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## **The Contagion and the Working Women**

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### **Abstract**

The covid-19 pandemic caused by a Corona Virus (SARS-CoV-2) turned the whole world upside down. Maintaining social distancing is the mantra these days due to corona induced issues. It had a far-reaching impact in manifold ways affecting every field. Economic activities came to a standstill, millions lost their lives and livelihood across the world. The education system, healthcare sector, hospitality sector, small scale business and several others were equally challenged. This unprecedented situation has created a precarious and fearful culture affecting even at the individual level. The marginalized and othered group being the worst suffers. The working women already doubly marginalized due to the patriarchal setup had to bear the brunt of the contagion to a far greater extent. Social media is flooded with news, articles regarding the exponential increase of atrocious and oppressive forces on them in Covidian times. The culture created has a hazardous effect. Culture is a way of life, that includes behaviour patterns, religious beliefs and traditions. Since cultural studies has broadened the purview of the study of literature, the unheard voices of the marginalized section thereby find a space in contemporary times. This paper intends to showcase the implications of Covid-19 on working women through the lens of cultural studies.

**Keywords:** Covid-19, Cultural Studies, Working Women, Pandemic.

### **Introduction: Pandemic – History and Present**

Pandemic is the worldwide spread of a new infectious disease beyond all boundaries according to the WHO which increase morbidity and mortality, while an epidemic is limited to a specific region. Great exploitation of the natural environment and our lifestyle can be cited as the reason for increased occurrences of pandemics. (Jones, et al., 2008). The development of a new virus strain that has the ability to easily spread among humans or bacteria which has become resistant to antibiotic treatment can also spread outbreaks rapidly. Epidemic outbreaks have been part of human civilization, affecting a large number of people. It is deadly and has shaped the economic, political, cultural, social and psychological aspects of society having profound and long-lasting effects, one of the few phenomena with such great impacts. The best-known example is Plague which finds mention not only in history books but also in religious scriptures. The Athenian Plague of 430 B.C., Antonine Plague of 165–180 A.D., The Justinian plague originated in mid-sixth century A.D., Black Death, a plague outbreak from the fourteenth century. There was a complete breakdown of societal structure and its infrastructures affecting many professions especially medicine. Quarantine and isolating were also common during this period. Spanish Flu Pandemic in 1918–1920 was the first pandemic after the development of modern medicines. The more recent outbreaks in the twenty-first century, include SARS, Swine Flu, Ebola, and Zika. All these lead to disruption, losses, hardships and paradigm shifts in culture too on a wide scale. Though internationally efforts are made towards preparedness

for mitigating the impacts of pandemics still there are gaps and challenges yet to be fulfilled.

### **1.1 Covid-19**

Coming to the present times we are in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic officially called Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) by the International Committee on Taxonomy of Viruses. Novel human coronavirus disease COVID-19 was first reported in Wuhan, China in December 2019 and later spread worldwide. Initially thought of as animal coronavirus it soon adapted the ability to infect, transmit and spread among humans. WHO on 11th March 2020 declared COVID-19 as a pandemic depending on the mortality of previous pandemic trends. Apparent symptoms included fever, malaise, dry cough, and dyspnea, comparable to flu but the effects are innumerable and deep-rooted. Since the virus keeps mutating and evolving during the pandemic and there is not any specific treatment or vaccine to date, we are struggling each day to cater to its horrendous effects. This highly contagious and infectious disease has a catastrophic effect on the world's demographics but there are various other effects too. The whole world has been turned upside down and there seems no sector, no individual left untouched by the corona. This topsy turvy world has been created by the transmission of SARS-CoV-2. There are several ways in which transmission occurs. The primary mode of transmission is by exposure to respiratory droplets carrying the infectious virus from close contact with symptomatic or asymptomatic person. Airborne transmission is another mode of spreading infection. Fomite transmission from contamination of inanimate surfaces is also common since many surfaces contribute and participate in it. Even expecting mothers can transmit.

### **1.2 Restriction - new normal culture developed**

The above conditions force us to live a life according to the 'new normal'. Isolating, alienating, distancing oneself has become a necessity. Educational institutions went through a paradigm shift from traditional pedagogy of classroom learning to online learning. Educators and learners both turned tech-savvy overnight. The distinction between home and office blurred. Tourism, construction, clothing and almost every sector either came to a standstill facing death or turned online with a new design. Challenge forced us to a new way of life which determined our traditions, customs, behavioural pattern, developed and practised during covidian times. Culture has been formed which is specific to this time but its aftermath might continue to cause topsy turvy for ages.

