

The Past as a Prologue: Silent Echoes of Pandemic in O. P. Shakir's *Bawa Meimal*

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“Right now, I’m having amnesia and *déjà vu* at the same time. I think I’ve forgotten this before.”

- Steven Wright

Pandemics are such harrowing phenomena which resonate deeply within cultural memory leaving lasting imprints on human psyche. Literature becomes a vital medium for preserving and interpreting the echoes of such happenings. The history recorded in folk narratives functions as a palimpsest—where past trauma is not erased but inscribed beneath the surface of the present—and which in turn, powerfully elucidate universal experiences of suffering, resilience, and healing. The past can never be entirely behind us; as William Faulkner succinctly stated, “The past is never dead. It’s not even past” (92). It emerges in the present through our memories, subtly influencing our perceptions and interpretations of current experiences. Memories, akin to other mental singularities like beliefs or perceptual experiences, are the states imbued with intention. As Marcel Proust observed, “Remembrance of things past is not necessarily the remembrance of things as they were” (44). Memory is not merely a static record of the past; it is dynamic and alive, often replicating elements of prior experiences into present-day occurrences, like a shadow that dances along the walls of our consciousness forever shaping the tapestry of today.

When we speak of memory, we often focus on those tied to tangible moments in the external world, memories conveyed through phrases like ‘I remember the way the rain fell during our last conversation’ or ‘I recall the smell of old books in the library where we first met.’ Do these memories truly represent past events, or are they merely reflections of our earlier perceptions constantly shaped and reawakened by the contexts of the present? Might they represent a fascinating blend of both

elements? In this research paper, the scholars will delve into these issues, using the portrayal of an epidemic in O. P. Shakir's *Bawa Meimal*, a famous Dogri play, as a focal point to examine how history and memory function not merely as static records, but as dynamic forces that skillfully intertwine with our present experiences — particularly as we, as readers, reflect on the memories of a past pandemic while living through Covid-19. Written three years before the worldwide COVID-19 crisis and centuries after numerous pandemics and epidemics have shaped human history, *Bawa Meimal*'s themes echo intensely with the stark realities of a pandemic—emphasizing the significance of hygiene, quarantine, herbal remedies, and the resilience of community solidarity. In addition, it is pertinent to mention that the play has been translated by the first author for the study of her doctoral dissertation. This discussion delves into *Bawa Meimal* through a multidisciplinary lens, utilizing memory studies, translation theory, and cultural sociology to reveal how the play serves as both a repository of traditional knowledge and a prophetic, ethical narrative that speaks to modern pandemic responses.

The past does not exist as a fixed and objective reality; rather, it lives on as memory, shaped and reshaped by human consciousness. History, in this sense, is not merely a chronological record of events but a dynamic recollection, constantly filtered through cultural narratives, personal experiences, and collective emotions. As memories evolve, so too does the meaning of the past, allowing each generation to reinterpret historical experiences in ways that serve contemporary identities and needs. Thus, the past becomes less a static archive, and more a living dialogue between memory and history, where remembrance is an active and creative force shaping how societies understand themselves. This understanding lies at the heart of the present study, where researchers reveal how the silent echoes of a historical epidemic continue to resonate across time. The trials faced by characters like Pillo and Ugg Mal are not isolated to their moment; rather, they mirror the anxieties, losses, and resilience witnessed anew during contemporary crises like COVID-19. In this way, the past acts as a prologue, offering both a warning and a source of wisdom, reminding us that the

struggles of history are never truly behind us but continue to shape the emotional and moral contours of the present.

The paper examines into the profound interpretation of memories, highlighting their powerful capacity to shape and resurface in our current perceptions and experiences. The epidemic depicted in the selected text is a pivotal event that intensely altered the lives of many, including Pillo, Radha Rani, Ugg Mal, Poala Sehniya, and Lajja. In the quaint town of Dori Dager in Jammu, *Bawa Meimal* stands as a testament to courage forged through the trials of an epidemic. The narrative revolves around Pillo, the village's sole 'hakim' and his devout wife Radha Rani, whose heartfelt prayers to Lord Shiva usher in the birth of their son, Ugg Mal. The past, embodied in the memories of these figures, serves not simply as a recollection of suffering but as a vital prologue to the present, offering lessons on resilience, communal responsibility, and moral courage. By preserving and retelling these memories, the narrative underscores how historical experiences continue to inform and illuminate contemporary struggles, reminding us that the past remains an active force in shaping the pathways of the contemporary times.

