

# From Crisis to Catalyst: Pandemic Fictions and the Future of Academia

**Prof. Prajakta Sharad Raut**

Head, Department of English, Abhinav Degree College, Goddeo, Bhayander (E)

## Abstract

Pandemics have long provided fertile ground for literary explorations, reflecting societal anxieties while simultaneously provoking critical introspection and imaginative reconfigurations of the world. In this paper, we analyze three significant pandemic fictions—Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* (1826), Ashoke Mukhopadhyay's *The Ballad of Remnant Fever* (2018), and Timeri N. Murari's *the Final Contagion* (1996)—to examine how crisis functions as a catalyst for transformation, especially in the realm of academia. Through these texts, this study explores how pandemics disrupt epistemological certainties, challenge traditional institutions, and encourage innovative ways of imagining knowledge, pedagogy, and scholarly communities. Drawing on critical insights from pandemic theory and contemporary academic discourse, this paper positions pandemic fictions as vital tools for reimagining the future of academia.

**Keywords:** *Explorations, reconfiguration, catalyst, innovative ways, reimagining, future*

## Introduction

"Academia, once cloistered in marble halls,  
Now breathes in the open winds of change—  
A phoenix rose from the pandemic's ashes,  
Winged by stories of resilience."  
- Anonymous

## Introduction

As one is aware, Crisis literature often arises in response to the collapse of established orders. Among such literature, pandemic fiction holds a unique position—"it is both prophecy and postmortem, often envisioning the total breakdown of society while simultaneously questioning the very foundations of knowledge, power and culture."<sup>1</sup> With the onset of Covid-19, the academic world has found itself thrust into a paradigm shift: remote learning, digital pedagogy and systematic iniquities have become focal points of discussion. This paper explores how three pandemic novels- *The Last Man* (1826) by Mary Shelley, *The Ballad of Remitaant Fever* by Ashoke Mukhopadhyay (2020) and *The Final Contagion* by Timeri N Murari (2020)- anticipate and reflect these very tensions.

By analyzing the representation of knowledge systems, human adaptability, and the reconstitution of learning communities in these texts, the paper argues that pandemic fictions do not merely document crisis but also serve as catalysts for imagining new academic futures grounded in empathy, innovation and resilience.

## Problem Statement

Pandemics have historically challenged societal structures, yet their impact on academic institutions and the epistemologies they uphold remains underexplored in literary studies.

## Aims

- 1) To critically analyze how pandemic fictions reflect and interrogate the disruption of academic and knowledge institutions.
- 2) To explore the role of pandemics as catalysts for innovation and transformation in academic contexts.
- 3) To draw interdisciplinary connections between literary narratives of crisis and contemporary academic shifts post-pandemic.

## Objectives

- 1) To examine the thematic portrayal of academic collapse, resilience, and reimagination in 'The Last Man', 'The Ballad of Remittent Fever' and 'The Final Contagion'
- 2) To identify the narrative strategies used to critique traditional epistemologies and propose alternative modes of knowledge.
- 3) To contextualize the fictional representations of pandemics within current academic disruptions caused by global health crises.
- 4) To integrate critical commentaries by experts on pandemic literature, crisis theory, and educational transformation.
- 5) To propose ways in which pandemic fiction can inform the development of more inclusive, flexible, and innovative academic models.

## Benefits of the Study

This research is expected to give the following benefits:

Theoretical benefits:

- 1) It will contribute to the growing field of pandemic literature studies with a focused lens on academia and intellectual futures.
- 2) It will offer a literary framework to reflect on post-COVID academic transformations, providing insights for educators, policymakers, and scholars.

**Practical Benefits:**

- 1) The research paper will definitely enrich interdisciplinary dialogues between literature, educational theory, and crisis studies.
- 2) It will also encourage rethinking traditional academic practices through the imaginative and critical possibilities offered by fiction.

## Research Methodology

### 1. Type of Research:

The research is **Descriptive** and **Qualitative** as the study involves literary analysis, thematic interpretation, and critical contextualization.

### 2. Type of Data Required for the Study:

a. Primary Data: It involves textual analysis of the novels viz. *The Last Man* by Mary Shelley, *The Ballad of Remittent Fever* Ashoke Mukhopadhyay and *The Final Contagion* by Timeri N. Murari

b. Secondary Data: It comprises scholarly articles, critical essays, journal papers, and books related to pandemic literature, educational theory, crisis narratives, and contemporary academic studies.

