

Exploring Collective Trauma in Selected Anglophone Covid-19 Poetry

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Abstract

The paper investigates the profound impact of collective trauma on humans, with a specific focus on the COVID-19 pandemic through the prism of carefully selected poetry from parts of Anglophone Africa, Europe, America and Asia. Employing a multidisciplinary approach of psychology and literature, the study discerns the intricate ways in which poetry serves as a poignant means to express, navigate and analyse the complexities of shared societal and global trauma. The research delves into diverse cultural perspectives, considers how various poets grapple with and articulate their COVID-19 pandemic experiences through poetry. With a range of comprehensive reviews of contemporary poetry stemming from the COVID-19 experience, the study identifies recurring themes, linguistic nuances, and emotional resonances that encapsulate the collective psyche. By employing qualitative content analysis, the study unveils ways in which the selected poets articulate collective trauma, offering a deeper understanding of the shared human experience in the face of unprecedented challenges. The study affirms that manifestations such as loss, grief, isolation, fear, guilt, uncertainty are common in collective trauma and poetry serves as a medium for resilience, hope, empathy and communal understanding.

Keywords: trauma, collective trauma, COVID-19, Pandemic, collectivity

Introduction

Traumas involve psychological and emotional responses to events that are regarded as harmful and distressing. Allen (1995, p.14) provides a detailed definition of trauma by including “responses to powerful onetime events like accidents, natural disasters, crime, surgeries, deaths and other violent events. It also includes responses to chronic or repetitive experiences such as abuse, neglect and combat. Thus, trauma describes experiences that are physically and emotionally draining and damaging”. Traumas may be personal such as sexual abuse, physical abuse or collective such as natural disasters, wars and pandemics in nature depending on the extent to which its impact is felt.

Collective trauma refers to a profound psychological and emotional impact of a disheartening event or series of events on an entire society or a specific cultural group. Unlike individual trauma, which affects a person’s mental and emotional well-being, collective trauma involves the shared experiences and responses of larger communities or even nations. According to Erikson (1976), collective trauma is distinguished from personal trauma because of its response to social transformations resulting from the accident rather than the acute shock of observing the destruction or experiencing personal losses. He argues further that:

Collective trauma blows to the basic tissues of social life that damages the bond attaching people together and impairs the prevailing sense of communality. It involves the gradual realization that the community no longer exists as an effective source of support and that an important part of the self has disappeared... (1976, p.154).

Saul (2022, p. 3) defines collective trauma as “the impact of adversity on relationships in families, communities and societies at large. This includes natural and human-caused disasters as well as the cumulative effects of poverty, oppression, illness and displacement”. It emphasises the shared experience of distress within a group of individuals who may or may not share the same cultural background. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic which is the focal point of the study, collective trauma manifests as a shared sense of loss, fear, uncertainty which overwhelms societies

globally. Collective trauma explores how large-scale events such as wars, natural disasters, pandemic or societal upheaval, impact groups collectively.

The study is grounded on the recognition of poetry as a reflective and creative medium for expressing the complex emotions associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. The COVID-19 crisis not only posed a public health threat but also deeply impacted societies worldwide, leaving a lasting imprint on collective memory. The study contextualises the pandemic experience within the broader framework of collective trauma, by understanding how the selected poets process shared distress through poetic expression. The study captures the multifaceted nature of responses, acknowledging the intersection between culture, identity and trauma. The poets selected for this study include: Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo and Kola Eke from Africa; Charlotte Jolley and Julie Sheldon from Europe; Scott Momaday and Michael Whitney from America and Cyrine Kotras, Ashish Gupta from Asia. The poets for this study have been carefully selected from English speaking areas of the four continents and these poems adequately explore how humans reacted to the COVID-19 pandemic by documenting these collective traumatic experiences which resulted in feelings of anguish, grief, frustration, depression, nostalgia, resilience, and survival. Examining COVID-19 through poetry and exploring collective trauma provides a unique perspective on the human experience during the pandemic. Their Poetry reflects the collective social dimensions of the pandemic. The different poets selected for the study provide unique perspectives on how their communities were impacted, revealing societal strengths, vulnerabilities and resilience of human spirit. Despite the deadly impact of the COVID-19 virus on the globe, not much attention concerning the collective traumatic effects of the pandemic have been looked at. Budryte and Resende (2023) in their study observe the lacuna in trauma studies that depict pandemics such as Spanish flu and COVID-19 despite the millions of lives that they have claimed (p.1). COVID-19 has had more impacts on humanity than any other man-made or naturally destructive event. It is this lacuna, this study intends to fill.

