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Health, Illness, Vulnerability and Care within Heterotopia: A Study of Select Fiction Set in Hospitals

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Abstract: Health Humanities is a pioneering field of study in literature which sheds light on how the medical practices are depicted in works of art. The way in which care is administered, the portrayal of illness and vulnerability comes under the context of Health Humanities. The paper is an earnest attempt to analyse the different factors that comprises Health Humanities by placing it against the backdrop of heterotopia. Heterotopia is a concept brought forward by Michel Foucault which refers to a space that is at the same time existing in a given society but has a unique and somewhat inverted existence within the society. The heterotopia chosen for the current study is a hospital. The selected texts include *Coma* by Robin Cook and *Doing Harm* by Kelly Parsons. Even though a hospital is very much connected to Health Humanities, the paper tries to delve deeper into the nuances of health, care, illness and vulnerability within hospital. Illness and vulnerability of the patients can be seen as a parallel to the care and treatments provided by the doctors and health professionals. The relationship between doctors, patients and bystanders is taken into account. The paper tries to show the spatial-temporal aspects that affects the psyche of the people who are present in the heterotopia of hospital.

Keywords: *Health, Care, Illness, Vulnerability, Heterotopia, Hospital*

Introduction

Health Humanities or Medical Humanities in literature is a field which explores various ways in which the question of health and care is depicted in works of literature. Health, its deterioration and how it is regained come under the purview of Health Humanities. The sub categories that come under the wide parlance of Health Humanities include the following: Illness Studies, Vulnerability Studies and Care Studies among others. The paper tries to address these categories under Health Humanities by putting them against the backdrop of a concept under Spatiality Studies, which is Heterotopia.

Spatiality plays an essential role in Health Humanities. Health, illness and other corelated concerns are affected by the place or atmosphere of an individual. Spatiality Studies is a theory which gives attention to how a text is placed in a specific background or setting. Heterotopia is one such space which has some unique features and distinctive characteristics. Michel Foucault is the proponent of the concept of Heterotopia. Foucault describes heterotopias as:

> There also exist, and this is probably true for all cultures and all civilizations, real and effective spaces which are outlined in the very institution of society, but which constitute a sort of counter arrangement, of effectively realized utopia, in which all the real arrangements, all the other real arrangements that can be found within society, are at one and the same time represented, challenged, and overturned: a sort of place that lies outside all places and yet is actually localizable. (Foucault 332)

Foucault identifies many sites of heterotopias including prisons, mental asylums and boarding schools. Hospital is also a heterotopia and the current study gives attention to how the hospital setting can have an impact on the narrative by placing it in parallel to Health Humanities.

The primary texts selected for the study are Robin Cook's *Coma* (2016) and Kelly Parsons' *Doing Harm* (2014). Both of these texts are set in hospitals. The works come under the broad genre of crime fiction and can be specifically grouped under medical thriller. The authors Robin Cook and Kelly Parsons are known for their works that are replete with characters and themes connected to hospital-like settings. The paper tries to shed light into how health, illness, vulnerability and care is depicted in these works of fiction.

Representing Health

Health and the condition of a person being healthy can be seen as the ideal nature of being. Health Humanities can be seen as a tool which can help in analysing a narrative from the perspectives of both

health and illness. The following section elaborates on how health is represented in the primary texts. The first thing that has to be addressed is the representation of health in heterotopia of hospital. The works *Coma* and *Doing Harm* presents healthy individuals in distinct manners.

In *Coma*, there are no characters who are in perfect health but there a relatively a few characters who seem to be healthy. The main reason behind the presence of healthy characters is that the novel involves inpatients who are ready for surgeries. A character, named Berman, who seems healthy to the protagonist Susan Wheeler, a medical student at the Boston Memorial Hospital is described thus: "Expecting to see an elderly ill individual, Susan moved into the room… Contrary to Susan's expectations, the patient was neither old nor infirm. Propped up in the hospital bed was a youngish man, seemingly in perfect health" (Cook 60).

