

REVISITING SUSAN SONTAG: A FEMININE GENIUS OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

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Abstract: Susan Sontag, also known as ‘The Dark Lady of American Letters’ is a feminine genius of the twentieth century. Working as a chief executive of PEN American Centre, she has learnt the notion of ‘free expression’ and with a very specific possession towards the concept of art, she has worked on the areas such as photography, culture, media, aids and illness, conflicts at the times of war. Disrupting the conventional mode of narrative, her writings enhanced with the “new sensibility” are “defiantly pluralistic”. Sontag experimented with the ideas of Roland Barthes, Walter Benjamin, T.S. Eliot and Sigmund Freud, in her critical and creative writing such as *Regarding the Pain of Others*, *Illness as Metaphor*, *Against Interpretation*. Her works project her aim to “delineate the modern sensibility from as many angles as possible”. Despite being one of the most intellectual critic her time her writings were disregarded by the critics and the scholars. The paper attempts to establish Sontag among the contemporary female literary critics. The paper would bring to the fore, Sontag as a feminine genius who with the spirit of assistance and the deliberation of the time ahead has reached out for the well being of the whole human kind.

Keywords: Susan Sontag, modern sensibility, free expression, feminine genius.

INTRODUCTION

The “feminine” and the “genius” may often seem contradictory phrases clubbed together within the metaphorical discourse of man’s world. However, carving a niche for themselves, certain women have lived a quintessential idolatry life establishing themselves as “feminine genius” in the modern world. Distinct from the theory of feminism, Feminine genius does not advocate the upliftment of women in the society rather it focuses on the women working for the upliftment of the society. Pope John Paul II in 1995 locates women as a “part of essential heritage of mankind”¹ which not only includes great personalities from the past but also the ones who, with the zeal of assistance are working for humankind. He finds women harmonizing with men and states that, “Woman complements man, just as man complements woman: men and women are *complementary*. Womanhood expresses the “human” as much as manhood does, but in a different and complementary way.”² Apart from the fight for equality and claiming the self, women are found working as a spiritual guide for the welfare of society and culture. As the creator of life, women attribute to magnanimity, maternology, receptivity and sensitivity.³ According to Julia Kristeva,

¹ John Paul II, “Letter of Pope John Paul II to Women,” accessed June 2, 2016, w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/letters/1995/documents/hf_jp-ii_let_29061995_women.html.

² John Paul II, “Letter of Pope John Paul II to Women.”

³ The characteristics of feminine genius. See “Letter to Women”, Wikipedia, accessed June 2,

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feminine genius is “the sexual, social and political liberation of women and their entry into various intellectual and professional domains in the modern polity raises the question of their equality or their difference with regard to men.”⁴

With this temperament, Susan Sontag⁵ in 1964 emerged as a new intellectual writer and a critic who “was venerated and villainized, depicted as either a counter-cultural hero or a posturing pop celebrity.”⁶ She believed that “the emancipation of women is just a question of having equal rights. It’s a question of having equal power.....”⁷ After reading the book *Second Sex* by Simone de Beauvoir in 1951, when she was only eighteen, Sontag encountered an urge to work as an activist. Known as the most highbrowed writer among the female writers of the twentieth century she was the contributor of the multidimensional fields of writings such as fiction, art, photography, culture, illness and politics. Defining herself she acclaims:

Every generation produces a few women of genius (or at least at irrepressible eccentricity) who win special status for themselves. But the historical visibility of that small band is understood to follow precisely from their possessing qualities that women do not normally have. Such women are credited with ‘masculine’ energy, intelligence, willfulness and courage.⁸

Women in the post world war scenario were an equally distressed species because existential angst and disillusionment had taken a toll not only on lives but also on honour. The war had left the world in a dilapidated condition, where women were subject to the worst forms of torture and sexual abuse. Captive women were often raped by the soldiers of the conquering country, which led to the spread of sexually transmitted diseases. Sontag was the first woman to develop discourse on the demonizing aspect of diseases like cancer and AIDS. The perception of shame and humiliation that is inextricably attached to the idea of these diseases is what Sontag wanted to contest through her writings. To her, “Illness is the night-side of life, a more onerous citizenship. Everyone who is born holds dual citizenship, in the kingdom of the well and in the kingdom of the sick.”⁹

2016, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Letter_to_Women.