COVID-19, caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus, is a respiratory illness that emerged in late 2019 in Wuhan, China. It quickly escalated into a global pandemic. The virus primarily spreads through respiratory droplets when an infected person coughs or sneezes. Common symptoms of the virus include fever, cough and shortness of breath, though it can range from mild to severe symptoms. Governments worldwide implemented several measures such as lockdowns, social distancing and masks mandates to curb the spread. The pandemic strained the health care system, the economies and daily life activities. Consequently, vaccines were developed and rolled out at a fast pace to mitigate the impact and spread of the virus. The virus brought with it several speculations and questions on the method of its transmission, the existence of the virus, the description and a label for it.

Theoretical Framework

The study adopts the psychological theory with the focus on trauma as an offshoot. The psychological approach to literature is concerned with the enquiry into the minds of writers and characters to understand why they think or act the way they do. Trauma as a sociological and psychological field of study, over the years has intersected with literature, making it a multi-disciplinary field of study. The rise of public awareness about trauma in the twentieth century and the growing attention given to the Vietnam War and the Holocaust survivors gave way to the flourishing of numerous trauma narratives. The relationship between trauma and literature is complex, as literature serves as a medium for individuals to express, explore and cope with traumatic experiences. Through literature, writers can convey emotional weights of trauma, offering their readers glimpses into the inner world of those who have experienced traumatic events. Harding (2006, p. 9) informs us that “Literary representations of trauma attempts to help readers access

traumatic experiences and thus, have an important place among diverse historiographic, testimonial, and representational approaches in illuminating the persona and public aspects of trauma". Through the reflection of trauma in literary studies, there is certain fostering of empathy by allowing readers to indirectly experience the emotional terrain of trauma. This occurs by allowing the readers engage with poets, personas, characters in literary texts who undergo traumatic experiences in order to gain a deeper understanding of the complexities surrounding trauma and devastating effects on individuals and groups of people. Literature often plays a major role in its ability to represent and broadcast trauma at the collective level. Overtime, psychologists like Caruth, Herman, Ferlman recognised only personal or individual trauma. However, in recent times, during the late twentieth century, psychologists and sociologists started to apply the concept of trauma to societal groups ranging from small to large scale population

Empirical Studies on Collective Trauma

Most studies on collective trauma have been on historical events and their effects on several societies. Most studies are centred on man-made traumas that involve political assassinations, collective trauma from colonial experiences, African American slave trade experience, terrorist attacks, genocides, and wars thereby neglecting naturally induced traumatic experiences such as epidemics, pandemics, volcanic eruptions, wildfires, tsunamis, and flooding. Ron Eyerman, one of the original creators of the theory of collective trauma has deeply explored on the theory by examining several studies on man-made collective traumatic experiences. Eyerman's 2001 study contributes significantly to the field of trauma studies in that he examines how historical events such as slavery in the United States of America shaped collective identity and memory over time. By focusing on slavery as a collective trauma, historical atrocity becomes embedded in the collective identity of African Americans which are transmitted from one generation to another. His 2008 study borders on the collective trauma experienced or triggered by the gruesome assassination in 2004 of former film director Theo Van Gogh. Furthermore, Eyerman (2011) analyses the murders of Swedish former Prime Minister Olof Palme and former Foreign Minister Anna Lindh and the episodes of grief and confusion in Sweden that caused collective trauma. Onwuachi-Willig (2016) like Eyerman dwells on the racial discrimination experienced by the African Americans and the collective trauma experienced. She uses the case of Emmett Till's brutal murder by two white men and criticises the racist acquittal of Till's murderers and concludes that the all white judicial jury acquittal caused the African American community deep collective trauma.

