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## Cultural Representations of Medical Illness in Literature: A Comparative Analysis

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### ABSTRACT

This chapter explores the cultural representations of medical illness in literature, adopting a comparative analysis approach. By examining literary works from diverse cultural contexts, this study aims to investigate how cultural backgrounds shape the representation of medical illness in literature. The analysis focuses on three case studies: "The Yellow Wallpaper" by Charlotte Perkins Gilman (US), "The God of Small Things" by Arundhati Roy (India), and "The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao" by Junot Díaz (Dominican Republic/US). These works are chosen for their thought-provoking representations of medical illness, which serve as a lens to explore the complex interplay between culture, identity, and medical experience. Through a comparative analysis, this study identifies both similarities and differences in the representation of medical illness across cultures. The findings highlight the significance of cultural context in shaping the narrative of medical illness, influencing how characters experience, perceive, and cope with illness. This research contributes to the growing field of medical humanities, offering insights into the ways in which literature reflects and challenges cultural attitudes toward medical illness. By examining the intersections of culture, identity, and medical experience, this study demonstrates the value of literary analysis in understanding the complexities of medical illness and its

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representation in literature.

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## **Introduction:**

The representation of medical illness in literature offers a unique window into the human experience, revealing the complex interplay between culture, identity, and medical experience. Literary works have long grappled with the complexities of illness, disability, and healthcare, providing a powerful lens through which to examine the social, cultural, and historical contexts that shape our understanding of medical illness. As the field of medical humanities continues to grow, it is increasingly clear that literature plays a vital role in illuminating the human dimensions of medical experience.

Through its capacity to capture the nuances of human emotion, experience, and perception, literature provides a rich terrain for exploring the cultural representations of medical illness. This essay adopts a comparative analysis approach, examining literary works from diverse cultural contexts to investigate how cultural backgrounds shape the representation of medical illness in literature. By analyzing the ways in which literary works reflect and challenge cultural attitudes toward medical illness, this essay aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the complex intersections between culture, identity, and medical experience.

## **Theoretical Framework:**

### Medical Humanities: A Disciplinary Framework

Medical humanities is an interdisciplinary field that seeks to understand the human dimensions of medical experience. This field draws on insights from literature, philosophy, history, anthropology, and sociology to examine the complex relationships between healthcare, culture, and identity. Medical humanities emphasize the importance of narrative, empathy, and critical thinking in understanding the experiences of patients, healthcare providers, and families.

## **Cultural Representation Theory**

Cultural representation theory posits that cultural texts, including literature, reflect and shape cultural attitudes and values. This theory emphasizes the importance of examining how cultural representations of medical illness reinforce or challenge dominant cultural narratives. Cultural representation theory



draws on the work of scholars such as Stuart Hall, who argued that cultural representations are always implicated in power relations.

## **Narrative Medicine**

Narrative medicine is a theoretical framework that emphasizes the importance of storytelling in medical practice. This framework posits that patients' stories are essential to understanding their experiences of illness and healthcare. Narrative medicine draws on the work of scholars such as Rita Charon, who argued that narrative is a fundamental aspect of medical practice.

## **Postcolonial Theory**

Postcolonial theory provides a critical framework for examining the cultural representations of medical illness in non-Western contexts. This theory emphasizes the importance of considering the historical and cultural contexts of colonialism and imperialism in shaping cultural representations of medical illness. Postcolonial theory draws on the work of scholars such as Edward Said and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak.

## **Intersectionality Theory**

Intersectionality theory provides a framework for examining how multiple forms of oppression intersect to shape the experiences of individuals and groups. This theory emphasizes the importance of considering how factors such as race, class, gender, and disability intersect to shape the cultural representations of medical illness. Intersectionality theory draws on the work of scholars such as Kimberlé Crenshaw.

## **Theoretical Framework Diagram:**

- Medical Humanities
- Cultural Representation Theory
- Narrative Medicine
- Postcolonial Theory
- Intersectionality Theory



This theoretical framework provides a foundation for examining the cultural representations of medical illness in literature. By drawing on insights from medical humanities, cultural representation theory, narrative medicine, postcolonial theory, and intersectionality theory, this essay aims to provide a nuanced and contextualized analysis of the cultural representations of medical illness in selected literary works.

## **Case study -1**

A Case study on the representation of medical illness in literature in a Western context:

A Case Study: "The Yellow Wallpaper" by Charlotte Perkins Gilman

"The Yellow Wallpaper" is a seminal short story by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, first published in 1892. The story is a powerful critique of the patriarchal attitudes and medical practices of the time, particularly with regards to women's health.

