

If Yuvi can, you can: Reconstruction of the Self and Body in Yuvraj Singh Singh's The Test of my Life: From Cricket to Cancer and Back

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Abstract: Illness by destabilizing the imagined relationship between the body and the self problematizes the identity of an individual. Published in 2013 and co-authored with Sharda Ugra and Nishant Jeet Arora, the memoir *The Test of my Life: From Cricket to Cancer and Back* (hereafter *The Test of my Life*) by Indian cricketer Yuvraj Singh is perhaps the first Indian sports illness narrative. Considering the fact that illness in India is still veiled in secrecy, the memoir *The Test of my Life* is significant in that the autopathography¹ as attested by Yuvraj Singh concerns his “life before cancer, with cancer” and “life after it” (10-11). With a rare germ cell cancer, mediastinal seminoma, rupturing his biological body and the lived experiences, Yuvraj Singh recuperates from his tumor with sheer determination and moral courage. As aptly endorsed by Sachin Tendulkar in the jacket cover, the memoir is “inspirational to its readers” for it is not just a medical record; but a success story of a human self which triumphs the adversities of the body by resilience and indomitable spirit. Using the theoretical postulates of Arthur Frank and S. K. Toombs, this paper, by close reading *The Test of my Life* seeks to investigate the protean identities that emerges during illness. In so doing, the essay delineates the ways in which Yuvraj Singh emerges as a cancer survivor.

Keywords: Identity, Cancer, Cricket, disciplining body

Divided into six chapters, excluding the prologue, the narrative meditates upon Yuvraj Singh's childhood, cricket and cancer. And then, befitting a memoir, there are some photographs placed toward the end of the text which complement and authenticate Yuvraj Singh's narrative. After establishing a steady career graph by winning the Man of the Series title in the ICC cricket World Cup 2011, Yuvraj Singh is diagnosed with cancer in January 2012 by Dr. RV Parmeswaran (head of Manipal Hospital's Nuclear medicine). This diagnosis alters his notions of health, life and cricket in drastic ways. Drawing inspiration from the cyclist Lance Armstrong's *It's not about the bike: My journey back to life* (2000) along with an unconditional support from his mother, friends and Dr. Nitesh Rohatgi (his oncologist in India) Yuvraj Singh copes with the altering identities occasioned by his illness.

“Cricket became a chore”: Disciplined body

Illness problematizes the identity of an individual by disintegrating the biological body and the lived experience. According to Mike Bury, illness

by creating a biographical disruption questions “our taken-for-granted assumptions about functioning of the body” (136). In the case of chronic illness like cancer, the biological body becomes the ‘Other’ which is erratic, uncanny and a source of pain to the self. Body as the phenomenologist Merleau-Ponty defines “is not a vehicle of a person but the embodied person himself” (99). Sharing a similar take on the issue Havi Carel in her essay *Can I be Ill and Happy* argues that “the lived body is not just a biological body but one’s contextual being in the world disruption of bodily capacities has a significance that far exceeds that of simple biological dysfunction” (100). Put differently, a change in the body alters the subjectivity of a person. The memoir, *The Test of my Life* explores these issues as lived by Yuvraj Singh. As a kid, Yuvraj Singh was “naturally gifted at sport” (12)—he enjoyed skating, tennis, and football among many other games. However his life changes, when he plays cricket in Maharani Club at Patiala. After critically observing Yuvraj Singh’s game, Navjot Singh Sidhu (a former Indian cricketer) blatantly criticizes that, “[Yuvraj Singh] was not made for cricket [and] [he] showed no promise” (13). This remark wounds his father Yograj Singh, who later takes a vow “to have [Yuvraj Singh] represent India” (20). In order to materialize his vision, Yograj Singh made his son undergo a rigorous physical training. As a part of the session, Yuvraj Singh was trained to tackle “wet tennis balls and hard plastic balls leaping of the cold hard turf, being bowled at [his] body” (21). Although the fitness regime spoiled joy of the sport and made cricket a chore, it instilled in Yuvraj Singh moral courage and endurance—traits which later aids him to surmount cancer.

