



Reading in the Time of Coronavirus

By Nalini Krishnankutty

It surprises me deeply that I have not read any fiction since mid-March, when Pennsylvania, where I live, began issuing stay-at-home orders. It is not because I have no access to books. I own several books that I am yet to read, and I have many books that my library has renewed indefinitely till they re-open.

I have been reading other things, mostly nonfiction. Especially, about the US; Pennsylvania, where I live; Connecticut, where my daughter went to college; and India, where my mother lives, and where 1 billion, plus people are under lockdown. Initially, I scoured the internet for information on the virus, searching for clues like a detective, about the projected virus trajectory and recommended precautions. I monitored government responses and the opinions of researchers and public health experts. I tracked news about universities, schools, businesses, airlines, and supply chains.

Not unlike the hunter-gatherer, I was gathering information, now an essential in Maslow's hierarchy of needs. I was exercising the privilege of education, resources, and computer literacy, of working from home. I sifted fact from fiction and re-imagined and

re-invented our lives while evaluating the unfolding science-fiction drama, where the virus, governments, and unfolding circumstances were engaged in a world-building exercise.

In the initial weeks, friends and family shared massive amounts of information that seemed as valuable as a military arsenal to a nation at war. Worry and hope, certainty, and incredulity traveled via calls and texts and emails. If information was all that was needed to defeat this virus, we would have been victorious already. Though we were walking encyclopedias, we were also aware of how thin the line was between fact and fiction, and how little we all knew, even collectively.

After a few weeks of this consumption, I had a meltdown when I saw a viral video of how groceries had to be disinfected after shopping. Though I changed some disinfecting habits, I realized that my information consumption was unsustainable, and restricted myself to researching twice a day – in the morning, I googled “US coronavirus,” at night “India coronavirus,” so I could convey important updates to my mother who would be waking up as I was going to bed.

Even so, the appetite for reading fiction was lacking - other family and friends shared that they felt the same. It was as if we only had energies to figure out what happened next in the survival stories of everyone in our sphere. When we reached out to family and friends, every connection revealed a new real-life story during the COVID-19

pandemic, truths that were stranger than fiction. The stories were gripping, sometimes heartbreaking and sometimes filled with hope - about pregnancy and surgery, cancer treatment, illnesses, funerals, marriages, and birth.

And about many more things.

Getting scammed online. Taking care of patients, losing a loved one. Hospice. Postponing surgery and travel. Testing positive for COVID-19, surviving COVID-19, dying from COVID-19. Watching temple pujas, worshipping online. Teaching online, homeschooling kids, learning online. Writing a thesis, applying for jobs, losing jobs, applying for benefits. Essential workers. Migrant workers. Losing visa status. Computer literacy. Nursing homes. Verbal abuse while grocery shopping. Staying alone. Domestic violence. Online celebrations, meetings, graduations. Making masks. Quarantining. Enforcing child visitation. Selfishness, kindness, empathy. Doing gardening, social justice work. Meditating, praying. Celebrating Vishu, Easter, Eid, and more.

These were all old stories of living, that were suddenly interesting, amplified by the coronavirus shining a light on them, similar to the existing anti-Asian racism that has resurfaced. Upheavals like this pandemic have always existed too. Like when millions of Native Americans were killed when Europeans arrived with measles, smallpox and the influenza viruses. And when governments deport people, declare war, or draw boundaries that displace people overnight.

So, this upheaval is not as unprecedented as we make it out to be. Neither is my current neglect of fiction. Reading fiction was a rare privilege I had, a luxury in my well-oiled life. I imagine that those living in war zones, in immigration detention centers, in turmoil and crisis due to personal situations or because of government laws or natural disasters might tell me that the imaginary problems of a protagonist in a fictional story may have to be briefly set aside during upheavals.

While my fiction waits patiently, I have found solace in poetry, in the words of Naomi Shihab Nye, Tagore, Langston Hughes, Thiruvalluvar, and many others. Their wise insights have shown me how universal the human condition is, including pandemics and our resilience to them. Sometimes the tight words and lines of even a single poem could illuminate many diverse experiences of my friends and family, and even of our ancestors, passed down in oral and written histories.

Contemplating on poetry has made me realize that this pandemic is not unprecedented at all, and moved me from information gathering towards empathy, understanding, and action. I have realized the unique opportunity that exists in re-examining our world before the pandemic so that we can re-build a more equitable world. Poetry reminds me of our common humanity, moving me to think of others, to work to counter acts of racism and bias in my community, even as I prepare lesson plans for new classes, and write essays, and create social justice resources for teachers. Poetry inspires me to

learn from the wisdom and resilience of other cultures – like Taiwan and South Korea and Vietnam that are doing so well in the fight against COVID-19 – to understand their embrace of masks and of taking care of their elders at home.

Reading poetry is helping me to feel empowered and thankful, even helping me find the answers to some existential questions – for now, I know that just being my mother’s daughter and my daughter’s mother is enough, it is in fact, everything, even as I create community conversations and digital dialogues, as I hear the beauty in the stories of my circle of care, even as I write my own poetry, my own songs.

