

Negotiating the Crisis of Trauma and Pain as Transformational: Exploring Cancer Narratives in Contemporary Culture

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Abstract: Life writing has captured pleasant experiences and human sorrows, including pain and recovery from disasters and traumatic challenges. Adversities are a reality of life and shape human existence; from them arise perspectives on survival and transformation. Illness and disease have accompanied humans throughout life, both individually and within communities. Writers of all ages have found a unique place in literature through physical and psychological struggles with illness. The present generation of life experiences continues to reflect survival through innumerable patterns of struggle, from pandemics to individual illnesses like cancer. Cancer has found a platform for discussion in literature, medical texts, medical testimonies, and representations of doctors' experiences. However, literature has also produced a new form of writing called cancer narratives. This paper studies the different interpretations and truths of cancer as a transformational illness in the context of Susan Sontag's *Illness as Metaphor* (1979), and also with the understandings seen through impacted individuals and the social unit over time.

Keywords: Life Writing, Cancer Writings, Disease Literature

A person's illness can affect both their physical and mental functions. When a disease affects the body, it not only manifests physically but also alters thought patterns and the ability to accept life's challenges. Attitudes are shaped by biological and psychological changes triggered by external and internal stressors. How people face life's difficulties depends on their experiences and environment. While support systems play a role, the core factor influencing transformation is the person's own disposition. Innate characteristics, including hereditary traits transmitted across generations, are unavoidable and strongly affect one's responses. These inherited factors also shape how people accept common terminal illnesses today. In the post-truth era, disease patterns are linked to human conditions, yet perceptions differ considerably across cultures and individuals.

Acceptance of illness depends on physical health, mental state, and cultural knowledge, all of which have evolved and continue to shape societal understanding and responses to disease. In *The Illness Narratives* (2020), Arthur Kleinman writes, "Illness refers to how the sick person and the members of the family or wider social network perceive, live with, and respond to symptoms and disability" (Kleinman 26). Moreover, "Disease is what practitioners have been trained to see through the theoretical lenses of their particular form of practice" (Kleinman 28). Anne Hunsaker Hawkins, in the article *Pathography: Patient Narratives of Illness*, published in August 1999, describes illness narratives as "Pathographies", which "not only articulate the hopes, fears, and anxieties so common to sickness, but they also serve as guidebooks to the medical experience itself, shaping a reader's expectations about the course of an illness and its treatment." (Hawkins 127)

Tracing the trajectory of interpretations of illness, one observes that in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, disease was regarded as a supernatural punishment and as demonic possession, whereas in Greek thought it was seen as deserved. With the advent of Christianity, there was a close association between disease and the victim. During the Nineteenth Century, it became the product of will. According to Schopenhauer, in *The World as Will and Representation* (1966), 'will' was considered an organised body in itself, and the presence of illness indicated that the will itself was sick. Later, disease was considered a vehicle of excess feelings. The truth behind disease was interpreted differently in particular times and spaces, sometimes logically and reasonably, and many a time according to the moulding and experience of personalities. Susan Sontag writes the first lines in the work *Illness as Metaphor* (1978) as:

Illness is the night-side of life, a more onerous citizenship. All born hold dual citizenship in the kingdom of the well and the kingdom of the sick. Although we all prefer to use only the good passport, sooner or later, each of us is obliged, at least for a spell, to identify ourselves as citizens of that other place. (Sontag 3).

Cancer has many facets and has been understood in different ways since its earliest recognition; at the time of its earliest identification, it was considered

contagious, like diseases such as TB and cholera. People with cancer were shunned by relatives and friends and subjected to decontamination practices, as if they were communicable. Cancer has been considered an evil, mysterious, and malevolent disease. It was considered equivalent to death. In France and Italy, it was still the rule that a cancer diagnosis was communicated to the patient's family and not to the patient. The disease, on the other hand, was widely considered a synonym for death and something to be hidden. It was also deemed obscene and ill-omened. According to Sontag, getting cancer was "a scandal that jeopardises one's love life, one's chance of promotion, even one's job." (Sontag 9)

In her 1892 journal, Alice James describes cancer as an 'unholy granite' and also says that it is a lump that is alive and a foetus with its own will. Novalis, in an entry written around 1798, considered cancer a 'parasite'. It was also regarded as a demonic pregnancy. According to St. Jerome, a patient with a swollen belly was pregnant with death. Sontag explains that a cancer patient was found to 'shrive' and to 'shrink'. Cancer was believed to work slowly and insidiously. It was also declared to be the disease of middle-class life, a disease associated with affluence and excess.

