harrowing tales of survival, as well as emergent meanings that arise at the same time. The literature written in response to the pandemic contains several implicit meanings and nuances related to individuals as well as society, but it is hidden under numerous layers of collective interpretation. Writings appear more deliberate because life has taken a more leisurely pace, allowing the writer to observe it up close and notice what was otherwise overlooked. This paper aims to delve into the multifaceted aspects of the pandemic experience, capturing the spectrum of emergent meanings, resilience, and the transformative power of crisis through the lens of existentialism in Emily St. John Mandel's novel *Station Eleven* as a common trope.

Keywords: Crisis; Emergent Meanings; Fear; Pandemic; Survival.

Introduction

"Crises and deadlocks when they occur have at least this advantage that they force us to think."

(Myles Munroe, [*Overcoming Crisis: The Secrets to Thriving in Challenging Times*](#), 2009:86)

The pandemic enveloped the whole of mankind in a rare situation, leaving trails of death, fear, witnessing misery, unemployment, poverty, financial strain, and the depletion of savings. It is a period of great tension and turmoil with several lakhs of people ravaged by the immediate and far-reach-

ing results of the disease. A pandemic refers to the widespread occurrence of a disease, affecting a large geographic area, multiple countries, or even continents. The epidemic has brought about an unprecedented global crisis, affecting people in numerous profound ways. There is much hardship being experienced by many people during such time, as they are mourning the loss of loved ones, fearing the unknown, and dealing with widespread economic fallout. The crisis has adversely affected each and every sphere of human existence. In addition to the loss of healthcare workers, the pandemic has caused a mass exodus of the population, creating fault lines in the nation and the world's social, cultural, and economic fabric. Pandemics have a long history. There have been several pandemics and the deadliest one documented in human history is the Black Death, which killed nearly 75–200 million people in the 14th century.

Other prominent pandemics range from the 1918 influenza pandemic or Spanish flu to the recent COVID-19. The advent of the 21st century brought with it not only unprecedented technological advancements but also unforeseen challenges that reverberated across the globe. The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2019 triggered a seismic shift in societal norms, creating a multifaceted impact on various aspects of human life. History is cyclical and repeats itself in a variety of enigmatic and inscrutable ways. It is believed that the Pandemic re-occurs in every century in different forms. History witnessed the ignobility and helplessness of the supreme human in the form of calamities and epidemics. The belief system, philosophical attributions, and narrations nullified the emptiness with uncertainty, anxiety, and insecurity shared by billions of citizens of the world amidst the global crisis.

The term crisis refers to a period of intense difficulty or danger that is unforeseen, happens suddenly, without giving any warning, and without any time to prepare. The word crisis is defined by the Merriam-Webster dictionary (2023) as “an unstable or crucial time or state of affairs in which a decisive change is impending, especially one with the distinct possibility of a highly undesirable outcome” (1). A world in crisis cannot help but react when uncertain circumstances arise.

Lanceley in his book *On-scene Guide for Crisis Negotiators* (2003) remarked, “A crisis is any situation in which a person's ability to cope is exceeded”. (13). Crises can be in any form, it can be a natural disaster like famines, earthquakes, floods, a tsunami, a landslide, or a wildfire. It can be a personal crisis, or some calamity in the family, it can be a political crisis when there is chaos in the society, in the country and it can be a pandemic, the

spread of a life-threatening disease. It can be an economic crisis, a period of recession, a banking crisis, a currency crisis, etc. All these can have a great impact on an individual and society, and the whole world and is a turning point in the life of the respective institution. The pandemic indeed stands as a significant crisis, impacting nearly every facet of life globally. It has been a health crisis, straining healthcare systems, affecting millions of lives directly, and causing immense loss and grief for many.

The word 'pandemic,' refers to an epidemic illness that spread throughout a larger territory and has a Greek origin. 'Pan' stands for 'all,' and 'demos' means 'people.' Avijit Ghosh in his article "How Literature has helped us make sense of Pandemic", calls Pandemics as mass murderers (1). Diseases like plague, smallpox, and Influenza have in the past been a main subject of writing various novels, fiction, short stories, and poems. Pandemics and epidemics have always been a rich source of inspiration for writers. Literature was among the significantly affected realms of crisis, a mirror reflecting the collective consciousness of humanity. The study of pandemics and their effects on human societies is represented in pandemic literature. As humanity grapples with the challenges posed by pandemics, literature has emerged as a powerful medium for expressing, interpreting, and reflecting upon these unprecedented events. Pandemics have played a recurring role in shaping the trajectory of human civilization, leaving an indelible mark on literature.

