

IMPACT OF ILLNESS ON HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS: ILLNESS NARRATIVE IN THE FAULT IN OUR STARS

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Abstract

Mental and physical health of a person has a key role in the maintenance of his relationships. Illness narrative, as a genre, addresses how illness, both physical and mental, and its subsequent trauma affect people and their relationships. Cancer which is considered to be a chronic disease continues to be people's nightmare and once a person is diagnosed with cancer, their life changes. The patients' difficulty to cope up with the situation, the attitude of people around them and the pain associated with the disease, all contributes to their trauma. The present study analyses the novel *The Fault in our Stars* both as a novel and a film and its Bollywood adaptation 'Dil Bachare' to see how these three texts have depicted the effect of illness on human relationships. The importance of support groups for such diseases is also discussed in the paper.

Keyword: Illness narrative, Osteosarcoma, Disease, Trauma, Human relationship.

Illness narrative is a genre of literature in which an illness and its effects on patient's life are described as an autobiographical or biographical account. Works dealing with illness narrative mainly focuses on creating awareness i.e., they usually attempt to give precise and accurate information of a disease, how the patients and the doctor comprehend the cause and treatment of a given disease. Physical illness, of any kind, can make a person physically, mentally, socially, and emotionally unwell. No disease comes with a patient's consent; it is an unwelcomed guest whose arrival can create a great impact on the lives of ordinary people. Every illness affects the patient as well as the people around them and creates physical and mental agony. Most terminally ill people want to avoid any kind of social gatherings and communications as they are afraid of being an object for people to gaze at and they don't wish to become a subject of talk. The need for rehabilitation centers, support groups and kind has been increasing as more and more people get affected by various types of chronic illness. Chronic illness often produces a considerable influence on one's mental health. At the same time, it is very important to have a healthy mind as a lack of a healthy mind can take one into a condition called depression. Depression has become a severe issue when it comes to disease as nowadays all kinds of diseases come up with depressants that may also create stress, anxiety, sleeping disorder, mood swings etc. They are also capable of transforming people into a worse version of themselves. Physical changes can affect the person's self-confidence, and this will make him or her keep a distance from his fellow beings. It won't be easy to cope with all the changes that come with such diseases as medication therapies, surgeries etc. The genre of illness narrative provides a clear image of the patient's life and a critical account of the social prejudices. Patients' stories about the experience of having disease have gained popularity in the last few decades. Illness narratives include a patient's living with a chronic illness, its diagnosis, consultation with doctors and other medical faculties, the impact of these diseases in both their private as well as social life. Narrating the story of a person with chronic illness deserves importance as it depicts a person's

sufferings and changes physically and mentally, he/she went through while fighting against the disease. All types of illness will affect a person's life, but when it comes to the case of a chronic illness it will change the normal life of a person completely.

Portraying an illness in the form of a narrative will help to create an interest among the people about the patient's life and the disease. Illness narratives can be depicted in various forms such as an oral or textual narrative. Illness narratives are meant to create an awareness about the disease to reconstruct a person's life history and make it more understandable to the people. As illness has become a common occurrence in the present society, importance for an awareness to deal with patients and their mental state is rising. Such a need has led to the inclusion of this theme in literature across the world in the last decade. "The Metamorphosis", a famous work by Franz Kafka, *Therapy* by David Lodge, *Truth and Consequences* by Alison Lurie, *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down; A Hmong child, Her American Doctors, and the Collision of Two Cultures* by Anne Fadiman, *The Wounded Storyteller* by Arthur Frank, *Illness Narrative* by Arthur Kleinman, *The Fault in Our Stars* by John Green and a few films like *Memento* and *In Fight Club* deals with the theme of illness and its effects. The realization that one's body is no more the same, but has some limitations can cause traumatic effect in the patient. The diagnosis of a disease in the near ones will adversely affect their dear ones.

