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'Texts' Battling COVID-19: A New Historicist Reading of *My Hero Is You* Published by UNICEF

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Abstract

New Historicist approach assumes power to be using texts and co-texts as tools to build as well as retain a certain set of ideology. Since the pandemic has re-defined the personal space of individuals as a precaution to avoid the containment and the spread of COVID-19, the world has come across an ideology of restraint, to live and survive. In other words, social distancing is about to become a new normative structure throughout the world. The study strives to view, how texts and co-texts are being used by the world powers to fashion selves those comply with the new normative, i-e., social distancing and personal care. It also shows the representation of COVID-19 in the literary discourse produced during this pandemic and re-validates Stephen Greenblatt's constructs of power, subversion and containment in this particular context. The essay, having analysed the child fiction *My Hero is You* published by UNICEF, finds that this pandemic has changed the dynamics of world politics by bringing all the world governments on one page to fight with COVID-19 and that they are relying heavily on literary as well as non-literary discourses to introduce and implement the new normative of social distancing and personal care. The study also suggests that this pandemic has also accorded the draconian image of power a new form, as this time power is trying to inculcate the ideology that favours humanity; and with the help of these 'texts', power wants to construct selves those comply with this new normative.

Keywords: COVID-19, child fiction, new historicism, literary and non-literary texts, self-fashioning

Introduction

Became known in January 2020, the novel virus COVID-19 had been declared a pandemic on 11th March 2020 by the World Health Organization. By the time this paper is being written, says WHO Corona Virus Disease Dashboard, the active COVID-19 positive cases toll has risen to 7,690,768 people worldwide, whereas the world has faced 427,630 deaths. According to UNDP (2020), the pandemic is greater than a health crisis which is generating a strong impact on the societies and economies, and that the pandemic is affecting the countries in different ways according to the resources a country possesses. Nevertheless, it has affected the globe in similar ways as well. From physical health to mental health, from unprecedented lockdowns to the rise of unemployment in various industries—hotel and tourism etc—it has affected the world in the similar way.

Among these similar impacts of COVID-19, the world has also witnessed some linguistic developments as well. For example, the coinage of different words such as covidiot, doom scrolling,

covideoParty, Quarantini etc. (Mahdawi, 2020, May 16) can also be considered as one of many ramifications of COVID-19. However, beside this neologism, we have also come across the narrative of sacrifice, resilience and collective endeavour –the discourse of war –propagated by almost all the national governments. For example, Xi Jinping declared it “people’s war in China; Emmanuel Macron imagined France on “War footing”, and Donald Trump called himself “the war time president” (Freedman, 2020, April 11). By re-evaluating the new historicist approach in the context of this current global pandemic, the present paper will analyse these narratives of war and heroism as presented by the presidents of these countries. We will compare these narratives with the short story *My Hero is You* published by UNICEF and will see, on a broader surface, how the texts (the selected short story) and the co-texts (the political narrative of War and heroism during COVID 19) are serving the interest of power by motivating the general populace to comply with the SOPs set by them to prevent the containment of COVID-19 as a heroic deed.

Methodology: New Historicism in the Context of COVID-19

The debate that whether literature serves the didactic, mimetic, or expressive purpose, can be traced back to the time of Plato, or even before him at the time of Plotinus, a rhetorician to whom Plato outcasted in his *Ion* (Leitch, V. B. & Cain, W. E., et al, 2018). However, the question about the truth value of literature remained unresolved and travelled through ages to the present day and became a root cause of a variety of theoretical approaches to literature. Among these approaches, New Historicism is the one that emerged in 1980s and viewed literature and real-life hands in hands by combining literature (texts) and the political discourse (co-texts) together and speculated them pursuing a particular set of political motifs (Brannigan 1998). He says, “New historicists usually see their practice as one of exposition, of revealing the systems and operations of power so that we are more readily equipped to recognise the interests and stakes of power when reading culture” (1998, p. 8).

The relevance of this approach with the current situation of COVID-19 can be determined due to its inclination towards ‘power’, that is an all-pervasive dominating agency able to contain what goes against it or against the normative structure set by it. As discussed in previous section that this pandemic has re-defined the social practices throughout the world and the world has come across a new normative such as social distancing and limited public exposure to prevent the spread of COVID-19, the paper studies the way the power in this case, with the help of texts and co-texts, is trying to contain the subversions that are appearing in the form of COVID-19 SOPs violations. For this purpose, we include, at the place of text, the short story *My Hero Is You* that has recently been recently published by UNICEF, and at the place of Co-text, the narratives of war and heroism developed by the current national governments, that have been presented in the speeches of their presidents. In order to delimit the study, we include only the speeches of the presidents of China, America and France. Borrowing from Foucault the notion of power that “Power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere” (1981, p. 93), new historicism accords a godlike status to power and considers it an ultimate reality that is able contain any kind subversion it confronts. The subversion, according to Greenblatt (1980), is contained at the level of representation—in literary as well as non-literary texts—of a particular narrative that in return produces norm abiding selves. He, in his book *Renaissance Self Fashioning*, introduces a linguistically and ideologically constructed self, that is always ready to comply with the normative structure. While commenting on Greenblatt’s construction of self, Brannigan (1998) says that:

