

## Illness and Wellness: Gender in Select Indian Short Stories

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### Abstract

Literature is a record and reflection on both health and illness. One can easily come across episodes of life, joy, mirth, laughter, gaiety, festivities, and feasting. Likewise, one can also find instances related to sickness, disease, grief, and death as presented in the literature. These narratives also reveal the working of the interrelation between gender and society. In other words, illness and death are also presented in literature with gender and socio-cultural nuances. Although, death is a natural occurrence, it cannot be denied that it is also manipulated by Gender, and identity politics. There are different narratives of care, sickness, and death. In the African and Indian context, where there is the concept of afterlife, one encounters different treatment of the subject.

Tradition, and culture apart, gender and social identity play a vital role in determining the course of illness and well-being. Evidently, care and nursing are gender specific roles that are taken up by only women. The proposed article aims to examine how the degree of illness, health, and care is regulated by gender and social class with reference to Indian short stories translated into English. The article will argue how the prescribed gender roles in a patriarchal society affect the health of women. It will also explore the tropes of illness and care in the lives of Indian women with reference to the selected short stories. Further, the article will argue that Men enjoy more healthy and carefree life in Indian society in comparison to Women because of their privileged gender position irrespective of social class. In order to render a holistic perspective, the authors intend to select a wide range of short stories from all over India.

**Key Words:** *Gender, care, illness, health, death*

In traditional patriarchal Indian society, women are usually kind and forgiving. She is ready to go to any extent to protect her husband and children. She is a woman whose heart inundates with kindness.



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If she falls ill, she thinks more about her family. She may skip her prescription, but she will never miss cooking food for her family members. She may neglect her needs and wants, but she will never ignore her husband and children. On occasions, she will further harm herself to provide for her family. She is so trained throughout that any deviation from the desired path would seem unimaginable.

“Bhadari” by Laxminath bezboroa is a classic example of such a prototype. Originally written in Assamese, the short story dramatizes the domestic conflict where a husband who is a farmer in an Indian village, almost murders his wife. It so happens that one day when Sishuram returns home from his fields for his lunch. He is extremely hungry. He goes to the kitchen immediately and finding his wife, Bhadari, still occupied with kindling fire, he gets annoyed. He is hungry and tired. He had hard time in the fields because of his bullocks. His neighbour was also troubling him by his act of encroachment.

He could not go to his farm the previous day as it was a holy occasion of some religious festival and it was forbidden to work on that day. As a result, he inflicts serious injury on his wife:

What do you say, you daughter of a bitch?’ roared Sishuram, and with a shrug of his shoulders he rushed towards Bhadari and struck her on the back with the maida that was lying on the floor. Before a second blow could be given, hearing Bhadari's heart-piercing shrieks, Kinaram, Sishuram's brother, came running in and immediately caught hold of his brother and dragged him outside. (6)

Bhadari is hospitalized. She gains consciousness after a couple of days. When she searches for her husband, she is told that he is in the custody. Instead of blaming him, as per her training, she curses herself. She implores the doctor to bring her husband beside her bed. She takes the entire blame upon herself and tries to rescue her husband. Bhadari, seeing the doctor coming near her bed, entreated, “My lord, my father, he is not to be blamed! He is innocent, not guilty; spare him; forgive him; I pray you, forgive my husband. It was I who stumbled over the maida and hurt myself. Her eyes brimmed over with tears” (7).

Laxminath Bezboroa, according to Ramakrishnan, the father of short stories in Assam with his keen and penetrating eyes, is able to present the hard and glorified side of an Indian wife in its glory and vivacity. Bhadari like her countless sisters prefers her own punishment in her illness instead of her husband's. Her gender overpowers her. Her conditioning overwhelms her. She is

carried away by her belief system. She, like her other counterparts, is made to believe that her husband is the Lord. She is convinced that her life will be nothing without him. She has learned by heart that a living and cruel husband is far better than a kind and dead husband.