In *The Norton Anthology of English Literature Eighth Edition* (2006), T. Christ and others mentioned, "As diseases are a recurring phenomenon across centuries, the representation of pandemic outbreak has been a staple theme in literature" (55-60). Devastation, destruction, human loss, and their impact have been described by writers in a manner that explains social distancing. Ghosh (2020) further mentions, "Literature provides us deepest and insightful record of events during pandemics and tries to provide consolation in times of need" (1). Stories about pandemics have portrayed how people react to such public health emergencies and provided strategies for dealing with such catastrophes. In literature, a pandemic not only physically harms a person, but also results in a mental sickness that isolates him from the rest of the world.

In previous times, the means of entertainment was story-telling and even now there is no dearth of publications. Literary works are especially considered to be of high artistic quality or lasting value. It is a well-known fact that literature represents the past, present, and future and sensitively showcases the various forms of crises that society faces from time to time.

A closer look at some representative works of literature would reveal how literature reflects society and on the other hand, how crises are reflected in literature. These works gave humans the opportunity to consider how prior crises of a similar nature were handled, as well as suggestions to structure communities more fairly in their aftermath. Literature offers escape, solace, and comfort during such moments when human beings increase their social isolation to 'flatten the curve.'

There has always been literature on pandemics because there have always been pandemics. Arvind M. Nawale in his research paper mentions, "Whether it was epidemics, pandemics or other sorts of crises, the literature never took the back seat" (46). Argha Kumar Benerjee in his article, 'Whose Afraid of Virus Wolf?' (2020) remarked, "The human tryst with epidemic is as old as the hills; writers over centuries have repeatedly explored it in prose and verse, underlining not just its terrifying power but also the resilience of the human mind in confronting it" (1). Since the beginning of time, literature has proven to be the most effective means of expressing social, political, and historical forces.

Whether it is a pandemic, economic turmoil, or political crisis, literature has always attempted to soothe humanity's damaged psyches. It offers crucial insight on how to conceptualize the pandemic during the chaotic period of new normality. Germilang's interpretation of literature embodies beauty (2020), "we can understand the history of certain time by reading literature, understanding the experience of certain people without directly experiencing it" (55). The literature of a particular age reflects the ethos and pathos of the cross-section of society. Stories have long existed among the constellations, beneath the depths of the oceans, and within the woodlands before human civilization began.

Literature existed long before ancestors taught humans to read and write on paper. It is the basis of humanity's cultures, beliefs, and traditions. Everything that occurs within a society is written, recorded, and learned from a piece of literature. Life is displayed in the form of literature and without literature, life ceases to exist. It is still today found as an expression of art, a source of knowledge, and entertainment. Books are being read seriously by readers who crave information and recreation. Literature kindles new ideas and gives voice to the people who want to express their opinions about certain things in life. Literature is found in the beginning of all things and continues to live throughout the ages as it connects human beings and artistically mirrors reality, in a profound value. With the devastating effect of the Pandemic, there has been a vast change in hu-

man behaviour, social customs, traditions, manners, tastes, preferences, likes and dislikes, working manners, and matters. Every pandemic has a direct effect on literature and culture bringing a change in the human sphere and human perspective.

The pandemic has served as a profound backdrop for literature, offering a canvas for authors to explore various facets of human experience. It is an outbreak of a disease that spreads from person to person and becomes uncontrollable as well as functions as an obstruction to successive human existential efforts. Pandemic literature has been a recurring genre for centuries that often reflects the anxieties, fears, and complexities associated with widespread disease outbreaks. The emergence of the pandemic has not only posed unprecedented global health challenges but has also cast a critical spotlight on existential questions. Elizabeth Outka in her article "How Pandemics Seep into Literature" (2020),

"Covid-19 promises to alter us all in strange ways. We will emerge changed, though how those changes will manifest is far from certain. The sensory details of this outbreak - the masks, the face of doctors and nurses creased with worry and fatigue, the closure signs, the empty streets, the stacks of coffins- will weave their ways into our minds and bodies, triggering us back to the moment years in the future." (1)

