THE POETICS OF THE PANDAMIC: A STUDY IN SELECTED COVID-19-INSPIRED POEMS

Ameer Chasib Furaih [1]

Abstract

Since the late 2019, the world is physically and emotionally affected by the novel contagious virus called COVID-19 which is '[a]n unwelcomed visitor' (From Ramona L. Hyman's poem 'COVID-19: A Prayer', 2020). It has caused thousands of fatalities across the globe; advanced, developing, as well as underdeveloping nations are suffering in facing pandemic, through relatively. The aim of this paper is to demonstrate how the poetry assumes a global role during the pandemic. The paper scrutinizes selective examples of COVID-19-inspired poems to show how poetry can transgress boundaries and assume a globally effective role in facing the social ordeals, in addition to raising awareness about the pandemic. The paper demonstrates how culturally diverse poets from different parts of the world (England, United States, Saudi Arabia, and Nigeria, India) respond to the pandemic.

Keywords: COVID-19, digital poetry, Internet, pandemic poetry, social media.

INTRODUCTION

Since the late 2019, the world is physically and emotionally affected by contagious virus, the "… unwelcomed visitor" (From Ramona L. Hyman's poem 'COVID-19: A Prayer', 2020, n.p.). Branded as the novel Corona Virus Disease 2019 (COVID-19), this virus has commonly been estimated as the crucial health calamity of the time, which have caused a tremendous social transformation. In their introduction to *COVID-19 Pandemic Poems* (2020), R. S. Regin Silvest

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[1] Dr. Baghdad University, Iraq, Department of English Language/ College of Education for Humanitarian Sciences (Ibn Rushd), ameer.furaih@ircoedu.uobaghdad.edu.iq.

and John Charles Ryan argue that the pandemic[2] is "the greatest challenge we have faced since World War Two" (2020, p. 5). Theories about the genesis or causes of COVID-19 are varied. But the most widespread story about it is this: At the end of 2019, a novel coronavirus was identified as "the cause of a cluster of pneumonia cases in Wuhan," a city in the Hubei Province of China (Silvest and Ryan, 2020, p. 5). This virus has speedily propagated, resulting in an epidemic not only throughout China, but also in several other countries across the world. This can be seen in the rapidly increasing number of cases globally. Following the Chinese government notification to the World Health Organisation (WHO) that a bunch of mysterious viral pneumonia cases appeared in the city of Wuhan, WHO declared COVID-19 "a pandemic and warned nations around the world to adopt strict preventative measures to halt its spread" (Silvest et. Al, 2020, p. 6). Full or partial curfew have been periodically announced by many countries because the pandemic has caused thousands of fatalities across the globe.

In fact, the story related to the genesis of COVID-19 has even been politicised and used in some sort of what I may call a twenty first century Cold War between China and the United States. This can be seen lucidly in the announcements of the ex-President of the United States Donald Tramp, especially on social media. On 17 March, 2020, Trump tweets in his official account the following in which he tagged the pandemic a "Chinese Virus": "The United States will be powerfully supporting those industries, like Airlines and others, that are particularly affected by the Chinese Virus. We will be stronger than ever before!" (Tramp, 2020). China, however, have defended itself through diplomatic channels against Tramp's claims as shown recently on social media and news.

As Sophie Cooper, a nine-year old girl from London, puts it: "The world is changing every day/ To a place I once knew is not the same" (Cooper, 2020, n.p). During the pandemic, people have suffered not only from severe economic crisis, but also from psychological depression as they are losing their jobs, not to mention the disentanglement in the social and (in some cases) familial connections. People's life-long routines and habits have been reconsidered, and even their working, teaching-learning style, to mention but a few, have been adapted to a totally novel (mostly computerized) style. Indigenous communities across the globe also have had their share during the pandemic. They felt the social "shift" brought by the pandemic. Tasmanian Stella Prize-winner Heather Rose proclaims that "I think COVID-19 has given us a really interesting shift in values. We've been able to see what makes our communities work and what doesn't" (as cited in Reich, 2020, n.p.). Shuar leader Maria Clara Sharupi Jua reflects on the impact of the lockdown on her:

