
Narratives of Abandonment: Representations of Ill Spouses in Literature and Media

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Abstract:

This paper examines the recurring motif of abandonment in narratives where one partner suffers from chronic illness, disability, or terminal disease, while the other confronts the emotional, social, and moral burden of caregiving. Across literature and media, depictions of ill spouses often highlight tensions between love and duty, intimacy and estrangement, loyalty and escape. By analysing a range of primary texts including novels, films, memoirs, and television dramas this study explores how cultural narratives construct the figure of the "abandoned" ill spouse and interrogates the ethical dilemmas faced by their partners. This paper examines literary and media representations of spouses who become ill and face abandonment literal, emotional, or institutional by partners, families, and societies. Combining close textual and filmic readings with theoretical frameworks drawn from medical humanities, disability studies, feminist theory, and sociology, the study maps recurring narrative patterns, ideological work performed by abandonment tropes, and the ethical questions these narratives raise about care, responsibility, and personhood. The paper proposes a typology of abandonment narratives, analyses their formal techniques, and discusses implications for cultural attitudes toward illness and caregiving.

Keywords: Abandonment, Illness narratives, Caregiving, Disability studies, Media representation, Spouse, Stigma, Gender, Medical humanities.

Introduction

Illness within marriage is often framed as a test of love, loyalty, and resilience. The wedding vow, "in sickness and in health," symbolically enshrines caregiving as an essential marital duty, yet literary and media narratives repeatedly reveal fractures in this ideal. When one spouse falls seriously ill, the dynamics of intimacy and obligation are unsettled: partners are thrust into roles as caregivers, emotional anchors, or, conversely, as figures who retreat,

detach, or abandon. These stories of abandonment resonate deeply because they expose the tension between cultural expectations of unwavering devotion and the human limitations of endurance, desire, and autonomy.

In literature and visual media, the motif of the “ill spouse” serves as a powerful site for exploring broader social anxieties about dependency, productivity, and vulnerability. Abandonment whether physical, emotional, or symbolic becomes a narrative device through which writers and filmmakers interrogate questions of morality, gender roles, and societal pressures. Often, such depictions reveal asymmetries in how men and women are judged: men who leave sick wives may be condemned or rationalized, while women who withdraw from ill husbands are often stigmatized more severely, reflecting entrenched cultural expectations about caregiving and sacrifice.

This paper seeks to analyse how narratives of abandonment are constructed and represented across selected literary texts and media portrayals. By drawing on interdisciplinary perspectives from disability studies, medical humanities, and feminist literary criticism, it examines how illness reshapes marital bonds, challenges the boundaries of duty, and exposes the fragility of social contracts. Rather than treating abandonment as a purely personal failure, this study argues that these representations mirror collective discomfort with illness and dependency, foregrounding the uneasy negotiation between love, responsibility, and self-preservation.

Literature Review

Research on illness and abandonment in Indian English literature is still emerging, but several novels, memoirs, and films provide rich insights into how cultural values, gender norms, and familial expectations shape the representation of ill spouses. Unlike Western texts, where autonomy and marital breakdown often dominate narratives, Indian contexts frequently foreground community, duty, and stigma, creating distinctive portrayals of abandonment.

Theoretical Context

Indian Writing in English (IWE) offers a rich tapestry of personal, social, and cultural narratives, yet the **specific theme of abandonment of ill spouses** remains underexplored. Where it does appear, it is often entangled with issues like **duty, social stigma, arranged marriage, gender roles, and familial responsibility**. The representation of **chronic illness, mental health, and disability** in marital relationships often reflects traditional Indian values juxtaposed with modern sensibilities.

Indian literary scholarship often draws upon **postcolonial, feminist, and medical humanities frameworks**. Writers such as G.N. Devy and Meenakshi Mukherjee have emphasized how Indian literature reflects social realities rather than abstract individual dilemmas. From a feminist angle, scholars like Susie Tharu and K. Lalita (in *Women Writing in India*) have shown how women’s suffering is frequently narrated through familial and marital obligations, where illness becomes intertwined with gendered sacrifice and silence.