In the field of literature, few studies have been carried out with regards to collective trauma. However, most literary studies have been on prose fiction genre as against the poetry genre. Mackichan (2012) examines Seamus Heaney's collection of poems *North* from the point of view of intersecting the discourse on collective trauma and testimony as theorised by Caruth, Felman and Laub to bear witness to the prolonged political conflict in Belfast, Ireland known as "Troubles". Closely related to Mackichan's study is that of Alsaden (2013) who uses the Iraq war of 2003 to explore the trauma manifested by the Iraqi civilians and American veterans with focus on the negative consequences of war. Through the adoption of the collective theory, her paper explores "how trauma fractures identity" and the present difficulties in dealing with the destructive nature of war (p.1). She uses poetry collections of Brain Turner, Al-Rubaire, Duaye Mikahl and Haider Al-Kabi for her study.

Moawad (2022) is pertinent to this study as in his study; he explores the collective traumatic effect on people's lives and the therapeutic nature of poetry, using Regin Silvest and John Charles Ryan's collection of poems, *Covid-19 Pandemic Poems Volume I*. He argues that while people's lives are affected by the Covid-19 virus all over the world, "disordered or traumatic people can have

psychiatric treatment through therapeutic processes of reading and writing poetry and behavioural activities” (p. 30).

Rostam (2022) undertakes a vivid study on collective trauma of African Americans through the portrayal of the characters in Toni Morrison’s novel *Song of Solomon* who are weighed down by the heavy burden of rejection, oppression, racism and white dominance. The paper studies these black characters who struggle with major repressive pressures within trauma theory. He concludes that recovery is for “only those characters (who) could surpass the pressure of trauma and find a connection as well as meaning in their lives that could pass the stages of recovery” (p. 3170).

Africa as a continent has experienced several traumatic experiences ranging from colonialism to disturbing post-independent experiences like civil wars in Nigeria and Rwanda and Congo to terrorist activities by Islamic sects like Boko Haram. Nigeria will be the main focus in the African context. The most notable event in Nigeria that has garnered attention from the world is the Nigerian/Biafran Civil war. The Civil war was a deeply traumatic event with significant collective repercussions as a result of a staggering loss of lives and properties leaving scars that endure in memories of those who lived through it. The war came with severe humanitarian crisis marked by famine and widespread starvation in the Biafran camp. It left deep psychological scars on individuals and communities with long lasting mental health problem.

The Nigerian/Biafran war experiences have received huge literary attention since the late 1960s till the 2000s. Literary texts on the three genres have been written to expose the traumatic experiences of the Nigerian Civil war. “Nigerian Civil war poetry” according to Okuyade (2021), “reveals the traumatic experience of Nigerians in turbulent times” (p.23). Through a sampling of poetry from Christopher Okigbo, Gabriel Okara, J.P Clark, Chinua Achebe, Odia Ofeimun, Chinweizu, and Peter Onwudinjo, the destructive nature of the war is depicted in literary studies. In the prose genre, many fictional representations of the Civil war have emerged. Numerous scholarly articles on trauma studies have emerged from the Nigerian Civil war experience. Some notable ones include: Nwahunanya (1997), Francoise (2011) Dalley (2013), Nwanyanwu & Anasuidu (2019), etc.

Despite the numerous social, political and literary reviews ranging from political assassinations to African American experiences and Civil wars from Europe, America, Middle East and Africa, there is still a gap on collective traumas that are induced and caused by natural disasters. Hence, poetry on COVID-19, the most recent pandemic man has experienced in the last century serves as a great choice for this discourse as a result of its global impact.

Manifestations of Collective Trauma in Selected Poetry

For the study, the poems selected include Adimora-Ezeigbo’s “Rhythms of Isolation”, “Portrait of Calm”; Eke’s “Every Symptom”, Jolley’s “A Life with no Colour”, Sheldon’s “Some of us”; Momaday’s “In the Time of Plague”; Whitney’s “Working from Home”; Kotras’ “When Death Comes to a House”, and Gupta’s “Covid-19: From Carrier to Warrior”. The poems are analysed according to the order in which they have been arranged in the previous sentence according to the poet’s continent of origin.

