

Psychological distress and diagnostic phase of cancer in Helen Garner's The Spare Room

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ABSTRACT

The Spare Room is an extraordinary novel from one of Australia's most admired writers to tell a powerful story about two women. This literary work is emotional complexity and uncensored empathy with pain, joy, ambiguity and sense of loss that is part of dying experience. It recounts two women quest for meaning in the face of loneliness, depression, disability, and loss, all intensified by a cancer diagnosis. The novel draws heavily on both events and details from Garner's life. This paper tends the manifestation that characterizes the psychological distress during the diagnostic phase of cancer.

Key Words: Traumatic, Depression, Cancer, Vulnerability

Helen Garner's The Spare Room is a fictional work which got published in 2008, and greatly considered media coverage with favorable reviews in several major Australian Metropolitan newspapers. This article delineates the psychological distress and emotional complexity of Nicola and Helen.

Nicola "a free woman, without husband or children" (The Spare Room p.3) comes to stay with Helen in order to pursue an alternative therapy for bowel cancer. The cancer is considered terminal by her doctors. Helen is suspicious of the treatment. She sees it deleterious health effects on Nicola. Helen extremely got anger with Nicola for refusing "made nothing of myself" (107) the seriousness of her illness. It forces those around her to do emotional work on her behalf in resisting head death, and in making easy for them to do so. Towards the end when the intensity of the disease increased, of the Nicola restore to oncology treatment. The doctors find out her symptoms of Cancer which spread and destroyed the part of her vertebrae. After a few months, Nicola returns to Sydney and eventually dies. Nicola truly embraces her death when Buddhist friend tell her dying, she has something to teach them.

Cancer is an illness associated with substantial physical, emotional, social, and financial ramifications for affected individuals and their families. Upon hearing a diagnosis of cancer, they are faced with a multitude of issues. In addition to the medical and logistic details, major concerns include fear of death, disfigurement, pain, disability, infertility, dependency, abandonment, altered relationships, and financial hardship. They are usually

filled with emotional turmoil consisting of feelings of anxiety, depression, irritability, insomnia, poor concentration, and inability to function.

Compact Oxford Dictionary defines seclusion as “the state of being private and away from other people”. It is the experience of being withdrawing from others. It may result from being physically separated from others. It can also result from being emotionally removed from a community.

Pain from the cancer can be caused by tumor pressing on Nicola’s nerves, bones or organs. Garner explores the physical struggle of Nicola and it inflicts (i.e.) emotional and psychological suffering. She undergoes severe pain in her shoulder, neck, liver and middle of belly, she feels terribly sick she says; “It’s my shoulder again, said Nicola my neck and there’s new pain. In the middle of my belly” (175)

Nicola’s pain pressed and stopped her involving, her duties or take part in day-to-day activities. Her a gong adds her anxiety and stops her aspirations about life and years. She has more trouble with sleeping and eating sometime she longs for human love; “she didn’t want to drink or eat or wash or go to the toilet. she was silent. Her head hung forward as if a fascinating scene were being enacted on her lap” (13)

Distress extends along a continuum ranging from normal feeling of vulnerability, sadness and fear of problem that can lead to disability and crisis of life. “My shoulder’s killing me. And it was probably just the stem. But this morning when I was getting out of the shower, I could not catch my breath” (158)

It is easily to get frustrated, sad and even angry when Nicola was more struggle with the serious illness. The psychological distress and related symptoms on the pain add the physical distress also ““Don’t worry,’ she said ‘It’s the treatment causing pain –that’s how I know they’re working. It’s just the toxin coming out.” (50)

Nicola was acting like normal person, who experience no pain, but actually undergoes pain on the top of the peek. She wanted to feel happy which is impossible for her because she was emotionally exhausted and haunted. Nicola long for peaceful life when she more affected with mental and physical problem. She exasperates for peace in her life. Helen comments that:

“she needs a very quiet house

because she is terribly sick”...Her breathing was speeding up.

She took a gasp of air and her teeth began to chatter

Nicola. What do you need me to?

Sleep. I wanna sleep. Go out. Thanks” (56).

The treatment that Nicola has chosen involves injection of huge dosage of Vitamin C which incaptiate her and leave her in tremendous pain, when she attempts to deal with initially at least with Aspirin through Helen quickly gets her to a real doctor and a prescription for proper painkillers.

I got off my chair and stop the forward. ”excuse me’, I said.

