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6 **Mental Health in Times of COVID-19: An Exploration of the**  
7 **Representation of Mental Health in Pandemic Literary and**  
8 **Cinematic Narratives**

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13 **ABSTRACT**

14 Pandemics though concern the medical health of a certain community or communities, also  
15 have a significant impact on the mental health of the members of that community. Each  
16 section of society is affected, albeit differently, in a pandemic. Art and literature engage with  
17 and represent society and all its mores. In a pandemic as well, these modes of representation  
18 assume a special responsibility and role. This paper seeks to analyse the representation of the  
19 mental health of individuals and society through literary and artistic mediums. In the case of  
20 artistic mediums, cinematic portrayals will be the centre of study. These representations, in  
21 turn, affect one's mental state and understanding of a situation. The paper will thus, study and  
22 evaluate certain literary and cinematic texts, their representation of mental health, and their  
23 applicability to the COVID-19 pandemic using established theories as supporting material to  
24 substantiate the claims made in the study of the aforementioned works.

25 **KEYWORDS:** Pandemics, mental health, literature, films, metaphors, COVID-19

26

27 **1. INTRODUCTION**

28 The outbreak of a pandemic does not only affect the physical health of an individual  
29 but also has a 'psychological impact on a person.' However, mental health is  
30 something that is often neglected in comparison to physical health. Mental health can  
31 be seen as an equalizer while also a marker of distinction or differences. An impact on

1 mental health is not determined by one's class identity, individuals may be affected by  
2 it irrespective of their stature, thereby giving it a universal scope. At the same time,  
3 not everyone is equipped and privileged to talk about mental health, and since only  
4 the privileged have the opportunity to talk about it, it is rebuffed as an elitist and  
5 classist issue. Pandemics call for the adoption of some serious and unfamiliar ways of  
6 living during the times. There may be present a complete shift in the idea of  
7 'everyday' while such a situation persists. Thus, such a situation affects the psyche of  
8 every individual in some way and may cause negative impacts on their mental health.

9 Pandemics affect the psychology, mental state, and neurology alongside the social,  
10 economic, and political spheres of life. Previous pandemic and epidemic breakouts  
11 and the studies and surveys around them reveal the drastic impact on the mental  
12 health of individuals caused by such a situation. Just like the previous pandemics  
13 witnessed by the world, the recent pandemic, COVID-19 has also affected the mental  
14 state of individuals in different ways. This impact can be studied to determine patterns  
15 by grouping the people into categories, based on the changes occurring in and due to  
16 their mental health and the prime reasons behind them. Meanwhile, some sections of  
17 these people are more vulnerable than others in terms of negative impact on mental  
18 health. As per an article published by Cambridge, the authors consider that the mental  
19 health and psychological consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic may be  
20 particularly serious for at least four groups of people:

- 21 • Those who have been directly or indirectly in contact with the virus
- 22 • Those who are already vulnerable to biological or psychological stressors  
23 (including people affected by mental health problems)
- 24 • Health professionals (because of a higher level of exposure)
- 25 • And even people who are following the news through numerous media channels.  
26 (Fiorillo & Gorwood , 2020)

27 Pandemics, as stated above affect the mental health of every individual differently.  
28 Certain features and elements of this impact include the following.

29 One of the most common effects of such a situation is anxiety. Individuals may  
30 experience anxiety regarding lack of preparedness, stocking supplies, catching the

1 disease etc. Alongside anxiety, these factors may also cause a person to panic.  
2 Quarantine and isolation are something individuals are not habituated to. Prolonged  
3 quarantine and isolation may lead to a person feeling lonely frequently, show symptoms  
4 of depression and schizophrenia. Further, as per an article, many of the anticipated  
5 consequences of quarantine and associated social and physical distancing measures are  
6 themselves key risk factors for mental health issues. These include suicide and self-  
7 harm, alcohol and substance abuse, gambling, domestic and child abuse, and  
8 psychological risks (such as social disconnection, lack of meaning or anomie,  
9 entrapment, cyberbullying, feeling a burden, financial stress, bereavement, loss,  
10 unemployment, homelessness, and relationship breakdown) (Holmes et al., 2020). It  
11 also becomes difficult for some individuals to adapt to a completely different and new  
12 lifestyle.

