

PalArch's Journal of Archaeology of Egypt / Egyptology

"ONLINE POETRY AND CONFESSIONALISM: A 2020 TREND"

Sukanya Garg

**Assistant Professor, Department of English, Modern College of Arts, Science, and
Commerce, Pune.**

E-mail: sukanyagargsmail@gmail.com

**Sukanya Garg, ONLINE POETRY AND CONFESSIONALISM: A 2020
TREND, -- Palarch's Journal Of Archaeology Of Egypt/Egyptology 18(10), 2481-
2488. ISSN 1567-214x**

Keywords: Confessionalism; COVID-19; Instagram Poetry; Mental Health

ABSTRACT

With the COVID-19 pandemic, the world was forced indoors and online indefinitely. This wrought havoc on people's mental health, inducing anxiety, loneliness, depression and more. In order to cope with this came a rise in online literature, wherein laymen turned into poets overnight. One thing that tied all these writers together was a sense of the collective 'I': in these raw writings, both the readers and writers found an outlet for their mental anguish. For this and the fact that they were published on easy-access platforms like Instagram, such writings gained instant and great popularity. Although online poetry has lately been debated regarding its literary merit, the paradigm shift it brought about in the past year cannot be overlooked. The present research paper will thus attempt to reveal how online poetry during the pandemic has revived the genre of confessionalism and has immensely aided in coping with mental health especially in these peculiar conditions of mandatory isolation and quarantine. This will be undertaken via a close look at the nature, appeal, and influence of Instagram Poetry in linking contemporary literary output and mental health.

INTRODUCTION

'Confessional poetry' is a genre of poetry from the 1950s - 1960s USA, best known as the "poetry of the personal or 'I'" ('Confessional poetry' n.d.). It "deals with the facts and intimate mental and physical experiences of the poet's own life" through which a poet may reveal "private or clinical matters about himself or herself, including sexual experiences, mental anguish and illness, experiments with drugs, and suicidal impulses" (Abrams 2015, p. 64). While this genre is particularly associated with American poets like Robert Lowell and Sylvia Plath, the closest one can get to confessionalism elsewhere is through singular instances, like Kamala Das' style of poetry in Indian English. With growing advocacy the world over for better recognition and treatment of mental health, confessionalism has gained

currency in the last several years. With the internet offering easy-access platforms, people have begun documenting their struggles with mental health via letters, blog articles, verse, graphic arts and so on. Online forums have become the new hub for continuous literary output. This is especially true of works published March 2020 onwards, when the COVID-19 pandemic forced everyone indoors indefinitely. The pandemic has thrown various aspects of life out of gear, like socialising, physical proximity, long-distance relationships, coping mechanisms and more. Due to mandatory isolation, things like support systems, mental health affected by people one lives with, the availability of therapy, the grief of losing a loved one to COVID-19, an immense sense of loneliness are some of the central themes of writings. All these aspects seem to only further disintegrate one's resilience, as some writers have mentioned a rise in anxiety levels and the fear of getting depression again. In posting their pain as online poetry, these writers have found not only an outlet but also a huge community that shares their experiences, thus turning confessionalism from that of 'the personal' to 'the collective'. This sense of solidarity has revitalised the genre of confessionalism with focus on conversations around mental health. One such online platform that has greatly contributed to this revision and revitalisation of the genre is Instagram. Primarily a photo blogging platform, Instagram has seen a steady rise in online poetry being published either in captions to images, or as text as an image. Called 'Instapoetry', it features a simple style and a modern spin on traditional poetry with writers from all walks of life. Its topics are of a wide range, covering experiences of immigration, identity, sexuality, politics, feminism, social justice, trauma, mental health and more. While there is much controversy over this genre, it can't be denied that Instapoetry is a powerful and popular sub-type of literature. Keeping this in mind, the present research paper shall take a look at the nature, appeal, and influence of Instapoetry in linking contemporary literary output and mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic, thus reviving confessionalism.

THE NATURE AND APPEAL OF INSTAPOETRY

For the current generation for whom social media is a vital channel of communication, Instapoetry is quite a natural form of everyman's literature. Its striking brevity and flexibility in modes of publication is evidenced as text on a minimalist image, on 3-4 image slides, or as a caption of maximum 2, 200 characters. Longer pieces are 'teased' with the full piece published in a parallel blog linked to the account. Another tendency is the wide use of simple language, some even including dialects and slang for a more familiar and spontaneous sense of expression. All these aspects enhance the appeal of Instapoetry to laymen, even encouraging them to write.