## **2. Culture**

The way we live, behave, act, follow traditions and customs define our culture. Culture study started in the post-war period, around the 1970s, with the establishment of the Centre for Contemporary Culture Studies at Birmingham, UK. Raymond. A diverse range of scholars worked together to cause its development. They focused on micropolitics. Williams, Richard Hoggart, E.P Thompson and Stuart Hall are the founding members of culture studies. Culture comes from the term 'cultivation' implying it is created and cultivated, not natural. Apart from the dominant ideologies various small, fragments called subcultures also develop. Culture bridged the various gaps, between the opposites like theory and material culture, high low culture. Culture studies tried to find counter-hegemonic cultures, the marginalized, othered, subalterns. It focused on petit narrative, small subcultures like gay/lesbian, working culture etc. which resisted against dominant ideologies. Subculture is a small social group in the society which has its own ideologies, lifestyle and behaviour. Postmodern society shows the prevalence of many subcultures which are marginalized, othered, subalterns at the periphery. By showing resistance against the dominant ideologies, it marks the existence of a single dominant ideology and culture opposed to it. Culture studies had two different lines of approach to include almost everything under its purview. Initially, it connected the works of literature to

the social, material, historical and ideological conditions of a particular time. This led to various perspectives for a single text. For example, now, Shakespeare's *Hamlet* could be read according to the 'Marxist Approach'. 'Tail male gets the crown', this material conditions caused Hamlet not to support her mother's marriage as well as wanting to kill, Claudius, his stepfather so that his stepsibling is not born and becomes heir to the throne. Moreover, the text can also be read from the perspective of Freudian ideology. Freud talks of the Oedipus complex, according to which a male child gets attracted to his mother. Consequently, due to jealousy Hamlet was against his mother's new husband and wanted to murder him. Thus, culture studies provide various perspectives, widening the study for each text. Secondly, pamphlets, non-written documents etc. was also included in the cultural studies apart from traditional works which were considered great works. Creating networks of consideration and understanding for otherwise marginalized and othered voices and dismissed activities was in itself a radical project which became possible with the advent and development of culture studies. Cultural studies scholars question the common understandings, views, and pasts that shape our world. Cultural Studies depend on interdisciplinary research on the formation of facts, supremacy and change. It explores the creation of divisions like race, class, ability, citizenship, gender and sexuality to understand such structures and practices of power and protest in contemporary society.

### 3. Marginalization

Marginalization has been a continuous phenomenon towards the weaker sections of society. It is ingrained in the very socio-economic system for centuries and the general sense of indifference towards the 'periphery' remained almost as it is, since time immemorial. Marginals are considered to be born unlucky, suffering at each step. Their fate is their state of oppression and discrimination. Society uses and misuses them discriminately. They are oppressed at the individual, state and national levels. Authority exploits by giving them dreams which never gets fulfilled. The subaltern is left in the lurch, oppressed, unprotected and compromised in no man's land, a place somewhere in between the society and state. Society and the state equally have the right to exclude them, use them, being opportunist at every stage. However, the irony is that this marginalized position has to face any catastrophes and calamities much more than the dominant class. Similarly, the catastrophe caused by the corona virus, creation of new normal is gradually becoming normalized for them. They have to keep on moving with it by accepting it. Migrant workers have gradually started returning to work because of a lack of alternative sources of income. Farmers are at mercy of politicians and middlemen. While daily wage workers keep suffering. Similarly working women being doubly marginalized bear the brunt too. They suffer initially because of their weaker position of being female and secondly due to Covid-19. The government do nothing to benefit or help them to escape from living in this no man's land instead give false promises in hope of votes. Society too remains unconcerned and unaware. This is becoming normal as we are getting used to it.

Saadat Hasan Manto's *Toba Tek Singh* (1955) was written in the backdrop of the historic end of colonial rule and partition of India. The short story is set in an asylum in Lahore, a few years after partition when the authorities in India and Pakistan decide to exchange some lunatics in their asylums based on their religion. The political chaos at the larger level has been juxtaposed against the chaotic situation of the mental asylum. The Macrocosm has been portrayed by the microcosm of the lunatics. The protagonist, Bishen Singh, a Sikh inmate of the asylum belonged to a village named Toba Tek Singh. Since he was always enquiring about his village, his identity merged with the identity of the place and he came to be known as Toba Tek Singh. Since he was a Sikh, he had to be moved to India but he refuses to oblige to the norms and dies in no man's land between India and Pakistan, showing his marginalized identity." There, behind barbed wire, on one side, lay India and behind more barbed wire, on the other side, lay Pakistan. In between, on a bit of earth which had no name, lay Toba Tek

Singh.” (Manto, 2007, p. 17) The marginalized are like Manto’s Bishen Singh. They are submissive yet firm. They are broken but not crushed. They protest and show resistance. Bishen Singh resists in his incoherent language when hurt. He says “Uper the gur gur the annexe the bay dhayana the mung the dal of the Pakistan and Hindustan dur fittay moun” (Manto, 2007, p. 15).

