

# CARE, GENDER, AND CRISIS IN POST-COVID AMERICAN LITERATURE: A FEMINIST READING OF CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN NARRATIVES

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**Abstract**—The COVID-19 pandemic profoundly reshaped social, political, and cultural realities across the world, exposing structural inequalities that disproportionately affected women and marginalized communities. Contemporary American literature has emerged as an important medium for documenting these experiences, portraying the emotional, psychological, and economic consequences of the pandemic through narratives of caregiving, isolation, grief, and resilience. This paper explores the representation of care, gender, and crisis in selected post-COVID American literary texts through a feminist critical framework. Drawing upon feminist literary theory and care ethics, the study examines how contemporary American writers portray women's invisible labour, emotional caregiving, domestic responsibilities, and gendered vulnerabilities during and after the pandemic. The research analyses selected novels by American authors to investigate how pandemic narratives challenge traditional gender roles while simultaneously exposing persistent inequalities embedded within family structures, workplaces, and healthcare systems. The study further explores the intersection of gender with race, class, and identity, demonstrating how post-pandemic literature critiques systemic injustices and reimagines new forms of solidarity, resilience, and social care. By examining these literary representations, the paper argues that post-COVID American literature functions not merely as a record of historical crisis but as a feminist intervention that questions patriarchal power structures and advocates more inclusive understandings of care, community, and social responsibility. The findings contribute to contemporary literary studies by highlighting the significance of feminist perspectives in interpreting pandemic literature and by emphasizing literature's role in documenting collective trauma and envisioning possibilities for social transformation.

**Index Terms**—Post-COVID American Literature, Feminism, Care Ethics, Gender, Pandemic Literature, Contemporary American Fiction, Trauma, Crisis, Women's Studies

## I. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic represents one of the defining global crises of the twenty-first century, transforming everyday life through illness, social isolation, economic instability, and unprecedented disruptions to human relationships. While the pandemic affected all sections of society, its consequences were experienced unevenly, revealing deep-rooted inequalities based on gender, race, class, and occupation. Women across the world assumed greater caregiving responsibilities, faced increased domestic burdens, experienced heightened job insecurity, and became more vulnerable to emotional and psychological stress. These realities have significantly influenced contemporary American literature, where writers have sought to capture the complexities of living through and beyond the pandemic.

Post-COVID American literature extends beyond documenting the medical aspects of the crisis. It reflects the emotional landscapes of grief, loneliness, caregiving, resilience, and survival while questioning the social structures that intensified inequalities during the pandemic. Many contemporary American narratives foreground women whose experiences reveal how domestic labour, emotional care, and family responsibilities remained largely invisible despite becoming essential to societal survival.

A feminist reading of these texts provides an important critical perspective for understanding how gender shaped pandemic experiences. Feminist literary criticism examines the ways literature reflects and challenges patriarchal systems while giving voice to women's lived experiences. Similarly, care ethics emphasizes relationships, empathy, responsibility, and interdependence as central ethical values. Together, these frameworks enable a deeper understanding of how post-pandemic literature redefines care as both a personal and political act.

This paper examines selected contemporary American literary works to investigate how narratives of care, crisis, and gender intersect within the post-pandemic cultural landscape. Through feminist analysis, the study explores how literature documents collective trauma while simultaneously imagining more equitable and compassionate social futures.

## **II. Literature Review**

Recent scholarship on pandemic literature has emphasized that COVID-19 produced not only a global health emergency but also a profound cultural and literary transformation. Researchers argue that literature written during and after the pandemic records experiences of uncertainty, grief, isolation, and resilience while preserving collective memory for future generations.

Feminist scholars have highlighted that the pandemic intensified pre-existing gender inequalities. Women's unpaid domestic labour, caregiving responsibilities, and emotional work increased dramatically during periods of lockdown and social distancing. These developments renewed scholarly interest in feminist care ethics, particularly the works of theorists such as Carol Gilligan and Joan Tronto, who argue that care constitutes a fundamental ethical and political practice rather than merely a private domestic responsibility.

