



## Article

# South Asian COVID-19 Memoirs: Mourning and Erasure of “Grievable Lives”

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**Abstract:** This article analyzes how narratives about the COVID-19 pandemic are beginning to memorialize lives lost in the crisis. It juxtaposes the author’s personal experience of the loss of family members with emerging memoirs by South Asian women to explore the diversity of genres like the lyric essay and the graphic memoir that memorialize lives lost to COVID-19. While acknowledging that the current pandemic and its effects are far from over, the essay argues that these memoirs are a conscious attempt to mourn and thereby restore the humanity of lives robbed of traditional acts of remembrance due to the isolation and bureaucracy of laws governing COVID-19 deaths and funerals. These texts by Barkha Dutt, Kay Sohini, and Jhumpa Lahiri are exceptional because the great majority of deaths during this time have been consigned to erasure, lack of documentation, or censorship. These texts are resisting the dominant trend to leave the pandemic behind and resume normal lives. By committing to grief instead of a facile recuperation, these memoirs are not just charting a private path of healing but also transforming private grief into a statement of shared suffering and solidarity, even when the pandemic has affected individuals differently based on stratifications of race, class, and privilege.

**Keywords:** COVID-19; South Asian women’s memoirs; grief; essays; graphic memoirs



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## 1. Introduction

My article is based on my own experience of the loss of family members from the second wave of COVID-19 in India in May 2021 in conjunction with my analysis of South Asian women’s memoirs of the pandemic. I examine Judith Butler’s urgent question “What makes for a grievable life?” in *Precarious Life* (Butler 2004, p. 20) in the context of personal and public tragedies that have unfolded during the pandemic. Butler reminds us in *What World is This: A Pandemic Phenomenology* (Butler 2022) that black and brown people have been disproportionately affected by the coronavirus and are more likely to die from it. Similarly, different parts of the world have had differential access to vaccines, usually determined by economic privilege. In the face of nearly seven million deaths due to COVID-19 in the last three years, how are literary works, particularly memoirs, beginning to tell stories of grief, loss, and deep social divisions? Before introducing the COVID-19 memoirs I analyze, I examine some currents in the discourse of historiography of pandemics. Several historians and cultural critics argue that pandemics have not always been carefully recorded or written about. Several scholars argue against the exceptionality of pandemics and see them instead in a continuum of the larger structural violence enacted on poor and disenfranchised populations. While they admit that the COVID-19 pandemic in India demonstrated the Indian state reneging in its role of protecting its citizenry, they are unsure about its influence in prompting any backlash against the current government. I examine these currents in the scholarship of historiography of pandemics to contextualize the writing of present-day pandemic memoirs.

## 2. Writing History of Pandemics and Writing COVID-19 Memoirs Today

I should preface this attempt to examine the memoirs as responses to the COVID-19 pandemic by stating that this pandemic is far from over. The virus continues to mutate into new variants, thereby affecting individuals more than once and leaving a significant number of victims with symptoms of long COVID. It is indeed not from a place of closure or recovery that I seek to examine emerging narratives of COVID-19. If anything, new scholarship on COVID-19 rejects the predictable framing of pandemics as world events structured by beginnings and endings. Arondekar and Seikaly (2023), in their introduction to a special issue of the journal *History of the Present* devoted to the COVID-19 pandemic, argue that the focus of their inquiries is not on pandemics “as temporally marked moments, organized through the telos of beginnings and endings, successes and failures” (Arondekar and Seikaly 2023, p. 1). They argue instead that the state of lockdowns and suspension of normal life is in fact a part of everyday life in many parts of the global South, particularly in militarized conflict zones. They assert “For many people in these countries, some version of isolated lockdown has long been the norm before the current pandemic” (Arondekar and Seikaly 2023, p. 4). Other scholars whose work appear in this special issue, like Bishnupriya Ghosh and Dwaipayan Banerjee, reiterate these claims with specific examples. Ghosh focuses on the story of smallpox, a disease whose successful eradication is “classically considered a biomedical triumph” (Ghosh 2023, p. 32). However, Ghosh points to not only the presence of the virus in labs like the CDC but also its insidious potential for misuse by rogue actors. She also highlights the emergence of viruses like monkey pox, which is closely related to variola, that have emerged almost simultaneously with COVID-19. Finally, Ghosh demystifies the triumphalism of the colonial enterprise of eradication by pointing to the fact that vulnerable children, biracial individuals, and orphans were used in the process of variolation which predated vaccination as a means of conferring immunity against smallpox (2023, pp. 32–35).