Adimora-Ezeigbo’s “Rhythm of Isolation” as the title implies, revolves around the idea of isolation during the dreadful COVID-19 pandemic. In the first stanza below, a reference to isolation is seen:

It seemed a joke when the orders sounded
“Stay home, stay safe,” was the command
“Whether you are man, woman, child,

Stay home and prevent Covid-19 infection” (p. 4)

The first line captures the initial skepticism or disbelief surrounding the directives to “stay home, stay safe” during the COVID-19 pandemic. This response reflects a collective reaction to the sudden imposition of restriction and the gravity of the situation. The subsequent lines that follow also suggest a shared response to the directives, indicating a collective experience of the pandemic. The abrupt shift in daily life marked by the command to stay at home reflects a shared disruption of social norms and values. The initial perception that it “seemed a joke” suggests a resistance or disbelief, which is a common initial response to unexpected and disruptive events. This resistance can be seen as a coping mechanism, as individuals and societies grapple with the unfamiliar and potentiality of a traumatic circumstance. The directive to “stay home, stay safe” becomes symbolic of the larger societal response to the public health crisis caused by COVID-19. The symbolism highlights the collective effort to protect individuals and communities, showcasing a shared response to traumatic events. The poet’s use of “whether you are a man, woman, child” emphasises the level of severity the virus comes with and thus this warning extends to the smallest unit of any society which is the family. This places the family as a symbol for the collective society devoid of race, class and creed.

The poem continues with the poet leading us into her newly crafted routine since the emergence of the virus. She informs in the following lines:

Widowed alone, I took refuge in old and new books,
Experimented with exotic recipes from cookery books,
Tackled loneliness with a burst of activity
That drained my energy like a sieve (p. 4)

The poet persona reflects on her individual response to isolation and loneliness, likely intensified by the experience of being alone at that moment in time. While it does not explicitly address collective trauma, it offers insights into personal coping mechanisms during challenging times, which can be connected to a broader societal responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. The poet’s engagement with books and recipes signifies a personal coping strategy which consequently leads to adaption to new realities. The lines above further convey a sense of loneliness and the draining effect of certain activities. This resonates with the collective experience of isolation during lockdowns and social distancing measures.

In another poem titled “Portrait of Calm”, Ezeigbo conveys a sense of individual fear and anxiety, reminiscent of facing an uncertain future. It reads:

I wake up in the morning afraid
Troubles of life weigh heavily on my mind
I feel a flutter in my heart, making me anxious
Like a warrior setting out to fight his first battle,
Like one embarking on a perilous journey.
Is this the way they feel who await confirmation
Of a life-threatening condition
After undergoing an array of tests?
The possibility of death looms large. (p.3)

This can be paralleled to the collective trauma experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic. The reference to a “warrior setting out to fight” and “embarking on a perilous journey” mirrors the global experience of confronting an invisible enemy-the virus. The line “is this the way they feel

who await confirmation of a life-threatening condition after undergoing an array of tests?” draws a connection to the widespread testing efforts during the pandemic. Many individuals underwent COVID-19 tests, anxiously waiting results that could potentially be life-altering, reflecting a shared experience on a larger scale. Furthermore, the looming possibility of death expressed in the poem resonates with the collective grief and loss felt globally due to the pandemic. The pervasive fear and uncertainty depicted in the poem align with the emotional toll experienced collectively during a period marked by illness, loss, and a sense of vulnerability.

Kola Eke’s “Every Symptom” in its entirety captures the heightened state of vigilance and suspicion surrounding symptoms during the COVID-19 pandemic, reflecting elements of collective trauma. This suspicion is expressed in the following lines:

Every symptom
Equivalent of the virus
Common cold and cough
Aches and sneezing (p. 58)

A woman
Unable to survive
Venom of caesarian operation
Linked to the virus (p. 58)

The first five stanzas of the poem convey a sense of hyperawareness where every symptom is treated as equivalent to the virus. Hyperawareness in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic refers to an elevated state of consciousness and attentiveness regarding the virus and its implications. Individuals experiencing hyperawareness may constantly monitor news updates, adhere strictly to safety measures, and exhibit heightened sensitivity to potential risks. This heightened awareness often stems from the severity and global impact of the pandemic, leading people to be more vigilant in protecting themselves and others. This reflects a collective response to the fear and uncertainty surrounding COVID-19, where heightened vigilance leads to the tendency to link various illnesses to the virus. Stigmatisation and taboos set in during these perilous times as symptoms like sneezing in public places or experiencing a headache, is linked to COVID-19. This reflects a collective response where individuals may face social stigma or be treated as suspects contributing to a collective sense of caution.

