

Pandemic, Memory, and Narrative Imagination: Reconfiguring Crisis in Contemporary Literary Discourse

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has prompted a significant reorientation in literary expression, compelling writers to engage with crisis not only as an event but as an ongoing condition that reshapes perception, memory, and social relations. This paper examines pandemic literature as a dynamic narrative field that extends beyond documentation into critical interpretation. Situating contemporary texts within a longer literary tradition, the study explores how themes such as isolation, vulnerability, ethical responsibility, and resilience are rearticulated in post-2020 writing. Through an analysis of selected works across memoir and fiction, the paper argues that pandemic narratives increasingly foreground interiority, fragmentation, and lived experience over grand historical abstraction. These texts resist closure and certainty, instead inhabiting ambiguity as a central mode of meaning-making. By engaging with the uneven realities of crisis and exposing underlying socio-political inequalities, contemporary pandemic literature redefines the relationship between narrative and lived experience. The paper suggests that such writing functions as a cultural archive as well as a site of imaginative reconstruction, where crisis is not only recorded but critically reframed.

Keywords: Pandemic literature; Covid-19 narratives; crisis and memory; narrative fragmentation; cultural trauma; literary response to disease; contemporary fiction

Introduction

Pandemics have historically disrupted not only bodies but also the frameworks through which societies understand themselves. Literature, in this context, becomes a crucial medium for negotiating the uncertainties produced by disease. While earlier works such as *The Plague* and *The Decameron* grappled with contagion through allegory and moral reflection, contemporary pandemic writing increasingly foregrounds lived experience, emotional fragmentation, and socio-political critique.

The COVID-19 pandemic, unprecedented in its global simultaneity, has intensified this shift. Writers are not merely documenting crisis; they are rethinking the very forms through which crisis can be represented. This paper argues that contemporary pandemic literature marks a transition from symbolic representation to experiential narration. It privileges interiority over abstraction and ambiguity over resolution, thereby redefining the narrative possibilities of crisis.

Review of Literature

Scholarly engagement with pandemic narratives has largely focused on their historical recurrence and thematic continuity. Studies such as Frank Snowden's *Epidemics and Society* and Mark Honigsbaum's *The Pandemic Century* situate disease within broader socio-political frameworks, emphasizing its role in shaping human history. Similarly, Slavoj Žižek interprets COVID-19 as a moment of ideological rupture, exposing the fragility of global systems. Literary criticism, however, has increasingly turned toward the representational strategies employed in pandemic writing. Earlier analyses of *The Plague* emphasize existential and allegorical dimensions, while recent scholarship highlights the emergence of hybrid forms that blur boundaries between memoir, fiction, and cultural commentary. Despite this growing body of work, there remains a gap in sustained close analysis of post-2020 texts. Much of the existing criticism remains descriptive, focusing on themes rather than narrative technique. This paper

addresses this gap by foregrounding narrative form as central to the articulation of pandemic experience.

Theoretical Approach

This study draws upon an interdisciplinary framework that combines cultural theory, narrative theory, and trauma studies. The concept of discourse, as articulated by Michel Foucault, provides a foundation for understanding how pandemics are constructed within systems of knowledge and power. At the same time, trauma theory informs the analysis of fragmented narration and disrupted temporality, which are characteristic of contemporary pandemic texts.

Narrative theory further enables an examination of how storytelling itself becomes a mode of processing crisis. Rather than treating literature as a passive reflection of reality, this approach considers it an active site of meaning-making, where experience is structured, mediated, and reinterpreted.

Research Methodology

This paper adopts a qualitative, interpretive methodology grounded in close textual analysis. Selected works are examined for their narrative strategies, thematic concerns, and ideological implications. The study focuses on representative texts from contemporary pandemic literature, including *Intimations* and *The Pull of the Stars*, *Leave the World Behind* which offer distinct yet complementary perspectives on crisis. The analysis emphasizes how narrative form shapes the representation of pandemic experience. Rather than providing a comprehensive survey, the study prioritizes depth over breadth, allowing for sustained engagement with individual texts.

Rationale for the Selection of Texts

The selection of *Intimations* by Zadie Smith, *The Pull of the Stars* by Emma Donoghue, and *Leave the World Behind* by Rumaan Alam is guided by both thematic coherence and

critical relevance to contemporary literary discourse. Although differing in form essayistic reflection and fictional narrative these texts collectively engage with the lived experience of crisis, particularly within the context of global disruption, uncertainty, and socio-cultural reconfiguration.