While Ghosh muddies the triumphalist claims of modern medicine and vaccination, Dwaipayan Banerjee’s research in “The Mystery of the Missing Pandemic” (2023) focuses on the absence of archival records for the 1918 Spanish Flu in India. This lacuna in the archives has perplexed other historians, like David Arnold, who wondered “how can twelve million people die, and yet apparently leave so little trace” (Arnold qtd in Banerjee 2023, p. 57). Even though the colonial archives in India do a meticulous job in recording deaths due to smallpox epidemics, they have not recorded deaths from the 1918 influenza epidemic. Banerjee ruminates on the implications of this lacuna for our present-day pandemic, asking “Should historians worry that Covid-19, too, might be fated for a similar erasure?” (Banerjee 2023, p. 58). While grappling with these questions of remembering a pandemic, instead of rushing towards correcting the historical lacuna, Banerjee rejects the idea of the Global South as “the epicenter of historical lack . . . The Global South is understood as having experienced the most devastation and as having done the least to remember it” (2023, p. 58). Banerjee attempts to reverse the narrative of characterizing the Global South as the zone of “exceptional abjection” (2023, p. 58). Banerjee lists the hypotheses offered about the causes for lack of records of the 1918 pandemic in India. They range from an exhaustion with epidemics to the greater absorption by most Indians in the decolonization struggle which may have led to minimal records of influenza deaths. Banerjee uses insights gleaned during his earlier research on cancer patients from the poorer socio-economic groups in Delhi to reflect on pandemics past and present. Instead of thinking of pandemics as *dues ex machina* or the hand of God appearing and then disappearing in a Greek play, he proposes that we think of pandemics as appearing in *medias res*, “as dispersed within an already unfolding scene, bending but not breaking the narrative arc” (2023, p. 66). Banerjee is suggesting that both the 1918 influenza pandemic and the present COVID-19 pandemic were part of a continuum of human disasters and suffering, precipitated by the “postcolonial Indian state’s neglect of public health” (2023, p. 67). Similar to the case of cancer, the exceptional hardship is not the result of the particular virulence of the virus, but “the result of ordinary conditions of structural inequality” (2023, p. 67). In the landscape of

chronic underfunding of health care infrastructure, “healthcare catastrophes are continuous rather than exceptional” (2023, p. 67). Banerjee argues that “the lack of hospital beds, oxygen tanks and other things that make up basic healthcare infrastructure, certainly came as a shock, but it came as a shock to a privileged few” (2023, p. 67). Banerjee implies that, for a privileged few, the COVID-19 pandemic may be ending with greater access to private and more exclusive medical care instead of facing the reality of too few resources available in relation to the overall population.

Even though I agree with Ghosh and Banerjee that pandemics in the past and in the present are part of a continuum of structural inequality causing more devastation to the most marginal groups, I am still interested in mapping the memoirs of COVID-19 that are emerging in a variety of genres. This is because these memoirs tell stories of actual lives lived and lost during this devastating time. Memoirs do not reduce lives lost to numbers and statistics but offer nuanced portraits of individuals as well as the implications of their loss for their families and communities. Most significantly, these memoirs resist the dominant trend of treating the pandemic as something humanity has triumphed over.

The memoirs emerging are fragmentary, episodic, and certainly not prolific in number. In this essay, I examine Barkha Dutt’s collection of pandemic essays *To Hell and Back: Humans of Covid* (2022), the short graphic narrative by Kay Sohini “Pandemic Precarities: An Account from the Intersection of Two Worlds” anthologized in *Covid Chronicles: A Comics Anthology* (2021) edited by Kendra Boileau and Rich Johnson, and Jhumpa Lahiri’s essay about her mother’s death during COVID-19 in “Translating Transformation” in *Translating Myself and Others* (2022). While broadly conforming to the generic conventions of autobiography, these autobiographical narratives subvert many of the conventions of autobiography as a genre associated with the development of the post-Enlightenment Western male subject. In their introduction to the now classic anthology *De-/Colonizing the Subject: The Politics of Gender in Women’s Autobiography*, (1992), Julia Watson and Sidonie Smith point out that, traditionally, the ‘autobiography’ has been implicated in a specific notion of ‘selfhood.’ This Enlightenment self. . . . Thus the ‘I’ becomes “Man’ putatively a marker of the universal human subject whose essence remains outside of history” (Smith and Watson 1992, p. xvii). Watson and Smith explore various cultural practices that decolonize the traditional genre of autobiography. Caren Kaplan (1992), a contributor to the same volume, specifically examines “outlaw genres,” like prison memoirs that deconstruct the master genre of autobiography. Many of these deconstructive practices eschew the individual “I” in favor of collectivities that encompass the self. The memoirs I focus on, particularly the one by Barkha Dutt and the graphic memoir by Kay Sohini, layer private stories of loss with public tales of the human disaster of the breakdown of the public health system. Even though they are not explicitly espousing a feminist position, by foregrounding the experiences of women collectively, they are subverting conventions of Western male-centered autobiography. These three works are diverse in their genres, but they broadly adhere more to the conventions of memoir than autobiography. Smith and Watson, in *Reading Autobiography: A Guide to Interpreting Life Narrative*, Second Edition (2010), distinguish the memoir not only as the term that publishing houses confer to life-writing, but also a term used “for recollections of one moment or period of experience rather than an entire life-span” (Smith and Watson 2010, p. 3). Smith and Watson prefer and use the term life-writing in their work since “both memoir and autobiography are encompassed in the term life-writing” (Smith and Watson 2010, p. 4). In my discussion, I use the term memoir not only because it decenters the Enlightenment male subject of autobiography, but because memoir is a term that has been deployed by many women writers of color, including works like Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts* (Kingston 1976) and Maya Angelou’s *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (Angelou 1969). Moreover, the memoirs I analyze are specific pieces of writing that capture discrete moments of personal crisis, usually involving the loss of a parent under conditions of social isolation and disruptions of international travel.