Roger Luckhurst defines trauma as "Something that enters the psyche that is so unprecedented or overwhelming that it cannot be processed or assimilated by usual mental processes. We have, as it were nowhere to put it, and so it falls out of our conscious memory, yet is still present in our mind like an intruder or a ghost" (499) in his work "Mixing Memory, and Desire: Psychoanalysis, Psychology and Trauma Theory". Trauma can be understood as an intense response to some instance that has deeply shaken an individual. Such events can include anything like losing one's loved ones, sudden physical or mental assault or the sudden realization of chronic diseases. Cathy Caruth and Dominick Lacapra has delved into the psychological impacts of

traumatic events. Their theory posits that trauma disrupts the linear progression of time and self, leading to fragmented memories and a pervasive sense of disruption. Key characteristics include the inescapability of trauma, the difficulty of representation, and the challenges of witnessing and testimony. Notable works engaging with trauma theory include Art Spiegelman's "Maus" and Toni Morrison's "Beloved," which highlight the lingering effects of historical traumas.

The Fault in Our Stars, a novel by John Green deals with cancer and related stages of depression. The novel is noted for its difference in the treatment of cancer. The novel revolves around the characters of Hazel and Augustus who meet at a cancer patients' support group. Hazel Grace Lancaster, the protagonist, is a teenager living with terminal thyroid cancer that has spread to her lungs. Her constant need for an oxygen tank and the reality of her condition creates a persistent physical and emotional trauma. At the same time Augustus Waters, another central character, is a cancer survivor who lost a leg to osteosarcoma. Augustus has come to the group to support his friend Issac who suffers from eye cancer. Both Hazel and Augustus share a close bond after the meeting and have discussions on their experiences of cancer. The novel revolves around a book that Hazel has read; a book that was very close to Hazel's experience. She believed that if Ann's (the cancer patient in the book) mother could survive her daughter's death, Hazel's mother can also overcome it. But the book had an abrupt ending that gave no clue of the fate of the characters. Augustus takes Hazel for a picnic where she realizes she loves him a lot and fears that it will hurt him if she dies. She compares herself to a grenade, which can injure the people around her through its end. She suffers some serious complications, gets admitted to the hospital and learns that Augustus stayed in the waiting area during her ICU days. Their journey to meet the author of the book and the following events made their relationship stronger. After their stay in the hotel, Augustus informs Hazel that his cancer has returned and is spread all over the body. Hazel compares Augustus to a grenade which is capable of shattering the lives of everyone around him. Though they loved each other, they were constantly under the fear of death, which always obstructed a peaceful love term for them. Augustus dies and Hazel realizes that her love for him can never be replaced with anything in the world. She also finds a sequel to her favourite book that Augustus has written for her. The novel ends with an affirmation from Hazel to the words in Augustus' mail, "You don't get to choose if you get hurt in this world, old man, but you do have some say in who hurts you. I like my choices. I hope she likes hers." (198) These words picturize the pain inflicted on the innocent souls by diseases.

The novel intricately weaves themes of love, loss, and the search for meaning amidst the trials of life. Central to its narrative is the exploration of disability and illness, offering a poignant look at how these conditions shape personal identity and interpersonal relationships. The characters' experiences with cancer underscore broader discussions within disability studies, emphasizing how society perceives and interacts with those who are ill or disabled. Trauma is one of the key elements in the novel as it portrays how the characters' lives are profoundly affected after cancer is diagnosed in them. Hazel and Augustus grapple with the physical and emotional scars left by their conditions, embodying the ongoing nature of trauma and its pervasive influence on their identities. Adaptations of the novel, including the 2014 film, further highlight these themes, visually portraying the impact of trauma and the resilience of the human spirit in the face of overwhelming odds. The novel focuses on the physical as well as the mental trauma the characters go through in a

detailed manner to educate the readers on the pangs of such chronic diseases.