At a foundational level, these works are united by their exploration of how crisis whether explicitly represented as pandemic or implicitly suggested through systemic breakdown reshapes individual subjectivity and social relations. *Intimations* offers a reflective, first-person engagement with the early months of COVID-19, foregrounding the instability of perception, time, and everyday life. Its fragmentary, essayistic structure resists linear narration, thereby embodying the disorientation it seeks to articulate. This makes it particularly valuable for examining how narrative form itself becomes a mode of registering crisis.

In contrast, *The Pull of the Stars* situates its narrative within the historical frame of the 1918 influenza pandemic, yet its thematic concerns resonate strongly with contemporary realities. By focusing on a confined maternity ward, the novel foregrounds the gendered dimensions of care, illness, and institutional authority. Its emphasis on embodied experience and ethical ambiguity allows for a nuanced exploration of how crisis intersects with structures of power, particularly those governing the female body.

Leave the World Behind, on the other hand, approaches crisis through ambiguity and atmosphere rather than explicit representation. The novel's refusal to clearly define the nature of the catastrophe becomes a deliberate narrative strategy, reflecting the epistemological uncertainty that characterizes modern crises. Its focus on breakdown of communication, trust, and social order offers a compelling framework for analysing how instability operates at both psychological and structural levels

Taken together, these texts enable a comparative analysis across different narrative historical fiction, and speculative realism while maintaining a shared concern with crisis as a

transformative condition. All three works foreground the interplay between private experience and broader socio-political contexts, making them particularly suited to analysis within feminist and postcolonial frameworks.

From a theoretical standpoint, these texts allow for the application of key concepts from feminist literary theory, including embodiment, care ethics, and intersectionality, as well as postcolonial concerns with power, marginality, and representation. The inclusion of both female-authored and gender-conscious narratives further enriches the analytical scope, enabling a more layered understanding of how gendered experiences are articulated and contested within contemporary literature.

Discussion

Pandemic Experience and Narrative Fragmentation: *Intimations*

Zadie Smith's *Intimations* offers one of the most intimate literary engagements with the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic. Rather than presenting a cohesive narrative, the text unfolds through a series of brief, reflective essays that capture the disjointed rhythms of life under lockdown. This formal fragmentation is not incidental; it mirrors the temporal and psychological disruptions produced by the pandemic itself. Days lose their distinction, routines dissolve, and the future becomes increasingly uncertain. Smith's narrative strategy, therefore, is deeply aligned with the lived experience it seeks to represent.

What distinguishes *Intimations* is its refusal to claim authority over the pandemic. The text resists the impulse to explain or totalize; instead, it remains grounded in partial observations and fleeting insights. This deliberate incompleteness reflects an awareness of the limits of knowledge in a rapidly evolving crisis. By foregrounding uncertainty, Smith challenges the expectation that literature must provide clarity or resolution. The essays become spaces of contemplation rather than conclusion, inviting readers to engage with ambiguity rather than escape it. A central feature of the text is its focus on the everyday. Smith does not

dramatize the pandemic through spectacle or catastrophe; instead, she attends to small, seemingly insignificant moments walking through quiet streets, observing changes in social behaviour, reflecting on personal routines. This attention to the mundane redefines the scale at which crisis is understood. The pandemic is not only a global event but also a deeply personal experience that reshapes the texture of daily life. Through this lens, the ordinary becomes a site of profound transformation.

Memory plays a crucial role in structuring the narrative. Smith frequently juxtaposes pre-pandemic experiences with the altered realities of lockdown, creating a sense of temporal dislocation. The past appears both familiar and distant, as though it belongs to another world. This estrangement underscores the extent to which the pandemic disrupts continuity, forcing individuals to renegotiate their relationship with time. Memory, in this context is not stable but fluid shaped by the uncertainties of the present. The text also engages, albeit subtly, with questions of privilege and inequality. Smith acknowledges that her ability to reflect, write, and isolate is conditioned by socio-economic factors. This awareness introduces an ethical dimension to the narrative, complicating its introspective focus. The essays do not claim to represent a universal experience; rather, they remain attentive to the uneven distribution of vulnerability. This tension between personal reflection and social awareness adds depth to the text, preventing it from becoming insular.

Stylistically, *Intimations* is marked by clarity and restraint. The prose avoids excessive ornamentation, reflecting the fragility of the moment it captures. This simplicity, however, should not be mistaken for lack of complexity. Beneath the surface lies a nuanced engagement with questions of perception, memory, and representation. Smith's writing demonstrates that subtlety can be a powerful tool for conveying the emotional intensity of crisis.