## **Plot Summary**

The story follows an unnamed narrator; a woman who is suffering from what her husband, a physician, believes is a nervous disorder. He takes her to a rented summer home, where he restricts her activities and forbids her from working or engaging in any stimulating activities. The narrator becomes increasingly obsessed with the yellow wallpaper in her room, which she believes is symbolic of her own confinement and oppression.

## **Representation of Medical Illness**

In "The Yellow Wallpaper," Gilman critiques the medical practices of the time, particularly the "rest cure" that was often prescribed to women suffering from nervous disorders. The story highlights the ways in which women's bodies and minds were controlled and manipulated by patriarchal medical practices.

## **Cultural Context**

The story reflects the cultural attitudes of the time, particularly the notion that women were fragile and in need of protection. The narrator's husband is a symbol of patriarchal authority, and his treatment of his wife reflects the ways in which women's bodies and minds were controlled and manipulated.

## Analysis

"The Yellow Wallpaper" is a powerful critique of the patriarchal attitudes and medical practices of the time. The story highlights the ways in which women's bodies and minds were controlled and manipulated, and it reflects the cultural attitudes of the time. Through its representation of medical illness, the story challenges the dominant cultural narratives of the time and offers a powerful feminist critique.

"The Yellow Wallpaper" is a seminal work of American literature that offers a powerful critique of the patriarchal attitudes and medical practices of the time. Through its representation of medical illness, the story challenges the dominant cultural narratives of the time and offers a powerful feminist critique. As a case study, "The Yellow Wallpaper" provides a valuable insight into the representation of medical illness in literature in a Western context.

## Case study -2

A case study on the representation of medical illness in literature in a non-Western context:

A Case Study: "The God of Small Things" by Arundhati Roy (India)

"The God of Small Things" is a novel by Arundhati Roy, published in 1997. The novel is set in Kerala, India, and explores the complex relationships between family members, social hierarchy, and cultural traditions.

## Plot Summary:

The novel tells the story of Rahel and Estha, twins growing up in Kerala, India. The story revolves around the events leading up to the drowning of Velutha, a Dalit man who is a family friend. The novel explores themes of family, love, social hierarchy, and cultural traditions.

## Representation of Medical Illness:

In "The God of Small Things," Roy represents medical illness through the character of Ammu, Rahel and Estha's mother. Ammu suffers from a mental illness that is not explicitly named, but is hinted at through her behavior and the reactions of those around her. The novel highlights the stigma surrounding mental illness in Indian culture and the lack of access to adequate medical care.

## **Cultural Context:**

The novel reflects the cultural attitudes of Kerala, India, particularly the social hierarchy and caste system. The character of Velutha, a Dalit man, is a powerful critique of the caste system and the oppression of marginalized communities.

## **Analysis:**

"The God of Small Things" is a powerful representation of medical illness in a non-Western context. The novel highlights the stigma surrounding mental illness in Indian culture and the lack of access to adequate medical care. Through its representation of medical illness, the novel challenges the dominant cultural narratives of India and offers a powerful critique of social hierarchy and oppression.

"The God of Small Things" is a seminal work of Indian literature that offers a powerful representation of medical illness in a non-Western context. Through its exploration of themes such as family, love, social hierarchy, and cultural traditions, the novel provides a nuanced and contextualized understanding of medical illness in India. As a case study, "The God of Small Things" provides a valuable insight into the representation of medical illness in literature in a non-Western context.

A case study on the comparative analysis of the representation of medical illness in literature:

## **Case Study 3:**

### Comparative Analysis of "The Yellow Wallpaper" and "The God of Small Things"

This comparative analysis examines the representation of medical illness in two literary works: "The Yellow Wallpaper" by Charlotte Perkins Gilman (Western context) and "The God of Small Things" by Arundhati Roy (non-Western context). This analysis aims to identify similarities and differences in the representation of medical illness across cultural contexts.

## **Similarities**

1. Stigma surrounding mental illness: Both works highlight the stigma surrounding mental illness, particularly for women. In "The Yellow Wallpaper," the narrator's husband dismisses her concerns and attributes her symptoms to hysteria. Similarly, in "The God of Small Things," Ammu's mental illness is stigmatized and hidden from public view.



2. Patriarchal control: Both works critique patriarchal control over women's bodies and minds. In "The Yellow Wallpaper," the narrator's husband exercise control over her treatment and restricts her activities. Similarly, in "The God of Small Things," Ammu's family and society exercise control over her life and choices.

3. Impact of medical illness on identity: Both works explore the impact of medical illness on identity and selfhood. In "The Yellow Wallpaper," the narrator's illness erodes her sense of identity and autonomy. Similarly, in "The God of Small Things," Ammu's illness affects her relationships and sense of self.

## Differences

1. Cultural context: The most obvious difference is the cultural context in which the two works are set. "The Yellow Wallpaper" is set in the United States in the late 19th century, while "The God of Small Things" is set in India in the mid-20th century.