On a similar note, *Doing Harm* also features characters who are waiting for various medical procedures. The maximum level of being healthy can be seen before a character undergoing a procedure. For instance, Mr. Bernard is a carpenter and he has come to the University Hospital to get his bladder removed. The protagonist of the novel, Steve Mitchell is the surgeon who is operating Mr. Bernard and the following is Steve's initial thoughts regarding his patient:

> I like him instantly. He's amiable, sharp and witty. He's also very precise and asks a lot of surprisingly insightful questions for a carpenter. He seems satisfied with my responses. He signs the remaining paperwork, including the consent form that gives us permission to perform the operation, without even looking at what's written on the paper. (Parsons 34)

The excerpt show the faith Bernard has on the doctor who is going to operate him. Moreover, the warmth in his voice and energy in asking different questions reveal that he is healthy to some extent. He is in full consciousness as to sign the papers prior to the surgery as well.

Health or healthy individuals as observed from the texts may not necessarily be completely healthy but rather the way in which the patients carry themselves even during difficult situations of their lives make them seem healthy. The manner in which the individuals talk, express their emotions, transfer their easy-going nature can be regarded as signs of health in the primary texts.

Narrative of Illness

Illness or sickness is a condition where an individual lacks some part of complete health, either physical or mental. This section focuses on the depiction of illness which will be analysed from the

angle of Illness Studies, a branch of study under Health Humanities. The narrative voice of patients is explored in the article "Illness and Narrative" as given in the following excerpt from the article:

> One of our most powerful forms of expressing suffering and experiences related to suffering is the narrative. Patients' narratives give voice to suffering in a way that lies outside the domain of the biomedical voice. This is probably one of the main reasons for the emerging interest in narratives among social scientists engaged in research on biomedicine, illness and suffering. (Hyden 49)

Illness is experienced differently in different settings. Each heterotopia unravels a particular kind of emotion in the mind of an individual. For instance, the same person who feels ill at his or her own home will find it more peaceful comfortable than he or she is treated at a hospital. The way in which illness and suffering is addressed by healthcare professionals can affect how the individual perceives the illness. This is further developed by Rebecca Garden in her essay on Health Humanities, "Focusing on suffering rather than pathology and recognising the social determinants of that suffering, the health humanities advocate on behalf of the person who seeks healthcare and whose biological manifestations of illness and disability maybe addressed by healthcare…" (Garden 77). Health Humanities give emphasis on the act of suffering and illness and shows an upper hand to those individuals who are able to seek healthcare. The primary texts present those characters who seek professional healthcare and are admitted for various reasons including surgeries.

Coma depicts several characters who are scheduled for minor and major surgeries. A character Berman who has come for meniscectomy and the way he tries to divert his mind from the illness is by making a conversation with the medical student Susan. The moment she comes in with an I.V. bottle he requests that no more needles be brought to him. The illness and the ways in which a person tries to overcome the illness can be seen in this example from the text. The feeling of illness is intensified because of the hospital atmosphere.

Doing Harm presents a character Mrs. Samuelson who has been admitted for the removal of a tumor. The illness has forced her out of her comfort of home. The family members are all beside her tending to her. She is described by the narrator Steve Mitchell in this way: "She's from a small farming town. She lived there all of her life, venturing out now only because she has to for this operation. It's easy to picture her in a busy kitchen, surrounded by her family, just as they surround her here in the pre-op area" (Parsons 85). For individuals like Mrs. Samuelson the hospital stays are a matter of inconvenience. Such instances make them emotionally weak. Her husband can be seen as acting distant towards the whole hospital scenario. The fear in his mind that he might lose his wife is evident in his demeanor.

Illness as depicted from the instances from the texts shed light into how the state of not being healthy or falling ill or sick is perceived by different individuals. The fear of getting hurt by needles or feeling of out of place in a hospital setting are some ways in which people try to tackle the whole situation of illness.