⁴ Julia Kristeva, “Female Genius, Freedom and Culture”, *Irish Pages* 2, no.2 (Autumn/Winter 2004), 214-228, accessed June 2, 2016, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30022048>.

⁵ Born in 1933, Susan Sontag was an American writer. Her major works are in the different forms of literary genres including fiction, non-fiction, monographs and films. She was the winner of the numerous awards.

⁶ Tresa Grauer, “Susan Sontag 1933-2004”, accessed June 21, 2016, <http://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/sontag-susan>.

⁷ Jonathan Cott, *The Complete Rolling Stone Interview with Susan Sontag* (United States of America, Yale University Press, 2013), 72.

⁸ Elaine Showalter, *Inventing Herself: Claiming a Feminist Intellectual Heritage* (New York, 2001), 225-226.

⁹ Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor* (United States Of America, McGraw-Hill Ryerson Ltd, 1978), 1.

ILLNESS AS METAPHOR IN SONTAG

Breast cancer was one of the most terrifying diseases among the women of the Twentieth Century all across the globe. As recorded, around 1,000,000 women died of breast cancer in America between 1959 -1990.¹⁰ In 1975, after being diagnosed with cancer, Sontag worked on her book *Illness as Metaphor* which is “a fervent plea to treat illness as illness, the luck of the genetic draw, and not the result of sexual inhibition, the repression of feeling.”¹¹ The book does not reveal her personal experience about the heart rending disease, rather she has dismissed the cultural notion of treating cancer as “irrational revulsion” and the “diminution of the self”.¹² What haunts Sontag is the metaphorical presumptions of the disease which is “treated as an evil, invincible predator, not just a disease”.¹³ She broods over the disease and compares it with tuberculosis, the one which was seen “as a disease apt to strike the hypersensitive, the talented, the passionate”.¹⁴ In the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century tuberculosis appeared as a disease which was irremediable but in the current years it is a curable disease and hence becomes distinct from cancer and AIDS. She upholds the idea of regarding “cancer as if it were just a disease - a very serious one, but just a disease. Not a curse, not a punishment, not an embarrassment.”¹⁵

With the modern diseases (once TB, now cancer), the romantic idea that the disease expresses the character is invariably extended to assert that the character causes the disease – because it has not expressed itself. Passion moves inward, striking and blighting the deepest cellular recesses.¹⁶

However over the years, there can be observed a tangible shift in attention from cancer to AIDS as an obnoxious disease with no cure. Sontag has been critical of the idea that AIDS as “a calamity one brings on oneself, is judged more harshly than other means-especially since AIDS is understood as a disease not only of sexual excess but of perversity”.¹⁷ She claims that the disease is more agonizing as society and its politics have led it to be. Sontag’s *AIDS and its Metaphor* depicts the plan “to confer meaning, which is the traditional purpose of literary endeavour, but to deprive something of meaning: to apply that quixotic, highly polemical strategy, ‘against interpretation,’ to the real world.”¹⁸ Sontag has been critical of

¹⁰ As recorded in “Breast Cancer in the 20th Century: Quest for the Ideal Therapy”, accessed June 2, 2016, <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3117557/>.

¹¹ David Rieff, “Why I Had To Lie to My Dying Mother”, 2008, accessed June 22, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2008/may/18/society>.

¹² Susan Sontag, *AIDS and its Metaphor* (New York: Picador, 1989), 12.

¹³ Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor*, 7.

¹⁴ Sontag, *AIDS and its Metaphor*, 14.

¹⁵ Sontag, *AIDS and its Metaphor*, 14.