13 Emotional and behavioural changes may be seen developing in individuals.  
14 Furthermore, the social, political, religious, and economic spheres also may impact the  
15 mental health of an individual negatively. These impacts include policy developments  
16 made by the state on controlling the pandemic situation, temporary unavailability of  
17 jobs, misinformation and rumours, religious beliefs of pandemics being divine  
18 punishment, economic changes such as inflation, a rise in taxes and temporary absence  
19 of a source of income. All these factors can cause severe negative impact on the minds  
20 of individuals. Further, a pandemic situation, especially in developing countries may  
21 drastically impact the mental health of casual workers and migrant labourers due to the  
22 unavailability of work, lack of sustainable ways of living, etc.

23 One of the major reasons apart from quarantining and isolation affecting mental  
24 health is the fear for one's loved ones, particularly for children and the elderly. This  
25 fear is further amplified if due to any physical or other reasons one or one's family  
26 members are more vulnerable to the outbreak.

27 Survivors or victims of such a situation may exhibit hallucinatory behaviour and show  
28 signs of PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder). Further, the negative attitude of  
29 society towards an individual who has contracted the virus may also lead to negative  
30 impacts on a person's mental health. Health sector workers may also show signs of

1 deteriorating mental health and symptoms of PTSD, depression, or other illnesses due  
2 to prolonged exposure to the virus and witnessing of unfortunate deaths caused by the  
3 pandemic.

4 When situations change and a pandemic takes over, there may be disbelief but there is  
5 also an acceptance of one's fate at the hands of the pandemic. As mentioned in the  
6 book *Psychiatry of Pandemics: A Mental Health Response to Infection Outbreak*,  
7 when the fifth-child of Sigmund Freud (the father of psychoanalysis) died due to  
8 complications associated with the Spanish Influenza pandemic of 1918-1920, he  
9 observed, there was a sombre, perhaps necessary, almost fatalistic acceptance of the  
10 influenza pneumonia, evocative of the "complete submission of fate." As the author  
11 puts it, visible are grief and devastating loss of a mourning parent, and strikingly  
12 absent are critical examinations of the meaning of such events and perhaps the outline  
13 of how our self, id, ego, superego perceive and relate to such phenomena (Huremovic,  
14 2019). The understanding of how such a situation is understood by the mind is also  
15 something that affects one's mental health. It can be said that it is hard for humans to  
16 accept that they have no control over what has befallen them and is stronger than  
17 them.

18 Literature and art play an important role in our everyday lives. Literary and artistic  
19 representations of pandemics or fear of something unknown and contagious, which  
20 spreads rapidly also present a certain depiction of the mental health of an individual or  
21 the society in general.

22 Representations of mental health in popular culture that focus on pandemics and  
23 fictional metaphors or pandemics also affect how we look at the subject. Literature  
24 and art serve as tools to represent a subject, and the study of how a particular theme  
25 has been represented, how accurate it is, and how does the work in itself affect one's  
26 psyche is important.

## 27 **2. METHODOLOGY**

28 The methodology that the paper uses is the study and analysis of projection and  
29 treatment of the subject of mental health in literary and cinematic productions that use  
30 the backdrop of a pandemic, or its metaphor. Metaphors of a pandemic are something

1 that draw from the fear of the unknown which is rapidly spreading and is contagious.  
2 In the introduction, the paper has established how mental health is associated and  
3 affected during a pandemic situation vis-à-vis the different segments of the society.  
4 These established theories have been collected from existing research and studies  
5 through books, articles, surveys, statistical data in reference to the COVID-19  
6 pandemic, and past pandemics.

7 Literature and art posit a mirror to society and prove as important elements that make  
8 up our social sphere. These elements play a vital role in initiating discourse, represent,  
9 and understand crucial subjects. The paper will study some important literary and  
10 cinematic works which draw from pandemics and their metaphors and evaluate them  
11 with reference to the subject of mental health.

12 The identified theoretical framework has been used to analytically assess the  
13 treatment and portrayal of mental health in certain literary and artistic productions vis-  
14 à-vis class dynamics, gender, state's responsiveness, occupation, et al.

15 The works of literature that the paper studies are Daniel Defoe's *A Journal of the*  
16 *Plague Year*, Albert Camus' *The Plague*, and José Saramago's *Blindness*. Cinematic  
17 productions that will be the centre of study are *Contagion* (2011), and *Bird Box*  
18 (2018). The study of these texts uses secondary material such as articles, books,  
19 reviews etc. which critically analyse the aforementioned works.

