

Vol. 8, Issue-II (April 2017)

ISSN: 0976-8165

THE CRITERION

An International Journal in English

Bi-monthly, Peer-Reviewed, Open Access eJournal



UGC Approved Journal [Arts and Humanities, Sr. No. 40]

Editor-In-Chief - Dr. Vishwanath Bite

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ISSN 2278-9529

Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal

www.galaxyimrj.com

The New Citizenship: Reading Illness in Mark Doty's *Heaven's Coast*

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Article History: Submitted-05/04/2017, Revised-21/04/2017, Accepted-23/04/2017, Published-30/04/2017.

Abstract:

Illness has been an omnipresent entity which coexists with humanity. Every individual has his/her own experience of being ill or being with the ill at different points of their life. In a wider perspective, one could perceive illness as an innate human experience of symptoms and sufferings and to a greater extent a platform for self-discovery and spiritual aspirations. Mark Doty's *Heaven's Coast* is an investigation into different arenas of life captivated in the pool of illness. The work is entitled as a *Memoir*, where Doty narrates his real life experience with AIDS. The memoir begins with the inception of AIDS and its lengthening shadow over a comfortable relationship. The narration follows the shifting patterns in the lives of two people as illness takes hold. This paper attempts to analyze the techniques the author uses to narrativise illness.

Keywords: Illness, narratives, metaphors, AIDS, human relationships.

“Everyone who is born holds dual citizenship, in the kingdom of the well and in 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 2)

Reading ‘illness’, in an era of multifarious social circumstance is a painful endeavour. The word ‘illness’ in its primary sense stands for impairment of normal physical or mental functions, affecting a part or whole of an organism. Illness is one of the modes of our being in this world. Every individual has their own experiences of being sick and ill at different times in their life time. In other words illness coexists with the very humanity. Suffering from illness does not come to pass with one individual; it happens to every individual habitually during their lifetime. Illness is a universal condition, which happens to everyone, irrespective of nationality, race, colour and ethnicity. But, the way people approach, exhibit or resist illness differ from one individual to another. Human existence is in a complex and fragmented world and a variety of frameworks are used to represent the many ailments that one undergoes.

Diverse human conditions provide diverse meanings of illness. Illness, apart from its literal biological meaning, offers ample number of perceptions and connotations. Arthur Kleinman, a prominent American Psychiatrist, in his theoretical work, *The Illness Narratives*, views illness in a wider perspective, “by invoking the term illness, I mean to conjure up the

innate human experience of symptoms and sufferings. 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.” (3) Thus illness becomes part and parcel of human life and suffering. It moulds the thoughts of the society; manipulates gears of human life, invades people’s imagination and dwells in their memories. It occurs often in conversations of the sick and in the people that surround them. A person’s health and mental condition change according to the dictatorship of illness within him/her and mould lives, thoughts and creative processes. In a nutshell, illness more often reflects the society. Illness in its wider sense represents suffering, depression, pain, mortality, life and so on. On the other hand it also lays a hand on inter/intra personal human relationships, empathy, ethics and care. When illness holds its influence on human life, naturally it reflects in their literature, which in turn reflects human embeddedness with illness. A patient is not only an object of medical enquiry, but also a ‘narrator of suffering’. Some narrators can effectively represent the sufferings of the ill, but some cannot. This paper tries to understand how illness is represented in literature. The investigator here uses American author Mark Doty’s memoir *Heaven’s Coast* as a microcosm mirrors a larger macrocosm.

Mark Doty’s *Heaven’s Coast* is an investigation into different arenas of life captivated in the pool of illness. The work is entitled as a *Memoir*, where Doty narrates his real life experience with AIDS. The memoir begins with the inception of AIDS and its lengthening shadow over a comfortable relationship. The narration follows the shifting patterns in the lives of two people as illness takes hold. Doty and his gay lover Wally Roberts had a solid and satisfying relationship over a period of eight years, but misery entered their relationship after Wally had tested positive for the Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV). In the introduction, he dedicates the memoir to everyone who lived their life in association with AIDS. He pronounces, “This book is for every men and women living with AIDS, for every men and women gone, for anyone who is loved them.” (Doty 6)

