



ADVANCE SOCIAL SCIENCE ARCHIVE JOURNAL

Available Online: <https://assajournal.com>

Vol. 04 No. 01. July-September 2025. Page#.3752-3760

Print ISSN: [3006-2497](#) Online ISSN: [3006-2500](#)

Platform & Workflow by: [Open Journal Systems](#)



**Illness and Identity at the Crossroads: A Cultural Reading of Dur e Aziz Amna's Novel
American Fever**

Rafia Kiran Zahid

Lecturer of English, University of Veterinary and Animal Sciences, Lahore

rafia.kiran@uvas.edu.pk

Muhammad Muneeb Sultan

Undergraduate, University of Veterinary and Animal Sciences Lahore, Punjab, Pakistan

Zainab Maqsood

Undergraduate, University of Veterinary and Animal Sciences Lahore, Punjab, Pakistan

Urwa Altaf

Undergraduate, University of Veterinary and Animal Sciences Lahore, Punjab, Pakistan

Abstract

This paper uses postcolonial disability studies to examine how illness and cultural identity are intertwined in Dur e Aziz Amna's novel American Fever. The story emphasizes the body as a real and symbolic location of negotiation by placing the protagonist's battle with disease within the larger context of migration and diasporic life. Instead of being presented as a personal suffering, illness is used as a critical lens to reflect on issues of cultural displacement, hybridity, and belonging using Dan Goodley's concept to analyze intersectionality of disability and postcolonial diasporic fiction. Amna emphasizes how illness undermines established ideas of identity while also allowing for new forms of self-awareness and resistance by setting the protagonist's physical vulnerability against the background of her experience as an immigrant. This study, which draws on postcolonial disability theory, contends that Amna's book challenges simplistic depictions of disease as a solely medical condition or a symbol of weakness, therefore complicating traditional illness narratives. Rather, disease turns into a site of contestation where diasporic worries, cultural memory, and affect meet. Thus, the book illustrates how postcolonial bodies bear the dual burden of sickness and displacement while simultaneously providing opportunities to rethink identity outside of the East/West and health/sickness dichotomies. Finally, by showing how embodied fragility can express new forms of agency, belonging, and cultural critique, this paper shows how Amna's work not only broadens the theoretical scope of postcolonial disability studies but also contributes to the expanding corpus of illness narratives in contemporary fiction.

Keywords: Embodied Vulnerability, Diaspora and identity, Rural America, Communal culture, immigrant subjectivity

Introduction

This study tells us about the junction between struggle for belonging in a cultural context and physical sickness. Illness has always been seen more than just a medical condition in our history. Illness symbolizes isolation, personal transformation, weakness and form of otherness where one feels separate. Our as well as other societies treat the sick person differently and makes him feel undesirable. In Literature, illness has always been used as a symbol for alienation. In many societies, sick people are often pushed to the margins of society. When illness occurs in a foreign land, the situation becomes more complex due to cultural differences just like Hira whose tuberculosis makes her struggle as an outsider in a foreign land. She was a sixteen years old Pakistani Muslim girl, who happened to move to United States as a part of a student exchange program. When Hira was trying to adjust in American culture, she got to know about her illness (tuberculosis) as a result she isolated herself feeling like a stranger in a strange land. The analysis shows that disease in the novel cannot be understood in isolation from histories of colonialism, migration, and cultural negotiation by placing the protagonist's tuberculosis within the framework of intersectionality of postcolonialism and disability studies, while the main focus of this study will be on the second part which is disability studies using Dan Goodley's (2011) theory on disabilities. He asserts that "Disability affects us all, transcending class, nation and wealth" (p. 1), and Hira's sickness disconnected her from Americans who see her as a different person also fear her illness and Pakistani who might view her illness as stigma. It becomes a symbol for her outsider status.

The topic also highlights the emotional and psychological effects of being sick in an unfamiliar place. Her illness forces her to face questions like home, belonging and identity. Illness was a turning point in Hira's personal and cultural journey and thus it is an effective tool through which to explore identity and belonging. *American Fever* offers a close examination of the interaction between sickness and cultural origins as well as exploring how personal health issues are triggered by migration, family history, and cultural allegiance. The novel illustrates how a person deals with physical sickness and questions of cultural identity by emphasizing the gaps between social expectation and personal identities. Sickness is the most enduring theme in the novel because it occurs practically and symbolically in the novel world.