The poet’s mention of treating “every infinitesimal illness treated as covid-19” reflects a pathologisation of everyday symptom. The mention of an elderly man’s prolonged headache in the third stanza being linked to the virus illustrates how the pandemic can influence the interpretation of natural causes. This reflects a collective trauma response where various health issues are viewed through the lens of the prevailing crisis. Furthermore, the poet’s reference to the isolation of suspected passengers on flights in the stanzas that follow indicate a shift in the manner in which health concerns are addressed. This reflects the collective trauma response of implementing strict protocols to contain the spread of the virus, even if it means isolating individuals with mild symptoms. Also, the portrayal of anyone who sneezes becoming a suspect, especially aboard an aircraft, reflects a collective atmosphere of suspicion and fear. This collective response is driven by the shared anxiety about the contagious nature of the virus and the efforts to prevent its spread. The suspicious passengers and aircraft crew are presented in the following lines below:

Aboard an aircraft
Any passenger who sneezes
Treated as a suspect
On landing

Gets to waiting hands
Of NCDC
Sneezing aboard (p.58)

Julie Sheldon's "Some of Us" is a witty poem which provides a survey into the living conditions of the collectivity during the COVID-19 pandemic through the use of contrasts. In the first stanza, Sheldon highlights several experiences of people during the COVID-19 pandemic. Some persons are compelled to stay at home, possibly due to safety measures or health concerns, while others are working intensively, perhaps in essential services. These divergent experiences are expressed thus:

Some of us must stay at home
And not go out the door
Some of us are working
Like we've never worked (n.p)

The poet's use of "working like we've never worked before" suggests a significant shift in work patterns, possibly due to increased demands in certain sectors. The need for some persons to stay at home indicates a collective adaptation to new norms and safety measures imposed by the pandemic. This adaptation is cultural in nature, reflecting changes in how individuals and society navigate daily life and interpersonal interactions during a pandemic. Sheldon's use of contrast is evident throughout the poem. The contrast between staying at home and working intensively reflects a shift in societal priorities. The COVID-19 pandemic has prompted a reevaluation of what is considered essential, with certain roles taking precedence over some others. This shift in priorities contributes to a collective re-assessment of societal values. These further reflect the collective responses to the pandemic, where societal structures had to undergo rapid transformation.

In the second stanza, relations are redefined as:

Some of us are falling out
With Siblings, Dads, and Mothers
Some of us are reaching out
And looking after others. (n.p)

The poet's use of "falling out with siblings, Dads and Mothers" suggest interpersonal conflicts within families during the pandemic and reflects collective trauma responses as individuals navigate heightened stress, tension, uncertainty and potentially strained living conditions, contributing to tensions in familial relationships. "falling out" indicates emotional strain and isolation, reflecting the impact of the pandemic on mental health and relationships. The collective trauma from the occurrence of the virus has the potential to create an emotionally charged atmosphere, contributing to more challenges.

The last two lines of the second stanza contrasts the first two lines which illustrate a positive response to the collective trauma, where some individuals actively engage in acts of comparisons and support. It depicts the resilience and solidarity that can emerge in response to shared challenges. "The act of "looking after others" extends beyond immediate family, suggesting a broader sense of community care and support. This reflects a collective response to the COVID-19 pandemic, where individuals recognize the importance of mutual assistance and empathy in the face of shared adversity.

The contrasting experiences of "falling out and reaching out" highlight the diversity of coping mechanism within society. In the sixth stanza, the poet portrays diverse emotional responses within the society to the pandemic, further offering insights into the collective experience. She affirms:

Some of us feel positive
 And think we're in charge
 Some of us feel anxious
 And fear the world at large (n.p)

The lines above illustrate a spectrum of emotional responses from feeling positive and in control to experiencing anxiety and confronting reality. The divergence highlights the complexity of the collective emotional atmosphere during the pandemic, indicating that individuals within the same society may perceive control or agency. This can be seen as a coping mechanism within the collective trauma, where some individuals explore more optimistic outlook to maintain a semblance of control over their circumstances. On the other hand, the lines also express feelings of 'anxiousness' and "trepidations". This reflects the collective trauma response to the uncertainty, unpredictability, and potential threats associated with the pandemics. Anxiety can be heightened during times of crisis, influencing how individuals navigate and perceive the world around them. The contrast in emotional state suggests that certain factors may influence how individuals within a society cope with and respond to trauma.

