

Cancer As A Health Concern In Of Mutability By Jo Shapcott

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Abstract

The present study elaborates on the intrinsic link between science and poetry. As one of the contemporary health concerns, cancer remains one of the stumbling blocks to most medical researches. Cancer consists in a diseased growth in the human body which causes anatomic mutations. Such a clinical reality has lent subject matter to the poetry Jo Shapcott, a British poet who has provided an exquisite representation of cancer in its chemotherapeutic aspects in *Of Mutability*. The purpose of this study is to use the semiotic method in order to highlight how Jo Shapcott aesthetically explores imageries and tropes in order to represent cancer in its clinical manifestations and the impacts cancer has on the morale and social relations of patients living with the ail.

Keywords: Poetry, cancer, depiction, ail, mutations.

1. Introduction

Cancer as a neoplastic disease has been an issue of great concern both in medical and creative literature. “Cancer prevalence in the UK is currently estimated at approximately two million and is projected to continue to increase in conjunction with improving survival rates. (Cancer, ReaserachUK, 2008) People living with cancer bear testimony of it as a scary ail with all the strains it has in their lives and social environment. While already in the 1970s the fear of cancer has become a point of serious concern and a deep seated reality, statistics have proven that it is a western type of disease which has remained unknown in spite of the insidious spread in developing countries. Indeed, “Most cancers occur in developing countries 61% of the global incidence in 1985.’ However, few data are available on cancer incidence, mortality, and, especially, survival in such countries” (Barbara, 2001: 296).

Cancer has therefore become a universal disease in a globalizing world. It has raised serious health and clinical issues that continue to hold attention. Irrespective of class, the rich and the poor, the healthy and sick are equally ailed in a variety of ways by the green eyed monster that is cancer.

From a mythical to a scientific angle of views, cancer has been idealized by creative writers with a tint of abnormal representations due to how it affects people and the fact that it remains a puzzle to

medical practitioners. A writer's link to the clinical world falls in the category of how language becomes domesticated to the field and issue the writer wants to de-familiarize. As John Mukand says it through his experience of a visitation in the cancer ward at hospital,

Even to the initiate, the hospital is mysterious. While I typed these words. The light in a room on the sixth floor, the cancer ward, went off, leaving a streetlight's fluorescent glare. Was it someone I knew? From my window, I could not tell. May be the patient, relaxed after a scheduled dose of morphine, floated down into sleep like a snow-flake; may be the body simply held its breath, refusing to give any mouth-to-mouth resuscitation to this world, and sank into the depths of white linen. Tomorrow morning, I might find out what happened. But tonight, my pager is off (Mukand, 1994: xxi).

Through an unusual use of the language poets have probed into the neoplastic universe of cancer and sought to bring out what effects it has on the ailing persons and how cancer affects the patients' psyche and their social relationships. In "Off the Country of Cancer", Liam Rector, opines that the mere mention of cancer to a patient is a source of psychic havoc. For as he says:

It comes on/ Comes on with the word, / A doctor's word,/ The doctor saying cancer./ "But do I have cancer?"/ "Yes, cancer."/ Doctor has to say cancer/ One more time/ Before the cancer/ In me/Becomes the Word/ I give over to it./"What then/ Will we/Do?"/(A we Enters/ Quickly, to calm/ The alone (Whitebread, 1994: 6).

It is evident from the quote above that on learning that one is diagnosed of cancer is the beginning a crumbling personality and the world around. Out of panic patients feel stigmatized and at times isolated. Barbara Clow looks at such a situation when she evokes the case of one patient named Sontag as it follows:

Against seemingly desperate odds, Sontag survived her confrontation with cancer. Yet the experience left her profoundly shaken. For months after her initial diagnosis, she was unable to write anything; then she worked frantically, feverishly - uncertain, as she later wrote, 'about how much time I had left to do any living or writing in'. Moreover, as she sat in hospital wards and waiting rooms alongside others victims of the disease, Sontag was struck by the extent to which cancer was not merely a physical affliction, but also a formidable social handicap (Barbara, 2001: 286).