The sickness of the narrator symbolizes her inability to fit in culturally even when by herself where disease is a process that goes beyond biology and is an aftereffect of the mixture of deeply rooted cultural ideals and native cultural beliefs. Titchkosky (2011) proclaims that "that the field of disability studies can no longer be well represented as a small group... Instead, the text persistently represents disability studies as a multileveled living field, full of its own tensions, productive conflicts, redundancies" (p.454). Family and community relations dictate the way individuals react to disease. In *American Fever*, the protagonist must deal with medical information as well as adhere to accepted medical protocol. The novelist employs the novel to demonstrate the way individuals of different cultures have internal problems because they have different expectations of diagnosis and healing. The novel also demonstrates the way cultural dislocation adversely affects physical as well as mental health. It examines how the tension between the medical culture of their host country and their indigenous traditions continually tests their belonging. This tension is experienced in their relationships, identity, and healing

cultures, and how it shows the immense psychological burden of sustaining two discrepant cultures. The novel examines the general impacts of migration on health issues. From the life of the protagonist, the novel shows how experiences in a series of places and cultures continually challenge immigrant identities. *American Fever* reveals the cultural intersections of illness and identities that inform learning in scholarly communities on health-migration interfaces in literature. The book examines the deep emotional and psychological effects of being surrounded by a new culture while at the same time grappling with illness. Furthermore, it provides a new twist on the immigrant experience and is the reason that we chose to read it. While this book differs from other stories aimed at talking about permanent moving, it focuses on what it means to live in a temporary exchange program.

Literature Review

Dure Aziz Amna's richly textured writing of *American Fever* masterfully weaving together the threads of somatic illness and the work of cultural self-negotiation that is being accomplished here through the medium of its own heroine, Hira. Standing at the nexus of life, Hira's debilitating illness is not a medical state of wellness but an ordeal by fire which her own self, family obligation, and position in American society are purified and remade. Hira struggles within a body that refuses to contain her, making her have to struggle not only with the bodily limits of her own self but the cultural duty and family duty which place her in response to this frailty. Goodley (2011) professes that disability alone doesn't have meaning as long as it is not studied in its lived realities; he says "While critical disability studies might start with disability, they never end with it, remaining ever vigilant of political, ontological and theoretical complexity" (p. 157). The novel does a good job in generating tension surrounding South Asian understandings of illness and health, otherwise mediated on her and others' behalf by care and anxiety.

Based on Julie Cadman-Kim's (2022) book review of diaspora literature, "Illness in diasporic narratives often is a strong metaphor for the experience of displacement and fragmentation of people between two or more cultures". It is a choice well within Hira's situation, whereby deteriorating bodily health is in itself an approximation of a dissolution of cultural support as she struggles to impose cure and understanding upon a host medical culture. Second, the book describes how illness is put to test Hira's social reality and self-knowledge in America.

Her vulnerability reminds us how much she had negotiated with her family, with her American-born friends, and with doctors and nurses who were treating her. Cadman-Kim does likewise with this thesis, explaining the way "the suffering body can be a site of cultural negotiation, where Western medical practice and personal autonomy meet traditional values concerning care, privacy, and the family's role" (Kim, 2022). Amna succinctly captures in Hira's life the tension between maintaining cultural identity and adjusting to the very private and often isolated state of chronic illness within a host country.

It is suggested in the novel that it is here that Hira will be forced to construct a new self, one which will be of her nation in terms of culture and of her body being sick in America. Furthermore, on another hand, Amna has created various ill threads and the cultural identity to be weaved together in Hira, who is not more than sixteen-year-old Pakistani exchange student in rural Oregon, among other characters in *American Fever*. "When she visited a small town in the state of Oregon where she had to stay with a host family, she found everything strange and

foreign” (Aslam, 2022). The conclusion of tuberculosis that was diagnosed to Hira is a part of metaphor in which we see a picture of solitude and vulnerability of life in another culture. Her physical disease goes hand in hand with her emotional and cultural discord which marks the struggle of integration and preservation of self. The depiction of Hira’s experience by Amna presents the dilemma of cultural identity in the face of danger. The novel reveals the personal inner conflict of embracing a new environment but having one’s heritage. “She navigated between two languages as well as cultures, Amna said when she was writing the novel it was not on her mind but after its publication, many readers in Pakistan felt connected to it which made quite a lot of sense” (Aslam, 2022).