“the self-polices and regulates its own desires and repressions. This removes the need for power to be repressive. No physical or military force needs be deployed or exercised for power to have operated effectively in the interests of dominant ideological systems when the self, ideologically and linguistically constructed, will reproduce hegemonic operations” (p.7)

The study renders that during the pandemic the world powers are trying to create the same law-abiding selves with the help of political as well as literary discourse; the selves who do not let the “power to be repressive” by complying with the SOPs set by world’s health organizations. The study establishes

that instead the dominant ideological structure, the inclusion of new normative structure has become the priority of the world powers during COVID-19 that is being achieved by the text (literary discourse) and the co-text (political discourse). In this part of the paper, we will only analyse the co-text that is being utilized to impart the new normative structure of social distancing and social vigilance as a heroic and gallant act. According to Xinhua (2020, February 11), China's president Xi Jinping in a video conference with the recently recovered Wuhan district officials says, "Wuhan is a heroic city, and people of Hubei and Wuhan are heroic people who have never been crushed by any difficulty and danger in history". Similarly, French president Emmanuel Macron (2020, March 12) while declaring France at "War footing" can also be seen as propagating the same narrative of heroism by declaring the people and doctors of France as "heroes in white hats and coats". On the other hand, America is a no exception in this ongoing politics that has become the need of the hour. President Donald Trump (2020, March 19) declares himself "a war time president" and glorifies Americans by saying that "every generation of Americans has been called to make sacrifices for the good of the nation. It is a very tough situation. It is an invisible enemy that is the toughest enemy, the invisible enemy. But we are going to defeat the invisible enemy". All these three speeches by the presidents of three different countries seem to be developing the same narrative, i.e., heroism and war. In the light of above discussion, it can be concluded that the pandemic has brought all the world powers on the same page in their fight against COVID-19 and that they are employing the political narrative of war and heroism to contain the subversions and to develop the new normative abiding selves. However, the second question that how the literary discourse of COVID-19 is complementing the same ideology has been discussed in the next section of this paper.

Textual Analysis: *My Hero is You* and the Co-Text

My Hero Is You is a fictional book that has been developed by UNICEF for children and families to understand and grapple with the pandemic. The story suggests a way forward to the children and parents to think about the pandemic as well as the questions it has brought with itself. It has been designed for parents, teachers, children and caregivers to know, understand and grapple with COVID-19. Being a child fiction, the story is about a girl, Sarah, who is worried about the disastrous ramifications of coronavirus. Her mother, who is her hero, is a scientist and is in a fix to invent the vaccine. Sarah is worried about the situation and wants to be a hero by helping people around her. At night, she hears a strange voice asking her about her wish and in demand she asks for someone who can fly and has a loud voice so that she can travel to different places and make people aware of the pandemic. Here appears Ario, a flying creature who can travel in distances and has a loud voice. Sarah goes with her to a place having Pyramids, presumably Egypt. There she sees a boy Salem who is already following the SOPs of social distancing. After that Ario takes the little heroes to meet Sasha, a little girl with superpower and her superpower is keeping distance from the loved ones outside her home as she is living with her sick father to avoid its further spread. Sarah, Ario, and Saleem meet two other kids of their age named Leila and Kim. One is living in gypsies and the other a recently recovered corona patient, and they share their own practices during COVID-19. Viewing critically, the story embarks on serving two purposes: first is the horrification of the disciplined individuals during the pandemic, and second is the introduction and propagation of the basic SOPs set by WHO during this pandemic in a fictionalized setting.

The story makes an alliance with the non-literary texts produced to combat COVID-19. The paper finds that COVID-19 is being confronted by the literary as well as non-literary texts of the time and with the help of these texts the world powers are trying to formulate the complying selves those would abide by the precautionary measures set by them to avoid further spread of the virus. As discussed in previous section, the narrative of heroism and war has been propagated by almost all the nations of the world in their fight against COVID-19, the similar narrative can be found in the literary discourse of the time as well. For example, in the selected short story, on numerous instances the same narrative of heroism can be traced. Sarah the protagonist of the short story opens up by declaring her mother as her hero only due to her profession, i.e., scientist, who is struggling to find the vaccine of COVID-19 (UNICEF, 2020, p. 4). Interestingly, we have come across the same narrative of heroism in the non-literary or political discourse as well, especially when the French president appreciates the scientists,

doctors and nurses as “heroes in white hats and coats” (Macron, 2020, March 12). Similarly, on another instance in the short story there appears again the combat narrative collimating with the narrative of heroism, when Sarah’s mother while telling her about the pandemic says that “we can fight it”, and that “I need you to be my hero” (UNICEF, 2020, p. 4). Here, seeing their conversation with the lens of new historicism it becomes obvious that Sarah’s mother is wanting Sarah to be a self that is “ideologically and linguistically” constructed (Greenblatt, 1980), and that will remove “the need for power to be repressive” (Brannigan 1998, p. 7).