> My personal life has radically changed: economically, socially, culturally and personally. Although I have always fought against gender, ethnic, and social-class barriers, Covid-19 has once again placed me at society's margins. My daily thoughts and actions focus on how to elevate the spirits of my children and other family members by trying to keeping hope though songs, poems and painting – all activities that have accompanied me as female household head and warrior woman (Sharupi Jua & Tomaselli, 2020, p.n, "Interview")

The current pandemic is fatal as is "Stealing breath from the Beautiful/ Demanding Distance. Quarantine. /Masks. Gloves. Death" (From Ramona L. Hyman's poem "COVID-19: A Prayer", 2020, n.p). In response to this, humanity needed a systematic and well-prepared global response to deal with coronavirus. Advanced, developing, underdeveloping nations have been suffering, though relatively, while facing this microscopic killer. This has called for global collaborations among governments to reduce the infectious potentialities of the virus. World Health Organisation (WHO), media, universalities, NGOs, among others, have been playing an influential part in raising people's awareness about the deadly threat of the pandemic. They advise people to improve their protective measures to maintain their health and keep social

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In *A Dictionary of Epidemiology* (Last, 2001), a pandemic is defined as "an epidemic occurring worldwide, or over a very wide area, [2] crossing international boundaries and usually affecting a large number of people".

distancing. Many world-leading companies participated in supporting the global "Stay Home" campaign. People have soon been realized that the pandemic is more than something happening elsewhere. To protect themselves, many people have, though relatively, responded to the "Stay Home" campaign and confined themselves at home, except those working in the health services: "We have to stay home to keep us safe, / But doctors and nurses are working till late" (From Sophie Cooper poem, 2020, n.p.).

METHOD AND MATERIALS

But what is the role of poetry/ poets in the globalized "Stay-Home" campaign? This paper, which is analytical in nature, scrutinizes selective examples of COVID-19-inspired poems to show how poetry can transgress boundaries and assume a *globally* effective role in facing the social ordeals, in addition to raising awareness about the pandemic. By adopting the close reading technique, the paper demonstrates how culturally diverse poets from different parts of the world (England, United States, Saudi Arabia, and Nigeria, India) respond to the pandemic. However, it should be mentioned that the poets chosen for this article do not represent the whole spectrum of the poets who write in response to, or emerged during, COVID-19.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Most of the poets selected for this study are relatively emerging poets from different parts of the globe, some of whom even did not intend or expect their poetry to be published or known beyond social media platforms. Therefore, there are little critical studies on the works of these poets. I adopt a close reading, formalist approach in analyzing their poems.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION
The Digitalized, Pandemic Poetics

To begin with, the old or traditional notion of literacy, that is reading and writing competency, has recently been expanded. Due to the advent of technology and the Internet, literacy has come to indicate a totally different meaning, that is "fluency in reading and creating electronic media" (Hughes, 2007, p. 1). The question here is that what happens when poets have a literacy in the expanded sense? During the lockdown, many emerging and critically acclaimed poets have gone beyond the traditional way of publishing poetry, or reading it face to face in literary occasions or gatherings. These poets make use of the high-tech tools (computer and the Internet, among them) and post their poems online through various social media platforms. Thematically speaking, their poems are related to the life of people during the 21st century pandemic. These poems ring with a sense of resilience and defiance, gratitude, and appreciation, not to mention a sense of reflection and renewal. This poetry is now commonly known as the pandemic poetry. As far as form is concerned, this poetry is vividly a computerized version of poetry, disseminated mostly through social media platforms. However, this does not mean that this e-poetry has little if any affiliation with the digital poetry. It seems that the former poetry can be seen as an integral part of an established (non-) literary field called digital humanities, which is a broad multidisciplinary field "dedicated to understanding the intersection between information technology and the traditional humanities" (Cuddon, 2013, p. 204).

