

## EXISTENTIALIST VOICES IN ILLNESS NARRATIVE OF PAUL KALNITHI'S *WHEN BREATH BECOMES AIR*

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**Abstract:** Illness narratives tend to question the Illness and disease, life and death, the meaning of life, and fact and fiction. The paper goes on analyzing the narrative of Paul Kalnithi on Existential grounds both as a patient and a doctor. It investigates the two dominant questions of life and death in Kalnithi's Life. Illness Narratives not only deal with the question of death but also reveals the innate secret of life. The paper also examines the relation between vocation and the meaning of life. The narrative focuses on the conflict, influences and the meaning of the metaphors it create. The paper also throws light on the reconstruction of Kalnithi's identity, isolation, suffering and religion.

**Keywords:** Death, Existentialism, Identity, Illness Narratives.

**Introduction:** "Seven words from Samuel Beckett began to repeat in my head: 'I can't go on. I'll go on.' " Paul Kalnithi's autobiographical narrative becomes an unquestionable account of existentialist concerns distinguished from all other Illness Narratives from the perspective of both being a doctor and patient at the same time. He was a neurosurgeon by profession, and was diagnosed with stage IV lung cancer at Thirty Six. His memoir was short listed for the Pulitzer Prize 2017, Welcome Book Prize 2017 and credited as the bestseller by the New York Times.

Kalnithi as a writer is more interested in the interior landscape of the mind in relation to the inseparable dualities of life and death.

Illness Narratives form those set of Narratives that are narrated by or a narration about a person's Illness. It can be classified under Creative Non Fiction or Non Fiction. There has been a nexus that is created between experience, narrative, text and interpretation. The nature of the narrative makes it to be classified under the larger umbrella term of Life Writing. Illness Narratives vary from autobiographical memoir to that of a narrative by the caregiver about the Partner or Spouse. 'I' narratives form a significant element in Illness Narratives. Sayantani DasGupta points out, "for a variety of both medical and literary reasons, patients' stories are still at risk of being perceived as untrustworthy, inaccurate, dishonest or mistaken." (Shapiro, 68) Paul Kalnithi's *When Breath Becomes Air* is a first person account of his Illness both as a patient and a doctor. The knowledge and experience as a doctor grants authenticity to the narrative. Unlike all other Illness Narratives, Kalnithi weaves a new saga by blending both fact and fiction together. Julia Kristeva points out Intertextuality, as "constructed of mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another." (Kristeva, 66) Kalnithi creates a collage of literary images through his background as a literature student. He quotes, William Shakespeare, Samuel Beckett, T. S. Eliot,

Alexander Pope et. al. There are many Biblical analogies drawn in the narrative. Thus the narrative becomes a parading of his scholarship. But at the same time the literary bent attached to it with the help of the intertextual elements gives it a new colour.

Paul Kalnithi, in his memoir, explores the working of the psyche of a patient in the death as it comes to grip with the environment. Kalnithi is more specifically concerned with the existential predicament confronted by him in the face of cancer and the imminent death; this lends to the memoir a universal reality of death. Paul's distraught mind, his mental writhing out of the sudden realization of his disease, his ultimate submission to the inexorable fate, and the temporary recovery and its revival forms the core of the psychological memoir.

*When Breath Becomes Air* highlights the struggle for survival against cancer that affected Kalnithi. He is as debilitated as a patient in his physical state and as knowledgeable as a doctor who can calculate the time of his life, when it comes to the understanding of cancer. He knows that the disease faced by him is full of pain which one should learn to endure, and should make it a part of his existence.

The cause of Kalnithi's existential predicament can be attributed partly to his disease and the knowledge about it and partly due to the separation anxiety. The other causes that can be attributed are frustration and preoccupation with death, which is planted in his mind as a result of the disease.

First I would like to consider Kalnithi's childhood and the relationship with his parents and family. Their movement from New York city to Arizona was in fact a shift in the perception of life itself. "As I first learned them, country facts granted fairy powers to desert creatures, making, say, the Gila monster no less an actual monster than the Gorgon" (Kalnithi, 23) Arizona represented the apprehension regarding future, life and everything else relating to uncertainties. "The snakes were a constant source of

anxiety, but it was her children's future that my mother feared for most of all." (Kalnithi, 25) There has been a blend with the nature in the creation of his ideals. "*Brave New World* found my nascent moral philosophy and became subject of my college admissions essay, in which I argued that happiness was not the point of life." (Kalnithi, 27) The literary bent along with geographical and social environment resulted in the formulation of his view on life.

