



Susan Sontag's Study of Illness as a Cultural Sign

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Abstract

Susan Sontag is an American writer and a political activist. She became famous with the publication of her essay "Notes on 'Camp'" in 1964. She examines certain illnesses as significant modern American cultural signs in her two nonfictional works *Illness as Metaphor* (1978) and *AIDS and Its Metaphors* (1989). In these works, tuberculosis is presented as a romantic illness; and cancer is described as a war. AIDS is presented as a cultural sign to suggest the moral depravity of people. After looking at how various illnesses in literature have been interpreted through metaphors, Sontag then rejects the use of these metaphors to see what actually the metaphorising of each illness means. The present paper examines the use of metaphors to represent illness with reference to Sontag's selected works.

Keywords: Cultural Sign, Illness, Metaphor, Tuberculosis, Cancer, AIDS.

Ferdinand de Saussure made a seminal contribution to modern semiotics, also known as semiology, the science of signs. He defines the sign as composed of the signifier and the signified. Baskin (1959) described the former as the sound-image and the latter to the concept that the signifier represents. (p. 66) In semiotics, the relationship between the signifier and the signified can be explained with the help of the terms denotation and connotation. Chandler (1994) wrote about the distinction between a denotative signified and a connotative signified. (89) A word has both denotations and connotations. Denotation is the literal meaning of the sign and connotation, as Chandler (1994) wrote, refers to the socio-cultural and personal associations of it [sign]. (p. 89) The denotative meaning of illness is a disease or one's experience of sickness that affects one's body or mind. The connotative meaning of illness is a sign in culture that is shaped by how one sees, experiences and adjusts to the disease. Cultural sign refers to an object, a sound or a picture that stands for a widely accepted concept or idea in a culture. The way in which one communicates about one's health and illness and to whom one conveys these are affected by beliefs in a culture.

Susan Sontag's use of metaphors in her books about illness unveils a culture where illness is largely understood through signs; and significantly, culture through its signs determines which illness is stigmatised and which not. Sontag discusses tuberculosis, cancer and AIDS as cultural signs in her books *Illness as Metaphor* (1978) and *AIDS and Its Metaphors* (1989). The former is a study of tuberculosis: she had lost her father to this disease. And she wrote about cancer as she herself was its victim. AIDS had emerged and spread catastrophically in the 1980s; 'moral depravity' among people was said to be its principle cause, which was obviously, a term the conservatives used.

It was almost ten years after the publication of *Illness as Metaphor* that Sontag wrote, in *AIDS and Its Metaphors*, about the reason for writing the previous book. The reason was to

highlight the social ostracism which cancer patients have to suffer. She also mentions there that parallels between the popular myths about tuberculosis and cancer provided Sontag with an idea to write the book. Sontag (2009) writes that the purpose of writing the book was to calm the imagination instead of inciting it. (p. 10) She did not want to bestow meanings into anything, but to deprive things of meanings. She applies her idea of against interpretation to the body and illness one suffers from. Her ideas in *Illness as Metaphor* underline how the metaphors of cancer might be dissuading the patients from seeking treatment at an early stage. Sontag suggests patients to trust the treatment and not to consider cancer a curse or punishment or a death sentence.

Sontag (2009) mentioned that it was from art that the Western medicine, in its early stage in Greece, took the metaphors that ascribe unity to human body. (p. 5) Sontag (2009) wrote that the Roman philosopher and poet Titus Lucretius Carus was scornful of harmony, a metaphor from music. (p. 3) He dismissed the metaphor of harmony in his philosophical poem 'De Rerum Natura,' pointing out its failure to deal with the fact that the human body has both essential and unessential organs and the metaphor was not even fair to death (Sontag, 2009d: 3). Sontag considers Lucretius' rejection of the metaphor from music. According to her, this is the earliest criticism of metaphoric thinking about illnesses and health. (p. 3) Significantly, many centuries later, Sontag, with her rejection and criticism of the use of metaphors of illness is following in Lucretius' steps.