## 20 **3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

### 21 **3.1. Understanding the psyche of a pandemic and associated literary devices**

22 Pandemics and mental health are generally studied on a cause and effect basis.  
23 However, they can be studied in association with each other. Interestingly, when we  
24 study fictional metaphors employed to represent a pandemic situation, a question  
25 which surfaces is why do viewers enjoy it? How can something unknown and  
26 contagious taking over us titillate our senses, grip us, and at the same time curdle our  
27 blood? Further, how this representation plays with our psyche and our understanding  
28 of a situation. As per *Psychiatry of Pandemics: A Mental Health Response to*  
29 *Infection Outbreak*, the burdensome stigma, and isolation of both mental illness and

1 infectious disease stem from ‘fear of contagion’. As put by the authors, we do not  
2 ordinarily permit those deeply seated fears of contagion and fears of insanity to come  
3 to the surface, because the anxieties they generate are intolerable, particularly if they  
4 are fused into one. We often, however, indulge in expressing those terrifying  
5 emotions for entertainment purposes. We allow ourselves to be scared by zombies  
6 when watching a zombie flick in our state of suspended disbelief because zombies are  
7 visibly sick, we know that their sickness is transmissible and that they could make us  
8 sick anytime. At the same time, as a bonus, we are shaken to our core because they  
9 are also invariably insane and it is the implied loss of our own sanity, our own self, in  
10 the process of ‘infection’ that terrifies us. In terms of a pandemic outbreak, the author  
11 further states, if zombification separates the soul from the body, a pandemic separates  
12 a community from its order and its well-being (Huremovic, 2019).

### 13 **3.2. A study of representation of mental health in literary texts focusing on** 14 **pandemic and pandemic metaphors**

15 In 1722, Daniel Defoe wrote *A Journal of the Plague Year* which is based on the  
16 Great Plague which swept across London in 1665. The title page notes that the text is  
17 “observations of the most remarkable occurrences.” The book claims to be written by  
18 a citizen who continued all the while in London. The narrator is named H.F., who  
19 could be Henry Foe, Daniel’s uncle. It is believed that Defoe structured his fictional  
20 writing based on facts available from the narrator.

21 Defoe very systematically presents the instances in the text and constantly provides  
22 the reader with the bills of mortality being generated every day during the time. As  
23 pointed in an article in *The Wire*, H.F. becomes obsessed with the weekly mortality  
24 figures. They charted deaths by parish, giving a picture of how the plague was moving  
25 through the city (Roberts, 2020). This fact seems to be very relatable even in the  
26 context of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, as when such a situation takes over,  
27 people get obsessed with news and statistics, which may affect them negatively.

28 Defoe traces the impact on the mental health of the citizens very explicitly throughout  
29 the text. The text talks about how several segments of the society reacted to the  
30 situation, the rich fled from the place to protect themselves, the poor had to take up

1 jobs like becoming nurses or watchmen, and were the most vulnerable section to the  
2 plague. Initially, the people were seized by the fear of the unknown, as put in the text,  
3 “But in the whole face of the things, I say, much was altered: sorrow and sadness sat  
4 upon every face; and though some parts were not yet overwhelmed, yet all looked  
5 deeply concerned; and, as we saw it apparently coming on, so everyone looked on  
6 himself and his family as in the utmost danger” (Defoe, 1722). This statement proves  
7 applicable throughout the history of pandemics witnessed by the world and even  
8 currently around us.

9 Defoe very explicitly documents people’s minds being guided by their religious  
10 beliefs which are explicitly witnessed in the approach of religious people in such  
11 situations. The narrator himself believed that God wanted him to stay and so he did  
12 even after getting the opportunity to flee. As put by an article, “For H.F., then, the  
13 plague is a spiritually significant experience, not just a physical phenomenon”  
14 (Zimmerman, 1972). He points to the readers the idea of predestination and if he  
15 believed in God, he would be saved.

16 People resorted to fortune-tellers and fraudsters who claimed to have the medications  
17 required to fight the plague. Ideas of divine intervention, supernatural events,  
18 astrology and predictions occupied people’s minds. People took to the streets  
19 confessing their sins running around repenting. Some patients came down to madness  
20 and lunacy and after knowing that they have contracted the plague, ran around  
21 shouting, kissing, and hugging other people which in turn infected the others.

