

The ‘Modern’ Narrative: Narrating Disability, Illness and the Self through Contemporary Life-Narratives

Literature has long served as a crucial medium for articulating experiences that resist easy expression, while simultaneously exposing the inherent difficulty and urgency of such acts of narration. In particular, writing about illness and disability foregrounds the tension between silence and speech, private suffering and public articulation. Disciplines such as disability studies and the medical humanities have actively engaged with these concerns by interrogating dominant social and medical assumptions about what constitutes illness or disability. By centering the voices of patients and disabled individuals, these fields have challenged reductive, pathologizing, and often dehumanizing narratives imposed by clinical or societal frameworks. In doing so, they have enabled individuals to reclaim agency over their own stories, modes of representation, and identities, thereby transforming the act of narration into a form of resistance as well as self-assertion.

A significant body of such writing emerges in the form of autobiographical narratives that focus on lived experiences of illness and disability. Often referred to as “autopathographies,” these texts generate critical conversations around sickness, pain, and embodiment, while also fostering a more empathetic and nuanced understanding of disability and illness. They allow ordinary individuals to document their extraordinary struggles, offering personal perspectives that complicate medicalized or stereotypical portrayals. These narratives engage deeply with questions of agency and helplessness, autonomy and dependence, and the ethical challenges of representation, particularly in the face of the persistent risk of being misunderstood, misrepresented, or reduced to a diagnosis. At the same time, such texts are marked by a distinctly ‘modern’ sensibility, evident in their heightened self-reflexivity and their experimental narrative forms, through which fragmented experiences of a life shaped by illness or disability are woven into coherent, though often non-linear, narrative structures.

Within this framework, the proposed paper examines two memoirs that explicitly engage with the experience of manic-depression, or bipolar disorder, under the broader theme of disability and life-narratives. The texts under consideration are *How to Travel Light: My Memories of Madness and Melancholia* (2017) by Shreevatsa Nevatia and *An Unquiet Mind: A Memoir of Moods and Madness* (1995) by Katherine Redfield Jamison. While the former emerges from an Indian context and the latter from an American one, both memoirs grapple with the complexities of conceptualizing, narrativizing, and making sense of mental illness. By placing these works in dialogue, the paper seeks to explore how differing cultural, social, and medical contexts shape the narration of bipolar disorder, while also revealing shared concerns about suffering, selfhood, stigma, and survival. Ultimately, the paper aims to highlight how contemporary life-narratives of mental illness negotiate the challenges inherent in writing about mental disability and contribute to broader conversations on voice, agency, and the modern self.