Sontag (1978) writes that illness serves as a double sign in American culture: first, it signifies all forms of social deviation; second, it signifies its popular understanding as a psychological event. (pp. 709-710) The former implies that socially deviant people should be sympathetically understood and treated. The latter implies that illness can be interpreted psychologically in popular discourse. People are told that they only fall ill because they unconsciously want to be ill; so they can cure themselves by means of a strong will. Many psychological theories blame the ill person by making him feel that he has invited illness. But Sontag proved this assumption wrong in her own case; she won her battle against cancer. She was diagnosed with breast cancer at the age of forty-two in 1975 and survived till 2004. During the period of her illness, Sontag produced many works of fiction and non-fiction and became a prominent writer.

Audre Lorde, Lucille Clifton and Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn have also recorded their experiences with cancer. Solzhenitsyn's *Cancer Ward* (1968) is generally believed to make use of his experiences during cancer treatment to metaphorically uncover the dark realities of the Stalinist practices. But Sontag (1978) refuses to consider cancer a metaphor for Stalinism. She supports her claim by citing Solzhenitsyn's statement that the title was not some kind of symbol and its principal subject was cancer itself. (725) His intention behind this statement was, probably only to get the book published in the Soviet Union. Clifton's *Blessing the Boats: New and Collected Poems 1988-2000* (2000) is all about illness, racism, death, and experiences of life whereas Sontag's works are about the metaphorical uses of illness; they are not some kind of representations of her experiences with cancer. Lorde in *The Cancer Journals* (1980) evokes the imagery of war but Sontag in *Illness as Metaphor* and *AIDS and Its Metaphors* does not support the use of military metaphors.

In *Illness as Metaphor*, Sontag does not dwell on her experiences of cancer. Her key argument is that the use of illness as a metaphor is questionable. Instead, she contemplates the years with cancer in *AIDS and Its Metaphors*. Notably, she started analysing the representation of illness in popular culture after she was diagnosed with cancer. Lupton (2012) writes that although *Illness as Metaphor* has been criticised for her view that metaphorical associations should be kept separate from an illness, yet she was one of the important modern critics to assert that an illness accrues cultural significance only with the help of metaphors. (58) Sontag's use of metaphor at the beginning of *Illness as Metaphor* bears this out. One cannot understand the meaning of an illness without examining it as a cultural sign: the use of metaphors to understand an illness helps in comprehending it in relation to culture. Sontag considers the various metaphors used for an illness as a vehicle to

highlight the inadequacies of a culture and to reveal people's attitudes to death.

Mailer (2018) writes that a good metaphor can originate only from an intense experience (p. 320). But there is always a risk in using a metaphor as many unconnected meanings tend to be associated with it. In the context of illness, metaphors often mislead.

Sontag (1978c) mentions how the metaphors of tuberculosis began to disappear with the discovery of antibiotics streptomycin in 1944 and of isoniazid in 1952. (p. 696) She suggests that the discourse about cancer must change when the disease has been substantially understood and its rate of patient recovery has improved. She writes about the replacement of radiation with chemotherapy in the treatment of cancer. She is hopeful that an effective treatment of cancer is around the corner and can be expected in some kind of immunotherapy. (Sontag, 1978, 728) She explains that cancer will be de-mythicized with the change in the discourse of treatment from military metaphors to medical terminology around the body's immunodefensive system. (Sontag, 1978, 728) She predicts that the prevalent metaphors related to cancer will gradually become obsolete. In the context of AIDS, an illness with no vaccine or cure, Sontag agrees that prevention is the only treatment. For Sontag (2009), this catastrophe suggests the instant necessity of limitation, of constraint for both the body and the consciousness (p. 57).

This paper examines the use of culturally significant metaphors in a society to represent illness, with reference to Sontag's two nonfictional works *Illness as Metaphor* and *AIDS and Its Metaphors*. With the help of illustrations, the paper calls attention to the moral degradation and misery of the ill. Further, it deals with how illness is considered a cultural sign either to describe the social status of a person or to explain various affairs of a society. The analysis considers how various metaphors make it difficult for an individual to come to terms with illness, suffering and death. The paper specifically presents tuberculosis, cancer and AIDS as important cultural signs according to Sontag.

Some of the key questions considered in these pages are the following: Does Sontag approve of the use of metaphors for illness? What makes these metaphors cultural signs in need of decoding? How can one avoid metaphorising illness? How can one understand the intention of imposing an illness on a particular community?