22 Defoe also mentions accounts of people having weird dreams and seeing apparitions,  
23 some heard voices. Defoe writes, “These things serve to show how far the people  
24 were really overcome with delusions; and they had a notion of the approach of a  
25 visitation, all their predictions ran upon a most dreadful plague, which should lay the  
26 whole city, and even the kingdom, waste, and should destroy almost all the nation,  
27 both man and beast” (Defoe, 1722).

28 Through H.F., Defoe also notes how economic decisions may impact one’s  
29 understanding alongside very clearly pointing out that some people needed to work  
30 otherwise hunger could have killed them if not the plague. These factors deeply affect

1 the psyche of an individual where one is left with no choice. Through this, one can  
2 explicitly observe the class dynamics present in society. Meanwhile, whereas, H.F can  
3 document his thoughts, everyone around him can't.

4 Defoe also talks about the decision taken by the government to lock the victims in  
5 their homes, deploying watchmen in front of those houses. The watchmen were only  
6 allowed to fetch essentials for the family. The people reacted to this very negatively,  
7 they sometimes bribed the watchman, assaulted or murdered him, tricked the  
8 watchman to escape, one even being blown-up by gunpowder. Defoe highlights how  
9 the citizens reacted to this forced confinement and did not adhere to it.

10 Through H.F.'s account and his reactions to other individuals' accounts, Defoe  
11 presents a collective psyche and the impact of such a situation on the mental health of  
12 various segments of the society.

13 Albert Camus wrote *The Plague* or *La Peste* in 1947 which focuses on a virus that has  
14 taken over the town of Oran in Algeria. Camus' work can be seen following certain  
15 lines laid by Daniel Defoe in his *A Journal of the Plague Year*. Camus' novel displays  
16 human understanding and reaction to such an incident through the idea of absurdism.  
17 When looked at in terms of the current scenario, as put by an article, Camus' narrative  
18 reveals our contemporaneous familiarity with the concept of how our lives and our  
19 sorrow become instantly meaningless in the face of epidemics that spread rapidly and  
20 unexpectedly, inconveniently interrupting our daily routines. He reminds us that we  
21 can never be mentally or fully prepared for pandemics (Franco-Paredes, 2020).

22 *The Plague* traces the phases of human reaction to the situation, first, there is denial,  
23 then slowly people acknowledge and try to define the situation and then the resolution  
24 takes place. The overtaking of the virus is marked by the growing number of rats  
25 coming out on the streets and dying. Initially, no one assigns the incident any  
26 importance until there has been a death of a human due to a mysterious  
27 reason/disease. An article by *The New Yorker* notes that the plague is of the virus of  
28 fascism, no one gives much thought to the rats until it's too late (Leproe, 2020). This  
29 psyche of humans is put forward in the novel as, "They fancied themselves free, and  
30 no one will ever be free so long as there is pestilence" (Camus, 1947). This statement

1 very accurately describes how it is difficult for humans to believe that something like  
2 this has taken over and that they have no control over it. Furthermore, a situation is  
3 only considered serious when everyone in a society can possibly be affected by it.  
4 This argument is further put forward in an article by *The Week*. Camus challenges our  
5 predisposition to attribute humanness to all events including calamities, and to deny  
6 vehemently, the possibility of such events escalating into proportions fully beyond the  
7 scope of human imagination (John, 2020). In the text, the protagonist says that “When  
8 war breaks out people simply say: it won’t last, it’s too stupid. And war is certainly  
9 too stupid, but that doesn’t prevent it from lasting” (Camus, 1947).

10 The novel circles around a team of men who have taken up the task of fighting the  
11 virus that has taken over. Through the individual narratives, put forward for us by the  
12 protagonist, DR. Rieux, the text represents the different impacts of a pestilence on  
13 different segments of society. Though the book doesn’t give space to all sections such  
14 as housewives, casual labourers, and certain other groups, it still manages to represent  
15 a collective psyche of society as a whole alongside some specific narratives.