However, I have noticed a slight difference between long-established digital poetry and the e-poetry of the pandemic. The difference lies in the fact that the latter poetry, though computerized and publicized through World Wide Web, has not been *heavily* sophisticated using voice over, graphics, animation, hyperlinks, and the like, as is the case with most pre-COVID-19 digital poetry. Most pandemic poems are basically texts posted through various social media platforms. However, unlike digital poetry that sometimes requires an active, collaborative reader for the text to take place, pandemic poetry does not require that; the reader's part in the creation of the text is passive. Sometimes, these poems are recorded or contextualized and publish in

private channels on YouTube. The pandemic poetry as a result becomes a combination of heterogenous semiotic systems; sound/ narration of poetry and background images which accompanied the video recording are the most common in the pandemic poetry (see for instance "Pandemic/ Spoken Word Poetry" by Adam Roa (2020) on https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FYGyP5736fY).

It should be noted that the Internet networks and social media make the publishing task of the emerging poets attainable. In his article "Community Development in the Cybersociety of the Future," Howard Rheingold contends that:

> Structurally, the Internet has inverted the few-to-many architecture of the broadcast age, in which a small number of people were able to influence and shape the perceptions and beliefs of entire nations. In the many-to-many environment of the Net, every desktop is a printing press, a broadcasting station, and place of assembly. Mass-media will continue to exist, and so will journalism, but these institutions will no longer monopolize attention and access to the attention of others. (as cited in Coleman & Blumber, 2009, p. 8).

Digital technology plays unprecedented role in the widespread of poetry. The "many-to-many environment of the Net" has deconstructed the traditional process of publishing with all its embedded hierarchies and has enabled these poets to freely broadcast their pandemic e-poetry. Reputable publisher also has a role in publishing and distributing COVID-19 poetry. One example is the Yellow Rose Publishing Company, US, which published a pandemic-related anthology, entitled *In the Midst: A COVID-19 Anthology* (2020). Poets have found ways to substitute the traditional way of sharing or reciting poetry face-to-face. Hundreds of pandemic e-poetries can be spotted on the World Wide Web. Still, as far as the purpose and objective are concerned, there is little difference between traditional formal verse and the e-poetry of the pandemic; both aim at communicating the extraordinary perception of the ordinary.

What about the reception of this interdisciplinary poetics? As far as readers are concerned, this non-traditional way of publication entails a change in the readership style, and to a great extent the kind of readers, who are expected to be equipped with high-tech tools and diverse social media platforms. The consequence is a form of poetry that appeals to a wide range of people, as the online viewing rates indicate. Most pandemic poems have gone viral on social media. Moreover, before the poetics of COVID-19, writers of traditional print literature may adopt different views about electronic poetry or literature in general. They might be worried that innovative electronic literature may competitively challenge their traditional literature. However, during the lockdown, both traditional and non-traditional poets adopt e-literature as an outlet to their life under the hegemony of COVID-19. Such a novel e-poetic voices the needs, fear, agony, aspiration of people during the lockdown. These poets also show sympathy for those who have been affected by the pandemic. Consequently, we have not heard harsh dispute or criticism on the pandemic poetry so far.

While readers are passive in the process of poetic creation, the poets are not. It is commonly known that poets can assume different roles, such as a journalist, a spokesperson, and/or a politician (one example in this regard is the poetry of the Civil Rights movements in the US and Australia, in addition to the poetry of various postcolonial (native) nations across the globe). Thus, poetry can assist in disseminating ideologies, instructions to the target audience(s). In his 1963 speech entitled "The Artist's Struggle for Integrity," African American writer and literary critic James Baldwin states that "[t]he poets (by which I mean all artists) are finally the only people who know the truth about us. Soldiers don't. Statesmen don't. Priests don't. Union leaders don't. Only poets" (as cited in Bove, 2021, p. 254). Moreover, Gilbert Keith Chesterton, an English writer, philosopher, and literary critic, argues that:

> I don't deny that there should be priests to remind men that they will one day die. I only say that at certain strange epochs it is necessary to have another kind of priests, called poets, actually to remind men that they are not dead yet. (as cited in Knight, 2004, p. 67)

In addition to the fact that, throughout ages, poetry has been utilized in sustaining cultures and traditions, it also can play a crucial role in raising social and/or political awareness among people especially in hard times and in (socio-political, international) conflicts. Such a role can be seen noticeable in the time of the pandemic, as I will discuss below.