O. P. Shakir may have employed the epidemic in *Bawa Meimal* as a purposeful narrative device to intensify the emotional stakes and elicit a stronger sense of empathy from readers. By placing the characters in the midst of a life-and-death crisis, Shakir intensifies the significance of human connections and responsibilities. Under typical conditions, gratitude and loyalty may linger as mere social niceties, yet when the very essence of survival hangs in the balance, these feelings transform into deep-seated moral obligations. The epidemic acts as a transformative force, shaping connections marked by sacrifice, duty, and a profound recognition of human vulnerability. One would find it hard to experience such profound and lasting gratitude towards another unless it pertained to matters of life and death or the very essence of survival. Consequently, the destruction caused by the

plague serves not just as a setting but as a compelling force that urges both characters and readers to face the essential, frequently unsettling, realities of reliance, appreciation, and ethical duty.

The narrative revolves around Pillo, the village's sole 'hakim', and his devout wife Radha Rani, whose heartfelt prayers to Lord Shiva usher in the birth of their son, Ugg Mal. As Ugg Mal grew, nurtured by the foundational teachings at the gurukul and the unwavering love of his parents, his future seemed promising. However, the devastating outbreak that swept through the village marked a crucial turning point not only for the community but also for Meimal's very existence. This unfortunate happening was evidential from Scene-IV of *Bawa Meimal*:

A clairvoyant tells, places are ravaged and torn all around.

He claims, it is no ghost nor any mortal's deed.

And tells, the faith and remedies are futile thereby.

Talked about Pillo's noble quest, giving medicines to one in need.

Behold, mortals; it is God's fury, succumbing Sehniya as well.

Sehniya called Pillo for solace, and he did give him a cure.

Take two doses, and brother, that's all. (77)

With unwavering determination, Pillo united the townsfolk to fight against the lethal illness, providing care and optimism when dread had immobilized everyone. Even the formidable landowner, Poala Sehniya, owed a debt of gratitude to Pillo's courage. Nevertheless, the epidemic exacted its ultimate toll: Pillo gave his life for the benefit of others leaving his family in a state of sorrow. Pillo's rational and heroic efforts to combat the deadly epidemic distinguish him as a figure of empirical wisdom in a superstitious community. As he addresses the Panchayat, Pillo firmly declares, "It's an

epidemic.... It caused too many deaths thereby resulting in emptying of even houses and villages.... You need not worry. This could be cured! We just have to follow some rules, since it gets transmitted through water, air, and pollution” (78). He then outlines practical measures to halt the spread, advocating boiling water, using neem leaves, and drinking lemon water—an approach strikingly similar to the public health advice issued during COVID-19. Despite Pillo’s rationality, he faces opposition and suspicion from figures like Putto, who accuses him of profiteering. Nevertheless, Pillo’s unwavering commitment remains, “In such a distressing moment, I am not going to charge anything for these medicines” (79). Ultimately, Pillo sacrifices his life for the village, “Pillo coughs loudly from the other side, and continuously vomits till he falls...” (81).

The young Meimal, who would later be honored as Bawa, set aside his educational goals to take on the heavy weight of family duties. Following a personal tragedy, even the slightest gestures of kindness seemed significant, yet Meimal discovered he was becoming more isolated in the face of daunting challenges. Following Pillo’s death, Meimal embodies ethical continuity through action rather than rhetoric. When he confronts Poala Sehniya for land, he does so humbly: “We just need a handful of it. I came here for that only” (90). Receiving barren land through the ‘satta’ system, Meimal and his companions’ labor is described poetically, “Bawa gazed upon the land, a fragment of his beloved abode. Beholding the rugged terrain, Bawa silently rejoice the remarkable, yet arduous piece of land” (92). This portrayal aligns with Paul Ricoeur’s idea of “narrative repair” — transforming personal grief into collective renewal. In pursuit of justice for his father’s sacrifice, he respectfully asked Poala Sehniya for a small parcel of land, a simple request for a significant obligation. Given land through the ‘satta’ tradition, Meimal and his associates worked diligently, turning the desolate earth into flourishing fields. Yet, success fostered envy poisonous!

