

Rupantaran : A Multidisciplinary Journal
 Vol. VII : pp 55-62, February, 2023
 ISSN (Print) : 2091-0061, ISSN (Electronic) : 2738-9960
<https://doi.org/10.3126/rupantaran.v7i1.52205>
 Research Management Cell (RMC)
 Dhankuta Multiple Campus, Dhankuta
 Tribhuvan University, Nepal

Logical Fallacies in V.S. Rai's Poem 'Corona Says'

Pradeep Rai¹
 Email: pradprai@gmail.com

Abstract

The poem "Corona Says" composed by a Nepali poet V.S. Rai criticizes the human actions that are assumed to have caused the recent pandemic of coronavirus. As the title suggests, coronavirus is the speaker in the poem, and it defends its presence against the human curse and tries to justify the affliction it has brought upon human beings through subtle arguments. This research paper analyses the truth of these arguments for their validity. For this purpose, various online articles written and published during the pandemic time were reviewed, and books on logical fallacies were also consulted. Close examination showed that the arguments of the corona are beset with logical fallacies which render these arguments invalid.

Keywords: coronavirus, pandemic, lockdown, argument, validity, fallacy

Introduction

"Corona Says" is a poem composed by a Nepali professor and poet Vishnu Singh Rai during the first year of the recent coronavirus pandemic. The pandemic that broke out from China in December 2019, the resultant lockdown and its consequences seem to have inspired V.S. Rai to write this poem.

In the poem coronavirus is the speaker, and it speaks to the human beings in the form of a dramatic monologue. Right from the very beginning the coronavirus has taken the defensive stance against the human blame and cursing done for the thousands of human deaths due to its infection. It starts by urging humans to stop blaming it for the deaths simply because, it says, it didn't come on the earth on its own free will, but was invited by humans themselves. And it was not just invited but was compelled to come, which implies that the humans are themselves responsible for their loss. Then, it tries to rationalize by asking humans to compare the number of deaths caused by it with the number of deaths caused by human wars (CDC, 2020, pp. 241-2). Since coronavirus is a recent arrival, it is obviously the human wars that have caused far more human deaths throughout human history. Here again, human beings seemingly lose the rationale for blaming the coronavirus.

¹ Mr. Rai is an Assistant Lecturer of English at Tribhuvan University, Dhankuta Multiple Campus, Dhankuta, Nepal.

After that, the corona proceeds to show humans' sheer irresponsibility. It accuses humans of calling themselves the crown of creation and thinking all other creatures as their slaves, thereby, exploiting, killing and doing whatever they like to other living creatures and their natural habitat. Against this backdrop of irresponsibility, corona tries to justify its acts. It says it has come to teach a lesson to the human beings. Hinting at the lockdown caused by the pandemic, it says that in visiting the earth it has wanted to give "a little rest" to the "mother Earth" and to show the humans "how clean the blue sky looks without dust and smoke." Further, it says that it wanted to make humans realize "how caged animals feel in a zoo" and make them know that the Earth is the common home for all the creatures, and not just the property of humans alone (CDC, 2020, pp. 242-3). Thus, it claims to be teaching a lesson to the irresponsible and ignorant human beings for which it is not to be taken wrong and cursed.

Finally, the corona warns the humans against not listening to it or not learning the lesson. It says that it will surely depart one day, but there are many others like it who will visit the humans in their time in future if the humans do not learn the lesson and mend their ways now. The humans who boast of the modern advancements will have to be "back to their cave time" if they keep inviting such infections in future too (CDC, 2020, p. 243). The humans had better heed to the corona's warning right now.

Corona is a short form of coronavirus, and it is associated with a particular disease called coronavirus disease. According to World Health Organization (WHO), "Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) is an infectious disease caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus" (para. 1). Hence, coronavirus is technically SARS-CoV-2 virus that causes the disease called coronavirus disease, which is dubbed as COVID-19. WHO informs us that "most people infected with the virus will experience mild to moderate respiratory illness and recover without requiring special treatment. However, some will become seriously ill and require medical attention" (para. 2). Those who are likely to become seriously ill are the ones who have less immune system in their body. "Older people and those with underlying medical conditions like cardiovascular disease, diabetes, chronic respiratory disease, or cancer are more likely to develop serious illness" (para. 2). If untreated in time or adequately, these people can die.