16 The novel most importantly puts forward the psyche and the mental state of the  
17 protagonist who is a doctor. During such times, they are one of the most vulnerable  
18 groups to the disease and the nature of their work may affect their mental health greatly.  
19 The text traces the growing sense of dizziness of the doctor and how witnessing  
20 constant deaths affect him. The text acknowledges the helpless feeling and irritation of  
21 those working in the field as for Rieux, the plague felt like “an endless defeat.”

22 Camus does acknowledge the fact that the understanding of a situation is greatly  
23 affected by media. He notes how misinformation, for instance, the description of the  
24 disease as Cholera gave a faulty impression to the citizens. There is also a mention of  
25 the social distinctions present in society. After the closing of the gates of the town,  
26 there were some privileged, who were able to send messages outside the town,  
27 whereas the poor who had caught the virus were worried if they would be used for  
28 experiments. The collective psyche of those affected by the contagious outbreak is  
29 also present throughout the text. Camus claims, “There are ones who are afraid and  
30 the others, the majority, who don’t even have the time to feel afraid” (Camus, 1947).

1 The collective psyche of society is very strongly represented by Camus. The rising  
2 anxiety and fear of contamination, some falling into madness, especially those who  
3 were infected by the plague and this idea of unavoidable death. The text also  
4 acknowledges the monotony of the situation, as the lines read, “Yes, the plague, like  
5 abstraction, was monotonous” (Camus, 1947). There is also present the theme of  
6 people being guided by religious beliefs and understanding.

7 The text throughout represents the constant fear of the condition of people’s loved ones,  
8 who they could not communicate with since the only way to do so was to write to them  
9 and no transportation was taking place. Camus notes, “This abrupt separation, without any  
10 halfway state and no predictable future, left us disconcerted, unable to react towards the  
11 memory of that presence, still so close, yet already so far away, that now filled our days. In  
12 reality, we suffered doubly: from our own suffering first and then what we imagined to be  
13 that of the absent loved one, whether son, spouse, or lover” (Camus, 1947).

14 Camus further notes the changing view of the situation, whereas, first it’s hard to  
15 accept and there is constant fear, then it starts to ‘normalize’ taking an existential and  
16 nihilistic approach often. Camus notes, “At first people had agreed to being cut off  
17 from the outside...but suddenly becoming conscious of a kind of incarceration beneath  
18 the lid of the sky.” (Camus, 1947). The people of the town accepted their new status  
19 as prisoners, as it is said that they were reduced to their pasts alone. This idea affects  
20 the psyche greatly, the idea of living in the memory.

21 Alongside focusing on literal pandemics, texts also resort to the use of pandemic  
22 metaphors which take upon the fear of something unknown and contagious. José  
23 Saramago wrote *Blindness* in 1995, a text which takes upon a pandemic metaphor of  
24 blindness. The book starts with a man suddenly going blind while driving on a busy  
25 road. The blindness is described as ‘white’ like a milky white sea. A man offers to  
26 help him by driving the blind man to his home who eventually steals his car. Then the  
27 blind man is taken to the eye doctor where other patients are waiting, however, the  
28 doctor is confused by this unfamiliar blindness. Soon, a blindness pandemic spreads,  
29 affecting first the blind man’s wife, the doctor, the car thief, and all the patients and  
30 people in contact with those affected. Throughout the novel, only the doctor’s wife

1 doesn't lose her sight. The government puts all the infected people in an abandoned  
2 mental asylum guarded by soldiers who have shoot at sight orders if anyone tries to  
3 escape. As the plot progresses, and the asylum gets flooded with people, and the  
4 conditions of the patients worsen, a group of hoodlums take control over food in the  
5 asylum and ask the other wards for valuables and women in exchange for food.

6 Through the novel, Saramago questions and highlights multiple aspects of humans  
7 and their psyche. He questions human rationality, behaviour, and understanding.  
8 Blindness also serves as a metaphorical blindness questioning if blindness is a human  
9 condition, whether we are blind or we choose not to see. As mentioned in a critical  
10 article, as in Camus' *The Plague*, José Ornelas suggests, we are faced with an allegory  
11 on the body politic that needs to apply rational and ethical policies if it is to get rid of  
12 the metaphorical plague. Saramago was explicit about his concerns with rationality:  
13 "With this book, I intend to question myself and my readers about our rationality, if  
14 we are, in effect, rational" (Keren, 2007).