Despite the diversity in emotional responses, the lines in the sixth stanza imply that those feelings are shared within the collective. The collective trauma of the COVID-19 pandemic influences the emotional climate, contributing to shared experience of uncertainty, hope, anxiety and fear among individuals in the society.

Charlotte Jolley's "A Life with no Colour" as the title implies, expresses the bleak and anhedonic moments during the pandemic. The poem generally conveys a sense of collective trauma in response to the unexpected and disruptive nature of the COVID-19 pandemic. The introductory stanza expresses this anhedonic mood:

Our world of innocence was caught unaware,
 Taunted by a malicious nightmare,
 Locked inside for the foreseeing future
 An experiment gone wrong; a distorted sculpture (n.p)

The poem is introduced with the phrase "our world of innocence" which suggests a pre-pandemic state of naivety or unpreparedness. The sudden emergence of the pandemic disrupted the perceived stability, leading to a collective loss of innocence as societies grappled with the unforeseen challenges. The poet's use of "malicious nightmare" in the second line characterises it as a malevolent force, contributing to a sense of collective trauma. This personification highlights the emotional impact of the crisis and the psychological toll it has taken on individuals and societies. Also, the poet's mentioning of being "locked inside from the foreseeing future" reflects the widespread implementation of lockdowns and social distancing measures. The poet also refers to the virus as "an experiment gone wrong" to suggest a sense of unpredictability and unintended consequences, thereby creating a speculation about the virus being deliberately spread into the world for biological warfare. She further describes the situation of the world at the moment as a "distorted sculpture" conveying the sense of social disfigurement or alteration. The pandemic has reshaped cultural norms, values and structures.

In stanza two, the line "We wait through the day for that word of relief" captures the collective anticipation and anxiety associated with waiting for updates on the pandemic. The reference to citizens "spiraling into psychotic belief" suggests the psychological toll of the crisis, reflecting a shared experience of heightened stress and uncertainty. The newspaper ad stating "Lives have been lost" directly addresses the collective trauma of bereavement. The pandemic has led to a

widespread experience of grief in countries around the world, contributing to a shared sense of mourning and sorrow. The stanza also shows the impact on the mental health of the collectivity. The line “coronavirus is sending people mad” alludes to the impact on their mental health, emphasising the collective psychological toll of the pandemic. This reflects collective trauma where individuals grapple with the stress, fear and uncertainty induced by the crisis. Stanza three presents a disruption of normalcy. The lines, “No longer walks or country hikes” and “isolated from family and friends” highlight the disruption of normalcy and social connections. These disruptions contribute to a collective sense of discrimination and a reevaluation of the cultural importance of social bonds and daily routines. The lines “where to go; what to do, we try our best to struggle through” reflects the collective effort to navigate the challenges posed by the pandemic. The shared struggle emphasises the collective resilience and determination to survive amidst the pandemic. The fourth stanza paints portraits images of solitude and vulnerability in the expression “Trapped inside till the crisis end” which involves an experience of being confined to one’s home represents a shared aspect of the collective trauma, where individuals feel restricted and uncertain about the future. The pandemic brings about a monochrome in existence. This is underscored in, “A life with no colour; only black” which symbolises the emotional impact of the pandemic, suggesting a pervasive sense of despair and bleakness. This reflects the collective trauma of experiencing a world transformed by the crisis with far-fetching consequences.

Scott Momaday’s “In the Time of Plague” reflects the collective trauma experienced during the pandemic and conveys a nuanced response to the challenges posed by the crisis. The first five lines depict cautious interaction and suspicion.