The novel starts from the meeting of a cancer support group and discusses the life of cancer patients, their organisations and mutual help. All the main characters in the novel, Hazel, Augustus, Issac and Ann are cancer patients. Hazel has terminal thyroid cancer that has spread to her lungs, Augustus Waters, lost a leg, Issac is going to get his eye removed and Ann already died, all because of cancer. The novel discusses different types of cancer, the fear and anxiety the patients are going through about the recurrence of the disease, their concern for their loved ones and the emotional turmoil they go through at their dear one's death. Both Hazel and Augustus fear of losing each other at the hands of this fatal disease which adds to their agony apart from the physical and emotional pains of the disease. This fear has a negative impact in their relationship as both are unsure of their own lives as well their partners'. Hazel's mother realizes that Hazel suffers depression and takes her to different meetings to console her. When Hazel planned to go to Amsterdam to meet Peter Van Houten, her mother was highly concerned about her health. She undergoes serious emotional trauma thinking of the fatal nature of the disease. Her helplessness makes her overprotective of her child and her unnecessary concern over everything related to Hazel. Similarly, Issac already lost one eye and was in the process of removing his other eye due to cancer and this has led to a breakup in his love relationship. He continuously expresses anger and despair on his fate that he was affected by such a fatal disease. The characters also undergo shades of existential trauma where Hazel and Augustus both confront the pain and uncertainty of their lives. They question the meaning of life, death, and what it means to leave a legacy. This is exemplified in their discussions about the novel *An Imperial Affliction* and their quest to find out what happens after its abrupt ending.

These elements of trauma are intricately woven into the narrative, influencing the characters' decisions, relationships, and worldview. The novel poignantly explores how individuals navigate their traumatic experiences and find ways to connect and find meaning despite their suffering.

Fault in our Stars is the fourth solo novel written by John Green. The novel was published on 10 January 2012, by Dutton Books. The title of the novel is adapted from Shakespeare's well renowned tragic play *Julius Caesar*. It is a dialogue between Cassius and Brutus in Act I, Scene III, L. 140-141. "The Fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars, but in ourselves, that we are underlings".

John Green was born on August 24, 1988, and is an American author, a You Tuber and a podcaster. He was born in Indianapolis, Indiana to Mike and Sydney Green. He completed his schooling in various schools. "Indian Spring School" in Alabama was the setting of his award-winning book *Looking for Alaska*. After graduating from college, he worked as a student chaplain (a priest who works on a hospital, a prison, or a school) at nationwide children's hospital in Columbus for five years. He always wished to become an Episcopal priest, but his work experience with small children who suffers from severe disease stopped him from perusing his desired path.

John Green got the inspiration to write the novel from several people including his friend Esther Earl (an American author and Vlogger, who died at the age of 16 due to thyroid cancer), his wife and son. Even though people always seem to misunderstand the character of Hazel with Esther, Green made it clear in one of his Tumblr blogs that, "I don't want people conflating Esther

with Hazel, and it's extremely important to me that I not claim to be telling Esther's story”.

The novel *Fault in Our Stars* brings an awareness in the readers about cancer, one of the leading causes of death worldwide. Osteosarcoma is a malignant tumor cancer the symptoms of which include the development of mass and severe pain. It is very important to diagnose osteosarcoma early so the treatment can be initiated as quickly as possible and potentially prevent the spread of cancer. Chemotherapy is the typical diagnosis method for this cancer too. This type of cancer is commonly seen in children and young adults, swelling of the knee is also a symptom. The bone in which osteosarcoma is affected will weaken which may lead to a fracture in the bone. Similarly the symptoms of thyroid cancer, lung cancer, its difficulties are all well described in the novel.

The book was adapted into a film in English with the same title directed by Josh Boone. In 2020, it was adapted into Bollywood *Dil Bachara* by Mukesh Chhabra with the same story line, at the integrating cultural differences.

