

The Brush for the Breast

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Abstract:

This article examines the role of aesthetic initiatives in the representation as well as creating awareness about breast cancer, with special reference to two art initiatives. In this process, the article traces how apart from its anatomical and clinical complexities, breast cancer is a deeply complicated socio-psychic and socio-cultural construction which is linked with sexuality, femininity, motherhood, finance, beauty standard and stigma, to name a few. Breast Cancer often transcends its medical and medicinal comprehension and turns out to be a tabooed physio-psychic condition. Interestingly, the scenario is same both in the West and the East. The huge amount of money needed for its cure too intensifies the tainted understanding of the issue. Hence, discussion on breast cancer demands discussion beyond oncology and medical science. Along with the medical and clinical efforts, a good number of artistic, creative initiatives are being undertaken particularly to ease the environment of stigma, to reduce the intensity of skepticism, to create awareness, to prohibit the tendency of cultural construction as well as to create a logical, liberal and sensible environment to understand the delicate issues of a disease which is solely associated with a particular sex. In this paper two art initiatives have been taken into consideration. Medical terminology and terminology of Art Criticism is avoided to the best possible extent.

Key Words : *breast cancer, female, women, art, awareness, medical, psychology*

Introduction

This article examines the role of aesthetic initiatives in the public discussion as well as creating awareness about breast cancer, with special reference to two art initiatives. Breast cancer is a disease in which abnormal breast cells grow out of control and form tumours. If left unchecked, the tumours can spread throughout the body and become fatal. It is still considered to be one of the most challenging health hazards. Due to two significant aspects –the gender and the intense impact of the disease, breast cancer often transcends its medical and medicinal narrative and turns out to be a tabooed physio-psychic condition. Issues like Femininity, motherhood, Beauty Standard, Finance, Sexuality, Stigma, Ignorance, Stiffness are so closely interrelated with the disease that discussion on breast cancer demands discussion beyond oncology and medical science. Along with the medical and clinical efforts, a good number of artistic, creative initiatives are being undertaken particularly to ease the environment of stigma, to reduce the intensity of skepticism, to create awareness, to prohibit the tendency of cultural construction as well as to create a logical, liberal and sensible environment to understand the delicate issues of a disease which is solely associated with a particular sex. In this paper two art initiatives have been taken into consideration.

Objective

The basic objective of the paper is to trace out the possible role of Art in demystifying stigmatic aspects related to breast cancer and women, easing the avenues for a clear and objective understanding of the disease and the victim community and in raising awareness about breast cancer.

Study Method

To conduct the research, two art initiatives have been selected. The artworks are the primary texts while write-ups on the initiatives have been used for secondary references. The Energy Restoration Framework has been used to contextualise the inclusion of the artworks. The Energy Restoration framework is an integrated framework that encourages exploration and experimentation towards discovering practical, creative strategies to create useable energy to address fatigue, especially cancer-related fatigue (Kirshbaum 111). An extended form of Intertextuality and certain frameworks of Adaptation Studies have been used to lead the discussion.

Discussion

A disease always carries two simultaneous discourses of meanings –medical and socio-cultural. Along with the medical and oncological understanding, breast cancer is also equally viewed and understood from socio-cultural and psychosocial perspectives as it is related to a wide range of sensitive areas like femininity, sexuality, motherhood, beauty norms

or stigma, to name a few. Female breast is more of a cultural site than of an anatomical structure. Breast is identified as a visible sign of femininity and womanhood, equally breast is an object and metaphor of sexual desire. The breast as a cultural signifier is a contested site of political and personal significance in an on-going dialogue deeply implicated in framing, challenging and policing woman and womanhood. “The female breast is a visible and tangible feature of the female body. Tabooed, worshipped and sometimes exploited, Spadola refers to a woman’s breast as a woman’s most public and private parts” (Jones 15). A female breast thus goes through overtly public and private scrutiny and becomes a burdened space for countless narratives.