The incessant and rigorous training of Yograj Singh develops a disciplined body in Yuvraj Singh as described by Arthur Frank in *The Wounded Storyteller*. One of the major traits of a disciplined body is that it “defines itself primarily in actions of *self-regimentation*” (Frank 41). The process of self-regimentation is evident in Yuvraj Singh when he states that “If there was a match on a ground and [he] had been invited it didn’t matter that the place had no wicket, that it was being played on a field that had just been tilled...he would pick up his kit and go” (23). The disciplined body is monadic and predictable in nature and one of the serious challenges that illness creates in this type of body is “loss of control” (Frank 41). The illness narratives of such bodies are predicated upon the regimens it follows in order to restore the predictability of the body. The memoir *The Test of my Life* partially follows such a narrative structure.

“C’ Change: From Cricket to Cancer”

After establishing himself as an international cricketer through his commendable victories in the under-19 World Cup in 2000 and the ICC World T20 in 2007, Yuvraj Singh eagerly awaits the ICC World Cup 2011. But on January 2011, his body begins to betray him in that for the first time he witnesses specks of red and purple colour in his phlegm which he casually “shrug[s] it off as something bad getting out of [his] system” (1). Subsequently, during the one day match against South Africa he becomes breathless, yet he “delay[s] the right decision” (3) of consulting the

physician. His confidence about his body and the upcoming World Cup training sessions made him negligent towards his health. Yuvraj Singh naively assumes that his symptoms of breathlessness and persistent coughing “would go just as it had come” (84). Even when his body completely failed him during the ICC World Cup 2011, he kept playing harder, for like every other sportsman Yuvraj Singh was trained to coax his body by stating “play on, play hard, play harder” (86). In this phase, Yuvraj Singh experiences his illness on a pre-reflective sensory level. As the critic Toombs puts it, in this level, the subject experiences pain as a temporal object. Pain is viewed as a continuum, is endured and lived by the subject (Toombs 232). This is evident in Yuvraj Singh's response to umpire Simon Taufel “No, boss, I ain't going out. I am nearing 100 after two years so if I fall and collapse you can take me to hospital. But until then, I'm not going out or going off. If I get out, I get out. Until then I am staying” (57). Yuvraj Singh by stretching the limitations of his body not only lays bare the truth that “physical fitness” and “medical fitness” (99) are two different states of health but also reveals the power of mind over body.

As a sportsman, Yuvraj Singh was “constantly in conversation with [his] body, coaxing, pleading, demanding [and] [it]” (80). Even when his body defied him throughout the 2011 World Cup Series and IPL Twenty20 test matches Yuvraj Singh manages to overcome the frailties of his body. He firmly believed that his body was “ever-repairable” and “indestructible” (81). Contrary to his notion, the FNAC (Fine needle aspiration cytology) report of Dr. PDS Kohli, indicated the presence of a malignant tumour between the cavity of his lung. Subsequently, Yuvraj Singh begins to view his cancer as the 'other' and lives in denial with the belief that “[c]ancer happened to old people, cancer doesn't happen to athletes” (98). This erroneous notion that cancer affected only the old and the infirm made it impossible for him to accept his new identity as a patient. Hence, he opts for an alternative therapy, as suggested by his friend Jatin Choudary. Although his family and friends counseled him against the treatment, his innate stubbornness and fear of being a patient drives him towards an easy cure. In so doing, Yuvraj Singh temporarily manages to resist his identity as a cancer patient and lives as a “happy zombie” (81). While the stigma around cancer and a promising cricket career prevented him from accepting the existence of cancer, the diagnosis of Dr. RV Parmeswaran, the head of Manipal Hospital forces him to deal with it. After the diagnosis Yuvraj Singh laments thus: “I am young, I am a sportsman, I am living my life full-tilt. I have just won a World Cup. How can I have cancer?” (92). The statement apart from revealing the contingencies life presents the attempts of the subject to rationalize his illness. With a complete lack of control over his body Yuvraj Singh becomes fatalistic and contemplates his illness as “a clean deal” (9) between him and God. For the night before the finals of World Cup 2011 Yuvraj Singh in a desperation to win the World Cup prays to Almighty thus: “[God] can take whatever he wants, take away my life, give me pain...God just give us (the Indian team) the World Cup”(8). In this phase, Yuvraj Singh as Toombs contends undergoes a second level of