State of Vulnerability

Vulnerability is a state of being in which an individual feels extremely weak in comparison to others around him or her. A concise explanation of vulnerability can be seen thus in the Introductory chapter of *Embodied VulnerAbilities in Literature and Film*:

> Thus, any individual or group scoring below the objective, quantitative rate of equality in any of the many instances that fit within a given category, such as wealth, health, or autonomy, is metonymically labeled vulnerable, disregarding the fact that he or she might meet or excel equality rates in a quality-based system of value. (Gamez-Fernandez and Fernandez-Santiago 7-8)

Every individual at some point in their life feels vulnerable. Illness and being at a hospital trigger one's vulnerability to a great extent. The question of life and death becomes pertinent in such a situation. Individuals who are ill tend to feel at a loss and those who are stuck in hospitals feel much worse. The texts taken for the study explores this feeling of vulnerability in unique ways.

The following lines from the Prologue of the novel *Coma*, depicts how the character Nancy Greenly feels vulnerable as she is lying on the operating table.

> Nancy Greenly lay on the operating table on her back, staring up at the large kettledrum-shaped lights in operating room no.8, trying to be calm. She had had several pre-op injections… Nancy was more nervous and apprehensive than before the shots. Worst of all, she felt totally, completely, and absolutely defenceless. In all her twenty-three years, she had never before felt so embarrassed and so vulnerable. (Cook 7)

The manner in which her emotions vary throughout the process of getting injected is clearly depicted. The helplessness she feels lying there shows how much vulnerable a patient is when posed in a similar situation. The atmosphere of the hospital adds to her emotional state of feeling completely weak and unable to react. This is evident in the continuing sentences from the paragraph quoted above: "She hated and feared the hospital at that moment and wanted to scream, to run out of the room and down the corridor" (Cook 7).

The vulnerability of patients in a general manner can be seen in the sentence from *Doing Harm*, "The good surgeons take the bad days in stride, and the patient never sees the difference" (Parsons 44). A specific instance of a patient being vulnerable can be seen in the excerpt from the text where the patient Mr. Bernard speaks to the doctor Steve: "Remember, Steve: The moment we're born, we start dying. We spend our lives dying. Some of us just get there sooner. You never know when you might hop off the local and end up on the express to death…" (Parsons 80). The statement by Mr. Bernard stems from his desperation and vulnerability. The thought of losing his life mid-surgery made him ponder the undeniability of death. The reminder of one's own mortality when placed at such life-threatening situations is shown through Bernard's articulation of life and death.

The examples from the two primary texts highlights how deep vulnerability is experienced by individuals who are ill. Illness and vulnerability can thus be seen as two sides of the same coin. Vulnerability can be seen in the way in which a person is completely helpless and is dependent on another human being or even certain medical devices. It can also be realised in such situation where a person who is desperately wishing to live that the fear of death makes them talk more about it, as in the case of the character of Mr. Bernard in *Doing Harm*.

Administering Care

Care Studies delves into how professional healthcare givers and even one's own family members administer care to those who are ill or hospitalized due to various conditions. The term "ethics of care" brings out the very essence of how care is administered. The term can be understood from the following description given in the Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy:

> The moral theory known as "the ethics of care" implies that there is moral significance in the fundamental elements of relationships and dependencies in human life… Most often defined as a practice or virtue rather than a theory as such, "care" involves maintaining the world of, and meeting the needs of ourself and others. It builds on the motivation to care for those who are dependent and vulnerable, and it is inspired by both memories of being cared for and the idealizations of self. (Sander-Staudt)

Care is something that makes humans humane. A hospital is a space which is an epitome of care. The healthcare professional work hand-in hand in order that the people who come to them feel safe and secure in their presence. An atmosphere of hospitals tends to create an uneasiness among people who are inside it. The doctors feel extremely responsible for transforming the space from that of fear to that of safety and comfort.