Breast cancer is an intricate phenomenon because as a patient of breast cancer, a woman has to deal with tremendous physical and psychosocial challenges during the traumatic journey of illness, treatment and post recovery process. Since the day of detection till recovery, along with the physical sufferings, the disease leads to deterioration of self-concept. Self Concept is a notion, examined under Psycho-Oncology, which basically stands for the categories of self-esteem, body image, self-discontent and self-appraisal (Wang and Feng 31). Any cancer patient goes under the deterioration of these values, but the intensity of breast cancer patients is always higher and more evident. Aggressive physical damage, declining social relationship, the pressure of financial issues and perceived but latent uncertainty among the family members causes huge stress. In a country like India, breast cancer patients have to deal with huge amount of culturally constructed stigma and taboos which is ranging from hesitation over public discussion about breast cancer, clueless fear of cancer transmission, prohibition over regular breast checking, narratives of cancer as punishments, frequent allusions of philosophical ideals like morality, character or sin to patients suffering from breast cancer, self-created mythical anecdotes over breast cancer treatment etc. Stigma is a powerful social process occurring within the context of power that has been described by Link and Phelan as beginning with labelling followed by stereotyping, which leads to estrangement, decline of collective and individual status and discrimination (364). In case of India, stigma is a very influential socio-cultural force and cancer or breast cancer stigma is an honest reality. Thus breast cancer often turns out to be more of a socio-cultural phenomenon than its clinical reality. Therefore, an interdisciplinary approach suits more to look into the juxtaposition of medical and societal phenomenon. This article initiates a discussion of the use of art as restorative medium to explore and extend the prevailing discourse of breast cancer. According to Kaplan et al. (1993), engagement with an aesthetic component in the stressful environment can create a deeper restorative experience. The restorative process starts as an individual is able to reflect within that environment, giving space and time to

“internal housekeeping” which promotes psychological wellbeing. Art has been identified as one of the most suitable aesthetic activities. Under the Energy Restoration Framework; art is identified as one of the five attributes of energy restoration in cancer and palliative care (Kirshbaum 104). This expansive and connective activity offers a new view of the body, new view of the self through reflection and introspection, an enhanced spirit of confidence and most importantly prepares for a new, alternative version of a popular narrative both for the victims and the public.

The two initiatives under discussion are – SURVIVORS and ArtCan. The SURVIVOR is a series of paintings by an Italian artist. ArtCan is an institutional project hosted by Apollo Cancer Centers where six Kerala Mural Artists prepared paintings on precautionary process of breast care detection. Italian artist aleXsandro Palombo, in the year 2016, released a series of paintings, entitled SURVIVORS which contained thirteen female figures posing in defiance while flashing the ‘V for Victory’ sign. The ladies in this series of paintings were re-imagined and re-created images of some of the world’s most popular fictional, animated characters and personalities as breast cancer survivors. The characters featured in the series include –Cinderella, Princess Jasmine, Sleeping Beauty, Ariel, Tatiana, Snow White, Marge Simpson, Jessica Rabbit, Wilma Flinstone, Betty Boop, Wonder Woman, Olive and Lois Griffin. All these characters are re-created as breast cancer survivors with either double or single mastectomies. The paintings show that none of them is going through post-mastectomy reconstruction. In all the paintings the scar and the stitch marks are clearly visible. All the paintings are bright in colour, images maintain the typical characteristics of their original visual presentation. The major difference is that the re-created images are devoid of clothes; especially the breast is completely naked. aleXsandro Palombo is an Italian Artist and an art-activist famous for his colourful, progressive, reflective, vocal and visionary artworks. Palombo, with his brilliant hold over message and medium, often uses his art for propagation or resistance to social, political, economic and political issues.

ArtCan was an initiative by Apollo Cancer Centres where art was used as a medium to spread awareness regarding breast cancer. In this process Apollo Cancer Centre joined hands with mural artists and breast cancer survivors to curate art that educates and empowers public about the importance of regular self-breast examination. Under this initiative six Kerala mural artists were provided a common platform to illustrate eight steps of self-breast examination-popularly known as SBE. The Mural is considered to be the oldest of India’s drawing tradition and mural painting from Kerala stand unique for their geo-historical contents, peculiar use of colour, narrative delicacy and elegant aesthetic taste. Under ArtCan, murals were prepared to inform the public the importance of self-handled inspection over the female

breast to look for any change or anomaly in the breast tissue. It is the preventive exercise in cancer detection. Each painting carries a delicately drawn Indian woman going for self-examination of her breast for any changes such as a new lump, thickenings, hardened knots change of shape or colour of the breast. The ladies in the paintings are presented under names like *Nila, Zia, Aisha, Devi, Dharini, Umang* etc. They are projected as representatives from different socio-economic strata- as they belong to different professions like fashion designer, painter, sprinter, housemaid, journalist, home maker etc. The artists engaged with the project were- Adarsh, Jijulal, Ramesh, Athira, Saji and Shaiju. The project was launched in the month of October, 2022.