Literature has taught humanity how to live meaningfully, and in times of crisis, people seek out literature for light and delight. The pursuit of meaning during a pandemic reflects the resilience and capacity for growth that humans demonstrate in challenging times. In the context of pandemic literature, incorporating concepts from existential resilience help to explore character's responses to crisis, their search for meaning, and their journey towards resilience. It can offer insights into how people cope with a global crisis, and provide insights into their struggles, growth, and ultimately, their ability to find meaning and resilience despite adversity. Pandemic literature survives not only to study the reasons for the pestilence but also serves the message that the world is not our own and humans must cope with the reality that they are not masters of this world. Disease is not an image, symbol, or story, it is simply something that kills you without consideration. The necessity of literature during and in the aftermath of a pandemic is pathetically illustrated in Emily St. John Mandel's novel *Station Eleven*.

Emily St. John Mandel's novel *Station Eleven* beautifully intertwines the

narratives of fear, survival, and meaning amidst a pandemic-induced collapse of civilization. The novel illuminates the human condition through various characters, highlighting their resilience, and the new meanings they find in a world forever altered by catastrophe. Mandel's portrayal of the pandemic isn't just about the virus itself but rather focuses on the aftermath which is the rebuilding of society and the exploration of what remains when the familiar structures disappear. The characters grapple with fear, not just of the disease, but of the unknown and the loss of the world they once knew. Survival becomes a central theme as individuals navigate a world without modern infrastructure, technology, and the comforts they once relied upon. Survival is portrayed in the novel not only as a physical endeavour but also as a mental and emotional challenge, exploring how characters cope with loss, adapt to new circumstances, and find hope in seemingly hopeless situations. Pandemics left an indelible mark on the world, unravelling the fabric of normalcy and forcing people to confront their deepest fears and survival challenges. In such exploration, there is the profound impact of existentialism, a philosophical perspective that grapples with the individual's experience of existence and the search for meaning in the face of crisis. Exploring the pandemic's multifaceted impact involves delving into various aspects, from the raw emotions of fear to the resilience that emerged in the face of adversity. The pandemic, seen through the eyes of existentialism, becomes a story not just of fear and survival, but of the human spirit grappling with adversity, seeking purpose, and crafting meaning amidst the chaos.

The onset of a pandemic prompts significant changes in societal norms and individual behaviours. Fear, uncertainty, and the need for self-preservation lead to shifts in cultural practices, social interactions, and daily routines. Quarantine measures, social distancing protocols, and the normalization of remote work reshape the ways people engage with one another, altering the fabric of social life. Exploring such cultural and behavioural shifts helps in understanding the adaptive strategies societies employ to navigate the challenges posed by pandemics. Beyond the physical health implications, global pandemics have a substantial psychological impact on individuals and communities. The pervasive fear of infection, grief over loss, and the stress induced by social isolation contribute to a heightened focus on mental health. In times of crisis, literature emerges as a powerful medium, mirroring the collective human experience, capturing raw emotions, and offering profound insights into the complexities of survival. Characters in novels, short stories, and poems often grapple with fear, anxiety, grief, and resilience, providing readers with an intimate glimpse into their emotional landscapes. Literature not only reflects the challenges

posed by pandemics but also serves as a reservoir of narrative strategies for coping and survival. Characters navigate uncertain landscapes, confront existential threats, and grapple with ethical dilemmas, offering readers a diverse array of responses to adversity.

The pandemic unfurled an unprecedented canvas of fear. It wasn't merely the fear of a virus but also the fear of the unknown, of losing loved ones, of economic instability, and of disrupted routines. It was a fear that transcended boundaries, connecting individuals worldwide through a shared sense of vulnerability. Stories emerged of individuals grappling with anxiety, navigating through a maze of uncertainty, and redefining their understanding of safety and security. Fear is unveiled in different forms throughout the novel *Station Eleven*. The outbreak of the Georgia Flu instilled a pervasive fear in society, leading to the collapse of civilization. Mandel vividly portrays the initial panic and confusion through his character Jeevan's perspective as he witnesses the rapid spread of the deadly virus. The fear of the unknown grips people, highlighting their vulnerability and the fragility of societal structures. The novel encapsulates the unveiled fear that permeates society when confronted with a pandemic's sudden onslaught, "First we only want to be seen, but once we're seen, that's not enough anymore. After that, we want to be remembered." (187) The innate human desire for acknowledgement and remembrance echoes the fears of being forgotten amidst chaos and tragedy. The pandemic strips away the familiar world, leaving survivors grappling with their newfound reality. Existentialism, with its emphasis on individual responsibility and freedom, provides a unique framework for understanding the unveiled fear that has permeated societies worldwide. The pandemic has unearthed existential anxieties, forcing individuals to confront their mortality and question the very essence of their existence. Existential fear manifests in the context of a global health crisis, unravelling the layers of uncertainty and prompting a reevaluation of life's purpose.