The servants of Poala, Nikka, Putto, and Jasumanu, fueled discontent, and Poala, consumed by jealousy refused to grant Meimal his fair portion of the harvest. Even with Meimal’s requests for

justice via mediation and Panchayat, Poala showed no signs of being affected. Holding onto his mother's counsel for tranquilly, Meimal still encountered no solution. Ultimately, at a magnificent "Yagya" hosted by Poala, Meimal performed a striking, symbolic gesture of rebellion: ascending the Banyan tree and inflicting a wound on himself with a dagger. His self-imposed suffering represented the deep sorrow, irritation, and powerless defiance against established unfairness. Similar to a volcano ready to erupt, unresolved pain can only be held back for a limited time before it erupts in a fierce manner. In Dori Dager's realm, much like in any other, power stands as the ultimate judge, unconcerned with the plight of those it overpowers.

The emotional trauma of epidemic loss permeates not only individual characters but the entire village's psyche. In a striking *karak* (traditional sung songs), the sorrow is expressed: "First blow was on tree, then he split open his own heart, Ugg Mall gashes again and again, and Goli shrieked from her yard" (53). These public performances of pain reflect what Jeffrey Alexander calls the processing of cultural trauma, using communal storytelling to survive collective wounds. As scholars of pandemic literature like Priscilla Wald have noted, "narratives of epidemic often work to transform private suffering into collective meaning, offering frameworks through which communities understand and endure catastrophe" (10).

Pandemic literature transcends mere accounts of disease; it embodies the severe heartache, unwavering resilience, and transformative spirit of communities teetering on the brink of despair. In works like *Bawa Meimal*, the articulation of loss transforms into a powerful ritual of survival, where echoes of the past resonate through generations. Through songs, stories, and performances, individual grief intertwines with a broader tapestry of collective memory. These narratives serve a dual purpose: they protect the raw truth of suffering while shining a light on a journey towards healing, thereby reminding us that even in the darkest chapters of history, storytelling ignites a flame of renewal.

Throughout history, various artistic expressions in response to pandemics have consistently aided individuals in understanding contagion, examining its effects, and forming both personal and communal stances. Riva, Benedetti, and Cesana note that the theme of the outbreak of plague serves as a “consistent and well-spread topos” (235) that contributes to a lengthy literary tradition, encouraging “the reader to reflect on the ancestral fear of humans towards infectious diseases” (1753). Priscilla Wald links the growing appeal of pandemic stories in the 21st century to their capacity to merge age-old anxieties about illness with modern societal issues. Wald’s definition enhances our comprehension of the genre by encouraging readers to perceive pandemic literature as a record of the current issues relevant to any specific historical era. She asserts that:

These narratives are critiques of socioeconomic inequities and titillating tales of apocalyptic struggles with primordial earth demons, hard-headed analyses of environmental exhaustion and hopeful stories of timeless renewal. As they simultaneously fore-cast the imminent destruction and affirm the enduring foundations of community, they offer myths for the contemporary moment. (10)

Given that the narratives surrounding pandemics in the 21st century are rooted in a rich literary tradition, examining historical literary responses to pandemics can enhance our comprehension of societal perceptions and reactions to such events, along with the evolution and persistence of the genre throughout various eras and cultures. Jo N. Hays emphasizes the diverse and occasionally contradictory explanations for pandemics leading to varied reactions to the crisis, “Epidemic diseases have been variously ascribed to divine will, environmental corruption, contagion, malign spirits, individuals or groups (sometimes stigmatized as scapegoats), organisms external to the body, and spontaneous internal malfunctions” (34). In ancient times, the deep-seated fear of pandemics was largely driven by a strong conviction in the supernatural causes of illness. The connection between pandemics and moral failings is evident in both classical literature and biblical stories. As Rowan

Williams articulates that there exists “a strongly defined template for reading plague as a matter of divine agency, normally punishment; and for seeing the possibilities of healing or averting disease as bound in with identifying where responsibility primarily lies, so that the innocent and the guilty can be properly distinguished” (200).