Sontag has used a comparative approach in *Illness as Metaphor* and *AIDS and Its Metaphors*. The principal illnesses in the first book include tuberculosis and cancer; she compares these two with other illnesses like typhus, bubonic plague, cholera, syphilis, and leprosy. The second book focusses mainly on AIDS and attempts a comparison with cancer; is also compared with syphilis, rabies, cholera, small pox and polio.

Both of Sontag's works can be described as discourses on specific illnesses and the metaphors that surround them. Foucault (1972) defines discourse as a group of statements that belong to a single system of formation. (107) Prosser (2009a) notes how Sontag, with historical genealogies of the discourse of illness, looks like a version of Foucault. (199) Lupton (2012) argues that in the analysis of western medicine as a social phenomenon, culture should be perceived as a collection of discourses, meanings, technologies and practices that gather around medicine in and outside of the West. (p. viii)

Sontag offers an extended criticism of the metaphors used to interpret tuberculosis and cancer. The book reveals the relationship between various metaphors of illness and the actual experiences of the ill. Sontag (2009f) follows the definition of metaphor given by Aristotle who says that metaphor means giving the thing a name that belongs to something else. (p. 4) It is also a sign that suggests something different from the normally denoted meaning.

Although Sontag criticises the use of metaphors to suggest an illness, yet she herself uses it to represent illness as the night-side of life. (Sontag, 1978, 677) The metaphorical beginning of the book suggests such deep-rootedness of metaphors that even Sontag could not escape their use in a book that disapproves their presence in a culture. Sontag (2009)

acknowledges her intention to begin *Illness as Metaphor* with a short, hectic flourish of metaphor, in mock exorcism of the devastating metaphorical thinking (4). She writes that it is impossible to think without metaphors, but there are some metaphors that one should avoid using. She divides the unhealthy from the healthy with her statement that every born human being has a dual citizenship. (Sontag, 1978, 677) Although everyone prefers to be in the realm of the well, yet he or she has to be a dweller of the other place, i.e., the realm of the sick (Sontag, 1978h: 677). In contrast to *Illness as Metaphor*, the type of illness in Sontag's short story *The Way We Live Now* blurs the dividing line between these two citizenships. One may find oneself on the other side without any forewarning. Sontag clarifies that illness is not some kind of metaphor; it is an excruciatingly real experience. To see illness correctly, one must see it without any filter, without metaphoric thinking. (Sontag, 1978, 677)

Everyone at one point or the other has the above mentioned two citizenships. Literature can be also read as offering a history of illness. Echoing Sontag, Stein (2008), a physician, writes that illness travels into a foreign kingdom or an unrecognized neighborhood. (10) It symbolises a frightening journey in which the ill feels disoriented.

A cancer patient is often seen as engaged in a war. Sontag notes how culture uses the language of warfare to represent cancer as extremely dreadful. The very first use of military metaphors in the medical realm dated back to 1880s where the bacteria said to invade or infiltrate were identified as harbingers of illness. (Sontag, 1978, 715) She writes how military terminology defines this illness in which cancer cells invade and set up small outposts in one's body. An outpost, a small military camp, is a metaphor here. A tumour, with a lot of catastrophic cells, creates its own supply of blood in these outposts. But human body's defenses do not have much strength to destroy it. Despite the scans of the body, tumour continues to invade it. The treatment of cancer is also explained in the language of military. In radiotherapy, metaphors of aerial warfare are used where victims are bombarded with poisonous rays. (Sontag, 1978, 715) Chemotherapy is described as a chemical warfare where cancer cells are killed, but hopefully without any harm to the sufferer. (Sontag, 1978, 715) The devastating impact of metaphors of war leads to represent illness as an enemy against which society fights a war. Notably, the impact of the Vietnam War that Sontag covered at the front is inevitable in her use of military metaphors to elucidate illness.

Sontag writes about how military metaphors suggest distinct medical conditions and situations. She considers illness an invasion of the unfamiliar and the unknown organisms, confronted by body through its military functions. Military metaphors became famous during the First World War; they were used to inform people about syphilis and tuberculosis. She cites an example from one campaign that was conducted in the 1920s in Italy. People were informed through posters about the deadly effects of fly-borne diseases. But the metaphor, *Guerre alle Mosche* (War against Flies), suggests the hypocrisy of the state. (Sontag, 2009, 7) Flies are actually the aircrafts, destroying population with bombs. The contradiction lies in the fact that state did its best to educate people regarding tuberculosis, but it did not stop the war to save people from the man-made weapons.