Firstly, the appeal of Instapoetry comes from its brevity making poetry a less daunting experience for both writers and readers. The next is its wide and exponential reach — it facilitates writers a quick way to publish themselves online with a ready and captive readership, and for the readers, it offers free and easy availability of the poem, thus ensuring better engagement. Social media also allows for instant feedback and interactions, along with the ease of sharing and forwarding to other netizens. Thirdly, there is a lesser sense of elitism in the use of simpler language in poetry, which encourages people to try their own hand at it. For this,

“some academics appreciate the way in which it has stimulated interest in poetry” (‘Instapoetry’ n.d.). Also, considering Instagram is primarily a photo blogging platform, the presentation of Instapoetry is quite appealing — “The textual lines laid on paper-textured backgrounds serve as a break to the user” (‘Here’s Why People Are Drawn To Instapoetry’ 2020). As Paolo Manalo says, “the effect is for the lines and verses to pop out as the interface of Instagram tends to saturate users in a series of objects” (‘Here’s Why People Are Drawn To Instapoetry’ 2020). With all this, Instapoetry has aided the return of confessionism on a universal scale in a way never envisaged before.

THE INFLUENCE OF INSTAPOETRY ON CONFESSIONALISM

Thanks to Instapoetry, laymen turned poets overnight, losing their lonesome personal ‘I’ to the collective and universal ‘I’. As Em Mampusti quotes, “Instapoets don’t really create a clear persona, allowing the readers to easily insert themselves in the situation” (‘Heres Why People Are Drawn To Instapoetry’ 2020). That confessionism thrives with renewed vigour on a much larger scale than its 1950s - 1960s American-centric counterpart, is just an idea whose time has come.

Confessionism via Instapoetry also smoothens out the issues critics had with the original movement — its ‘narcissism’ and ‘nihilism’. Due to the newly-gained sense of the collective more than the singular personal, confessionism ceases to be ‘narcissistic’. The poet’s musings find resonance with readers who are readily responsive, finding themselves mirrored in the emotions and psyche portrayed in Instapoetry. Also, it is arguably no longer ‘nihilistic’ — instead of only a sense of dread and hopelessness in confessionism, nowadays, such poems strive to understand the world within and without. Given the nature of the platform, each writing breaks the shackles of self-obsession, isolation and loneliness, reaching out to be heard. Such writings gain a quick and massive readership which only serves to prove the lack of nihilism in this new form of confessionism.

Confessionism in Instapoetry also tackles social issues and happenings through a personal lens, making it document the era in a very realistic manner. The pandemic outbreak and its management, while affecting normal life sparing no one, have naturally led to a spike in mental health issues across the globe. For many, Instapoetry has become a new lifeline of social interaction offering some solace, given the restrictions on social life.

CONFESSIONALISM AND MENTAL HEALTH IN PANDEMIC ERA INSTAPOETRY

The immediate past, the distant future, the clear and present ‘isolation’, helplessness and desperation all find expression in Instapoetry. The news of the rise and spread of the pandemic is a mentally-harrowing ordeal to all across the globe. Confessionism is a subjective yet collective experience that amplifies the addressing of the resultant mental health issues through literature.

When the virus was still novel and nascent in March 2020, some confessional Instapoetry expressed longing and hope to get through the mandatory isolation imposed worldwide. An anonymous writer in their poem ‘Imagine’, posted in May 2020 on the Instapoetry page ‘pandemicpoetryclub’ quotes:

“I imagine our future together,
 it is warm,
 it is bright.
 We can hold each other again,
 we can walk side by side.
 I imagine life together,
 where we laugh,
 and create memories.
 We can talk and not shout,
 across the fields of distance.
 I imagine a lot,
 and hope soon enough,
 it becomes our reality.”

Here, the personal is infused with the universal desire of essentially getting out of isolation and being able to socially interact freely without a mandatory six feet distance, lack of physical contact, and masks covering the face. The poem expresses the need for physical intimacy, which has been reconsidered and simplified as even walking beside one another during the pandemic. While the poem doesn't reveal restlessness, it expresses a sense of longing with a touch of hope.

