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Reading the Brain, Narrating the Mind: A Comparative Study of Richard Powers' *The Echo Maker* and Oliver Sacks' case diary *A Man Who Mistook his Wife for a Hat* and *Other Clinical Tales*

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Abstract: Narrating stories has always been a part of human culture. Stories were told to children by their grandparents, servants and aunts usually at night thereby delving deep into the unconscious surface of the human mind. Reading aids for the better function of the human brain. It transports the readers to a different realm, which in Coleridge parlance is 'willing suspension of disbelief'. Reading rewires our brain, by providing a better understanding of the world around us. It creates a positive change in the neural networks of the human brain. The narrative structure of different genres of literature sheds light on how mind and the brain function. Its traces can be seen in the works of writers like Charles Dickens, Charlotte Bronte, R L Stevenson, Umberto Eco, Ian Macwan, Richard Powers, Oliver Sacks etc. We cannot ignore the fact human brain represents both inner conflicts and interpersonal relations, which a writer represents in his own terms thus providing a neurochemical depiction of the human mind. In delving deep into the world of literature we get an opportunity to understand how literary texts aids the brain to shape perceptions, emotions and memory. It will also help the readers experience the characters emotions as if it were their own. This paper aims to focus on various narrative techniques like stream-of-consciousness, fragmented memory and portrayal of characters with neurological issues like autism, aspergers, capgras syndrome etc using the genre of medical humanities. By analysing the narrative structure of the select literatures I would like to do a critical reading of the same and offer a literary view of the select works. This paper also aims to demonstrate how Medical Humanities provides an important forum for literature to address the experiences of illness, trauma, and suffering as experienced by characters, thereby tracing some of the gaps that exist in present-day literature in dealing with Medical Humanities.

Keywords: Capgras, neurochemical, stream of consciousness, neurological.



In a close examination of various literary texts we come across varied characters who mirrors health conditions like brain damage, syndrome, memory loss, madness, strained family relationships etc. It makes us think about the various challenges they face in the world beyond the comfort of their home. Medical humanities has initiated much conversation in the field of health, fitness and disease as these are the primary concerns of human life. The genre of literature has provided a vast space for the readers and doctors to think empathetically when they deal with their patients/characters. Dr. Prasenjit Das in his article “Medical Humanities and Contemporary Literary Practices” highlights the importance of introducing medical humanities in the curriculum. Awareness on health and treatment could only be generated with an interdisciplinary field of study that justifies the idea that literature written for the same is best suited for the world which we live in. Humanities and arts provide a rich array of works that is best suited to address various issues related to health, treatment and recovery. Besides offering a historico-cultural perspective on medical practices, attention to literature and the arts became an important aspect in Medical Humanities as it started developing and nurturing the skills of observation, analysis, empathy and self-reflection qualities which are most essential in providing a humane medical care. Relevant ideas in the field of medical humanities has always been a topic of discussion. Some accepted while others being dismissed. Medical industry always set goals to improve the health of the people. When faced with a medical emergency, patients always expect for a more humane approach from doctors and the people around them. They always feel a desire to be treated with empathy and understanding, expecting a kind-hearted approach. This is where the medical humanities step in.

When writers handle their works with precision and accuracy literature may inspire, educate, and encourage the readers. It creates a rich tapestry of stories that shows how illness can be accepted with greater understanding and empathy. It acts as a mirror reflecting wide range of experience, showcasing various challenging situations. Arthur Frank, a Canadian sociologist and a key figure in the field of medical humanities, known for his influential work *The Wounded Storyteller*, explores how narratives are shaped on the basis of the experiences of the ill person. His categorization of illness narratives – restitution, chaos, and quest – offers a kaleidoscope of insight to examine the narrative strategies within the medical field. The structure of any illness story is shaped by how the individual conceptualizes their condition: whether as a



disruption to normalcy, an overwhelming and disordered experience, or a transformative journey that redefines purpose. Often, these perspectives overlap in lived reality.