Hira’s predicament is typical of the wider immigrant destiny when the impulse of acceptance interlocks into the fear of root loss. The narrative also exposes what society thinks and believes about illness and foreignness. Hira’s state becomes the subject of focus for discussing such issues as otherness and stigmatization that could come due to disease or cultural difference. With the assistance of Hira’s perspective, readers are being sensitive to the hidden and visible trials of the life of dualities. Amna’s sensitive narration shouts the voice of a young woman’s capability to survive and to find herself in the hardship of ailment and cultural digging. The novel presents a bittersweet story about persistence of cultural identity and the change which can be made through acknowledging one’s weakness.

Discussion:

The study unearths a close exploration of the culture shock generated by the first contact with the new environment along with the difficulties of living in a new place as a Pakistani Muslim immigrant. It’s the book’s focus on making ‘home’ in the face of identity, belonging, racism and Islamophobia that resonated with me as these are predicaments of the moment — when world is more global than ever. It is also important because of its critical success and accolades, such as the Asian/Pacific American Award for Literature; therefore, this is a good choice for further exploration. Hira’s case illustrates how a series of factors have converged: weakened immune system that may be the result of alcohol intake, malnutrition caused by dietary deficiencies, limited access to healthcare and the social implications of migration. These are important points to address in so far as public health in areas where resources may be lacking, and migration is common. This offers the opportunity to analyze Hira’s situation in such a way that focalizes on these interconnected issues, informing the development of targeted interventions and support systems.

Learning about Hira’s particular difficulties will help us to formulate better solutions to reduce risks and enhance health in the community at large. In this analysis, health disparities are further represented microscopically for further understanding of hole gaps and their need for tailored support systems. A deeper analysis of how illness connects with cultural identity would have an impact on Hira’s cultural identity in this novel mention as tuberculosis. These are the challenges faced by immigrants and minority population, where cultural difference in health care and communication with providers occurs. One of the areas that it examines involves how social and cultural structure intersect with illness with respect to individual identities. It also dawned on us that no matter where we go, our past sure follows and the people and the places that are as good as those born from us don’t run away from us. This study reflects how the physically

distressed state is tangled up with the mentioned illness in the novel does not merely occur as a biological condition; instead, it becomes a crucible for the sense of self established in the homeland as it struggles with and is reconciled to the alien territory of American culture. This inter-section becomes a fertile field for the thesis of alienation, belonging and struggle to preserve cultural traditions to thrive during assimilation pressures. Her tuberculosis for protagonist Hira is not simply a physical disease, but it triggers an intuitive examination of self and an instant reminder of her “otherness” in a foreign country.

Born in a cell with four walls, she fights not only the physical ache of her illness but the weight of emotions and thoughts, from being separated from her family and the familiars, as well. Having emerged from the sterilized environment of the American hospital with its alien routines and medical discourse de-attached from it, the communal practices of healing and familial support systems that she would have received in Pakistan could not have been any more different. As Qasim et al. (2024). note, the dislocation people experience in diaspora is common, and in Hira's illness it becomes intensified by the sense of a different culture in her own body. In addition, through its discussions of the way in which cultural notions of illness and healthcare further confuse the immigrant experience, the novel reveals its concern with exploring the extent to which culture provides a mere perspective to understand the immigrant experience. It is differences in the beliefs concerning the causes and treatments of diseases which bring misunderstanding and erect barriers between the patients and the American medical set-up. The characters are regularly trapped between traditional healing practices, which are prized in their homeland and the scientific approach so popular in the United States. As a result, Turkish people constantly wrestle with trying to preserve their heritage in a new culture. As explained in the article, immigrants struggle when trying to access healthcare that respects their cultural beliefs, which is shown well in *American Fever*. Illness is used throughout *American Fever* to illustrate the many sides of identity within the diaspora. When people get sick, their dependence can bring separation from their culture and still develop links to those around them. At the joining point of their health and identity, they must contend with challenges and find ways to become part of their culture and the environment where they live. With great care, Dur-e-Aziz Amna considered the troubling intersection of illness and the culture, especially the case of Hira, who finds herself navigating an American institution of higher learning. Hira's struggle with mononucleosis serves as an all-encompassing lens toward her physical fragilities as well as the unforgiving schism of her past and present surroundings. As (Laraib et al., 2024) articulate in their assessment, “Hira's illness serves as a metaphor for her displacement, mirroring the internal turmoil she experiences as she struggles to reconcile her Pakistani heritage with American individualism.”