A more provoking account of loneliness and desperation is captured in the poem 'Isolation' by Jen, posted by 'pandemicpoetryclub' in 2020. It opens with talking about a girl at an old writing desk, unable to write and gazing at the scene beyond her window. But rather than taking in the clear spring day, the girl focuses on the window's framing:

“The girl's eyes weren't focussing on what lay beyond the glass however,
 but what lay on it.
 The window was divided into 12 sections,
 these were separated into 6 by a bulky piece of white plastic where,
 the girl assumed,
 hinges should have been so that it might open.
 This window did not,
 Nor would not open,
 And this bulging piece of plastic
 Seemed to lie to her very face.
 Suggesting fresh air, teasing it, tempting with it,
 but never offering it.”

These lines clearly reveal the longing and helpless frustration at being forced indoors. This alienation is further explored when the girl focuses on something even smaller on a window panel:

“A fly's gravity-defying body was attached to the clear panel.
 Its wings pressed together pointing towards the ceiling,
 its filament legs sprawled in any direction you like,
 a small black green smudge beneath it.
 'Dead... and for how long?' She thought.

...

'Unless it died of age' she continued, lost.
 'Stopped right in its tracks, like pressing pause on a DVD.'

...
 ‘Trying to get outside’ she thought.
 ‘Waiting to get outside’ she thought.
 ‘To see its fly-friends and fly-family’ she thought.
 ‘Just like me’ she thought.”

Towards the end, the girl of the poem becomes one with something as insignificant as a dead fly in her house, both trapped indoors. As seen in the poem, people worldwide had begun to feel immensely alienated, withering away on the inside while Nature healed on the outside from the lack of human activity.

In a short poem titled ‘Tomorrow’ posted in 2020 on the Instapoetry page ‘pandemicpoetryclub’, poet Bethany Jade captures both hope and helplessness at the pandemic:

“Tomorrow,
 the sun shall rise.
 Tomorrow,
 the birds will sing.
 Tomorrow,
 a new day will dawn.
 But my journey won’t change.
 There will be no new turns for me to take.
 I am trapped,
 here in today.

Silently waiting for my tomorrow.”

The poem encapsulates the early-on sensation of desperation yet patience in a situation where nothing else could be done by laymen but isolate. This resignation to fate has been shared by many as months pass by with the pandemic getting worse. There is a sense of suffering, but also a collective faith and hope.

For some people, the effect of this lockdown has been more than loneliness and longing. It has forced many to confront their mental health issues with no solace being found outside. Anonymously submitted to ‘pandemicpoetryclub’ in 2020, the poem ‘Boundaries’ quotes:

“The walls are still made of concrete
 Nothing has changed there
 but in my mind
 they feel metres
 Thick and heavy,
 my mind yearns to stay indoors
 scared to feel the cold wind
 icy on my cheeks
 Lockdown, stay inside
 but now I choose to lock my self in.”

Here, there is a clearer look at the pandemic’s effect on mental health. While self-quarantine is enforced for some, for quite many, it is self-imposed. Physically confined within the heavy concrete walls, the pandemic has taken a toll on the otherwise ‘unfettered’ mind that now seeks shelter in voluntary confinement. This poem resonates with many who share this experience, revealing a sense of unity brought about by confessionality.

Posted in July 2020, the poem ‘Before Dawn’ by Ankita Singh talks about the pandemic-influenced stupor:

“July came empty-handed,
not much was
expected of it anyway.

...

You’ve been asleep
only for two hours,
but it feels like ages,
and not in a good way.
What can one do?

...

You want to cast the blankets off,
and take a refreshing stroll -
but you can’t.

You want to drive over to
your best friend’s, unannounced,
or be a host yourself,
for the guests you actually want -
but you can’t.

...

You slide into
the sanguine sheets,
as smoothly as you slipped out,
and dream -
of mountains, and oceans,
and roads, and rivers,
of bus rides,
and rickshaw stands,

...

of journeys over miles, and
of people with their smiles -
of smiles without masks

...

You dream of the past,
and of the future,
you dream of everything.
Anything, but the present”.

The tags in the post aptly include ‘normalcy’, ‘hope’, ‘empty streets’, ‘quarantine poetry’, and ‘together in this’. The poem captures the shared sentiments of numbness and thinning hope as the pandemic went on for much longer than initially anticipated. The confession is of a surreal situation, a normal world now existing only in dreams, and the present being far removed from the past or anticipated future. There is a constant sense of shared destiny through it all — in the experience of isolation, in the waning hope for a better future, in reminiscing — to help process the gloom better. This can be seen as a reflection of people’s declining mental health, wherein many began to chant ‘We are together in this’ and ‘We will make

it' to band together against the mental alienation caused by physical isolation. Mental health, as seen in this poem and its tags, is no longer a personal realm alone and like current confessionism, has become a community experience.