Historically, every age witnessed illness of one kind or another. In the Middle Ages, the bubonic plague caused the death of approximately one fourth of the population of Europe. During the Renaissance, melancholy, what is called depression now, pervaded. In Elizabethan literature, physical imperfections were seen as spiritual or moral depravity. In the Enlightenment Period, gout and syphilis held sway. These illnesses were attributed to the loose morals of upper class people. In the nineteenth century, tuberculosis turned out to be a dominant illness. Many writers and artists of this age, including John Keats, Emily Brontë, Robert Louis Stevenson, and Frédéric Chopin died of tuberculosis.

Sontag (1978) examines the making of a tubercular [a term medically used to denote a person suffering from tuberculosis] look in the Romantic Age. (692) At the peak of this age, tuberculosis, also known as consumption, was believed to make the person suffering from it interesting. Lord Byron wished to die of it, so that the women would find him interesting while dying. It shows the possibility to aestheticise death through the fantasies related to this

illness. (Sontag, 1978, 686) Tuberculosis was described as an illness of only one organ: the lungs. For the Romantics, death from tuberculosis brought a tubercular's body to an end, making his personality ethereal and expanding his consciousness. Sontag (1978) wonders why anyone has not considered death caused by cancer as decorative and lyrical likewise. (686)

In the Romantic era, consumption became the cause of the death of many protagonists in literature. Its principal symptoms, such as pale face with red cheeks, graceful and thin features were often associated with poetry. This association shows that consumption, instead of being fearful, was depicted as a romantic illness; the death of many artists by this illness added to its popularity. John Keats had consumption. His poetry depicts tuberculosis through the metaphors of the tubercular's pain and pleasure, delight and melancholy. His 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci' is usually analysed in the context of this illness. The knight becomes pale and is hallucinating when he is extremely infatuated by the maiden. Graves (2010) points out that the maiden is an embodiment of consumption in the poem. (727)

In the twentieth century, cancer emerged as a formidable illness that required surgery, chemotherapy and radiation. The illness actually became a metaphor for the century itself. As cancer dehumanised people and, in the same way, the rise of technology took away the centrality of human beings in work. Many authors tried to tackle their anxiety regarding illness by writing about it. Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol* presents the sickly figure of Tiny Tim to throw light on the joys of Christmas. Through his character, Dickens suggests if the poor creature who is suffering from illness can be happy, then the people who are leading normal lives can also be happy. Morris (1998) writes that the metaphor of illness is so powerful that almost every age appears to be marked by a distinctive illness that defines or influences it intensely. (50)

Illness due to the social anxiety becomes one of the reasons that a character suffers in Fyodor Dostoevsky's works. In *Crime and Punishment*, Rodion Raskolnikov experiences guilt of killing a woman. He chooses to be a victim of pain and suffering alone and pushes everyone away from himself. (Dostoevsky, 1917, 268) In *The Brothers Karamazov*, Pavel Smerdyakov suffers from epilepsy as Dostoevsky suffered himself. It can be stated safely that there is a pattern in these works of Dostoevsky where guilt is at the centre. The novels, such as *The Wings of the Dove* and *The Portrait of a Lady* by Henry James also employ tuberculosis as a symbol of wasting away. Mental illness has also been a popular subject of literature. People who are mentally ill are incapable of behaving in a way which is considered reasonable. In Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*, the protagonist, Esther Greenwood, loses her ability to think who she really is—talented and intelligent woman. She feels trapped by the skewed view of the world and by the assumptions that everything is all right.