¹⁶ Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor*, 46.

¹⁷ Sontag, *AIDS and its Metaphor*, 26.

¹⁸ Ann Jurecic, *Illness as Narrative* (United States of America, University of Pittsburgh Press, 2012), 68.

the social and the political aspects related to AIDS. During the long period of her illness, Sontag endured the pain of numerous chemotherapies and radiotherapies. She underwent the experience of losing hair during the course of her treatment.¹⁹ Through the work, Sontag reveals that there is integration between the ailing of a body and the self which ultimately results in the change of the individuality of a person. A victim of cancer who is thought to have repressed desires is alienated from society. According to James Marther, Sontag “attacks those who (like Karl Menninger) are reluctant to ‘name’ cancer or to ‘label’ patients who have serious disease for their ‘anti-intellectual pieties and a facile compassion.’”²⁰

Similarly, *AIDS and its Metaphor* is a denunciation of the metaphors of the disease. Sontag argues that the diseases which are accustomed with the cultural myths are not as dreadful as the ones which are really brutalized. Through the essay, Sontag apprises the divergence of reality. The metaphorical assumptions about AIDS may lessen its effectiveness and the illness may seem to be customary. To this Elaine Showalter acclaims that “Whereas photography disables our senses of the present by weakening our consciousness of the past, the metaphorization of AIDS disables our senses of the present by lessening our consciousness of the future.”²¹ AIDS is compared to the plague “that are not simply fatal but transform the body into something alienating.”²²

Sontag is critical of the way in which the disease is seen in the society; like a battle field where the patient is exposed to all sorts of dangerous and life risking attacks. As the “war of drugs” with “aggressive” treatment to cure the “immunological defences” AIDS is considered as a “calamity” which is brought by the excessive sexual desires. The disease is considered as the “alien “other,” as enemies are in modern war”. In the words of Sontag, “Military metaphors contribute to the stigmatizing of certain illnesses and, by extension, of those who are ill.”²³ According to Ban Ki-Moon,

Stigma remains the single most important barrier to public action. It is the main reason why too many people are afraid to see a doctor to determine whether they have the disease, or to seek treatment if so. It helps make AIDS the silent killer, because people fear the social disgrace of speaking about it or taking easily available precautions.²⁴

¹⁹ Jerome Boyd Maunsell, *Susan Sontag* (London, Reaktion Books Ltd 2014), 119-144,

²⁰ James Marther, “Illness as Metaphor”, *Journal of Medical Ethics* 7, no.1 (March 1981), 45, accessed June 13, 2016, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27715928>.

²¹ Elaine Showalter, Lea Baechler and A Walton Litz, *Modern American Women Writers* (United States of America, Charles Scribner’s Son, 1991), 331.

²² Sontag, *AIDS and its Metaphor*, 45.

²³ Sontag, *AIDS and its Metaphor*. 11.

²⁴ “The Stigma Factor: Biggest Factor to Combat HIV/AIDS,” *The Washington Times*, August 6, 2008, accessed June 12, 2016, <http://www.un.org/sg/articles/articleFull.asp?TID=83&Type=Op-Ed>.

Sontag too asserts that the meaning which is created by the society regarding the epidemic acts as a hindrance for the patient to cope up with it.

The essay is regarded as a strong disputatious speech as it objects the countless ways in which the disease is regarded by the society. The message which Sontag administers through the work is “not to confer meaning, which is the traditional purpose of literary endeavour, but to deprive something of meaning: to apply that quixotic, highly polemical strategy, against interpretation, “ to the real world”.²⁵ She is reluctant of regarding the disease as per the metaphorical measures as it weakens the morale of the patients who thereby, lose their strength to fight with the disease.

