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## A Postmodernist Intertextual Reading of Kalanithi's *When Breath Becomes Air*

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### Abstract

The present research paper attempts an intertextual reading of *When Breath becomes Air* by Paul Kalanithi, an Indian-American neurosurgeon and a writer. The term intertextuality was originally coined by Julia Kristeva and it refers to the presence of one or more text/s within a text. It rejects the idea of the closure of meaning and it demonstrates the dialogic state of a text. The current research study is significant as it aims to provide a better understanding of the interdisciplinary connection of fiction with that of any non-fiction text. It further highlights that the use of allusions, reminiscences, aphorisms, and quotations, and aphorisms in the novels that call for many interpretations. The current study has applied the theoretical perspective of postmodern historiographic metafiction proposed by Linda Hutcheon in her book *Poetic's of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (2003). This research uses intertextuality as a tool to analyze the selected text. Early on, the memoir has been studied with respect to limited perspectives; however, the present study aims to analyze it in the light of postmodernism that refers to a trend of plurality, uncertainty, metafiction, fragmentation, identity crisis, pastiche and intertextuality. The research objective explores the extent to which the writer interweaves fiction into historical texts to generate a postmodern blend in a single narrative. This research is qualitative and descriptive, while textual analysis has been used as a research method. This research ends with the findings and recommendations for the future research.

**Keywords:** Postmodernism, Linda Hutcheon, Historiographic metafiction, *When Breath Becomes Air*, intertextuality



## 1. Introduction

Postmodernism, at present, represents the contemporary world with all its characteristics and its influence on an individual's life. There are many theorists namely Linda Hutcheon, Jurgen Habermas, Ihab Hassan, Jean-Francois Lyotard, Fredric Jameson and Jean Baudrillard who have proposed their understanding of postmodernism. Though, their attempts could not define the movement in an absolute way as this trend is still in practice and ongoing, hence, it is always vulnerable to change. Lyotard in his *The Postmodern Condition* states that it is not a new movement rather it emerged after modernism as a consequence of materialistic progress and scientific advancements. He refers to postmodernism as a movement that shows an 'incredulity towards metanarratives' (x x iv), as it challenges the existing perceptions and thought patterns which are based on claims of objectivity and truth. The philosophical theory of postmodernism involves a plurality of forms/styles, pastiche, uncertainty, rootlessness of belief systems, skepticism towards universal truth values and knowledge. The emphasis is more on subject than content, illusion then reality and fragmentation then continuation. Another renowned postmodern Canadian theorist named Linda Hutcheon was born in 1947. Currently, she is serving as a professor of English in University of Toronto. Her famous books include *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, *A Theory of Adaptation*, *History, Theory, Fiction*, *Narcissistic Narrative*, *Irony's Edge*, and *A Theory of Parody*. She in her book *Poetic's of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* coins the term 'historiographic metafiction' for those novels which reconstruct and retell past by fusing fiction and reality through discursive strategies. "She further asserts that fiction and history are not fixed products but, in fact, both are in a continuous process of making. She calls such postmodern mixture of fiction and history as historiographic metafiction that combines the 'constructedness' and 'story-telling' together" (Ashraf & Farooq 395).

Intertextuality highlights the inter-connectedness of various texts and it refers to the process, in which, the reception and interpretation of a given text depends upon the reader's knowledge of other texts. Graham Allen describes intertextuality, "Texts, whether they are literary or non-literary, as viewed by modern theorists, as lacking in any kind of independent meaning. They are what theorists now call intertextual" (1). It reveals that no single text can have an independent and separate identity rather every text takes a bit from the other texts and, in this way, it also



presents itself to be taken in future. The present research study analyzes the memoir *When Breath Becomes Air* as an embodiment of intertextuality that serves as a bridge to connect non-fiction with literature. Paul Sudhir Arul Kalanithi was born on April 1<sup>st</sup> 1977, and he died at young age of 36 years on March 9<sup>th</sup>, 2015 due to fatal lung cancer. He was an Indian-American neurosurgeon and also a graduate in English literature and a writer. His book entitled *When Breath Becomes Air* is a memoir that is based on the narration of all the significant events happened in his life and it also records his illness and his struggle to the battling stage IV metastatic lung cancer. This book was posthumously published in 2016. “In 2016, this novel sold a million copies and was placed second among Amazon’s best sellers, after “Harry Potter and the Cursed Child” (Gamerman 2016). It remained on *The New York Times* Non-Fiction Best Seller list for several weeks.