The perspectives and approaches opted by the artists are brought into the discussion to examine the use of art in disseminating information and awareness about breast cancer. Such initiatives fall into the Arts Intervention framework popularly known as Art-making. Art-making is different from other overtly therapeutic art-forms as it involves the active creation of art or craft that aim to create awareness bring pleasure or spread information. While for a patient it works in catalysing in decreasing mood disturbances, for others it works as an easy, open and engaging communication about cancer (Kirshbaum and Ennis 71). As a form of psychotherapy, art (visual, expressive, performance) has been used within health and social care for many years (Wood and Payne 136). For some, a verbal expression of concern may be challenging particularly where disease, surgery or treatment impedes communication and disrupts self-image. Art may provide a useful bridge for communication and expression of psychosocial concerns within a therapeutic relationship wherein participants use a choice of art materials in an expressive manner to facilitate insight, increase self-agency, break taboos and promote wellbeing (Brenda et al. 77). With this understanding, ArtCan and SURVIVORS are selected for the research.

Artists under the ArtCan initiative selects Indian women for their frame. All the figures are dressed in Indian attire, their beautification processes are completely Indian. The use of colour is also done to reflect the average Indian look and tone. All these figures are named as Indian women. Here the audience or the spectators develop an affinity with the images. They somehow appear to be familiar figures of the spectator's surrounding. After building this affinity, the spectators are now taken into the crux point of the painting -the activity of self-breast examination. They are posing in front of the mirror to check their breasts as they have already discovered some anomalies in regard to skin tone, shape, structure of their breast. If someone has discovered a change in her skin tone, someone has discovered a lump or a thickening which is intensified by the use of colour red. In the tradition of art and painting, colour red often stands for something dangerous, aggressive, intense and

urgent. Though colour cannot be interpreted from an umbrella understanding, but this is also true that certain colours are already imposed with certain values and meanings which also gains universal acceptance. Spectators, while enjoying the painting, gradually discovers the contradiction of colours as well as the meanings they try to carry out. Now starts the process of meaning-making. Under the adaptation of meaning, the painting now transcend their primary nature and appear to be platforms of information and awareness. The seemingly aesthetic painting of a beautiful Indian woman turns out to be an alert and confident woman who is opting for self-breast examination. Self-breast examination is a detection process of one's own breast to check if there is any anomaly is visible which then prepares the concerned woman for her next steps. It is a preparatory mechanism to make women alert about their own body, especially to prevent them for a painful disease like breast cancer. But as breast cancer is often a tabooed, stigmatic cultural construct, this topic is hardly discussed and women are hardly encouraged to do so. Women even feel hesitated to talk about it or to opt for it in the presence of her husband or other family members (Radhakrishnan and Shah). It is the cultural stigma associated with cancer and breast cancer in particular that self-breast examination, in spite of being a simple, approachable mechanism, is hardly found to be discussed openly. ArtCan attempts to fill in the gap by presenting a bunch of seemingly familiar average women frankly engaged in self-breast examination. Women figures under this initiative are representatives of different socio-economic statuses -they are journalists, home makers, sprinters or fashion designers. But when comes to breast cancer, all are encouraged to opt for the different steps of self-breast examination. Thus ArtCan clarifies certain thing – breast cancer can happen to anyone irrespective of social and economic stature. Secondly, it also clarifies that the first and foremost duty of self-examination, detection and consequent consultancy should be initiated by woman herself. The other parties -the family members, physicians or health care providers join the process in the later stage. Awareness should be raised within, external agencies always locate in a critical distance in arousing awareness. The paintings intensify that in matters like breast cancer, the awareness should be self-awareness for being practical, not panic. Thirdly it is also communicated that the care for avoiding any disease and the concern for remaining alert to one's own body is primarily one's own responsibility. It is a very significant point as the moment the detection happens, treatment of the cancer or breast cancer patients turns out to be a family responsibility. It happens because of the huge amount of money it need and for a prolonged time period for treatment it demands. In India, the situation becomes more public due to the organisational fabric of the family. Hence, before engaging a huge number of people with a prolonged and stressful procedure, a woman can initiate these simple steps for planning a less panic,

systematic and less stressful journey. ArtCan thus offers significant insight into the necessity and value of a pre-breast cancer precautionary mechanisms. From the Adaptation perspective, it has been found that different Art forms-Paintings, Cartoons, Illustrations, and comics are attention-holders and can convey the desired message to the layman. “Public health messages. i.e. the process of meaning and implications of primordial and primary preventions can be depicted colourfully, visually comically in a socially acceptable manner employing pictorial diagrams, pictures, illustrations, etc. to encourage more women participation in women’s cancer awareness and screening” (Kumar 3). Similarly, it also resembles with a flexible process what Julie Sanders defines as “proximation”, a strategy that brings the text closer to the personal frame of reference of the public, according to contexts and local audiences. Here the paintings are the new texts with notes of awareness, information and appeal for ease.

