

## Healing as Narrative Strategy in Fiction

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### Abstract

Healing is one of the more underemphasized aspects of medical studies. Alternative medical approaches emphasize healing more than cure and medicine. But one of the most enduring aspects of disease-centric fiction is the way it represents healing. Research shows that the techniques employed by both Western allopathic medicine and spiritual or traditional healers make extensive use of narrative techniques. Storytelling is taken as an important, constructed ritual today, recommended by medical practitioners and counsellors. But long before that, traditional, folk and spiritual healers have employed such techniques of storytelling, determined by their culture.

Writers of the twentieth century have also employed these techniques to great effect. Rabindranath Tagore's *The Post Office*, and Roopa Farooki's *The Way Things Look to Me* are two texts written a hundred years apart from each other, dealing with different aspects of healing and of disease itself. They have become seminal texts because of their layered treatment of multiple themes related to disease, illness, healing and wholeness.

New theories of narrative medicine involve terms like narrative logic, healing drama, and empathy. This paper examines the narrative strategies that offer healing as a holistic solution to cope with prolonged illness, and the resultant suffering endured by all concerned.

Healing is one of the more underemphasized aspects of medical studies. The emphasis of western criticism and theory has always been on the medical and psychological aspects of diseases or illnesses. Alternative medical and critical approaches emphasize healing more than cure and medicine. One of the most enduring aspects of disease-centric theories is the way it represents healing,

often related to fiction or story-telling. Research shows that the techniques employed by both Western allopathic medicine and spiritual or traditional healers make extensive use of narrative techniques, though it remains underemphasized as opposed to medicine. Storytelling is taken as an important, constructed ritual today, recommended by medical practitioners and counsellors. But long before that, traditional, folk and spiritual healers have employed such techniques of storytelling, determined by their culture.

Writers of the twentieth century have also employed these techniques to great effect. Rabindranath Tagore's *The Post Office*, and Roopa Farooki's *The Way Things Look to Me* are two texts written a hundred years apart from each other, dealing with different aspects of healing and of disease itself. They have become seminal texts because of their layered treatment of multiple themes related to disease, illness, healing and wholeness.

Ancient Western classical writers like Homer have given trauma and sickness their due place, and later Chaucer, Shakespeare, Boccaccio, Dante and even Eliot, Sartre, Camus, Kafka have spoken about trauma and illness with their due importance. Modernist psychoanalysts like Freud have related illness to feelings and the spirit, and somehow associated a moral core or values with illness. Michele Foucault (1964) has tried to show how historically, western societies have mistreated the mentally ill, and how even modern psychiatry falls short of understanding mental illness. Post-Foucauldian studies have attempted to negotiate the difficult path of combining narratological, aesthetic, deconstructionist and other approaches. However, early trauma theoreticians like Cathy Caruth and Soshana Felman from the 1990s have continued the Freudian narrative. While engaging with her own terminal illness, Susan Sontag has reread the western emphasis of illness: she shifts the focus from a medical or clinical problem to how illness has been used as metaphor in her book, *Illness as Metaphor*, in 1978. She shows how TB was associated with early capitalism, romantic excess and a failing spirit, whereas cancer took on the aggression of later capitalism, more violent, corrosive, more of a decay and a rot of the human body. AIDs took on more of a moral taint by its association with the Christian sanctions against homosexuality. She offers a fully constructed challenge to western medicine and its tendency

to associate it with objects, events or values outside of the body, and blaming the patient as being inherently a tainted body. Hence western medicine cannot provide healing as well through its highly judgmental scope, she seems to suggest.

Stef Craps, Michelle Balaev and others, from the 2000s till date, have written to bring in non-western, non-traditional parameters to study trauma. They talk about other contexts, locations, non-western paradigms and emphasise on very different things to theorise trauma, like violence, loss of identity, loss of land, migration, separation from family etc. They suggest the study of literature from non-western countries to cope with trauma. Stef Craps mentions “cross-cultural ethical engagement” as a challenge to engage in (Craps 51). In the face of major upheavals in the visibility of trauma in recent years, new theorists from the west are now ready to embrace non-western norms to study trauma fiction, and emphasize the limitations madness/illness/revenge stereotypes to shift their gaze outwards.