illness, wherein, the body and pain is given a meaning by constituting the painful experience as illness.

“Scary Shades of Pain”

After the diagnosis of mediastinal seminoma in January 2012, Yuvraj Singh as advised by Dr. Nitesh Rohatgi meets Dr. Peter Harper in London who suggests him immediate chemotherapy. However, honoring, his spiritual *gurus* in India who prophesied that “[w]hen Yuvi comes back from America he will be all right” (118), Yuvraj Singh proceeds to Indiana University Simon Cancer Center in the University of Indiana to be treated by Dr. Lawrence Einhorn. After listening to Yuvraj Singh's misgivings about chemotherapy, Dr. Einhorn explains the course of the treatment thus: “[chemotherapy] is going to be difficult. But you need to remember you are going to be better” (119). This assurance from the physician alleviates Yuvraj Singh's fear of the treatment, for he had to undergo three cycles of chemotherapy which would last for “[f]ifty-seven days” (120). By equating his treatment with that of the World Cup Series, Yuvraj Singh strategically conditions his mind to endure the hardships. According to Toombs in this phase of one's health, the subject experiences the third level of illness, where illness is reduced to a mere physiological dysfunction and is oriented towards cure and treatment. This kind of outlook is predominantly found in the restitution narrative which according to Frank revolves around the concept of cure. The basic plot of any restitution narrative is “Yesterday I was healthy, today I'm sick, but tomorrow I'll be healthy again” (Frank 77). Narratives of this kind are intimately connected to the notion of restorable body-self image.

Like a typical restitution narrativeⁱⁱ Yuvraj Singh shares his experience of the chemotherapy by confessing that “[c]hemotherapy may feel like death but it is the only way through for a life again” (123). By associating the treatment with death, Yuvraj Singh clarifies that life after chemotherapy is a rebirth for a sick person. On the third day of his chemotherapy session, Yuvraj Singh was filled “with the sensation that only bad things would happen from now on” (124). Unable to bear the effects of the drug on his body, Yuvraj Singh “was groping for good thoughts but none came” (124). Thus, slowly he begins to understand the “terrifying power” (124) of the chemotherapy and the negative impact it created on the human mind and body. Reflecting on his torturous chemotherapy sessions Yuvraj Singh states that “the body that [he] knew was gone... [his] mind was in pieces and it had still to deal with what was left on [his] body” (132). The sessions apart from making him suffer the “scary shades of pain” (129) alters his self-image. In fact, the chemotherapy sessions negatively transforms Yuvraj Singh into a sober person. Thus, Yuvraj Singh experiences a “new self: Yuvi, the Shell” (132) who was “shy” and “unsure” (139) of himself.

“Fight, Yuvi”: The Communicable body

In the middle of his second chemotherapy session, Yuvraj Singh alters his approach towards illness. He begins to confront his cancer experience head on, which according to Frank is a characteristic of any quest narrativeⁱⁱⁱ. After the visit of Anil Kumble, Yuvraj Singh stops watching

the YouTube videos of his matches which “remind[ed] [him] of what was not there” (138). Instead he motivates himself thus: “I could not and would not succumb to [cancer]. I would put up a fight” (138). This self-motivation not only aids Yuvraj Singh in reconstructing his self but also helps him to overcome his negative image. Further his resolve to overcome illness is evident when he meets his fans outside his apartment, despite his ailment. Following the adage “this too shall pass” (135), Yuvraj Singh makes conscious efforts to surmount his illness.