In the face of adversity, the human spirit displayed remarkable resilience. Communities came together, frontline workers displayed unwavering courage, and individuals adapted to unforeseen circumstances. Yet, survival wasn't solely about physical well-being but also about mental fortitude. It involved navigating a terrain where each day presented new challenges—be it in adapting to remote work, ensuring access to healthcare, or coping with the loss of normalcy. "Survival is insufficient." (119) This recurring phrase in Mandel's novel becomes a poignant reminder that mere existence is not enough; it is the quest for purpose and significance that drives humanity even amidst the most trying circumstances.

Survival becomes the central focus for the characters in the post-apocalyptic world. The Traveling Symphony in *Station Eleven* embodies this resilience, navigating a world where culture and art are cherished as a means of preserving humanity's essence. Their determination to uphold performances of Shakespeare's plays amid adversity reflects the human desire to find solace and continuity in art even during the darkest times. Existentialism contends that existence precedes essence, and individuals must define their meaning in life. The pandemic has posed unprecedented survival challenges, both physical and psychological, pushing individuals to grapple with the fragility of their existence.

Amidst the chaos, the pandemic also sparked profound introspection. It prompted a reevaluation of priorities, relationships, and personal aspirations. People discovered newfound meanings in simple joys, rekindled passions, and formed deeper connections with themselves and others. It led to a collective questioning of societal norms and structures, paving the way for discussions on mental health, work-life balance, and the interconnectedness of global communities. As characters navigate the challenges of survival, the novel delves into the emergent meanings they find in the wake of the crisis,

“She was thinking about the way she'd always taken for granted that the world had certain people in it, either central to her days or unseen and infrequently thought of. How without any one of these people the world is a subtly but unmistakably altered place, the dial turned just one or two degrees.” (225)

This reflection underscores the value of human connections and the realization of their profound impact, both in their presence and absence. Emergent meanings and significance evolve in the remnants of the old world. The significance of simple pleasures and connections takes precedence as survivors grapple with a new reality. For instance, the comic book in Mandel's *Station Eleven* itself becomes a symbol of hope, reminding individuals of the beauty of the past and the enduring nature of art. Kirsten Raymonde, the protagonist of the novel carries the comic with her, seeking meaning and solace in its pages, emphasizing the importance of memories and art in shaping identity and purpose. The novel unveils the emergence of new meanings. Art and culture take on a renewed significance as a means of preserving humanity's essence. The Traveling Symphony, a group of musicians and actors, embodies the resilience of the human spirit, showcasing the power of art to connect, heal, and preserve a sense of identity in a world shaken to its core. Mandel's storytelling

prompts reflection on the essence of humanity, emphasizing the resilience to endure, create, and find meaning even amidst the darkest of times. Existentialism posits that meaning is not inherent in life but must be created through individual choices and actions. Amidst the chaos and uncertainty of the pandemic, individuals and communities have sought to forge new meanings and connections.

Pandemic literature is marked by recurring themes and motifs that transcend temporal and cultural boundaries. Writers, both past and present, use their craft to explore the psychological, emotional, and societal dimensions of pandemics, offering readers a mirror to reflect upon their own experiences and responses. Novels, short stories, poetry, and even non-fiction works become conduits for conveying the complexities of pandemic experiences. Through vivid imagery, poignant metaphors, and intricate storytelling, writers capture the nuances of the human condition amidst the chaos and uncertainty unleashed by pandemics. One of the primary themes that literature unveils during pandemics is the palpable fear that permeates the human psyche. Authors, through various genres and narrative techniques, navigate the landscape of anxiety, dread, and existential uncertainty. Whether it's the allegorical representation of fear in dystopian novels or the intimate exploration of personal fears in autobiographical accounts, literature becomes a canvas where the intricate tapestry of human emotions in the face of pandemics is laid bare. Literature also serves as a poignant chronicle of survival challenges during pandemics, illustrating the resilience of individuals amidst adversity. Protagonists navigating a world engulfed by contagion offer a lens through which readers can explore the spectrum of challenges—from the physical threats posed by the virus to the socio-economic and psychological hurdles that accompany pandemics. In the aftermath of pandemics, literature often contributes to the emergence of new meanings and insights that shape societal perspectives. Authors craft narratives that delve into the collective experience of grief, loss, and reconstruction, offering readers a space for reflection and contemplation. Exploring the nuances of emergent meanings in literature enables a nuanced understanding of how societies make sense of the chaos wrought by pandemics, fostering a collective sense of meaning-making that transcends individual experiences. Through literature, the intangible aspects of the pandemic find expression, fostering empathy, introspection, and a shared sense of resilience in the face of uncertainty.