Within the field of memoirs, my chosen texts belong to the sub-set of memoirs of trauma and crisis. They bear close resemblance to illness narratives, with the difference that they are not first-person records of victims of COVID-19, but daughters or granddaughters witnessing or recording the illness and death of their parents or grandparents. Kathryn Conway, in *Beyond Words: Illness and the Limits of Expression* (2013), critiques the dominant trend of illness narratives conforming to a triumphalist recuperation over illness without a deep engagement with the actual costs and losses entailed in surviving major illnesses. Conway also ponders the question of form in illness narratives and the difficulty of balancing the chaotic nature of illness with the act of writing, which is intended “to bestow order” (Conway 2013, p. 101). The texts I study, and my own life experience, certainly defy the trope of the triumphalist framework of the illness narrative that Conway is deeply critical of. These texts speak instead of loss, helplessness, the inability to provide relief to loved ones, and the questioning of major life choices, like immigration. The narratives are short, episodic, and, for the most part, do not attempt narrative closure. Their primary aim is to record COVID-19 experiences in India that have gone missing or have not been recorded. Due to the compressed amount of time since these events happened, reflection and a complete processing of grief has not been achieved in any of the memoirs. They present an incomplete and continuing struggle to make sense of grief. There are moments of deep reflection embedded in the texts, but often, these reflections do not reach a point of closure for the authors.

Jhumpa Lahiri’s memoir is somewhat different because it is the private experience of losing her mother during the time of the pandemic and her attempt to come to terms with this loss through her translation work. The lyrical essay is as much a manifesto and defense of translation as it is a record of private grief and an attempt to transcend it. Thus, Lahiri too is not just writing about her subjective experience of loss but about her identity as a translator. It is by engaging in a collaborative translation project on Ovid that she is able to make sense of her personal loss.

These memoirs emerge from very distinct genres and conventions; however, they are all dedicated to the act of memorializing and processing loss. Although varied in their appeals to diverse audiences, like readers of literary memoirs, comics, and journalistic accounts, they exhibit one similarity across genres. They are short and fragmentary. Even Barkha Dutt’s work is an essay collection that contains a series of snapshots of the COVID-19 pandemic rather than a continuous personal memoir. The other feature which these narratives share is that they are written by South Asian women and focus on the roles of women as daughters and granddaughters. They explore affective relationships and the private dimensions of loss, mourning, and memorialization. All three writers deal with the loss of a parental figure and, in at least Kay Sohini’s case, the experience of mourning without physical proximity to the departed. All three writers’ experiences resonate with my own narrative of loss of family members during the COVID-19 pandemic. I blend my literary readings with my own narrative of loss since I see them as connected to the same endeavor of remembering, even though the world is in a rush to move on, and these are stories that the world may be weary of hearing.

While these are fledgling attempts to confer dignity and meaning to some lost lives, there is still a great abyss of unmourned and uncounted lives that continue to be denied the humanity of grief. Rustom Bharucha’s book *The Second Wave* (Bharucha 2022), which analyzes photographs and performances of grief, points to the fact that there is a paucity of cultural productions representing the COVID-19 pandemic. He attributes this to the overt and covert regimes of censorship that result in self-censorship by newspaper editors of photographs which may present the ruling Hindu nationalist government in India in poor light. Bharucha claims “the pandemic that we are experiencing today is not likely to be envisioned either theatrically or cinematically for quite some time” (2022, p. 39). Moreover, Bharucha argues “The process of forgetting is precisely what the Indian state in its present political dispensation would appear to be prioritizing in its scrupulous adherence to silence in manufacturing a form of amnesia” (2022, p. 62). In light of these facts, the act of



memorializing, undertaken by the three memoirists I focus on, is an act of resistance, where remembering and recording become acts of subverting official narratives of COVID-19 as a pandemic that was a temporary threat which the world successfully vanquished. In the light of the undercounting of COVID-19 deaths, these memoirs are acts of first-person witnessing that can provide a corrective to official accounts of the pandemic.

### 3. Personal Narrative

In 2020, my husband, son, and I were in the throes of the COVID-19 pandemic, but I still felt cocooned from its devastation. Although I was acutely aware of the impact of the harsh lockdown in India, I was protected from that suffering by my family's location in the urban professional class. Three of our four parents were in their seventies, still full of energy and love for life. They were sheltering in Kolkata for most of 2020. In 2021, we felt a glimmer of hope and anticipation when we all received vaccines.

Then on Bengali New Year's Day, 15 April 2021, my parents-in-law reported symptoms of a cold, and soon, a COVID-19 test turned out positive. What followed was a fortnight of steady devastation. My mother-in-law's symptoms grew worse. The home oximeter readings were consistently below 90. At this time, we also realized that hospital beds in Delhi had been overrun. There were too many critically ill people for hospitals to accommodate patients. They could not provide high flow oxygen and insisted that patients come with their own oxygen cylinders. The news media was breaking horror stories of patients waiting in line for hours to be admitted before dying in the streets. For example, David Person and Ahmer Khan reported in the *Los Angeles Times* about the desperation in small towns like Meerut, near Delhi, where families were struggling to find oxygen cylinders for ailing members (Pierson and Khan 2021). In April 2023, Rebecca Ratcliffe reported in *The Guardian* that hospitals in Delhi were running out of oxygen (Ratcliffe 2021). We could not travel to Delhi due to severely restricted international flights. My husband is an oncologist who has dedicated his life to the care of cancer patients. He decided that his mother should have oxygen support and die in the comfort and dignity of her own home. A nurse was arranged, and family members and friends rallied around to find oxygen cylinders. On one occasion, a lead proved to be elusive; the contact disappeared after receiving about \$500 from us through a wire transfer without delivering a cylinder. On May 2, my mother-in-law inhaled her last ragged breaths in this world. Even when we were remorseful in our inability to provide her with adequate care, she only blamed herself for succumbing to the disease.