In patriarchy, a wife is incomplete without her husband and until she finds one, she remains worried and helpless. Bhadari not only believes in this, but also practices this by heart. Her pain and torture are nothing in relation to her husband's wickedness. When she opens her eyes for the second time in the hospital, she beholds her husband standing near her. At this point, her concern for his welfare is evident in her entreaties, "She smiled slowly and enquired: How are you? Have you been taking your meals regularly? I am sure you are finding it hard to prepare your meals. Never mind, I shall be all right in a day or two. Kindly arrange to take me home; I'll come to your help" (7).

He is the same man who had almost killed her the previous day. He is the same husband who had shouted and scolded her. He is the same person who had vomited his fury over her. Her response to the entire situation is as if nothing has happened. She behaves as if, she is not in a hospital, but in a room of her's own. She is more concerned about his food and struggles. She is ready to forget and forgive as soon as possible. Her physical injury and illness do not matter. Her psychological trauma is not at all worth counting. What is more important is his comfort. Her gender and related duties interfere with her own self as a human. Bhadari as a woman overpowers Bhadari as a human being. She forgets that she is also like him a creature of flesh and blood. Her self-respect and her self-identity disappear, and she obliterates her natural self for his sake. Her illness and injury become insignificant before his happiness and pleasure.

Here, one is reminded of a famous poem by Nissim Ezekiel titled "Night of a Scorpion." In the poem also, one encounters an Indian wife. Here, she is presented in the guise of a mother. She is a woman who is taught from her childhood that comes what may, she has to live for others. This woman concretizes this even at the cost of her suffering. She is a mother. Her children are supreme to her. It is her duty to look after their physical and psychological needs. She has been listening to everyone since her girlhood days that her children and their happiness should be her aim after her wedding. When she is stung by a scorpion, she thinks more for her children and their benefit at the cost of her sacrifice.

She is ill. She is stung by a scorpion. She is twisting and turning because of pain. She is lying on the ground helpless for several hours. Everyone is trying to cure her:

They clicked their tongues.

With every movement that the scorpion made his poison moved in Mother's blood, they said.

May he sit still; they said.

May the sins of your previous birth be burned away tonight, they said.

May your suffering decrease the misfortunes of your next birth, they said.

May the sum of evil

balanced in this unreal world against the sum of good. (Gokak 270)

Her response on this painful occasion is typical and traditional:

After twenty hours it lost its sting.

My mother only said

Thank God the scorpion picked on me and spared my children. (Gokak 270)

In pain also, she thinks about her children. In trouble also, she remembers her kids. In a state of trauma, her life revolves around her offspring. As a woman, as she is told time and again, her heaven is with her children. She has to surrender her wishes and aspirations for their sake. If she will not think about her children, she will be deemed selfish in the society.

If she will not take care of her offspring, she will be regarded as a stepmother which is a stigma in traditional Indian rural society. If she will not provide for her children, she will be cursed. As a result, her own discomfort does not matter. She is more bothered about her children's safety. Here also, gender and its construction prove to be more powerful than the individual. Here also, the mother is a mother first and a human only if there is any scope even in her illness.

“The Shroud” by Premchand is another story that revisits the concept of illness with reference to women from the perspective of caste. Here, one observes the caste factor intricately interlaced with gender that it becomes impossible to extricate one from another. As the story opens, one confronts the naked and bleak reality of a segregated Indian village. Ramakrishnan also argues, “Premchand's stories are so powerful that they portray Indian village life with its poverty, caste, and superstitions vividly and graphically” (10).

The opening of the above-mentioned story is enough to elucidate the point, “At the door of their hut, father and son sat silently beside the dead fire while inside the son's young wife,

Budhiya, was thrashing about in the agony of childbirth. From time to time, she would let out such a piercing scream that both would get startled” (45).

