

“CORONA BUT FREEDOM”: SELF-DISCOVERY AND FAMILY IN SAJEEV SASI’S SHORT STORY DISCOVER YOURSELF: A TALE OF COVID-19 DAYS

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Abstract: This paper examines the impact of the novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) on the human in Sajeev Sasi’s short story Discover Yourself: A Tale of COVID-19 Days. In doing so, the paper looks at two opposing sides of the COVID-19 during the pandemic. First, it briefly argues the negative aspects of the pandemic because it has disrupted the normal flow of life and caused the death of millions of people. Secondly, the paper explores how the pandemic has also created opportunities. Individuals reconsider their lives and discover themselves, their hidden identity, unknown potentials, and their way of life positively when locked down at home. Given the opportunity created by the lockdown, the article also discusses the importance of a warm, safe, and comfortable family life during hardship and difficulties. The paper argues these points through the life and views of the fictional character Karihaalan in the story above.

Keywords: Coronavirus, pandemic, patriarchy, identity, and family.

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"Corona but Freedom": Self-Discovery...

The novel Coronavirus (COVID-19), which occurred in the Chinese city of Wuhan in December 2019, has highly shaken the entire world with its crippling impacts on daily life, healthcare system, economy, education, social relations, and so on (Cohut, 2020; Engle 2020; Radcliffe, 2020; Azhari, 2020 and Huang, 2021). As in the previous plagues experienced in different places worldwide, the COVID-19 pandemic has caused life to come almost to a standstill and paralyzed the sense of peace, harmony, and community. For instance, as Kimberly Chiscaden, Communications Officer at the World Health Organization (WHO), argues, “the COVID-19 pandemic has led to a dramatic loss of human life worldwide and presents an unprecedented challenge to public health, food systems, and the world of work.” She also continues to state that “The economic and social disruption caused by the pandemic is devastating: tens of millions of people are at risk of falling into extreme poverty, while the number of undernourished people, currently estimated at nearly 690 million, could increase by up to 132 million by the end of the year” (2020, para. 1). Here, what is essential is that these vast multilevel “devastating” disruptions and impacts, as Amiri, Paghesh & Amiri argue, have not remained local but become global, seriously affecting every corner of the world. Thus, although intrinsic policy-making is problem-oriented and aligned with changes in policy issues and contexts, the speed and extent of this crisis have necessitated changes in macro-decision-making systems (2020, para. 7). All these views and arguments above are correct and give us an insight into how the entire world suffers mainly economically and socially. In addition, the fatal contagious COVID-19 does not remain there, yet it has traumatized the people mentally and spiritually throughout the world during the pandemic lockdown. Kritika Poudel and Pramod Subedi point out that the COVID-19 has brought about some psychological problems such as “anxiety”, “fear”, “uncertainty,” “hopelessness”, and “stark spiritual breakdown” not only among those who have been infected and experienced the harsh side of the virus with its severe post-traumatic effect but also among those who have been exposed for a long time to “the lockdown curfews, self-isolation, social distancing and quarantine” (2020, pp. 748–755). These “lockdown curfews” and “quarantine,” as Brooks et al. argue, are often linked to “an unpleasant experience for those who undergo it. Separation from loved ones, the loss of freedom, uncertainty over disease status, and boredom can, on occasion, create dramatic effects,” sometimes leading to “suicide” (2020, p. 912).

As seen in the discussions above and in many other studies elsewhere, this lethal virus has severely disturbed the normal flow of daily life and turned everything into hell across the world. In addition, it has caused the death of more than 2 million people, the collapse of the healthcare system, economic recession, the loss of jobs, massive damage to education, social isolation, post-traumatic mental problems, and so on. The scientific world has been working very hard to develop a vaccine to achieve mass immunization against the spread of the deadly virus to leave all these abnormal situations behind. Several pharmaceutical companies have promisingly developed some kinds of vaccine, even though an entirely satisfactory result is yet to come very soon.