I consider each narrative type in four sections, beginning with its plot. Second, I describe the elective affinity that the narrative type has to the action problems of embodiment (control, body-relatedness, other-relatedness and desire). Third is how the narrative works as a self-story. Finally, I discuss the power of each narrative type and its limitations. (Frank 76)

Various literary works have examined illness and suffering offering insights into the real life experience of those who are affected. It fosters empathy and understanding thereby providing readers with an opportunity to learn about the difficulties faced by people in real life. Over time societal perceptions have changed, moving from shame and ignorance to increased acceptance and recognition. Neurodiverse characters are portrayed in contemporary literature and media with greater depth and complexity, showcasing both their strengths and weaknesses while dispelling myths and encouraging acceptance and inclusivity. Richard Powers and Oliver Sacks have published literary works and case diaries portraying characters with neurodiverse issues. Richard Powers' *The Echo Maker* and Oliver Sacks' case diary *A Man Who Mistook his wife for a Hat and other Clinical tales* are examples. In the present scenario, there has been a growing research to study the human brain as there is an increasing number of brain disorders like Alzheimers, Autism and Schizophrenia. The brain is one of the most important parts of the human body. Its working is complex. It determines our perceptions of reality. It controls our dreams, aspirations, thoughts and even our movement. Emily Dickinson, in her poem "The Brain is Wider than the Sky" portrays the immeasurable capacity of the human brain. The poem illustrates how the brain can absorb limitless things, and its imagination is wider than the vast expanse of the sky.

The Brain—is wider than the Sky—
For—put them side by side—
The one the other will contain
With ease—and you—beside—
The Brain is deeper than the sea—
For—hold them—Blue to Blue—
The one the other will absorb—

As sponges—Buckets—do—

The Brain is just the weight of God —
For — Heft them — Pound for Pound —
And they will differ — if they do —

As Syllable from Sound (Dickinson 1-12)

Richard Powers, in his novel *The Echo Maker* bridges the gap between literature and neuroscience. Mark Schultze, a young man, meets with a fatal accident, thereby developing Capgras syndrome. In the case of Capgras syndrome, patients can consciously recognize people and objects through their sight and hearing, but for people with whom the patient has considerable emotional ties, the unconscious recognition malfunctions; the actual emotional response to such familiarities does not match up to the brain's expected response, which therefore leads the patient to believe the mother, brother, spouse, pet, or home is not the real one, but instead has been replaced by an impostor. The brain's ability to trick itself into believing in its mental construct showcases itself especially well in Capgras. In the novel Mark believes that his sister Karin Schluter is an impostor. Mark's identity and self is disrupted after the accident. He loses connection with his inner self and the outside world. Karin struggles hard to bring back Mark to normalcy.

They moved him from trauma to a room where she could sit with him. He lay stretched on the bed, a felled mannequin. Two days later, he opened his eyes for half a minute, only to squeeze them shut. But they opened again, at dusk that evening. Over the next day, she counted six more eye openings. Each time, he looked out on some horror film (Powers 18)

Apart from his inability to communicate Mark faces difficulty in the cognitive functions of the brain. He loses his ability to think and act. Spoken language becomes strange for him: "The windowed tube came out of his throat, leaving the passage open for words. Still, Mark didn't talk" (Powers 43). He was not able to control his aggression and desire: "He alternated between docility and rage" (Powers 43). "His days were laced with flashes of paranoia, outbursts of pleasure and rage, and increasingly elaborate explanations" (Powers 89). The complex feelings connected to social alienation and loneliness are also conveyed in *The Echo Maker*. After the fatal accident Mark's own self became fragmented. Powers powerfully illustrates this with the migration of Sand Hill Cranes. The bird's migration symbolically suggests Mark's own self from continuity to



dislocation. The entire world of mark turned upside down migrating to a different world just like the sand hill cranes. “It occurs to Mark: his accident happened right at the very start of bird season” (Powers 324)