Cancer is therefore an ail that purports a variety of effects on the life of the patients. The symptoms and their aftermaths range from anatomic to psychic and social effects. Jo Shapcott appears to have navigate the scene of such symptoms through a deft poetic language that keeps reader and listener

of her poetry pondering on her art of representation as she elaborates on cancer without really mentioning it.

2. Aims And Scope

The present study examines how Jo Shapcott explores the clinical reality of cancer and highlights aesthetic representations of cancer in its clinical manifestations and the impacts it has on the patients' psyche and their relationship with the outside world throughout their journey to healing. The rationale behind this article lies in the attempt to explore how art and science, especially, literature and medicine bridge together in the poetry of Jo Shapcott with cancer and its patients as aesthetic pretexts. Emphasis will be laid on the imageries used to make allusion to cancer, to the psychological and the social impacts it has on the patient. The study has approached the literature as a multi-dimensional phenomenon, which addressed both theoretical and applied research.

3. Methods And Design

This study is a qualitative research that explores content analysis in order to highlight how symptoms and effects of cancer represent signs worth considering through a semiotic insight of Shapcott's poetry. Indeed, a look at the origins of semiotics reveals that,

Semiotics arose from the scientific study of the physiological symptoms induced by particular diseases or physical states. It was Hippocrates (460-377 B.C.), the founder of Western medical science, who established semeiotics as a branch of medicine for the study of symptoms - a symptom being, in effect, a sēmeion 'mark, sign' that stands for something other than itself (Sebeok, 2001: 4).

The exquisite poetic language in *Of Mutability* makes it a book of signs and marks in and outside the body. In *Of Mutability*, Shapcott addresses cancer with a deft psychosomatic representations of the ail and the patient's struggle to heal. It is therefore an attempt in this study probe an insight into semiotic indexical and iconic representations of cancer and an ail and how the poet seems to lay clues of healing from cancer.

4. Representing Cancer in *Of Mutability*

As an ail, cancer is to be seen in *Of Mutability* as a lurking monster that licks and eats away at the human body. To put this forward, the poet relies on indices and show on the patient or discreetly lie in his body. In the lymphatic matrix, cancer expands through infected cells to leave out only

destruction when it is done. Shapcott depicts such a state of things through an insight into the manifestations of tumorous cells and their system. The poet seems to have opted for an impressionistic but evocative approach in addressing cancer when in *Of Mutability* she says: “Too many of the best cells in my body/are itching, feeling jagged, running raw/in this spring chill. [...]” (Shapcott, 2014: 3).

From a semiotic perspective, the cells and the body reactions are signs alluding to cancer and how it affects the patient’s body. For Anthony Wilson, *Of Mutability* is full of signs and connotation.

The book’s achievement is to transform the vocabulary of discussions of cancer without ever using the word itself, whilst paying scrupulous attention to its effects on both mind and body. Of Mutability does not describe an event so much as to offer the reader an experience, on a cellular level almost, without ever forgetting the primary concerns of art-making. It is wild and forensic, controlled and dreamlike, angry and celebratory (Anthony, 2011).

Through an implied diction, the author represents the somatic manifestations of cancer on the cancer patient. While it is arguable to maintain that cancer is the only cause for itching, it must be noted that many cancer patients display symptoms of lymphoma which is a common ail deriving from cancer treatments. Indeed, studies on cancer have shown that

Cancer begins as a single abnormal cell that begins to multiply out of control. To keep itself in good repair, the body produces more than 10 million new cells every second—almost a trillion new cells every day. New cells develop only from preexisting cells, as needed (Raymond, 2011: 50).

It is obvious from the extract above that Shapcott clinically represents the reality of blood cells in cancer patients through signs of cancer manifestations. It is implied that the immune system of the speaker in the poem continues to resist to cancerous cells as she mentions residual good health through the “best cells”. This is to underscore the existence of tumorous cells under which the body is ailing. From the effect on blood cells, one has the impression that Shapcott features cancer as an insidious disease creeping through the veins like a snake towards the destruction of its victims.

The effect of cancer on blood cells is a clinical reality among the hundreds of symptoms that science has in its nomenclature. In “La Serenissima”, Shapcott gives indices into how the body suffers from within. The poem reveals that once disoriented by the ail, the speaker feels lost and unconnected to his environment. As the lines read, “My face turned/ towards rainclouds. I could feel the membranes

in my body tremble with fluid/ they contain, and the stately flow of lymph, / the faster pulse of blood” (Shapcott, 2014: 5).