There was the practical matter of the end of a body that had perished from COVID-19. COVID-19 deaths were not allowed the traditional rituals of Hindu mourning, cremation, and immersion of ashes. From the Internet, we found a funeral service who could collect the body and cremate it according to Hindu rituals and bring the cremains home. It must be mentioned that this was a Christian business that was offering this service to Hindus who were unable to perform last rites. No family members could accompany my mother-in-law on this last journey. Through the pictures sent on WhatsApp, we saw my mother-in-law's unrecognizable body, wrapped in a plastic body bag, almost like a mummy placed on a bed of dry firewood until the flames consumed the shrunken frame.

Meanwhile, my parents in Kolkata also tested positive for COVID-19. After we spoke about our irrevocable loss on May 2, my father's condition declined rapidly. Once again, we heard about the low numbers on the oximeter. Luckily, on 5 May, my father was admitted to a highly reputed private hospital in Alipore, Kolkata. He was treated with steroids and remdesivir, but his condition worsened, and he was moved to the ICU. Communications became very erratic after this transfer. My sister in Delhi, a physician, called and spoke to ICU nurses and the attending doctors daily, but we seldom received any updates. My sister often requested that we have a video conversation with our father but there were no voice and video calls arranged by the overworked staff. Finally, on 13 May, in the morning in the U.S, we received word that our father was being moved to the floor. I received this news in Eau Claire, Wisconsin, while my sister heard this communication in Delhi while

speaking to our father's medical care team in Kolkata. An hour later we were told that he had suffered a cardiac arrest and had passed away. The mystery of the shocking reversal of our father's status from being released to the floor to dying in the ICU was revealed to be a case of wrong reporting due to a change in bed numbers.

My sister and her husband reached Kolkata on 14 May and saw the plastic-wrapped body of our father. She sent me a photo of his unveiled face before following the Kolkata Municipal Corporation van to the cremation grounds and watching the cremation from a distance. Family members were denied the traditional honor of lighting the pyre. There was also no opportunity to touch the body of the departed parent one last time or prepare the body for its final tryst with fire. Traditionally, the body of the dead is washed and dressed in new clothes, sandalwood paste is applied to the face, and flowers are arranged on the bed. All these traditions were abandoned for COVID-19 funerals. These rituals may seem trivial compared to the devastating loss of lives, but they allow the bereaved family members to care for and claim the corporeal body of the lost family member before finally letting go of the physical body. My sister did collect our father's ashes and immersed them in the River Hooghly at Babughat the next morning. A year later, we were able to offer prayers in person at his batsorkik, the one-year anniversary of his death, after conducting two memorial meetings with family and friends on Zoom.

#### 4. Mourning in Memoirs: Diverse Genres

The Greeks believed that the absence of proper funeral rituals prevented the passage to the afterlife, and even the bravest of warriors, like Hector in the *Iliad*, were petrified of this fate. In *Iliad* (Homer 2002), Book XXII, lines 300–320, the depth of this belief in Greek society is evident in Hector's dying pleas to Achilles that his body be returned to his kinsmen. In *Antigone* (Sophocles 2002), which I teach, I have always focused on how acts of mourning constitute what becomes a "grievable" life according to Judith Butler. Butler has drawn parallels between the state's denial of burial to Antigone's brother Polyneices because of his status as a traitor and the many lives that were denied the rites of mourning during the AIDS pandemic. Butler elaborates on Antigone's contemporary relevance in her work *Antigone's Claim* (Butler 2002).

Butler extends her concept of differential bodily vulnerability in her new book *What World is This: A Pandemic Phenomenology* (2022). In the introduction, she states how black and brown people have been disproportionately affected by the coronavirus and are more likely to die from it. Similarly, different parts of the world have had differential access to vaccines, usually determined by economic power in striking bargains with pharmaceutical corporations. Butler reinforces her theory of grievable lives with the reality of lives which are dispensable due to the logic of capital. The economy is willing to accept a certain death rate in order to re-open after the pandemic. However, it is precisely in this moment of crass indifference to human life that Butler identifies grassroots movements, like Black Lives Matter, which stake a claim to the value of lives that have been rendered dispensable by the necropolitical state apparatus. She argues "it is not possible to understand social inequality without understanding how grievability is unequally distributed." (Butler 2022, p. 93).