Tuberculosis and cancer have a common mythology of being passionate. Tuberculosis was somehow believed to stimulate sexual desire, bestowing on the patient with an exceptional power to seduce. The mythology surrounding tuberculosis was such that sex was even thought to be a natural treatment for the illness. In a letter to a friend, Keats wrote that he would have been healthy, if he had been in a relationship earlier. The tuberculars might be described as passionate but they lacked energy and life force. (Sontag, 1978, 689) Sontag refers to the drowsy girls in Pre-Raphaelite paintings; they were explicitly portrayed in Edvard Munch's (1863-1944) paintings as having sunken eyes and abnormally thin bodies. They appear to be suffering from tuberculosis. *The Sick Child*, a group of Munch's six paintings, is a good example. The recurring image of the courtesan, who is a tubercular, signifies that the illness was also believed to show a person sexy. Cancer, in comparison, is generally viewed as de-sexualising. (Sontag, 1978, 682) [The popular opinion of cancer is that it desexualises its patients]. Tuberculosis is an illness of time: it makes life fast and spiritual. Relatively, cancer functions slowly but with devastating effects. Its characteristic of being slow was the first metaphor used for cancer. Earlier, it was a metaphor for idleness and sloth also. (Sontag, 1978, 683) [This notion runs counter to the incredible speed at which

cancer in many cases, metastasises].

The prevalence of cancer is thought to be the highest in affluent countries—a likely reason for this perception is the greater chances of detection of the disease—and partially, it results from food that is rich in proteins and fat. It is also an outcome of the poisonous discharge of the industries that makes countries rich. [The link between cancer and the American life style is sharply illustrated by Norman Mailer in his writing]. Mailer (2013) highlights the word cancerland and writes about how garbage can of bruises, migraines...absurd relations, and cancer overpowered the twentieth century life of individual effort, liquor, and tragic wounds. (311) This also suggests Henry Miller's viewpoint who calls cancer the disease of [modern] civilization. (Brassaï, 2011, 48) The advancement in science, medicine and technology has equal benefits and drawbacks. The benefits include the comfort this advancement has provided in life whereas the drawbacks indicate the civilization that invited diseases. Cancer is one of these diseases. Davenport (2019) considers cancerland to be a foreign land that is distinct from day to day life; it is crowded with strange ideas, customs, and people. These customs and ideas may refer to misconceptions in a culture that are thoughtlessly employed to define cancer.

Pulmonary tuberculosis is the most prevalent form of tuberculosis but tuberculosis can also be of the other organs like larynx, brain, kidneys and long bones. In common perception, the indications of tuberculosis are identified with the nature and functioning of the lungs. Tuberculosis usually takes on the traits given to lungs. And lungs are part of the spiritualized—invested with the spiritual aura- upper body. It is an illness of the utmost contrasts as a tubercular suffers from paleness and redness, from extreme activity and a state where one lacks physical activity. Comparatively, cancer invades the parts of the body, such as bladder, colon, breast, rectum, prostate, cervix, and testicles; the patient may feel embarrassed while acknowledging the cancer of these parts. A patient of tumour feels shame in his illness and according to the hierarchy of the organs of the body, rectal cancer is considered more shameful than lung cancer. The person is looked upon with dignity in tuberculosis and with contempt in cancer. Sontag compares the deaths from both the diseases. The tubercular's death is portrayed as more soulful whereas the death of a cancer patient is portrayed as if his abilities of self-transcendence have been taken away from him (Sontag, 1978, 684). The victim often faces humiliation and agony.

In its early stages, cancer may lack visible symptoms and becomes noticeable often in the last stage. It is an illness of deadly growth that is stable, constant and uniform. At times in cancer, tumour growth stops or delays itself a little. In comparison to tuberculosis where hyperactivity is considered its important characteristic, in cancer there are not extreme changes in behaviour. A tubercular is pale at times but a cancer patient may not be. A tubercular can see and possess his X-rays as happens in Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain*, where patients carry their X-rays in their pockets. Cancer patients, on the other hand, cannot have a look at their biopsies.

According to Sontag, the metaphors circulating misrepresent one's experiences of illness. She is curious about how the metaphors of tuberculosis were used during early capitalism that focussed on the need to regulate spending and saving. Like money, energy needed to be saved. The exhaustion of energy produces tuberculosis. With the advent of cancer in the twentieth century, capitalism enters into a new phase in which saving was against the expansion of economy. This new phase of capitalism symbolised repression of one's energy. Unlike tuberculosis, cancer is represented in the image of repressed energy. [It may be suggested that capitalism both represses and harnesses energy: cancer is the cultural sign of this repression].

