

American by Birth, Cosmopolitan by Choice: Susan Sontag as a Crusader of Our Time

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Susan Sontag (1933-2004)

Courtesy: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Susan_Sontag

Abstract

Susan Sontag (1933-2004), a prominent American, has made a mark in history and has carved out a distinct identity of her own in the American literary imagination because of her abiding concerns to expose and highlight the problems and issues of American life, like the baneful effects of capitalism and consumerism, drug abuse, or the dangers of a military-industrial complex. Her writings are being discussed internationally; though she was an American, her works were never only centered on America, as they touch upon issues and concerns which are truly cosmopolitan, and universal. Once Susan Sontag had devoted a chapter to the German writer Mr. Elias Canetti (1905-1994) in her book of essays *Under the Sign of Saturn* and his knowledge “about the exiled writer's easily generalized relation to place, and his way of claiming many places as one's territory as he had the privilege and the burden of understanding, Jew that he is, the higher cosmopolitanism. Canetti was writing in the tradition of Goethe, an 18th-century writer living in the 20th century, someone who was both cosmopolitan and universal. Like Cannetti, Susan Sontag urged “to remember your humanity and forget the rest.” She believed in the ideals of secularism, reason, libertarianism, internationalism and solidarity; she detested the way capitalism and

fundamentalism were resulting in democracy's death; and she knew that the dismantling of traditional norms by the capitalist culture, and the growth of secular consumerist capitalism was not acceptable to her. She visualized that America was trying to overpower other nations, and to empower herself by disempowering others and destroying their culture. Americans were, in fact, trying to get away with their conscience, just the way Nazi did, during Second World War. Susan Sontag travelled to Vietnam and witnessed the terrible conditions of people and soldiers, and she criticized the selfish role of American government in Vietnam War, which was resulting in the death of its own soldiers as well as that of the Vietnamese. America's run for a munificent future at the cost of humanity was disdained by her. She believed that through art one can delight, inform as well as transform. She believed in aesthetic pleasure, but also, she emphasized that art has the power to transform the society, build nations, instill moral values and safeguard humanity at large. Susan Sontag, like Canetti, had felt in a profound way the responsibility of words, and much of her work makes the effort to communicate something of what she had learned about how to pay attention to the world by going beyond the frontiers of her own country to write about issues of universal human concerns, like the war in Vietnam and Angola, or Salvador, as another writer Joan Didion wrote about it, or the fight against AIDs, or in the field of literature, to write about the way photography determines and influences our perceptions of reality, or those manifold problems faced by Americans at home ,which , though rooted in American culture , touch upon the lives of others in other cultures.

Keywords: Susan Sontag, issues of universal human concerns, power of art and literature, transformation of society, remember humanity.

Susan Sontag, a prominent American literary writer, has made a mark in history. She has carved an identity of her own in the field of aesthetics. Her writings are being discussed internationally. Though she was an American by birth but her works encompassed the entire humanity. She was a globe-trotter and her writings focused on international and global issues.

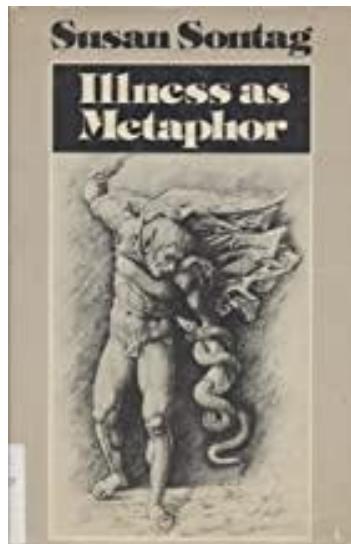
She urged, "to remember your humanity and forget the rest." She believed in the ideals of secularism, reason, libertarianism, internationalism and solidarity. She detested the way capitalism and fundamentalism results in democracy's death. The dismantling of traditional norms by the capitalist culture and the growth of secular consumerist capitalism is not accepted by her.