Here, Ghisu and Madhav are both helpless to do anything. Even if they want to do anything, they are limited by penury and caste. They belong to the lowest strata of Indian society. They are known as untouchables. They are regarded as impure and dirty. They live on the margins of the village. Their life is controlled by stereotypes. They both are indolent and undesirables as far as the entire village is concerned. They are not able to bring any money into the home.

When Budhiya, the wife of Madhav is suffering because of pregnancy, both father and son wish and pray for her death as they know that it will liberate her from suffering on earth. Budhiya, in her helplessness, dies as there is no one to help and cure her. Had they not been untouchables, somebody might have helped them despite being poor. When Budhiya is crying in pain, there is no one around her. People in her vicinity are all Dalits. They are as penurious as they themselves are. Women of the neighborhood can only come once she is dead. When she is alive, no one dares to come near her as they are in no position to help. They are so poor and helpless that the little money that Ghisu and Madhav get from the upper caste people, they decide to eat to their heart’s content, they know that they will not get any other chance to eat proper food.

Finally, Budhiya is left uncared for as there are neither resources nor the power to procure any, “In the morning Madhav entered the hut and saw that his wife had turned cold. Flies were buzzing around her face and her stony eyes were gazing upwards. Her body was coated with dust. The child had died in her womb. Madhav ran towards Ghisu and the two began to scream” (49).

Not only caste, but gender also played its part in Budhiya’s death. She was a hard-working woman. As a woman, she was supposed to keep her husband’s home in order. She was discharging her duty as per societal norms. As a woman, she was also supposed to carry forward the family by giving birth to a child. In a home, where there was hardly any food or water, it was impossible for her to obtain proper care during pregnancy. Where father and mother were forced to sleep on an empty stomach, their birth of a healthy child was only a farfetched dream. A pregnant woman requires care and a proper diet to sustain both herself and her upcoming child.

Because of their lower caste, Ghisu and his people were misfits in the larger society. Ghisu and Madhav could sustain themselves somehow as they were not required to undergo childbirth. They were men and nature had saved them from this pain. Budhiya was a woman, she had to give birth otherwise, she might have been considered barren. In that case, she might have been further excluded. Before her pregnancy, she is somehow managing. As soon as she decides to conceive, she loses the battle. First her caste and then her gender account for her suffering culminating in her death.

Vasanthi's "Murder" is a Tamil short story translated by Gomathi Narayanan. It is set in an extremely patriarchal and poor family from a Tamil village. Vasanthi very skillfully paints the background with shades of poverty, patriarchy, and ignorance. She portrays a large family run by an elderly staunch patriarch, Somaiya Thaatha who rules his household like a monarch, "As a matter of fact, he was the monarch here, and would remain one as long as the lands remained in his name; whatever he prescribed was law" (477). Somaiya Thaatha believes in the increase of progeny to constitute the human labor of the household. He is opposed to the idea of family planning. This motif of childbirth underscores the mental and physical condition of the women characters in the narrative. Further, this biological and natural process of childbirth is used against women of the family despite their health and will. As a result, this imposition of the patriarchal decree on women's bodies results in ailment and death.

The conflict of the narrative lies between the personal choices of women and the regulation of the patriarchal society. To be more specific, the conflict between Somaiya Thaatha's command against family planning and Kamalakka's plea for contraception results in the death of later. The women in the family after bearing many children request to take medical measures for family planning. For few, the husbands agree, but the grand old patriarch disagrees and does not allow the couple to seek medical intervention. As a result, one of the desperate female members of the family, Kamalakka who tries to take low-priced and amateur help to terminate her pregnancy becomes terribly ill. However, the women in the family are unable to take the sick Kamalakka to the hospital without Thaatha's consent. One of them, Nagalakshmi comes forward to speak for them and ill Kamalakka to Thaatha. She beseeches Thaatha, "Kamalakka is not well. She has to be taken to the town hospital" (490). This does not only signify the secondary position of women in a household, but also the degree of regard for their well-being and lives.