Paul Kalnithi becomes an explorer who delves into the life and seeks to find out meaning about his life, death in relation to his views on time. He tries to grow beyond the limits of the knowledge which he has acquired. "Though we had free will, we were also biological organisms-the brain was an organ, subject to all the laws of physics, too! Literature provided a rich account of human meaning; the brain, then, was the machinery that somehow enabled it." (Kalnithi, 30) In the whole memoir there has been a blend of anatomical as well as literary elements. Kalnithi quotes T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* which resonated profoundly, "relating meaninglessness and isolation, and the desperate quest for human connection." (Kalnithi, 31)

The usage of the language related to physiology and anatomy acts as a search for his inner self and the meaning attached to it. "My brief forays into the formal ethics of analytic philosophy felt dry as a bone, missing the messiness and weight of real human life." (Kalnithi, 31) "I studied literature and philosophy to understand what makes life meaningful, studied neurosciences and worked in an fMRI lab to understand how the brain could give rise to an organism capable of finding meaning in the world, and enriched my relationship with a circle of dear friends through various escapades." (Kalnithi, 35) Thus through his narrative he points out that man is not only a thinking subject but the centre of all activity and passivity, of feeling and creativity. He becomes a philosopher who philosophizes his views on life, spectrum of existence, known directly and concretely in the very act of existing. Brown points out that the,

Philosophy is a product of the humanity of each Philosopher, and each Philosopher is a man of flesh and bone who addresses himself to other men of flesh and one bone like himself to other men of flesh and bone like himself... he philosophizes not with the reason alone but with the will, with the feelings, with the flesh and with the bones, with the whole soul and with the whole body. (Brown, 584)

Kalnithi attempts to find from within the answer of the meaning of life and the meanings attached with it. In Sartre's view, the existence of man precedes his essence. Man's prior existence, his encounter and the world, and finally the attempt to define nature or its essence. Kalnithi points out a significant question

that "If the unexamined life worth living, was the un-lived life worth examining?" (Kalnithi, 31)

The dialectics of the experience of Kalnithi can be analysed on the discourses of the Existentialist Dialectic of Kierkegaard. Kalnithi becomes an aesthetic individual who dresses as Mongols and raids school cafeteria, posing in front of the gates of Buckingham Palace in gorilla suit; breaking into Memorial Church at Midnight to 'lie on backs and listen to the voices echo'. An image of an aesthetic individual who is carefree and wishes to enjoy the sweets of the life is depicted in the image of Kalnithi.

Kalnithi's experience as a student and his childhood experience lends him with the feelings of futility and emptiness of the aesthetic mode of existence gives rise to ethical stage. He receives a call within himself as St. Augustine received voice in the garden or a call within a call, "Take up and read," "Set aside the books and practice medicine" (41) Kalnithi finds that practising medicine will grant chances to understand the unique dignity and purposefulness of life. "Medical school sharpened my understanding of the relationship between meaning, life and death." (Kalnithi, 51) A better understanding of the life has been attained by the view due to the relation between the patient and a doctor. But there has been a revelation as observed by Kalnithi that, "I still had a lot of practical medicine to learn, but would knowledge alone be enough, with life and death hanging in the balance?" (Kalnithi, 66)

Kalnithi's terminal illness gives him a completely different perspective about life, a reality which he has to face both as a doctor and patient. At this critical junctures, the question posed was "whether to live or die but what kind of life is worth living?" (Kalnithi, 71) Kalnithi's experience has led to an exposure about views on life is metabolism and death its cessation.

... I faced the same existential quandaries my patients faced ... My carefully planned and hard-won future no longer existed. Death, so familiar to me in my work, was now paying a personal visit... Standing at crossroads where I should have been able to see and follow the footprints of the countless patients I had treated over the years, I saw instead only a blank, a harsh, vacant, gleaming white desert, as if a sandstorm had erased all trace of familiarity. (Kalnithi, 120, 121)

The Illness forms the judgement call that is an epiphany that it is difficult to find meaning about the concept of life and death, its meaning. The suffering of patient is not just physical but rather psychological pain that arises out of the traumatic experience of Illness. The alienation towards life that arises out of the Illness within him is directed towards god. Grand Illness was life clarifying where one in Kierkegaardian sense lends a religious stage spurred by the belief in God. "Yet I returned to the central values of

Christianity-sacrifice, redemption, forgiveness-because I found them so compelling. There is a tension in the Bible between the Old Testament and the New Testament.” (Kalnithi, 171) Kalnithi identifies himself with Walt Whitman’s views of “the Physiological-Spiritual Man”. He realizes himself as a sinner and entrusts in God for forgiveness.