Sontag witnessed how America is imposing her identity and trying to destroy the mosaic of culture. America is trying to overpower the other nations. It is trying to empower herself by destabilizing other nations and their cultures. Americans are trying to get away with their conscience, just the way Nazi did, during Second World War. They are trying to ignore their own history and build a new world, steeped with their own capitalist culture.

Sontag was not supportive of America's role in Vietnam War. She travelled to Vietnam and witnessed the terrible and horrific conditions of people and soldiers.

She reproaches the selfish role of American government in Vietnam War, which resulted in the deaths of countless American soldiers and so many Vietnamese citizens.

America's race for a fabulous future at the cost of humanity is disdained by her. She believed that art could gladden, inform as well as transform mankind. She believed in aesthetic pleasure, and also she emphasized that art has the power to transform the society, and build nations, instill moral values and safeguard humanity at large.



Courtesy: www.amazon.com

In my paper, I discuss Sontag's cosmopolitan idea enumerated in her work, *Illness as Metaphors*. Illness is rarely used as a topic of literary discussion, but Sontag in her work, paved new grounds by using illness as a topic of discussion. This is a rare venture where men of letters trying to explore illness, a critical work outside medical texts.

Sontag refers to diseases like T.B and Cancer, to get her point. These diseases used to terrorize people, people used to fear them, but in course of time, these diseases have lost their monstrosity, and the deadly metaphors have lost weight. Sontag has discussed this passage of being in state of mystery to a state of being discovered.

Susan Sontag says that when one enters the world, he/she one day has to enter the kingdom of illness. For some, the kingdom enlarges and encompasses them in their gulf and for some it is a mere visit. Diseases like Cancer and Tuberculosis etc. which are dangerous, usually makes them a permanent resident of the kingdom of illness.

Sontag, in her monograph, has interpreted the problems of those citizens who visited the kingdom of illness, and became a permanent resident of it. T.B and cancer are those diseases which are considered to enter one's life slowly and stealthily, turn a healthy man into a patient, who slowly merges in the very sand from which he has taken birth from. Earlier T.B was a dreaded disease; it grew terror among people. It was shrouded by mystery, but slowly the veil was removed, the monstrous mask was uncovered. People became aware of the reasons, and a cure was found.

Now this mask has been worn by cancer. Cancer is a monster disease which slowly and painfully consumes its patients. It's still a mystery that is why it is considered a taboo. They are morally shunned by their society and family.

The metaphors associated with cancer are deadly, monstrous, etc. which symbolizes a dark, negative side of life. The patient is shown as guilt ridden and morally damned.

Patients feel worse affected when they know they are suffering. So, they are usually not informed about the disease. Those suffering from T.B, they are usually not informed about it. Their approach towards life will change, For example, Kafka, in his letter wrote, that how people don't discuss T.B freely, "since in discussing tuberculosis...everybody drops into shy, evasive, glassy eyed manner of speech."

For example, like in Italy and France, the patients are not informed about their disease. They believe not all patients can maturely handle the news; it can break them mentally and physically.

In certain places like America, the patient's family is not informed about the disease. They cannot inform the patient's family without patient's permission. For example, "A Federal Law, the 1966 Freedom of Information Act, cites "treatment for cancer" if disclosed "would be an unwarranted invasion of personal privacies."

The same treatment is meted out to patients suffering from cancer. There are certain places where the thought process and approach is changing, the mystery is getting disclosed, but in certain places it is still a mystery.

In the language of Arnold, literature is 'Criticism of Life'. Literature is the mirror of society. It reflects certain things which is invisible to our eyes or which we are unaware of. The life is judged in a critical way, we try to analyze things.

In this work, Sontag has shown people's attitudes, viewpoints about diseases and patients and the way the society and individual approaches a disease, and the metaphor attached to the diseases.

Sontag here tries to give us an idea that how society treats patients and how illness affects an individual and society. She gives us a picture how illness down the ages, how in 19th century T.B was dreaded, with time the mystery was resolved and in 20th century the vacuum created by T.B is filled by Cancer.