Her migration indeed results in deep seated anxieties that most people face, which in this case is a ceaseless feeling of being ‘othered’ transcending physical realms. Hira's feverish state frequently puts her into an uncanny reality-distorting state where she vividly recalls her family and her homeland. This strongly contrasts with the feelings of isolation and solitude that dominate much of her existence during her visit to America. The unending swings focus attention on the concept of liminality, ‘in-between’ cultures, which is made worse due to her sickness. As in the article of (Laraib et al., 2024) elaborate, “The novel vividly illustrates how Hira's physical ailment exacerbates her cultural torment, estranging her to the point that she grapples with

questions of belonging and identity in a foreign land.” The degradation brought on by her sickness compels Hira to reconsider her hopes and the compromises she has made, exposing the staggering cost of pursuing an ‘American dream’ that feels perpetually unattainable and deeply unfulfilling. In the end, *American Fever* employs Hira’s sickness as a strategic device to explore the complex psychological and emotional impacts of cultural assimilation, mitigating the effects of physical suffering on identity construction in a globalized context. The narrative underscores that, while the fever might justify her alienation, it is the scars from cultural negotiation that profoundly shape Hira’s sense of self. Moreover, the interplay of illness and culture is perhaps best described as a ‘quest for selfhood amidst cultural hybridization.’ As suggested by (Laraib et al., 2024).

Amna traced the journey of Hira, but a physical illness that forces her to confront an unfamiliar world. Freedom long envisioned turns on its head, and destiny is left in suspension. But illness is not physical exhaustion; it is a rationale by which Hira must deconstruct herself. Her journey to America—revolution fantasy, rebirth possibility, and miracle fantasy—is only relinquished dust as tuberculosis is discovered in her. Threshold space is where Pakistani past and American present conjoin in Hira’s disease. Farooq Chaudhry tracks the thematics of tension, that “Wherever she goes, her past goes with her; her idea of self— and of the people and places it becomes fixated at—is one she can’t shed but must decipher” (Chaudhry, 2022). Illness keeps her at arm’s length but compels her to think alone—to think in terms of roots, necessity, and those fragments of herself which she loathes and holds on to. Amna does not apply illness as a plot device, but metaphorically: an optic through which one can look at the imposition and construction of identity, how culture is developed and grounded. In one of them, Hira encounters a man named Hamid reciting the words, “You wanting to be known by other people doesn’t change your past... Your life doesn’t require another’s approval” (Chaudhry, 2022).

It is where, in Chaudhry’s words, the scene “beautifully raises” the question of belonging to the world. As Chaudhry illuminates, “Within the single character of Hira, Dur e Aziz Amna brilliantly interrogates what it means to feel at home in the world, exploring themes of gender and religion” (Chaudhry, 2022). At such brutal moments of furious rage, in interior introspection, even at rebellion on Hira’s part, we are compelled to understand how awful it is to be ill in a foreign country as compared to any other place.

And through this world hanging in the balance between cure and hope, Hira goes on constructing a self who thinks out the two worlds (Pakistani and American surroundings) in raw but true terms. In predominantly white America, she went through a set of experiences shaped by her tuberculosis and the accompanying cultural dissonance. “Once in the US, Hira becomes a cultural ambassador for her country and a translator between languages and practices. She feels “straitjacketed by English” and self-conscious about her faith, defending her reasons for fasting during Ramadan” (Goyal, 2022). Her illness functions as a metaphor for the conflict and sense of homelessness conflict she experiences during the challenging period of coping with her identity in relation to the new culture. Sana Goyal, in her review for the *Guardian*, highlights the book’s revolutionary take on the conventional coming of a story. She points out that Hira’s sharp responses and direct remarks disrupt the conventional tropes of the immigrant experience, providing a new interpretation of culture assimilation complexity. The protagonist’s sharp