It is also very surprising to find western rejection of literary models to study trauma: Freud has based his work and named psychological complexes on fictional characters and myths. He has even written his observations almost like dialogues in fiction, but when it comes to seeking solutions he and others, have excluded literature. Literary writers with exceptional mind-reading skills have repeatedly portrayed affirmative, positive, heroic ways in which individuals have faced trauma and illness. Today theorists and medical practitioners are slowly turning towards bibliotherapy or the art of both reading and writing books to face trauma and/or illness.

New theories of narrative medicine or bibliotherapy involve terms like narrative logic, healing drama, and empathy. This paper examines the narrative strategies that offer healing as a holistic solution to cope with prolonged illness, and the resultant suffering endured by all concerned.

A few of these theorists, who have tried to engage with the different aspects of illness and trauma associated with prolonged suffering, talk about trauma fiction and what it offers the reader. According to Gumb, the fiction writer and the theorist must resist and challenge the overemphasised western attitude to see illness within a predictive and formulaic psychoanalytic framework. They

must seek how bibliotherapy locates agency in the individual's way of self-healing, "recovery, self- and social-repatriation, rather than within the limited theoretical frame of madness/illness/vengeance" (304). Within the fictional limits of plot, character, and other narrative aspects, tales of trauma and illness offer reconciliation, resilience and resistance to aid the process of bibliotherapy or narrative healing. The present researcher adds re-enactment as another strategy used by writers of trauma fiction that add to the process.

### **Reconciliation, Resilience, Resistance and Re-enactment**

The play *The Post Office* by Rabindranath was translated into Polish, German and English and performed for Jewish children in 1942, by Janusz Korczak, the Polish doctor, author and director living in the Warsaw ghetto. He staged an adaptation of *The Post Office* when talks of death camps were in the air and it was known that few, if any, of them would survive. In fact the children were executed a month after the play was staged. Sushrita Acharjee relates: "Sometime in late 20th century, a group of disabled children of a Swiss school performed the play with some of them in wheelchairs." (Acharjee 2020). The story of an orphaned boy taken care of by his uncle and aunt, the play traces the final few hours in the boy's life as he was to die of an incurable illness. But the boy was keen that the king would send him a letter through the post office and take charge of his health, and he would finally be cured and happy, and play with his friends and travel like those passing by the single window of his sick room. The play offered a glimpse into the possibilities of accepting death as a release, seeing as if a mystical light, seeking a happiness that was definitely not earthly. Lyrical passages narrated by the highly imaginative boy about what he envisioned the vendors and passers-by would have seen, his endless questions and their answers abound in double entendre about life and death, sickness and health, work and play, the wealthy king and his poor subjects.

The novel *The Way Things Look to Me* depicts the life of the three British Asians of the Murphy family, born to an Irish father and a Pakistani mother. The Murphy siblings live a secluded life away from all relatives and even friends. This may be so as they have to look after Yasmin, the youngest, who has Asperger's syndrome, a traumatic experience for them due to her meltdowns, since

her, and their own, childhood. The narrative is divided into alternate narrative chunks of Asif's and Lila's third person points of view and Yasmin's first-person narration, as if it is a think-aloud session of three lonely individuals with the reader. Layered in its portrayal of loneliness and inter-racial friendship are the tales of Lila's eczema and self-harm, and Yasmin's Asperger's syndrome. Yasmin is nearly on the verge of suicide after losing their mother as her loneliness and increasing non-normative behaviour become more pronounced. It is her siblings who finally realise that from her largely predictive habits and speech, and prevent her suicide as well as draw strength from her non-neurotypical ways to cope with their own trauma.