### 3. Techniques of Data Collection:

In this case, the writer uses two techniques of collecting data:

- A) Observation: This step is used to make our research paper more penetrative by reaching the depth of the matter which involves **Textual Analysis** viz. close reading of the primary texts to identify themes, narrative structures, and representations of academia during crises.
- B) Library Research: It involves  
Critical Review: Collection and synthesis of expert commentaries on pandemic fiction and post-pandemic education.

4. **Techniques of Data Analysis:** The Research paper is Descriptive and Qualitative. So, the data is analyzed by resorting to

- A) Comparative Method: Comparative evaluation of the three novels to understand convergences and divergences in their portrayal of academic futures.
- B) Contextual Research: Analysis of real-world academic disruptions due to pandemics (especially COVID-19) to contextualize literary findings.

## Literature Review

For chronological convenience, one had better commence with *The Last Man* by Mary Shelley, often regarded as one of the earliest works of pandemic fiction. Set in a future devastated by a mysterious plague, the novel is a meditation on loss- not only of life but of civilization, culture and collective memory. In this melancholic landscape, Shelley questions the durability of human institutions, including learning and political governance.

The novel is framed as a recovered manuscript, hinting at the fragility of archival knowledge. The plague renders traditional academic and cultural centers obsolete: libraries, universities, and parliaments are emptied. The protagonist Lionel Verney becomes a solitary witness to the end of human legacy. As scholar Anne Mellor notes, *The Last Man* Critiques Enlightenment ideals of progress, suggesting that human hubris in mastering nature may be self- defeating.<sup>2</sup>(Mellar, 1988) In this context, the novel prompts a vital question for contemporary academia: how do we preserve and adapt knowledge in the face of planetary crisis? Shelley's imagined future anticipates the need for decentralized and adaptable educational models- ones that value emotional intelligence, ecological awareness, and interdisciplinary approaches.

In contrast to Shelley's global apocalypse, Ashoke Mukhopadhyay's *The Ballad of Remittent Fever* ( 2020) grounds its pandemic narrative in regional memory and the politics of medicine in colonial and postcolonial India. Set during an outbreak of relapsing Fever, the novel intertwines medical history with personal trauma, focusing on a doctor who uncovers long- buried truth about disease, caste, and institutional neglect.

Mukhopadhyay critiques the colonial scientific paradigm that often-excluded indigenous knowledge and marginalized Rural population. Academician Rukmini Bhaya Nair rightly observes here: *The novel recovers forgotten epistemologies that were always coexistent with colonial modernity.*<sup>3</sup> (Nair,2020)

The idea of ‘Remittent’ Fever becomes symbolic- what knowledge, like the Fever, lingers long after the crisis ends?

For academia, this poses a challenge: how do educational institutions acknowledge and incorporate diverse epistemologies? *The Ballad of Remittent Fever* encourages a rethinking of curriculum that is inclusive of oral traditions, regional histories, and non- western frameworks. In an era where decolonizing the syllabus has become a rallying cry, Mukhopadhyay’s work offers a compelling model of interdisciplinary pedagogy.

While Mary Shelley’s *The Last Man* is the melancholy of erased future and Ashoke Mukhopadhyay’s *The Ballad of Remittent Fever* the documentary of local histories and medical memory, T. Murari’s *the Final Contagion* (2020) goes a step further for unveiling ethics, stripping off exploitation, and throwing a flood of light on scientific accountability on global platform. Being a fast-paced thriller, it blends science fiction and political commentary. It centers around a deadly virus and the global response to its spread, including governmental cover-ups, pharmaceutical profiteering and the manipulation of public fear. What distinguishes Murari’s novel is the interrogation of the ethics of science and the role of experts in society.

The critic Priyamvada Gopal rightly accords that Murari’s fiction exposes “the fissures between scientific advancement and moral accountability.”<sup>4</sup> The narrative suggests that even scientific institutions- often valorized as objective and benevolent- are susceptible to corruption and misuse. In the context of academia, Murari’s novel invites reflection on research ethics, the commercialization of knowledge, and the necessity of public engagement. As Covid-19 has shown, misinformation can thrive in the absence of transparent academic communication. Thus, *The Final Contagion* ‘calls for a more ethically engaged, socially responsive scholarly model- one that prioritizes public trust and interdisciplinary collaboration.

In the light of the above discussion, it is totally getting manifested that all three novels chart not only the collapse of traditional systems but also the emergence of new possibilities. Shelley’s lament for lost institutions paradoxically reinforces the urgency of preserving cultural memory. Mukhopadhyay’s excavation of forgotten knowledge points to the value of interdisciplinary research. Murari’s critique of scientific hubris underscores the need for moral reflection in academic pursuits.