## 2. Literature Review

A research study entitled “Perspectives on Postmodernism and Historical Fiction” states that, “Ihab Hassan browses history looking for mentions of this term and finds it used for the first time in 1934 by Federico de Onís in his *Antología de la poesía española e hispanoamericana*” (233). The principal significance of postmodernism lies in the idea that it unites various art systems, or assimilates their features to create new genres, ideas and tendencies in literature. The postmodern literature combines all features of aesthetical systems such as ancient and modern art, West and East tradition, and mass and elite class. It transforms the conception of author-reader idea as now the author becomes the observer and his aim is not to dictate his values to his reader, and he also sketches a different hero now. The hero, in postmodernist literature, doesn’t demonstrate a perfect behavior while the boundaries among rules, values, imagination and reality get blurred. Through the use of intertextuality, the reader participates in an intertextual dialogue with the text that requires his active intellectual and imaginative understanding to discover the ties of one text with the other texts. The reader’s intertextual interaction leads to the transformation of triangle i.e. the text, the author and the reader. R. Barthes defines:

Every text is an intertext; other texts are present in it at various levels in more or less recognizable forms: the texts of preceding cultures and the texts of the surrounding culture. Each text is a new fabric woven from old quotes. Fragments of cultural codes, formulas, rhythmic structures, fragments of social idioms, etc.—all of them are absorbed



by the text and mixed in it, because the language exists prior to and around the text. As a prerequisite for any text, intertextuality cannot be reduced to the problem of sources and influences; it is a common field of anonymous formulas, the origin of which is rarely to be found, unconscious or automatic citations given without the quotation marks (p. 78).

H.Abrams and Geoffrey Galt Harpham in *A Glossary of Literary Terms* define, “The term intertextuality, popularized especially by Julia Kristeva, is used to signify the multiple ways in which any one literary text is in fact made up of other texts, by means of its open or covert citations and allusions” (401). Julia Kristeva, a French linguist, coined this term ‘intertextuality’ in her essay “Word, Dialogue and Novel” in 1966 and according to her any text can be seen with reference to two axes: a horizontal axis and a vertical one. The horizontal axis relates the actual writer to the reader while the vertical axis relates the text to other texts. As the word written, in any text, not only belong to the writing subject but also the addressee, similarly any given text belongs to both the author and the reader. There are few other theorists like Mikhail Bakhtin and Roland Barthe who also have contributed in the development of this concept of intertextuality. Some other theorists such as Kjersti Flottum, Oswald Ducrot and Henning Nolk associate it with the technique of polyphony as a text, through intertextuality, generates many voices. In fact, the meaningful collection and arrangement of words in any given text give way to the “transposition of one (or several) sign system(s) into another” (Kristeva 59-60). A text cannot exist in complete isolation from other texts, images, words, code, model or fragment and intertextuality prevails almost in every genre. Most magazines or newspapers contain cartoons or pictures, similarly texts on the computer also show combination of various graphics, texts, film, audio and video chat and motion pictures. There are some theorists like Michael Riffaterre who consider that intertextuality is significant to “fill out the text’s gaps”(57). Intertextuality creates an atmosphere for meaning-making on an individual level that denies the received interpretations and the common understanding of the text. In fact, “When exposed to fiction, we undergo a literary experience in which we are given opportunities to interpret the content” (Mackey np). Intertextual references can be intended as well as unintended as Lodge claims that, “Some theorists believe that intertextuality is the very condition of literature, that all texts are woven from the tissues of other texts whether their authors know it or not” (98–99). As mentioned that



the term ‘intertextuality’ is used differently in different contexts but in this research study, the actual Kristevian understanding of intertextuality is applied. This study attempts to find the artistic use of intertextuality in the sense conveyed by Lowell Edmunds in *Intertextuality and the Reading of Roman Poetry*, he comments, “The various ways in which one text can signal its relation to another came to be seen not in static terms of imitation and influence but as artistic devices that have the same status as figures of speech or anything else in the poet’s stylistics repertory” (1).