Nevertheless, Thaatha dismisses Nagalakshmi's request and believes that the women of his family are making a fuss over nothing. However, Nagalakshmi does not yield and pursues, "She is losing blood. A high temperature. Delirium" (490). Nagalakshmi and the other women in the family become sensitive to Kamalakka's illness only after she begins to bleed heavily and run a high temperature. This indicates that the women generally, overlook minor health complications and mild sickness. The symptoms Nagalakshmi lists out also postulate that Kamalakka's condition may also result in fatality.

Thaatha does not succumb to Nagalakshmi's urgent prayers and maintains that a visit to hospital is superfluous. However, Nagalakshmi tries to reason out with the adamant Thaatha, "No, Thaatha. She must be taken to the hospital immediately". Thaatha dismisses the claims to seek medical help and instead recommends a counterfeit remedy. He argues that the sickness ailing Kamalakka is a result of the Late Chellathai's unsatiated wrath, and appeasement of the spirit will solve the problem of Kamalakka's ailment. He orders, "You heard what I said. Go, insert a bunch of margosa leaves on the threshold. We will make an offering to Chellathayi today" (490). This approach of Thaatha towards Kamalakka's dire condition not only symbolizes the ignorance of the poor village families but also, the powerlessness of the women in the families. Chellathayi is a deceased female member of society who has hung herself to death. Therefore, Thaatha believes that Chellathayi's spirit is haunting the family, and especially him. Thaatha's suggestion of placing neem leaves and a sacrifice is a subtext reading both the class and women's oppression in society.

Further, Nagalakshmi who is taken up the courage to advocate for Kamalakka's cause is mortified and fearful to reveal about the attempted abortion, "Fear had dried up Aunt Nagalakshmi's tongue. It seems she had asked the midwife to come last night to have an abortion. The midwife has messed it up" (491). Nagalakshmi and other women in the family realize the taboo of an attempted abortion. Despite all this Kamalakka is driven to take dreadful measures by calling for the aid of midwives in secrecy. This describes the secret and silent agony of women who have mortgaged their bodies to the patriarchal system.

"Murder" is a social and class satire that mocks the interplay between patriarchy and poverty. Thaatha is not troubled that Kamalakka is severely ill, but he is alarmed that she has attempted an abortion clandestinely. He retorts, "So, you women have started doing all these

things, have you?" (491). Kamalakka's health and life become secondary to Thaatha and the other men in the family. This act of attempted abortion is not only an act of defiance and resistance but also a statement by Kamalakka about her choices and her body. She is finally able to challenge Thaatha's authority but at a greater cost of her life.

The clamor of the woman's cry for help is unable to drown Thaatha's accusation and meaningless countermeasures. He does not listen to the women's prayer for help, and dismisses Kamalakka's severe condition intentionally. Eventually, it becomes very late for Kamalakka and she loses her life because of Thaatha's denial of her grave condition and his chauvinistic attitude. Thaatha kept repeating, "We will make an offering to Chellathayi". The women in the family- the maternal and paternal aunts- were crying as if death had already occurred. Perhaps that was the reason why they were not able to cry when Kamalakka's dead body returned in the middle of the night from the hospital.

On the contrary Aunt Nagalakshmi's eyes reflected "intense hatred and anger" (491). The helpless and tearless women cut a pathetic representation of all such women in a society where patriarchy and poverty overrule. As a result of Thaatha's strong-headedness and wrongheadedness, Kamalakka loses her life, and the women lose their hope. The irony also lies in Tabatha's obstinacy in not letting the women of the family go for family planning, as he intends to expand and rule the family like an empire. On the other hand, he deliberately lets a precious life ebb away.