Theoretical Framework

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- **Postcolonial Feminist Theory (Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Spivak):** Examines how colonial legacies shape gender roles, especially caregiving expectations in South Asian cultures.
 - **Medical Humanities and Narrative Medicine:** Provides tools to analyze illness as a lived experience within literature, focusing on how stories of illness and caregiving are told.
 - **Disability Studies (India-specific work by Anita Ghai):** Questions the visibility and representation of disabled/ill individuals in Indian cultural narratives, especially within marriage and family.
 - **Stigma and social identity.** Building on Goffman, this lens attends to how illness may mark a spouse as "other" and thus liable to social and intimate rejection.
 - **Care ethics and gendered labour.** Feminist scholarship on care (e.g., Tronto, and broader ethical debates) foregrounds the gendered distribution of caregiving labor and how narratives either valorize or devalue that labor.
 - **Narrative and medium specificity.** Borrowing tools from narratology and film studies, this lens examines how narrative voice, focalization, temporal structure, and cinematic techniques enact or resist abandonment.

These lenses are mutually reinforcing: stigma shapes the cultural plausibility of abandonment; gendered expectations determine who is expected to provide care; and narrative form determines how audiences are asked to interpret abandonment.

2. Illness and Estrangement in Indian English Novels

Several Indian English novels engage directly with the theme of spousal illness and its aftermath:

- **Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence* (1988)** explores emotional abandonment within marriage, where Jaya's psychological struggles and silences reflect the alienation experienced by women whose emotional needs are neglected, even if physical illness is not always explicit.
- **Anita Desai's *Fire on the Mountain* (1977)** portrays Nanda Kaul's retreat into isolation after a life of caregiving and neglect, dramatizing symbolic abandonment as a response to emotional and familial exhaustion.
- **Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017)**, while broader in scope, features narratives of bodily suffering and social marginalization that echo the theme of abandonment of the vulnerable, particularly women and marginalized genders.

These works suggest that illness whether physical, psychological, or metaphorical creates fractures in marital and familial bonds, often resulting in silence, withdrawal, or neglect that functions as abandonment.

3. Memoirs and Autobiographical Narratives

Autobiographical writings also illuminate this theme. **Neena Gupta's memoir *Sach Kahun Toh* (2021)**, while not centrally about illness, touches on caregiving expectations and emotional neglect in relationships. More poignantly, life-writing around illness in India, such as narratives of cancer survivors (e.g., Manisha Koirala's *Healed: How Cancer Gave Me a New Life* [2018]), foregrounds the importance of spousal support but also hints at the social

fear of abandonment that hovers around chronic illness. These texts reveal the tension between public portrayals of resilient marital devotion and the private realities of strain and withdrawal.

4. Media and Film Adaptations

Indian cinema has frequently dramatized illness and spousal abandonment, offering a cultural mirror to literary depictions. Films like *Anand* (1971) romanticize terminal illness while leaving spousal perspectives underexplored, whereas more recent narratives, such as *Margarita with a Straw* (2014), confront the complexities of disability, intimacy, and neglect directly. These cinematic portrayals often reinforce gendered expectations: women are idealized as caregivers, while male withdrawal or detachment is occasionally normalized.

5. Gender and Cultural Expectations

Scholars of Indian literature and culture (e.g., Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Uma Chakravarti) highlight how Indian social structures position women as primary caregivers, reinforcing their role as self-sacrificial figures. Ill husbands in literature are rarely abandoned; instead, their wives' loyalty is depicted as virtue. Conversely, ill wives are often shown as emotionally or physically abandoned sometimes through neglect, sometimes through silence reflecting patriarchal anxieties about dependency, productivity, and "burden." This asymmetry underscores the culturally specific dimensions of abandonment in Indian narratives.

6. Gaps in Indian English Scholarship

While Indian English novels and memoirs engage with illness and marital strain, explicit critical attention to **spousal abandonment** remains limited. Much scholarship emphasizes themes of duty, sacrifice, or resilience, while neglecting the silences around withdrawal, neglect, or desertion. Furthermore, critical work often privileges physical illness, leaving mental health struggles and their associated abandonment underexplored. There is also a scarcity of comparative studies linking Indian narratives with global representations, which could illuminate cross cultural continuities and divergences.