#### 4. Working Culture

There is great interest in the new normal nowadays. This will apparently be a new way of life taking shape and will get established post-pandemic. New terminology has been developed and online webinars, seminars and research have been done to show possible drastic changes during and after the pandemic. Millions of people around the world are facing a precarious future as a result of corona virus. The pandemic is having massive negative impacts. 1st May is celebrated as Labour Day all over the world. However, due to the Covid-19 crisis, painful truths have been exposed depicting inequalities in societies around the world and stark contrasts in our lifestyles. Working culture has changed immensely. Unemployment is at its rise and pay scale have been cut. Moreover, the distinction between workplace and home has been blurred leading to increased levels of stress and domestic violence.

#### 5. Working women challenges

For the last 22 years, extreme poverty globally had been declining. Then came COVID-19, and with it, massive job losses, shrinking of economies and loss of livelihoods, particularly for women. Weakened social protection systems have left many of the poorest in society unprotected, with no safeguards to weather the storm.” says Ginette Azcona, lead author of UN Women’s latest report *From Insights to Action* and UN Women’s Senior Research and Data Specialist. (“COVID-19 and its economic toll on women”, 2020, para. 8)

Various reports show that corona will push millions into extreme poverty, with females being more affected. The pandemic induced poverty will expand the gender poverty gap too, implying that women would be majorly affected in comparison to their male counterparts. This would affect women, especially in their productive years.

The resurgence of extreme poverty as a result of the pandemic has revealed women’s precarious economic security,” adds Antra Bhatt, Statistics Specialist and co-author of the report *From Insights to Action*. “Women typically earn less and hold less secure jobs than men. With plummeting economic activity, women are particularly vulnerable to layoffs and loss of livelihoods. (“COVID-19 and its economic toll on women”, 2020, para. 11)

All sectors have been badly hit. The Covid-19 pandemic and associated steps for its prevention have taken their toll.

Women run businesses have almost come to a standstill. A disproportionate increase in women’s unemployment is obvious. Small-scale businesses like selling random things on streets, in shops have been severely hit. The working hours have also been reduced so automatically due to low footfall too, the profit margins have decreased. Hawkers, vegetable vendors, daily wagers are badly affected. Innumerable examples can be seen from around the world which testify to the women being badly affected. Unemployment and loss of jobs is a trend harming females more in comparison to males. Forecasts by the International Labour Organization predict almost 140 million full-time jobs may be lost due to COVID-19 and women’s job is 19 per cent more at risk than men. However, they remain unheeded and ignored. Unless women specific policies are formed and implemented to provide economic benefits and security, the condition of women will keep deteriorating.

It’s unfortunate that the most impacted industries like the food sector, retail, and entertainment primarily have women as their working force and therefore tend to suffer greater

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than their male counterparts. The hospitality sector has been impacted financially too around the world. Many of the sectors hiring informally, the employees already are subjected to varied hardships in terms of low pay, deprived protection and inhuman working circumstances before the Covid-19 pandemic started. A very high percentage of women work in such informal working environments around the world, therefore facing staggering impacts. The corporate sector has been showing no better impact on working women. Only essential workers have been maintained, the companies have been trimmed and it's mostly the women who have lost jobs. Many have been rendered jobless, facing pay cuts and increased working hours to combat the ailing sectors, which have troubled women workers much more than the men workers.

Due to corona and the protective measure, lockdown followed. The whole world turned topsy turvy and almost everything became online. Stay at home and social distancing forced people to indoors. Entire family being at home, the workloads increased manifolds. Women had to bear the brunt most. Looking after the children, family as well coping with their professional liability. When everybody was at home, they also relieved the domestic helpers who were primarily women. So apart from the lady of the house being overburdened, domestic workers were also left in the lurch. Astounding number of people were thrown out of the job with no economic protection, paid leaves, like many other informal economy jobs, leaving them without food and money. When employers rolled up their sleeves, some domestic workers associations however came forward to help them.

Even before the pandemic, women globally had to work much more in comparison to their male counterparts, carrying out unpaid labour. Poverty and lack of basic amenities like food shelter, shelter and sanitation, force them to work, even doing menial jobs for their day-to-day survival. With children and family staying at home the amount of workload increased manifold both for the male and female. However, since the women are already marginalized their role was to carry out the majority of the work. Schools and daycare centres closed burden increased. This was complimented with no outside help, leading to additional work. The working mothers were burdened with childcare and teaching responsibilities as well as looking after the sick and elderly apart from other household works. All these responsibilities had to be balanced with their professional work finely. Women found themselves in a vicious circle of work with no outlet. This stark inequality even at home and in unpaid care has been laid bare during the pandemic and it's high time that we recognize and acknowledge this unpaid labour of women and distribute this load.