While Butler offers Black Lives Matter as an example of a movement fighting for equality through a plea of grievability, does this translate to similar movements in India? In answering this question, I turn to Dwaipayan Banerjee's research on past pandemics in comparison with the present COVID-19 pandemic. Drawing on Kavita Sivaramakrishnan's research on the crisis of colonial legitimacy that followed the plague of 1896, Banerjee wonders if a "similar backlash against authority in the present" (Banerjee 2023, p. 64) could be anticipated. Again, Banerjee rejects the idea that pandemics are exceptional events. Even though he locates the Farmers' Protests against agricultural laws in India as one prominent movement to vigorously oppose policies of the current Prime Minister of India, Narendra Modi, he does not see this as a result of the failures of the ruling Hindu Nationalist party with regard to managing the COVID-19 health crisis. It should be mentioned that the Farmers' Protests were a year of protests against agricultural reforms passed by the Modi

government in September 2020 that continued until the laws were revoked by Narendra Modi after a year. The farmers argued that the end of government protections in the pricing of essential crops and opening up the farming sector to the market would place significant hardships on farmers who are already facing financial precarity and are vulnerable to mental health crises and suicides (Mashal et al. 2021). Banerjee sees limitations in the idea that pandemics are forces which “catalyze change” (2023, p. 65). Instead of the COVID-19 pandemic, Banerjee locates the forces behind the long and successful Farmers’ Protests to other genealogies of struggle. He traces the most recent Farmers’ Protests to others in 1988 and 2018, which brought these issues to the national limelight long before the COVID-19 pandemic. So, unlike Butler, Banerjee does not offer a direct link between the pandemic and a movement for greater social justice, like the Black Lives Matter movement. While we may not have large-scale movements emerging as a result of the current pandemic in India, I did locate examples of cross-religious solidarity that the pandemic engenders.

The book *To Hell and Back: Humans of Covid* (2022) by the acclaimed Indian journalist Barkha Dutt points to the difference between the first wave of COVID-19 in 2020 in India and the second wave. The Delta wave in 2021, which was more virulent, shattered the aura of invulnerability of those endowed with relative economic privilege. In the unfolding of the tragedy of COVID-19 in India, Dutt is adamant in her rejection of the truism that COVID-19 was the great equalizer. She writes:

The virus was anything but a great equalizer. It exacerbated existing inequalities and birthed new ones. In an already stratified society, it created a new social order.

Yes, it is true that almost no Indian in a country of 1.3 billion has been left untouched over the two seasons of sadness. But the way those who live at the margins of power and economic access experienced the horrors of Covid is incomparable with the travails of the more privileged.

(Dutt 2022, p. 5)

The first part of Dutt’s book chronicles her experiences of the first wave of COVID-19 in India, which she covered extensively as a journalist. She documents that the Narendra Modi government declared a national lockdown to counter COVID-19 on 10 March 2020, at 8 PM. The lockdown went into effect at midnight. Unlike the established script of other national lockdowns, India stopped all forms of public transportation. Dutt argues:

The short window was deliberate so as to prevent widespread movement of people. With economic activity coming to a halt, millions of daily wage workers left the cities of India for their villages on foot, walking hundreds of kilometers with no food or water.

(Dutt 2022, p. 18)

This already establishes the pattern of differential grievability of lives in India. The deaths of migrants were not worthy of grief or even acknowledgment in national data. The draconian lockdown, the lack of transportation, and financial assistance which led to the freezing of day laborer’s wages instantly affected 100 million internal migrants and the country’s poorest citizens, producing the largest mass movement of people from cities to villages since India’s Partition in 1947. Yet this human tragedy was rendered invisible by the callousness of official policy as well as the refusal to record these deaths.

Dutt’s chapter “Fathers and Daughters” marks a shift in the book of essays from journalistic accounts of India’s tryst with COVID-19 to a lyrical personal account of the loss of her own father to COVID-19, and the long series of regrets of all the factors that could have produced a different outcome. In this essay, Dutt changes her usual genre of journalistic reportage to a more personal lyric essay. The horrific isolation of her father’s death is exacerbated by the fight for a space in the crematorium to perform his last rites. Through her grief, Dutt remains steadfast in her critique of the failure of the Indian state to accelerate the acquisition of vaccines or prepare for adequate production and transportation

of oxygen and hospital beds, reducing ordinary individuals to begging on social media for oxygen tanks.