The researchers Triyoga and Apriyana, in their study presented in a conference, discuss the positive and negative manifestation of death as depicted in the novel *When Breath Becomes Air* from a psychological perspective. The researchers analyze the main character in terms of his positive and negative reception of death and it demonstrates that he always has a passion to find the meaning of life. They assert, “The novel suggests that death happens to all human beings in the world. There is no exception and no one can avoid death. Kalanithi knows that fighting death is a losing battle and that death always wins upon the war with humans” (183). According to the researchers, the negative attitudes towards death are fear and hopelessness while positive attitudes are continuous determination and hard work to fulfill the dream. Similarly Martin in his review of *When Breath Becomes Air* highlights that Kalanithi was diagnosed with lung cancer that completely transformed his personality. After the diagnosis, he became the patient and faced same existential crisis but tried to face the hard phase of his life. He comments, “His love for books and language only grew as he completed his BA and MA at Stanford. Kalanithi was unsatisfied with the answers he’d amassed regarding life and death. He believed the answer rested at the intersection of morality, literature, philosophy, and biology” (120-121). Similarly, Nesby and Johansen analyze Kalanithi’s *When Breath Becomes Air* from the perspective of significance of illness stories and their impact on human mind. The researchers have evaluated the novel through the theoretical approach of Rita Felski’s *The Uses of Literature* to explore the four defined objectives i.e. recognition, enchantment, knowledge and shock. They assert:

We soon also found that recognition, enchantment, knowledge and shock were concepts that were relevant used in connection with Kalanithi’s own experience of becoming ill



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and being a patient. The concepts, therefore, seem most useful for reflections on both the reader's response and the author drives of the pathography genre" (189).

### 3. Research Methodology

The present study is descriptive and qualitative. The data comprises of *Breath Becomes Air*, a memoir of Paul Kalanithi's life and his strong struggle against cancer. Julia Kristeva's intertextuality has been used as a research method that focuses on the extracts taken from other works that transform, develop, affirm or negate the story of the memoir. She "insists that a text...cannot exist as a hermetic or self-sufficient whole, and so does not function as a closed system" (1). This research uses the theoretical framework of Historiographic Metafiction, proposed by Linda Hutcheon who challenges the coherent and traditional representation of history and narrative. She in *Historiographic Metafiction: Parody and the Intertextuality of History* states, "In reality facts exist in discontinuity, as: In fact, that teller—of story or history—also constructs those very facts by giving a particular meaning to events. Facts do not speak for themselves in either form of narrative: the tellers speak for them, making" (73). This research is organized and carried systematically through divisions i.e. introduction, literature review, analysis and discussion, conclusion, findings and works cited. The primary data used in this study is *When Breath Becomes Air* while secondary data comprises of various books, research journals, theses, and articles.

### 4. Research Questions

On the basis of research objectives, this study investigates the following questions:

1. How does *When Breath Becomes Air* utilize the phenomenon of intertextuality to facilitate the connection between an autobiographical memoir and various existing historical, cultural and literary texts?
2. How does the intertextual form of the selected memoir exhibit postmodern characteristics of uncertainty, fragmentation and pastiche?

### 5. Analysis and Discussion

Paul Kalanithi, in his novel, incorporates various intertextual references while narrating the story about his life, illness, struggle to fight the disease, and family life etc. A reader may recognize



various generic traits and differences in his memoir which are extracted sometimes from poetry, fiction or non-fiction. In fact, this reflection ascertains the universality of texts and their influential presence in the life human beings in general and of the writer in particular. Through intertextuality, a text shows affiliation towards other texts in various ways such as a total transformation might occur due to parody of an existing text. The other way transforms a text completely to re-write the story in a new way. The memoir represents the following postmodern characteristics with the help of intertextual references that are taken from various works of different genres.