The *Iliad* stands as one of the earliest significant literary works to illustrate a culpable entity facing retribution through divine intervention, manifested as a lethal plague. From the outset, we are presented with a bleak scenario of an illness that devastates the Greek forces, as the deity Apollo sends forth the plague in retaliation for the kidnapping of his priest’s daughter: “That god was Apollo, son of Zeus and Leto.” Furious with Agamemnon, he unleashed a plague upon the soldiers— a lethal, infectious curse. For Agamemnon had disrespected the priest of the god, Chryses” (20). The passage demonstrates that the affliction and its accompanying destruction, anguish, and mortality are seen as a consequence of divine retribution for human mistakes. The only solution lies in convening an assembly, publicly naming the wrongdoer, discussing the retribution with the gods, and making amends: “He won’t remove this wretched plague from the *Danaans*, until we hand back bright-eyed Chryseis, give her to her beloved father” (11).

In the same way, Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex* employs plague as a mechanism for readers to contemplate the intricate connection between the ruler’s transgressions, the well-being of his subjects, and the concept of divine justice. A terrible crisis strikes the city, brought on by a culpable agency, while desperate prayers to the gods echo in hopes of saving lives. Oedipus, the ruler of Thebes, seeks guidance from the Delphic Oracle, who reveals that the unresolved murder of King Laius is the source of the devastating plague. It asserts that restoration can only occur if the killer is discovered and expelled to satisfy the gods: “Banish the man, or pay back blood with blood.” “The act of murder unleashes a storm of plague upon the city” (12). Therefore, it is evident that the plague represents a

tangible expression of human wrongdoing and can only be eradicated when the wrongdoer is recognized and held accountable.

A similarly moral perspective influenced by divine intervention is illustrated in the biblical story of the Exodus, where the ten plagues of Egypt served as a consequence for Pharaoh's unwavering refusal to permit the Israelites to depart from Egypt: "This is what the LORD says: About midnight I will go throughout Egypt. All firstborn sons in Egypt will perish, from the firstborn son of Pharaoh, who reigns on the throne, to the firstborn of the slave girl at her hand mill, including all the firstborn of the livestock. Throughout Egypt, there will be a loud outcry" (The Holy Bible, Exodus 11:4-6). The intricate connection between the monarch's actions and the well-being of his kingdom shapes how people perceive and react to epidemics.

During the Middle Ages in Europe, the view of pandemics as a manifestation of divine punishment persisted, particularly evident during the Black Death, which claimed the lives of millions between 1347 and 1352. In contrast to numerous biblical and classical stories that highlight a specific agency or action resulting in divine retribution, there was no identifiable primary guilt or clearly defined wrongdoer, which contributed to the emergence of collective acts of atonement. Joshua J. Mark describes how, to seek God's favor and make amends for human transgressions, groups of flagellants would publicly lash themselves in towns and cities. However, these practices were considered unproductive and were condemned by the Pope.

Mark contends that "the perceived failure of religion to mitigate, or at least reduce, the suffering and death brought about by the plague pushed many away from the mediaeval Church in pursuit of answers elsewhere; a trend that would eventually contribute to the rise of the humanistic viewpoint of the Renaissance" (2020). A notable work that provides a precise account of the Bubonic plague's emergence in Italy is Giovanni Boccaccio's *The Decameron* (1349-1353). This collection features tales told by ten young individuals who escape the plague-ridden Florence to seek shelter in

a remote countryside villa. Boccaccio effectively portrays the responses of individuals to the devastating disaster that resulted in an overwhelming number of deaths in Florence. The passage highlights the varied reactions to the pandemic, influenced by individuals' economic conditions and social standing. The affluent were able to either seclude themselves in their residences, relishing fine amenities and music, or abandon Florence entirely, seeking refuge in rural villas. Conversely, those who "lacked the attention of doctors or the assistance of servants suffered and died continuously, not as human beings, but more like animals" (18).