Perhaps the most significant aspect of *Intimations* is its refusal of closure. The text does not offer a definitive interpretation of the pandemic, nor does it suggest that resolution is

imminent. Instead, it remains open-ended, reflecting the ongoing nature of the crisis. This lack of closure is not a limitation but a deliberate narrative choice that aligns with the uncertainties of the present. In this way, *Intimations* exemplifies a broader shift in pandemic literature toward fragmentation, interiority, and ethical awareness. It challenges conventional expectations of narrative coherence and completeness, offering instead a mode of writing that is provisional, reflective, and deeply attuned to the complexities of lived experience. Through its understated yet powerful engagement with crisis, the text redefines the possibilities of literary representation in times of uncertainty.

Crisis, Care, and Embodied Vulnerability in *The Pull of the Stars*

Emma Donoghue's *The Pull of the Stars* offers a strikingly intimate portrayal of pandemic experience by situating its narrative within the confined space of a maternity ward during the 1918 influenza outbreak. Although historically distanced from COVID-19, the novel resonates powerfully with contemporary readers, not because it mirrors current events directly, but because it reveals the structural and emotional continuities that define pandemic experience across time. Unlike large-scale narratives of collapse, Donoghue's novel narrows its focus to a three-day period, intensifying the immediacy of crisis and foregrounding the embodied realities of care, illness, and survival.

An important character in the novel is Nurse Julia Power, whose perspective anchors the narrative. Through her, the text explores the intersection of professional duty and emotional strain. Julia is not presented as an idealized caregiver; rather, she is exhausted, conflicted, and acutely aware of the limitations of her own capacity. This nuanced characterization challenges conventional representations of healthcare workers as selfless heroes, instead emphasizing their vulnerability. The pandemic, in this sense, is not only a medical emergency but also a condition that exposes the fragility of those tasked with managing it. The spatial confinement of the ward plays a crucial role in shaping the narrative. The hospital becomes a microcosm of

the broader social order, reflecting hierarchies of class, gender, and institutional authority. Patients are not treated equally; their experiences are mediated by social status, moral judgment, and access to care. Donoghue subtly critiques these disparities, revealing how systems of inequality persist even in moments of collective crisis. The ward, while ostensibly a space of healing, is also a site of control, where bodies are regulated and decisions are often made without the consent of those affected.

One of the novel's most compelling aspects is its attention to the female body. Pregnancy, illness, and mortality intersect in ways that underscore the precariousness of life. The women in the ward are not passive victims; they exhibit resilience, fear, resistance, and solidarity. Their stories complicate any singular narrative of suffering, revealing a spectrum of experiences that resist simplification. Through these characters, Donoghue reclaims the maternal body as a site of both vulnerability and strength, challenging its historical marginalization in medical discourse.

Time in *The Pull of the Stars* is compressed yet intense. The three-day structure creates a sense of urgency, but it also allows for moments of reflection. Julia's internal monologue provides insight into her evolving understanding of the crisis. As she navigates the demands of her role, she is forced to confront ethical dilemmas that have no clear resolution. Should she prioritize one patient over another? How does she reconcile institutional protocols with her own moral instincts? These questions do not yield definitive answers, and it is precisely this ambiguity that gives the narrative its emotional depth. The presence of Bridie Sweeney, a volunteer with little formal training, introduces an alternative model of care. Bridie's approach is intuitive, empathetic, and unburdened by institutional constraints. Her interactions with patients often succeed where formal medical procedures fail, suggesting that care is not solely a matter of expertise but also of human connection. This contrast between institutional and informal care highlights the limitations of medical authority, particularly in situations where

established systems are overwhelmed. Donoghue's prose is deliberately restrained, avoiding melodrama even in moments of intense suffering. This stylistic choice reinforces the realism of the narrative, allowing the emotional weight of events to emerge organically. The language does not seek to dramatize the pandemic; instead, it captures its quiet brutality. Death is not sensationalized but presented as an ever-present possibility, woven into the fabric of daily life within the ward.