Station Eleven ultimately poses profound questions about what truly matters in life and how human connections, memories, and creativity endure even in the face of overwhelming adversity. It's a testament to

the strength of the human spirit and the innate drive to find purpose and meaning, even in the most challenging of circumstances. From the unveiled fear that has shaken the foundations of our existence to the survival challenges that demand re-examination of priorities, and finally, to the emergent meanings born out of crisis, existentialism offers a rich framework for navigating the complexities of pandemic reality. The existential perspective invites individuals to reflect on people's choices, embrace their responsibility for meaning-making, and find resilience in the face of adversity of Form.

As the world navigated the turbulent pandemic period, stories of hope emerged. These narratives showcased the indomitable human spirit, illustrating how adversity became a catalyst for positive change. From scientific breakthroughs to acts of kindness and innovation, the pandemic became a watershed moment in rewriting narratives of resilience, empathy, and adaptability. While the pandemic inflicted profound wounds, it also catalyzed growth and transformation. The journey forward involves introspection, learning from experiences, and envisioning a future that's more inclusive, empathetic, and prepared to face unforeseen challenges. This chronicle of the pandemic captures the multifaceted nature of this epochal event, acknowledging the unveiled fears, celebrating resilience, and seeking the emergent meanings that will shape our collective narrative in the upcoming time.

The pandemic upheaval became a canvas on which existentialist themes painted themselves vividly, reshaping our lives in profound ways. Existentialism stresses individuality, authenticity, anxiety, and freedom. Barret in his book *Philosophy in the Twentieth Century* (1962) defines existentialism as the philosophy that confronts the human situation in its totality, and "to ask what the basic conditions of human existence are, and how man can establish his own meaning out of these conditions" (43). As fear unveiled its raw form, existential questions echoed louder than ever before. The crisis ripped off the veil of our assumed security, exposing the fragility of human existence.

Existentialism, with its focus on individual freedom, choice, and the search for meaning in a meaningless world, found resonance amidst the chaos. The fear of the unknown, the fragility of life, and the uncertainty of tomorrow – these were not just abstract concepts but palpable realities. Survival became a daily battle, not just against a virus but against the overwhelming weight of existential dread. The threat to life brought forth fundamental questions about one's purpose, connections with oth-

ers, and the essence of existence. Individuals found solace in connections, and in creating meaning from seemingly meaningless moments. The crisis became a catalyst for reevaluating priorities, cherishing simple joys, and finding meaning in the most unexpected corners of life. Existentialism teaches us that meaning is not inherent but created and that we have the agency to shape our lives despite the chaos. In this pandemic, people confronted the absurdity of life, and the absurdity of the situation, and in doing so, they found ways to create their meanings.

Conclusion

Literature depicts pandemics as reckoning forces capable of altering lives and transforming assumptive norms. The pandemic proves that Nature has power that is beyond the reach of human beings despite many biological and technological advances and inventions. A pandemic's literary purpose is not simply to explain the causes of the outbreak, which may not even be its primary objective, but rather to remind us that sense still exists somewhere, and even if there is no meaning outside the quarantine zone, at least there is meaning in our invented tales. A literary work is an act of reclamation against the notion that we are not masters of the world, as represented by illness. One must not mess with nature instead nature, animals, plants and the environment should be respected. A reader's engagement in literature can prevent distress due to pandemics. The existential delirium is captured in various forms of literature, where the very existence becomes the source of pain aroused from the depravity of hope and an inquiry into the unending trauma caused by the invisible force of nature eating through the interwoven texture of humanity. These dreadful instances forced humans to reevaluate what it means to live in fear of dying or possibly extinction. This widespread pandemic provides a chance to pause and consider the uneasy and weedy layers of artifice that have been applied to hide life's unvarnished beauty.

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