Theoretical assistance is necessary for a better understanding while analysing illness narratives. Susan Sontag, an American writer and critic, has written two theoretical treatises on illness; *Illness as Metaphor* (1978) and *AIDS and Its Metaphors* (1989). These works are based on her personal experience, academic research and non-academic observations. She tries to dissolve the mystery and myths related to illness. Many metaphors are surrounded to illness. Sontag drew some metaphorical images related to cancer, AIDS, Tuberculosis and Syphilis. These metaphors play a major role in the social understanding and observation of a disease. In the beginning of her work *Illness as Metaphor*, Sontag gives a metaphoric image of the illness. She considers illness as the night side of life and as the citizenship of the other world. Sontag puts forward, “Illness is the night-side of life, a more onerous citizenship. Everyone who is born holds dual citizenship, in the kingdom of the well and in 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.” (2) These two works of Sontag laid enormous influence on the thought process of medical professionals and in the lives of the ill and their caretakers. Even

though she uses many metaphors in her works, she actually dedicates her works to liberate illness from metaphoric thinking. She argues that metaphoric thinking of illness creates prejudices and stigma in the minds of the reader. She says about her intention in writing her theories on illness, “it is towards the elucidation of those metaphors, and a liberation from them, that I dedicate this enquiry.” (4)

The memoir reflects on the responses of the writer and his lover to illness; the ways they perceived, suffered and lived with AIDS. The memoir holds different layers of reading illness. At the same time the author reads illness as a source of grief and suffering as well as a promising hope for redemption in future. Doty starts his writing, stimulated by the sense of loss or by a current of grief but later the shift in thought happens and he portrays death as a ‘liberator’ from sufferings. Arthur W. Frank classifies these kinds of narration as ‘Quest narrations’ in his theoretical work *The Wounded Storyteller*. In quest narrations, the narrator accepts illness as an absolute reality and derives wisdom by experiencing illness as a means for spiritual quest. Quest narration ascends to a philosophical level of reading illness and accepts illness as a new way of understanding the world. Doty, in the memoir, considers pain as “the essential part of our spirit’s education” and as a “teacher.” Quest narration interprets illness as a source of anticipation for spiritual enlightenment. The narration is filled with both subjective and objective accounts by the author. As a fellow sufferer, a caretaker of Wally and as a witness to his sufferings, the narration shows the subjective and objective reflections of the author. The study, here, tries to analyse Mark Doty’s narration and the methods he used to narrativise illness.

Susan Sontag, in her theoretical work *Illness as Metaphor*, condemns the metaphoric thinking of illness. She says, “...illness is not a metaphor, and the most truthful way of regarding illness-and the healthiest way of being ill – is one most purified of, most resisted to, metaphoric thinking.” (2) According to Sontag, metaphoric portrayal of illness creates prejudices in the minds of the reader. Metaphors mystify illness and create phony notions in the psyche of the society. Sontag persuades her reader to be devoid of metaphoric thinking of illness in order to avoid prejudices. But Doty has a different opinion about thinking and understanding illness by utilizing metaphors as a vehicle. An ample number of metaphors have been used in the construction of his memoir, *Heaven’s Coast*. Doty contradicts Sontag’s reading of metaphors, for him “metaphor is a way of knowing the world, and no less a one than other sorts of ways of gaining knowledge....metaphoric thinking a sort of work artist do to apprehend their reality, be some function of the mind, applied in somewhat different way.”(15) Doty uses metaphors as an effectual device to express the complex patterns of human reality.

Doty, in the memoir, metaphorically visualises AIDS as a “darkly spreading bruise-coloured tattoo.” (51) He observes AIDS as a dark ‘ink’ which is gradually spreading on the outline of Wally’s body. The metaphor shows the characteristics of AIDS which gradually arrest the physical activities of its victim. To describe the HIV virus, Doty uses two important metaphors in the memoir: metaphor of a solvent and of a stain. The virus is like a solvent because it dissolves the future of the sick; the solvent which also dissolves the health and hope of

the patient. The stain metaphor goes with the traditional 'Pollution' metaphor associated with AIDS. The HIV virus pollutes or stains the body of the affected. The metaphor shows the popular perception of HIV virus as a pollutant or as a contaminator. A third metaphor is used to understand AIDS as an 'intensifier', which makes things more intense than what they already are. The disease has the capacity to intensify whatever exists in the life of the diseased. AIDS has the ability to intensify the hope in a person and at the same time, it is also capable of intensifying despair. AIDS as an intensifier, "makes more generous and terrified, more cranky and afraid, more doubtful or more trusting, more contemplative and more in fight." (7) 'Irradiation' metaphor, in the memoir, reveals the exposing characteristics of radiation lights. When colourless minerals are exposed to radiation it shows different colours and characteristics. Doty compares the radiation lights with illness; when a person is exposed to the lights of illness it reveals a cluster of colours like torture, grief, suffering, chaos and so on.

