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## **The Art of Sickness: A Reading of Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis***

**Neha Mishra\***

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**Abstract:** The study taken here is an attempt to understand illness or sickness beyond medicine, as an art, taking account of the most prominent variables at operation. The paper advocates the utility of critical humanities to understand the sickness and enhance the meaning of medicine, per se.

The paper would analyse and attempt to understand the peculiar case of Gregory Samsa, a symbol of a disgusting sickness. He is the protagonist of Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* (1915) who is transformed into gigantic insect overnight and is a subject of curiosity, indifference, disgust, hatred and is murdered in time. The story does not only discuss Mr. Samsa's metamorphosis rather it also displays the metamorphosis of those who surround him as his family, as his caregiver, the informal nurses; those who finally bring an end to his life. The paper draws a comparison between Mr. Samsa's art and those who suffer diseases like leprosy and are abandoned on the ghats of Varanasi by their family members, if not murdered, to beg and to die. And there are other such diseases which are subject of similar disgust, like AIDS, in the movie *Dallas Buyer Club* (2015), the protagonist Woodroof is outcasted as it is revealed that he is an HIV+ and the agony is no different for the sexy masculine cowboy of Dallas, Texas who is the also the protagonist of the pathography.

The paper attempts to understand the metamorphic power of the art called sickness, as it functions on its subject and those who surround him, as its meaning, literally and metaphorically forms a narrative of multiple categories of sickness, entailing various contours of existence.

**Keywords:** Art, Artist, Sickness, Meaning, Nursing

### **The Art and the Artist**

The art of sickness, like any art exudes a meaning, it is a comprehensive metaphor of moral or ethical or social projection and

a metonymy which conducts on the grounds of existential questions raised throughout ones' life and in the process of death. Sickness is more of what it becomes than what it is. Keats who lost his life to an exotic disease, that disease becomes exotic in time. Cancer, as correctly coroneted by Siddhartha Mukherjee as the 'Emperor of all Maladies', earned its emperor status when an uncountable number of people suffered and died in the hands of the emperor. It is never the first case or the first day of sickness that it emerges with its full inglorious panache instead like a painting in the frame or like a thought in literary head, it grows but unlike a painting or literary thought it doesn't develop to enhance the art contained within but the art of sickness transforms its subject and the ultimate metamorphosis can be seen, which is metaphorically meaningful but is just not a metaphor of reality or language but it is also what it is to what it becomes.

As stated by Susan Sontag in *Illness as Metaphor and AIDS and its Metaphors*:

Any important disease whose causality is murky, and for which treatment is ineffectual, tends to be awash in significance. First, the subjects of deepest dread (corruption, decay, pollution, anomie, weakness) are identified with the disease. The disease itself becomes a metaphor. Then, in the name of the disease (that is, using it as a metaphor), that horror is imposed on other things. The disease becomes adjectival. Something is said to be disease-like, meaning that it is disgusting or ugly. (Sontag 58)

Experiencing the art, as a connoisseur or a viewer is remarkably different from the artist itself. The artist is the indulgent one, the intoxicated, similarly, the sick has overwhelming attributes, no one may teach her sickness but she must learn to embellish the unlearned, the undesired art. The indulgence can be maddening, chaotic or inspirational. Franz Kafka wrote to his dear friend Max Brood on 24th September, 1917 "The morality is perhaps the last consideration, not even the last, the blood is the first and the second and the last. The question is how much passion is there, how much time it will take, for the walls of the heart to be pounded thin, that is if the lungs do not give out before the heart."

Kafka, though suffering, is inspired in passion to continue with his heart. There is little sense of complaint and higher sense of verve which,

even it is to die, the fear is romanticized; and the life is somewhere between the medical matter-of-fact and the intimate suffering as recreational as Tolkien fantasy. *The Metamorphosis* (1915) is the reflection of the middle passage. It can very well be viewed in hints of David Lynch's abstract work but the story defines 'Kafkaesque' and almost all kinds of illnesses with the potential to kill, are Kafkaesque, in the frame, or in the skill of the art while the artist has right to be rational, rebellious or romantic. Keats, for whom a thing of beauty is joy forever, was marred by his terminal illness, but his poems subtly carved from the log of his illness which burdened his soul, are defiantly exuding beauty in this century. He was sick and he was sad, as observed in the letter to Charles Brown on 20th November, 1820, he writes:

There is one thought enough to kill me – I have been well, healthy, alert & etc, walking with her – and now – the knowledge of contrast, feeling for light and shade, all that information (primitive sense) necessary for a poem are great enemies to the recovery of the stomach.