Sontag also highlights how the ill are ostracised in a society and how they show their unwillingness to name an illness. People feel demoralised by knowing the name of an illness they are suffering from. The French writer, Stendhal's novel *Armance* (1827) unveils the fear of the protagonist's mother of uttering tuberculosis as she believes it will quicken the track of her son's illness. Paul Kalanithi, in his memoir *When Breath Becomes Air* (2016), expresses

his fear of believing that cancer has been growing inside him. This fear has to be overcome.

Sontag (1978) writes that the epidemics like typhus, bubonic plague and cholera infected large populations, whereas tuberculosis separated the sufferer from the population. Sontag's this statement needs to be questioned. COVID-19 is the recent pandemic the world has undergone. It was transmitted through droplets or particles containing virus. The infected were isolated and people had to maintain distance from them. Our recent experience with pandemic shows how a disease can bring people together by affecting large populations, and yet can isolate each individual. Like cancer later in the present world, tuberculosis, which was considered a mysterious illness, could strike any person and it picked up its victims one by one. One of the infamous illnesses of the nineteenth century was syphilis, but it was not at all mysterious. Unfortunately, the syphilitic [a medical term used to denote an individual infected with syphilis] personality suggested a moral perception about prohibited sex and prostitution. (Sontag, 1978, 698) Comparatively, consumption provided some psychological and moral judgments about the ill. Leprosy, syphilis, cholera, and cancer are not only deadly but they convert the body into something alienating. The primary illnesses to be referred as repulsive were leprosy and syphilis. Leprosy was often considered a divine punishment for a man's sins. Syphilis was a version of various metaphors that have flourished around AIDS. (Sontag, 2009i: 34)

Sontag (2009) writes in *AIDS and Its Metaphors* that the beginning of AIDS as an epidemic provided an opportunity for its own metaphorizing (13). AIDS stands for acquired immunodeficiency syndrome. It is a chronic immune system disease that is caused by HIV—human immunodeficiency virus. This virus attacks the immune system of the body and interferes with its ability to fight against this infection.

AIDS has a double metaphoric genealogy: first, it is an invasion as cancer is; second, it is a metaphor of pollution that has been used for syphilis earlier. (Sontag, 2009, 13) Sontag draws comparison between the military metaphors used to explain cancer and AIDS. In the case of cancer, a metaphor usually neglects causality and picks up the rogue cells (Sontag, 2009, 13). In medical terms, these cells have been described as multiple chromosome-type aberrations in some subjects and are supposed to be more hospitable to cancer (Ahuja and Obe, 1994). Following this, metastasis—Sontag (2009) calls it domestic subversion—happens where rogue cells change and move from the first host organ to invade other organs. (13) The case of AIDS is different: in it, an infectious agent appears from the outside. [Here the agent is HIV, the virus that is transmitted sexually or by using the contaminated needles]. Sontag (2009) describes this external source as a small invader against which the scouts or macrophages alert the human body's immune system. (p. 14) But AIDS virus neglects the blood cells on its way, avoids the defenders and concentrates on the immune system only. In cancer, cells multiply themselves; in AIDS, they die.

Sontag (2009) extends the comparison to include syphilis, cancer and AIDS and writes about how Syphilis has been described as the great masquerader. (16) It has capability to hide itself behind the symptoms that a syphilitic manifests. AIDS, similar to Syphilis, identifies itself with the symptoms which show that the person has a specific illness. AIDS-related complex or ARC is used to describe the people who have premature symptoms of immunological deficiencies that include fever, fungal infections, weight loss, and swollen lymph glands. AIDS is a progressive illness: once a person attains certain symptoms, it becomes fast and the suffering worsens. [Antiretroviral therapy or ART can slow the progression of this virus]. Some degrading symptoms can make the AIDS sufferer frail. In terms of stages, AIDS is more like syphilis than cancer. Syphilis is disastrous in its third stage called tertiary syphilis. In the case of AIDS, acute HIV infection is the first stage that raids body's immune system and it only has latent symptoms. The second stage is chronic HIV infection. AIDS is the last stage. Although cancer develops itself gradually, yet cannot hide itself for long. Like syphilis and AIDS, it also has stages that help in determining its advancement.