The Prologue of the memoir is immediately followed by a chapter entitled 'Coastal Studies.' This chapter purely focuses on the author's metaphorical analysis of illness employing the elements of a sea shore. Doty utilizes the faculty of close observation, while he uses the metaphoric images of both animate and inanimate objects of the coastal region. A sea shore is a peculiar place where two entirely different habitats or life systems are linked together into a natural whole. The land on one side and aqua on the other join to form a new kind of eco-system. Doty uses the sea creatures 'seals' as a personal metaphor to explain Wally's state of illness. He uses the possessive pronoun 'my' to address the seals as 'my seal.' He describes the seals "seals are coastal creatures citizens of two elements." (14) Seals are adapted to living in two different topographies – in water as well as in land. It is this adaptability of seals that inspired the author to form the images of a dual identity. A seal on a shore metaphorically represents a patient's state of being ill. As the sand restricting the smooth locomotion of seals, illness restricts freedom or confines the patient into his sick bed. The sea acts as a liberator for seals. The water enables them to move smoothly and freely without any restrictions. Here Doty considers illness as a disabling agent and death as a liberator of sufferings. He believes, that, after death the spirit breaks out from the physical body of suffering and dissolves into the nature's vital energy. Death offers new horizons to a person. He enters into a new realm of identity which is not known to mortals. "The wounded one's gone free, gone swimming into what is familiar with no mortals." (15)

Doty's comparison 'citizens of two elements' and Sontag's idea of 'dual passport', bring into being the same idea of dual phases of human life. The first phase is of being hale and hearty; the other being the sick. Sontag presents the second phase – the phase of being sick, as a phase of suffering and chaos. But Doty elevates these thoughts to a higher grade by considering the phase of illness as a spiritual guide and a liberator.

The attack of illness is represented in the memoir using the metaphor of hunger. Hungry gulls and other predatory animals attack the flesh of seals and dolphins lying defenseless on the sea shore. The wounds and the imprinted foot marks of gulls on the flesh symbolize the

aggressive nature of AIDS. Gradually the amount of flesh in the body gets reduced and the skin shrinks to form a cover for the heap of bones. Wally's body also suffers gradual decay in course of time. He suffers because of paralysis and later it renders him into a state of immobility. Like the hungry gulls AIDS gradually eats Wally's freedom of movement. The wheel chair, which Wally hates to see and use, becomes a symbolic representation of losing control of bodily activities. The body becomes increasingly unable to cooperate with the command of his will. Wally being confined to his bed becomes an undeniable evidence of AIDS. The animal metaphors and the metaphor of hunger together form a logical corollary, to elucidate the makeovers made by illness in human body.

Along with animal metaphors and sea metaphors, Doty makes use of some 'season metaphors.' From older days itself man had always related the different phases of life with the seasonal changes in nature. Doty compares years of Wally's illness to an 'avalanche', towards the end of a winter season. Like the snow that goes on to melt out from an avalanche, little by little, during the end of winter season, Wally too loses his senses by responding gradually to the deathly course the disease takes. Doty metaphorically compares the lingering end of a season with the gradual surrendering of a patient to AIDS. Doty uses the expression to show season 'snow out more snow' to denote the loosing sensation and responses in Wally. Doty also compares his subjective suffering; the suffering resulted from 'anticipation of grief' by witnessing the agony of his partner with the winter season. He addresses his internal suffering as the 'darkest of winters' and he wishes for a break out of his sufferings like a man who wishes for sunlight in cold rough winter. He says, "I have the desire to be filled with sunlight, to sock my skin in as much of it as I can drink up, after the long interior darkness of this past season, the indoor vigil, in the hardest and darkest of winters, outside and in." (27) Doty uses season metaphors as a perfect vehicle to communicate the characteristics of illness.

Doty's work tries to derive meaning for life from the sense of memory. The entire incidents in the memoir are narrated in forward momentum of a current of grief which had resulted from the death of Wally that happened in the past. The recollected events from memory are the major reference source for the narration. This stands for the past moments that have accumulated in the memory with the sick as well as with sickness act as a source of influence in the present. The unheard voice of the dead is reflecting in the narration. Doty remarks, "I'm speaking with my lover's tongue, I am speaking for the dead I carry in me, I will make sure they will head." (87) The sense of memory abridges the gap between the past and the present. In a way, the moments Wally and Doty shared in the past, with or without AIDS echoes in the narration through the recollection of old memories. The recollection of memory gains metaphorical significance when it merges with the writer's imagination. He relates his memory with things his senses capture from the surroundings. A writer dissolves, dissipates, rearranges and relates his sense of memory in order to narrate his state of being with AIDS.