The same chemical and lymphatic interchanges between blood cells are evoked when Shapcott puts that:

My body's is a drop of water. Maybe the imperfections, the proliferating cells/ help it refract the full spectrum. These last breaths,/ air, water bubbling at my lips. The soap film is my skin:/permeable-for-some-things, membrane, separating-other-things,/ this and that, the moving point between, the unsettled limit, stretching and contracting under the breath/ that comes and goes: I am this one, I am that one,/ I breathe in and become everything I see (Shapcott, 2014: 6).

The excerpt above makes it clear that cancer destabilises the human body system from within by causing malfunctions in the blood cells. Such malfunctions transpire in the form of symptoms on the body as messengers of defects in the organism. However, it needs to be read through the lines that while the infestation goes on, most of cancer patients opt for chemotherapy which is topical to cancer treatment and consists in injections into the blood system, or bone marrow. In “La Serenissima” and “Deft” it is evident that the patient’s body is under chemotherapy and is flushed with drugs and nutrients necessary to make the immune system resist the spread of cancerous cells. Shapcott’s achievement in these representations lies in how she is able to open up on the emotional experience patients go through while the ailed cells and antibodies interact in the body. The instability within the body has a correlation with what happens to patients’ physical appearance. Indeed, as a malignant growth, the cancerous tumour also leaves mark the patients’ external appearance as the body goes through metamorphoses.

*There is no choice. Terrified,
I start to climb, know at once
potent invaders are racing through
my channels, taking me over. Appalled,
my inner systems signal rebellion.
What resources can I muster
to contain the battle in my body? (Shneider, 2003: 68).*

In the 1930s, the American novelists, Thomas Wolfe was alert enough to raise awareness on the body impairments caused by the effects of cancer. He made an insight into what it means to cope with the disease and the reactions of the body to the disease. Indeed,

Thomas Wolfe's Of Time and the River, published in 1935, is one of the few examples of North American literature that deals with the subject. In this epic story

of a young man's search for self-awareness, one of the principal characters, W. O. Gant, is stricken with and eventually carried off by an unspecified form of cancer. To some extent, Wolfe's account mirrors the experiences described by Sontag and Patterson. Gant does, indeed, wage a long and sometimes dreadful battle with cancer; his body wastes away, leaving only his hands, the hands of a stonemason, untouched by the ravages of the disease (Barbara, 2001: 308).

In *Of Time and the River*, the reader is carried on a journey which dramatizes the plight of Gant, the protagonist. The central conflict in the plot of the novel lay in addressing Gant's journey with the ail. As the extract above delineates, there is a look at the body deficiencies caused by cancer on its patients. The external appearance of Gant is an epitome of the indexical functions of the symptoms of the tumorous growth and how it spreads insidiously within the patient. *Of Mutability* makes similar but poignant allusions to such body metamorphoses when in "Hairless" we read:

Can the bald lie? The nature of the skin says not:/it's newborn-pale, erection-tender stuff, / every thought visible - pure knowledge, / mind in action - shining through the skull. /I saw a woman, hairless absolute, cleaning. /She mopped the green floor, dusted bookshelves, / all cloth and concentration, Queen of the moon. /You can tell, with the bald, that the air/ speaks to them differently, touches their heads/ with exquisite expression. As she danced/ her laundry dance with the motes, everything/ she ever knew skittered under her scalp, / It was clear just from the texture of her head, she was about to raise her arms to the sky;/ I covered my ears as she prepared to sing, to roar (Shapcott, 2014: 8).

Signs of cancer symptoms speak loud enough to build the meaning about the physiological effects of the ail on the patient. The extract above puts forward an implied hair loss that comes with the disease and which the one suffering from cancer has to bear with. Apparently, Shapcott challenges her readership about the undeniable effect of hair loss in cancer patients. She points at the devastating baldness and the changes it implies in the patients' contact with the natural environment. Such implicit details work to establish how the disease can affect a person's outward look. These symptoms on the patients' body are traumatic signs through which the cancerous growth creeps through the body and steals life and vitality. It is real in many clinical reports that cancer causes havoc in the life of the patients and can leave markers on the body enough to differentiate the sick from other people around them.