The Coronavirus pandemic has given rise to the crisis in almost every aspect of life worldwide. Yet, Amiri, Pagheh, and Amiri argue that this compelling situation could also lead to a “point of hope”, which is “the vast ‘accumulated experience’ that the people worldwide have gained in the face of future crises. If the history of epidemics is a guide to humanity, the spread of the disease, like any other, could create a wave of innovation tailored to how lifestyle changes” (2020, para. 4). This paper argues, reflecting on Sajeev Sasi’s short story *Discover Yourself: A Tale of COVID-19 Days* (2020), how the COVID-19 pandemic also creates an opportunity in life, an option that enables one to re-“discover” himself/herself, reconsider her/his life and realize what s/he has lost in life as for the meaning of the life and the values that used to give sense to life and keep the community closer together as being safe and sound in every aspect. In so doing, the paper first examines in the story how the COVID-19 pandemic causes the main character Karihaalan, an English teacher in Trichy, Tamil Nadu, India, to “discover” himself and re-examine his life. He psychologically frees himself from “his routine life,” “subjugation”, and “suppression” imposed on him by “the gender norms” of the male-dominated society (Sasi, 2020, p. 56). His lifestyle and perception of his life visibly change. He becomes able to find what was “missing in his life.” He achieves a sense of freedom, realizes his different potentials, and finds space to practice whatever he wants to do in life without being subjected to the routine of everyday life and confinement imposed on him by society. Secondly, the paper argues that when he shifts his viewpoint and perspective of life, when he may find what was missing in his life when he controls the center of his life on his own and when he learns how to think differently from others, Karihaalan also “discovers” another aspect - another value which has been ignored for

decades in life – the importance of a warm, peaceful and secure family life, which “turns out to be a place for the uplifting emotional and psychological spirit” (Gunes, 2020, para. 16) and the value of the excellent family “relationship” with family members. As the paper debates, Sajeev Sasi’s short story suggests that a warm family and good family relationships are essential during crises and pandemics. A comfortable family may enable individuals to cope with the crippling effects of trouble; it also connects individuals to and causes them to remain at the center of life and look into future life with hope.

Sajeev Sasi’s short story *Discover Yourself: A Tale of COVID-19 Days* takes place in Trichy, Tamil Nadu, India, and talks about the life of Karihaalan, the protagonist, during the COVID-19 pandemic. Friends and students also call Karihaalan “Kari”. As Sajeev Sasi represents him, Karihaalan “enjoys [his] profession,” but “he did not enjoy his routine life” (2020, p. 56). Strangely, his discontent may derive from the fact that he, though a male, feels that “he had been subjugated, dominated and suppressed by the gender norms. He knew that a male-dominated society set up the subjugation” (p. 56) and “even being a male, he couldn’t liberate himself from the misery of the boredom, emptiness and mundane life. He had to breathe within the frame of the society’s freedom” (p. 56). These quotations do not give us a clue about how the “male-dominated society” restricts Karihaalan’s life and causes him to feel “the misery of the boredom, emptiness and mundane life.” Yet, it seems that “the male-dominated society” may impose many rules and norms on both males and females, in which they may feel that their “freedom” is crippled in different ways. In addition, these quotations may suggest that the routines of rules and norms may always be familiar and stable, which does not let individuals see other aspects of life and enjoy them. Still, they have “to breathe within the frame of the society’s freedom”. Karihaalan feels that this is indeed the nature of a patriarchal society, which pushes both males and females to align with its expectations differently.

However, Karihaalan yearns for enjoying his complete “freedom”: “He dreamed to be a cook at home, homemaker and baby sitter at home” by going beyond the rules and expectation of the society, and “he often wanted to hit the roads,” even though “he used to go long drive on the empty roads, he often irritated to pick up the shortcuts and on the messy roads. He preferred Chennai by-pass and Madurai by-pass where he could hit the road

in a couple of minutes” (p. 57) so that he feels that the way he lives and acts “was not him, something was missing in his life. He always wanted to find himself” (p. 56). In his story, Sajeev Sasi writes about the nature of a patriarchal society and how it crumbles identities and destroys dreams of individuals as being repressive, dominant, and uncompromising. Sajeev Sasi writes that his story mainly relates to the Indian society and other patriarchal societies worldwide, where gender identities are constructed in line with the expectations and norms of the community. Therefore, in the story, when Karihaalan intends to remain at home, do the housework, and look after the baby. Still, the patriarchal Indian society regards these activities as women’s responsibilities and thus insults men if they act contrary to the patriarchal expectations. Moreover, Karihaalan wishes “to hit the roads and achieve a sense of freedom without being subjugated to the constraint and decimation of the patriarchal culture and ideology. He experiences a severe identity crisis between two marginal views of life – on the one hand, he feels forced to submit to the patriarchal norms and views, which impede the ways for individuals to act freely and practice what they year for, and on the other hand, Sajeev Sasi endows Karihaalan with a different strategy which allows him to forge the patriarchal “subjugation” and “dominance” so that he becomes able to hit the roads, distance himself from the society and take refuge into nature and to achieve a sense of psychological liberty, even though it is temporary.