Contemporary American literary criticism has increasingly examined post-pandemic fiction as a site where questions of vulnerability, community, and identity are negotiated. Novels such as *The Sentence*, *Our Country Friends*, and *The School for Good Mothers* portray emotional isolation, caregiving, motherhood, and systemic inequalities within the context of pandemic society. However, comparatively few studies examine these works collectively through the combined perspectives of feminist literary criticism and care ethics.

The present study seeks to address this gap by offering a comparative feminist reading of contemporary American narratives that foreground care, crisis, and gender in the aftermath of COVID-19.

## **III. Research Objectives**

The study aims to achieve the following objectives:

1. To examine the representation of care and caregiving in post-COVID American literature.
2. To analyse the portrayal of women's experiences during and after the COVID-19 pandemic through a feminist perspective.

3. To explore how contemporary American narratives challenge patriarchal structures and gender stereotypes.
4. To investigate the intersection of gender, race, class, and social inequality in post-pandemic literary texts.
5. To evaluate the relevance of feminist care ethics in interpreting contemporary American pandemic narratives.

#### **IV. Research Questions**

The present study seeks to answer the following questions:

1. How is care represented in post-COVID American literature?
2. In what ways do contemporary American narratives portray gendered experiences during and after the pandemic?
3. How does feminist literary criticism help interpret post-pandemic American fiction?
4. What role does care ethics play in understanding the emotional and social dimensions of pandemic literature?
5. How do these literary works critique existing systems of inequality and imagine more inclusive communities?

#### **V. Research Methodology**

This study adopts a qualitative research methodology based on textual and comparative literary analysis. It employs feminist literary criticism and feminist care ethics as its primary theoretical frameworks. The research analyses selected contemporary American novels published during or after the COVID-19 pandemic to examine how literary narratives represent gender, caregiving, emotional labour, trauma, and resilience.

The selected primary texts include:

- The Sentence
- The School for Good Mothers
- Our Country Friends
- The Candy House

Secondary sources include peer-reviewed journal articles, books on feminist theory, care ethics, trauma studies, and contemporary American literature. MLA 9th edition guidelines will be followed for documentation and citation.

The research is interpretative rather than quantitative, focusing on close reading, thematic analysis, and comparative evaluation of literary representations.

## **VI. Theoretical Framework**

### **6.1 Feminist Literary Criticism**

Feminist literary criticism examines how literature represents women, gender relations, and structures of power. Emerging from the broader feminist movement, it challenges patriarchal assumptions embedded within literary texts and seeks to recover women's voices and experiences that have often been marginalized.

The works of Simone de Beauvoir, Judith Butler, bell hooks, and Elaine Showalter provide important foundations for feminist literary criticism. These scholars argue that gender is not merely a biological category but a cultural and political construction shaped by systems of power.

Within the context of post-COVID American literature, feminist criticism enables readers to examine how women negotiate domestic responsibilities, emotional labour, caregiving roles, professional identities, and personal autonomy during periods of crisis. The pandemic exposed long-standing inequalities that feminist scholars have identified for decades, making feminist literary analysis particularly relevant to contemporary pandemic narratives.

### **6.2 Feminist Care Ethics**

Care ethics emerged during the late twentieth century as an alternative ethical framework that emphasizes relationships, empathy, compassion, and responsibility rather than abstract principles of justice alone.

Carol Gilligan, in *In a Different Voice*, argued that moral reasoning frequently develops through relationships and responsibilities rather than solely through universal rules. Building upon this work, Joan Tronto conceptualized care as a political and social practice essential for sustaining democratic societies.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, care became central to everyday life. Healthcare workers, teachers, mothers, family caregivers, and essential workers performed indispensable forms of labour that often remained socially invisible despite being critical to collective survival.

