

Abstract

My thesis questions the problematic connection between illness and modernity: complicated negotiations involving the body both in its physicality and phenomenology and the poetics and praxiality of illness. The project, which is predominantly conceptual in nature for it does not see illness solely as a clinical-physical category (with heavy leanings on medical sciences) but perspectivizes its phenomenology and pathographical limits and manifestations, lateralizes on its critical correspondences with a select band of modernist texts ranging from Virginia Woolf to Samuel Beckett. My work unearths different other ‘possibilities’ of illness without denying its (quite natural) association with morbidity, pain, suffering, dying and death. It looks at illness and its effects on different bodies phenomenologically with the help of some twentieth-century philosophers namely, Martin Heidegger, Jean Luc-Nancy, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Jean Paul Sartre, Emmanuel Levinas et al. The thesis locates these phenomenological understandings in my reading of some of the important literary works of early twentieth-century Europe – five different literary works of five different genres (poetry, drama, fiction, non-fiction and epistles) — critiquing the relevance of the phenomenological body in the literary and narrative world of the texts. My thesis chooses Samuel Beckett’s *Endgame*, Kafka’s letters, Thomas Mann’s *Death in Venice*, Virginia Woolf’s *On Being Ill*, and T. S. Eliot’s *The Wasteland* within the aesthetico-philosophical space and the epistemic dialogism that modernist aesthetics implies and spouses.

Modernity and its contemporary disability find their just representation in the post-Holocaust-like situation of Samuel Beckett’s *Endgame*. The first chapter titled ‘The Disabled Players of Samuel Beckett’s *Endgame*’ looks into the disabled characters, their

impaired bodies in the play, to disembody the hermeneutic continuity and see those bodies in their phenomenological materiality; it would mean going back to the internal structure of pain, suffering and disability. 'Circumcised Body of Kafka's Select Letters', the second chapter, investigates Kafka's epistolary conversations which are also in a way his body-writings. Kafka's imagining of his body— an 'overdetermined' body racially and medically infested with different meanings— was a part of the early twentieth-century anti-Semitic *weltanschauung*. Such discourses, especially, medical discourses, were generated to re-produce the Jewish body as abnormal, diseased and deviant— the abject 'other'. Kafka and his bleeding body with all its flesh and blood and its embodiedness anticipate the condition of the Jewish body during the time of *Shoah*. And in this 'somatic turn', Kafka emerges as a brilliant study of the history of the flesh and the history in the flesh, a perfect paradigm of how that demonstrates in the twentieth-century the crises in civilization and how that leads to the crises of representation. The third chapter entitled 'Connoisseurship...of Disease and Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice*' juxtaposes biological decay, repressed desire and *dépaysement*— the state of being in a foreign, unfamiliar country. In the novella the beauty of the Venetian city and the destruction of Gustav von Aschenbach's forbidden love for Tadzio are closely interwoven. Set at the backdrop of the cholera epidemic illness becomes a metaphor of "a new susceptibility to the erotic" and the Dionysian impulses ("*Kunsttriebe*"). Playing on the dichotomies of modern life with its divided aims, Mann weaves a narrative based on modern metaphors and illness— illness as metaphors and metaphors as illness. Like the Romantics, Mann regards illness and dying as both an end and a mode of emancipation. The fourth chapter – 'Undiscovered Countries with Virginia Woolf's *On Being Ill*' – seeks to validate the perspective of the invalid and the recluse. In the essay Woolf traces the journey of a

recluse who in illness withdraws from the daily humdrums of life, from the hustle and bustle of the city of health to a room of one's own: a room which allows one to reflect on things around, and see the world both inside and outside in different light. Here, the pre-reflective involvement with the world gives way to a more contemplative and meditative way of looking. Like *epoché*, illness can become a tool for philosophical enquiry. The Romantic empathy of sitting and hearing 'each other groan' is substituted by a modernist disjuncture and 'disinterestedness'. It enables the pensive pathological being to challenge the discourses of modern urban existence driven by machines. The Chapter Five titled 'Connect Nothing with Nothing in T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*' (re)reads the most representative poem of the time in which we find a blind transgendered speaker lamenting on the sickness of modern life figured through a king who is suffering from an undiagnosed disease and who fishes by a polluted stream. *The Waste Land* epitomizes modernism's reaction against modernity. The poem is analysed as a pathological narrative— a narrative which diagnoses the problem of alienation, disjuncture, sterility, mechanicality, fragmentation and breakdown of communication and as prognosis prescribes a new vision of centre.

The overarching question, however, in all these remains the same: in what way pathology and poetics tend to overlap? The effort to locate the zone of indistinction between the poetics of pathology and pathology of poetics can be exhaustive but not unfruitful; its understanding requires a phenomenological and psychoanalytical enquiry into the question of body, illness and writing. How body speaks through illness and how illness speaks through writing? This work perceives the body as emaciated, incompetent, impotent and painful and deals with the complex of mind-body-matter and the mysterious "happening" (*Geschehen*) of human existence. It raises some essential and existential

questions pertaining to the twentieth-century human condition in the light of a generic reading of modernism in general and the modern literature in particular— demonstrating how pain transmutes into an art form. Through a pregnant hyphenation of literature and/as pathography the texts in questions and under separate chapter heads rethink the premises of modernity, the body as process, illness as an aesthetics of doing and happening, interrogating the foundations of art and pain, writing and writhing, expressions and experiences. My work problematises illness in the making and the unmaking of literature as poesis, pathology, ‘patient’ and pathography.