The May 2021 poem 'Aggrieved' by Karan Kapoor talks about the pandemic as an apocalypse, addressing the political mismanagement and immense grief at losing loved ones to the virus. The first verse mentions a friend's father:

"We're hunters who cannot hunt oxygen for him...

He is at 51 and going down with the sun.

We carry time on our shoulders as it bleeds".

This captures the frantic search and sense of dread that befell Indians during the second wave, wherein hospitals and COVID-19 centres were stretched beyond their capacity with patients and severe lack of medical supplies. Kapoor writes:

"Some pray for their fathers to be relieved,

some want them to live no matter.

The one who now stands in the queue for oxygen

will soon stand in the queue for crematoriums".

This addresses the grim reality where live or die, you have to 'wait for your turn'. Mourning the loss of a loved one by giving the departed soul a decent funeral became an impossible luxury in the second wave. He goes on to say:

"Everyone we love plunges deep into a sleep there's no waking from,

men and women reduce to rising numbers on television.

We were never taught to count so far".

People moved from members to numbers at an alarming rate during the second wave in India, and this personal account has been proven time and time again to voice the public's gloom and heartbreak. The poem goes on to bemoan:

"The newspapers must be full of obituaries but they aren't

...

The dead are nameless

...

Is there no god in the heart of a monster?

He is tearing us apart, and making slow work of it."

Soon after, it ends on a note of dread regarding the bleak future:

"There are no words, all we can do is look silently at the dead.

...

Future is nothing but a hole in the ground".

The second wave felt almost like an apocalypse for India, leaving people despondent and numb with shock at the state of things. The poem's ending encapsulates this feeling that, with the way the pandemic has affected people's lives, the world will soon end "not with a bang but with a whimper" ('The Hollow Men' 1925).

Instapoetry thus becomes many things: a vent for the frustrated, a portal to a carefree past, and a panacea for the bereaved who are scarred for life and need to heal. The unfiltered expression of it all through confessionism heightens Instapoetry as a support system of sorts for mental health, making this a very interesting literary trend.

CONCLUSION

The selected poems are only a few of many that prove the power of Instapoetry in reviving confessionalism on a larger scale, encouraging talks around mental health, and creating a sense of community despite the isolating aspect of the COVID-19 pandemic. There is a lesser sense of elitism and higher inclusion in literature thanks to Instapoetry, especially due to it transforming confessionalism from an American-centric movement of the past to a way for people to express their turmoil and be seen and heard world over. Lastly, Instapoetry has given hope that mental health need not be reclusive as confessionalism originally suggested. Instead, contemporary confessionalism via Instapoetry has made mental health less of a solitary battle and more of a collective social experience.

REFERENCES

- Abrams, M. H. (2015) *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. Cengage Learning, Delhi, India.
- Anonymous (2020) 'Boundaries'. Instagram. Available at <https://www.instagram.com/p/CALTO00BPpE/> (Accessed: 8 July 2021).
- Anonymous (2020) 'Imagine'. Instagram. Available at <https://www.instagram.com/p/CAvaHZOpCXM/> (Accessed: 8 July 2021).
- 'Confessional poetry' (2021) Wikipedia. Available at: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Confessional_poetry (Accessed: 6 July 2021).
- Eliot, T. S. (1925) 'The Hollow Men'. All Poetry. Available at: <https://allpoetry.com/the-hollow-men> (Accessed: 10 July 2021).
- 'Here's Why People Are Drawn To Instapoetry' (2020) Clozette. Available at: <https://www.clozette.co/article/popularity-of-instapoetry-6513> (Accessed: 7 July 2021).
- 'Instapoetry' (2021) Wikipedia. Available at: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Instapoetry> (Accessed: 6 July 2021).
- Jade, B. (2020) 'Tomorrow'. Instagram. Available at <https://www.instagram.com/p/CAXokVrh4L5/> (Accessed: 8 July 2021).
- Jen (2020) 'Isolation'. Instagram. Available at <https://www.instagram.com/p/CADED4Bhzii/> (Accessed: 8 July 2021).
- Kapoor, K. (2021) 'Aggrieved'. Instagram. Available at <https://www.instagram.com/p/CPNWAdMrX8e/> (Accessed: 9 July 2021).
- Singh, A. (2020) 'Before Dawn'. Instagram. Available at <https://www.instagram.com/p/CCGKpcdHynpQJN56ZIM9trZ3E27kMYvWsatuD U0/> (Accessed: 9 July 2021).