Cancer has found a platform for discussion in medical literature, testimonies, and representations of doctors' experiences. However, in literature, it took a new form in the 1970s, with the publication of Audre Lorde's *The Cancer Journals*, which presented cancer as a metaphor for death and as mysterious in all its aspects. It was also viewed as an expression of resistance and a fight for life. Later writings on cancer have shifted understanding of the disease, recognising a moment of life transformation through survival and resilience, a change that has occurred during the 21st century regarding cancer. It is represented in a much more positive way, where the diseased can be seen as more resilient and hopeful on the path of struggle, facing severe treatment methods and other traumatic adjuncts that accompany it, causing physical and psychological discomfort.

Sontag describes cancer as "a disease not understood – in an era in which medicine's central premise is that all diseases can be cured. Such a disease is, by definition, mysterious." (Sontag 5) She also quotes it as "a disease that does not knock before it enters." (Sontag 5) According to Sontag, one belief about cancer was that the disease seemed to result in part from a diet rich in fat and protein and from the toxic effluvia of the industrial economy that creates affluence. She also proclaims that cancer was thought to be excruciatingly painful, with the fight all inside one's own body, and that the person who was dying of cancer was portrayed as robbed of all capacities for self-transcendence, humiliated by fear and agony. The ancient world portrayed it as an instrument of divine wrath. Sometimes, a fatal illness was viewed as a test of moral character.

There was also alternative thinking about cancer, often cited in discussions of its psychological aspects, dating back to Galen, who argued that "melancholy women" were more likely to be affected by breast cancer than "sanguine women". According to the English surgeon Sir Astley Cooper in 1845, grief and anxiety were considered

frequent causes of breast cancer. Geiger comments that the stagnation of the flow of life energy in the being caused cancer.

Alternative cancer facts and conspiracy theories about cancer and its cure are prominent among the educated as well as the general public. Unproven cures and the belief that a real cure has been suppressed for financial exploitation can mislead readers in the post-truth era. Such claims create panic and fear, obscuring the real facts about cancer treatment. When a plurality of unsupported information replaces facts, paranoia grows, and poor decisions follow about diagnosis and treatment. Cancer is dangerous and scary, and, sadly, it is still all too often way out of our control. Where there is fear, there are conspiracy theories, and the cancer landscape is riddled with them. From outlandish cures and unlikely preventative measures to outright bonkers myths about scientists already knowing the cure for cancer, the real, genuine, truly hope-giving progress made by cancer research has become clouded and distorted. A muddled mess of half-truths and outright lies has blurred it.

The present literary landscape has witnessed the growth of cancer narratives, from pathos-laden memoirs and autobiographies to comic and cartoon works by those affected. Many factors underpin this shift towards resilience, both physically and psychologically. Advanced treatment methods, social acceptance of the disease, the possibility of recovery, and government initiatives create a ray of hope for survival through resilience. In the present diagnostic studies, cancer is understood as an emerging process that is recognised as growing beyond the medical and technological system. The interconnectedness of the survivor with other factors, such as other bodies, practices, technologies, and emotions, leading to the embodiment of the self, gives new meaning to the survival process and makes the experience emerge and evolve. Liza Ray says, "Cancer had thrown me through a window into the eternal courtyard of crisis, and because of that impact, new windows had opened" (Ray 333). The survival process is not confronted alone by individuals; aspects such as family and society accompany it. Therefore, cancer as an emerging process does not merely focus on the guidelines of health professionals, cancer patients or the support system. It relates to the survivor's cultural, political, social and economic conditions accompanying the survival process.

"Cancer is much more than a diagnosis of a diseased bodily state" (Broom and Kenny 26). Survivorship is considered emerging and evolving, despite the chaotic conditions of the survival struggle caused by medical interventions. It is regarded as a social practice that encompasses many aspects of human life. It reflects the social relations created at the time of diagnosis. Cancer is understood as an emerging process, recognised as growing beyond the medical and technological system. The interconnectedness of the survivor with other factors, such as other bodies, practices, technologies, and emotions, creates new meaning for the survival process and makes the experience emerging and evolving. Manisha Koirala writes in her memoir, *Healed: How Cancer gave me a new Life* (2018), "Cancer is not a death sentence. There is hope" (Koirala 183). Neelam Kumar says in *To Cancer with Love* (2015), "I am grateful to my cancer for giving me a new perspective on life, for new cells in my body- a new me." (Kumar 73). Anita Moorjani writes in *Dying to be me: My journey from cancer, to near*

death, to true healing (2012), "The deliciousness of each day made me feel as though I had just been born." (Moorjani 107), and Lisa Ray states in *Close to the Bone* (2019), "Illness is alchemy" (Ray 336).

Therefore, in the post-truth era, the plurality of claims about cure, food, lifestyle, environment, genetic factors, and psychological influences redefines cancer and its perception. The beliefs and false notions contradict and revolt against one another, obscuring real perceptions of the deadly disease cancer. These competing views shape how cancer is understood as a transformational illness.

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