In her chapter “Awaz de Kahan Hai,” after chronicling the callousness of authorities in continuing to hold election rallies which fueled the Delta wave, Barkha Dutt finally draws attention to how the dead were stripped of the dignity of mourning and last rites. Dutt narrates that “across the world, countries have called for an effort against the dehumanization of the dead and to remember that behind every number is a person, a family, a friend, a lover, a child” (2022, p. 189). This is in essence a call to grieve the lives lost in the pandemic and grant each life lost the humanity of remembrance. However, Dutt exposes that, in India, municipal officials were instructed by directorates not to record the cause of death in death certificates. This resulted in severe undercounting of those who died from COVID-19, also making it difficult for the poorest families to seek compensation. Dutt offers that, while the official death toll in India stands at 478,007, the actual figure could be close to 4 million (2022, p. 189). Dutt, in her journalistic work, investigates not only the official and makeshift crematoria and graveyards running out of space, but she also chronicles the many bodies that were buried quickly on the banks of the Ganga in shallow graves that were washed to the shore in a few days. She describes it as “the Ganga was regurgitating corpses” (2022, p. 195). In these sections, Dutt’s account makes it very evident that the majority of the poor and marginalized who died from COVID-19 were not acknowledged as grievable lives by the Indian State. However, in the chapter “The Covid Pall Bearers,” Dutt offers a glimpse of cross-ethnic solidarity. Those who perform the tasks of disposing the bodies of the dead belong usually to the untouchable caste of Doms among Hindus. During the early days of COVID-19, there was a mortal fear and lack of accurate information about the infectability of dead bodies, causing many family members to shun the funereal rituals. It was left to certain individuals to bury or burn the dead and offer prayers specific to the religion of the departed. Dutt recounts stories of those who crossed religious lines to offer funereal rites to members of other religions. This account resonates with my own experience of a Christian company performing the Hindu funeral rites for my mother-in-law and bringing her ashes home. In contemporary India, where religious divisions have intensified, these acts of solidarity are the closest we have to examples of cross religious and ethnic solidarity propelled by the pandemic. These actions of individuals proclaim the humanity of dead bodies and restore them to the status of the grievable when all the myriad acts of the state seem to be denying that very essence.

The second COVID-19 memoir that I examine is a short graphic narrative by a comics artist. Kay Sohini’s “Pandemic Precarities: An Account from the Intersection of Two Worlds” which is an eight-page graphic memoir anthologized in *Covid Chronicles: A Comics Anthology* (2021) edited by Kendra Boileau and Rich Johnson. This book curates sixty-four short comics providing a multi-perspectival vision of life during the COVID-19 pandemic. In her preface to the volume, Kendra Boileau writes that this collection is a result of a call for short comics to document experiences of COVID-19 that comics artists responded to. Boileau also tries to provide an artistic rationale for comics as a favored genre for documenting both disasters and diseases. Boileau draws on the work of Hilary Chute, who, in her book *Why Comics: From Underground to Everywhere* (2017), provides one of the most persuasive explanations for the propensity of disasters to be depicted in graphic form. Drawing on classic graphic novels like Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* (Spiegelman 1986) and Keiji Nakazawa’s *Barefoot Gen* (Nakazawa 2004), Chute argues that “this handmade form is able to explore violence without sensationalizing it. It can express the multifaceted experience of trauma and the disaster of history—in its grammar of boxes, gutters, and lines” (Chute 2017, p. 68). In addition to a theoretical analysis of comics and graphic memoirs, Boileau’s project of a compendium of COVID-19 comics drew inspiration from the emerging field of graphic medicine which “began as an area of study for scholars, educators, practitioners, and artists who saw in the subversive power of comics the ability to challenge prevailing attitudes toward the disabled, the ill, the dying, and those who care for them” (Boileau 2020, p. x). The goal of the movement evolved to using comics to effect cultural change about



attitudes to disease, medicine, and healthcare. For Boileau, the *Covid Chronicles* project extends the paradigm of graphic medicine into a new series by publisher Graphic Mundi, which aims to explore connections between the human and the non-human world of plants and animals in exploring the topic of health.

While offering an incredible diversity of thematic and stylistic content, propelled by the new agenda of Graphic Mundi, Kay Sohini's work is the only item in their catalogue that features COVID-19 from the perspective of immigrant experience, of belonging simultaneously to more than one location. The comics creator here is a South Asian immigrant who has made New York City her home while also having deep affective ties to Calcutta, her grandmother's hometown.

Kay Sohini's "Pandemic Precarities: An Account from the Intersection of Two Worlds" is a narrative using a short form comic to describe the loss of Sohini's grandmother to COVID-19 in Calcutta while sheltering in New York City during the first wave of the pandemic. At first, the pandemic is an abstraction for Sohini. While in Boston at a conference, she reads the announcement of a state of emergency declared in New York state. The panel focuses on the announcement by Governor Andrew Cuomo, which occupies the whole page, before jumping to two panels depicting New York cityscapes and with its "emptying streets" (Sohini 2021, p. 211). A few panels later, Sohini receives the news of her grandmother's death due to COVID-19 complications in Calcutta, and, for the first time, the graphic narrative focuses on Sohini's grieving face, against a black background, eyes lowered, while she reflects on this deep personal loss. She writes. "I realized one of the hardest things about occupying this space between two worlds is dealing with the death of a loved one from afar" (Sohini 2021, p. 212). One panel later, she continues this reflection, which is offered in white letters against a black background: "So much of the grieving process involves exchanging stories with your loved ones about the one you lost" (Sohini 2021, p. 212). Sohini is highlighting the particular aspects of the COVID-19 pandemic that make its losses especially harsh and difficult to bear. The greatest burden is the isolation of COVID-19 deaths and the inability to properly mourn loved ones. Sohini's grandmother could not have a funeral in India, and Sohini is unable to join her family in Calcutta at a time when international flights are severely restricted. There is an acute lack of a community to share and heal through the process of grieving. Perhaps it is to reverse this predicament that Sohini offers a flashback of a memory of her grandmother. Sohini is sharing a story about her grandmother with her audience as a way of dealing with the grieving process. Her grandmother is depicted wearing a pink nightdress cooking payesh, a Bengali dessert, in an Indian kitchen on a gas stove with a bluish orange flame. She refuses to be dissuaded by Sohini's reminders about TSA restrictions of food; instead, she insists: "ora thik bujhbey/they will understand." Sohini captures a Bengali phrase to capture the stubborn affection and care that her grandmother lavished on her. It springs from an ethos of her grandmother living in a multi-generational home where family members care for each other as part of everyday life.