The poets who have tackled the pandemic in their writings have recently come to the fore because many "people all over the world are turning to poetry in response to the pandemic" (Riechers, 2020, p. 1). This is because poetry is commonly known for its potential clearly in expressing overwhelming emotions. This social role of poetry during this time can be seen as an extension to the various roles that poets can play throughout ages. For example, poets on Instagram (@i t t o c) are committed to support charitable health organizations who have been fighting COVID-19.

While people are sheltering indoors all over the world recently, poets have decided to remain creative (in-door) and began writing coronavirus-inspired poems. The recent publication of the anthology entitled *POETRY in the TIME of CORONAVIRUS: The Anthology*[3] (31 March 2020) is indicative of this fact. As one poet puts it, "[w]e have a deep need for richness, sweetness, especially when everything is falling apart" (ARTery, 2020, n.p.). Inspiration for writing Covid-19-related-poetry seems to be obvious all over the world. People are re-strengthening their belief in the necessity and vitality of poetry, among other literary genres, particularly at the current time, when most things appear alarmingly "falling apart." Poetry has been an outlet for people to distil their current experience; they share their writings, to pass ideas, or to comfort one another. Most poets have realized that one way to protect the most vulnerable individuals from being infected by COVID-19 is to encourage them to support each other by standing apart, maintaining social distancing measures, and follow the globally agreed upon preventative advices, notable among them is to stay home. As poet Charles Coe puts it in "Love In The Time Of Corona": *"In these days of fever and fear/ we keep our distance, resist/ the timeless call of flesh to flesh"* (Coe, 2020, n.p.). This poetry also has sustained hope for salvation: "Artists are an empathic link between hope and/ the outside world" (From "Hope Matters" by acclaimed Indigenous Canadian poet Lee Maracle, 2020, n.p.). It seems that through sustaining hope, humanity's ability to defeat the pandemic will be boosted.

First and foremost, emerging-poets have played a significant role in the time of the pandemic, though they did not expect such popularity when they first posted their COVID-19 poems. This is because poetry in general has a last-long potentiality of offering an influential incitement to understanding that handwriting and/or sometime visual media could not offer. For instance, the young Londoner girl poet Sophie Cooper penned a touching poem entitled "To the NHS Heroes", which is dedicated for the National Health Service (NHS) workers, caring for COVID-19 patients:

……………………………………

They are leaving their families with a hug and a kiss,
To save the world from the coronavirus.

These are the heroes, the heroes of the NHS,
They're risking their lives with tears in their eyes,
They're tired and hungry and praying and hoping that one day this will end.

With gloves on their hands and masks on their faces,
These NHS heroes are angels sent to save us.

We thank you for your love and care,

Capitalization original.[3]

> *In this scary time we all share,*
> *The whole world claps their hands,*
> *To you with a big cheer.*
>
> *Thank you!*
> *(Cooper, 2020, n.p.)*

Although the poem reflects the heart-breaking experience of the medical staff, particularly those of the NHS (National Health Service) of England, it can also be generalized to represent the situation of all the medics across the globe. Here, the NHS workers subordinate their personal life, "leaving their families," for one (inter-) national noble aim or purpose, namely the salvation of humanity: "To save the world from the coronavirus." The NHS workers, who has been fighting at the front lines, are much valued as the "heroes" and "angles sent to save us." They are risking their lives, fighting a submicroscopic infectious agent, and supplying medical care for patients with positive COVID-19 on daily basis. Thus, the whole world is indebted for their brave task: "The whole world claps their hands, / To you with a big cheer./ Thank you!". The description of the outward appearance of NHS workers, 'With gloves on their hands and masks on their faces,' can be seen as an attempt to raise awareness among people in England, and elsewhere, of the importance of following strict preventive measures by wearing these disposable gloves and masks to avoid COVID-19. The poem marks with a simplicity of diction and high emotive tone that fit the current pandemic situation.

From the other side of the Atlantic Ocean, Kitty O'Meara, a retired teacher from Lake Mills, a city in Jefferson County, Wisconsin, United States, is one of those who posted a poem about COVID-19. Entitled "In the Time of Pandemic," the poem has enthusiastically been received by many people across the globe. The translation of this poem to different languages is a telling indication to its popularity beyond the borders of the United States. On March 30, 2020, O'Meara wrote in her blog *The Daily Round*:

> Many people have taken the time and effort to translate the poem into their own beautiful languages, and I am so grateful for that. Forgive me if I have neglected to share a creative endeavor that was offered to me; please share it in the comments! (O'Meara, 2020, n.p.)