From a semiotic point of view, baldness and other external signs that sprout on the patients are the signs through which the poet constructs the nomenclature of cancer and makes it clear that there is an ail lurking in the body of the patient whose health is hacked and pushed to instability. These external symptoms of cancer play an indexical functions and stands as poetic structures that work

to describe how the body is ailed and brought to struggle. In addition, it is evident to assume in the light *Of Mutability*, from inward to the outward parts of the body that there is a

Nonverbal communication takes place within an organism or between two or more organisms. Within an organism, participators in communicative acts may involve - as message sources or destinations or both - on rising integration levels, cellular organelles, cells, tissues, organs, and organ systems. In addition, basic features of the whole biological organization, conducted nonverbally in the milieu interieur, include protein synthesis, metabolism, hormone activity, transmission of nervous impulses, and so forth (Sebeok, 2001: 12).

Jo Shapcott has the merit of having used this biological and cellular motif in the making of the lines *Of Mutability* in which she hardly mentions cancer while the book centres on it.

5. The Morale of Cancer Patients

Cancer is a devastating disease that not only affects the physical health of patients, but also has a significant psychological impact. It has been shown that cancer patients often experience a range of emotions, including fear, anxiety, and depression, which can significantly affect their quality of life and ability to cope with treatment. This section of the study will explore the representation of the psychological incidence of cancer through iconic signs evoked by the speaker through the allusions made to the ail.

Under the effect of cancer, patients tend to lose control and psychological stability and can't help guessing what is happening to them. There is an estrangement vis-à-vis the usual milieu in which life used to be smooth and harmonious. The poem titled "Deft" is an epitome of such a reality when we have a look at how the speaker relates to the effects of the ail and what his morale turns into. As we can read, it says:

My body's/ a drop of water, maybe the imperfections, the proliferating cells/help it refract the full spectrum. The last breaths, /air, water bubbling at my lips. The soap film is my skin:/permeable-for-some-things, membrane, separating-other-things, /this and that, the moving point between, the unsettled/ limit, stretching and contracting under the breath /that comes and goes: I am this one, I am that one, / I breathe in and become everything I see (Shapcott, 2014: 6).

The quotation above pinpoints the supposed effects of the cancerous growth on the connection one has with the reality, henceforth. The speaker puts forward the image of a destabilised mind that depends on anything around it for solace as if healing lies in everything the patient will breathe in. Cancer patients turn out to have the psychology of drowning man who would desperately hold on to everything floating on water in order to survive. The excerpt also makes it clear that under the

effects of the lymphoma, the patients' morale may turn distraught and they might lose confidence and assurance in what actually needs to be done for survival. It is the reason why the speaker is prone to escape and identify to everything he breathes in and comes into contact with.

Jo Shapcott emphasises signs of bewilderment that occur to most cancer patient who struggle for balance on noticing that they enter a way of no return. The same situation is depicted by Mira Schneider who has it that once diagnosed with the ail, the patient comes to the realisation that,

Trauma and stress are disorientating. Your illness has probably disrupted your life at least for a while and there may be times when you feel weak, isolated, uncertain, stressed, depressed, powerless, and when it's a struggle to hold onto your image of the person you were before your illness (Shneider, 2003: 175).

Cancer patients are often at a loss. The quote states that one of the attributes that patients lose once they are aware of the tumorous growth is self-control and their mental stability. The situation equates to a persistent sense of sadness and loss because cancer is often viewed as a fatal disease resulting in death in most cases. Indeed, one of the most common psychological impacts of cancer is fear and anxiety. Many patients worry about the potential side effects of treatment, the possibility of recurrence, and the impact on their family and loved ones. These fears lead to stress, which can in turn affect the mental focus and a steady belief in better days.

In "Uncertainty is Not a Good Dog", we get the sense of imbalance in the patient's morale. Shapcott uses a stylish turn of language to expose the ways in which the proliferation of cancer cells destabilises the patient's psyche. The poem reads as follows:

Uncertainty is Not a Good Dog/Uncertainty is not a good dog./ She eats bracken and sheep shit, drops her litters in foxholes and rolls in all the variables./wriggling on her back until/ she reeks of them,/ until their scents are her scents./She takes sudden, windy routes/ She takes sudden, windy routes/ through hummocks, cairns and ditches/ so you can't spot where she is/ and acknowledge her velocity/ at the same time./She's fidgety (Shapcott, 2014: 50).