The narrative elements in *The Post Office* offer a reconciliation of the trauma of illness: the boy accepts his illness and embraces the little freedom embodied by the open window, and when the time comes, the closed room cannot confine his spirit. He sees an ethereal light filling up the room and sees all the visions of freedom and oneness with the universe, implied by the "stars now twinkling from the other side of the dark", and his request to the king to make him his postman to "wander far and wide, delivering his message from door to door" (Tagore 21)

Yasmin is reconciled to her condition, calling herself "non-neurotypical" (Farooki 49), practising repetitive routines only to keep herself occupied, like washing clean dishes over and over, or listening to Mozart, or Simpsons back to back, or walking around in concentric circles in the garden. The only sure thing about her life is the routine set by her mother, and the knowledge that she was not going to "get better" (336). Her sister Lila on the other hand scrubs away at herself peeling off her tender skin after a burst of eczema only to soak in warm water and later paint her skin, not able to reconcile to her condition. Asif, her older brother is also introverted and cannot trust relationships as he feels he cannot be himself with anyone, and having to care for Yasmin alone, he feels it would be wrong. The story is an invaluable record of how Asif and Laila learn reconciliation from Yasmin especially healed by her oft-repeated words and actions, the only certainties of life.

It is this reconciliation that leads to resilience in the characters: Amal is sick but has an unusually robust attitude to life, and Yasmin, after the death of her mother, manages herself very well

at home, at school and outside. Amal's resilience is so infectious that all those present with him at the end, the State Physician, the herald, his uncle Madhav, and Sudha the flower-girl comfort themselves with the knowledge that he is finally only asleep, and happy. The most moving impact of the two narratives come from the fact that those who appear the feeblest are really the most resilient: they are capable of inspiring others to draw strength from them.

Amal and Yasmin both offer resistance in their unique ways. Amal is not afraid of death, nor bound by the limitations of being house bound, and Yasmin not afraid of not getting any more "normal" (Farooki 336) than she is. Amal travels all over the country in his mind's eye, recreating for the others with his own eyes, what they themselves might not have seen or heard at all, in casual indifference to their humdrum routine.

The re-enactment of certain actions and moments also offer moments of healing out of the gravely tragic aspects of suffering. Amal and Yasmin re-enact their daily stories or lived experiences into the unfamiliar, the unthinkable or sub-normal. "I can see it all..... I can feel him coming nearer and nearer and my heart becomes glad" (17) says Amal about the King's imaginary messenger carrying an imaginary letter for him.

These two works are examples of what we may call recovery narratives, which trace the aftermath of trauma, in which individuals are found reclaiming individual agency, and readers are finally successful in finding the ordinary hero in a recovery narrative through a new lens, the eyes of an innocent, somewhat naïve and gullible hero, Amal, and Yasmin Murphy, an unlikely heroine.

### **The Innocent Hero**

"Amal is in adoration with life and the livelihood of the universe and for this reason every minute of his life is momentous to him" (Nayakvadi 7). Amal's innocence and his patient, quiet acceptance of being confined is expressed so lyrically by Tagore, that it creates a hero out of a little boy. Sandip Shah writes "Tagore's unflinching faith in man and divinity, his concern for women and solicitation for children, his sympathy for the poor and the downtrodden, his philosophical speculations and practical wisdom, his perception of belief and the evolution of taste-all find expression..." (308) in the play.

The play uses symbols and language to achieve a heightening effect, to show the almost invincible innocence of the hero. In the face of his innocence all else fails. The headman, the postman, the watchman all are converted to believers or optimists, that one day the letter from the king will come and Amal will live, and be free to travel all over the world. A contrast between the home and the world makes an adventurous hero out of an innocent boy. “In *The Post Office* home is located within the space of a house and a village where the main character is a sick child whose doctor forbids him to go outside the space of his convalescence because the fresh air would aggravate his disease; as he is able to see the Maharaja’s post office out the window, he longs to receive a letter from the Raja which will eventually happen in a surreal dénouement as the child dies” (literaturewise.in par 7).

Similarly, Yasmin Murphy is a hero in her own way. Her repetitive routines give clarity to Asif’s empty and lonely life. His extremely gentle, selfless caring for her little routines of babyhood leads him to a little child and her mother, and they fall in love.