The poem was even turned into a song by Katie Smith and the video was sent to O'Meara (see O'Meara's *The Daily Round* Blog, "Gifts" March 30, 2020). In a video posted online, this poem was read aloud by Deepak Chopra, an Indian-born American author and alternative-medicine advocate. Shortly after, the poem had struck a nerve as Oprah Magazine was declaring O'Meara "the poet laureate of the pandemic" (as cited Riechers, 2020, n.p.).

O'Meara's poem went viral through a prism of social media remixes. It first appeared on Facebook, and then on Instagram, YouTube and reposted heavily on Twitter. Of this poem, O'Meara in an interview says, "[i]t was just a post on Facebook. I don't know that I even considered it a poem…. You know, it was just a way of offering some comfort to my friends and myself" (as cited in Riechers, 2020, n.p.). Sharing the poem through various platforms creates a socio-poetic, interdisciplinary networks of poets, poetry-fans, artists, singers. Therefore, this poem plays a significant role in connecting people globally. People are moved by this poem as their sharing and/ or translation zeal on various social media platforms indicate. But why or what is in this poem that stimulates such an unprecedented sharing and popularity? It can be claimed that people have realised that the pandemic may give them new perspectives to look at their life. And this may give their lives more meanings. O'Meara's poem participated in presenting these new meanings to people. **The poem,** "In the Time of Pandemic," **reads:**

> *And the people stayed home. And read books, and listened, and rested, and*
> *exercised, and made art, and played games, and learned new ways of being,*
> *and were still. And listened more deeply. Some meditated, some prayed,*

some danced. Some met their shadows. And the people began to think differently.
And the people healed. And, in the absence of people living in ignorant, dangerous, mindless, and heartless ways, the earth began to heal.
And when the danger passed, and the people joined together again, they grieved their losses, and made new choices, and dreamed new images, and created new ways to live and heal the earth fully, as they had been healed.
(O'Meara, 2020, n.p.)

The poem's significant lays in its imagistic depiction of people's life during the lockdown. It represents, for example, the spiritual impact of social distancing on people. *It begins with the conjunction 'and' which gives the impression that the poem is telling an ongoing story (event) that people are living in, a story whose untold part is familiar to the readers(s)/ audience of this poem. Thus, it focuses on the aftermath of COVID-19, and* how it leads to a profound change in the life style of people all over the world. *People are being engaged in alternative in-door recreational activities such as "read[ing] books," listening to music, exercising, making art, playing games and the like. This is to resist day-to-day monotony caused by the partial and/or inclusive curfew imposed officially by governments.* They created their own pseudo-world where they try to practice or compensate what they used to before COVID-19.

The poem touches on a very significant issue that the whole world realized in the aftermath of COVID-19, namely the novel way to look at life: "*the people began to think differently." People have begun reassessing their style of life, reactivating their social and familial ties. In a broader sense, COVID-19 has an indirect, positive impact on the planet: "… the earth began to heal." This ecopoetic note is indicative to the fact that almost all sources of pollution, especially those in the developing and developed countries, that badly affected the universe have been diminished during the locked down.* This ecopoetic note also goes in accordance with the perspective adopted by Shuar leader Maria Clara Sharupi Jua, who argues that 'what is happening is due to the human transgression of the laws of Nature which has caused instability in the harmony of life" (Sharupi Jua & Tomaselli, 2020, n.p., 'Interview'). *The poem ends up with an apocalyptic view,* a relative renewal in people's social perspective, reconsidering their life and their connections with "Others". It *foresees the aftermath of the pandemic and how culturally diverse people 'joined together / again', putting aside all man-made, xenophobic barriers that had segregated some people (or minorities) based on colour, race, culture, and/ or religion. As a result of this global social harmony, people will be healed and consequently the planet earth will be healed too: "… heal the earth fully, as they had been healed."*

O'Meara's poem, and its representation of some positive side effects resulted from COVID-19, has a parallel in the poem "Corona Speaking," by Amar Chandra Das from India. In the latter poem, the poet also touches on comparable personal and social transformation. Here, the personified COVID-19 is arguing with humanity through several rhetorical questions:

Will you not thank me for making you aware?
Use mask, maintain proper hygiene –
Defend humanity! Celebrate Life –

(Das, 2020, p. 1)

Because of these positive side effects, COVOD-19 itself is given a poetic space in this poem where it protests the title "pandemic": "I am Corona, WHO has lauded me pandemic" (Das, 2020, p. 1).

