

NATIONAL CONFERENCE

**CRITICAL HEALTH HUMANITIES:
HEALTH AND DISEASE IN
LITERATURE AND POPULAR
CULTURE**

5-6 October 2018

Organized by

The English and Interdisciplinary Studies Forum

MMV



**BANARAS HINDU UNIVERSITY
VARANASI, INDIA**

VENUE: CONFERENCE HALL, MAHILA MAHAVIDYALAYA, BHU

The Critical Health Humanities is a recent interdisciplinary field that explores the relationship between culture, society and medical science. A growing body of research in this area examines the experience of health, illness, trauma, medical treatment in relation to various other academic disciplines such as Psychology, History, Literature, Philosophy, Law, Archaeology, Drama, and Religious studies in order to provide interesting perspectives on Medicine. Also known as Medical humanities, it has emerged as a discipline which critiques the notion of medicine to reconfigure meta-narratives of scientific frameworks of understanding health & wellbeing. Further, it speaks for the urgency to make health studies more interdisciplinary, and also to be disciplined by arts and humanities along with the sciences. As a discipline, it also invites consideration of the psychological, emotional, spiritual states of human beings along with their physical & biological condition fostering significant interpretive inquiry into illness, disability, suffering, and care. In other words, it adds narrative dimensions to medical sciences and medical framework to arts and literary studies.

In *Art as Therapy*, Alain de Botton and John Armstrong deal with the question of how art serves humanity. They argue that art has a useful therapeutic and medical purpose. Following their argument, it can be easily deduced that Health Humanities too brings to the fore medicinal function of art which attempts to eliminate and reduce suffering through an awareness of suffering (cognitive component), sympathetic concerns (affective component), a wish to the relief of that suffering (intentional component) and responsiveness or readiness to help relieve that suffering (motivational component).

Since the beginning, literary narratives have had medical undertones. The plays of William Shakespeare abound in powerful and emotive representations of the mental health. Psychosis, self-harm, paranoid delusions, hallucinatory voices and incoherent speeches and several other instances of mental illness including madness figure in his dramas. Hamlet's character can be seen as a curious case of a young romantic man battling depression born out of familial and personal contexts. He, as revealed through his soliloquies, suggests depression, his disgust at delay and passivity in avenging his father's murder indicates a case of psychomotor retardation. Further, his loss of sleep, alternation

of ideas, elevated and expansive use of language and reference to suicide can also be read as the symptoms of maniac syndrome. Several other texts too take up medical questions such as the issues of psychologically troubled childhood in Mary Karr's *The Liar's Club*; shocking visceral and emotional power causing frustrating and violent mood swings by self-starvation, abuse, numbing sex, and self-mutilation in Marya Hornbacher's *Madness: A Bipolar Life*; manic- and catastrophic depression in Kay Redfield Jamieson's *An Unquiet Mind*; definitional dilemmas of sanity/insanity and the *progressive* methods of treatment in Susanna Kaysen's *Girl, Interrupted*; suicidal depression and illuminating path to recovery in William Styron's *Darkness Visible*; and addiction to drugs (crystal meth) and therapy sessions in David Sheff's *Beautiful Boy: A Father's Journey Through His Son's Addiction*. Conversely, Hilary Mantel is skeptical and sharply critical of psychiatrist experts in her fiction and memoir. In her memoir, *Giving up the Ghost*, Mantel discusses alternatives to psychiatry. Ian McEwan too deals with how art heals and subsides the instinct of violence and murder in *Saturday*, and opens a debate between medical excellence and relevance, cure and healing through a wounded French soldier in London Hospital in *Atonement*.

The issues of medical ethics, the principle of informed consent, the norms of privacy and the question of voyeurism are dealt in such films as Lauren Greenfield's *Thin*, Eric Steel's *The Bridge*, and Susan Smiley's *Out of the Shadow*. The Hollywood movies have explored several aspects of health: sexually transmitted diseases in David Robert Michel's *It Follows*; Proteus Syndrome, a sporadic genetic disorder, in David Lynch's *The Elephant Man*; intellectual disability in Robert Wienie's *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari*, etc. Although there are very few literary medical narratives from India, yet Indian cinema has attempted representation of illness/diseases such as the issue of cerebral palsy in Shonali Bose's *Margarita with a Straw*, genetic disorder of quick process of ageing (progeria) in R. Balkrishnan's *Paa*, issues of quadriplegic disease and mercy killing in S.L. Banshali's *Guzaarish*, HIV+ patients in Revathi's *Fir Milenge*, memory loss in A.R. Rahman's *Ghajini*, disorder of neural developments in Anurag Basu's *Barfi*, the problems of dyslexic children in Aamir Khan's *Taare Zameen Par* to name a few.

The Conference endeavors to explore epistemological possibilities of interdisciplinary collaborations between medical sciences and liberal arts. It intends to re-examine the concepts of health & wellbeing, disease/illness & medicine, and the role arts and humanities – literature and popular culture in particular – can play in reconstructing the possibilities of alternative and preventive health-care practices. The conference proposes to invite scholars from humanities and social sciences researching on health and wellbeing along with doctors, medical researchers, health-care givers, and survivors/struggling individuals and their family members with a view to sharing stories that reflect sincere commitment to realize universal health. The Conference opens several sub-topics but not limited to:

- ❖ The Practice of Health Humanities Scholarship
- ❖ The Position of Health Humanities in Contemporary Society
- ❖ Health Humanities' Engagement with other Disciplines
- ❖ Construction of Health and Illness through Biosocial Organism and Politico-economic Discourses
- ❖ Health and Illness of the Mind and Body
- ❖ The Visual Representation of Bodies in Art and Medical Imaging
- ❖ Theories of Care and Disability
- ❖ The Contemporary Anti-Vaccination Movement
- ❖ Race and Biological Citizenship
- ❖ Anthropological View of Culture and Health
- ❖ Trauma Studies
- ❖ Madness and Insanity
- ❖ Aging
- ❖ Patient Testimony in the Health Humanities
- ❖ Childhood Adversity, Caring, and Moral Imagination
- ❖ Illness as Narrative/Discourse
- ❖ The Future of Health Humanities

Important Notice:

- ❖ Kindly send an abstract of your paper in 200 words along with the title of the presentation, full name, sex, course, institutional affiliation and contact number to engmmvbhu@gmail.com on or before **15 September 2018**.
- ❖ The maximum intake is 30.
- ❖ Five Postgraduate students from the Department of English, BHU, will be selected to present papers without any charge.

Registration Fee (Non-Refundable):

Research Scholars: Rs 1500-

Teachers: Rs 2500/-

Registration fee does not include accommodation fee. No TA/DA shall be paid to the participants.

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