Without actually naming cancer and the psychological effects it brings about, it is clear from the extract above that Shapcott, represents a patients' experience with the disease that lurks and eats into their body. The iconic representation transpires in the way we are told what cancer cells feed on and the troubles they cause. To achieve such an effect, the author explores such notions "bracken and sheep shit", "litter in foxholes", "windy routs", "hummocks and cairns and ditches". These coined expressions play an iconic function as they allow to reproduce their referents in the patients who turn out to isolate and stay on the fringe of society. Moreover, the excerpt lays emphasis on

how the awareness of the ail creates a state of insecurity in the patient. Patients worry because everything in their life changes from inside and impacts how they perceive themselves and the way others look at them. In substance, there is a sense of vulnerability that transpires in the ever changing anatomy and the scent of the body. The speaker makes it a point that, one cannot really spot cancer symptoms as they vary constantly. These aspects participate in maintaining the sick persons in a state of loss and depression.

Mira Schneider's "What's On My Mind" is in line with Shapcott's insight into depression and the anxiety that holds on the psychology of cancer patients. When the speaker is brought to say:

I am terrified of facing chemotherapy. / I am dreading feeling sick and being out of action or partly out action. / I am afraid of my hair thinning and falling out. / I feel ill just thinking about this treatment. / I feel upset that I have to think about this while I'm recovering from the operation. / I feel overwhelmed that I have so much to contend with (Shneider, 2003: 42).

We have blatant evidence that depression is another common psychological symptom experienced by cancer patients in addition to physiological and anatomic trauma. Although cancer is not mentioned, reference to depression plays the iconic function of indicating how cancer brings down the morale of the patient and besieges it with bewilderment. This is actually due to the emotional burden generated by the disease, as well as the physical changes and limitations caused by its treatment. While it is important for patients to seek treatment for depression, it is worth noting that depression constitutes a medical challenge that Jo Shapcott makes crucial in her treatment of the plight of cancer patients.

In addition to fear, anxiety, and depression, cancer patients may also experience feelings of grief, loss, and isolation. The physical and emotional changes caused by cancer offer lead to a sense of loss of control and identity, and patients may feel isolated from their loved ones and social support. It is important for patients to find ways to connect with others, through support groups or therapy, to help manage these emotions.

In *Writing my way through Cancer*, Myra makes explicit what runs in the mind of cancer patients. In "What's on my mind", the speaker says the following about fear and anxiety:

I am afraid of the operation./ I am afraid they won't do the operation because I have a bit of a cold./It will be a relief if they do the operation – even to have the fear of the operation./ I am afraid of going through another waiting period and the disease spreading./ I am afraid of the anesthetic./ I am afraid of the period after coming round./ I am afraid that I'll have difficulty with breathing./ I am afraid of

being very weak and muzzy./ I am afraid of not being in control./ I am afraid of being seen as a feeble coward./ I am afraid of the wound and the discomfort./ I am very sad I am losing one of my small breasts./ I am even afraid that they will remove the wrong breast (Shneider, 2003: 25).

Managing the psychological incidence of cancer can be challenging. It is evident from Myra's view that under the effects of cancer, patients develop a distress built on what they undergo or meant to go through on their way to cure. Both clinical and anatomic conditions participate to the fear and cause the patient to live in a state of agony whereby hope in scientific achievement do no more provide assurance. In the specific case of the excerpt above, the uncertainty behind the surgical intervention and the possible ablation of the breast are put forward as the root causes of the fear and anxiety she develops due to cancer while in the ward. In *Of Mutability*, Shapcott supplies epitomes of the same morale. In "Procedure", she has the speaker say:

... this tea, is the interpreter/ of almond, liquid touchstone which lets us/ scent its true taste at last and with a bump, / in my case, takes me back to the yellow time/ of trouble with blood tests, and cellular/ madness, and my presence required/ on the slab for the surgery, and all that mess/ I don't want to comb through here because/ it seems, honestly, a trifle now that steam/ and scent and strength and steep and infusion/ say thank you thank you for the then and now (Shapcott, 2014: 53).