They (families) see the past, the accumulation of the memories, the freshly felt love, all represented by the body before them. I see the possible futures, the breathing machines connected through a surgical opening in the neck, the pasty liquid dripping in a hole in the belly, the possible long, painful, and only partial recovery – or sometimes more likely, no return at all of the person they remember. In those moments, I acted not, as I most often did, as death’s enemy, but as it’s ambassador. (Kalnithi, 87)

Kalnithi throws light on the fact that there is no difference between life and death of a doctor or a patient. He identifies that “it is our fate as living, breathing, metabolizing organisms. Most lives are lived with passivity toward death-it’s something that happens to you and those around you.” (Kalnithi, 114) This revolves around his role as a guide to death to that of the pupil facing death, the inescapable one.

There are several other attributes that can be attributed to the existential predicament in the memoir *When Breath Becomes Air*. The primary attribute is related to the concept of time in relation to life and death. There is a negation of a sense of past, the present and the future. “*But why didn’t I make the time?*” (Kalnithi, 86) During his residency, Kalnithi finds the monotonous nature of time where, “The days are long, but the years are short.” (Kalnithi, 103) The enmeshing of contrasting images of the tortoise and hare in relation to the consumption of the time also point to the fast depleting nature of time.

*When Breath Becomes Air* also critiques the nature of Biomedical ethics and poses an existential question towards the medical practitioners who act as Prophets. “Those apocryphal doctors who gave specific numbers (“The doctor told me I had six months to live”): Who were they, I wondered, and who taught them statistics?” (Kalnithi, 95) Kalnithi is also counting days of his fixed tenure in life and death under Emma. “You have five good years left” “She pronounced it, but without the authoritative tone of an oracle, without the confidence of a true believer.” (Kalnithi, 193) There has been a clinical error in the calculation of the life span, where life and death is in the midst of uncertainties.

V’s question to Paul, “do you think my life has meaning? Did I make the right choices?” (Kalnithi, 101) point to rather an existential view that “the future that was no longer mine: early career awards, promotions, new houses” referring to the transient,

ephemeral, temporary nature of life. (Kalnithi, 147) The only meaning that Paul can make out is like Mr. Michaels response in terms of the numbers to emote the smile, scowl and sigh, “Fourteen one two eight,” (109)

Kalnithi identifies himself with a lost sheep who is not able to place within the criteria of. “defeated” to “pessimistic” to “realistic” to “hopeful” to “delusional” in relation to the life he is leading. “I knew that someday I would die, but I didn’t know when. After the diagnosis, I knew someday I would die, but I didn’t know when. But now I knew it acutely. The problem wasn’t really a scientific one. The fact of death is unsettling. Yet there is no other way to live.” (Kalnithi, 132) This leads Kalnithi to a realization that he has become an invalid who has spent a “an ‘instant,’ too brief to consider” like the Beckett’s character Pozzo. (Kalnithi, 66) The two tramps in *Waiting for Godot* by Samuel Beckett views “I can’t go on. I’ll go on.” (Kalnithi, 149) There is an enlightenment that is generated that it is impossible to ward off the hardships of the short life, “Because I would have to learn to live in a different way, seeing death as an imposing itinerant visitor but knowing that even if I’m dying, until I actually die, I am still living.” (Kalnithi, 149, 150) Illness clubbed with the views of life and death asks two questions “Or ask Why me? (Answer: Why *not* me?)” (Kalnithi, 138)

Life and Death has been Kalnithi has been associated at two levels which are mutual in nature one to that of a patient and other to that of a doctor. “And I realized I was trying to do the same thing now, my doctor-self remaining responsible for my patient-self.” (Kalnithi, 183) An identity is forged by Kalnithi which is a hybridized one where he has to face death everywhere. “The monolithic uncertainty of my future was deadening; everywhere I turned, the shadow of death obscured the meaning of any action.” (Kalnithi, 149)

The view of Presence and Absence form a significant matter in the definition of one’s existence. This is nurtured in the mind of Kalnithi through his father, “I knew medicine only by its absence- specifically, the absence of a father growing up, one went to work before dawn and returned in the dark to a plate of reheated dinner.” (Kalnithi, 20) Kalnithi quotes Montaigne “he who should teach men to die would at the same time teach them to live” where a presence is being determined by life and absence by death. (Kalnithi, 119) There has been a transcendence of it from that of one’s personal life and even having children. “Even in having children in this new life, death played its part.” (Kalnithi, 145) The memoir *When Breath Becomes Air* becomes an utterance that becomes a presence for his daughter as well as an absence for her.

Thus *When Breath Becomes Air*, is an autobiography concerned with the terrors of existence and multidimensional through the Illness. What matters is the psychic and the existential reality of Paul Kalnithi- his obsessions, tremors and traumas. The “enduring human condition” and the “emotional life”

from the dual perspectives of a doctor and patient grants the narrative a varied tone. The hermeneutical analysis of the existence and the discourses associated with the Illness Narratives point to the propagation of *Damyata*, which promotes a sense to give as the life is ephemeral.

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