Care holds an important position in the lives of the sick. It is care that enables the sick to dream of a distant cure. But in the case of an AIDS patient, he suffers social segregation and

marginalization. The society looks at AIDS as a disease of immoral life style, a life devoid of any sort of morals. AIDS patients are treated as second grade citizens in the society; they become twice marginalized if they are practitioners of homosexuality. To put it into Susan Sontag's words, when people came into discussion about diseases like AIDS "everybody drops into a shy, evasive, glassy-eyed manner of speech." (Sontag 7) People are embarrassed to acknowledge or discuss AIDS in a public sphere. AIDS has a negative acceptance in the society as the comfort of care hardly reaches an AIDS patient. In the memoir Doty is the sole caretaker for Wally. They live in isolation far away from the mainstream society. Doty introduces animals as substitute caretakers for human beings. Wally's heart desired a new dog which would lick his face and sleep next to him. The thought came to Wally as a manifestation of his inner desire to love and to be loved. In the final days of his life Wally desperately wants companionship and care, and dogs are the only creatures, unlike human, that could provide altruistic companionship.

Issues such as the fear of impending death, distress, traumatic outlook on life come as a result of suffering. They were unleashed in the dreams of the characters of this memoir. Dreams are the extensions of human wishes and anxieties; it demonstrates the complex responses of human psyche. The characteristics of illness, the pain it creates both physically and psychologically has been narrated in the memoir using 'dreams' as a vehicle. Our being in this world puts us into a threat when a disease defeats the body and soul. When illness coexists with our lives its sinister shadow reflects in every sphere of our being. Doty muses on a dream which gives him horrified feelings consistently. He constantly used to see in his dreams a sudden death or loss of their pet dog Arden. Doty foresees the dream as 'future's dark vessel', because he knows that Arden is not more than a symbol, which indicates Wally's state of sickness. The dream is an outcome of witnessing the agony of Wally. The illness which prevails in Wally is capable of dissolving the future of both. The 'dark vessel' indicates the impending sufferings which come as an aftermath of sickness. Dreams become a nightmare for Doty, he says, "I'd wake up in horror, afraid to sleep because I was afraid the dream would start again." (62) The dream here reveals a sense of anticipation or expectation of death. The moment AIDS enters into the lives of people they start anticipating an impending death at their door steps. The social conviction regarding AIDS is always associated with death. The society expects a contiguous death when it looks into the eyes of an HIV patient. Even the close relatives or partners of an HIV patient follow this popular norm of the society. The grief, which comes as a result of witnessing the suffering of the sick, conceals a sense of anticipation for death in it. Doty sates about his grief, "The grief which seeps over me is the grief of anticipation. It is a grief in expectation of grief-expecting death of the partner." (8) But Wally's dreams possess a different dimension. He dreams of himself as a 'traveller' who travels to an unknown realm where he finds a group of people playing cards. In his dream he fancies the place as a room between heaven and earth. He sees his good old father there who had died fifteen years back. Wally in his dream feels so happy and reassured to see his father again but, the good old man persuades Wally to get back home. Wally's dream indicates his mental reflections on life and death and life after death. These dreams are stimulated in the minds of the sufferers by illness, thereby

becoming the interpreters of illness. Wally's dreams suggest two choices for him: either struggle with the disease to live or give up the struggle to die. But Doty does not want Wally to give up his hope. He needs Wally in good spirit in order to fight the disease. However, the dreams at the same time become the symbol of loss and the symbol of hope.

After illness enters into their lives, Doty remarks everything that they have encountered with has given them an insight about the metaphorical relations with illness. For example, the things which Doty had come across at the sea shore such as, the seals, dolphins and gulls-generate a metaphoric thought processing in his mind. Most of the images and symbols the writer uses in this memoir in some way or other relates to illness. A good cluster of appropriate vocabulary is used to demonstrate the intensity of the disease. Doty brings into play some biblical allusions and terminologies, and makes use of these terminologies to address the illness. Words like 'dooms day' and 'apocalypse' are often used in the memoir to elucidate the tragic side of AIDS. In his descriptions of old buildings in the memoir Doty provides the reader the same concept of relating buildings and illness. After the death of Wally Doty decides to visit some places where they had spent their happiest moments in the past. He visits their old apartment at 115 Beacon Street, Boston. He witnesses a diminishing antique building, which once stood as a paradise for gay couples. The writer describes the house as 'a house of no one.' The phrase 'house of no one' holds a dual level of interpretation. At the surface level, the building is 'a house of no one' because, after Wally's death when the writer visits the house, a few people are found living there, in poverty and obscurity. Their lives and the old building are invisible in the midst of the busy rustic life in Boston. To a deeper level the phrase 'house of no one' stands for the isolated and marginalized part of the society. The house was a dwelling place for gay men and many gay relations flourished as well as deteriorated under its roof. So many men spent their last days of their life inside the house, affected with AIDS and with several ailments that came after it. The society sees people with sexually transmitting diseases as polluters; these people are placed on the fringes of the society. People with AIDS are invisible to the eyes of the society; they are 'no one'; Doty addresses such perceptions of a society by exercising phrases like 'house of no one.' The antique building symbolically represents the degenerating characteristics of AIDS. The building stands as an epitaph inscribed stone with the past memories of the dead. Doty muses over the building as a 'tomb stone'. He says, when a tenant of the building opens one of the old rooms for him, "He opens the heavy black door with his key, and suddenly I am almost overcome by a sense of wonder and strangeness. It is as if he was opening the gate of a tomb, some ancient place, little disturbed, still containing the artefacts left with the dead." (21) The degeneration that happened to the building also marks the degeneration in the lives of its inmates.