Corona, thus being just a virus, doesn't actually behave like a human being. It doesn't speak like humans, doesn't feel like humans, and neither attacks anybody on purpose nor defends itself like humans; it simply responds according to its very nature. So, it is not the corona itself that makes the arguments; rather, it is the poet V.S. Rai who personifies the corona by giving it a talking mouth and human-like thoughts and words to speak out for itself. Now, whether corona can speak or not is not the question here. For the purpose of this paper, we can even assume that corona can actually speak like human beings. Here, we are concerned with the very arguments the corona makes in its defense.

When the poet Rai makes corona speak and argue against human blames, he is obviously satirizing human misdeeds and harm done to the nature. He is critical of irresponsible human actions that he assumes have caused the diseases like coronavirus disease. Here, we do not want to question the intention of the poet either. We shall assume that he is right to criticize the human misbehaviors. But the very arguments he has used through the persona of corona can be analyzed for their validity in their own right. The objective evaluation of these arguments in relation to their validity of reasoning is the purpose of this paper.

Hence, the research questions are: Are the arguments made by the corona in the poem valid? How scientific or truthful are the bases upon which these arguments are made? Can we identify any logical fallacies in the arguments? If yes, then what kind of fallacies? It is a matter of careful investigation which this paper has aimed to achieve, and thus answer the posed questions.

Methods and Materials

Qualitative research design has been used in this paper to examine the validity of the arguments made by corona in the poem. The secondary data, such as factual information and reports obtained via readings of various articles published in different online newspapers, magazines and official websites during the time of coronavirus pandemic have been reviewed. To identify any existing logical fallacies in the arguments, certain books on logical fallacies were consulted too.

Results and Discussion

Logical Fallacies

The pandemic of coronavirus began in December 2019, and while the first strain of virus was still active and spreading, this poem was composed by the poet Rai. WHO reports, “By 31 December 2020, [the death toll] figure stood at 1,813,188. Yet preliminary estimates suggest the total number of global deaths attributable to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 is at least 3 million, representing 1.2 million more deaths than officially reported” (para. 1). So, just in one year coronavirus killed around 3 million people. But the corona in the poem doesn’t make any attempt to refute this estimate of huge death toll, or scientifically reject its hand in the death of those people. Instead, it attacks the humans for their supposed irresponsible actions that are assumed to have caused the birth of coronavirus.

In his book “A Rulebook for Arguments,” Anthony Weston (2017) defines the fallacy called ‘ad hominem’ in Latin (literally meaning ‘to the man’) as “attacking the *person* of a source rather than his or her qualifications or reliability or the actual argument he or she makes” (p. 87). Such a fallacy of ad hominem can be seen in the poem which begins defending itself as follows:

*Stop crying,
Oh man,
Stop cursing me
And listen.
I didn't come here
of my own free will.
I was invited.
Believe me,
I had no choice
but to visit you. (CDC, 2020, p. 241-2)*

In this very first argument corona is not refuting the blame that it has killed many people, instead, it is trying to justify its actions by attacking the person (in this case, ‘man’ which refers to all human beings) himself. It is saying humans cannot blame it since it is humans themselves who invited it forcibly to come into the world. So then, according to this argument, the humans don’t have the moral ground to curse corona for the harm done by it since they themselves invited the corona, and thereby, invited the harm too. This argument is clearly attacking the opponent’s moral

integrity and authority, and hence dismissing the main issue in question. The corona doesn't make any objective counter-claim against the claim that it has killed many people for which it is to be cursed.