### 5.1. Uncertainty about Life

Through intertextual reference of Samuel Beckett's *Waiting For Godot*, Kalanithi expresses his profound distrust on the concepts of life and death. The text writes, "Birth and death had been merely abstract concepts. Maybe Beckett's Pozzo is right. Maybe life is merely an "instant," too brief to consider" (66). He loses reliability on life because of an incident that happens in hospital that a twin pair of babies dies in less than twenty-four hours' time. When Kalanithi hears this news he gets shocked, "In that moment, I could only think of Samuel Beckett, that one day we were born, one day we shall die, the same day, the same second" (65). In this way, he agrees to Beckett's representation of life's philosophy that is based on uncertainty and waiting for some help i.e. God/Godot. E. A. Tsurganova comments on the same connection between one text to that of a prior one as he asserts: "Intertextuality means the "intertextual interaction, correlation with other specific text where each text is seen as the result of assimilation and transformation of another text, as a part of the "cultural text" (qtd by Dzhundubayeva, 297).

Similarly, the memoir refers to plurality of ideas through connecting with fictional and non-fictional texts. For instance, it refers to Shep Nuland's *How We Die* who happens to be Kalanithi and Lucy (Kalanithi's wife) teacher in the Yale School of Medicine. Kalanithi writes, "Few books I had read so directly and wholly addressed that fundamental fact of existence: all organisms, whether goldfish or grandchild, die" (52). By remembering past texts, Kalanithi provides his own commentary on the text while leaving no room for verification and this approach coincides with Huthceon's theory of metafiction i.e. fiction within fiction. Saeed and Zain quote:



Hutcheon (2004) contends that historiographic metafiction is one of the postmodern perspectives to study such works in which historical setting, accounts and voices are presented in such a far-fetched and fictional way that nothing can be extracted as absolute or final truth except for the infinite voice of fiction, that is, metafiction. (np)

He seems so impressed with Nuland's description of mortality of life with reference to his grandmother's illness and "in particular the description of his grandmother's illness, and how that one passage so perfectly illuminated the ways in which the personal, medical, and spiritual all intermingled"(52). Finally, her fatal heart failure made Nuland remember Thomas Browne's *Religio Medici (The Religion of a Doctor)*. It is a spiritual and psychological self-portrait that reflects upon the Christian tenants of Faith, Hope and Charity, the existence of hell, the *Judgment*, and the resurrection. Kalanithi quotes from *How We Die*, "With what strife and pains we come into the world we know not, but it is commonly no easy matter to get out of it" (53). Later, by giving intertextual reference, he modifies the same thought as proposed by Darwin and Nietzsche about the constant determination and struggle to face the hardships of life. Unfortunately, very soon the fear of death occupies his nerves again, and for that he gets solace from reading English literature. "I began reading literature again: Solzhenitsyn's *Cancer Ward*, B.S Johnson's *The Unfortunates*, Tolstoy's *Ivan Ilyich*, Nagel's *Mind and Cosmos*, Woolf, Kafka, Montaigne, Frost, Greville, memoirs of cancer patients—anything by anyone who had ever written about mortality" (148). He metaphorically compares his own life with T.S Eliot's *The Waste Land* to express his utter hopelessness about any resurrection. In this way, by referring, relating and connecting two texts together demonstrate a dialogical process, "Literary texts, in this dialogic process can question, alter and even modify the previous texts" (Sarkar, Nutan, and Seshadry Sarkar 274). Similarly, Kalanithi not only represents his feelings towards life but also the uncertainty in his doctors. For instance, when he inquires the doctor Emma about the result of his treatment he sees hopelessness on her face. "You have five good years left" she said, but without the authoritative tone of an oracle, without the confidence of a true believer" (193). He, as a doctor and a patient at the same time, is familiar with this hopelessness and he states, "Doctors, it turns out, need hope, too" (194).