The second level at which the selected literary text is fighting COVID-19, is its consideration of the act of informing others as a heroic deed. Sarah says to Ario, the flying creature: “If I have you... then I can tell all the children in the world about the coronavirus!” and by doing that “I can be a hero!” (p. 6). Similarly, in the end of this short story when Sarah comes back after visiting different people around the world by flying with Ario, her mother welcomes and acknowledges him as a hero by saying, “You are my hero”, and that “You are my hero too, Sarah. You are a hero to all those who love you” (UNICEF, 2020, p. 21). Moreover, she also affirms and represents the narrative of resistance and combat that has been propagated by Trump, Jinping and Macron, as discussed above, by saying that “There are many heroes keeping people safe from the coronavirus, like wonderful doctors and nurses. But you remind me that we can all be heroes, every day, and my biggest hero is you” (UNICEF, 2020, p. 22).

The third important function that the short story plays is its propagation of useful information as a heroic deed. Like many non-literary texts, the short story also embarks on the same motif of social awareness with the only purpose to re-define the personal spaces of individuals as a weapon to combat COVID-19. For instance, every interaction among the characters within the short story repeats the same narrative of social distancing and personal care that is prevalent during this time of the crisis. The recurring lesson of social distancing embedded in their greetings is also a salient feature of this short story. For example, when Sarah meets Saleem, he makes her aware about social distancing and personal care by saying that “Sorry we can’t come closer, we have to stay one metre away”, and that we “Wash our hands with soap water[...]cough into our elbows if we are sick –we have to wave to people instead of shaking hands” (UNICEF, 2020, p. 8). Similarly, when Sarah, and Saleem meets Sasha she also mentions about one metre distance. Nevertheless, the glorification of Sasha’s act of self-quarantine (p. 12) and the short story’s emphasis on the way of caring for some loved one as an act of staying away from them (p. 19) also affirms literary texts’ effort to construct the complying behaviour that will ultimately battle COVID-19.

The last purpose that the selected literary text serves in its fight against coronavirus is the suggestions it renders to cop up with fear and anxiety in the case of self-isolation. For example, the telephonic conversation with the loved ones and recalling the good moments a person has spent, have been suggested as the possible cure for anxiety and fear (UNICEF, 2020, p.11). And even this act of compliance has again been glorified in the short story as a heroic act and is attributed the status of “a real superpower, because it can make ourselves and others feel better” (UNICEF, 2020, p. 13). These examples from the selected literary text displays a diligent and deliberate effort by UNICEF to inculcate in children, parents and caregivers the healthy practices to combat COVID-19. However, concluding this section in the light of above discussion it would be pertinent to say that the story offers no separate narrative of social distancing and personal care as is set at first place by the world powers. It also affirms the critique of Stephen Greenblatt (1980) which asserts that the literary and non-literary texts serve the interests of power and these are the places where power justifies and explains its policies and where the subversion is contained:

“My interest in what follows is in a prior form of restraint – in the process whereby subversive insights are generated in the midst of apparently orthodox texts and simultaneously contained by those texts, contained so effectively that the society’s licensing and policing apparatus is not directly engaged” (p. 41).

We conclude, therefore, in the light of above discussion that *My Hero Is You*, like the non-literary texts being produced during this pandemic, is serving the interests of power by containing the possible

subversions and offering a place of explanation and justification of the policies set by the world powers to combat COVID-19.

Conclusion

The above investigation of literary and non-literary texts as a tool of power to drive the behaviour of masses has conceptualized the salient features of the main critique of new historicism in the context of COVID-19. Examining the non-literary texts that appeared in the form of public speeches given by the presidents of the selected countries, the article finds the proliferation of the narrative of heroism and combat in them on one side; and on the other, it exposes the representation of the same narrative of heroism and combat in the literary texts being produced during COVID-19. In sum, the study discovers that the texts, literary and non-literary, have been used a weapon by the world governments to fight COVID-19 by shaping the individual selves who would abide by the new normative structure of social distancing and personal care. However, along with many similarities with the new historicist approach, the study also finds some differences in power approach to contain the subversions it confronts. This difference is the changed role of power that has become positive during this pandemic especially in the under-discussion context. The all-pervasive characteristic that Foucault attributed to power and later adopted by Stephen Greenblatt had vilified it within the structure of criticism. The paper finds that COVID-19 seems to have turned power's preferences from the ideology of 'supremacy' to the 'adoption of new normative structure' in its struggle to rescue peoples' lives.

Conflict of Interest and Data Availability Statement:

It is being declared that no funding has been received for this project as well as we have no conflict of interests to disclose. Moreover, since this is a theoretical project, no animal or human is directly involved in this research. However, all data analyzed during this study is in the form of books and research articles, and is publicly available in both soft and hard form.

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