1. **Medical humanities and illness narratives.** Critical works examine how storytelling frames sickness and patient hood (e.g., illness-as-metaphor critiques). These texts help explain how narrative choice can stigmatize or humanize characters who are ill.
2. **Disability and care studies.** Scholarship from disability studies and feminist ethics of care analyses societal expectations around caregiving, emotional labour, and dependency. These works provide tools for interrogating abandonment as a social and moral phenomenon.
3. **Cultural and media studies.** Analyses of film and television representations reveal how visual grammar (editing, close-ups, miser-en-scène) and serial storytelling (e.g., soap operas, series television) shape audience responses to illness and abandonment.

Key theoretical influences invoked in this paper include Erving Goffman on stigma, Susan Sontag on illness metaphors, and Michel Foucault on bio power and the regulation of bodies, and feminist theorists who explore the politics of care and dependency.

Methodology

This qualitative study uses close reading and film analysis of a curated corpus of novels, short stories, and films that depict spouses who become seriously ill and subsequently face abandonment in various forms. The approach is interdisciplinary and hermeneutic: texts are read for recurring motifs, metaphors, and representational strategies; films are analysed for visual and performance-based cues that construct the meaning of abandonment.

Corpus selection criteria: works were chosen for:-

- 1) Centrality of a spouse's illness to plot or theme,
- 2) Presence of an abandonment dynamic (physical, emotional, institutional, or narrative erasure)
- 3) Diversity in period, genre, and medium to capture a broad cultural range.

Analytic steps:-

- 1) Identify how abandonment is staged (who abandons whom, for what reasons).
- 2) Map narrative techniques used to justify or condemn abandonment.
- 3) Analyse intersectional dimensions (gender, class, race) that alter the meaning and reception of abandonment.
- 4) Consider audience alignment and emotional positioning (sympathy, judgment, ambivalence).

Typology of Abandonment Narratives

From the corpus and readings, five primary patterns emerge:

1. **Physical desertion:** a spouse literally leaves or abandons the household when illness appears (desertion). This is often framed as moral failure or cowardice.
2. **Institutional abandonment:** a spouse is placed in a care facility and effectively separated from home life. Narratives may depict this as practical necessity or betrayal.
3. **Emotional abandonment:** the partner remains physically present but withdraws emotionally, delegitimizing the ill spouse's subjectivity.
4. **Narrative erasure:** the ill spouse's interiority is elided by the narrative; their perspective is underrepresented, and their personhood is defined primarily by dependency.
5. **Compassionate withdrawal:** difficult ethical decisions (e.g., refusing life-sustaining treatment) are framed as a form of sanctioned abandonment — morally ambiguous, sometimes valorized, sometimes condemned.

Each pattern performs different ideological work: desertion dramatizes moral culpability; institutional abandonment raises questions about state/family responsibility; emotional abandonment highlights loneliness and the psychic dimensions of care deficits; narrative erasure reflects power in representation; compassionate withdrawal probes autonomy and dignity.

Media and Formal Strategies

Literature (novel/short story): textual interiority allows authors to depict the ill spouse's consciousness, or to withhold it thereby enacting narrative erasure. First-person narrators can generate empathy, while omniscient or partnered focalization may marginalize the ill partner.

Film/television: visual and performative elements — casting, close-ups on the caregiver's hands, mise-en-scène of domestic spaces, and editing choices — can emphasize either the

abandoner's perspective or the abandoned spouse's isolation. Serial television has the luxury of time to depict slow attrition (emotional abandonment) while films may condense choice points (institutionalization, mercy decisions).

Genres: melodrama tends to moralize abandonment (clear right/wrong), while realist fiction often invites ethical ambiguity. Comedy may use abandonment for dark satire, revealing social hypocrisy.

Gender, Class, and Intersectionality

Patterns of abandonment are shaped by gendered expectations: women historically are coded as primary caregivers, so narratives featuring male abandonment of ill wives often signal transgression from expected masculinity. Conversely, women abandoning ill husbands can be read through the lens of labor exhaustion and constrained choice.

Class mediates possibilities for institutional care and stigma: wealthier families have options (private care, paid help) that complicate accusations of abandonment, while economically precarious families may face structural constraints that narratives sometimes, but not always, acknowledge.

Race and culture are also crucial but underrepresented in mainstream corpora; stories from marginalized communities often have distinct norms of kinship and care that resist facile readings of abandonment.

Illustrative Analyses (Selected Works)

Note: the following mini-analyses are illustrative rather than exhaustive—they highlight how the typology and frameworks apply across media.