## 5.2. Fragmented Character



Kalanithi, as a student of English literature, seems to be impressed by many famous writers and poets as he says, “For my thesis, I studied the work of Walt Whitman, a poet who, a century before, was possessed by the same questions that haunted me” (40). Like Whitman, Kalanithi expresses his strong desire to know the philosophy behind the term “Physiological-Spiritual Man” (ibid). He expresses postmodern uncertainty about the demarcation between various fields of knowledge or learning because somehow a central focal point connects all of them. He remains unable to find the answer to his question, “I could only conclude that Whitman had had no better luck than the rest of us but at least the ways in which he’d failed were illuminating” (40). His confusion provokes him to find a way that connects his knowledge of medicine to that of philosophy and literature. He refers to his PhD advisor who tells him that it would be a difficult task for him as literature experts mostly react to science. “I wasn’t sure where my life was headed. My thesis “Whitman and the Medicalization of Personality” was well-received, but it was unorthodox” (40). He, in his thesis, treats neuroscience as literary criticism and combined it with the history of psychiatry. After the diagnosis, Kalanithi starts reading about lung cancer but, at the same time, he wants to avoid little or excessive knowledge. Here he refers to Alexander Pope; one of the renowned English poets in 18<sup>th</sup> century, “A little learning is a dangerous thing;/ Drink deep, or taste not the Pierian spring” (126). He is confused due to abundance of knowledge that is why, finally, he leaves the matter to surgeons.

Kalanithi faces postmodern identity crises where it has become difficult for him to distinguish himself between a doctor and a patient. He is playing both the roles and then is a part of role reversal too. “Periods of identity crises are times of intense self-questioning, self-discovery and often doubt. Those who question are in crises. They need help” (Heidi 35). At times he seems hopeful and alive at heart but on other occasions he loses all hopes by experiencing the fear and closeness of death. He is confused to comprehend the meaning of hope, “The word hope first appeared in English about a thousand years ago, denoting some combination of confidence and desire” (133) he says, “But what I desired—life—was not what I was confident about” (ibid). With the passage of time, Kalanithi becomes strong to face the hard phase of illness and bear the thought of departing from his family. “It had occurred to me that Darwin and Nietzsche agreed on one thing: the defining characteristic of the organism is striving. Describing life otherwise was like painting a tiger without stripes” (143). His character gets fragmented owing to different



thoughts with respect to his illness, “I know that I was going to die, but it felt like someone had taken away my credit card and I was having to learn how to budget” (160). Later, he shows his helplessness in fight against cancer, “Maybe I’d been cursed by a Greek god” (183). At the later stage, he seems to lose all his hope about recovery, “Over the course of the day I began to deteriorate, my diarrhea rapidly worsening. My kidneys began to fail. My mouth became so dry I could not speak or swallow” (188). His physical organs almost started dying and he reached at fatal stage. His physical and mental senses began to deteriorate “I began losing track of events and time” (190). He was unable to comprehend the doctors’ explanation regarding his treatment “I wobbled in and out of coherence” (ibid). He feels like floating in the wave of pain and relief, he tries to calm down by relaxing his nerves. “As the darkness of delirium descended again, I finally relaxed” (191). However, with the constant support of his wife Lucy, parents and colleagues, he seems determine for a recovery “I am ready to get back to physical therapy and start recovering” (192). After getting repeated therapies, the treatment does not seem successful that raises many doubts in his mind. He does not want to lose his life because he loves his passion i.e. to treat patients, for his beloved wife, and for their expected baby. His thought gets broken as he narrates “Phrases of doubt fell from my mouth” (193).

### 5.3. Discursive Blend

The selected memoir is a combination of various genres to create a postmodern pluralistic narrative, and it resists the single genre based art, be it music, painting, literature etc. The memoir *When Breath Becomes Air* incorporates pastiche by mixing up different genres like science, medicine, art, literature, and film etc. Kalanithi says, “I recalled Henry Adams trying to compare the scientific force of the combustion engine and the existential force of the Virgin Mary” (157). Later in the memoir, Kalanithi talks about religious beliefs by referring to few authors and texts, for instance, while emphasizing the uncertainties of metaphysics he takes the conversation to atheism. He is of the view that atheism can be defined on two essential grounds. “The prototypical atheist, then, is Graham Greene’s commandment from *The Power and the Glory*, whose atheism comes from a revelation of the absence of God” (170). Then he moves on to define the second type “real atheism” by quoting the Nobel Prize Winner French biologist Jacques Monod, “The ancient covenant is in pieces; man at last knows that he is alone in the unfeeling immensity of the universe, out of which he emerged only by chance” (ibid). He



presents his point of view regarding the existing of God that this is a reality that seems delusional even if it comes with empirical evidence. Unlike atheists, he highlights the strong impact of significant values of Christianity like redemption, sacrifice, justice, mercy and forgiveness on his personality. “There is a tension in the Bible between justice and mercy, between the Old Testament and the New Testament” (171), he says, “The main message of Jesus, I believed, is that mercy trumps justice every time” (ibid).

