

## Strident Shielding of Life from the Proximity of Death in Cancer Narratives of Four Indian Women Writers

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*Death, be not proud, though some have called thee  
Mighty and dreadful, for thou art not so; ... canst thou kill me... And death shall be no more;  
Death, thou shalt die. - John Donne*

### ABSTRACT:

Illness and survival narratives are foreseeable realms of discussion in life writing. The struggle, chaos and fear of living lead to the uncertainty of existence. The threat of death is observed in the writings of Susan Sontag to Susan Gubar. Women and illness narratives tend to create a space for observing various lived experiences in each culture and locality. The intense journey of living through traumatic conditions of struggle towards survival, urges close observations in literature. The passion for life and the fight for a successful conquering of life through resistance, resilience and redemption are identified in the memoirs of survivors. This study evokes the search of four Indian women survivors' successful struggle of fighting back the villain 'cancer' through quests and inquiries into the inner self, finding strength from within, realising the powerful source of living, accommodating support groups and conquering a peaceful existence. The tough journey from diagnosis through treatment and finally towards the success of survival confirms a battle, achieving the triumph of life. The quest for life informs the realisation of existence in the lives of the four writers reaching a moment of complacency, and evolving into characters of completeness for an ingenious living experience.

*Close to the Bone* by Lisa Ray a renowned model and Actor, *Healed* by Manisha Koirala, a leading film actor, *Cancer with Love* by Neelam Kumar a motivational speaker and *Dying to be me* by Anita Moorjani, a consultant for multinational companies, speak for the fortunate triumph of survival, conquering life towards the nurturing of complete living and mindfulness.

**Keywords:** Women and Cancer Narratives, Disease Literature, Gender Studies, Trauma theory.

## INTRODUCTION:

Illness narratives, the much aspired fragment of life writing, addresses, as Edson says in the play *Wit*, “Life, death, Soul, God. Past, present. Not insuperable barriers, not semicolons, just a comma” (8) Life, disease and literature are entangled together to expose the soul of the diseased, as life and death is being coupled by illness. Susan Sontag in *Illness as Metaphors* considers “illness is the night side of life” (3), as the reflection of the will which is speaking through the body. Leading towards the expression of the self. (44)

Disease has been represented as creating histories from time immemorial. Literary texts explored the different strands of illness through plots and characters in classics and in contemporary writings. Literary texts like *Illiad* and *Odyssey* portrayed illness as a supernatural punishment or as the presence of demonic powers. Greeks considered disease as something that was deserved. With the rise of Christianity, a closer relation was created between disease and the victim. Boccaccio described the great plague of 1348 in *The Decameron* because of the behaviour of the citizens of Florence. During the nineteenth century, disease was considered as the product of the will. Susan Sontag quotes the 19<sup>th</sup> century German philosopher Schopenhauer’s representation of illness as “The will exhibits itself as organised body and the presence of disease signifies that the will itself is sick” (43) constructing a psychological association of illness with the will of the diseased. Kafka wrote to Milena in 1920 in *Letters to Milena*, “I’m spiritually ill, my lung disease is nothing but an overflowing of my spiritual disease.” (22)

Illness has always accompanied humans to appreciate the value of life. In such a context, the experience of a life threatening disease like cancer makes one to reflect on an array of emotions to survive successfully. As Audre Lorde expresses in *The Cancer Journal*, “What is there possibly left for us to be afraid of, after we have dealt face to face with death and not embraced it? Once I accept the existence of dying, as a life process, who can ever have power over me again?” (24) The pathos of the struggle and the fearlessness of death could be identified in Lorde’s writings.

In the contemporary circumstances cancer is considered as a prime reason for death and an important obstacle for the increasing life expectancy worldwide. As per the reports from the World Health Organization (WHO) in 2019, cancer is the first or second leading cause of death in 112 of 183 countries.

