



## THE PRESENT PANDEMIC DIMENSIONS: A STUDY ON CULTURE AND ECOLOGY

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### ABSTRACT

*The present paper develops an ecocritical and cultural discourse around the present coronavirus crisis to have a better understanding of this dilemma. Ecocritical analysis the present scenario gives us an understanding of where we went wrong and what can be done to put things in order. Apart from that, the present paper takes into account a few movies and texts about turbulent times to find a perspective. The present study analyzes the present situation using cultural and ecocritical apparatus.*  
**Key Terms:** Coronavirus, Pandemic, Philosophy, Holocaust, Culture, Resilience etc.

### INTRODUCTION

It is in human nature to blame things on others and feel superior about it. With coronavirus, we are dealing with something that we cannot blame on others: capitalism, racism, colonialism, communism, atheism, religion, science, environmental degradation etc. Famous philosopher and social critic Slavoj Žižek has called this virus a 'stupid' thing. It is not a military coup, another world war or an alien attack. This 'stupid' organism which is, strictly speaking, not even alive has taken hold of our normal lives.

But this has not stopped us calling it a 'Chinese virus' or an American military intervention or, to make the matter worse, 'a disease of the rich'. Now it has been proven that this virus was not created in a lab after studying its genome sequencing. So, it's not a bio-weapon as it has been claimed by many virologists. Now comes the issue of blaming it on our eating habits. People around the world eat a plethora of living creatures. So, it would be irrational to blame it on one eating habit. So far it has not been proven how it transmitted from bats or pangolins to humans.

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For a moment, if we look at the world from the perspective of coronavirus, we have some complex problems from a philosophical point of view. Is it okay to blame the virus for the catastrophe we are facing right now? This virus is following the same rules of Darwinian natural selection for its survival which has made human life on this planet possible. Apart from that, a virus like other organisms has the sole purpose of survival— Its purpose is not to kill a host but to find another host to propagate its life through its copies. But we know for sure that the lives of millions of people cannot be weighed against a 'stupid' virus.

In India, things are a little different. In a country where a few people still call it a rumor; where our social media is rife with audios which claims that long lockdowns are going to be imposed; where people believe that its cure has been found in some science book for students; where people are scared to be quarantined; where people are running from airports in fear of thermal scanning; where a celebrity parties after coming from an affected country; where protests are more important than social distancing; where people are giving home-made remedies; where people are going for panic-buying; where people still don't trust their leaders, we are in a very complex conundrum. Scientists, who believe that science is the answer to all questions concerning human existence, are clueless. Religious places have been closed down.

Coming to popular culture, two Hollywood movies come to our notice regarding the present scenario: *Contagion* and *Twelve Monkeys*. *Contagion* is strangely similar to what is happening right now. We can learn a lot from the movie. There is a very deep line written on its poster: "Nothing spreads like fear". More than the disease, we are facing the danger of its fear. People have become paranoid. In the movie, the virus which is a different type of coronavirus spreads from a pig which came in contact with a bat. In the aftermath of the pandemic, a war of sorts starts over who get the vaccine first while it is still not clear whether the vaccine will work properly. *Twelve Monkeys* is a movie about a virus which was developed in a lab and spread in the world by some psychopaths. It is more science fiction with time travel coming to the rescue of scientists. A web series titled the same is available on Amazon Prime, with almost similar theme. Many conspiracy theories about this virus being developed in a lab in Wuhan are doing the rounds. A book *The Eyes of Darkness* by an American author, Dean Koontz, is also going viral on social media. The book made some very eerie predictions about a virus. In a podcast with Sam Harris, Nicholas Christaki, a social and natural scientist, opines that this virus is not going away any time soon and it will keep affecting us unless we become self-immune to it. On a positive note, some virologists believe we can ward it off by developing a vaccine soon.

With coronavirus pandemic wreaking havoc on our social and economic life, some environmental concerns have resurfaced. On the one hand, some environmentalists are happy about the fact that owing to the lockdown, nature is healing: Lockdown on Industrial production, public transport, and various other measures. On the other hand, some see it as an environmental disaster in itself: Our proximity with wildlife creatures. China's wildlife market has been the source of other viruses as well in the past. At present, we are in a state of flux— Our thoughts on the present situation are changing by the day as the new data is emerging on a daily basis. But one thing is crystal clear: We should be ready for such situations and measures should be put in place.



Looked from an environmental perspective, the present crisis does not seem to be an environmental crisis to some. There are so many viruses present in ecological system and you never know when one particular virus can go rogue. And, coronaviruses have been there for years with different genome sequencings: MERS and SARS are also coronaviruses. But, these viruses worked as a prognosis to something bigger and we should have learnt our lesson. As our interaction with wildlife creatures went on, the problem was never solved— From this perspective, it does seem to be a problem which is related to environment.

All this leads us to find fault in our anthropocentric attitude towards nature. Biocentrism is a branch of ecology that might appear to be to the light at the end of the tunnel. Biocentrism as opposed to anthropocentrism is an approach to nature where ‘Nature’ is at the centre of our point of view rather than ‘Man’. Much of the Romantic poetry was obsessed with this anthropocentric approach. Though the Romantic poetry taught us to return to nature, it was Man’s interest which was paramount there as well. Somehow, it translates into our understanding of nature as a goddess whose job is to make us content. Nature is all powerful but we should keep that in mind that it is not nature’s job to rescue us from our crises. It is up to us to clean up the mess we have made.

Ethics are morals are concerned with concepts of right and wrong. We often weigh moral and ethical questions in relation to what we consider to be right and wrong from a human perspective. For example, many people consider it acceptable to take life of another animal for their own sustenance but would consider it wrong to take life of another human being for the same reason. We use the term anthropocentric to refer to ethics that are centered on a human view point. When taking a biocentric view of the world, answering these types of questions from a human perspective is considered to be too limiting, given our place on the planet with many diverse forms of life. Rather than giving priority to human concerns, biocentrism is a philosophy that asks us to give equal priority to all other living organisms when making moral and ethical choices. (Bruner, “Biocentrism in Environmental Ethics”)

Unchecked overexploitation of nature has made us a vulnerable species: Though extinction of human species might be a far-fetched idea, we are already having a glimpse of it. Human resilience is what has made us the most advanced species on the planet. We have survived many problems like this: The Spanish flu in 1918, nuclear crises, terrorist attacks among others. But, we survived it. When the Holocaust happened in the Nazi Germany and the World War II was still raging on between 1941 and 1945, people thought that it was the end of the world. But we survived it.

But this is something unprecedented which has put us on our back foot both economically and health wise. The next step as to how to get back to ‘normal’ is still unclear. This is not to say that we would be stuck where we are forever. *Gulag’s Archipelago* by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, published in 1973, is a wonderful book about survival and finding meaning in the times of crisis. The book is about a camp in the Communist Soviet Union. In the same vein, *Man’s Search for Meaning* by Viktor Frankl is a great book about hope and human resilience.



We can answer these questions from experience as well as on principle. The experiences of camp life show that man does have a choice of action. . . . Man can preserve a vestige of spiritual freedom, of independence of mind, even in such terrible conditions of psychic and physical stress. . . . Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms — to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way. (Frankl, "Man's Search for Meaning")

On concluding notes, we can say it is human resilience and hope that will take us out of this global conundrum as has been the case with human history on this planet for thousands of years.

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