Kalanithi’s medical treatment becomes uncertain with the sudden cure and later appearance of the tumor, and the very painful chemotherapy, as the final solution, forces him to refer to T.S Eliot. “But at my back in a cold blast I hear/ the rattle of the bones, and chuckle spread from ear to ear” (174). His cumbersome journey also demonstrates the unbearable treatment of cancer not for himself only but for every patient. This gives a message to consider the worth of a healthy life because a human being does not know what can happen to him in next moment. However Kalanithi does not lose hope and he, as a neurosurgeon, also maintains his passion to serve the patients. In this way, he familiarizes the readers with specific medical terminology used for brain illness like “I spent an extra couple of minutes with a patient, Mr. R. He had developed a rare syndrome, called Gerstmann’s, where I had removed his brain tumor” (175). By reading such medical experiences, the readers construct the bridge between literature/memoir/narrative and the outside reality i.e. hospital/medicine. Hutcheon in “Canadian Historiographic Metafiction” comments on the same very idea, “We, as readers, make the link between life and art, between the processes of the reception and the creation of texts: the act of reading participates in (and indeed posits or infers) the act of textual production” (228).

Later on, he performs another operation on an elderly man with compressed nerves and degenerated spine, “I began to remove the lamina, the back wall of the vertebrae, whose bony overgrowths, along with ligaments beneath, were compressing the nerves” (176). He managed to perform the operation so well “as if there had been no surgery at all” (177). After the successful surgery, he soothes his nerves by listening songs “I put *Getz/Gilberto* on the radio, and the soft, sonorous sounds of a saxophone filled the room” (178). As the narrative progresses, it is seen that Kalanithi’s emotions and hopes do transform with the passage of time, as he expresses; “King Lear’s Gloucester may complain about human fate as “flies to wanton boys”. But now I lived in a different world, a world that was more Greek tragedy than Shakespeare” (180).



Through intertextual reference of William Shakespeare's plays, Kalanithi goes back to classical tragedy of Oedipus, "No amount of effort can help Oedipus and his parents escape their fate" (ibid). He compares his own fate with that of Oedipus that both were put in a situation of powerlessness and "their only access to the forces controlling their lives is through the oracles and seers, those given divine vision"(181). Similarly, the medical terminology/jargon reflects the specific use of labels in the context of hospital, for instance, during one his fits, Kalanithi is taken to hospital. The text writes, "I was in pain, while a pantheon of specialists was brought together to help: medical intensivists, nephrologists, gastroenterologists, endocrinologists, infectious disease specialists, neurosurgeons, general oncologists, thoracic oncologists, otolaryngologists" (189). The novel also mentions numerous few medical terminologies specific for drugs, treatment and therapies such as NSAIDs, Avastin, bronchoscopic biopsy, targetable mutation, IV tube, Tarceva drug, molecular therapy, GI problem, metastases, and WICOS (who is the captain of this ship) etc.

## 6. Conclusion

The particular study has found that the autobiographical memoir *When Breath Becomes Air* is a work of historiographic metafiction as it is based on citations taken from various works that prove that every text is a new tissue of past citations. The study shows that writing is always a process of re-writing which foregrounds the bits of the texts that it both places and dis-places. The study also supports the view that most of the texts are intertextual in nature and this very phenomenon is natural in the world of arts. The memoir is unique as it represents a distinct combination of various intertexts which formulate a multi-faceted interaction of one text with the other texts within the literary matrix. Kalanithi has used the technique of intertextuality in terms of different quotations, metaphoric presence to develop his character, story and narration of his life. Moreover, through intertextuality the narrative relates and fuses various genres to demonstrate the blurring of boundaries in a postmodern work. Kalanithi's memoir is full of philosophy, science and spirituality that can be explored by fresh scholars.



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