Different ages had different approach towards illness, for some it is a heroic act, for some lethal. Some feel it is an individual/ self who is responsible for the disease while some feel it is the environment which is responsible for their miserable condition.

For example, Victorian T.B. patients described overcrowded life, burdened with work and family obligations and bereavements. Nineteenth century cancer patients were thought to get the disease as a result of hyperactivity and hyper intensity. In early twentieth century it was said that cancer is a disease that is caused due to repression of energy. While in late twentieth century the image changed, cancer as a metaphor used for ferocious energy. Tommaso Landolfi, in his science fiction, calls the spaceship ‘Cancer Queen’.

Certain people feel it is the divine intervention; it is a divine judgment upon people, the individual and society. Usually when disease happens to be in an epidemic scale, the society gets disturbed, some lose their mental balance, and some behave like insane. For example, “Massacres of Jews in unprecedented numbers took place everywhere in plague-stricken Europe of 1347-48...”

In literature there are various instances, how a society treats an epidemic disease. For example, in Oedipus Rex, Oedipus feels that it is the some individual’s grave mistake that God is punishing them in the form of plague. When he gets to know that he is one, he blinds himself to punish him for the sin he committed by mistake. Epidemic diseases were a common figure for social disorder.

From pestilence came “pestilent”, whose figurative meaning according to Oxford English Dictionary, is “injurious to religion, morals, or public peace-1513”; and “pestilential” meaning “morally baneful or pernicious-1513.” In *Iliad* and *Odyssey* disease happens to be a supernatural punishment, as demonic possession, and as the result of natural causes.

Sontag has also enumerated the fact that sexual diseases are considered a taboo, which is usually not discussed. It is considered as awful, immoral, because people know the source of the disease. The patient is guilt-ridden and usually ostracized from the society.

But T.B. and cancer were mysterious, cancer still is. Anything that is mysterious is treated as dangerous. Earlier people thought T.B. and cancer to be same but with passage of time,

advancement in medical fields, and invention of microscope cleared this misconception. X-Ray, microscope helped them to distinguish between them, while T.B. is a disease of lungs, cancer happens because of mutation, sudden increase in the number of cells.

When people understood T.B. can be cured, its terror, or else the treatment meted out to the patients were awful, like leprosy in its heyday aroused a sense of fear.

Joseph Severn, Keats' companion, wrote how when Keats died of T.B. in Piazza di Spagna, the 'Italians burned all the furniture, door, scraped walls and windows, etc.' "Those brutal Italians have nearly finished their monstrous business." Now that people know its cause and effect, they treat it with less hate. Cancer is still a mystery, that's why it still grows a terror among individuals; it is feared, and the patients ask themselves "Why me?". As if it is unfair or wrong to suffer from such disease, making them and their family mentally and physically suffer.

Sontag in her writing has discussed the difference between T.B. and Cancer. T.B. is a disease of time, poverty etc, while cancer is because of idleness and slug. In T.B., change of environment is advised, while the fight is against one's one body. T.B. is painless, it is a disease of the lungs, with development of medical science, its cure has been found, but cancer is a painful disease nobody knows its total cure. Kafka wrote about T.B., "I'm mentally ill, the disease of the lungs is nothing but an overflowing of my mental illness."

All one knows about Cancer is it happens because of abnormal growth of cells, mutation of cells. The treatment process is equally painful, mentally as well as physically. Chemotherapy - Radiation makes a man weak. "The agony of chemotherapy is a standard phrase." The patient always questions himself why he is the one who has to undergo through such pain. T.B. happens in the upper part of the body, it is considered to make man spiritual. While cancer can happen in any part, or whole body, making one uncomfortable to discuss about it.

T.B. is the disease of soul, it expands one's consciousness, and it is a disease of passion, too much passion. While cancer is a disease of the body, it lessens one's vision; it is a disease of repression of emotions, or resignation.

It is said that T.B. makes one romantic. It is associated with romantic notion of melancholy. Poe wrote, "A fitful strain of melancholy will ever be found inseparable from the perfection of the beautiful." Sontag writes there is a considerable amount of literary work about T.B. In some it is glorified, while some talk about its negative side.

