



Illness Experiences and Racial Identity in *Sickness: a Memoir*¹

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Abstract

In the Iranian American writer Porochista Khakpour's powerful memoir *Sick: a Memoir*, Khakpour's racial identity plays an important part in her illness experiences. Different from traditional American autopathographies, *Sick* mixes Khakpour's illness experiences and autobiographical experiences. The memoir is not only about the mysterious Lyme disease and its symptoms but about the feeling of alienation and homelessness and the trauma of being an outsider in America. Khakpour's experiences of living with Lyme becomes a trope of her experiences of living in America as a racial other. In combining illness and racial experiences, *Sick* enriches the genre of autopathography which is mainly white and middle-class and provides a new perspective to observe illness in a multi-cultural context.

Key words: Illness experiences; Trauma; Racial experiences

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In *Reconstructing Illness*, the ground-breaking study on illness narratives, Anne Hawkins comments, "... pathography seems to be a middle-class or upper-middle class genre, we will not learn from these books

what illness or its treatment means for the very poor or marginalized." (159) In a nation like America with diverse ethnic and cultural background, the racial minority's experiences of illness for a long time have been ignored. Luckily, in the past decade, there emerges some illness narratives with multi-cultural contexts. The Iranian American writer Porochista Khakpour's powerful memoir *Sick: a Memoir*, published in 2018, is one of the latest attempts to express the intersection of illness experiences and the racial experiences.

Sick: a Memoir has got much critical acclaim. The memoir describes Khakpour's struggle with the mysterious Lyme disease and the pain, suffering, dislocation she experiences for her whole life. Critical response usually focuses on the disease's effect on Khakpour as if all her suffering results solely from Lyme disease itself. For instance, Julia Berner-Tobin comments, "...a pain because of an illness is unwelcome, because it is perceived as imagined, irritating and gross. Yet, Khakpour wrote about it anyway." In her opinion, the publication of *Sick* is a big deal for it is about an "unsexy kind of pain" or the physical pain itself. (2) In a brief book review in *World Literature Today*, the reviewer only mentions Khakpour's struggle with Lyme disease but never touches upon her racial identity. (Heing, 91) In both reviews, Khakpour's identity as an Iranian American has never been talked about as if it is not worthy of consideration. After all, the Lyme disease experiences seemingly have nothing to do with the experiences of being an Iranian American.

The thesis wants to prove that Khakpour's illness experiences and traumatic racial experiences influence and enhance each other. The memoir is not only about the physical Lyme disease and its symptoms but about the feeling of alienation and homelessness and the trauma of being an outsider in America. The experiences of living with Lyme become a trope of her experiences of living in America as a racial other.

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MYSTERIOUS ILLNESS AND MYSTERIOUS IDENTITY

Lyme is a mysterious disease. The memoir is about Khakpour's seeking for diagnosis after years of a series of severe symptoms like insomnia, fainting, neuropathy among others. Although at last she was diagnosed as Lyme disease, the diagnosis is not an once-and-for-all result. In "author's note", Khakpour explains the nature of Lyme disease: a clinical diagnosis, a disease that is transmitted by a tick bite. The Lyme spirochete can cause infection of multiple organs. Early-stage Lyme disease can be cured by antibiotics. However, in a late-stage Lyme disease, the bacteria has spread the whole body of the patients and leads to a series of severe symptoms. (1-2) However, the most difficult part of being a Lyme disease patient is "the lack of concrete knowns" and "certainties" (1) about it. There are no tests to prove whether people are afflicted by it nor evidence that patients are "cured" although one can test for inflammation and other markers. (2) It is not fully accepted and understood in the medical circles.

Khakpour's racial identity is as mysterious as the Lyme disease. Khakpour was born in Tehran in 1978, infant of the Islamic Revolution and toddler of the Iran-Iraq War. (27) Her parents were refugees of Iran and settled in Los Angeles for a shelter. In America, she was alienated and estranged because of her racial identity. For native Americans, she was a mysterious other from a same mysterious country—Iran. Mystery evoked danger. The background of the memoir was haunted by the shadow of 9/11 terrorist attack and the recent Paris attacks. Although the attacks were carried out by a handful of terrorists, Iran and Muslims had become the scapegoat. After the 9/11 terrorist attack and Paris attack, Khakpour witnessed increasing hostility towards Iranians and Muslims. When she had an car accident and had a tow truck driver take her home, the driver took an interest in two things: her not being married and her name. (19) The alien name "Khakpour" revealed her identity as a racial other from "Middle East", a mysterious place most Americans do not know much about. He told Khakpour bluntly that "you Arabs have not been my favorites". (19) But ironically, he could not even tell Iran from Iraq. (19) This example reflects clearly that most Americans do not have a real understanding of Iran and its history and culture. The Iranian and Muslim identity carries the same "stigma and unresolved issues" (21) as Lyme disease.