Another example is from Saudi Arabia, where Malk Alouch writes the poem entitled "Be Hopeful!":

> *People call it Covid-19,*
> *Tiny, small and not be seen.*
> *Do and don't, but people want,*
> *To go, to leave, oh! Please don't.*
> *We sit, watching all the news,*
> *Waiting for one, the best to choose,*
> *The best medication, for generations.*
> *Be home! Wash your hands!*
> *Good advice, singing the bands.*
> *Because of Covid, we sit at home,*
> *Sharing thoughts, under the dome.*
> *Will it leave and even go?*
> *To Allah we pray, begging so.*
> *Virus becomes the long story,*
> *Virus stops even the lorry.*
> *Countries all, try to make,*
> *What we all wish to take.*
> *Doctors could, find the clue,*
> *That's good, the sky's blue.*
> *People wait, hoping for,*
> *Let it be and even more!*
> *Children play having a dream,*
> *Shouting loud, the doctors seem!*
> *The last to write, the last to say,*
> *May Allah stop it today!*
> *(Alouch, 2020, p. 5)*

Unlike Cooper which describes the outward appearance of the NHS medics, Malk Alouch starts with a simple, but not simplistic, description of the virus itself. This description is not supported with scientific unfamiliar jargons related to the shape or the internal parts of the virus. It is a description that is familiar to all of us as we all know that COVID-19 is a "Tiny, small and not be seen." This is to make his message come across straightforwardly to the common people in the world, whether they are native speakers of English or for them English is a second or third language. Moreover, it is this microscopic creature that entails heavy restrictions, the 'Do and don't', on peoples across the globe. Later in the poem, the poet reflects on people's adapted style of life during the pandemic as they keep watching the news, expecting the one that may put an end for this manic killer through the invention of an effective COVID-19 vaccination, which is "The best medication, for generations." In addition to his trust that "Doctors" are capable of finding "the clue" to cure the patients inflected by the virus, he at the same time supplicates twice in this poem: "To Allah we pray, begging so. / [...] The last to write, the last to say, /May Allah stop it today!". This prayer is a culturally imputed episode as the poet reflects his religious culture of Islam. This vividly reflects the authenticity of each of the selected poems in this study.

Nigerian poet Onipede Festus Moses' "Like a Wildfire" is interesting since it politicizes COVID-19. Moses presents a social criticism and attacks established hierarchy:

> *…………………………………*
> *Like joke it spreads like a wildfire*
> *the rich are dying of the pandemic in their empire*
> *their deaths, a dilemma to the poor*
> *the poor are dying of starvation when their diet is not pure*
>
> *Like joke it spreads like a wildfire*
> *the jargons of self-isolation, quarantine, social distance; all for prescribed health precaution and*

resistance. Yet people are dying;
yet people are starving;
covid-19 We are all contracting;
God! We need you now for our healing!
………………………………………
(Moses, 2020, p. 8)