We keep indoors
When we dare to venture out
We are cautious, our neighbours
Smile, but in their eyes there is
Reserve and suspicion (n.p)

These lines communicate a feeling of wariness and skepticism in interpersonal exchanges, reflecting a shared experience amid the pandemic. The neighbour’s smiles with “reserve and suspicion” underscore the impact on social relationships and the need for distance to prevent the further spread of the virus. The poet’s expression of “much of our fear is unspoken” in the eighth line points to the silent, pervasive anxiety unspoken by individuals in the community. The reliance on “rote consolation” suggests the collective response to cope with fear through familiar repetitive gestures and phrases.

In the lines below, the poet weighs the impact of the pandemic and the reaction of the collectivity, thus:

We endure thoughts of demise
And measure the distance of death
Death too wears a mask.(n.p)

The preceding lines encapsulate the collective trauma of contemplating mortality and the constant awareness of the potential consequences of the virus. The virus becomes a shared existential concern. However, from the fourteenth line till the end of the poem, the poet evokes a sense of hope amid the darkness that comes with the virus in the following lines:

But consider, there may well be good
In our misfortune if we can find it is
Hidden in the darkness of our fear

But discover it and see that it is hope. (n.p)

The lines above, the poet suggests that hidden within the darkness of fear, there is hope. This reflects the resilience of the collective spirit in the face of adversity, emphasising the cultural capacity to find optimism even in challenging times. The poem encapsulates the collective trauma of the COVID-19 pandemic, portraying a society struggling with fear, caution and uncertainty but also finding resilience, hope and a sheer commitment to positive transformation.

Michael Whitney's poem "Working from Home" humorously reflects an individual's experience of working from home during the COVID-19 pandemic, highlighting the elements of collective and cultural adaptation. The poem begins by recalling the initial speculation that working from home would be great with the freedom from a daily commute and formal attire. The poet expresses this excitement in the following lines:

I remember the days when I'd speculate
That working from home would simply be
great.
No need for car, the tie and the suit;
No need, ever again, for that daily commute
I could work in my jammies, or wear nothing
at all.
And never worry about the boss down the
hall
I'd only dress up when I'd be meeting on
zoom
Then I'd just have to clean a little part of the
room (n.p)

The lines above reflect a collective sentiment during the early days of the pandemic, where there was some optimism about the benefits of remote work. The poem touches on the inevitable shift to remote work, where traditional workplace norms, such as dressing up and commuting, changed. This reflects the broader societal adaptation to new work structures and expectations during the pandemic.

The poet uses humour as a technique in his portrayal of the pandemic through the humorous depiction of the home office life. Phrases like "work in my jammies", clean a little part of my room" reflect adaptation to the informalities of remote work. The poem humourously captures the change but also alludes to potential challenges.

Ironically, as the poem progresses, the tone shifts, the poet persona expresses frustration with the unexpected challenges of working from home. This change is expressed in the lines below:

But now that it's happened, my dream hasn't come true
'Cuz working from home is like life at the zoo
A big cage of monkeys couldn't be any worse
The noise and congestion drive me to curse (n.p)

The lines above express the loss of peace and quiet which emphasises the collective struggle of individuals to adapt to the blurring of professional boundaries. The loss of a quiet working environment contributes to a shared experience of frustration and stress.

The concluding part of the poem produces a sense of nostalgia for the days when the poet persona used to go to the office. This reflects a cultural longing for the familiarity and structure of the traditional work setting, indicating that the shift to remote work may not have been ideal as initially

imagined. Overall, the poem captures the mixed emotions and unexpected realities associated with the shift. This regret is captured in the following lines:

Alas, working from home, I get nothing done
And what's even worse--- it's not that much
fun
Now I yearn for the days when I went off
work
Working from home, it turns out, was the dream of a jerk. (n.p)

Cyrine Kortas' poem "When Death Comes to a House" poignantly conveys the collective trauma experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly in the context of death and mourning. The first stanza describes the disruption of funeral rites and ritual as a result of the lockdown during the pandemic. The poet persona expresses this disruption in the lines below:

When death comes to a house,
No cousins are called
No relatives from different,
Countries will be flying (p.7)