In the course of his second chemotherapy session Yuvraj develops a communicative body. One of the major characteristics of a communicative body according to Frank is that it “accepts its *contingency* as part of the fundamental contingency of life” (48-49). Unlike the disciplined body which views the body and the self as two different entities the communicative body “understands that the body-self exists as a unity, with its two parts not only interdependent but inextricable” (49). A communicative body is dyadic in nature, “it never belongs to itself alone but constructs its humanity in relation to other bodies” (49). Put bluntly, a person who has a communicative body does not live arbitrarily but in relation to others in the society. He not only empathizes with the sufferings of the others but also narrates his illness in such a way that, “the story invites others to recognize themselves in it” (50). In so doing, it provides the readers with a narrative map as how a person should surmount his illness.

“Coming to full circle”: Hope, Courage and Determination

After three cycles of chemotherapy Yuvraj Singh found it “incredibly hard” (151) to stay in Indianapolis for he wanted to end his “endless monotony” (150) induced by cancer. During ten days of recovery he had to battle with the adversities of his body. Finally when he left the hospital Yuvraj Singh felt like he “was being let out of jail” (152). As he begins his travel to India *en route* London he felt “the colour creeping back into life” (152). However, his real healing happens at Gurgaon, where he rejuvenates both his mind and body. After a short recess, Yuvraj Singh begins his training session at the National Cricket Academy. Without paying much heed to his protesting body Yuvraj Singh continues his practice and at the end of the session he “marvel[s] at the human body and what it could achieve” (174). By successfully returning to cricket within a year, Yuvraj Singh's life comes to a full circle. His journey from cricket to cancer and back not only alters his notions of life, health and cricket but also transforms him into a spiritual, philosophical and an introspective person.

In the final chapter titled *The Battle for confidence* Yuvraj Singh explains that “hope [was] the recuse rope” (186) through which he could recuperate from cancer. Yuvraj Singh also attests that “we can win back our life and passions” (186) through hope, courage and determination. Post-cancer by accepting contingency as norm of life Yuvraj Singh learns to balance between his life and cricket. Further his statement that “If I fail, I fail. If I succeed, I succeed. I really want to succeed but if I fail, it will be without any regrets. If I fail, it will be without any regrets. If I succeed, it will be without any swagger” (189) manifest his knowledge, which he

gains from his illness experience. As a typical commutative body Yuvraj Singh ends his narrative by discussing The Yuvraj Singh Foundation (YSF) and its initiative 'YOUWECAN' which "aims to work for early detection of cancer" (189).

To conclude, the memoir *The Test of my Life: From Cricket to Cancer and Back* apart from clearly registering the enabling power of hope, courage and determination explicates the crisis of identity which Yuvraj Singh experience during his illness. During various stages of illness Yuvraj Singh views himself as a person with cancer, as a victim, as a patient and a survivor of cancer. These altering identities not only make him aware of the contingencies of life but also aid him in reconstructing his body and self. Thus, he transforms his disciplined body into a communicable body and refashions his outlook towards life—that is "to live in the moment and enjoy the fruits of [his] labour" (176). The odyssey of Yuvraj Singh from cricket to cancer and back proves that with self-determination and fortitude a person can surmount his illness and emerge as a cancer survivor.

Endnotes:

- i. The term 'pathography' can be defined as written illness narratives primarily by patients and their caregivers. Pathographies are further classified into autopathographies (pathographies written by patients) and biopathographies (pathographies written by caregivers). Read Thomas Couser's *Autopathography: Women Illness and Life writing* (1991).
- ii. The restitution narratives are "filled out with talk of tests and their interpretation, treatments and their possible outcomes" (77). Read Arthur Frank's *The Wounded Storyteller* (1995).
- iii. Quest stories "meet suffering head on; they accept illness and seek to use it" (115). Read Arthur Frank's *The Wounded Storyteller* (1995).

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