

# Illness as Metaphor in Contemporary Autobiographies: A Theoretical Exploration

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**Abstract:-** This paper examines the use of illness as a metaphor in contemporary autobiographies, highlighting how illness serves as a narrative and symbolic framework for understanding individual identity, societal structures, and existential crises. Drawing on the works of Susan Sontag, particularly her seminal book *Illness as Metaphor* (1978), this paper explores how the metaphor of illness is employed by authors to convey personal, social, and political messages. Autobiographies such as *The Cancer Journals* by Audre Lorde and *When Breath Becomes Air* by Paul Kalanithi offer compelling narratives where illness becomes a central figure in the process of self-representation and meaning-making. Through this analysis, we aim to demonstrate how illness in autobiographical writing transcends the physical experience, becoming a vehicle for broader metaphorical reflection.

**Keywords:-** Identity, Societal Structures and Existential Crises, Metaphor, Metaphorical Reflection.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Illness has long been a potent metaphor in literature, reflecting the complexities of human experience and societal anxieties. In her influential work *Illness as Metaphor*, Susan Sontag critiques the use of illness, particularly cancer and tuberculosis, as metaphors that often lead to stigma and moral judgments. Sontag argues that illness should be seen in purely medical terms, devoid of metaphorical significance. However, despite her compelling argument, autobiographies and personal narratives of illness continue to use disease as a lens through which individuals explore broader themes of identity, mortality, and social structure.

This paper focuses on contemporary autobiographies where illness is central to the narrative. We will explore how authors like Audre Lorde in *The Cancer Journals* and Paul Kalanithi in *When Breath Becomes Air* engage with illness not only as a physical reality but also as a powerful metaphor. By juxtaposing these autobiographical accounts with Sontag's theoretical framework, we examine how illness as metaphor continues to evolve and influence autobiographical writing in contemporary society.

## II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: SONTAG'S *ILLNESS AS METAPHOR*

Susan Sontag's *Illness as Metaphor* was groundbreaking in its challenge to the dominant narratives surrounding disease. Sontag argues that society often metaphorizes illness to project moral, social, or psychological qualities onto the afflicted. For example, tuberculosis in the 19th century was often romanticized as a disease of sensitivity and artistic temperament, while cancer, in Sontag's time, was viewed as a mysterious and often shameful illness. Sontag asserts that these metaphors are harmful, as they dehumanize the sick and create unnecessary fear and stigma.

Sontag's key contribution to the discourse on illness is her insistence on separating the metaphorical from the medical. She believes that illness should be understood strictly in its biological and clinical context, free from cultural interpretations that moralize or stigmatize the patient. Yet, the persistence of illness as a metaphor, especially in autobiographical writing, suggests that it continues to serve as a meaningful way for individuals to narrate their experiences and understand their place in the world.

## III. *THE CANCER JOURNALS* BY AUDRE LORDE: ILLNESS AS IDENTITY AND RESISTANCE

Audre Lorde's *The Cancer Journals* (1980) is one of the most influential autobiographies dealing with illness. Lorde, a Black lesbian feminist poet, chronicles her battle with breast cancer, focusing on the physical, emotional, and political dimensions of her illness. For Lorde, cancer is not just a medical condition but a site of struggle against societal expectations, particularly the pressure to conform to normative standards of femininity.

Lorde uses her illness as a metaphor for both personal and political resistance. By refusing to wear a prosthetic breast after her mastectomy, she challenges societal norms that prioritize women's appearances over their well-being. Her decision to live openly with her scar becomes a metaphor for her broader feminist and anti-racist activism. In this way, illness in Lorde's narrative becomes a tool for empowerment and self-assertion, rather than a mark of shame or vulnerability.

Lorde's work exemplifies how illness can be reappropriated as a symbol of strength and defiance. While Sontag critiques the use of illness as metaphor, Lorde demonstrates that metaphors of illness can also serve as tools for challenging oppressive systems and reclaiming agency.

#### IV. *WHEN BREATH BECOMES AIR* BY PAUL KALANITHI: ILLNESS AS A PHILOSOPHICAL INQUIRY

Paul Kalanithi's *When Breath Becomes Air* (2016) presents a different perspective on illness, focusing on its existential and philosophical dimensions. Kalanithi, a neurosurgeon diagnosed with terminal lung cancer at the age of 36, uses his illness as a metaphor for the fragility and unpredictability of life. His autobiography is not merely a reflection on his own illness but a meditation on mortality, the meaning of life, and the practice of medicine.

For Kalanithi, illness becomes a metaphor for the uncertainty of existence and the limits of human control. As a doctor, he had spent his career saving lives, but as a patient, he confronts the limitations of medicine and the inevitability of death. His reflections on the dual roles of doctor and patient create a powerful metaphor for the tension between knowledge and helplessness, control and surrender.

Kalanithi's narrative resonates with Sontag's critique of the metaphorization of illness but also challenges her insistence on purely medical interpretations. For Kalanithi, illness is inextricably linked to philosophical questions about life and death, and to strip it of metaphorical meaning would be to deny its profound existential significance.

#### V. THE METAPHOR OF ILLNESS IN CONTEMPORARY AUTOBIOGRAPHIES: A SYNTHESIS

Both Lorde and Kalanithi's autobiographies use illness as a central metaphor, but in different ways. For Lorde, illness is a metaphor for identity, resistance, and political activism. Her narrative challenges societal norms and uses illness as a site of empowerment. For Kalanithi, illness is a metaphor for the existential uncertainties of life, a tool for exploring philosophical questions about death, meaning, and the limits of human knowledge.

While Sontag argues for a clear separation between illness and metaphor, contemporary autobiographies suggest that illness continues to be a rich source of metaphorical meaning. Illness in these narratives is not just a biological event but a symbolic and narrative device through which authors explore broader themes of identity, power, and mortality.

#### VI. CONCLUSION

Illness as metaphor remains a powerful tool in contemporary autobiographical writing, despite Susan Sontag's call to resist such metaphorization. As seen in *The Cancer Journals* and *When Breath Becomes Air*, illness is not merely a medical condition but a complex metaphor through which individuals explore personal identity, societal norms, and existential questions. While Sontag's critique remains relevant, these autobiographies demonstrate that illness as metaphor can also serve as a means of empowerment, resistance, and philosophical reflection.

In conclusion, illness in contemporary autobiographies transcends its physical manifestations, becoming a narrative framework for exploring human existence in all its complexities. Whether as a site of political resistance or existential inquiry, the metaphor of illness continues to shape our understanding of both self and society.

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