From this warm and vibrant color palette memorializing her grandmother, the graphic narrative shifts to two large rectangular black panels with white text. In one of them, Sohini's body is depicted in a crouched position, symbolizing her confinement to her NYC apartment for seventy-five days because her asthma is a risk factor for severe COVID-19. From the profound personal despair and isolation, the panels shift to vignettes of news from India and the U.S., evoking the horrors of the pandemic. Subsequent panels capture the severe consequences of the lockdown on migrant workers, who are brutalized by the police, the rampant Islamophobia, xenophobia, and abuse Northeast Indians are subjected to because of the similarity of their appearance with the Chinese.

The last two pages of "Pandemic Precarities" shift location to the U.S, and Sohini offers various vignettes to show similar divisions within American society. The most poignant images are the masked faces of essential workers with the caption that hazard pay for them ended in June. The final panel depicts Sohini's figure in the middle with COVID-19 cases and death tolls of both countries she belongs to on either side of her. Sohini's words echo

Judith Butler when, in the previous page, she mentions that the “the value of a human life is calculated based on its functionality, its capitalizable utility” (Sohini 2021, p. 216). Thus, Sohini’s narrative expands in scope from a private recording of loss and the isolation of her grief to a larger critique of structural inequalities in both India and the U. S. and their pernicious effects on marginalized groups.

Among South Asian authors, a memoir that is written during the pandemic and that depicts the loss of a parent is the last essay in Jhumpa Lahiri’s collection *Translating Myself and Others* (2022). The book is dedicated to Lahiri’s mother Tapati Lahiri in the epigraph. While most of the essays in the collection are reflections of Lahiri’s experiences learning Italian as an adult and choosing to write only in Italian, then becoming a translator of her own works, which were originally written in Italian, into English. It is also a defense of translation as a creative activity in its own right and not lacking in the originality and authenticity attributed to the original. Lahiri is drawn to the example of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* (Ovid 2004). Within *Metamorphoses*, she is specifically drawn to the myth of Echo and Narcissus. In the essay “In Praise of Echo,” she reads the myth of Echo and Narcissus as metaphors for the translator and writer. Lahiri’s attraction to Ovid and, in particular, the Ovidian myth of Echo and Narcissus is twin fold. First, she sees in the myth of Echo and Narcissus a metaphor of her twin vocations of writer and translator. Narcissus is more ostensibly the figure of the writer, in love with his own shadow, while Echo is overtly the translator, fated to repeat the words of others. Lahiri critiques the primacy afforded to the writer as more creative than the translator seeing elements of both Narcissus and Echo in her own vocation as writer and translator (2022, p. 49). However, this attraction to the Ovidian myth is more than an affirmation for Lahiri of her own life work. It is a way for her to grapple with the facts of death. Ovid gives her a path to understand death as a transformation into another state of being rather than an irrevocable and absolute loss. In many ways, the Ovidian myth of metamorphoses parallels Greek ideas about the transmigration of souls as well as the Hindu idea of the immortality of the soul and its many transitions through birth, death, and rebirth into diverse life forms. While she never admits to any ostensible spiritual quest, it is possible to infer that the death of a parent is profoundly unsettling and propels Lahiri to seek some understanding of the meaning of this immense loss.

It is important to note that Lahiri’s mother Tapati, unlike Barkha Dutt’s, father did not die of COVID-19. However, her death was during the pandemic, at a time of tremendous social isolation. The essay begins by the admission that Lahiri has only seen her mother on Zoom for a period of several months before she realizes that her mother is slipping away (Lahiri 2022, p.147). This is followed by Lahiri’s visits to Rhode Island, where she sees for herself that her mother is dying. Unlike COVID-19, Lahiri’s mother’s condition is not precipitated by a virus. It is a slow, imperceptible shift in energy which makes her disinterested in her normal activities, like cooking and caring for guests. Later when her mother is hospitalized, the diagnosis is not a stroke, as was first suspected, but a rise in carbon dioxide in her blood.

While her mother’s decline is inexorable, the way Lahiri deals with this grief is by embarking on a new project to translate Ovid to English with the help of a colleague. She comes to terms with her mother’s decline by suggesting that “she is not dying as much as becoming something else” (Lahiri 2022, p. 153). Since she is immersed in Ovid, she concludes “Though certain beings do die in Ovid, the vast majority cease to be one thing but become something else. I was convinced that it was the inevitable passage from life to death that Ovid was recounting and representing again and again, in order to enable us, his readers, to bear the inevitable loss of others” (Lahiri 2022, p. 153).