This lets the observer contemplate over the idea if the art of sickness and its progression can be the muse in veil, the necessary and the unwanted muse. Can a disabled health is the agent of creative ability? Gregory Samsa, as he concludes that he cannot go to work anymore, commence a mission of introspection and of 'looking around'

Gregor had an opportunity to test the power of the decisions he had just made, for his. He remembered his family with deep feeling and love. In this business, his own thought that he had to disappear was, if possible, even more decisive than his sister's. He remained in this state of empty and peaceful reflection until the tower clock struck three o'clock in the morning. (*The Metamorphosis* 71)

Illness, at its best performs the finality of its art, that's the extremities of suffering .It has performed its rituals and torments and transformation has taken place within the soul of the artist and her 'being' as a body has been metamorphosed, and medical sciences along with societal perception, in symbols and in process, has contributed to the final outcome, -the painting ready to be auctioned in the world gallery, and the bidding would consist of sympathy, mourning, disgust, disrespect and everything else.

## **Sick Men Tell No Tales**

A disease is a meticulous course of sickness, not an event of pain. The suffering is a consistent line of evolution catering to the disease or sickness. The sense of suffering is the ghost which everyone can talk about but only those who have seen it would know the real face of it. There is no language, no narrative style which may tell the tale of the suffering. No signifier is capable enough to sustain a sign to express the signified, in the most judicious way. Without proper metaphor, the illness remains a public secret, for its best benefit. Sontag observes that

My point is that illness is not a metaphor, and that the most truthful way of regarding illness—and the healthiest way of being ill—is one most purified of, most resistant to, metaphoric thinking. (Sontag 3)

In the lack of the metaphor, the sick silently suffers and uses an insufficient language to speak about it, trying to express the agony of illness but since his suffering cannot be translated, it is mutilated in medical jargons, social meaning and health insurance. However, these projections dare not enter the territory where a cancer patient waits to die with a mouth full of blisters reminding her next day chemotherapy appointment or in the heart of the young boy who sees his body decay because of leprosy. For everyone Gregory Samsa turned into a gigantic insect but Gregor Samsa was the only one to know the retribution of his physical structure and the testament of his soul when he realized his metamorphosis and anticipated that he is to be killed by the family who once loved him. He was a creature, a sheer abjection which has to tolerated indignantly until eliminated. His family has no retaliation to their response and the treatment given to him as the cleaning lady response to the situation is extremely appropriate as she develops an indifferent loathing for the object who once was the master of the house, the Mr. Gregory Samsa, as she goes on to act as "She pulled open the door of the bedroom and yelled in a loud voice into the darkness, 'Come and look. It's kicked the bucket. It's lying there, totally snuffed!" (*The Metamorphosis* 72)

Gregor Samsa, the son and the brother who was such a joy and protector to his family, lost his identity to his condition. He was no more a human entity. He became 'It'. His identity had to be reconstructed according to the condition he was in. It is not an exaggeration to conclude like a name, profession, ethnicity and nationality, sickness or

illness has a fair share in the construction of one's identity; like all other elements of identity, it has the capability to influence the other elements.

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. (Sontag, 2)

However, the tragic truth is the lack of the voice which could let the illness reveals its conundrum. While Critical Humanities survive in obscurity, it is hard to acknowledge if the passage of suffering has been acknowledged beyond the societal norms and the meanings attached to it. In the text of *The Metamorphosis*, as he wakes up remotely flabbergasted in as a 'monstrous verminous bug' (*The Metamorphosis* 2) and interrogates to himself 'What's happened to me,' (*The Metamorphosis* 2), the question has remained unanswered in last hundred years because Gregor Samsa never told what happened to him but the world knew him as he was perceived by his family or other acquaintances, not as he knew himself.

The following passage well illustrates his alienation and sister's perception of Gregor not being Gregor and also why he should not, could not and must not be Gregor. It might simply be his sister's view of life, of her brother or the meaning of attached to his condition.

It must be gotten rid of,' cried the sister; 'That is the only way, father. You must try to get rid of the idea that this is Gregor. The fact that we have believed for so long, that is truly our real misfortune. But how can it be Gregor? If it were Gregor, he would have long ago realized that a communal life among human beings is not possible with such an animal and would have gone away voluntarily. Then we would not have a brother, but we could go on living and honour his memory. (*The Metamorphosis* 69)

Is it not what happens with countless people who suffer leprosy especially women?

They face significant problems during treatment, which often lasts a full year. They do not have intercourse at all due to the fear of contagion, are kept distant from loved ones, and both spouses sleep in separate beds. Also, most of the leprosy-affected women are

abandoned or sexually abused by their husbands even after treatment. (van't Noordende et al. 2016)

This lack of voice has been questioned in the movie *Dallas Buyer Club* (2015), when Woodroof is diagnosed with AIDS and is given thirty days to live. He explores his way to his treatment and prolongs his life for seven years by refusing to take AZT, which is a legal, government-approved drug instead he sustains himself on unapproved drug which he smuggles from Mexico. Woodroof, is rarest of the rare who risks going beyond doctors' words and advice. The story also deals with the other societal inference of AIDS, as in 80s the disease was contextualised with homosexuality, so Woodroof, a man dying with fatal disease, is an 'alleged' homosexual and soon evicted from his job and home.