Sontag’s perception regarding the solemnity of the illness again appears in her short story, “The Way We Live Now” in (1986). It pictures the angst of a sick man whose inflammation is severe. The story appears in the form of a conversation which reflects the attitude of the elite class of the New York City. McEntyre points out that the “heartening message is that communities of friendship, despite that fallibility, can be strong, flexible and resilient even as they construct themselves ad hoc and ex tempore in a time of crisis.”²⁶

Much later in 1993 Sontag wrote a play “Alice in Bed” which carries forward the idea of female illness and their suffering in the society. The play is an apologue of Alice James, who dies of breast cancer at an early age of forty three. The uncertain malady cramped the young girl to lead a disabled life of pain and distress. This draws the analogous to the life of Sontag where she survived but Alice dies. The play hints at the harsh reality of an alienated character that strives for her identity with the awareness of the self and feels that she is lost in the midst of her sickness. The only way she finds out to fulfil her desires is her imagination. She walks through the streets of Rome experiencing the scenic beauty of the city in her imagination. In the monologue of the sixth scene of the play she says “My mind. I can travel with my mind. With my mind I am in Rome, where Margaret lived.”²⁷ This reveals the difficulty of a woman whose miserable ailing confines her to the four walls of her house. Jerome Boyd Maunsell in his introductory book to Sontag points out that:

Sontag’s own wilfulness, her refusal to be defeated by life, her strength, her compulsion to pay attention to the wider world outside, mean she cannot endorse Alice’s helpless state, even as Alice’s life of the mind is also the life of a writer.²⁸

²⁵ Sontag, *AIDS and its Metaphor*, 14.

²⁶ Marilyn McEntyre, “The Way We Live Now,” Literature Arts Medicine Database, October 4, 2005, accessed June 2, 2016, <http://medhum.med.nyu.edu/view/755>.

²⁷ Susan Sontag, “Alice in Bed Monologue,” February 6, 2014, accessed June 6, 2016, <http://markiana528.tumblr.com/post/75791616124/alice-in-bed-susan-sontag>.

²⁸ Jerome Boyd Maunsell, *Susan Sontag* (London, Reaktion Books Ltd., 2014), 150.

The only way to break from the confinement is to step into the world of fantasizing. The play also depicts the fact that the suppression of women by the male members of the family leads to psychological damage. As an inspiration to these women Sontag points out that “the victories of the imagination are not enough.”²⁹ Sontag’s emphasis on the mythological treatment of illness links her to Sheila M. Rothman, who explores in her book *Living in the Shadow of Death: Tuberculosis and the Experience of Illness in American History* (1994) that the attitude towards the diseased person varies according to the gender. In the patriarchal society AIDS affected women face humiliation and neglect and even their treatment operates through the patriarchal codes.³⁰ Women invalidism impacts the external body as well as the psyche. Focusing on cancer, Sontag seems to fight for the right to health for women who are stigmatized with such deadly diseases and valiantly try to survive for their future aspirations. Like Alice, in 1967 Jennifer, the protagonist of the novel *Valley Of Dolls* proclaims “the word *cancer* meant death, terror, something so horrible I’d cringe. And now I have it. And the funny part is, I’m not the least bit frightened of the cancer itself—even if it turns out to be a death sentence. It’s just what it’ll do to my life.”³¹

In Sontag, the discourses on illness are exemplified through the world of fiction. Sontag’s world of illness relates her to the philosophy of existentialism. The disgust and anger leading to the identity crisis is reflected by Alice in the play. The long party scene with other female friends brings in Annie’s voice against the consequences of the sexual harassment of women. The incarceration of herself and the way she looks at the world reflects the abdication of a woman from the real life situations who perceives her life as a failure.

The mythic assumptions about the pernicious disease like AIDS, cancer and tuberculosis moulds an ailing person’s fear about the inexorable death, segregation and emptiness of life, the loss of the sense of self. To avoid this what Sontag claims is “the most truthful way of regarding illness - and the healthiest way of being ill - is one most purified of, most resistant, to metaphoric thinking.”³² The representation of the different aspects and effects of illness is a result of her surveillance of the real pain and sufferings of the people.