I clear my throat. excuse me doctor but my friends had violent reactions to the vitamin C. Are you sure it's appropriate?”(50).

Violent behavior begins with verbal threats but later it involves physical harm.

Several studies have reported that receiving or waiting the diagnosis is a traumatic experience. It may cause various emotional reactions such as chaos, uncertainty, anxiety, hopelessness and despair. It generates damage both physically and emotionally. Helen’s angry and aggressive thoughts badly spoil her health and mind. Diagnosing any disease arises the anxiety levels and emotional stress for quickly in women which begin to create disorders. In John Michael Green’s *The Fault in Our stars* talks about, Hazel’s mother, who a very caring constantly worries about Hazel and her life. She was an emotionally strong and kind woman who has committed her life to care and charge for Hazel. Initially, she is worried about Hazel's presumed depression and behavioral changes. Hazel records thus:

Late in the winter of my seventeenth year, my mother decided I was depressed, presumably because I rarely left the house, spent quite a lot of time in bed, read the same book over and over, ate infrequently, and devoted quite a bit of my abundant free time to thinking about death. (Stars,3)

In a major depressive mood, the world seems like a dark place for Hazel. Nothing seems comforting, pleasurable, or worth living for her. Everything appears meaningless to her, including previous happenings and what had given life meaning.

In the case of Nicola, she endures a deprived living rambling with her disease. I ‘am scared it might be my liver (75) and “she sat shivering on the edge of the bed” (13). Nicola’s feeling of fear, uneasiness, misconceptual thought happens due to their poor comprehension of information and limited knowledge about cancer. Nicola’s cancer experience, the emotions of anger, sleeping problem, fatigue pain and much more which cause from extreme trauma and traits. Even happiest person like Helen feels upset and depressed when he/she is exposed to face an emotional crisis. Iris and Gab come for a short stay and they encourage Helen to confront Nicola with her anger:

The last of my self-control gave way.

‘Get that grin off your face. Get it off, or I’ll wipe it off for you.’

It faded of its own accord. She took two steps backwards, gaping at me. ‘Why are you so angry?’

‘This house is full of anger! Can’t you feel it? The rooms are stuffed with it. And a lot of it’s got to be yours.’

[...]

‘Everyone’s angry, everyone’s scared,’ I shouted. ‘You’re angry and scared. But you won’t admit it. You want to keep up this masquerade, so you dump your shit on me. I’m sick with it. I can’t breathe.’ (137)

Lingering feeling of sadness and anger had interfered with Helen's life which gradually and eventually developed into depression. It was highly challenging and emotionally burdensome to deal with Nicola when she expressed emotion, pain, struggle in an unexceptional and uncontrolled way of behavior. Personal characteristics of Helen contribute a weird, habitual change directly to Helen's emotional health. Here Helen spends most valuable time for changing sudden sheet, making meals uneaten, extra shopping, taxi Journeys days spent in waiting room, sleepless nights make a psychological disease and increase in the level of stress which imbalanced her daily activity.

In 1969 Elizabeth Kubler-Ross wrote her famous work, *Living with Death and Dying*. Kubler Ross’s Grief theory; involves denial, anger, bargaining, depression and Acceptance which is a wholesome episode of Nicola life script. Grifness occurred in Nicola’s life which prolonged for a larger existence.

Kubler-Ross's work was done with terminally ill patients so her work is closely associated with anticipatory grief. So, no doubt, the theory of grief is closely connected to “Psychological distress and diagnostic phase of cancer in Helen Garner’s *The Spare Room*”

Moreover, it also creates an anxiety disorder such as worry, fear, and dread in them. This negative experience triggers a psychological reaction: the need to protect themselves from further emotional hurt. Moreover, these emotional lesions hold her incredible power, steering their motives, actions, and beliefs. The idea of experiencing this kind of emotional trauma again becomes a deep fear and causes behavioral changes in them. One can see, five signs of ailing mind in them: Personality change, Agitated, Withdrawal, Poor self-care, Hopelessness.

Psychological distress is a multifunctional and unpleasant emotional experience of a psychological social and spiritual nature that interferes with the ability to cope effectively with cancer. Thus, Helen Garner, pictures a poignant diagram of the psychological distress and emotional sufferings and pain during the diagnostic phase of cancer: As a research result, a major difference can be done, if the infected women keep the diagnosis at some distance to avoid, being overwhelmed by emotional reactions.

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