Susan Wheeler in *Coma* is the perfect example of a professional caregiver. She is ready to delve deeper into the health conditions of her patients. Even though the hospital sounds and lights intimidates her to some extent, she never stops pursuing to give care for the patients. One such instance is evident in the scene where she is trying to see whether a patient Nancy Greenly responds in some way or the other. The following excerpt sheds light on how Susan cares for Nancy: "Looking down at Nancy Greenly, it was difficult for Susan to comprehend that she was looking at a brainless shell rather than a sleeping human being. She wanted to reach out and gently shake Nancy's shoulder so that she would awaken so that they could talk" (Cook 109). Susan then goes on to grasp Nancy's wrist tightly and just for an instance Susan felt some resistance from Nancy's side. She tried it with the other wrist as well. She arrived at the conclusion that Nancy was not completely weak. This instance from the text shows that professional caregivers can go to any extent for the well-being of their patients.

Doing Harm is presented from the point of view of the Chief Resident surgeon Steve Mitchell. He explains the duties of his junior resident, Luis Matinez, as part of administering care to the patients in the given lines taken from the novel:

> As a junior resident, Luis's job is to handle the myriad practical issues involved in taking care of hospitalized patients: medication orders, nursing questions, diet changes, initial assessment of problems, discharge paperwork-all of the minute-to-minute, hour-to-hour details and minutiae that constantly arise when patients are staying in the hospital. (Parsons 24)

The role of by-standers is another factor that adds to the way in which care is administered. The love, care and warmth of the family members help the patients to feel at ease. This is all the more important as they are in a hospital-like setting. The patients can feel more at home if their family is present during the time their vulnerable moments. The contrasting situation of family being absent and present can be seen in *Doing Harm*. The former situation can be seen in the case of a patient named Mr. Bernard. He is not married and therefore no one is waiting for him outside. He admits to the doctor that his girlfriend would soon be there for him. The latter situation is the one in which a patient, Mrs. Samuelson, is surrounded by her family outside the pre-operating area.

The instances from the texts brings to light how care is administered in hospitals. The work of doctors and medical students are very much appreciable but so is the efforts of the family members who try to be there for the individual who is ill and in a vulnerable state of being.

Conclusion

Health Humanities and Heterotopia are two concepts that can be placed side-by-side. The paper has attempted to read the two primary texts Robin Cook's *Coma* and Kelly Parsons' *Doing Harm* by placing them in the context of Health Humanities. The different layers that come under the broad field of Health Humanities has been explored to some extent. The way in which health is represented, how illness is narrated, the depiction of vulnerability and how care is imparted are dealt in the paper.

Health is represented in such a manner that those individuals who are ill find moments where in they try to present their best by engaging in interesting conversations or just by being themselves. The illness of the individuals was presented through the eyes of the caregivers - how they try to invent ways in which they do not reveal how weak they are. Vulnerability is depicted in the thought-provoking statements made by the patients and through the helplessness of lying on an operating table. All these three factors are related to the patient or the ill individual. The fourth and the final category is the only which deals with the doctors or other healthcare professionals. Care is an important element under Health Humanities and the way it is imparted especially in hospitals makes it relevant means of making the patients under these professionals retain their peace of mind. Even when the patients are unaware of how they are treated, the bystanders get to experience the care given to their loved ones.

In conclusion, the paper has attempted to trace the patterns of health, illness, vulnerability and care in the texts *Coma* and *Doing Harm*. Hospitals as a type of heterotopia serves as the thread that holds all the four factors under Health Humanities together. The area of Health Humanities stretches far and wide. The paper is a humble attempt to unravels at least a few concepts under Health Humanities.

Limitations and Scope for Further Research

The paper was limited to health, illness, vulnerability and care under Health Humanities. There is a scope for identifying other areas under the field of study. Since four categories was included within the study, there was a considerable limitation in expanding each category beyond a certain level. The paper focused only on the heterotopia of hospital. There is a scope for future research that involves other types heterotopias as well.

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