There are numerous diseases in this world and some of them can be cured while some are fatal. One of the main causes of deteriorating health condition is the change in life style, whereas some are passed on genetically. Cancer is believed to be a fatal disease which can take one's life. Even though it's true, it is a curable disease if it is detected in its earlier stages. Cancer is the second leading cause of death in the US and 22% of deaths happening all around the globe. Humans always relate cancer to death and this reference is the first thing that one should change as cancer is curable. The human body is made up of trillions of cells. Cancerous cell growth varies from normal cell growth, and it occurs at different stages. Some types of cancers may have four stages (while some have zero stage. It depends, and some people would have cancer for years without them realizing it and this will result in the worsening of their health condition and may even lead to death. For most of the people, they see cancer as a trap from which they will never escape and this thought will lead to other serious health issues like high blood pressure, heart diseases, depression, stress etc. According to the statistical data of World Health Organization of the year 2022, it is estimated that about 1,918,030 new cancer cases and about 609360 cancer deaths have been reported in the US and a scale of 350 deaths/day from lung cancer.

Cancer is a public health condition which needs proper health care and medication. There are stories of many people who have fought against cancer and came back to life when everybody thought that they would die. The society still is not ready to welcome cancer affected patients; they recognize it as a contagious disease. In such an environment it is important to provide awareness among people to untangle their misconceptions and fears.

The novel "Fault in our stars" somehow managed to give out such an awareness. The phase of adolescence and youth is a period where people start to enjoy their life. In this novel, Greene, as an adult writer, managed to express the feelings and difficulties of two cancer-stricken adolescents who fell in love. Greene provided many incidents and character attitudes to wipe out the stereotypical misunderstanding about cancer and at the same time, he gave a vivid picture of how cancer will affect the personality of a person. Both of his characters, Hazel and Augustus, were optimistic even for a short period of time. Green filled his characters dialogue with sweet and bitter words which referred to love, life, books, death, friendship, family, etc. He included all the aspects of human life in this novel from family to death.

Moreover, it is to be noted that the acceptance of the disease by Western society is a contradicting subject while comparing with the Indian society. There is a scene in the film where Hazel is in the airport to go to Amsterdam. She didn't become an object for people to gaze at as she was carrying an oxygen cylinder and had tubes connected to her nose. A small girl approaches Hazel and asks for her to remove the tube and the girl wears it, her father watching the girl never prevented her from doing so. While in Dil Bechara, Kizie Basu, who has thyroid cancer, frequently feels isolated and is treated with excessive sympathy. Her parents' overprotective attitude was driven by fear and lack of understanding about her condition. This overprotectiveness is a direct result of the stigma and misconceptions surrounding cancer, where the disease is often viewed as terminal illness rather than a manageable one. The film even reflects how Kizie feels out of place or gets unwanted attention while in public due to her medical equipment (oxygen cylinder), thereby highlighting how physical manifestations of illness can lead to social stigma and discomfort in public spaces. These narrative elements in "Dil Bechara" encapsulate the broader societal attitudes towards cancer in India, where the disease is often surrounded by fear, misconceptions, and stigma, impacting the lives of patients beyond the physical challenges of the illness. The film effectively uses these personal stories to shed light on the need for greater awareness and a more compassionate, informed approach to dealing with cancer in Indian society. Indian Cancer Society (ICS) is an institution that fight against cancer across India. It was established in 1951 with the aim of awareness, detection, and providing cures and treatment for cancer patients in the country. India is not lagging in the terms of cancer care facilities, but the attitudes and mindset is still far away from better. The support groups in this novel are yet another catching aspect. There is a need for more and more such supporting groups for all kinds of chronic illnesses so that the victims may not feel isolated, unwanted, and dying. The Western version of the novel portrayed the picture of a supportive family while the Indian film adaptation of the novel represented the family as a typical Indian family that fears Cancer. People of old age are highly prone to cancer, but it doesn't mean that young people will not be affected. Even small children suffer from cancer nowadays.

In an interview talked about his hard work behind the novel "It was very important to me to talk to a lot of people who were living with cancer or who had children, other family members, die of cancer," said Green. "I also talked to a lot of oncologists, and I read a lot about the disease. I read a lot of memoirs, textbooks about the disease so that I could try to understand it." He also explained about what inspired him to write the novel "I guess I wanted to show that people living with illness are also doing many other things," Green told us.