15 The impact of a pandemic that may not kill you but leave you blind has a significant  
16 impact on the characters in the text. There is present a sense of loss of identity as one  
17 cannot be identified with their names but their voices. Further, no character has been  
18 assigned names in the text. The characters also feel massive frustration, alienation,  
19 helplessness associated with a certain lack of agency caused by the 'white-blindness.'  
20 As Saramago puts it in the text, " we are so remote from the world that any day now,  
21 we shall no longer know who we are, or even remember our names, and besides, what  
22 use would names be to us, no dog recognizes another dog or knows the other by  
23 names they have been given, a dog is identified by its scent and that is how it  
24 identifies others, here we are like another breed of dogs, we know each other's bark or  
25 speech, as for the rest, features, colour of eyes, or hair, they are of no importance if as  
26 if they did not exist" (Saramago, 1995).

27 Furthermore, as discussed earlier in the project, there is present a certain acceptance  
28 of the disaster caused by a pandemic, no one questions it. As mentioned in a review  
29 by *The Washington Post*, we were reminded of Albert Camus' essay on Franz Kafka.  
30 Camus points out that Kafka's characters seem so bizarre precisely because they

1 accept their unusual if not outlandish circumstances as being perfectly ordinary”  
2 (Nova, 2017). This perfectly fits the narrative of Saramago’s text as all the patients  
3 accept their situation and there is no explicit complaint against the ‘disease’.

4 This aspect is also associated with the understanding of the loss of agency and control  
5 over one’s fate. Further, the characters have no idea when things will go back to  
6 ‘normal’. Slowly the entire city falls victim to the plague and there is complete havoc,  
7 people are roaming around clueless, ransacking shops for food, dogs are feeding on  
8 the dead lying on the streets, and it’s completely catastrophic.

9 Women in the text witness additional trauma and torture, as when the hoodlums take  
10 control over the food, they demand the other wards for valuables and women, to rape  
11 them. To keep people alive, they are treated as transactional objects and go through  
12 heinous situations. This completely traumatizes some of them and in the end, leads  
13 the doctor’s wife to murder the leader of the group of hoodlums.

14 The text can also be read in association with Foucault’s theory of power relationships  
15 and the theory of the panopticon. Panopticon was a structure developed by Jeremy  
16 Bentham that will permit a supervisor to see all without being seen by anyone under  
17 surveillance. The unequal gaze caused the internalization of the gaze of the  
18 supervisor. This means one is less likely to break rules if he believes he is being  
19 watched even if he is not. As per Foucault, disciplinary power is a type of power that  
20 is based on a permanent system of surveillance which eventually results in an  
21 individual’s self-regulation of their behaviour. (Foucault, Society Must be Defended)  
22 (Esmaili & Zohdi, 2015). This theory can be applied in the text, where the mind is  
23 led to believe something which affects the behaviour of the characters in multiple  
24 ways. There is a constant fear of the guards outside the asylum who might shoot them,  
25 this even leads to the patients showing reluctance to step out even when the building  
26 is on fire. Further, as a corollary, the doctor’s wife who can see everyone, especially  
27 those who can’t, also affect her negatively, there is a sense of unethical practice.  
28 Further, she sometimes gets so upset and impacted by the devastating conditions  
29 which lead her to want to be blind. Through this, the text presents a dual  
30 representation of mental health in the shifting power structure.

### 1 3.3. An analysis of the representation of mental health in movies focusing on 2 pandemics and pandemic metaphors

3 Several cinematic productions focusing on pandemics and their metaphors have been  
4 made in the history of films. These representations have a huge impact on the viewer  
5 because of their visual, graphic content. The reason behind such movies receiving a  
6 surge in their viewership during a pandemic is because people want to understand the  
7 seriousness and implications of such a situation. It becomes a medium for the human  
8 mind trying to look into the future of their own circumstance. As put in an article by  
9 *The Guardian*, for some psychological profiles keeping fear out of sight only enables  
10 it to expand in size and intensity. Such films such as *Contagion* and *Outbreak* allow  
11 audiences to vicariously live through the end of days and survey what will be left after  
12 (Bramasco, 2020).