We don't find that amount of literature regarding cancer, though there is a growth in literary articles presenting psychological functions of cancer. It talks about the emotional causes of cancer that is usually 'depression', 'unsatisfied with lives', 'broken homes', and 'broken relationships'.

All speak of despair, discontent, isolation, a mark of consumer culture, a language many Americans use now.

Sontag has drawn her metaphors from her engagement with different walks of life. She has discussed how disease metaphors is referred in every field.

1. Disease metaphors used in society: - Something that is evil is used with reference to cancer. For example, like 'Lawrence said, "masturbation, is the deepest and most dangerous cancer of our civilization."'"

Sontag said about America's involvement in Vietnam war that "the white race is the cancer of human history."

2. Disease metaphors used in politics: - Something that is wrong or virulent is compared with cancer. For example: - Arab polemics, feels that "Israel is a cancer in the heart of the Arab World." On the other hand Israelites claim that Arab is "the cancer of Middle East."

Trotsky called, "Stalinism the cancer of Marxism." Stalinism was called cholera, syphilis, and a cancer.

3. Disease metaphors used in the field of economics: - Sontag here discusses the metaphors in terms of capitalism. The growth of capitalism had certain negative impact on the economic forefront. The negative picture is depicted through the metaphors related with T.B. and Cancer. In the late nineteenth century, consumption, wasting; squandering of vitality give us the image of ill effects of capitalism that is compared to T.B. In the late twentieth century capitalism was described in the way cancer is described in an evil way like abnormal growth, repression of energy that is refusal to consume or spend.
4. Disease metaphors used in field of military: - Cancer is considered as an enemy which invades the human body and colonizes it. It is compared with gangrene that brings forth disaster. The military metaphors used for cancer is all radical, which has nothing to do with peace; that is why it is not good to use fatal metaphors while referring it with cancer because it somehow puts negative impact upon the patient.
5. Disease in terms of morality:- The effect of disease in individual's character as well as society. When a person suffers from a disease the individual's character is revealed. It acts as a booster for some people, they change their attitude, develop insight into life, and modify themselves, by changing their mode of life. The realization of death makes them do good work. Instead of blaming the environment they bring a change in self. But in some it brings their monster to the forefront, they wish to live at any cost.

I conclude my paper that, Susan Sontag vehemently asserts her cosmopolitan view; in her metaphors, she states how dreaded diseases like T.B. and cancer have made an impact on an individual and society.

Literature is making an entry into the field of medicines, illness which isn't a forte of literature. Sontag is analyzing diseases within social context, from a humane point of view, instead of a medical point of view.

Man is a moral and rational being. He tries to get answers to his questions; he wishes to know the causes and effect of any phenomenon. When mystery disappears, knowledge occurs, you can find a reason when you know the cause. When mystery lingers, fear increases, dread of the disease occurs, lack of knowledge makes a disease dreadful. Cancer is still a mystery that's why it is still feared, while T.B. isn't.

Sontag uses different types of metaphors to state her point. The virulence of disease corresponds to human situation. A dreadful disease is being used to bring the quality of the situation, like the 'Plague of the society, Cancer of civilization'. The fearful quality of illness corresponds to terrible human condition. But unknowingly it makes a patient's life miserable because it deepens the taboo that usually attached with the disease.

While looking for metaphors through illnesses Susan Sontag has thrown light on human character, what impact diseases have on man's body and mind, in short, what diseases make of man. She makes her observation with remarkable insight. The impact of diseases is observed to be negative most often and yet, at times, they are positive. In the nether world of darkness of the diseases, all human being are treated equally a Byron, a Shelley, a Stevenson, a Lawrence or even Sontag herself. It is a cosmopolis where no land is set apart. All its denizens while set free from the dread of T.B. are still waiting for cancer to lift its mystery of veil and offer much awaited relief. The metaphor of cancer then, could not be used where contexts are grave.

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