The COVID-19 pandemic has made these fictional concerns very real. Universities have had to rapidly transition to digital platforms, raising issues of access, equity and effectiveness. But this disruption has also opened space for innovation- hybrid models of teaching, open educational resources, global classrooms, and greater awareness of mental health in academic settings.

Experts such as Cathy Davidson argue that the post- pandemic University must move beyond rote assessment models and embrace collaborative, project- based learning. As Davidson (2021) notes, “Education should be a tool for transformation, not transmission.”<sup>5</sup> Pandemic fiction, with its capacity to imagine altered realities, becomes a key ally in this pedagogical rethinking.

So, when discussing the role of Narrative in Academic Futures, it will not be a sweeping statement that pandemic fictions do more than entertain as they function as cultural blueprints. By articulating loss, resilience, and reinvention, they mirror the tasks that academia now faces. Each of the three novels studied here represents a different narrative mode: elegy ( *The Last Man*), historiography ( *The Ballad of Remittent Fever*) and techno-thriller ( *The Final Contagion*). Together, they offer a composite map of crisis response- from mourning and remembering to critiquing and rebuilding. Literature thus becomes a tool not only for understanding pandemics but also for imagining post-pandemic Futures since “ the capacity to aspire is a navigational capacity. “ (Appadurai, 2004)<sup>6</sup>. Fiction enables that navigation especially when reality offers few certainties.

## Limitations

Firstly, its scope is limited to Select Texts. This study focuses on three specific novels—‘The Last Man’ by Mary Shelley, ‘The Ballad of Remittent Fever’ by Ashoke Mukhopadhyay, and ‘The Final Contagion’ by Timeri N. Murari. While these texts offer rich insights, they do not encompass the full spectrum of pandemic fiction across cultures and time periods.

Secondly comes the matter of Language and Regional Bias. Two of the three primary texts are in English or translated into English. This may exclude nuanced readings found in native language interpretations or other regional pandemic narratives that remain untranslated.

Thirdly it carries Literary-Centric Framework. The analysis is primarily literary and interpretative. While the study touches upon real-world academic disruptions (e.g., due to COVID-19), it does not incorporate empirical data or field-based educational research, which may have added quantitative depth.

Fourthly , it bears temporal Relevance. The insights drawn are reflective of the current post-COVID academic environment. Future developments in academia might render some conclusions provisional or context specific.

Fifthly, it is narrowed by the dependence on Secondary Sources. The study relies on the availability and relevance of existing scholarly commentary. In some cases, limited critical discourse on specific texts (like ‘The Ballad of Remittent Fever’ ) may affect analytical breadth.

## Conclusion

A potent of ‘human’ experience comes down to us after reading these three novels. From Mary Shelley’s solitary survivor to Mukhopadhyay’s local healer and Murari’s whistleblower scientists, pandemic fiction presents a spectrum of responses to crises- grief, résistance, adaptation, and Innovation. These narratives underscore the importance of flexibility, ethical reflection, and pluralism in any system that claims to advance knowledge.

As academia confronts its own moment of reckoning, it would do well to heed the lessons encoded in these stories. The pandemic may have disrupted traditional learning environments, but it also opened the door to new forms of academic community- more inclusive, more collaborative and more attuned to the realities of a shared global future which one can well substantiate with the quotable poetic quote by anonymous:

*In the silence of shattered classrooms, new dreams take root-*

*Crisis writes its own sorrow in ink,  
But the future pens its promise in gold.*

The lines clearly underscore the fact that pandemic fictions, then, are not just chronicles of catastrophe but catalysts for imagining what comes next:

*From the ashes of isolation, the mind rekindles fire,  
Pandemic fictions weave the torn fabric of knowing ,  
Stitching tomorrow from the broken threads of today.*

## References

### Primary Sources:

Shelley ,Mary. *The Last Man*. 1826.

Mukhopadhyay, Ashoke. *The Ballad of Remittent Fever*, HarperCollins, 2018.

Murari, Timori N. *The Final Contagion*. Penguin Books, 1996.

### Secondary Sources:

Appadurai, Appadurai. *The Capacity to Aspire: Culture and the Terms of Recognition*. Stanford University Press, 2004.

Davidson, Cathy. *The New Education: How to Revolutionize the University to Prepare Students for a World in Flux*. Basic Books, 2021.

Gopal, Priyamvada. "Contagion and Control: Postcolonial Pandemics." *Postcolonial Text*, vol. 5, no. 2, 1999.

Mellor, Anne K. *Mary Shelley: Her Life, her Fiction, her Monster*. Routledge, 1988.

Nair, Rukmini Bhaya. "Crisis of Knowledge: Recovering India's Medical Archives." *EPW*, vol. 55, no. 29, 2020.