Susan Sontag's Study of Illness as a Cultural Sign

The advent of AIDS was a matter of debate everywhere. Like cancer, it was also considered shameful. Michie (1990) writes that in popular culture of America, AIDS disguised itself in acronyms and euphemisms that include: ACIDS, GRID, gay cancer, and gay plague (328). The use of these terms manifests how the spread of this illness in America challenged its culture to use words that were considered a taboo earlier (Michie, 1990a: 328). Most of its patients knew the reason of their getting AIDS. Sontag (2009p) mentions a certain risk group or pariahs and homosexual men, in the case of United States that suffer from AIDS (19). [Sontag's this statement proves the prevalent notion that diseases belong to a certain group of people only].

AIDS is also said to result from a person's addiction to certain chemicals, such as amyl nitrite, methamphetamine, crack cocaine etc. Another cause is to have sex that is deviant and in this way, Sontag (2009) writes that it is an illness of perversity—homosexuals, in this case, may be considered perverts. (20) According to Sontag, when AIDS is transmitted sexually, it becomes a disaster that one brings to himself. This illness, having sex as its principal cause, risks the lives of people who are more active sexually. Some people get this illness by using contaminated needles and thus, according to Sontag (2009) commit inadvertent suicide (20). Gilman (1988) also notes that AIDS became noticeable when it was categorised as a sexually transmitted illness. (247) But people did not talk much about this disease.

Sontag employs the metaphor of plague to understand the epidemic of AIDS. AIDS trivialized cancer and, in this way, the misidentification of cancer in popular culture as an epidemic and a plague decreased. She objects to the metaphor of plague because it presents an illness as a punishment, a visitation that strikes not only the ill but the whole society. The punishment is certainly inflicted for the lack of morality. [Homosexuals, in this case, were people who lacked morality] Besides AIDS, Sontag writes about some other illnesses, especially epidemics such as leprosy, syphilis and cholera, for which the metaphor of plague has been used. The progression of cholera in the nineteenth century manifests a decrease in the religious interpretations of this illness. In 1866, the epidemic of cholera was not only regarded as some punishment by God, but it was also considered to be an outcome of the lack of sanitation. The epidemics of influenza and polio lack the attributes of plague; thus the metaphor of plague cannot be used for such illnesses.

The plague, which afflicted the Thebans in Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* was regarded as a punishment, but it was not as shameful as leprosy and syphilis were. Sontag mentions that previously, illnesses were collective calamities, judgments on a particular community; disabilities and injuries were considered individual sufferings. (34) The character of Philoctetes from Sophocles' eponymous play symbolises such suffering. He was bitten by a serpent on his way to the Trojan War and noxious smell of his wound led to his abandonment by his own countrymen. (Philoctetes- Story of Philoctetes, n.d.)

It used to be commonly believed that plague arrives from another place. In this way, some other illnesses for which the metaphor of plague has been used, such as leprosy, syphilis, cholera, cancer and AIDS, are also believed to have come from other places. The bubonic plague that reappeared in London during the 1720s had come from Marseilles and from there, it was said to have entered Western Europe with seamen and soldiers. Sontag writes about how AIDS is also considered to have begun in the dark continent, Africa, from where it spread to Europe and the United States. (38) [Many studies show the HIV infection to have come from a virus that was found in a type of chimpanzee in the West Africa]

During the 1930s, the metaphor of plague was used synonymously for social and psychic catastrophe. According to Sontag (2009), Albert Camus' *The Plague* (1947) does not signify any kind of corruption or tyranny, not even mortality rather, for her, his use of plague is more epitome than metaphor to present a detached tone. (43) The characters in the novel reveal how unimaginable it was to undergo plague in the twentieth century.