Whether it is really the human actions that have caused the existence of coronavirus or it is due to some natural process independent of human actions is a matter of scientific enquiry. Even if human action is held responsible in some way, then what percentage of contribution can be attributed to human action – further inquiry should be made. But till date, medical science has failed to figure out what actually originated this particular virus. According to National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID):

Research evidence suggests that SARS-CoV ... originated in bats. SARS-CoV then spread from infected civets to people To date [March 2022], the origin of SARS-CoV-2 which caused the COVID-19 pandemic has not been identified. The scientific evidence thus far suggests that SARS-CoV-2 likely resulted from viral evolution in nature and jumped to people or through some unidentified animal host. (2022, para. 1)

Thus, although the very first case of coronavirus infection was identified in China, the scientists are still debating the origin of the virus. Even when it can be scientifically shown that human actions have directly caused the coronavirus to come into the world, it still does not absolve the corona from the charge for the harm done by it; its actions will still be blamable – until and unless it can be shown that humans have deliberately and sovereignly created the corona with all its evil. Hence, the fallacy of ad hominem has been committed here, whereby, the corona attacks the man who made the argument instead of the argument itself.

Next logical fallacy committed by the corona is the fallacy of faulty comparison. Bo Bennett (2012) in his book “Logically Fallacious: The Ultimate Collection of over 300 Logical Fallacies” defines faulty comparison as “comparing one thing to another that is really not related, in order to make the one thing look more or less desirable than it really is” (p. 167). Corona says:

*How many lives were lost
Because of me?
You count.
But have you ever counted
How many have died so far
Because of you and your wars? (CDC, 2022, p. 242)*

In these lines corona makes an argument of comparison. It compares the number of deaths it has caused with the number of deaths caused by human wars against each other. It tries to show that human war-induced deaths outnumber corona-induced deaths by far greater degree. It tries to defend itself by saying that the number of deaths it has caused is nothing in comparison to the number of deaths caused by humans themselves. But here lies the fallacy of faulty comparison, since the two data compared are actually not comparable.

Corona talks about the deaths caused by human wars since the beginning of human society, which covers the time period of thousands, if not millions. But the COVID-19 is a recent disease and even if we consider the deaths caused by it until today, it will be the deaths occurred only over three years. So then, how can the deaths occurred just over three years (if we consider the fact that the poem was written soon after the COVID-19 pandemic began, then it is just about a year) be

compared with the deaths occurred over thousands of years? Clearly, these two figures are incomparable because of huge difference in the scope of time. If the same time period is taken, then obviously the number of deaths caused by corona during its active years of two years far outnumbers the deaths caused by human wars during those very years. Thus, the argument made by corona is invalid for the second time.

There is one more logical fallacy we can identify in the argument made by corona. It is appeal to consequences. According to Bennett (2012), fallacy of appeal to consequences is “concluding that an idea or proposition is true or false because the consequences of it being true or false are desirable or undesirable. The fallacy lies in the fact that the desirability is not related to the truth value of the idea or proposition” (p. 62).

Corona says:

*Don't blame me.
I just wanted to show you
How clean the blue sky looks
Without dust and smoke.
I wanted you to realize
How caged animals feel
In the zoo.
Not to give you a test.
I came
So that mother Earth
Could have a little rest. (CDC, 2020, pp. 242-3)*

Here in these lines corona doesn't state it directly, but we readers can easily understand that the reference is being made to the situation of lockdown and its consequences: clean air and sky, knowing the feelings of caged animals, and a little rest for the Earth. The rapidly spreading COVID-19 compelled many governments to shut down their business completely or partly and force their citizens to stay at home for months so as to check the spread of the virus. One BBC website article written by Martha Henriques in March 2020 reports, “The streets of Wuhan, China, are deserted after authorities implemented a strict lockdown. In Italy, the most extensive travel restrictions are in place since World War Two. In London, the normally bustling pubs, bars and theatres have been closed and people have been told to stay in their homes” (para. 2).