13 One of the films focusing on pandemics that came into massive limelight during the  
14 outbreak of COVID-19 was Steven Soderbergh's 2011 film, *Contagion*. The film  
15 gained a huge audience due to its startling similarities with the ongoing pandemic. In  
16 the film, a virus named MEV-1 takes over, which, as put by a scientist in the film was  
17 caused as, "somewhere in the world the wrong pig met up with the wrong bat"  
18 (Soderbergh, 2011 ). The virus in the film is spread by respiratory droplets and  
19 fomites and has 25-30% mortality rates.

20 The film in a certain sense traces the public behaviour and psyche accurately during a  
21 pandemic situation. Soderbergh features multiple facets of the situation in this film.  
22 There is present a clear representation of the increase in crimes and looting during the  
23 times due to a lack of adequate food supplies and essentials. The helplessness and  
24 frustration felt by the patient are depicted in the film overtly. The fear of contagion,  
25 contact, and stepping out from quarantine is traced by the 2011 film.

26 Certain scenes in the film very accurately capture the fear and seriousness which  
27 engulfs people's mind. In one scene, a scientist who is aware of the seriousness of the  
28 situation as it has just taken over sits in a café and deeply ponders as he sees people  
29 constantly coming in direct and indirect contact, and this makes the audience fear  
30 even touching a glass near them.

1 The film shows how even during such times, there are people who are guided by  
2 malpractices and spread rumours about the disease, and influence citizens over fake  
3 remedies and medications for their capital gains. The harm caused to the minds of the  
4 people due to misinformation and rumours is summed up in the film by Dr. Ellis  
5 Cheever when he says, “in order to get scared all you have to do is come in contact  
6 with a rumour, or a television, or the internet” (Soderbergh, 2011 ) as opposed to  
7 coming in contact with an infected person or surface to catch the disease. The film  
8 accurately grasps people’s obsession with news and numbers during such an  
9 occurrence which affects their mental health greatly which gets amplified when  
10 misinformation steps in. The belief that rumours are as contagious as the scenario to  
11 one’s mind is highlighted. Further, the question that what amount of fear of contagion  
12 is desired to understand the seriousness and what amount starts affecting one  
13 negatively may surface in the viewer’s mind.

14 The 2018 Netflix post-apocalyptic film, *Bird Box* based on a novel of the same name,  
15 draws on a metaphor of a pandemic situation that has taken over. As suggested in the  
16 film, the earth has been taken over by demonic entities which take the form of one’s  
17 worst fear prompting the person to kill himself/herself. As summed in one sentence, ‘if  
18 you see it, you die.’ This causes the central characters of the film to blindfold themselves  
19 whenever outside, and cover the doors and windows of their accommodations.

20 The film delves into multiple aspects of mental health during such a situation. There  
21 is a graphic and explicit representation of people indulging in suicides after they fall  
22 into ‘madness’ when they see the entities. The film projects the mental state of its  
23 characters in certain ways and the constant fear of seeing the ‘forbidden.’ There is  
24 present the constant fear if the entity is around them and if they can see the  
25 characters whereas they are blindfolded, a panopticon like situation, where there is  
26 present an internalisation of gaze which causes for extreme levels of self-regulation,  
27 just like discussed above in terms of the novel, *Blindness*. This idea may affect the  
28 mental state of the characters and viewers greatly. The film also features constant  
29 anxiety and fear for one’s loved one’s wellbeing. The film further focuses on the  
30 distress and impact on the people who are seeing their near ones die, in this case  
31 through suicide.

1 The film garnered discussions concerning mental health in terms of both depiction  
2 and the film's impact on the viewers. It was argued by multiple viewers on social  
3 media that the film lacks the provision of an essential trigger warning of mental health  
4 and how the film affected their mental state negatively. As put in an article by  
5 *Psychology Today* on the rating the film provides, while the rating is helpful, it's  
6 rather broad and fails to include certain elements pertaining to mental health...the  
7 current classification could benefit from specifiers pertaining to mental health trigger  
8 warning to themes such as anxiety, trauma, self-harm, and suicidality. Many viewers  
9 flocked to social media to share their personal experiences and warnings (Ali, 2018).