Although AIDS was identified as an illness in the 1980s, yet the virus had been present earlier in the society. Soon, it became an epidemic in Africa. AIDS determined

attitudes not only toward illness and medicine but also toward sexuality. Sontag (2009) uses the metaphor of an age-old military campaign for medicine, which was going to be victorious, soon. (52) But AIDS, as an epidemic changed the position of medicine. For Sontag, the arrival of AIDS clarified that the infectious diseases could not be conquered. (52) But her statement has been proved wrong in the 21st century as a fifty-three year old man, who was diagnosed with HIV in 2008, has been freed from this virus with the help of a stem cell transplant. (Sullivan, 2023)

Sontag further notes that the idea that illnesses which are transmitted through sex are not dangerous reached its climax during the 1970s. At the same time, male homosexuals, with sexual voracity as its folkloric custom re-established themselves as an ethnic group. (Sontag, 2009, 55) AIDS brought many constraints on sex; there was a sexual depression after restraint-free sex during the 1960s and 70s. She relates this freedom with capitalism: it provides a person the liberty to consume, grow and to do what one wants to do. It provides a person with an opportunity to express himself. According to Sontag, sexuality is also a consumer option and it was not the male homosexual subculture that invented risk-free sexuality but the culture of capitalism that assured it through medicines. (56) But the advent of AIDS changed the scenario and forced the need of putting constraints on free sex.

Sontag calls attention to the uncertainty about the proliferation of AIDS. This uncertainty was at the centre of discourse about AIDS. The discourse had questions, such as whether AIDS would be restricted to the marginal populations only (including the risk groups and the urban poor) or it would become the classic pandemic that affects the entire society. (Sontag, 2009, 60) Various articles published after the advent of AIDS pointed out that the illness belongs to them, not to us. (Sontag, 2009w: 60) This referred to the popular notion in the Western Europe and the United States that the general population, including the whites and the heterosexuals, are on the safe side. The word 'them' refers to homosexuals and the Africans. Paul Monette's *Borrowed Time: An AIDS Memoir* (1988) is also about male homosexuals. Monette writes about his lover's war against AIDS and his eventual death from this illness. Even the prediction of World Health Organisation hinted that among the AIDS patients in future, the most affected will be the Africans. Sontag unveils another popular viewpoint that is concerned with how the Africans were targeted. Many academics, journalists, doctors, and educated people believed that America sent the AIDS virus to Africa. It was considered a sort of bacteriological warfare that aimed to lessen the birth rate in Africa. (Sontag, 2009, 39) But it went out of control and affected the creators themselves when was brought back to its country of origin by homosexual missionaries. [There is no evidence to prove this].

Towards the end of *AIDS and Its Metaphors*, Sontag expresses her disgust for the use of military metaphors to describe AIDS. The image that these metaphors create over describes and contributes to the banishment and condemnation of the sick. (Sontag, 2009, 69) Referring to the military terminology, she clarifies that the human body is not a battlefield and no one is being invaded. Sontag (2009) quotes Lucretius who aptly wrote about military metaphors: Give it back to the war-makers. (69)

Prosser (2009b) writes about how Sontag's rejection of interpretation in her essay *Against Interpretation* and of metaphors in *Illness as Metaphor* and *AIDS and Its Metaphors* depends on a problem with meaning. (188) They deal with how people make sense of living and dying, the creating, finding, and understanding of significance in their lives and deaths. (Prosser, 2009, 188) Sontag (1966) writes that to interpret something is to impoverish and to deplete the world for the purpose of creating a shadow world of meanings. (14) She carries the idea of her rejection of interpretation in her books on illness by criticising the use of metaphors to explain an illness. The beginning of *Illness as Metaphor* suggests that Sontag is not against the use of metaphors, but is against some metaphors, such as military metaphors that degrade and condemn the illness and the ill.

Conclusion

The study in this paper has brought to light Susan Sontag's critical analysis of the metaphorical functions of tuberculosis in the nineteenth century, of cancer in the twentieth century and of AIDS in the late twentieth century. Tuberculosis came to be associated with literary and artistic creativity of its victims and was thus projected as a romantic illness. The use of military metaphors to explain cancer made this illness a sign of war against which its victim fights. AIDS as a cultural sign suggested the moral depravity of people. In this way, Sontag has unveiled how metaphors shape the perception of the reality of an illness and prevent the ill from perceiving the illness rationally. Metaphors are interpretations. As such, they often have serious consequences in the lives of patients as they interfere with the treatment of illness. The solution that Sontag has provided to get rid of metaphors is to get them out of the discourse of illness. For her, once an illness is understood and is made curable, the language around it also begins to change. Everywhere in the world, metaphors are used to wrap an illness in. So the need is to understand that no illness is disgraceful and contemptible, but the signs that society attaches to it make it so.

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