These lines emphasise the profound impact of the pandemic on traditional funeral practices. The absence of cousins and other relatives from different countries, rites and rituals reflects trauma where the customary ways of bidding farewell to the departed (dead) are disrupted due to the constraints imposed by COVID-19. The poet's dismay about "the dead will not be paid tribute" highlights the collective trauma of being unable to perform customary acts of respect and remembrance. The absence of funerals, a significant cultural ritual, contributes to a shared sense of loss and unfulfilled mourning practices. The third stanza depicts unfinished stories and lost legacies as a result of the interruption in the funeral rites. The lines, "When death comes to a house, no grandchild will ever hear, the rest of the story" (p.7) encapsulate the collective trauma narrative. The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the continuity of family stories and histories, leaving future generations with gaps in their understanding of the past. The last two lines of the third stanza, "the rest of the story, it ended in a covid zone" (p.7), suggest that the pandemic became a defining and concluding element in the lives of those who pass away during this time. This contributes to the collective trauma of the unique and challenging period that shapes how death is experienced and remembered. The last stanza further captures the collective grief experienced by individuals and communities dealing with death during the pandemic. The limitations imposed on traditional mourning practices further contribute to a shared experience of sorrow and a sense of inadequacy in expressing grief.

The last poem selected for the study is Ashish Gupta's "Covid-19: From Carrier to Warrior". The poem presents an individual's reflection on contracting the virus as he deliberates in the following lines:

How did I get contaminated?
How did I become a corona carrier?
Why did I become the burden for government and corona warriors? (p. 9)

The poet persona grapples with questions about how he got contaminated and became a virus carrier. This reflects the individual's internalisation of the fear and uncertainty surrounding the virus, contributing to a shared sense of vulnerability experienced by many during the pandemic. The poet

persona also expresses a sense of responsibility and guilt for being a burden and a potential risk for both government and corona warriors. His guilt continues in the next few lines below:

Why did I not obey the rules?
Why did I not prove myself
A law-abiding, responsible citizen? (p. 9)

This personal responsibility reflects the broader collective expectations for citizens to adhere to the guidelines and avoid spreading the virus, contributing to a collective consciousness about civic duty. The poet persona questions his act of disobedience to the pandemic rules by blaming himself for not being a law-abiding citizen. This self-reflection mirrors the societal emphasis on responsible behaviour to curb the spread of the virus, contributing to a collective awareness of the importance of adherence to safety measures. The poet persona probes further into the activity that leads to the contracting the virus. This brings a feeling of uncertainty and fear of the unknown as one might not know who has the virus in the community. The poet queries:

Who trapped me? Who snared me?
Let me think, let me the link
Once I had gone to a vegetable shop.
Everywhere I was alert
Everywhere I was coward
Is this its reward?
How to guess? How to trace?
What was the face? How was the pace?
Who was he, or who was she? (p. 9)

In the lines above, the poet expresses uncertainty about who trapped him and how he got infected. This uncertainty is a shared experience during the pandemic, as individuals grapple with the invisible nature of the virus, contributing to a collective fear of the unknown.

In the later parts of the poem, the poet persona's journey from uncertainty to recovery and the subsequent plasma donation conveys a sense of triumph over the virus. The personal victory becomes a collective narrative of resilience and contribution to the fights against the pandemic, fostering a shared sense of hope. He expresses this optimism and hope in the following words:

I was discharged with showering flowers
I was a common man, but all made no Mars.
A Few days later, I donated my plasma
It saved more lives, even critical with asthma (p.10)

Summarily, the poem captures the poet person's journey through the trauma of being infected with COVID-19 and reflects broader cultural responses to the pandemic, encompassing themes of responsibility, isolation, fear, resilience and community solidarity.

Conclusion

The study has shown that collective trauma experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic has been poignantly expressed through poetry, serving as a mirror to an aspect of society's deep-seated emotions. The examination of collective trauma stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic reflects manifestations of grief, uncertainty, fear, guilt, anxiety, isolation, frustration and the stark of deaths. In this collective expression, shared experiences that highlight resilience and power of human connection in the face of adversity are present. As communities grapple with the aftermath, the poetic narratives offer a cathartic space, fostering understanding and solidarity, emphasising the

importance of acknowledging, processing, and collectively healing from the multifaceted impacts of the pandemic. The poems selected for the study acknowledge the universal struggles faced by humanity and man's ability to adjust to the uncommon living conditions.

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