The pandemic has led to a profound disruption in our perception of time and identity, revealing the fragmented nature of memory and existence. Life transformed into a cycle—endless, dreamlike, and adrift—where experiences seemed simultaneously strange and hauntingly familiar. This distortion of temporal and emotional continuity not only shaped personal consciousness but also influenced how societies remember and make sense of collective trauma.

The emergence of the epidemic has always undeniably transformed lives, creating a clear distinction between 'before' and 'after.' Its profound effects on socioeconomic, cultural, and health aspects have consistently been integral to the human experience. Michele Augusto Riva, Marta Benedetti, and Giancarlo Cesana assert that:

In the ancient world, plague and pestilence were rather frequent calamities, and ordinary people were likely to have witnessed or heard vivid and scary reports about their terrible ravages. When plague spread, no medicine could help, and no one could stop it from striking; the only way to escape was to avoid contact with infected persons and contaminated objects. (1753)

The outbreak in Dori Dager transcended the boundaries of a typical health crisis, becoming a profound social rupture that reshaped individual lives and the community as a whole. In the grim tradition of

pandemic literature, this event exposed the fragility of human life, the brutal realities of disease, and the deep moral and existential questions it raises. Much like the plagues of history that have prompted both personal and collective reckonings, the epidemic in Dori Dager demanded painful sacrifices and irrevocably altered the future of its survivors. Pillo's valiant struggle against the disease not only saved lives but unwittingly ignited a chain of events that would radically change his son Meimal's trajectory. With Pillo's death, a deep personal and societal void emerged, pushing Meimal into premature adulthood, burdened with the weight of responsibility and the loss of his own aspirations.

The repercussions of the epidemic also revealed, in stark terms, the latent social fractures that pandemics often expose: envy, greed, and the exploitation of power surfaced as Meimal grappled to reclaim the future once promised to him. In this sense, the epidemic became more than a simple calamity; it became a powerful narrative device, a transformative event that through its sorrow, sacrifice, and suffering, catalyzed new conflicts around dignity, survival, and justice, themes common to the genre of pandemic literature, where crises are not only about survival but about the social and moral reconfigurations they provoke in their wake.

In the wake of the much recent COVID-19 pandemic, scholarly attention has reignited toward how communities narrativize, memorialize, and transmit experiences of collective disruption. In such contexts, literature emerges not merely as an artistic reflection but as a vital mnemonic tool, a conduit for memory, continuity, and ethical deliberation. O.P. Shakir's Dogri-language play *Bawa Meimal* (2017) attains striking contemporary relevance, offering a profound literary meditation on how epidemics are remembered, moralized, and woven into communal identity. At the heart of *Bawa Meimal* lies Pillo, whose medical advice and ethical action position him as what Astrid Erll calls a "carrier of cultural memory," (05) an agent who encodes inherited knowledge and transmits it within a performative, socially embedded structure. Pillo's practical instructions to the villagers—boil water, maintain hygiene, avoid crowded gatherings—prefigure the public health measures later advocated

by the World Health Organization during COVID-19. Yet his guidance is not delivered within a clinical framework, but through the spiritual and epistemological registers of Dogri village life. Pillo must navigate not only disease but superstition, rumor, and political manipulation, embodying a figure of both empirical authority and moral conscience.

The tension between scientific reasoning and metaphysical fatalism forms the central axis of conflict within the play. Initially, villagers interpret the outbreak through the lens of divine wrath or witchcraft. Pillo's rational approach thus stands in sharp contrast, reflecting what Mary Douglas in 'Purity and Danger' describes as society's tendency to mythologize impurity and danger when empirical explanations are inaccessible. Pillo's rejection of supernatural causality, in favor of scientific reasoning grounded in lived communal practices, parallels the global efforts to counter misinformation during the early stages of COVID-19.

The narrative arc of Bawa Meimal, Pillo's son, introduces a second layer to the play's meditation on memory, inheritance, and ethical continuity. Returning from his studies only to find his father dead—a tragedy painfully reminiscent of the pandemic's isolated bereavements—Meimal refuses despair. Instead, he transforms grief into ethical labor. Rather than seeking material compensation, he asks for barren land and commits himself to cultivating it. In doing so, Meimal enacts what Paul Ricoeur terms narrative repair—the reordering of time and memory in the aftermath of loss. His work on the land becomes a living homage to his father's memory, rooting remembrance not in ritual but in transformative action.