The novel resists the impulse to frame the pandemic as a moment of transformation or redemption. While acts of kindness and solidarity occur, they do not negate the systemic failures that the narrative exposes. The ending offers no grand resolution, reflecting the ongoing nature of crisis. This refusal of closure aligns the novel with contemporary pandemic writing, which often prioritizes authenticity over narrative satisfaction. *The Pull of the Stars* reconfigures pandemic narrative by shifting attention from large-scale events to intimate, embodied experiences. It foregrounds care as both a necessity and a burden, revealing the ethical complexities that arise in conditions of scarcity and uncertainty. Through its focus on the female body, institutional critique, and emotional realism, the novel expands the scope of pandemic literature, offering a deeply human account of crisis that resonates across historical contexts.

Atmosphere, Uncertainty, and Slow Collapse in *Leave the World Behind*

Rumaan Alam's *Leave the World Behind* approaches crisis from a markedly different angle, eschewing direct representation of disease in favor of an atmosphere of pervasive uncertainty. The novel does not explicitly name a pandemic, yet its narrative unfolds in a context that strongly evokes the anxieties associated with global disruption. Rather than depicting crisis as a clearly defined event, Alam constructs it as a gradual, almost imperceptible unraveling of normalcy. This ambiguity becomes the novel's central strategy, compelling readers to confront the discomfort of not knowing. The narrative begins with a seemingly

ordinary premise: a family vacation disrupted by unexpected circumstances. However, as the story progresses, subtle disturbances accumulate power outages, loss of communication, unexplained environmental changes. These disruptions are never fully explained, and it is precisely this lack of explanation that generates tension. The novel resists the conventions of disaster fiction, which typically rely on clear causality and resolution. Instead, it immerses readers in a state of suspended understanding, mirroring the uncertainty experienced during real-world crises such as COVID-19.

The novel depicts the breakdown of trust. The arrival of the homeowners, who seek refuge in their own house, introduces a layer of social tension that intersects with issues of race, class, and belonging. The characters' inability to fully trust one another reflects broader societal fractures that are exacerbated in times of crisis. Alam does not offer easy resolutions to these tensions; instead, he allows them to persist, highlighting the ways in which fear and uncertainty can destabilize social relationships. The novel's treatment of information is particularly significant. In a world where access to news and communication is taken for granted, the sudden absence of reliable information creates a vacuum that is filled by speculation and anxiety. Characters attempt to make sense of their situation using fragments of knowledge, but these fragments never coalesce into a coherent narrative. This fragmentation of information parallels the narrative structure itself, reinforcing the theme of epistemological instability.

Nature, in *Leave the World Behind*, functions as both setting and metaphor. The environment becomes increasingly unsettling, with animals behaving strangely and landscapes taking on an unfamiliar quality. These shifts are subtle but persistent, suggesting a world that is quietly but irrevocably changing. The natural world, often perceived as stable and predictable, becomes a source of unease, reflecting the broader collapse of certainty.

Alam's prose is meticulously controlled, characterized by detailed descriptions and a measured pace. This stylistic precision contrasts with the uncertainty of the narrative, creating

a tension between form and content. The language does not rush toward revelation; instead, it lingers on moments, allowing unease to build gradually. This slow pacing is crucial to the novel's impact, as it mirrors the creeping realization of crisis rather than its sudden onset. One of the most striking aspects of the novel is its refusal to provide closure. The narrative does not resolve its central questions, leaving readers in a state of ambiguity. This lack of resolution is not a failure but a deliberate choice that aligns the novel with contemporary experiences of crisis. In a world where events often unfold without clear explanations or outcomes, the expectation of narrative closure becomes increasingly untenable. At a deeper level, *Leave the World Behind* can be read as a meditation on modern dependency. The characters' reliance on technology, infrastructure, and social systems becomes evident as these structures begin to fail. The novel exposes the fragility of these dependencies, revealing how quickly they can unravel. In doing so, it challenges assumptions about stability and control that underpin contemporary life.

Alam's novel expands the boundaries of pandemic literature by shifting focus from disease to atmosphere. It suggests that crisis is not always visible or immediately comprehensible; it can emerge gradually, through subtle disruptions that accumulate over time. By embracing ambiguity and resisting resolution, *Leave the World Behind* captures the psychological dimensions of uncertainty, offering a narrative that is both unsettling and deeply reflective of contemporary anxieties.

Comparative Discussion

A comparative reading of *Intimations* by Zadie Smith, *The Pull of the Stars* by Emma Donoghue, and *Leave the World Behind* by Rumaan Alam reveals a shared preoccupation with crisis as both a lived condition and a narrative problem, even as each text approaches this concern through distinct formal and ideological strategies. While Smith's work is essayistic

and introspective, Donoghue's is historically grounded and corporeal, and Alam's is speculative and atmospheric, together they offer a layered understanding of how contemporary literature reconfigures experience in moments of uncertainty.