A little later, Henriques (2020) writes, “As industries, transport networks and businesses have closed down, it has brought a sudden drop in carbon emissions. Compared with this time last year, levels of pollution in New York have reduced by nearly 50% because of measures to contain the virus” (para. 3). As of China, he writes, “emissions fell 25% at the start of the year as people were instructed to stay at home, factories shuttered ... The proportion of days with good quality air was up 11.4% compared with the same time last year in 337 cities across China” (para. 4). Such environmental effects were reported from different places around the world that were affected by the coronavirus.

Even in Nepal, significant reduction in air pollution was seen over the sky of Kathmandu. Writing in March 2020, Aditi Baral reports, “Nearly a week after the government imposed a temporary lockdown across the nation to contain the spread of the coronavirus (COVID-19), the Kathmandu Valley and other major cities have started to witness a significant improvement in their

Air Quality Index (AQI)” (para. 1). A little down Baral writes, “the decrease in the air pollution level comes as a consequence of reduction in the movement of people and vehicles like motorbikes, cars, buses and even trucks or tipper trucks that emit carbon monoxide, nitrogen oxide and harmful hydrocarbons” (para. 3). Hence, the pandemic of COVID-19 forced lockdown and the lockdown resulted in clean air. As people had to be locked up in their home, many may also have realized how caged animals feel in their confined state. Also, when almost all the human businesses had halted, the Earth can be said to have got a little rest in the meantime. All these were the positive consequences of the lockdown, which was in itself an important consequence of COVID-19.

As the definition of the fallacy of appeal to consequences mentioned above suggests, just because the consequence of an action turned out to be desirable, the action itself cannot be judged right. For an example, a murder of a person cannot be right just because the murder of that person resulted into something good. But even if we accept the consequence as the basis for judging the right or wrong of an action here, we still have a problem. The COVID-19 has negative consequences too, which have been overlooked by the corona speaking in the poem, and these negative consequences clearly outweigh the positive consequences.

The huge death toll already mentioned above is the most undesirable consequence of the presence of coronavirus. The lockdown too does have more negative effects than positive ones. Daniel Kurt (2021) in an economic article reports:

Certain industries, such as travel and hospitality, felt the pandemic’s impact most directly. Shops and restaurants closed their doors altogether or opened with low seating capacity and low demand to dine in. Nonessential travel evaporated, causing massive lost revenue for not only airlines and cruise ship operators but also smaller businesses that rely on tourism dollars. (para. 5)

Telling how the pandemic led to the loss of millions of jobs creating a huge problem of unemployment, Kurt (2021) further writes:

Many workers and potential shoppers sequestered themselves in the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, which had a momentous impact on the global economy... sudden drop in demand had a disastrous effect on employment. [In United States] The national unemployment rate climbed as high as 14.8% in April 2020 before dropping to 6.2% in February 2021. (para. 12, 13)

Kurt (2021) also mentions International Monetary Fund (IMF)’s report that says “the global economy contracted by 3.1% in 2020 – the worst slide in recent memory” (para. 14). Thus, a large number of people all over the world suffered a huge economic crisis during the lockdown as many lost their jobs, or had no economic transaction in the meantime, and no income to sustain their livelihood.

One medical research done in Pakistan by Abraish Ali et al. (2021) reports the impact of lockdown upon students:

Due to the lockdown imposed by the government in response to COVID-19, the sleeping patterns of the students was affected the most...increase in use of social media applications led to a widespread increase in the length of sleep, worsening of sleep habits (people sleeping at much later hours than usual), and a general feeling of tiredness. (para. 4)

Similarly, Shreyansh Mangla (2021) writing about impact of COVID-19 on Indian economy reports that the Indian economy contracted by 7.3% in the April-June quarter of the fiscal year-2021, which was the worst decline ever observed since the ministry had started compiling GDP stats quarterly in 1996. Owing to the job loss due to the imposition of the lockdown, in 2020, an estimated 10 million migrant workers had returned to their native places. Mangla further mentions, “India’s \$2.9 trillion economy remains shuttered during the lockdown period, except for some essential services and activities. As shops, eateries, factories, transport services, business establishments were shuttered, the lockdown had a devastating impact on slowing down the economy” (para. 2).