Cancer, diagnosed at an earlier stage has a better prognosis and is easier to treat. ArtCan does not provide any prescriptive, medical information about self-breast examination. Rather it fulfils the most urgent requirement -to bring to book a forbidden aspect to the public in the most dignified and artistic manner. Breast self-examination is the most economical and potential screening procedure which provide significant results. Women are encouraged to get to know their breasts and become more attuned to any changes, without resorting to a strict regimen of self-examinations at predetermined intervals. It has been found that self-examination of the breast is a very helpful in low-resource countries where access to mammography is limited. It is interesting to note that ArtCan is an initiative by Apollo Hospitals, the most trusted and most well-equipped cancer care provider of the country. Apollo Cancer Centres are evaluated as providers of quality treatment to cancer patients. When such an institution opts for an artistic initiative to talk and inform about breast cancer, it certainly bears immense significance. It proves that treatment is a later procedure, first there should an attempt to talk, share, engage and be informed about the disease. Secondly, breaking the taboo or stigma associated with diseases like breast cancer, should be an inter-disciplinary, an interconnected initiative. Engagement of the maximum number of stakeholders is the basic urgency in such matters. It also demystifies the notion that some diseases are so complicated, so intense that common people have nothing to do about it. The fear borne out of ignorance about the processes related to diagnosis, treatment or therapy and medical terminology often leads to unwanted loss and expenditure. Therefore, Apollo Hospitals might have thought initiating such visually reflective programs on breast cancer and the issue of Women’s; health can be made more visible, audible and approachable. Initiating an art project and patronising the artists for ArtCan by a super speciality health care provider

agency also reflects that women’s health should be prioritised, should be brought into the discussion in public domain by all possible means. It reflects their belief that to make this urgency a reality, we should opt for those kinds of mediums which are more visible, more comprehensible and more accessible by the public. Discussion over breast cancer or a book on cancer might have burdened with medical and oncological terms, relatively complex narratives or long lists of vocabulary which may not be comprehensible for common mass. In such a situation the visual medium is more effective both in attracting audience and communicating the message about a gendered disease. Though ArtCan is different from the therapeutic usage of Art, it too believes that art can ease complexities in public understanding in regards to breast cancer, encourage more people to think about, can heal the emotional trauma and offer a platform of release and discuss an area that is strategically side lined from public discourse.

SURVIVORS deals with the post mastectomy scenario. As mentioned earlier, SURVIVORS contains images of breast cancer survivors who have already gone through the mastectomy procedure. They stand confident, openly expose the empty space with visible scars and stitches and poses for V for victory. The series is a thoughtfully designed enterprise to call for acceptance of breast cancer survivors in an open, normal manner. It is an attempt to confront the scars objectively, not to impose other connotations over a body part of the woman and most importantly to retain confidence, hope and dignity in the post—surgery period. The paintings are found to be inspired by the dwindling state of self-esteem and dubious sense of beauty that women often experience in their post-surgery period. It is really a confusing and challenging situation as the patient entangles between the satisfaction of overcoming the most crucial stage of her treatment but the uncertainty that in future how is she going to be accepted. SURVIVORS transform this phase into artworks.

A woman, whether married or unmarried, is frequently judged by her physical appeal, prevailing standards of beauty, her reproductive ability where the breast is the most crucial organ. A woman without breast suddenly finds herself in a situation where she is devoid of one of one of the most prominent indicators of all those agencies. In such a situation, there is the maximum possibility of slipping to the state of depression, frustration, identity crisis and coping difficulty. Beauty and sexuality are universal indicators of woman identity. Again coping with the new environment of her own physique, the changing socio-cultural surroundings or to fulfil the expectations like a normal woman often worsens the psychic situation of the survivors. Surviving thus turns out to be a constant war between self and body. SURVIVORS locates itself in this crucial junction of contradictory state of affairs. The characters of the series try to rise from all the conflicting forces and it is indicated by the use of the specific

hand gesture. Though in popular consumption, this sign stands for an overused, casual gesture, the gesture posed by these characters imply beyond that and promise of hope and normalcy to a victim who has already gone through severe physical and emotional pain. SURVIVORS celebrates woman as woman, not as gendered storehouse of sexuality, femininity and womanhood. SURVIVORS offers the scope how adaptability of art opens new horizon of maximising the possibility of art from aesthetic exercise to mechanism of healing, dialogue and acceptance. Adaptation is often seen as the practice of transcoding as well as the assimilation of a work of art to other cultural, linguistic, semiotic, aesthetic or other norms. SURVIVORS justifies what Sanders said that adaptations contribute to the revitalization of the canon, reformulating and expanding it to adapt itself to new contexts (Sanders 15)

