BOOK REVIEW

Illness, culture, and power: stories beyond the clinic

AYSHA FEMIN NK

Haris Qadeer. *Medical Maladies: Stories of Disease and Cure from Indian Languages.* India: Niyogi Books, 340 pages, INR 495, ISBN: 978-93-91125-75-2.

Health is not a fixed or universal state — it is subjective and shaped by historical, political, social and cultural contexts. To access these plural experiences of illness, an interdisciplinary approach is not only helpful but necessary. In various forms of literary expression, experiences of illness are depicted, expressed, and understood, in ways that resist "medical" reductionism. Medical Humanities as a field, argues that understanding of illness does not start at the clinic, but with everyday experiences of health and illness, the cultural contexts and symbolic meanings that structure how illness is perceived and lived. *Medical Maladies: Stories of Disease and Cure from Indian Languages* is a collection of stories on various contexts of health, illness and cure.

As the title of the book suggests, the stories included are fictionalised accounts of diverse experiences of illness, effectively exposing and subverting the hierarchies of power that constitute "medical" practices. One common assumption these stories shatter is that of the sovereignty of medical knowledge and institutions. In its opening, the book invokes Michel Foucault, where Qadeer cites how the clinical gaze is a gaze that burns things down to their furthest truth. This reference illuminates an era dominated by the "medical model" of illness, constructed within a capitalist framework. The book deftly intertwines these insights, offering a nuanced discourse on the social and cultural dimensions of the experience of illness.

The anthology comprises nineteen short stories translated into English from various Indian languages, curated with a deliberate emphasis on the short story as a genre historically attuned to representing illness. As Qadeer notes, the short story offers a flexible form for capturing ethnomedical knowledge, indigenous healing practices, plural medical cultures, and the processes of biomedicalisation. The selection underscores the genre's capacity to convey complex socio-medical realities across diverse cultural contexts. The selection of authors, ranging from canonical figures like Rabindranath Tagore, Premchand, and Manto to contemporary voices such as Annie Zaidi, underscores the temporal and thematic breadth of the volume.

David T Mitchell's foreword frames the collection in relation to the rise of medical corporatisation, arguing that the marginalisation of patient agency remains a persistent feature of modern healthcare. The stories curated in this volume, such as "A Major Operation," "A Day in the Labour Room," "A Crisis of Medical Treatment," "The Longing," and "The Gift of Vision," consistently expose the silencing of patients by institutionalised medicine. In "A Major Operation" by Basant Kumar Satpathy, a 60-year-old man's search for clarity regarding his gallbladder condition is met with vague, fragmented responses from biomedical and alternative medical practitioners alike, including his own doctor-son. Despite undergoing scans, tests, and multiple consultations, the protagonist remains uninformed about the nature of his illness, reduced to a passive recipient of disjointed treatments. Similarly, "A Crisis of Medical Treatment" by Rajshekhar Basu portrays Nanda Babu's confusion and desperation following a minor injury as he navigates a maze of practitioners from plural medical systems, including *daktar, homoeopath, hakim,* and *kaviraj*, each offering conflicting guidance. These narratives not only reflect the multiplicity of medical traditions in India but also the social pressures and hierarchies that shape the patient's experience, while patients are frequently excluded from decision-making processes that affect their bodies and lives.

Citing Atul Gawande [1], Qadeer reminds readers of the enduring paternalism in medical practice and its consequences, which include unnecessary interventions, poor communication, and the infantilisation of patients. In emphasising the literary representation of illness as an embodied and narrated experience, the collection aligns itself with a key tenet of medical humanities which is the need to understand health not solely through pathology, but as an embodied experience, rearticulated through narrative. Yet these are not just stories of suffering; they are also acts of storytelling that reclaim voice, critique systemic failures, and reimagine care beyond institutional boundaries.

Importantly, the collection situates itself within a long literary history, tracing the representation of illness from classical texts to contemporary pandemic narratives. Qadeer's introduction thoughtfully outlines how literature has long grappled with the moral, existential, and collective dimensions of illness from the plague in Sophocles and Camus to recent Covid-19 era writing. In doing so, the volume positions itself not only within Indian cultural contexts, but also within global conversations about how illness reshapes our relationship to the body, the state, and the social aspects.

One limitation of the volume is its minimal engagement with the process of translation though it does include a brief bio note of the translator. Given the linguistic and cultural richness of the original stories, a brief reflection on the translator's role and how meaning travels across languages, could have further deepened the collection's interdisciplinary resonance, especially for readers attuned to questions of voice, representation, and linguistic nuance.

Nonetheless, *Medical Maladies* is a valuable and timely intervention. It offers an accessible yet theoretically grounded account of how illness is experienced, narrated, and contested. For those working at the intersections of literature and medicine, the collection is both an archive of subaltern voices and a critical lens for rethinking the socio-political dimensions of illness, health, and healing.

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Conflict of Interest: None declared **Funding:** None

To cite: FNK Aysha. Illness, culture, and power: stories beyond the clinic. *Indian J Med Ethics.* 2026 Jan-Mar; 11(1) NS: 67-68. DOI: 10.20529/IJME.2025.067

Submission received: July 24, 2024

Submission accepted: August 7, 2025

Published online first: September 1, 2025

Manuscript Editor: Sanjay A Pai

Peer Reviewer: Rakhi Ghoshal

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BOOK REVIEW

A book on tuberculosis for everyone

ADITHYA PRADYUMNA

John Green. *Everything Is Tuberculosis: The History and Persistence of Our Deadliest Infection.* Ebury Press; 2025. 208 pages, INR 999, ISBN: 1529961432

"Everything is Tuberculosis" brings in the rich tapestry of the history of tuberculosis (TB) — both, how it has shaped our world, and how perspectives and care evolved over time. It covers the size and nature of the TB challenge (that it is preventable and curable) to help establish it as a problem of public health importance to the lay reader. It is also an account of the bacterium, the affected, the caregivers, the various social contexts, governments, corporations, and the advocacy associated with TB. In addition, it is a meditation on the ethical dimensions of the experience of TB at an individual, community, health system and global level.

The book is populated with several personal anecdotes, which form the basis for the author's motivation to better understand and advocate for action against TB as a global health concern. He writes, "I care about TB because I care about Henry" (p141), referring to a boy from Sierra Leone (in West Africa) — a TB survivor, college student, and health reform advocate — with whom Green has built a strong friendship over the past few years.

Through the eyes of Henry, his parents, and his friends (fellow patients and hospital staff) at the Lakka TB care centre in Sierra Leone, we learn about the pains of interrupted treatment, stigma, sacrifices, health-seeking behaviour, quality of care, disparities, the importance of family and community, and global health challenges. The book gives a vivid description of how TB patients may look and feel over the course of months as the disease progresses, especially those in whom the antibiotics did not work.

About the author

I take a pause here to mention that I did not pick up this book to learn more about TB (although I did learn and am glad of it). And while I have enjoyed Green's fiction books, that was not the reason for picking this up either. I did so because I am a fan of John Green the person, and of his passion for this subject. I've followed the YouTube channel "vlogbrothers" that he manages with his brother Hank Green (the creator of one of the most important educational channels, "Crash Course") for more than 15 years. They are among the pioneers of YouTube. By following this channel, I've closely seen his concern and advocacy for better access to TB care over the past few years. Some of these vlogs are so good — especially the ones where he urges pharma and medical diagnostics companies to make TB drugs and kits more accessible globally — that I've used them in class as examples of what moral arguments look like. It certainly helps that he has got a good sense of humour and is clear in his communication — both of which are reflected in this book. He expresses vulnerability in an intimate way, while also being self-deprecating for comic effect.