Unlike the earlier narratives, Githa Hariharan's "The Art of Dying" is about an elderly sick woman from an urban middle-class family. "The Art of Dying" is a narrative of a mother and daughter representing the sophisticated society – where one is the patient, and the other is the caregiver. The story is set in a metropolitan city in a well-to-do family. The patient is an aging and sickly mother who suffers from a terminal illness, and more than that, a broken heart due to the untimely death of her young son. The bedridden mother is kept well and enjoys the privilege of good nursing from her daughter. The narrator describes her ailing mother, "My mother, clean and well-scrubbed, smells of lemony soap. Her hair, still thick and long, is in a girlish braid. It is only the middle parting of her hair that has grown a little wider with the years. Her scalp, pale ivory, shines through a well-beaten track of light" (262). The physical features of the bedridden woman suggest the luxury which accompanies class even in disease and illness. The woman



seems to be resting or relaxing than ailing or dying. She is not only feeling well but seems to be well. The mother is not feeling well because she has found a cause to brood over her son's death. On other hand, it can also be that she is apprehensive of her own death but uses her grief for her son's death as a rouge.

The relationship between the invalid and the caregiver is an important narrative strand in "The art of Dying." The ailing mother portrayed is invalid, and is suffering for a long time. The caregiver is the daughter who is a medical professional and a personal nurse of her mother at home. The daughter is a professional counselor, listening to patients and helping them cope with illness and other maladies. However, she is uncertain about the course of her mother's illness. The mysterious illness as her daughter observes, "She has no growths anywhere; at least nothing palpable, visible to X-rays. But she is ailing, dying of unidentified causes" (262). Clearly, the mother basks in her daughter's care and good medical facilities. However, the daughter is worried about her mother's condition.

Hariharan romanticizes death as a lover, "My mother could give it all up now, struggle individually with the death closing in on her like tomorrow, two lone combatants, or lovers, the rest of us forgotten. She knows the face of the shadow inching nearer by the hour. Its presence turns her mother's grief, a commonplace enough thing, into a grand passion" (262). This poetic vision of illness and death evokes less piety and more awe.

Evidently, the mother embarks on her journey of sickness from the time of the death of her son. "Without a whimper or a moan, she groped for her widow's narrow bed. She lay there for days, eyes open, arms frozen by the sides of her body, playing dead" (262). The death of her son is a cusp in her life that hurls her sending in the trail of illness. Possibly, her sickness is her response to the sad and great loss. The heart-sick ravings of mother override her physical sickness. She complains and blames her son's death. The sick mother goes on, "He left me behind, she says suddenly. The words hang in the quiet sick-room with the bitter weight of conclusion, not complaint. He was always impatient" (262).

The mother also seems to have brought the sickness upon her by way of resigning from life and retiring to the sickbed. Further, she starves in order to end her life. The daughter recounts, "I spooned the mashed rice, pulpy baby food, into her tightly-pursed lips" (262). Therefore, the daughter does not only care for her mother's body but also for her heartache and grief.

The narrator is more than a nurse to her mother, acts as a sympathetic listener. “I sit by her bedside, ready to receive stray bits of flotsam, her legacy of stubborn dregs” (263). The patient representing the middle-class society has the luxury of care and cleanliness alike. She has both professional and family support to cope with her illness. The narrator says, “She lets herself be cleaned, bathed and dressed. She lies there, neither resisting nor actively cooperative, while I sponge her, pat her dry, and turn her over” (263).

Githa Hariharan renders a clinical gaze of the ailing mother. “She does not have a single wrinkle on her face. It is exactly as I remember it from twenty years ago, except perhaps that it is thinner, sparer. Her muscles have condensed, withdrawn into themselves, not sagged with the burden of her tearless, unsmiling face” (263). Evidently, the good care and medical aid that the ailing mother receives outweighs the corporeal invasion of the sickness. The body is able to survive the encroachment of illness because of care and nourishment she receives.