1) Institutional Abandonment and Public/Private Blame:-

In many film and literary treatments, institutionalization functions as a symbolic rupture public systems absorb private failure. Narrative choices determine whether the institutional act is framed as compassionate pragmatism (a last resort) or moral abdication. Analytically, such narratives reveal anxieties about the limits of familial duty and the social infrastructures that determine care.

2) Emotional Abandonment and Narrative Focus:-

Narratives that keep the ill spouse off-stage or mute them perform abandonment as representational erasure. When a partner's interior life is absent from the text, audiences are encouraged to read their decline as a plot device serving the caregiver's emotional development rather than as an experience deserving of empathy.

3) Compassionate Withdrawal and Ethical Complexity:-

Stories involving assisted dying, withdrawal of treatment, or painful decisions frame abandonment in morally ambiguous terms. These narratives force audiences to reckon with autonomy, suffering, and the ethics of letting go.

Discussion: Cultural Functions of Abandonment Tropes

Abandonment narratives do several cultural jobs:

- **Moral adjudication:** they create moral exemplars or cautionary tales about filial or spousal duty.
- **Social critique:** by dramatizing failures of care, narratives can critique weak social infrastructure and the privatization of suffering.

- **Psychic economy:** abandonment stories allow societies to process anxieties about dependency, mortality, and the fragility of intimate bonds.

However, problematic effects include reinforcing stigma around illness and delegitimizing burdens of care borne by marginalized caregivers.

Ethical and Practical Implications

Studying abandonment narratives matters beyond literary criticism. It informs public conversations about eldercare policy, disability rights, mental health stigma.

Case Studies:-

1) Savita Raj / "Treated but abandoned...":-

Savita Raj a 36 year old, she does not want to marry again. When she first showed symptoms of bipolar affective disorder 17 years ago, her husband abandoned her. She was barely 20, and pregnant. Her parents escorted her from Mumbai to Tamil Nadu, where they left her at a temple. Her son got lost in a crowded street on one of her trips back to Mumbai, though she cannot remember exactly how. In fact, Savita remembers little of her past life, not even recognising her native Marathi. But she has kept one resolve: "I don't want to marry again."

2) The Indian women abandoned because of mental illness....

Ramaa (whose name was changed upon request) turned 45 on 20 August 2018. Her birthday is one of the few details she remembers from what she calls "her past life" - when she lived with her husband and two sons in the western city of Mumbai.

"When people say they love their families and cannot live away from them, I just don't understand it," she says. Her marriage, she explains, was tumultuous and her sons were not very affectionate towards her. A few days before she turned 30, Ramaa's husband brought her to the Regional Mental Hospital in Thane, a suburb of Mumbai. She was diagnosed with bipolar affective disorder, a condition that causes extreme mood swings.

According to mental health professionals in India, it's common for women to be abandoned if diagnosed with a mental illness. Nearly 14% of Indians are mentally ill and at least 10% of those need immediate intervention, according to a study published in 2016 by the National Institute of Mental Health and Neuroscience (Nimhans). And in 2017, the WHO estimated that 20% of Indians may suffer from depression at some point in their lives. But few reach out for professional help or care because of widespread social stigma and poor access to mental healthcare.

Conclusion :-

The narratives of abandonment of ill spouses whether physical, emotional, or institutional reveal deep-rooted intersections of gender, stigma, social expectations, and systemic failure. This research has shown that in both literature and media, particularly within the Indian context, the ill spouse is often portrayed not merely as a sufferer of illness but as a social burden frequently deserted by their partner or family due to the perceived disruption of marital or familial "normalcy."

Through real life case studies and fictional representations, it becomes evident that men and women with mental or physical illnesses are especially vulnerable to abandonment,

largely due to patriarchal norms that tie their worth to caregiving, reproductive ability, and physical conformity. On the other hand, men facing illness, while sometimes similarly neglected, are more often portrayed with sympathy or societal leniency, highlighting a gendered imbalance in responses to spousal illness.

This paper also highlights how illness becomes both a medical and social category constructed not only through diagnosis but also through societal responses to it. In the Indian context, the silence around mental illness, the lack of legal recourse for deserted women as well as deserted men, and the social expectation of self-sacrifice reinforce cycles of abandonment and invisibility.

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