However, “COVID-19 stopped [Karihaalan’s temporary] relaxation, his hobbies, his joy and his empty roads” (p. 57) when the pandemic virtually restricts people’s mobility. As well known, the COVID-19 pandemic has caused the states across the world to apply sometimes a partial and occasionally total lockdown to keep people at home, which, they have intended, will contribute to avoiding the spread of the infectious virus (Kaplan, Frias & McFall-Johnsen, 2020). Like many other people in different parts of the world, the COVID-19 lockdown also initially disturbs Karihaalan and interrupts his daily life and teaching at the college. At the beginning of the pandemic, he shows mixed reactions to the new situation. For example, he learns that “the college was going to be shut down, immediately” and thus “he felt relieved from the tedious routine and mundane life” because he, unlike many other men, wants to be “home all the time, cooking the favorite fish gravy, and dry fish gravy” (Sasi, 2020, pp. 56-7).

However, “his happiness lasted only for a while, he was called for the duty that was, ‘to sign the attendance register’” at college:

He wasn’t assigned any work for a couple of days. Along with other professors, he also stayed in the department without any role to play. They just discussed the new virus for hours. But after a couple of hours, they felt normal and started bullying each other. Most of the normal routine working days, they never had that much free time and general talks. Only the lockdown for the students made them be in the department for an unusual task (p. 57).

As the quotation suggests, there appears confusion between the college administration and the teachers, in which nothing was clear as to the teachers’ duties during the lockdown. Instead of teaching, they constantly talk about the new virus, and uncertainty and confusion occupy their mind, leading them to fight each other because the constant talk about the latest virus and what it has brought to life annoy them psychologically. Another point, the quotation suggests, is that being together in the room may also cause them to be infected and thus be in jeopardy. They are just forced to come to college without any practical purpose and duty so that they loaf about. This situation gives Karihaalan a feeling that the teachers’ lives and health are not cared for much by the college management and the higher administrative body of the country. Finally, the news of the lockdown reaches the college management that “asked [the teachers] to be at home. He felt happy and relaxed” (p. 58).

Being locked down at home provides Karihaalan with one negative outcome and one positive outcome. As for the negative outcome, for instance, the COVID-19 pandemic confines him, like millions of others worldwide, to home, where he constantly uses his mobile phone, often reads and listens to the news on the deadly effects of the COVID-19, which negatively influences his life and attitudes. He feels isolated, disturbed, and hopeless since the bombardment of the news of the death and the rapid spread of the Coronavirus continuously keeps his mind busy. Eventually, Karihaalan comes to realize that such kind of news will further traumatize him and his sense of peace, so he starts listening less to the news about the Coronavirus, which visibly leads him to allocate space to other activities, in which he gradually restores to peace of mind (pp. 59-61).

This peace of mind gained by the lockdown creates a strongly positive view, which enables him to discover himself – a self-discovery, in which he not only frees himself from the psychological “subjugation” of the patriarchal society, as well as from the routines of everyday business and chronological flow of life from the early morning to the evening mainly in the college but he also becomes able to act in the way he wants and practice what he enjoys the most. In doing so, Karihaalan subverts the identity and roles given to him by the patriarchal society, he finds himself amid the distressing lockdown of the pandemic. For example, when he listens less to the news, Karihaalan finds time and space to think of other things, other aspects of life, or what he calls a new “relationship” in his life (p. 64). He starts spending much time with his mother; he also watches “the horoscope” together “with his mother” (p. 61), even though he sometimes criticizes and angers his mother. For him, “that was the most important moment of the day as the laughing and happiness stay for a while but think about the laughing for the rest of the day and could be a reminiscence for the rest of the years to come” (p. 61; emphasis added). As seen in the quotation, being together with his mother, being closer to his mother, spending good time together and “laughing” with his mother not only reduces his anxiety and boredom and then removes Karihaalan from the adverse effect and feelings of the Coronavirus but also makes him happy for a while. As in the Romantic sense, he imaginatively free frees him and feels a sense of peace and happiness, which keeps him alive and motivated.

The “laughing and happiness,” which Karihaalan achieves in his life when he is together with his mother and when he spends good time with his mother, causes him to realize how warm, secure family life and closeness with love and kindness are essential in the time of a crisis and hardship as in the trouble of the COVID-19:

The COVID-19 made him understand his family and be with his family for hours. As he spoke to his mother as much, he could, as much time he could spend. He used to talk to his parents whenever he needed something and whenever he was bored. He didn’t realize before the lockdown he was squeezing his parents’ time. He didn’t know that he was using them, didn’t know they worked and lived for him. After the week pas[sed], he could understand them as they spent their life for him (p. 62).