Selection of the characters for the series is another significant aspect. They all belong to the category of most popular, most read, most adapted and immensely influential literary characters of the universe. The fantasy and the magic the characters create over the readers, especially in the children's mind, is a universally accepted reality. Painting of such characters as breast cancer survivors, with stitches and scars, set off a deconstructive understanding of the popular consumption of female identity in literature and visual mediums. It is a fine postmodernist or Inter textual approach in specific. As Inter textuality refers to the examination of the relationship between texts where one's text's meaning is shaped or twisted by another text, SURVIVORS beautifully twists the conventional consumption of these characters as well the conventional internalisation of beauty by projecting them as female without a breast. Disney princess and the other cartoon and Graphic characters are celebrity woman, known for their femininity, beauty standards, values and skill. There is a strong overtone of feminine values in their literary narration and visual representation especially in norms related to beauty, relationship status and their skills (Sun 1). Though, there is a powerful trend of criticism against the stereotyping of such characters, interestingly they are popular because of those traits. Hence presenting these influential figures as woman without breast is a daring deconstruction. Palombo, here opens up a window for numerous interpretations. Firstly it enhances the already mentioned point that cancer can happen to anyone. Making spectators ready to accept and love their favourite characters as breast cancer survivors actually performs the same catalytic function of changing one's outlook towards women, their body and making a plea to accept the new one. The objective of the series is not limited just to raise awareness about woman and breast cancer. It rather poses a question over the hegemonic structure that determines and defines the very concept of beauty where the existence and shape of the breast is one of the very basic condition. The concepts like pretty, sexy or cute has their

own standards of body essentials and majority of the women and men agree to those norms. SURVIVORS challenges to all these norms, question over the authenticity of those norms and declare that acceptance is not guided by norms rather by reality. The body of the woman cannot be restricted to ideal standards borne out of dominant psycho-social power structure, rather it can attain any shape and it is the reality. Palombo here uses the art as the agency both to culminate a dominating narrative and to initiate a new narrative of objective acceptance. Though not clearly mentioned, the association of the select characters with the children world is another considerable factor. The tender souls should be provided an environment of reality and honesty when it comes to sensitive matters like breast cancer. When children discover that their favourite princess or cartoon character in a new look, they go through a series of emotional experiences starting with shock, dilemma of acceptance, query over the factor and a gradual re-creation of the image. SURVIVORS opens up the avenue of those emotional experiences which ultimately results in a more open-ended understanding about the characters in specific and the disease and woman in general. Thus, SURVIVORS transcends the label of mere awareness initiative.

Conclusion

Discussion of the two initiatives offer certain commonalities and uniqueness. From a general understanding, both the initiatives demonstrate the potentiality and scope as well as urgency of interdisciplinary approaches to address critical issues related to women's health and wellbeing. Both the initiatives expound the adaptability and intertextual possibility of a certain aesthetic form. Using a text of a certain discipline and format for understanding or communicating knowledge of a different discipline or format is an extensive, interdisciplinary activity which also fulfils the rising demand of multidisciplinary intervention, especially for the sake of "effectiveness, reach and to build trust" (DeAraujo 254). The United Nations General Assembly declared the year, 2021 as the International Year of Creative Economy for Sustainable Development with intent to centre the importance of the arts' contribution towards the UN sustainable development goals on a global scale. Hence, art is always playing a vital role in health awareness (Chen). Crossing the boundary of traditional discipline is what the art initiatives does when it comes to seriously and sensibly working on women's health. In both the initiatives, Art, even after retaining its fundamental aesthetic characteristics has been used for numerous aspects of the discourse of breast cancer - application of art as an effective awareness mechanism, deconstructing the internalisation of certain ideas related to woman, breast and breast cancer, intensification of the need not to overlook the element of culture and gender while dealing with diseases like breast cancer and most importantly the investment of art in the widening the level of engagement of stakeholders up to the children

community. In their rejection of the romantic glorification of women body or dismissal of mystical imposition of meaning over the contested site of women, both the initiatives remain progressive. Such initiatives, teach to accept the reality, refines the taste of public consumption and creates a liberal and easy environment to place the women, their health and health issues in a mainstream, wider, more comfortable space for further action.

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