The myth of Echo and Narcissus returns in the final gift that Lahiri offers her mother. These are the gifts of two plants, the daffodil and hydrangea. In one of the final conversations between mother and daughter, Tapati tells her daughter Jhumpa that she will continue to be present in the flowers. This is a rare moment of perfect understanding between the mother and the daughter, where the mother seems to be echoing the same

mythology of metamorphosis that has so fascinated the daughter. We are not told if Tapati shared Jhumpa's love for Ovidian myths, or that she thought of death in Ovidian terms as a metamorphosis. But in saying that she will live on in the plants presented to her, Tapati is affirming the continuity of life even after the inevitability of death. Mother and daughter seem to be in consensus in terms of the meaning of death and our relationships with loved ones beyond death. This is a rare gift made possible by the proximity of mother and daughter at the time of death. This is the proximity and conversation that has been an absent feature in the previous works examined, including Barkha Dutt's memoir of her father's death, Kay Sohini's inability to visit her grandmother, and my own loss of my father, compounded by the utter lack of the possibility of final words. In all these cases, there was no final conversation to make meaning of death. This is the privilege that was denied by COVID-19 and its protocols of isolation. Lahiri, when she realizes on Zoom that her mother is dying, is able to reach Rhode Island, spend time with her at the hospital, and offer her flowers. She and her mother are able to imagine connections with each other beyond the physical end of one of their lives. As I read Lahiri's memoir, I am also deeply aware that, under conditions of lockdown, the basic supplies of mourning and funerals, like firewood and flowers, were not available. For both my father and my husband's mother, flowers were conspicuous by their absence in the abbreviated funerals afforded by Kolkata Corporation and the private funeral service we had hired.

Many millions of children lost their parents to COVID-19. For many in India, the deaths of family members were denied all traditional rituals of mourning. Moreover, the state apparatus grossly underreported death tolls to not admit how dire the situation was. Many were denied the opportunity to claim death benefits since COVID-19 was not recorded on their death certificates. While news reports have captured the brutal facts on the ground, literary memoirs offer not so much the detailed documentation of the horrific catastrophe but ways by which we can acknowledge, record, mourn, and cope with our losses. While Lahiri's position in the U.S., living in social isolation and continuing to work and translate during the pandemic when many millions were on the brink of joblessness and economic disaster, is extremely privileged and cannot be equated with the indignity and neglect of COVID-19 deaths, her lyrical essay still offers a perspective on loss and bereavement as a transformative experience that all mortals have to negotiate, often with widely varying resources. At a time when the COVID-19 pandemic is being brushed aside as a temporary aberration in the march of global capitalism, a personal lyric essay by Lahiri documenting death, mourning, and making meaning of loss is an attempt to acknowledge this reality that millions have faced and have been denied any means of memorializing or processing.

My own experiences with COVID-19 resonate with the three memoirs I have analyzed. The greatest commonality in the experiences of Dutt, Sohini, Lahiri, and myself is the overwhelming isolation that is a feature of COVID-19 death. Although, like the AIDS pandemic of the 1980s, the stigma and fear of infection associated with the COVID-19 dead body denied it the traditional honor and funereal mourning, unlike AIDS deaths, COVID-19 deaths also foreclosed the possibility of conversations and goodbyes between loved ones. This is because of the nature of airborne transmission associated with COVID-19. This is poignantly depicted in both Dutt's essays as well as Sohini's graphic memoir. It did not matter that Sohini was thousands of miles away from her grandmother and that Dutt was in the same city as her father, both were denied the closure of final conversations. In my own case, like Sohini, distance from my father foreclosed the possibility of a final conversation, but this was also denied to my mother and sister, who were in India. Ultimately, it should have been possible for loved ones to see their dying family members with the use of protective masks, but the bureaucracy associated with COVID-19 was disinterested in affording these humanizing opportunities in the management of a public health disaster. Jhumpa Lahiri's memoir begins with seeing her mother on Zoom, but since the diagnosis is not COVID-19, she is able to be with her mother in person, and, through their mutual acknowledgement of the myth of metamorphosis, they are able to transcend their sense

of loss, at least in part. For Dutt, Sohini, and myself, the relief from our own suffering occurs in the acknowledgement of collective suffering and solidarity with those whose circumstances were far more precarious.

## 5. Conclusions

The analysis of three very different texts written in the immediate aftermath of COVID-19 provides some interesting insights. All three of the texts I have studied depict life writing by women who are in the roles of daughters or granddaughters of individuals who died during the pandemic. While the purpose of Barkha Dutt and Kay Sohini's memoirs seem to be to inform and document the atrocities and failures of the health infrastructure of the Indian state, Jhumpa Lahiri's essay is a painstaking portrayal of losing a parent during a time of profound social isolation. All three authors are seeking to make sense of the trauma of losing parents or parental figures. Each writer charts a distinctive road to recovery, but, in each case, the recovery is predicated on an affirmation of social bonds rather than an individual path to recuperation. Although representing different genres within the broad category of memoir, each writer subverts the dominant "I" of Western autobiography to create fragmentary representations of the pandemic where the individual subjectivity develops in conjunction with enduring social relations. I follow the same principle in telling my own COVID-19 story in conjunction with these authors, not to claim privilege because of this lived experience, but to blend my scholarly analysis with my own life-experience for a more layered examination of COVID-19 stories. Not enough time has elapsed to allow each writer to come to a full reckoning with grief and to a mature reflection of the meaning of the pandemic's losses. However, collectively, these fragments offer the beginnings of a possible archive of COVID-19 life writing.

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