Moses, like other poets who writes pandemic poetry, stresses on the sudden, global spread of COVID-19. The rapid spread of the virus is compared to a brutal and a swift spread of a 'wildfire," which thoughtlessly burns everything in its way. For the poet, COVID-19 is like a "wildfire," which indiscriminately attacks everyone, regardless of race, culture, color of skin, and social status. As Maria Clara Sharupi Jua reminds us, during the pandemic lockdown, "I recognised that borders, social classes, powerful governments and developing countries do not exist anymore" (Sharupi Jua & Tomaselli, 2020, n.p., "Interview"). Therefore, not only the poor have been facing death, but also "the rich are dying of the pandemic in their empire". As if the poem is presented as an anti-thesis to the lifelong thesis of class distinction and social discrimination. This Marxist position seems relevant to the poet's socio-political and cultural backgrounds. As a Nigerian poet and individual, he must have been acquainted with the long history of African enslavement in the so-called New World as well as their socio-political, cultural discrimination in the post-Civil War and "emancipation" periods. It should be noted that here I am not conflating the history of Nigerian people and that of African descents peoples in the US. The poem therefore implicitly seems to reflect the situation of 'Black' people globally. Moreover, the phrase "the poor" in this poem could also be generalized to include all the poor people across the globe, White, Black, and/ or other minorities poor people: "the poor are dying of starvation when their diet is not pure." The lockdown just doubles their suffering as it leads to an economic depression which is dramatically boosted. During the lockdown, the change in workstyle resulted in the comprehensive computerization of most professions. Thus, professions have become suitable or doable only for those who are well-equipped and well-trained in high-tech tools. This is one reason behind the starvation of the poor during the lockdown. As is the case with Malk Alouch's poem, here the poet ends up the poem with a supplication for 'God' for help and support during these tough circumstances: "God! We need you now for our healing!"

What about Indigenous peoples' response to the pandemic? First Nations peoples are among those who have been deeply influenced by the lockdown. Outdoor gatherings, ceremonies and cultural shows have been at the core of their postcolonial culture. They aim not only to keep their socio-cultural and familial ties sturdy, but also to confirm the continuity of their race and cultures in the face of brutal post-colonialial, de-cultural policies[4].

In addition to the outdoor rituals and activities, many Indigenous peoples have also been poetically creative in staying physically distanced during the pandemic: "We thought we would have to shut down shows, but I just found a new way to do it," Indigenous Canadian artist and poet Kevin Wesaquate said. "I've been pushing for an online poetry slam for a few

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[4] Despite the lockdown, some Indigenous peoples have decided to continue with their rituals and ceremonies. One example is Canadian Saskatchewan people, who continued with their "sun-dance ceremony last weekend [i.e. May 7, 2020]. Organizers said they worried important traditions were being pushed back underground" (Malone, 2020, n.p.). However, Scott Moe, the 15th and current premier of Saskatchewan, warns that "[n]o one should be exempt from these health orders because, quite frankly, no one is exempt from the virus" (Malone 2020: n.p.). This ban can be seen as a reminiscent to the Canadian federal ban on Indigenous ceremonies and potlatches which began in 1884 and lasted until the 1950s. Of this institutionalized racism and bigotry, Marc Miller, who is currently serving as Minister of Indigenous Services in the Federal Cabinet, said that banning sacred ceremonies is a "dark stain" on the country's history. Canadian Prime Minster Justin Trudeau proclaims that "Indigenous community leaders know what needs to be done to keep people safe" (Malone, 2020, n.p.). This, however, cannot be generalized as a representation of all First Nations peoples' situation across the globe. Regarding the Institutionalized racism, Tyson (2006) argues that it "refers to the incorporation of racist policies and practices in the institutions by which a society operates: for example, education; federal, state, and local governments; the law, both in terms of what is written on the books and how it is implemented by the courts and by police officials; health care, which can be racially biased in everything from the allocation of research dollars to the location of hospitals to the treatment of individual patients; and the corporate world, which often practices racial discrimination in its hiring and promotion despite whatever equal-opportunity policies it officially claims to have." (p. 361).

years now and the timing was right to do it now" (as cited in Vocke, 2020, n.p.). The poem "We Carry the Last Century," by Denise K. Lajimodiere, from North Dakota, US, is an example of First Nations people's response to COVID-19:

> *My father's mother died*
> *in the flu pandemic of 1918.*
> *I know little about her,*
> *As a child she survived*
> *Indian wars, treaties, starvation,*
> *forced to live on a newly*
> *formed reservation.*
>
> *Now, a hundred years later,*
> *I tell my grandchildren*
> *my grandmother died*
> *in the flu epidemic.*
> *I wonder if I will survive*
> *this new pandemic.*
> *(Lajimodiere, 2020, n.p.)*