10 Further, in terms of the film's depiction of mental health, it is very ambiguous and has  
11 seen two schools of thought by its viewers which is necessary to be pointed out to  
12 understand how the film impacted one's understanding of the situation and mental  
13 health. It has been argued by certain critics and viewers that the film villainises people  
14 with mental illness as the characters such as former patients of a psychiatric hospital  
15 and a store clerk described as 'a bit crazy' are shown immune to the entities and as  
16 carrying out the mysterious entities' agenda by attacking others. As put by an article,  
17 instead of killing themselves in gratuitously gory ways like 'normal' characters do,  
18 people with mental illness become agents of evil, obsessed with carrying out the  
19 monsters' mission to destroy humanity (Joho, 2018). Whereas, as per some viewers and  
20 critics, the film represents the frustration of people with mental illness. As pointed out  
21 in an article, this thought can be summed up through the reference to a social media  
22 user who is also a mental health campaigner, Benny James, "...people labelled as  
23 'mentally ill' are immune to the monsters and they want everyone else to see it. They  
24 want everyone else to see what it's like to want to take your own life, hear voices in  
25 your head. The monster is suicide and mental illness personified" (AltPress, 2019).

#### 26 **4. CONCLUSION**

27 After studying the, literary and cinematic works that were the focus of this study, the  
28 following has been observed.

29 We have seen several literary and artistic works that focus on pandemics and their  
30 metaphors. Often these serve as tools to express one's mental state during such times.

1 It can further be said, that there is a certain psychology behind productions of such  
2 works or even to the responses on its consumption.

3 The literary and cinematic works studied, acknowledge and delve into the social,  
4 political, and economic spheres at some level and their engagement vis-à-vis mental  
5 health during pandemic situations.

6 One of the most important observations made was seen in Camus' *The Plague*, which  
7 very accurately traces the general societal understanding and reaction to such a situation,  
8 first, there is denial, then acknowledgment, and understanding of the situation, and then  
9 resolution. The text also traces how after a point of time, the situation 'normalizes.' This  
10 has been very explicitly observed in terms of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. The  
11 situation, after a point of time, turns to be the 'new normal.' Further, the important aspect  
12 of acceptance of one's fate in the hands of the pandemic is present throughout. This  
13 aspect was clearly seen in Saramago's *Blindness*. There is no question of the casualties  
14 caused by a pandemic, there is a clear acceptance of one's fate.

15 In both Defoe and Camus' work, there is an acknowledgment of the social divide in  
16 society, and how such a situation blatantly highlights that social divide.

17 In such times, there is present a constant fear of the well-being of one's loved ones,  
18 especially if they are more vulnerable to contagion due to any reasons. This factor  
19 affects one's mental health, and well-being greatly. These aspects have been well  
20 traced in the film *Bird Box* (2018).

21 An important aspect of the entire subject is the impact on the mental health of a  
22 pandemic patient. There are several factors that may cause a negative impact on their  
23 mental health, and may even cause PTSD. The film *Contagion* (2011) manages to  
24 acknowledge the subject and helps one get a glimpse of how such a situation may  
25 affect a patient.

26 Living in times of social media, where the platform has gained major importance in  
27 our lives, there is a huge role played by the medium around the subject. One of the

1 key elements of the medium which impacts an individual's mental health is rumours,  
2 and misinformation. These may include, faulty data, occurrences, fake medications,  
3 and solutions, etc. Camus' *The Plague* acknowledges the role of misinformation, and  
4 Soderbergh's *Contagion* (2011) deeply delves into it.

5 Apart from representing mental health, these mediums also affect one's mental health.  
6 This aspect was highlighted explicitly by the responses of viewers in relation to  
7 Netflix's *Bird Box* (2018).

8 Literature and cinema have a huge role in one's life and has certain responsibilities  
9 too. Literature and cinema are often termed as a mirror to the society, and thus  
10 represent all the spheres around us in certain ways. Texts and cinematic productions  
11 based on pandemics depict human and/or societal understanding and psyche in a  
12 certain way and the project analysed this representation of mental health using  
13 established studies and the primary survey carried out to determine the applicability  
14 and accuracy of this portrayal. It could be said that these media's representation  
15 highlights the impact on the mental health of individuals during pandemics. They also  
16 instigate dialogue around the social issue of mental health, especially during  
17 pandemics, and how all the spheres around us play a role in impacting our mental  
18 health. There is also present a certain level of de-stigmatisation of the topic when the  
19 works portray the universality of the subject. These can be done through metaphorical  
20 representations also.

## 21 **5. CONFLICT OF INTERESTS**

22 Aakriti Agarwala and Manisha Saluja declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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