Lila’s obsessive routine with her skin disorder is almost as repetitive as Yasmin’s habits. She remembers that it took her exactly “one hour and fifty-three minutes” (Farooki 16) to scour her face, and instinctively recognizes Yasmin’s accurate counting of time. “It’s not how we are alike, but how we’re different that’s what matters: thinks Lila” (17). Lila, also a painter, tries to capture the colours Yasmin sees as she hears a few seconds of Mozart’s music. Her painting, which she produced with colour and texture to match the excerpt from the transcript of Yasmin’s television interview (326), is the best she has so far produced. Lila reads Yasmin’s like the reader tries to. Thus it is her thoughts and how she sees things that change the lives of others around her.

Yasmin’s participation in a filming project, to tell people about what it is like being “non-neurotypical” (49) is also a message which can enrich others’ lives. Yasmin’s mother had always taught her to be useful to others, and as always, Yasmin took everything she said very seriously. The way Farooki shows Yasmin’s siblings Asif and Lila, learning lessons from her simple and honest ways makes her an exceptional, though innocent hero.

### Further Narrative Strategies

Leanne Dodd suggests four ways in which crime fiction, like trauma fiction, employs certain narrative strategies to offer something akin to bibliotherapy or therapeutic benefits to readers. She enumerates fragmentation, repetition, characterisation, and resolution as these strategies which one might find repeated in both the play and the novel under consideration.

*The Post Office* and *The Way Things Look to me* are both fragmentary to an extent. The play quickly jumps to the last few days of Amal's life, with broken scraps of words by way of introduction and back story. Asif, Lila and Yasmin offer their inputs alternately, by way of the chapters in the novel. Time rushing by through the passing of so many visitors, is also a big factor that operates in *The Post Office*, as something that fragments the peaceful unity of the sick boy's life. Together, the fragmented narratives offer glimpses into the large but condensed canvas of the stories, building a harmony out of the restless energy of the multiple perspectives and the press of time.

Repetition is a leitmotif of both narratives. Amal repeats both questions and answers about both what he wants to see and what he has already envisioned in his mind's eye, to each of the passers-by. His incurable illness and inevitable death are also repeated as the tragic focus of the play. In the novel the faithful and predictable repetition of her actions make Yasmin's life most bearable to her, though it is most peculiar to the reader. Yet it is repetition of the everyday action that saves her from imminent suicide and sets an example of resilience to her "normal" siblings also.

Characterisation is Tagore's great strength: Amal, his father, gaffer, the little flower-girl and all other wayfarers are portrayed with great warmth and are highly empathetic. Farooki's novel also evinces great strength of characterisation. Asif, Lila and Yasmin are drawn very nuanced manner, bringing out their separateness as keenly as their filial similarities. Mei Lin, Wes and the absent mother are also portrayed very keenly as well. Through the portrayal of full-bodied characters and their emotions, healing is offered to the reader's troubled vicarious suffering and close brush with death knocking at the door.

Death is the resolution offered in the first piece, but an elegiac passing is what the spectator sees, Amal sees a light, feels the oneness with the king and hears his message as it were real: the audience responds, elevated into a cathartic visual of a tragic grandeur. Through a poetic, almost spiritual resolution, Tagore offers death a transcendental stature, though otherwise it is but a pitiful end to a young boy's life. Enacted, as we know, for Jewish children facing an imminent massacre, this play and its treatment of inevitable death provided emotional sustenance for little children.

In the novel, the resolution is more literary or literal, as through the family lore, the repeated words and phrases of Mrs Murphy and Yasmin, her older siblings find a way to move ahead, to end their essential unsociability, find love and happiness. The way Farooki has dealt with their social isolation and continuing grief for their mother's death and the responsibility of their autistic sister, the only way out of it is the fictive resolution through words and expressions. These vague and almost unrealised endings can "open up deeper reflection leading to alternative solutions for the reader" (Detrixhe, 'Souls in Jeopardy' 66, 68).

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