SEEKING FOR DIAGNOSIS AND SEARCHING FOR HOME

Khakpour puts more emphasis on experiences of pain and suffering of living with the illness, both physically and psychologically. Lyme disease causes serious symptoms

but they are not the only source of Khakpour's pain and suffering. The most difficult part of Lyme disease is that it is a stigmatized disease for it has been thought of as "the disease of hypochondriacs and alarmists and rich people who have the money and time to go chasing obscure diagnoses". (21) Lay people do not understand it. Cameron, Khakpour's ex-boyfriend, only responded with indifference when his mother was in bed, tortured by Lyme disease. His explanation was "my mother would do anything for attention". (58) Even doctors, if they are not specialists in the disease, do not understand it and accept it. Once Khakpour told a young internist that she had Lyme, only to find the internist responding with "a half smile", "laughing" and "smirking" (23) with a nurse. She felt a "rage" (25) because her suffering was laughed at and her identity as a Lyme disease patient was suspected.

Khakpour was preoccupied with being identified as a Lyme patient. When she finally got definite diagnosis from Dr. Canfield that she had Lyme disease, she couldn't believe it at first for "it had been years of people not believing in me and my illness, and suddenly I couldn't accept it myself". (220) She asked the doctor "Are you sure?" for three times. When she was confirmed, her eyes were "full of tears" (220). For her, Lyme disease had become an integral part of her identity. She confessed, "There was never a home for me as a human in the world—which is why moving around was almost easy. There was never a home for me outside as there was never a home for me inside—my own body didn't feel like my own." (167) The word "home" is a connecting bridge between her illness and identity.

The memoir is not structured by plot or theme but by a series of settings where she wandered in past years. Khakpour's wandering journey is not only a journey searching for diagnosis but for her own identity. Khakpour always has a sense of homelessness. She never developed a sense of home in Los Angeles for her parents kept telling that their escape was temporary and one day they would return to Iran (86). When she left home for college, she escaped to New York. But she could not find the sense of home there either. Later she kept wandering from New York, back to Los Angeles, then Santa Fe and even a university town in Germany, but she failed to find a sense of home in any place.

"Home" in the context is both a metaphor and pun. "A home outside" is a material place where a person develops attachment and feels comfortable. "A home inside" means a person feeling comfortable with his carnal body. Unfortunately, Khakpour doesn't feel at home either inside or outside. She does not feel at home in her body as she does not feel at home in America. Her body is not the comfortable home her soul can dwell in and America is not the comfortable home she can live in. She is alienated from her body as well as from America. For Khakpour who always feels isolated as an "outsider" and "foreigner",

being identified as a Lyme patient means being understood and accepted. This explains why the diagnosis and her identity as a Lyme patient is so important to her.

ILLNESS, TRAUMA AND RACIAL IDENTITY

In the memoir, Khakpour discusses the relationship between chronic illness and PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder). PTSD is triggered by a terrifying event and can cause symptoms like flashbacks, nightmares and severe anxiety. (166) PTSD can trigger a relapse or surfacing of some disability and illness. Similarly, the disability or illness could cause PTSD, and the experience of going for years undiagnosed and then misdiagnosed as she can cause considerable trauma. (166) In this way, trauma becomes the connecting factor between racial experiences and illness experiences.

For Khakpour, Lyme disease is not only a physical but a psychological illness closely related with her trauma. Khakpour's PTSD was tied to setting. When her family left Iran at war and revolution and escaped to America as refugees, she suffered from PTSD. Her PTSD got worse when she encountered racial discrimination against Iranians and Muslims, no matter in Los Angeles or New York or elsewhere. She found that her Lyme relapses always coincided with global turmoil. She would become sick after some external political stressor, like the Paris attack, the election of Donald Trump and its endless horrific aftermath of mainstream bigotry. (167) The fact is that every time there is such a political stressor, there is tenser hostility towards the alien, especially Muslims. "When the Muslim ban became a constant on

the news in 2017, when I found my home country rather unsurprisingly on the list of six countries that had been designated problems according to this administration, I immediately had an acute plunge in health." (167) To some extent, she is not a victim of Lyme disease, but a victim of racial discrimination and hostility.

CONCLUSION

Illness experiences and racial experiences are seemingly unrelated topics, but in *Sick*, Khakpour has established ties between illness and race in three ways. By describing both her illness and racial identity as mysterious other, she depicts how similarly she is alienated by the unsympathetic medical staff and narrow-minded racists in America. By using the word "home" as a pun, she depicts her lack of sense of home both in her body and in America. By employing the term "PTSD", she constructs a bridge between her traumatic illness experiences and racial experiences. In combining illness and racial experiences, *Sick* enriches the genre of autopathography which is mainly white and middle-class and provides a new perspective to observe illness in a multi-cultural context.

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