The narrator who is also the caregiver displays all the virtues of a good nurse and a dutiful daughter. She keeps trying to make her sickly mother feel better both physically and emotionally too. However, she is unable to pacify her mother, “When I prop her up against the pillow and the room swims languorously about her head, she is furious” (263). The caring daughter is very scrupulous in her nursing efforts and she takes stock of her mother’s breathing also. She observes, “The night air is so still, so heavy with its obvious, palpable silence, that I can hear her breathe.” Further, she goes on to study her charge, “She is bitter that it is an undignified, drunken weakness. Her slim legs feel elephantine; her eyes blur, a fraction less than perfect focus, when she raises her head” (263).

The invalid is able to introspect and indulge in internal discourses as poverty or class discrimination does not trouble her. The narrator’s mother keeps fluctuating between mental and physical agony. Her inner turmoil as a result of her son’s untimely death dissuades her fortitude,

If I loved him, she says, I should have stopped breathing the moment I heard. Instead, I was stunned. Something in me, a vital organ, disconnected itself and turned a clumsy somersault. I cheated myself: the heart, the lungs, ruthless survivors, betrayed my love. One continued to beat, the other inhaled and exhaled callously. (263)

The interplay between illness and care is very significant and palpable through Hariharan’s rendition of a dying mother, and a caring daughter. The narrator does all in her power to tend to her mother’s needs and urges, “My mother shuts her eyes as I massage her scalp lightly with a

thick, green oil. We are a quiet family. Doctor, nurse, mother: creatures of habit, dedicated to the housekeeping of the body” (264).

The rich and poor have different opinions of death. The narrator’s mother has the luxury of pursuing it whilst she is riding in the chariot of medical help and care. The narrator reports, “Death, she says, the word rolling off her tongue with intimacy, demands strength, not a final weakness” (266). Nonetheless, the ailing mother despite her desire to pass away, displays a natural fear of death. She exhibits this fear and the need to cling on to life, “The last two days my mother has insisted that I sit by her all the time” (272). Heike Hartung in the introduction of *Aging, Gender, and Illness in Anglophone Literature* observes, “As an anthropological condition, aging challenges constructivist notions of the individual and social body by defining the limits of life in the finality of death” (1). The narrator’s mother is oscillating between pain of loss and the prospect of death.

Githa Hariharan portrays another female character who is ill only to get attention and care. The narrator is a professional counselled comes across several patients and individuals in need of care and advice. She comes across a wealthy woman who seeks professional help in order to share and talk about her dreams. However, she learns, “Very soon we discovered her reason for coming to us: she wanted someone to listen to her dreams” (268). Doctor’s or counselor’s fee here becomes the exchange value which provides time and care for the rich who suffer alone.

“The Art of Dying” validates the stark reality that class is an important quotient in health and gender. The narrator’s mother is able to receive long-term care and hygiene because she belongs to a middle-class family and there is no male intervention. Further, it is also proven that the task of caregiving is imposed upon the female friends or relatives, and in cases where there is no female care available, then the female invalid suffers. “Within the durations of illness, of treatment and recovery, the caregiving tasks that women might typically engage in fall by the wayside; furthermore, ill women are often left uncared for themselves” (178). Therefore, care and illness both vary in degree depending on class and gender.

### **Conclusion**

The short stories discussed here represent colonial and postcolonial Indian society. In addition to representing different times, they also embody different parts of India. The first two short stories – “Bhadari” and “The Shroud” belong to colonial times and are set in the Northern

and Northeastern part of the country. On the other hand, the latter two short stories, “Murder” and “The art of Dying” are set in the recent past in South India. Further, the social background of the selected narratives ranges from a village to a metropolitan, and from working class to upper-middle class. Regardless of time, class, or region, the women characters undergo a two-fold ordeal as patients. They not only suffer from the illness but also struggle due to social apathy and neglect. They suffer from lack of care, negligence, and powerlessness. They endure both bodily and emotionally the trauma of abuse and abandonment. The role of caregiving is perennially assigned to the women members of society, and it is irreversible in the patriarchal order of things. Further, women endure additional health maladies related to childbirth. Instead of the women receiving additional care and support, they live a deprived life.

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