The sick person has a few responsibilities as the one who is sick, which is to be sick and look sick, follow advice and receive the sympathy or disgust which enables the society to feel responsible and good about its norms and behavioural codes. In the Sitcom, *Sex and the City*, (1998-2004), Samantha Jones suffers with breast cancer, while the chemotherapy is on, she loses her hair and wears a wig during a support event which she throws off as the heat builds and delivers a powerful speech (Ep. 16, Season 6) but she ends up stating no experience of suffering though her suffering is omnipresent.

It is a dreadful question to ask that how should this absence of the sick man's tale be perceived, if it is necessary to sustain or just natural, if this absence is detrimental to the art of sickness or it is causing a wilderness to the suffering of the sick, is it even possible to find a metaphor for the suffering? In any case, the truth is the existence of the 'suffering', of Gregor Samsa, of Woodroof, of Samantha and other billions of people.

### **The Aporia of the Art**

Sickness, as an art is art because it is transformative. The patient is the artist, the skill of art and the art itself. The aporia of this sadistic art lies in the agreement between the sick and sickness. The sick that has no intent to fall sick, falls sick and performs its responsibility to the unwelcomed guest in the best possible manner. The condition she never wanted is the condition which is her all-time engagement and the area of darkness which lights the direction of her life. Her responsibility to her sickness has made her irresponsible to all other elements of life, the aporia rules. For her it is just not the moment of undecidability, but it is

undecided if she can decide or not, to be sick or not to be sick, because if she chooses a cure, the question would be what is a cure anyway? Since the cancer recur, HIV refuses to be thrown out of the system, geographical tongue has no cure and the next day lies uncertain, anticipating suffering even after the cure. Every moment of a growing life is moment of growing death, the aporia is to call life, the death or calling death, the life, Gregor Samsa concludes the convulsions of his truth,

But Gregor did not have any notion of wishing to create problems for anyone and certainly not for his sister. He had just started to turn himself around in order to creep back into his room, quite a startling sight, since, as a result of his suffering condition, he had to guide himself through the difficulty of turning around with his head, in this process lifting and banging it against the floor several times. (*The Metamorphosis* 69)

### **The Care (?)**

The nursing industry is thriving. However, the first (supposedly) caregivers are the family members. The general truth conveys that the family is the well-wisher and their care is an act of pure love, it cannot be denied that the conception of pure love, if not in all cases but many, is a societal idea, based on human emotions, the idea of love for a sick man turns into a vivid social projection attached to the sickness in context. The 'pure love' experienced by a cancer patient is certainly different from an AIDS patient.

However, there are two aspects of this care, the one which slowly transforms into obligation, indifference, disgust and a desperation to get rid of but the other where it is substantially the result of 'pure love' and care, nursing back to good health brings relief but if the patient dies, the death can bring depressive bouts, and the caregiver is haunted like the hell hath no fury.

The other form of caregiver is the professional ones, those who are commercially involved in the process and are less conceptual about the emotional business but are extremely efficient and skilled. It is hard to accept or deny if they develop an emotional connect with a patient or the patient over time do so but they certainly go beyond realms of the hypocritical oath on occasions as Susie Monahan in the movie *Wit* (2001), when she announces 'no code' as the professor collapses and



tries to save her from the elongated agony of cancer. The other horizon which cannot be neglected is the professional nursing served to mental illness. Their job is certainly very different from the others in the profession as it requires much more than physical skills. The job is to reach the alternative universe in which the patient resides and infer it for the purpose of nursing.

The art of sickness owes its debt to nursing, as it is not only an outcome of social projection but also an element in the formation of the social projection and calibrates meaning. As capricious the nature of nursing, varied we see its influence in the social structure of illness. A sick person evidently feels better when she receives love and the care caused by it, it engages the will to get better, a space to share her romance with the disease like a teenage girl; the art is simply different but when there is less love but more disgust, the sick person resigns in defeat, the romance becomes a self-sabotage and death signs like hope or fantasy as seen in the case of Gregor Samsa. His mother desires and deliberates to get rid of him as well and as he sense the boredom of his life, the autonomy of his body which has disfigured his being is more unusual and his very own disgusted self, is the only entity in existence which belongs to him. All his love is lost. It reflects as "In any case, no one paid him any attention. The family was all caught up in the violin playing". (*The Metamorphosis* 64,)

The formal nursing contribution to the art of sickness primarily looks at the material cost involved in it. The more cash flows, better the nursing grows and simpler it is to bear the pain it fails to reduce. The green bills has the power to influence the artist but not as much as the informal caring can but it affects the finality of the art, determining the quality of the frame or the pages, the ink or the printer.

### **The Consolation**

It is important that illness now be understood with the help of other disciplines along with medicines. With the advent of post-modern realities, the metanarratives are unfolding its layers for other realities to appear and surface. Similarly, illness resides in the darkness and lights where medicine cannot reach. Medicine must seek new meaning and transcend its boundaries it place beyond biochemical combination and look at sickness the art no one wants to create but everyone does.

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\* Research Scholar, Dept. of English  
Banaras Hindu University, Varanasi, India  
[nehamishraraj03@gmail.com](mailto:nehamishraraj03@gmail.com)