As the quotation suggests, it is true that the Coronavirus has disrupted life

in many ways and caused the loss of life of millions. Still, it may also have reminded us of what we have lost—the importance of a warm, stable and secure family life., the Coronavirus has forced us to go back to the basics of life—the values that have been forgotten or ignored for decades. As I argued in my short article on the negative outcome of the corona pandemic, today family life “is no longer the concern of many people, particularly young people: simply, it has no meaning in their lives because they believe that the family life imposes restrictions on them and brings many responsibilities and that it is too hard to manage family life and children dues to the economic hardship” (Gunes, 2020, para. 12). The family as an institution, since the advent of modernism at the beginning of the twentieth century, has gradually lost its importance in life because modernism had waged war against what were traditional values and establishments resulted from the radical developments and changes between the last part of the nineteenth century and the early decades of the twentieth century (Daiches, 1967; Faulkner, 1977; Brown, 1989; Eysteinnsson, 1990; Childs, 2000 & Parsons, 2007). Modernism disparaged the family, but it also considered it an old-fashioned institution used by society and its ideology as the center of reproduction and control to restrain individual life and freedom. Mainly the feminist movement, which gained speed during the modern period, has powerfully slammed the family institution in the sense that the family is a patriarchal construction, which had suppressed and curbed the life of women, while it had given men many privileges over women, so the family has become one of the contentious subjects and then gradually lost its importance and credibility in the eyes of both young men and women. In addition, the economic reasons have led young women and men not to marry or delay their marriages until the age of 35 and even beyond because both men and women have started working. Money and economic welfare have become the center of their lives, particularly during consumerism in the wake of World War II. Besides, the divorce rate has enormously increased in recent years, further undermining the basis of stable family life. As Taylor Brownwell argues, the divorce ratio has increased further during the COVID-19 pandemic due to the “financial stress, boredom, disagreements about parenting, and household chores” (2020, para. 4); the family as the cornerstone of a stable society and a haven for its members, the cornerstone of a stable community and a haven for its members have been exposed to a massive disruption in many ways since the beginning of the twentieth century.

In his short story *Discover Yourself: A Tale of Covid-19 Days*, however, Sajeev Sasi suggests that COVID-19, though it has given rise to so many negative aspects in life, has also brought about a few opportunities, which have enabled us to understand what we have lost and what we need in the future as a proverb says: "Misfortune is better than thousands of pieces of advice." Therefore, through his representation of the life of his fictional character Karihaalan, Sajeev Sasi illuminates that a warm, secure and stable family life is of vital importance during the time of hardship and calamity such as the COVID-19 pandemic that has caused the whole world to suffer for more than a year. In the quotation above, for instance, Sajeev Sasi enables Karihaalan to discover what has been lost – a warm family life, which not only saves him from boredom, psychological stress, and the harsh reality of COVID-19 throughout the lockdown of the pandemic but also causes him to uncover what he has missed or what he has craved inside him for years. Before the lockdown, he did not spend much time with his family; there were more or less formal relationships between him and his parents, suggesting as if they had lived in a hotel room with minimum contact. In addition, before the lockdown, he did not help his parents at home at all with an excuse of saying, "I need to study". His parents used to say, "Stop your studies, you've been studying for many years". After listening to that, he knew he was excused. Being at home, being a boy, he never did any household works before" (pp. 62-3).

Nevertheless, the COVID-19 lockdown makes Karihaalan realize that other things are more important than "studying". These "other things" bind him to life, make his life meaningful, peaceful and happy, he undergoes "self-discovering" that "was like discovering the anatomy of a plant" (p. 65). Another "discovery" he perceives in his life is that "the COVID-19 made him realize what is important in his life", "discovering the relationship" (p. 64), in which "the bonding and understanding in the family grew well as never before" (p. 65). Thus, this "self-discovery" and "realization" brings him to the point that a warm family with a good "relationship" is of importance in one's life and that his parents actually "worked and lived for him": After the week passed, he could understand them as they spent their life for him" (p. 62). Having "discovered" himself and "realized" other vital things in his life, Karihaalan strives to act in line with these new perspectives:

Because of boredom, because of being at home, he volunteered to do house-

hold works. Even he chopped onions with watery eyes, even he cleaned his toilet and swept the floors with dust behind. Though it wasn't a shock for him, it was a great shock to his parents. Being a bachelor, without hitting the gym, he knew he would put on weights. So, he decided to take part in the household works which made his belly stop from protruding. At one point in time, even he felt of having mask-wearing at home, by the way, it was not to stop protecting from the virus but to protect from the habit of the excess of eating, especially of the junk foods (p. 63).