A common goal for the patients with neurodiverse identities is, accepting who they are. Bibliotherapy aides patients with neurological disorders to bridge the gap between their own self and the real world around them. Reading aids in the emotional well-being of patients. Its like a workout for the brain, helping to enhance the cognitive abilities of our mind. Reading can be helpful to people with facing with memory challenges. In *The Echo Maker* we could see Karin helping Mark to retain his memory by reading. “She sat and read him for hours. She read aloud until the visitors on the other side of the sliding curtain began to curse her under their breath. Reading calmed him, especially at night, when he slipped downward, back into the accident”.(Powers 44). Elsewhere in the novel, we could also notice Bonnie and Karin reading Hickory Dickory Dock for Mark. “They tried him on “Hickory Dickory Dock” Mark his face strained with ecstatic concentration, scored perfectly on dock, clock, down, and dock” (Powers 65). Dr Webber, who treats Mark, reads a story so that Mark can complete the sequence of the story. Regular reading by his sister and friends helps Mark to balance his memory and perceptions about the world around him.

The significance of accepting difference and appreciating the richness of neurodiversity in all its manifestations is ultimately shown by their personal journeys of self-discovery. By providing readers with a window into the lives of character who suffer from neurodevelopmental disorders, literature has the capacity to promote empathy and an awareness of neurodiversity. Readers can learn about the difficulties that people with such disorders encounter, like perspective-taking issues and deficiencies in empathy, through detailed portrayals etc. Readers who really immerse themselves in the story will be able to relate to the characters hardship, setbacks, and victories, leading to a greater comprehension and appreciation of neurodiversity. Readers can face their prejudice and preconception by delving into the inner thoughts, motivation, and interactions of character, which promotes better acceptance and empathy. Additionally, literature offers a forum for discussion and debate, enabling readers to examine their own perspectives on neurodiversity and how they could support the development of a more accepting society. In the end, readers who engage with a variety of narratives might grow in empathy, compassion, and understanding of the human condition. By means of meticulous characterization, writers portray the peculiarities and intricacies of people with mental



challenges highlighting their advantages, and development over the narrative. Recurring themes symbolize the character's inner world and outside environment, and symbolism can also be used to illustrate the difficulties of navigating social interactions and viewing the world through a different lens.

Apart from novels there are numerable case diaries that pictures people with various challenges. A neurologist by profession Oliver Sacks' case diary *A Man Who Mistook his wife for a Hat and other Clinical Tales* is one among them.

The Man who Mistook his wife for a Hat, I believe it to be of fundamental importance. Such cases constitute a radical challenge to one of the most entrenched axioms or assumptions of classical neurology-in particular, the notion that brain damage, any brain damage, reduces or removes the 'abstract' and categorical attitude, reducing the individual to the emotional and concrete" (Sacks 10)

The first case diary is about a musician with a rare neurological condition called 'visual agnosia'. (caused by the damage due to the occipital or parietal lobes of the brain). "There is nothing the matter with your eyes, the doctor concluded. But there is trouble with the visual parts of your brain" (Sacks 11). Dr. P, the talented musician could not recognize people by their face, but by their voice. Music is a form of narrative for Dr. P. This helped Dr P to maintain a balance between his brain and his own self. Music is central to his neuropsychological health. "He sings all the time-eating songs, dressing songs, bathing songs, everything. He can't do anything unless he makes it a song" (Sacks 18). Dr. P faced the students not with his eyes but with his ears. He had perfect musical intelligence. Oliver Sacks makes Dr. P do many activities. Once he gave Dr. P a pair of glove. Initially he could not recognize it as a glove, but a box used to collect coins. Oliver Sacks was puzzled at the juncture. In the book he says "No child would have the power to see and speak of continuous surfaces...unfolded in itself, but any child, any infant, would immediately know a glove as a glove see it as familiar, as going with hand" (Sacks 16). Later Oliver sacks was surprised to see Dr. P misunderstands his wife to be a hat. Dr. P is seen holding his wife head and pulling it off. He had mistaken his wife to be hat.

