



Illness, Narrative, and the Ethics of Care: Medical Humanities in Indian Writing in English

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Abstract

Medical humanities examine the intersection of medicine, literature, philosophy, and culture in order to understand the human experience of illness. Indian Writing in English provides rich literary narratives that portray disease, healing, and the ethical responsibilities of care within complex social contexts. This paper explores how modern Indian writers represent illness not merely as a biological condition but as a cultural and philosophical experience. Through an analysis of works by Amitav Ghosh, Kavery Nambisan, and Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar, the study argues that Indian literary narratives expand the scope of medical humanities by foregrounding empathy, social inequality, and ethical responsibility. These narratives reveal how literature humanizes medicine and invites readers to reflect on suffering, dignity, and the moral dimensions of healing.

Keywords: medical humanities, indian writing in english, illness narratives, ethics of care, narrative medicine, social inequality, healing and compassion.

Introduction

The field of medical humanities has emerged as an important interdisciplinary area that seeks to bridge the gap between medical science and humanistic understanding. Medicine, while grounded in scientific knowledge, inevitably deals with experiences that are deeply emotional and philosophical: pain, vulnerability, mortality, and care. Literature offers a powerful medium through which these experiences can be explored and articulated. In Indian Writing in English, narratives of illness frequently reflect the social realities of the country—

poverty, rural healthcare challenges, colonial medical history, and the cultural meanings attached to disease. These narratives expand our understanding of medicine beyond hospitals and laboratories. They reveal the emotional and moral worlds of patients, caregivers, and doctors.

The American physician and literary scholar Rita Charon argues that narrative competence enables physicians “to acknowledge, absorb, interpret, and act on the stories and plights of others” (Charon 1897). Indian literary narratives similarly demonstrate that storytelling plays a crucial role in



understanding illness and healing. Through narrative, literature becomes an ethical space where suffering can be recognized and interpreted.

Colonial Medicine and the Politics of Disease

One important theme within medical humanities is the historical relationship between medicine and colonial power. Colonial medicine in India was not merely a scientific enterprise; it was also an instrument of governance and authority. This tension between medical knowledge and power is explored in the novel *The Calcutta Chromosome* by Amitav Ghosh. The narrative revolves around the discovery of the malaria parasite and the research conducted by British scientist Ronald Ross. However, Ghosh complicates the conventional story of scientific progress by introducing alternative narratives of indigenous knowledge.

The novel suggests that the official history of medical discovery often excludes the contributions of marginalized individuals. By reimagining the story of malaria research, Ghosh challenges the authority of colonial scientific narratives. The novel states that “history is not what happened but what is remembered” (Ghosh 71), implying that dominant institutions—including medical science—often control historical memory. Through this perspective, illness becomes not only a medical condition but also a political and epistemological issue. Literature thus exposes the power relations embedded in medical knowledge.

The Doctor as a Moral Agent

Another central theme in medical humanities concerns the ethical responsibilities of medical practitioners. Doctors occupy a unique position in society because their decisions directly affect human life and suffering. The writings of Kavery Nambisan offer a deeply personal insight into this ethical dimension of medicine. As a practicing surgeon, Nambisan has written extensively about the emotional complexities of medical practice. Her reflections reveal that the doctor-patient relationship is grounded not only in scientific expertise but also in empathy and trust.

In her medical memoir *A Luxury Called Health*, Nambisan observes that “health is often taken for granted until illness forces us to recognize its fragility” (Nambisan 12). This statement captures the philosophical insight that the human body is inherently vulnerable. Nambisan’s narratives emphasize that medical practice involves moral choices. Doctors must navigate conflicting pressures—limited resources, institutional constraints, and the expectations of patients. Literature allows readers to perceive the emotional burdens carried by healthcare professionals, thereby humanizing the figure of the doctor.

Illness and Marginalized Communities

Medical humanities also emphasize the social determinants of health. Illness does not occur in isolation; it is shaped by economic inequality, environmental conditions, and cultural beliefs. The works of Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar vividly portray these realities. In his novel *The Mysterious Ailment of Rupi Baskey*, Shekhar narrates the story of a young woman in a tribal village who suffers from a mysterious illness. The narrative explores how disease is interpreted within the cultural framework of the Santhal community.

Rather than presenting illness purely as a medical diagnosis, the novel reveals how social stigma, poverty, and gender inequality shape the experience of disease. The community struggles to understand Rupi’s illness, and her suffering becomes entangled with local beliefs and social tensions. Through such narratives, literature reveals how marginalized communities experience illness differently from those with access to modern healthcare systems. Medical humanities therefore highlight the importance of cultural sensitivity in medical practice.

Philosophical Perspectives on Illness

Indian literary traditions often approach illness from a philosophical perspective. The human body is seen not only as a biological entity but also as a site of existential reflection. Disease reminds individuals of the impermanence of life and the fragility of human



existence. This philosophical sensibility resonates with classical Indian thought, where suffering is considered an inevitable aspect of human life. Literary narratives transform illness into a means of exploring deeper questions about mortality, compassion, and ethical responsibility.

In many Indian texts, the act of caring for the sick becomes a moral duty. Compassion is presented as a fundamental human value that transcends professional obligations. Literature therefore invites readers to reconsider the meaning of healing—not simply as curing disease but as responding to suffering with empathy.

Narrative and Healing

Medical humanities emphasize the importance of narrative in the healing process. Patients often seek to make sense of their illness through storytelling. By narrating their experiences, they transform chaotic suffering into meaningful narratives. Indian literary works illustrate how storytelling can function as a form of psychological and emotional healing. When illness is articulated through narrative, it becomes part of a broader human experience rather than an isolated medical condition. Literature thus performs a therapeutic function. It allows readers to confront the realities of pain and vulnerability while also affirming the possibility of compassion and resilience.

Conclusion

Medical humanities reveal the profound connections between literature and medicine. In Indian Writing in English, narratives of illness illuminate the ethical, social, and philosophical dimensions of health and healing. Through the works of Amitav Ghosh, Kavery Nambisan, and Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar, literature demonstrates that medicine is not merely a scientific discipline but a profoundly human practice. These writers reveal how illness intersects with history, culture, and social inequality. Ultimately, medical humanities remind us that healing requires more than technical knowledge. It demands empathy, ethical reflection, and an awareness of the stories that shape human life. Literature therefore becomes an essential partner to medicine, enabling a deeper understanding of suffering, dignity, and care.

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