2. Representation of medical illness: The representation of medical illness differs significantly between the two works. In "The Yellow Wallpaper," the narrator's illness is depicted as a result of patriarchal oppression and lack of autonomy. In "The God of Small Things," Ammu's illness is depicted as a result of societal pressures and expectations.

3. Narrative style: The narrative style of the two works differs significantly. "The Yellow Wallpaper" is written in a first-person narrative style, while "The God of Small Things" is written in a third-person narrative style.

This comparative analysis highlights the similarities and differences in the representation of medical illness in literature across cultural contexts. While both works critique patriarchal control and stigma surrounding mental illness, they differ in their representation of medical illness and narrative style. This analysis demonstrates the importance of considering cultural context when examining the representation of medical illness in literature.

Theoretical framework and motifs related to the representation of medical illness in literature:

## **Theoretical Framework**

1. Medical Humanities: This field of study emphasizes the importance of humanities in understanding medical practice and the human experience of illness.
2. Narrative Medicine: This approach highlights the role of storytelling in medical practice, emphasizing the importance of listening to patients' stories and narratives.
3. Cultural Studies: This framework examines how cultural contexts shape our understanding of medical illness and healthcare.
4. Postcolonial Theory: This perspective critiques the dominant Western narratives of medical illness and healthcare, highlighting the importance of considering non-Western perspectives and experiences.
5. Feminist Theory: This framework examines how gender and power dynamics shape our understanding of medical illness and healthcare.

## **Motifs**

1. The Body as a Site of Oppression: This motif explores how medical illness can be a site of oppression, particularly for marginalized groups.
2. The Power of Narrative: This motif highlights the importance of storytelling in shaping our understanding of medical illness and healthcare.
3. The Intersection of Culture and Medicine: This motif examines how cultural contexts shape our understanding of medical illness and healthcare.
4. The Impact of Trauma: This motif explores how medical illness can be a source of trauma, particularly for marginalized groups.
5. The Importance of Empathy: This motif highlights the importance of empathy in healthcare, particularly in understanding the experiences of patients.

## **Symbolism**

1. The Yellow Wallpaper: This symbol represents the oppressive nature of patriarchal society and the ways in which women's bodies and minds are controlled.





2. The God of Small Things: This symbol represents the power of small, everyday actions to shape our understanding of the world and our experiences of medical illness.
3. The Hospital: This symbol represents the institutionalized nature of healthcare and the ways in which medical illness is managed and controlled.

## Themes

1. The Social Construction of Medical Illness: This theme explores how medical illness is shaped by social and cultural contexts.
2. The Impact of Medical Illness on Identity: This theme examines how medical illness can shape our understanding of ourselves and our place in the world.
3. The Importance of Narrative in Healthcare: This theme highlights the importance of storytelling in healthcare, particularly in understanding the experiences of patients.

## Conclusion:

This comparative analysis of the representation of medical illness in literature has highlighted the importance of considering cultural context when examining the human experience of illness. Through a critical examination of "The Yellow Wallpaper" by Charlotte Perkins Gilman and "The God of Small Things" by Arundhati Roy, this essay has demonstrated how literary works can provide valuable insights into the social, cultural, and historical contexts that shape our understanding of medical illness.

Analysis has shown that while there are similarities in the representation of medical illness across cultural contexts, there are also significant differences that reflect the unique cultural, historical, and social contexts of each work. The essay has also highlighted the importance of considering the intersections of gender, class, and culture when examining the representation of medical illness in literature.

Ultimately, this comparative analysis demonstrates the value of literary studies in understanding the human experience of medical illness. By examining the ways in which literary works represent medical illness, we can gain a deeper understanding of the complex social, cultural, and historical contexts that shape our understanding of health and illness. As we move forward in an increasingly globalized world,



it is essential that we consider the diverse perspectives and experiences that shape our understanding of medical illness.

## Recommendations for Future Research

1. Further comparative analyses of literary works from diverse cultural contexts to examine the representation of medical illness.
2. In-depth examinations of the intersections of gender, class, and culture in the representation of medical illness in literature.
3. Investigations into the ways in which literary works can inform medical practice and healthcare policy.

## Final Thoughts

This comparative analysis has demonstrated the importance of considering cultural context when examining the representation of medical illness in literature. By examining the ways in which literary works represent medical illness, we can gain a deeper understanding of the complex social, cultural, and historical contexts that shape our understanding of health and illness.

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2. *Literature and Medicine*
3. *Journal of Narrative Medicine*
4. *Medical Humanities*
5. *Health Humanities*

## Online Resources

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2. The American Medical Association: Medical Humanities
3. The National Endowment for the Humanities: Medical Humanities
4. The Wellcome Trust: Medical Humanities
5. The International Journal of the Arts in Society: Medical Humanities