Applying feminist care ethics to contemporary American literature reveals how narratives transform caregiving from a private domestic responsibility into a broader social and political concern. Care is represented not simply as emotional support but also as resistance against social neglect, inequality, and institutional failure.

### **6.3 Feminism, Care, and Pandemic Literature**

The combination of feminist literary criticism and care ethics provides a comprehensive framework for analysing post-pandemic American literature. Together, these perspectives illuminate how literary narratives challenge traditional gender expectations while foregrounding empathy, interdependence, and collective responsibility.

Rather than portraying women solely as victims of crisis, contemporary American literature increasingly represents female characters as agents of resilience, community-building, and social transformation. These narratives critique structural inequalities while imagining more compassionate forms of social organization grounded in mutual care and shared responsibility.

Accordingly, this study employs both feminist literary criticism and care ethics to investigate how selected American literary texts reconstruct meanings of care, gender, and crisis in the aftermath of COVID-19.

## **VII. Textual Analysis: Care, Gender, and Crisis in Contemporary American Narratives**

### **7.1 Caregiving and Emotional Labour in The Sentence**

Set during the COVID-19 pandemic, *The Sentence* intertwines the realities of lockdown, racial injustice, grief, and community life through the setting of an independent bookstore in Minneapolis. Rather than presenting the pandemic merely as a public health emergency, the novel explores its emotional and psychological consequences.

From a feminist perspective, the novel demonstrates that caregiving extends beyond domestic work. Female characters provide emotional support to family members, friends, customers, and their wider community despite their own experiences of fear and uncertainty. This reflects the feminist argument that women's emotional labour often remains invisible and undervalued.

The pandemic intensifies feelings of isolation, but the novel portrays acts of listening, compassion, and shared responsibility as forms of resistance. Care becomes a collective social practice rather than a private obligation. Through this representation, Erdrich challenges patriarchal assumptions that define care as women's natural duty and instead presents it as an ethical responsibility shared by society.

### **7.2 Motherhood, Surveillance, and Gender in The School for Good Mothers**

Jessamine Chan's novel presents a dystopian vision in which motherhood becomes subject to state surveillance and institutional control. Although the novel extends beyond the immediate pandemic experience, its concerns resonate strongly with post-COVID debates regarding parenting, childcare, mental health, and work-life balance.

The protagonist experiences overwhelming pressure to fulfil impossible expectations of motherhood while navigating emotional exhaustion and social judgment. Feminist criticism reveals how society continues to impose unequal standards upon women while largely ignoring similar responsibilities among men.

The novel demonstrates that crises expose rather than create gender inequality. During the pandemic many women balanced professional responsibilities, childcare, domestic work, and emotional caregiving simultaneously. Chan transforms these realities into literary critique, illustrating how institutions regulate women's identities through unrealistic ideals of perfect motherhood.

From the perspective of care ethics, genuine care cannot emerge through surveillance or punishment. Instead, the novel argues for empathy, understanding, and structural support for caregivers.

### **7.3 Community, Isolation, and Human Relationships in Our Country Friends**

*Our Country Friends* follows a group of individuals who isolate together during the pandemic. The novel explores loneliness, anxiety, friendship, and changing interpersonal relationships under conditions of prolonged uncertainty.

The pandemic exposes differences of privilege, race, class, and gender among the characters. Women frequently assume emotional responsibilities within interpersonal relationships, offering stability during moments of crisis. Feminist analysis identifies these interactions as examples of emotional labour that often remains socially unrecognized.

The novel also questions assumptions regarding independence and self-sufficiency. Instead, survival depends upon cooperation, compassion, and mutual dependence. This aligns closely with feminist care ethics, which rejects excessive individualism in favour of relational responsibility.

#### 7.4 Technology, Memory, and Human Connection in The Candy House

Jennifer Egan's *The Candy House* examines memory, technology, digital communication, and identity in an increasingly interconnected society. Although not exclusively about COVID-19, its themes reflect post-pandemic concerns regarding digital intimacy, virtual communication, and social isolation.