Green even mentioned in his interview that, They are not solely defined by their illness or disability. Often, people from the outside might see sick individuals as nothing more than their sickness, especially those who are terminally ill. However, chronically ill people have many other aspects to their identities. They are capable of love and possess the same desires as anyone else. Their lives are just as rich, complex, important, and meaningful as others'. One of the major challenges they face is social isolation, which means they must cope not only with the physical effects of illness and disability but also with the unfortunate social stigma.

The healing potential of disease narratives is an important function. Writing or speaking about one's condition can be a therapeutic practice that aids in the processing of trauma and

difficult emotions. By encouraging patients to express their experiences, this method—known as narrative medicine—creates a sense of agency and control in them. Additionally, it enables patients to reinterpret their experiences and find purpose and meaning in the midst of hardship. For instance, Susannah Cahalan chronicles her struggle with a rare autoimmune condition in her memoir "Brain on Fire," turning a horrifying experience into a tale of resiliency and healing.

Moreover, illness narratives bridge the gap between patients and healthcare providers. They offer doctors, nurses, and other medical professionals a deeper understanding of the patient's perspective, highlighting the emotional and psychological dimensions of illness that clinical observations might overlook. By engaging with these narratives, healthcare providers can develop greater empathy and improve their communication skills, ultimately enhancing the quality of care they deliver. The work of Rita Charon, a pioneer in the field of narrative medicine, underscores this point, demonstrating how narrative competence can transform medical practice.

Additionally, narratives about illness are very important in public health and activism. They bring attention to certain conditions, which frequently prompts financing for study and changes in legislation. The story of Ryan White, a teenager who received a blood transfusion and subsequently became infected with HIV, played a crucial role in shifting public attitudes towards AIDS and promoting laws that safeguard the rights of those coping with the illness. Like this, the accounts of people with uncommon or misdiagnosed ailments have the power to mobilize groups of people and spur them to action, encouraging cooperation and a sense of camaraderie.

The power and reach of disease narratives have increased dramatically in the digital age. Patients can share their experiences with a worldwide audience through social media platforms, blogs, and online support groups, and they can find support and camaraderie in these virtual communities. These digital stories provide voice to people who might otherwise be ignored or marginalized, democratizing the storytelling process. As a result, illness narratives are a powerful testament to the human spirit's resilience and creativity. They offer patients a means to cope with and transcend their suffering, provide healthcare professionals with crucial insights, and mobilize societal change. By listening to and valuing these stories, a more compassionate and inclusive world can be developed, where the experiences of those facing illness are acknowledged and honored. Illness narratives are personal stories that individuals create and share about their experiences with illness. These narratives serve multiple functions: they provide a way for individuals to make sense of their suffering, communicate their experiences to others, and navigate the often-turbulent journey of illness and recovery. Through storytelling, patients can externalize their internal experiences, giving form to feelings that may be difficult to articulate otherwise. These narratives are not just clinical accounts but rich, textured stories that encompass emotions, fears, hopes, and the broader impact of illness on an individual's life.

As people accept their disease and how it affects their life, this strategy may result in increased acceptance. As individuals process and release repressed emotions and settle internal issues, they may reach emotional closure. In addition, by helping people understand their experiences and actively participate in their own recovery, this narrative reconstruction promotes a feeling of empowerment. They become active storytellers instead of passive victims, which might increase their sense of agency and control. In essence, the therapeutic process of story

reconstruction in both psychoanalysis and illness narratives helps individuals create a more integrated and coherent sense of self. It enables them to weave their experiences of illness into the broader fabric of their experiences of illness into the broader fabric of their lives, facilitating emotional healing and promoting overall well-being.

This paper is an attempt to analyze how far the helpings of literary narratives is incorporated in the visualization of the novel, whether it has any difference from the book in the Hollywood and Bollywood films and how all these helps the films and the novel to create an awareness about the life of diseased people and how to treat them as equal in the society by extending support not sympathy.

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