The memoir dedicates a brief space for the oriental philosophical readings on illness. Indian mythology considers Lord Siva as the god of 'samhara' (destruction and dissolution). Indian philosophy says that, if Siva can wipe out everything, he is also capable of destroying our pains and sufferings. If god gives us the ailment he also gives the strength to cope with it. Doty

mentions this philosophy in one of the statements in the memoir. He says, "A prayer to Siva, god of destruction and dissolution; if the forces of the world dissolves what we love, then they also dissolves tension, pain and difficulty." (43) The oriental attitude towards illness possesses a colouring of spirituality. They consider illness as a means for spiritual quest. The philosophy accepts illness as a reality and ascends to a higher level of philosophical thought, where they consider illness as a guru or as a liberator.

A vast number of techniques have been used in this memoir to narrativise illness. The animal metaphors and sea metaphors serve as a perfect vassal to narrate the intensity of AIDS sufferings. The metaphors of ancient buildings and dreams indicate a sense of isolation and loss of mental and physical responses. It artistically portrays the conflict between past memory and present being of the author. The memoir narrates suffering at two levels; it shows the suffering of the AIDS patient and also shows the sufferings of the people bound with the patient. The author is not narrating the memoir as a direct witness, but in recollection of his memory after the death of the patient, his lover. The narration came out as a result of recollection of memory; a series of thoughts seems to have invaded into the mental realm of the author while he was constructing his work. He had simultaneously made use of his past memories and present experiences. This clearly indicates his past memories with the disease and his present observations after the death of Wally, overlaps or in a way fastens together to form a novel kind of narration. He compares, relates or reconstructs his past memories with whatever he perceives from the surroundings in the present. As a result, one can find a handful of metaphorical and symbolic representations of illness. Doty uses objects – both animate and inanimate, to construct or to support his acquaintance with illness. Thus the memoir could be read as a well-constructed and well narrativised work on illness.

A reading or examination of illness narratives does not hub on a particular disease like AIDS. Older days, the world had perceived illness as a biological phenomenon. But today illness has gained recognition in relation with the social phenomena and the totality of its milieu. It is true that the presence of illness is ubiquitous; it also proves that illness has the ability to transform the self of its victims in many dimensions. The shifted selves in patients and in people surrounded them articulates their experience with the illness. Some narrators narrate the miserable side of illness, some others narrate the spiritual or liberating side of illness. Illness in a broader sense represents suffering, misery, hopelessness, pain, mortality, life and so on. On the other hand it also lays a hand on human relationships and also in values like empathy, ethics and care. When illness holds its influence on human life, naturally it mirrors in their literature, which in turn reflects human embeddedness with illness. To concise, illness narratives interrogate the different ways in which the sick people differentiate, resist or live with illness. But to put the misery or experience into a framework is not an easy affair. To give voice to the suffering of the ill is easier said than done. A narration should face the complexities of popular experiences of illness, technical and medical exonerations and complexities of human emotions and psyche. A writer or a narrator have to transform his/her personal experience with illness in terms of

language; for that he/she has to find the suitable vocabulary, symbols and images that suits the expression in mind. The emotional distress which the illness initiated in the minds of the laid up could flow out only through their sharing or narrations. A sick body and a frustrated psyche create a new identity and when it comes to illness narrations this identity speaks. Storytelling repairs the derelict psyche of the ill by creating an empathic bond between the narrator and listeners. Thus story telling turn out into a reconstruction process that renovates the scattered identities of the ailing flock.

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