Even in Nepal the effects of lockdown were of serious kind. In their research paper, Kusum Sharma et al. (2021) write, “Multidimensional impacts of lockdown have been found in society, many people lost their jobs, and businesses along with health care were impacted. It disrupted the supply chain, shut many informal and small enterprises, and pushed more vulnerable people into poverty” (para. 18). The tourism industry was also hit hard as “it fell below 10%, resulting in more than 13,000 job loss of trekkers and guides” (para. 18). Reporting on the impact on health, the researchers further write, “The lockdown has affected the health of individuals and disrupted healthcare services, particularly emergency and regular health services” (para. 19). Psychologically too people were affected as “Quarantine, social isolation, and travel restrictions” caused “stress, anxiety, depression, insomnia among the general population as well as frontline health workers” (para. 19).

Hence, there were more negative or undesirable consequences than the positive or desirable consequences. But since the speaker corona in the poem appeals to only the positive consequences, the argument becomes invalid as the mere desirable consequences of the COVID-19 cannot be accepted as the sole basis for saying that the coronavirus was right to visit the earth. The fallacy of appeal to consequences, or precisely in this case, appeal to ‘limited’ consequences, has been committed here.

Conclusion

V.S. Rai’s poem “Corona Says” is an argumentative poem where the coronavirus speaks to human beings unilaterally defending itself against the human blame of killing many people. Corona presents its arguments which seem to be quite convincing on the surface, but upon closer examination, it is revealed that these arguments are beset with three logical fallacies, namely, *ad hominem*, faulty comparison, and appeal to consequences. The presence of these fallacies render the arguments invalid.

References

- Ali, A., Siddiqui, A. A., Arshad, M. S., Iqbal, F., & Arif, T. B. (2021, February 4). *Effects of COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown on lifestyle and mental health of students: A retrospective study from Karachi, Pakistan*. Pubmed.gov. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/33612842/>
- Baral, A. (2020, March 31) *Kathmandu breathes relaxed as lockdown improves air-quality*. myRepublica. <https://myrepublica.nagariknetwork.com/news/kathmandu-breathes-relaxed-as-lockdown-improves-air-quality/>
- Bennett, Bo. (2012). *Logically Fallacious: The Ultimate Collection of over 300 Logical Fallacies*. Sudbury: eBookIt.com
- Curriculum Development Centre, Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, Government of Nepal. (2020). *English (Grade 11)*. Sanothimi, Bhaktapur: Ministry of Education, Science and Technology.
- Henriques, M. (2020, March 27). Pollution and greenhouse gas emissions have fallen across continents as countries try to contain the spread of the new coronavirus. Is this just a fleeting change, or could it lead to longer-lasting falls in emissions?. BBC. <https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20200326-covid-19-the-impact-of-coronavirus-on-the-environment>
- Kurt, D. (2021, December 17). *The Special Economic Impact of Pandemics*. Investopedia. <https://www.investopedia.com/special-economic-impact-of-pandemics-4800597>
- Mangla, S. (2021, July 11). *Impact of Covid-19 on Indian economy*. The Times of India. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/readersblog/shreyansh-mangla/impact-of-covid-19-on-indian-economy-2-35042/>
- National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases. (2022, March 16). *Origins of Coronaviruses*. <https://www.niaid.nih.gov/diseases-conditions/origins-coronaviruses>
- Sharma, K., Bastola, A., & Parajuli, R. R. (2021, April 8). *Assessment of COVID-19 Pandemic in Nepal: A Lockdown Scenario Analysis*. Frontiers in Public Health. <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpubh.2021.599280/full#B18>
- Weston, Anthony. (2017). *A Rulebook for Arguments*. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company.
- World Health Organization. (n.d.). *Overview of Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19)*. https://www.who.int/health-topics/coronavirus#tab=tab_1
- World Health Organization. (n.d.). *The True Death Toll of COVID-19*. <https://www.who.int/data/stories/the-true-death-toll-of-covid-19-estimating-global-excess-mortality>