In this poem, the poet not only talks about the impact of COVID-19 upon her and her people, but also compares the 21st century pandemic to that of the early 20th century which took her grandmother's life. The poet wonders whether her grandmother follows similar preventive health procedures as the ones currently proposed by the health sectors across the globe: "Did she wear a mask? / […] Was she afraid/ as death closed in?" (Lajimodiere, 2020, n.p.). The first stanza goes beyond the mere response of one's grandmother's death. The poet exploits her pandemic poetry to reflect on several socio-political issues related to her family ("My father's mother") in particular, and her Indigenous, colonized people in general. She discusses the socio-political and cultural circumstances that her peoples experienced during the American Frontier Wars (or the "Indian wars") which took place between the 17th century and the early 20th century. The poem thus has a vivid political criticism. The poet tells us that her people were politically oppressed and suffered from imposed de-cultural policies as they were "forced to live on a newly/ formed reservation." But her mother could not survive the 'flu pandemic'. The poet wonders if she would face similar fate as that of her grandmother, and that her grandsons will report her death to the coming generation: 'Will my grandchildren say/ My grandmother died during/ the 2020 Covid pandemic?' (Lajimodiere, 2020, n.p.). This pessimistic conclusion seems to be inspired by the frustrated socio-political circumstances that Indigenous peoples in the US have been experienced. To sum up, "We Carry the Last Century" is not purely a pandemic poem, but also a politicized and historicized interdisciplinary poem, which can also be seen as a representation of the socio-political situation of many Indigenous peoples across the globe.

CONCLUSION

The paper examines selective pandemic poems by poets from different nationalities, cultures, races, religions and social backgrounds (Indigenous and non-Indigenous) who have responded to the pandemic. The paper demonstrates the effective role poetry has been, and still is, playing in the time of the pandemic, namely raising awareness about COVID-19, besides promoting protective measures to keep people immune. This poetry has effectively collaborated with governments, NGOs, universities, and other influential institutions to combat the pandemic. It attempts to reactivate people's hope and resilience in facing such a tough time.

On the local level, as in the case with Cooper's 'To the NHS Heroes', the pandemic poetry reflects a simple, but not simplistic, observation of urbanized life during the lockdown. This poetry has also participated in reflecting the global socio-political situation that has initiated during the spread of COVID-19. For instance, by supporting the global 'Stay-Home' campaign, the poems selected here have crossed the boundaries of the local to the transnational audience,

and have transcended differences based on ethnicity, nationality, color, and culture. This poetry unites people in an almost unprecedent way against one common microscopic enemy, which blindly attaching "rich and poor" peoples across the globe. In other words, the pandemic poetry has functioned as a cross-cultural bridge that connects peoples from diverse ethnicities, nationalities, and cultures on the same ground, to fight a common microscopic killer. What has enabled such a (trans)-national poetic connection is the digitization of this pandemic poetry. This has been achieved using computers, Internet, and various social media platforms as tools to publish and widespread the content the pandemic poems. The digitalization of the pandemic poetry is resulted in a distinctive interdisciplinary poetics that combines heterogenous semiotic systems; sound/ narration of poetry and background images which accompanied the video recording are the most common in the pandemic poetry. Furthermore, the pandemic poems transcend the established lines between genres to the extent that we have discussed in this article examples of politicized, historicized, and culturally saturated pandemic poems.

This kind of e-poetry is idiosyncratic in form and in content. It is not a purely traditional paper-based poetry, published in traditional publishing houses and distributed in libraries, online, or in other commercial venues. It is written and publish individually through various social media platforms, though there have been many pandemic anthologies published and promoted online (through www.amazon.com, for instance). The response of people to this kind of poetry is a telling indication that its content has been close to the public test. However, it should be noted that although all the poets selected in this study deal with the theme of COVID-19 and its impact on the personal, social, and cultural life of Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples across the globe, yet these poets are not a replica of each other. Each has his or her own distinctive, authentic poetic voice.

Biographical Statement: Ameer Chasib Furaih

Dr. Ameer Chasib Furaih graduated from Griffith University, School of Humanities, Australia, in 2019. I am currently teaching at Baghdad University, College of Education (Ibn Rushd), English Department. Prior to Griffith, I received a master degree in Modern American Poetry from University of Baghdad, College of Education (Ibn-Rushd) in 2008, and joined the English Department in 2010. My current research primarily investigates the poetry of Aboriginal Australian and the African American poetry during the Civil Rights era and beyond.

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