The education sector was equally victimized. Due to the reduction of the working force, a large number of teachers, especially from the kindergarten and primary section, lost their jobs. There were cuts in the wages too. Moreover, almost overnight educators were forced to become tech-savvy. There was a paradigm shift from the traditional modes of classroom teaching and learning and it became online globally. Developing countries faced extra problems due to the lack of basic infrastructure. Since teaching jobs involve more females than males, they again had to suffer like other sectors. There was a blurring of the distinction between home and institution, exposing their home to the public and overloaded with the extra burden. The other aspect which is long-lasting was the withdrawal of girls from the schools and colleges. Due to financial issues, many female children were withdrawn to cut the expenses, leading to increased illiteracy among them. This will affect the lives of women in the coming years as has been witnessed in the previous cases of crises. There will be a widening increase in the education gender gaps which already existed but has a tremendous surge recently due to the pandemic. Such consequences will outlast the pandemic and need immediate attention.

Domestic violence and atrocities already observed have increased surprisingly too. Both males and females were forced to be at home due to the novel virus. The patriarchal society gives men the power to dominate, discriminate and cause atrocities on women. Even though working women try to balance profession and household responsibilities they are

subjected to the whims and tortures of men for trivial matters. Sexual assaults are also very much part of their lives. Such brutal action will continue even after the pandemic subsides unless it is addressed immediately. Due to lack of adequate monetary resources and education, women are unable to be free themselves from the atrocities of abusive partners as well as face greater danger of sexual exploitation and trafficking.

### **Conclusion**

The consequences of the pandemic will keep women folks behind from workforce participation much longer. They are likely to experience longer impediments at work and financial security, losing their savings, leading to extreme suffering. The marginalized lot have been doubly marginalized due to the pandemic. It has predominantly affected women and they are not able to find alternative ways to secure themselves financially, facing violence at the same time. Financial limitations restrict them to branch out to other professions and upskill themselves. The biased society and government need to change their outlook towards the marginalized, othered, subaltern section, the vulnerable women, for the overall development of nations.

Despite the clear gendered implications of crises, response and recovery efforts tend to ignore the needs of women and girls until it's too late. We need to do better," urges UN Women's Chief Statistician, Papa Seck. "But most countries are either not collecting or not making available data broken down by sex, age and other characteristics – such as class, race, location, disability and migrant status. These acute data gaps make it extremely difficult to predict the pandemic's full impact in countries and communities. They also raise the concern that COVID-19 policy response will ignore the priorities of the most vulnerable women and girls. ("COVID-19 and its economic toll on women", 2020, para. 39)

The covid-19 pandemic caused by a Corona Virus (SARS-CoV-2) disrupted the whole world. The destruction, death and catastrophe it caused and continues to have are manifold, just like the crisis of the past. The history is testimony to the immediate and long-term devastation of such a crisis. Every sector has been affected and faces chaos and turmoil. The weaker section, the marginalized had to suffer and bear the brunt much more than the dominant class. The women being the most vulnerable and among the 'othered' section are therefore deemed to suffer. Lack of financial security leading to extreme poverty also adds to their suffering due to domestic violence, sexual assault etc. Analyzing newspaper reports, researchers depict and bring to the fore, their prevailing traumatic conditions, gender gap, inequality and discrimination present in the society. It also gives a clarion call for action to protect our women. Appropriate rules, regulations and policies need to be formed and enforced by the government, institutions and society at large have to participate towards their upliftment. Working women despite sharing financial loads and trying to maintain a balance between domestic and professional levels are discriminated against, subdued and forced to bear violence. It is imperative to ease the negative economic impacts of COVID-19 on women by taking apt methods. Providing financial support to working women can be done by giving tax benefits, easing working hours, giving flexibility in their working hours, child and family benefits and at times cash help is need of the hour. Specific grants and loans at low-interest rates need to be given for trades that are run by women or to those where women work in larger numbers predominantly. Moreover, social protection and proper childcare facilities need to be provided to help women excel professionally as well. Moreover, the mindset of the patriarchal society also needs to change so that women, especially working women have helping hands to share their loads at home and their works get acceptance. Equal pay for the same work is a necessity as well as a right since the gender wage gap has been widened by the Covid-19 pandemic. Informal workers also need social and economic security, exempting of taxes so that unprecedented burden caused by the pandemic can be dealt with. Domestic women workers, caregivers also need paid leave and limited working hours. These measures can help the vulnerable women working outside their homes and provide them lots of relief. Analyzing the research papers, reports, newspaper articles through the cultural lens highlights the perspective



of the marginalized women giving them voice.

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### **Bio-note**

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### **Acknowledgement**

I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude to Dr. Muniba Sami, former faculty of the English Department of Patna University, for her encouragement, guidance and support.