This intergenerational transmission of values resonates strongly with Jan and Aleida Assmann's distinction between 'communicative' and 'cultural memory.' While communicative memory is based on direct, short-term experience, cultural memory is deliberately structured and mediated through texts, performances, and rituals to endure over time. In this sense, *Bawa Meimal* itself becomes a vessel of cultural memory, preserving communal responses to disease, valorizing

sacrifice, and offering moral paradigms for future audiences. Pillo's death, thus, marks not an end but a transition—his legacy embedded in Meimal's principled life and in the community's evolving consciousness.

The play's dialogic structure, interspersed with karaks, further deepens its mnemonic function. These reflective passages cultivate an emotional resonance that is simultaneously affective and pedagogical. Moreover, the setting of Dori-Dager acts not merely as a backdrop but as a chronotype in Bakhtin's sense: a fusion of space and time that encapsulates traditional worldviews alongside emergent modern imperatives. Through this dynamic environment—temples, forests, dirt paths, royal courts—the play roots itself in a layered memoryscape, negotiating the past and the uncertain present. Translation also plays a critical role in preserving *Bawa Meimal*'s cultural significance beyond its Dogri-speaking audience. Gayatri Spivak's notion of "intimate surrender" in translation is instructive here: the translator must immerse in and preserve the source text's cultural specificity rather than flattening it into universality. Retaining Dogri proverbs, healing practices, and social codes is therefore essential to maintain the play's function as a cultural memory artifact, even as it resonates across global contexts of pandemic experience.

The relevance of *Bawa Meimal* to post-COVID cultural trauma is also significant. As Jeffrey Alexander and Ron Eyerman have argued, cultural trauma occurs when a community's foundational narratives are shattered, necessitating processes of symbolic repair. *Bawa Meimal* functions not merely as a historical narrative but as a trauma text, offering models of ethical resistance, critiques of institutional failure, and visions of community resilience. The corrupted officials—Putto, Nikka, and Jasumanu—stand as antagonists to both empirical knowledge and moral responsibility, much like the political failures witnessed globally during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Finally, the play's conclusion—where Meimal and Paaru begin cultivating their barren land—serves as both an ending and a beginning. The wasteland, once a symbol of 'death' and 'neglect,'

becomes a site of regeneration. This resonates with Walter Benjamin's notion of constellational time, wherein the past is not merely repeated but transformed in the present moment. Meimal does not replicate his father's profession but instead preserves its ethical core, cultivating life from desolation—a metaphor acutely relevant to post-pandemic recovery. *Bawa Meimal* is a resonant narrative of cultural memory, ethical inheritance, and collective resilience. Through the intertwined stories of a healer, a son, and a community, it captures the cyclical yet transformative nature of pandemics—how they disrupt, how they are remembered, and how they ultimately reorient human societies. Literature, as *Bawa Meimal* shows, does not merely survive crises; it equips societies with the narrative tools necessary for making meaning, fostering remembrance, and imagining renewal.

Bawa Meimal embodies the continuing patterns of suffering and resilience that have consistently influenced the course of human history. In times long past, epidemics were common, nearly unavoidable events, and Shakir's portrayal of such an epidemic showcases his profound understanding of these trends, and his link to a wider, shared human experience. This literary exploration deeply echoes Carl Jung's concept of the 'collective unconscious', the belief that shared memories, traumas, and archetypes are intricately woven into the human psyche throughout generations. The echoes of bygone disasters, though frequently hushed and hidden, persist within the cosmos, resurfacing whenever humanity confronts akin challenges. Shakir's narrative implies that genuine novelty is an illusion; instead, history cycles through familiar patterns, similar to the scientific principle that energy is neither created nor annihilated, but merely transformed. In *Bawa Meimal*, Shakir delves into the shared memory of humanity, depicting the epidemic not merely as a local calamity but as an integral part of a timeless, universal narrative of human fragility, resilience, and rebirth.

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