This quotation suggests that the difficult times or intolerable crises in life enable one to "discover" themselves, their abilities, find other ways and "relationships" to get out of the deadlock, rejoice in their life and eventually look into the future with hope because it is natural that an individual cannot live forever under anxiety and tediousness. In the story *Discover Yourself: A Tale of Covid-19 Days*, for instance, the COVID-19 lockdown bestows vital energy and vision on Karihaalan to "discover" himself, his other abilities and find other "relationships" under the stressful predicament of the COVID-19 lockdown to keep him away from "boredom."

With this new vision, although it is a shock to his parents, Karihaalan, contrary to his previous life, starts helping them with household chores; he cleans his toilet and the floors; he starts eating the home-cooked foods, whose importance he did not realize before since "he used to purchase the snacks outside, especially Mixtures, Murukku, Chips, and so on" (p. 64); he also spends time in conversation, particularly with his mother, who is a very knowledgeable woman and who knows much about cooking, horoscopes, the cinema, stars, and their past and present lives. All these activities may help him in two ways. First, they make him forget the monotony and tension caused by the COVID-19 lockdown so that he manages to minimize the adverse impact of the plague in his life. Secondly, he realizes that family is not a place which its members use like a hotel where they come and sleep with minimum contacts as in a typical modern family but it a place where there is warmth, peace, happiness, security, and uplifting spirit, where its members collaborate, help each other when any need occurs, protect each other when they are in danger and difficulty and spiritually support each other when they are bored and depressed. His perception of home and family shifts, and he becomes more household-oriented. Thus, Karihaalan reverses what "many claimed COVID-19 was 'freedom but corona', but for him, it was just the opposite, 'corona but freedom'" (p. 63). COVID-19, unlike anything else, frees him from his old illusions of

the so-called truth that he was shown by the patriarchal society as correct ways of his life:

His parents were cooking something which he wasn't aware of. They gave him mixtures, he liked that one and asked how and where they did get this one. He felt that was too good. To his surprise, they cooked themselves. At the age of 34, he never knew his mother would know how to cook mixtures at home. He had a shocking and surprised look on them. The COVID-19 made him not only open himself but his parents, too. The bonding and understating in the family grew well as never before (pp. 64-5).

"[D]iscovering the [new] relationship" (p. 64) with his family through "freedom" created by the COVID-19 pandemic opens Karihaalan's mind and makes him realize how good and quality relationships with family members are of vital significance in life. His relationship with his mother gradually improves, and he reaches a point where he starts to find happiness in doing chores with his mother. They also comment on the news on the smartphone or Facebook; they exchange ideas with each other about so many things related to life; they talk about "cinestars' past and present life" (p. 64). This new relationship and life overthrow the basis of what he was taught before, how he acted, and what he practiced in his life. This "discovery" of a new relationship with his mother expands his mind and understanding. Eventually, it creates a communal perspective, in which both he and his mother entertain themselves and forget the damaging influence of the COVID-19 pandemic. In this sense, Sajeev Sasi suggests that the warm family with its close members is crucial when putting up with the crisis, suffering, and poverty caused by destructive events such as a pandemic, earthquake, flood-related disasters, and so on; family people who act communally help, support and comfort each other: in his story *Discover Yourself: A Tale of Covid-19 Days*, Sajeev Sasi artistically points to the fact that people look for a haven in difficult times and situations.

In conclusion, the COVID-19 pandemic, though it has affected life negatively worldwide, provides Karihaalan in the story with an opportunity to know who he is and what is essential and what is not essential in life. Thus, "after the lockdown, his talking was limited only to updating his intrapersonal skills rather than the interpersonal skills" (p. 65), which enables him to explain further "what he needed and what he lacked" in life (p. 65). It is what he calls "self-discovering [that] was like discovering the anatomy of a plant" (p. 65):

The lockdown made him watch nearly a hundred films. At a point in time, two movies per day. Sometimes movies helped him reduce the boredom and sometimes increased his boredom. It was like, what he did to others was not a matter of concern, but what he did to himself counts a lot. He didn't know how long the lockdown extend[s] but locking down to himself would continue forever. The COVID-19 made the male-dominated society to be at check, it made no gender disparity. It made a male Karihaalan be at home as he wished. At last, because of COVID-19, he felt, he wasn't suppressed, marginalized, and, moreover, DISCOVERED HIMSELF! (p. 65)

In his short story *Discover Yourself: A Tale of Covid-19 Days*, Sajeev Sasi suggests through the life of his fictional Karihaalan that human beings can change negative situations into positive ones with their inner power, energy, realization, and understanding, which often come in a time of crisis, misfortune, and hardship like COVID-19. Indeed, Sajeev Sasi gives the reader hope and vision that it is always possible to find a way out of any trouble and destitution without surrendering to despair and deadlock.

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