BATTLING A DISEASE

The recuperation from her long illness gathered her possession to experience more. Shattering the conventional tradition of patriarchy Sontag sets an example for the

²⁹ Barbara Ching and Jennifer A Wagnor-Lawlor, *The Scandals of Susan Sontag* (New York, Coloumbia University Press, 2009), 13.

³⁰ Summary by Kristine Kelly and Humaira Omar, “Sheila M. Rothman Living in the Shadow of Death,” accessed June 2, 2016, http://www.history.vt.edu/Jones/3724_S99/books/rothman.html.

³¹ Jacqueline Susann, *Valley of the Dolls* (United States of America, Bernad Geis Association, 1996), n.p.

³² Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor*, 3.

modern women when in 1989 she became the president of PEN American centre.³³ Apart from being a literary figure and a philosopher, Sontag was a political activist. She was associated with many people all through her life. In retaining her position, she supported a number of moves for the writers who were punished for expressing their views. She was an active writer at the times of Vietnam War and Siege of Sarajevo. As a feminist she talks about the power of women in “The Third World Women”, and declares that apart from the relation with men ‘liberated women’ is free to live the way she desires and can unite with other women in the society.³⁴ Holding high temper and determination, she tried to enliven the qualms of the Americans and the Europeans about the racial killing in Bosnia. To Sontag politics stands as “an arena for practicing the high moral style.”³⁵ As a political activist Sontag worked for changing the society by revolutionary means. “Politics in her view were included in the welding of iconoclast strategy, denouncing conformist, programmatic art or the false or secret hierarchies of power.”³⁶ Sontag through her writings emphasised on the idea of ‘contemporariness’. Her censorious and political pursuits focused under the light of modernism and Marxism makes her extra ordinary in the coterie of other female writers. Despite being a female writer, Sontag never proclaims herself to be a feminist. She declares herself as an “antisegregationist” and believes in working for the needful emendation and modification of the civilization. “I don’t believe that the *goal* is a creation or a vindication of feminine values. I think the goal is half the pie.”³⁷

As an experimentalist, Sontag in *Against Interpretation* came up with the view that, the modern word is so oppressed with the idea of intellectuality that the spiritual importance of ‘art’ has been changed. Rejecting the conventional perception of interpreting the art Sontag proposes a new way of interpretation which means a “conscious act of the mind which illustrates a certain code, certain “rules” of interpretation”.³⁸ Tresa Grauer in the Encyclopedia of Susan Sontag asserts that Sontag’s essay falls under the domain of American and European genius which ranges from aesthetics of silence to the present day visualization reflecting the

³³ It is an organisation which supported the writers of free expression. It was founded in 1922 in the New York City. Thomas Mann, Salman Rushdie, Robert Frost were the other members associated with it. See “PEN American Center,” Wikipedia, accessed June 2, 2016, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/PEN_American_Center.

³⁴ Elaine Showalter, *Inventing Herself: Claiming a Feminist Intellectual Heritage* (New York, Scribner, 2001), 225-226.

³⁵ Ellen Wills, “Three elegies for Susan Sontag” New Politics,” accessed June 2, 2016, <http://newpol.org/content/three-elegies-susan-sontag>.

³⁶ Marius Jucan, “Susan Sontag: Experiencing Radicalism as Authenticity,” accessed June 2, 2016, <http://americanajournal.hu/vol8no2/jucan>.

³⁷ Jonathan Cott, *The Complete Rolling Stone Interview with Susan Sontag* (United States of America, Yale University Press, 2013), 73.