Women and disease have in itself a very long journey to trace. Women have always had to struggle both physically and psychologically in order to reach a point of success in life. But when accompanied by disease then it is a double challenge. Women have taken writing as a medium of expression in order to voice out the struggle encountered by them in various phases of life affected by disease in particular. In recent situation, we can identify women expressing their lived experiences through various literary forms of writings like autobiographies, Memoirs, Journals, Diaries, biographies etc.

Cancer victims like Susan Sontag, Audre Lorde, Susan Miller, Susan Gubar etc. have effectively explored the traumatic conflict with cancer through their literary works since 20<sup>th</sup> century under the umbrella of life writing. The passion for life and the fight for the successful conquering of life through various attempts of resistance, resilience and redemption could be identified in the memoirs of survivors. Cancer is considered as a word of fear and the focus on the balance of the entire system has been a sign of revitalisation.

The struggle that the victim encounters is a journey in search of life itself. This paper attempts to observe the journey of four Indian women writers, *Close to the Bone* by Lisa Ray a renowned model, *Healed* by Manisha Koirala a leading film actor, *Cancer with Love* by Neelam Kumar a motivational speaker and *Dying to be me* by Anita Moorjani, a consultant for multinational companies, who have successfully journeyed through the toughest corporeal phase of the disease 'cancer' and moved towards the transition of life for the finest of living.

Observations are made under three stages of the process of the disease diagnosis, then the treatment and finally the survival stage.

## DIAGNOSIS – QUEST FOR LIFE:

The fear and uncertainty generated in an individual during the time of diagnosis is the utmost traumatic and perplexing circumstance that navigates oneself into the ambiguity of life. As Manisha speaks about the time of diagnosis as, “C-A-N-C-E-R, I repeated the word incredulously. ‘How can I have cancer?’” (9) in her memoir *Healed* expresses the pain of acceptance of the disease. She being a leading actor in Indian Film Scenario, she claimed for herself that she was healthy, ate well and exercised well.

The fear of death encroaching the life of Manisha is well portrayed in the very first sentence of the book where she quotes, “I don’t want to die” (xi). Darkness is symbolically represented as engulfing her and cutting off the light and seeping into her to get settled at the pit of her stomach, evidently exposes the fear generated through diagnosis. Thoughts of uncertainty of life is observed in the words before she leaves for Mumbai for treatment from Kathmandu, her family home. “Will I be back to complete the task? ...Will I be here when the snow on the Himalayas begin to melt? Will I be ...at all? (15) Manisha did not wish to become a sorrow figure as she says, “The darkness of my fear was seeping into my bones now. But I did not want us to become a public spectacle” (19 ) Compassion for parents and family is inevitable while illness encroach, Manisha expresses the agony of her mother about her illness, when she says “I should have been protecting her in her old age instead of inflicting pain on her” (43).

The distancing of the self from one’s body, creating aversion towards oneself due to the disease, could be identified in the words of Manisha, “I looked down at myself in distaste. I had begun to feel my body did not belong to me. I was a caricature of what I once was”(43)

The fear of death and agony created due to the disease is well portrayed in the first phase of the work where Manisha is trying to console herself with the memories about the luxury of the past life. Manisha is also found to realise her passion for living, as she says, “No longer will I remain a passive observer. I will now become an active participant in my treatment, I decided (45).

“Fear crept in around us, warning that a shock waited around every corner”, as Moorjani portrays the fear to accept reality and to encounter the shock of the term Cancer. She also conveys that “the effects of chemotherapy frightened me even more. Every muscle tightened in a protective clamp and held onto life”, expresses the writer’s passion for life. But later fear disappears and the courage the cancer victims had to hold on to is specific in the words of Moorjani, as she says, “And I was no longer afraid of anything. I didn’t fear illness, aging, death, loss of money, or anything.”