At the level of narrative form, the three texts demonstrate a clear departure from linear, stable storytelling. *Intimations* adopts a fragmentary structure, composed of short reflective pieces that resist continuity. This fragmentation is not merely stylistic but epistemological it reflects the breakdown of temporal coherence and the difficulty of sustaining narrative meaning during crisis. In contrast, *The Pull of the Stars* employs temporal compression, unfolding over a brief three-day period. This concentrated timeframe intensifies the immediacy of experience, drawing attention to the physical and emotional demands placed on bodies within a confined space. Meanwhile, *Leave the World Behind* operates through narrative ambiguity, withholding key information and refusing resolution. The absence of explanatory closure destabilizes the reader's interpretive position, mirroring the uncertainty that defines the characters' experience. Together, these formal strategies suggest that crisis disrupts not only social structures but also the very frameworks through which stories are told.

A second point of comparison lies in the treatment of space. In *The Pull of the Stars*, the maternity ward functions as a microcosm of society, where hierarchies of class, gender, and institutional power are both enacted and contested. The spatial confinement heightens the sense of vulnerability while also foregrounding the relational dynamics between characters. *Leave the World Behind* similarly uses a confined setting a secluded house to explore the breakdown of social norms. However, unlike Donoghue's clearly defined institutional space, Alam's setting becomes increasingly unstable, as external disruptions blur the boundaries between safety and threat. In *Intimations*, space is less physically bounded but equally significant; the domestic interior becomes a site of reflection, isolation, and reorientation. The home, often idealized as a space of security, is reconfigured as a space of uncertainty and introspection.

Across these texts, space is not merely a backdrop but an active participant in shaping experience, reflecting broader socio-political conditions.

The representation of the body further distinguishes and connects these works. Donoghue's novel foregrounds the female body in states of pregnancy, illness, and exhaustion, emphasizing its material vulnerability. The body here is a site of both suffering and resilience, subject to institutional control yet capable of resistance. In contrast, Smith's *Intimations* engages the body more implicitly, focusing on the psychological and emotional effects of confinement. The absence of overt physicality does not diminish the sense of embodiment; rather, it shifts attention to the cognitive and affective dimensions of experience. Alam's *Leave the World Behind* occupies a middle ground, where the body becomes a site of anxiety and unease, marked by subtle signs of disruption rather than explicit illness. This variation in bodily representation underscores the multiplicity of ways in which crisis is experienced and narrated.

Another crucial dimension is the negotiation of knowledge and uncertainty. All three texts grapple with the limits of understanding in the face of crisis, but they do so in different ways. *Intimations* openly acknowledges the inadequacy of language to fully capture the present moment, embracing partiality and hesitation as modes of expression. *The Pull of the Stars*, while grounded in a medical setting, reveals the limits of scientific knowledge, particularly when confronted with overwhelming conditions. Decisions are made with incomplete information, and outcomes remain uncertain. *Leave the World Behind* takes this uncertainty further by refusing to provide any definitive explanation for the unfolding events. The narrative's ambiguity becomes a commentary on the fragility of epistemological certainty in contemporary life. Collectively, these texts suggest that crisis exposes not only material vulnerabilities but also the limitations of knowledge systems..

Despite their differences, all three texts resist the notion of crisis as a moment of clear transformation or resolution. None offers a definitive sense of closure; instead, they foreground

continuity, ambiguity, and the persistence of structural inequalities. This shared refusal of resolution marks a significant shift from traditional narrative forms, suggesting that contemporary literature is increasingly attuned to the complexities of ongoing, unresolved conditions.

In comparative terms, then, these works collectively reframe crisis as a condition that is at once material, psychological, and narrative. They challenge conventional modes of storytelling, reconfigure space and embodiment, and interrogate the limits of knowledge and representation. Through their formal innovation and thematic depth, they not only reflect contemporary realities but also reshape the ways in which those realities can be understood and articulated.

Conclusion

Contemporary pandemic literature represents a significant evolution in the narrative representation of crisis. While rooted in longstanding thematic concerns, post-2020 texts exhibit a heightened emphasis on interiority, fragmentation, and socio-political awareness. These works move beyond mere documentation, offering nuanced interpretations of lived experience and exposing underlying inequalities. By reconfiguring narrative form and embracing ambiguity, pandemic literature continues to expand its expressive and critical potential. It remains a vital space through which societies process, remember, and reimagine moments of profound disruption.

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