The widespread reliance on digital technology during lockdown transformed everyday relationships. Egan illustrates how technological innovation simultaneously connects and distances individuals. Feminist analysis demonstrates that digital communication cannot entirely replace embodied forms of care, empathy, and emotional presence.

Women in the novel frequently negotiate complex relationships shaped by technology, work, family, and personal identity. Their experiences reveal continuing tensions between professional achievement and caregiving responsibilities.

### VIII. Comparative Discussion

The selected novels collectively demonstrate that post-COVID American literature redefines care as a central ethical and political concern. Rather than treating care as an exclusively domestic activity performed by women, these narratives portray caregiving as essential for sustaining families, communities, and democratic societies during periods of crisis.

Several recurring themes emerge:

- **Invisible emotional labour:** Women continue to shoulder emotional responsibilities that receive little public recognition.
- **Gender inequality:** The pandemic magnified existing inequalities in domestic work, employment, and caregiving.
- **Collective trauma:** Grief, isolation, and uncertainty become shared experiences requiring mutual support.
- **Intersectionality:** Gender intersects with race, class, and social status, shaping unequal experiences of crisis.
- **Resilience through community:** Recovery depends upon empathy, cooperation, and collective responsibility rather than individual success alone.

Together, these texts challenge patriarchal assumptions surrounding caregiving and propose alternative visions of society grounded in justice, equality, and compassion.

### IX. Major Findings

The study reveals several important findings regarding post-COVID American literature from a feminist perspective.

- 1. Care is redefined as a political and social responsibility.** The selected novels demonstrate that care extends beyond domestic labour. It includes emotional support, community solidarity, healthcare, and ethical responsibility during times of crisis.
- 2. The pandemic exposed existing gender inequalities.** Women continued to perform disproportionate amounts of unpaid caregiving, household management, childcare, and emotional labour while balancing professional responsibilities.
- 3. Contemporary American literature documents collective trauma.** The novels portray grief, loneliness, anxiety, and uncertainty not simply as individual experiences but as shared social realities that reshape human relationships
- 4. Feminist care ethics offers an effective interpretative framework.** The theories of care ethics illuminate how empathy, compassion, and interdependence function as central themes within post-pandemic narratives.
- 5. Intersectionality remains significant.** Gender interacts with race, class, occupation, and economic privilege, producing diverse experiences of crisis and recovery.
- 6. Literature becomes a form of social critique.** Rather than merely recording the pandemic, contemporary American writers challenge institutional inequalities and imagine more inclusive, compassionate communities.

## **X. Conclusion**

The COVID-19 pandemic transformed not only global public health but also the ways in which literature represents human relationships, vulnerability, and social responsibility. Contemporary American writers have responded by producing narratives that capture the emotional complexities of caregiving, grief, resilience, and inequality. Through a feminist reading of selected post-pandemic American novels, this study demonstrates that care occupies a central position within contemporary literary imagination.

The analysis reveals that caregiving is neither an exclusively private nor exclusively feminine responsibility. Instead, post-COVID American literature redefines care as an ethical practice essential for sustaining democratic communities during periods of crisis. The selected novels expose the unequal burdens placed upon women while simultaneously celebrating solidarity, empathy, and collective resilience.

Feminist literary criticism and care ethics together provide valuable frameworks for interpreting these narratives because they foreground relationships, emotional labour, and social justice. The novels examined in this study challenge patriarchal assumptions surrounding gender roles while emphasizing the importance of mutual responsibility and community support.

Ultimately, post-COVID American literature functions as both historical testimony and cultural intervention. It records the lived experiences of an unprecedented global crisis while encouraging readers to imagine societies built upon equality, compassion, and shared care. As pandemic literature continues to evolve, feminist perspectives will remain essential for understanding how literature reflects and reshapes social realities in the aftermath of COVID-19.