After a painful episode of biopsy, Lisa Ray’s words, “I rested my head on my arms, my breathing jagged, thinking about how to turn this into a funny anecdote later” conveys the streaming of pathos added humour, which is often traced throughout in the work, *Close to the Bone*. She expresses that, “I was seeing all of this as a new adventure. I swear I even found the colonoscopy interesting.” (281). Lisa feels as if strength is restored, with the support of her father’s words, “Now that we know what’s wrong, we can fix it” (288). This helps her in creating an irrational optimism in spite of the doctor mentioning the disease as “serious situation...not curable...fatal”(285).

Though Lisa understands that the average survival rate of her illness is one to two years, it is with her optimism that she expresses, “ I still believe in multiple chances and second lives.”(289).

Neelam Kumar in *To cancer with love*, explores the various stages life when affected by cancer on the left breast. The fight and struggle that Neelam encountered in the process since prognosis is represented through a unique white snow flower Landashi, that blooms against all odds. Neelam, a young widow with two children, was diagnosed with cancer which was a shock for her, but with the help of her inner self whom she named Carol, helped herself to cope with her trials of cancer.

The quest for life could be observed in the writings of all the four writers but in four different ways, Manisha, through her strong faith and with the presence of her family at each step of the tough journey, Neelam with her courage and determination, Anita, with the experience that she had in the other realm through her Near Death Experience and Lisa with her boldness and optimism. Independently and boldly they handled pain and trauma to move into the toughest days of treatment and medication.

## TREATMENT - STRUGGLE WITH DEATH:

“So down he went into my hip with his electric drill over and over, while I sang ‘Hey Jude’ at the top of my lungs” (282), Lisa Ray explores the depth of pain in the process of the treatment, with her exposure to her vulnerability. Certain realisations about the self and one’s own body come across when she says, “I never knew that we have sensation inside our bones, they’re a part of the body we never touch.” (283) And the reaction of the body towards the un informed intruder is also visible in, “my bones were not ready for this full disclosure...The more the doctor drilled, the deeper the secret travelled” (283).

The pursuit for life and the search for healing could be observed through the path of Anita, in *Dying to be Me*, who meets several specialists of natural disciplines and of different healing modalities like hypnotherapy, meditation, prayers, Chinese herbal remedies and finally to Ayurveda and yoga. Chaotic situation of the mind and body added to the uncertainty of life and the various treatment methods lead to greater conflicts of the mind in the matter of food, treatment patterns creating a threat for survival itself.

The four oddities that occur as an after cause of steroids as mentioned by Lisa as “You will turn into a raging maniac...you are going to be bloat...you are hungry all the time...you get no sleep on steroids” (301), which are not specifically mentioned by doctors but are to be experienced, create a sense of both physical and mental traumas which accompanies the treatment process which was struggled and fought back by the survivors.

Neelam’s visit to the Tata memorial Cancer Hospital is an eye opener explaining true love which is unconditional and untiring. Taking a decision, saying that “From now on, the rest of my life is going to be the best of my life” (34). Neelam tries to fulfil all her dreams and live life completely, in spite of all the struggles she tackled with during her treatment and process of recovery.

As Manisha shares in her work about the tiresome process of treatment which makes her to fight against death after her surgery, “I was confused and my eyelids felt heavy. My mouth just couldn’t form the many questions I had. I looked up wearily” (67), conveys the immensity of the procedures of treatment that a victim overcomes due to cancer. “Was I going to live? Was I going to die? This statement of not knowing was the worst” (69), fighting with the mutilated body, Manisha struggles to come out with her questions between life and death.

The confidence of Lisa is evident in her words, “...it still didn’t occur to me that I could die. I will, of course, one day. But not now. And not from this blood cancer called multiple myeloma” (286). The experience and the power to face death appears unique according to a person’s mental strength, when she says “Life is unpredictable, so why should we react in predictable ways?” (288).



Though a strong woman, Lisa Ray, expresses her struggle to convince people around about her physical changes, as she encounters questions about her hair by the immigration officer as “what happened to your hair?”, her response was , “ I have cancer” and she was thus tagged as a ‘medical tourist’ (334).