From a semiotic perspective, allusions to cancer and its treatments is blunt when the poet chooses words such as "tea", "interpreter", "yellow time" these are indicators and implied signifiers of the panic resulting from the cancer experience and attempts to overcome the disease or cope with it. There is an implied reference to the effects of chemotherapy and how bilirubin¹ builds up in the blood to become a blockade to liver ducts. The patient's alarm is therefore, kindled when references to the turmoil in the cells participate to her refrain from surgery. Experience shows that for most cancer patients, surgery does not represent a way out but a hazard that no one can trust for his/her life.

This section has argued that Jo Shapcott depicts psychological unrest caused by cancer in *Of Mutability*. She deftly does so without making any literal reference to the ail. She provides commonplace clinical indication of mental instability that stand as icons of the actual ways in which cancer impacts the mental health of the patient. In doing so, she has created a host metaphors and coded of meanings that hardly name cancer even though it is the central piece of her book.

¹ Bilirubin is a yellowish substance made during your body's normal process of breaking down old red blood cells. Bilirubin is found in bile; a fluid your liver makes that helps you digest food.

6. Social Incidence of Cancer on the Patient

The psychological impairments caused by the disease deeply change personality and how the individual relates to his social milieu. The social incidence of cancer refers to the impact that cancer has on an individual's social relationships, roles, and interactions with others. This section of my study will explore the various ways in which Jo Shapcott looks at the social bond henceforth people are diagnosed with the disease.

Beforehand, it needs be noted that Shapcott shares almost the same views with Thomas Whitbread who has it said in a poem that: “As the body/Dies, it requires strictest attention, /Nutriment, doctors, nurses, /Everyone who has given it harm, /Each person who has loved it, /All, arm-in-arm, /To keep it warm” (Mukand, 1994: 6).

Thomas mentions the need of support and empathy towards people living with cancer. He suggests that apart from the way the body is fed, the patient needs attention on the part of his social entourage in order to be able to cope with the devastating effects of the disease.

Arguably, signs of cancer in *Of Mutability* display a dark tableau of distorted relationships between the patients’ and the social and natural environment around them. One of the first signs which put forward the speaker’s shunning of the social bond occurs in “Era” when the speaker confesses that:

The twenty second day of March two thousand and three/I left home shortly after eight thirty/on foot towards the city. I said goodbye/ to the outside of my body: I was going in. The magpies were squabbling in the park. / The little fountain splashed chemical bubbles/ over its lips. Traffic swarmed and swam/ round Vauxhall Cross, like crazy fish, with teeth/ And anything could be real in a country/ where red kites were spreading east and now/ we had February swallows. Planes for Heathrow (Shapcott, 2014: 4).

The extract above carries indications of isolation and how the speaker begins to feel estranged from the world around him. Basically, most cancer patients experience stigmatization deriving from the way others look at people living with the disease. They have to bear with social considerations and the prejudice associated with the disease they carry. Shapcott implants clues that function as the social mechanisms of gossip and scorn through which members of a community get accepted or rejected in the social interactions. Such clues are expressed through the use of “the squabbling magpies” in the park or the “little fountain” that “splashed chemical bubbles” and “the dull traffic”.

These metaphoric expressions indicate the effect of the social external world on the patient. It is possible to infer that the speaker has the impression of being talked about or being jested at by the fountain. Therefore, breaking with such an environment stands as a way out. Shapcott makes it clear that patients run away from social contact because they can become subject to ill-talk that weakens their relationships with others. It is obvious to see from her lines that stigmatization is part of the social signifiers of rebuke and acceptance that cancer patients are aware of and cannot help reacting to. They are aware of the social mechanisms that work to shove them in the fringe of society.

In “Abishag: after Rilke”, the reader perceives a sense of empathy for a sick partner. As we can read:

Tie my arms round the neck/ of my beloved, so as to wrap/ me close, even when I'm asleep/ through long, sweet hours of wedlock/with my face in his beard, /the hair so thick owls might nest/where my cheek nests and those be small bird/ cries, not the sound of my dearest/wheezing. Stars tremble in his sweat/ though he feels cold. I lick his skull /dry. My own perfume stirs, stinks abject/ and rose against the enormous other smell (Shapcott, 2014: 10).