³⁸ Sontag, *Against Interpretation and Other Essay* (New York: Picador, 1966), 11.

elevated modernism and ‘mass culture’.³⁹ Sontag expresses her view in an interview with Roger Copeland that her aim was to “delineate the modern sensibility from as many angles as possible.”⁴⁰ According to Liam Kennedy, Sontag’s targets in *Against Interpretation* are such critical hierarchies as “high culture” and “low culture,” and “highbrow,” “middlebrow” and “lowbrow” formidable features of American cultural criticism in the 1940s and 1950s. Interpretation of art in the modern times should not be restricted by the content and the presumed apprehensions. This limits the aesthetics of the art. She acclaims that “in place of a hermeneutics we need an erotics of art.”⁴¹ This is applicable to what T.S. Eliot in the early twentieth century explains in “dissociation of sensibility”⁴² which suggests the involving of “not only the integration of sensation and idea...but also a special kind of thought — a detached intellectuality combined with passion.”⁴³ Sontag’s understanding of the modernity is the deprivation of the sensual acquaintances. Like, Eliot, Sontag, through her writing has defined that the scientific inventions are more dominant in the present culture to define the reality of life. According to her, “bleak factory buildings and billboard-cluttered avenues look as beautiful, through the camera’s eyes, as churches and pastoral landscapes.”⁴⁴

CONCLUSION

Susan Sontag’s place within the realm of prominent theorists is established by the fact that she was one of the first women to interrogate the problem of female illness and disease in the post-world war scenario. Her major works border on how pathological diseases have psychologically affected woman and the human species in general. Having experienced traumatic years of struggle fighting a deadly disease herself, Sontag draws on the annals of this disease to the extent of having developed a full-fledged discourse on it. She combines her subjective distress with a universal appeal to the whole human race. Breast cancer during the time of war became a taboo for women. Her critical questions provided answers to all those women who are still suffering to survive. Her intention in developing a discourse on such fatal diseases was quite clear in her interview with Jonathan Cott, “I wrote it because I feel that what I said was true - but it’s a great pleasure to write something

³⁹ Tresa Grauer, “Susan Sontag 1933-2004,” accessed June 2, 2016, <http://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/sontag-susan>.

⁴⁰ Grauer, “Susan Sontag 1933-2004.”

⁴¹ Sontag, *Against Interpretation*, 7.

⁴² “Dissociation of Sensibility”, Wikipedia, accessed June 2, 2016, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dissociation_of_sensibility.

⁴³ Allen Austine, “T.S.Eliot’s Theory of Dissociation,” *College English* 23, no.4 (Jan 1962), 309-312, accessed June 2, 2016, <http://dxdoi.org/10.2307/373077>.

⁴⁴ Sontag, as quoted in Ruth Prigozy, *The Cambridge Companion to F. Scott Fitzgerald*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2002), 82

that can be useful to the people.”⁴⁵ Apart from the corporeal world of disease, her works extended to the boundaries of the imperceptible sphere where she defines the changing perception of the interpretation of art. Art has its own dimensions for changing and cannot be compared with the scientific progression. Illness, politics, art and culture are the various fields where Sontag exhibited her critical and creative acumen. “What united Sontag’s output was a propulsive desire to define the forces — aesthetic, moral, political — that shape the modernist sensibility. And in so doing, she hoped to understand what it meant to be human in the waning years of the twentieth century.”⁴⁶ The abstract ideas of her works, her obtuse and oblique style and novel issues warrant her calibre and place her on the pedestal of eminent women writers of the Twentieth Century. Writing in the early years of women emancipation, Sontag’s bold and intrepid diatribe against societal norms at large is commendable because this was an era in which women were made to speak less. Even while expressing her loud disinterest in feminism, her works reflected the ‘humanist’ angle that inevitably characterised her potential as a ‘feminine genius and perhaps this why she remained “a mysterious woman, standing alone alongside a gallery of the great male philosophers and writers of the century.”⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Cott, *The Complete Rolling Stone*, 6.

⁴⁶ Tresa Grauer, “Susan Sontag 1933-2004.”

⁴⁷ Angela McRobbie, “The Modernist Style of Susan Sontag,” *Feminist Review* 38 (Summer 1991), 18, accessed June 2, 2016, <http://dxdoi.org/10.1057/fr.1991.16>.