Lisa asserted herself a fighter when she accepted that “small dehumanizing moments are part of the patient’s life. It was my responsibility to transform them, to find the humour and meaning in them. To survive” (312) more than a cancer warrior or a cancer fighter she realised of being a ‘Cancer Graduate’.

Physical trauma also represented fertility and reproduction crisis among women, which is experienced by Lisa when a nurse very bluntly spoke “If you want to have kids, you need to think about banking your eggs - now” (318).

The physical and mental trauma encountered by the diseased and the fight for fortune mission is seen successfully attained from their expressions.

### **SURVIVAL – CONQUEST OF LIFE:**

The near death experience of Moorjani, as she realises the detachment from all her loved ones and enter into the realm of unconditional love, as well as when she questions the physical bonding which humans cling on to throughout life as she experiences the near to death situation, as she says. “I felt free,liberated and magnificent! Every pain,ache,sadnessand sorrow was gone.I was completely unencumbered.” (5), Moorjani. The writer tries to realise the value of life after her cure that, “My life and my time here are much more valuable to me.”(111) Trust in oneself and through the internal guidance, and with the realisation that “i’m the centre of the great cosmic web that is the universe”(116), and if one is happy, the whole universe is happy, leads Moorjani to understand one’s magnificence and the connection to the Infinite.

The words of Manisha, as “we are Interconnected, Not Separate, We Are Powerful, Not Helpless” (188) conveys the successful realisation of conquering life by herself after all struggles. As she contributes to greater realisations, “Cancer is not a death sentence. There is hope” (183) and specifies cancer to be her teacher. She also effectively convinces that Cancer has made her work mindfully to create the best version of herself emotionally, spiritually and physically, as she says, “I grew to become the kind of person I would like to be with” (192), she also reflects on liking oneself which for her is the first step towards healing.

Steering forward in life, Manisha evaluates cancer to be a wakeup call to bring back harmony and health accompanied with the understanding of living mindfully in the ‘Here’and ‘Now’ which helps one to be more introspective to gain clarity, to be kind to oneself, to focus on change, especially to change the unhealthy habits ,to develop an attitude of gratitude, to develop positivity and to drop negativity, realising that we are not just our physical body and also realise the interconnectivity of the mind and the body, realising that humans are not only

connected to each other but also to all that is around us and also to accept death as a natural process of life. Cancer has evidently influenced Manisha to bring joy and to find joy in life not to be examined after death but as the belief of the ancient Egyptians that to be joyful in the present life itself.

Lisa realises that “Cancer was pushing me in the direction of saying what needed to be said and doing what needed to be done” (306). The whole process of diagnosis, treatment and struggle has helped Lisa to become more missioned as she says, “... a woman who knew her worth was not conditional on the shape of her body, her style, her racial identity, gender or face...swollen and relaxed and living with a serious cancer. I was also standing up for something that was meaningful...hijacking the spotlight to bring awareness to multiple myeloma” (311) this she considered as a greatest moment where we “go beyond who we think we are” (311).

The financial insecurity and the paper works that attach illness is something that is not overtly exposed. Lisa opens out in the form of writing and sharing experience frankly and transparently to the vulnerable who are to decide whether to feed the family or to pay for chemo. Creating awareness about the experience of enduring cancer was a part of the process. It was proven true when she received the prestigious Queen Elizabeth II Diamond Jubilee Medal in 2012, awarded by the Canadian government for her contribution in raising cancer awareness.

“The essence of being a warrior is this- the refusal to give up on anything or anyone” (311) becomes the real understanding of life for Lisa. Prioritising life and the needs and the intensity to understand the worthiness of one’s existence could be realised from Lisa’s final few words from *Close to the Bone*. “What do you care about most? / What matters? / Pursue that. / Forget the rest” (376).

The lines express the search and then the finding of the self that all the diseased realise finally after a long run of search, struggle and survival as the end of all struggles. “I was lost, but now am found” (377). The tough journey from diagnosis through treatment and finally towards the success of survival confirms a battle achieving triumph of life, concluding, “One cannot consent to creep when you are meant to fly” (342).

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