The extract suggests that instead of rejecting the patient, the speaker shows empathy and also attempts to find ways in which the pains of the suffering partner can be soothed. Indications of the social bond between them materialize through the speaker’s readiness to hug and stay close to her husband in spite the blatant symptoms of his ail. There is even a tolerance of the partner’s wheezing breath and the repulsive smell that derives from his ail.

In further developments of the same poem, we get evidence that Jo Shapcott seeks to remediate social failings due to cancer. When the speaker puts the following:

All day my beloved is empty in his chair. /He tries to tell me what he's done, and hasn't felt/ so far, of his dog and his life as an angler. /I want the night when I'm the author/ of what time's left to us and only his dear /old man's skin between us, so thin it might melt against my breasts under the hot quilt. On and off his knowledge of women seeps back, /his eyebrows knot and he's remembering - a trick /or two, some little nibble, or touch, what my mouth is for - though he's not doing. I smile and hold him /like my own child, a precious child whose birth/ was at least as hard as his death, his dear, soon death will be. Something stirs, somewhere in the room (Shapcott, 2014: 11).

It is crystal clear that these two stanzas carry a pathetic overtone. Such a general impression is built on signifiers of the social and affective link between the two partners. In connection to the conflict of the poem, the closing lines put forward the distress that cancer patient go through, calls for

support. It is in these critical moments that they mostly need closest friends to help them bear with the disease and reach out for cure with a bit of luck. The speaker is aware of the ultimate minutes left but does not let down the patient. Leaving a patient in such moment can worsen his situation and precipitate his death.

It is worth noting that the speaker in the extract above crosses the social barriers prejudicially erected against cancer patients to stay and support the beloved one in his struggle against cancer. Around the cancer patients,

Conventions of treating cancer as no mere disease but a demonic enemy make [it] not just a lethal disease but a shameful one'. At the same time, metaphoric meanings had very serious practical consequences in the lives of patients because they tended to interfere with proper treatment (Barbara, 2001: 297).

It is, therefore, necessary to work against prejudice in order to help society get rid of attitudes that worsen the situation of cancer patients. Such an endeavor would inevitably cause the patient to stick to the reality that “cancer was *sic* a biological phenomenon rather than a social or moral one” (Barbara, 2001: 297).

One of the most significant ways in which cancer can impact social functioning is through the physical symptoms and side effects of treatment. The external signs and side effects participate in stigmatizing the patient because the outward symptoms speak loud to relatives around as they become signs and codes through which relatives can identify the patients and make them look different. For example, chemotherapy can cause fatigue, nausea, and hair loss, which can make it difficult for patients to engage in social activities or perform their usual roles. Additionally, the physical changes that may result from cancer or treatment can lead to stigma and discrimination, further limiting social interactions between the patients and partners at work or in the family circle.

7. Conclusion

In the light of the issues developed in this study, it could be inferred that Jo Shapcott explores signs and symptoms of cancer as tools of poetic expression in *Of Mutability*. This article has reached the evidence that Jo Shapcott’s book talks about cancer. She explores body, medical and chemotherapeutic tropes in order to discuss cancer without really mentioning it. Such an achievement as we have attempted to highlight has been possible because the poet lays clues

physical and physiological indices through which the reader and listener of her poetry can perceive the alarming processes through which cancer ails the human body and also marks the body through visible symptoms. From a semiotic perspective the study has argued and proved the patients carry stigma of underlying body ailment which causes them pain. In addition to the indexical functions attributed to the symptoms, there is a representation of the psychological and social effects of cancer as iconic signs that to many readers allude to the disease without really spelling it out. Such iconic representations come in the form of depression, stress, fear, anxiety and stigmatization on the part of the social relations. It has also been the contention of this study to bring out the evidence that in *Of Mutability*, hopes of healing are also put forward. For, in spite of the physical symptoms and side effects, financial strain, and social isolation, with some extent of social support and resources, cancer patients can maintain their mental health, their social connections and roles and improve their overall well-being.

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

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