Neurological disorders have ripple effects. Apart from the self-suffering of the patients, the family members also endures the pain of the disorders. Neurological impairment alters the very foundation of the family. It creates complex challenges for the family as well. Family members witness the sudden decline of their loved



once. In *The Echo Maker* we could witness how Mark's brain injury challenges his relationship with his sister Karin. The moment Mark gains consciousness he thinks that his own sister is an imposter. He rejected his own sister. Karin felt helpless in the situation. She abandons her hometown and takes up the role of a caretaker for Mark. "I'm sorry. It kills me to see him like that. The more he says he doesn't know me, the less I know how to be toward him" (Powers 152). The more she attempts to rebuild the relationship, the more she gets distanced from her brother Mark. Richard Powers comments:

The Woman Who Would Be Karin keeps coming by, pretty much every day. She brings him groceries and doesn't want cash for them. All very suspicious, but the food is mostly sealed, and by and large it tastes pretty great. Sometimes she cooks for him. Go figure. But it seems like a sweet deal, at least until he learns what it's going to cost him. (Powers 256)

Similarly, in Oliver Sacks' case diary *A Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat and Other Clinical Tales*, Dr P's visual agnosia alters his family relationship as he fails to identify his wife. Unlike *The Echo Maker*, in *A Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat* (the first case diary), Dr P's wife adjusts to her husband's disorder. When he tried to pull his wife's head, mistaking it for a hat, she was quite adapted to the disorder.

The human body emerges as a battleground where power, discipline, culture, love, emotions, medicine, and disorders collide. It is a canvas onto which the demands of society are etched, cleverly masked under the pretence of personal choice and improvement. Literature on neurodiverse issues provides insight into how the condition is portrayed in literature and how this can greatly influence how the general public views and comprehends it. In addition to reflecting cultural sentiments, literature advances a larger conversation by giving characters who might symbolize this condition nuance and complexity. It is clear from a thorough examination of numerous books that writers have differed in their sensitivity, correctness, and representation. Writers have broken stereotypes and provided complex viewpoints about different aspects of people with diverse characteristics. Literature has the power to significantly contribute to the development of a more inclusive society by presenting stories that are sympathetic and well-researched. It is crucial for us as readers and academics to interact critically with these depictions, supporting those that shed light on the condition and dispel myths in order to improve our understanding of disorders and syndromes as a whole. Such a portrayal of characters fosters empathy and understanding within the family and the society. The books *The Echo*



Maker and *A Man Who Mistook his wife for a Hat* and other *Clinical Tales* are now recognized as important literary works that delve into the complex lives of characters faced with neurological disorders. Richard Powers and Oliver Sacks have succeeded in fostering a deep emotional connection between the readers and the characters. Mark Schultze in *The Echo Maker* and Dr.P in the first case diary of *A Man Who Mistook his wife for a Hat* and other *Clinical Tales* are complex characters who tries to overcome their situations by doing various activities. Mark also regains his ability to imitate speech. He begins to repeat sounds, words, and phrases in a nonsensical way. “Mark’s speech traced the same tight loops his walking did. One afternoon it was chick, chick, chick, chick, ‘for most of an hour” (Powers 37).

Meaningful communication between doctors and patients is necessary for curing ailments, be it disorders, syndromes and disabilities. Medical humanities aids in addressing the human condition using disciplines like history, philosophy, literature and sociology. Proper treatment of illness requires a better understanding of the patient’s thoughts and emotions. Literature offers a platform for narrating the inner conflicts of the victims, thereby making the bond between the doctor and patients stronger. The complexity of brain damage and syndromes and the many narrative approaches and viewpoints that each author uses in his fiction/non-fiction create opportunities for more in-depth investigation. Future studies should focus further on particular areas, including how the characters' sensory and cognitive experiences are portrayed or how different storytelling techniques are compared to elicit empathy and comprehension in readers. As the themes in the two selected works are still relevant today, further research into them is likely to follow a fruitful path, demonstrating that this journey is only the first step towards a deeper comprehension of how literature can change the way society talks about itself and open doors for more acceptance and knowledge of neurological disorders.

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