consciousness of her foreignness and the comprehension of Identity in a foreign land is highlighted by Goyal in a conversation between Hira and her friend Zahra in which Hira declares, "But you are from elsewhere, yarr"; Goyal's (2022) interview with Amna in the Los Angeles review of books explores the novels diasporic elements further and explores the authors intention to present a protagonist who is both self-assured and profoundly reflective. Amna discusses her desire to create a character who challenges the narrative often associated with immigrant stories, presenting Hira as a multifaceted individual navigating the intersections of health, culture and adolescence.

An important turning point in Hira's story is the diagnosis of tuberculosis, which represents the outward expression of her inner conflicts. Her path of self-acceptance and self-discovery is made more difficult by the stigma and isolation surrounding her illness which reflect the distance she experiences in her host community. Amna's analysis of Hira's life experiences makes a criticizes the simplistic version of the 'American dream'. It brings to light the struggles of people who live within two cultures. "Perhaps if you imagine a moment long enough, it begins to exist outside of time" (Goyal, 2022). Suffice it to say, American fever examines the intersection of sickness and culture by telling a compelling personal story along with navigating through complicated themes. Through the lens of Hira's story, Amna invites the audience to rethink the concepts of Identity, wellness and the immigrant narratives often portrayed.

Amna (2022) states, "Every winter, the dry, dusty cold of Pindi got me sick, and every time, the cold turned to bronchitis, sneaking into my lungs and turning their passageways narrow and swollen. I would spend sleepless nights with Ammi and a Ventolin inhaler on my side, head propped up on three pillows." (p.132). Hira recalls that before coming to America. She had already been coughing and feeling sick at night. But no one, including her mother, took it seriously. She had chest pain, but her family didn't let her go to the doctor, and no one even identified those symptoms as Tuberculosis. That shows how illness is normalized in Pakistan. She later manifested on this cultural attitude with irony, realizing that in Pakistan, unless you're very ill, people don't stop to think that what is going on there. After moving here in America, she repeated same habit as she always did in Pakistan.

Amna (2022) uphold, "The morning after I puke orange into the toilet bowl, I call up the doctor's office. Ethan sits with his bowl of Cheerios at the table, listening in. The doctor says I have to continue the medicine for a few days to see if my body will start tolerating it." (p.131). This perspective in America clearly shows how serious illness is taken. When she fell ill in America, the reaction was completely opposite. There are strict rules, isolation, medical screenings and in her case, people even had to keep distance from her. Suddenly, her illness became a prominent part of her identity, and it isolated her both emotionally and socially. In the perspective of Hira, she thought that the Americans were ignorant or less ignorant, unless they were from New York.

Amna (2022) asserts, "The months leading up to Christmas were her busiest time of the year at work. That night, she made a hearty beef stew; my cold had finally broken me and I had decided to give up halal. She offered the serving bowl to me again and again." As Hira faced severe challenges including diagnosing the disease and isolation, she became fed up with her cultural values which led her to eat Haram foods. She manifested all the problematic notions which made her realize that there was no such certainty in both of these nations. While according to her,

America had all those opportunities which she desired of, but the emotions of the people regarding her illness made her realize how hard it is to survive when there's no such person besides you. The people started to disconnect with her after realizing that this illness could come on them too. On the other hand, she also knows how less values are given in Pakistan to a common man. She has got those dreams, habits and goals which she can't pull up in her own country. All those interactions and contradictions made her realize how her health played an important role in understanding the depth of the cultures and human perspectives in both countries.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study has argued that *American Fever* by Dur e Aziz Amna employs disease as a vital place where embodied precarity, cultural identity, and diasporic belonging converge, rather than only as a narrative backdrop. The ill body in the novel turns into a literal and metaphorical site where fears of cultural difference, fragility, and alienation are reflected. Dur e Aziz Amna's novel *American Fever* studies the link between culture and illness, shown through Hira, a Pakistani teenager from the country. Besides introducing her disease, the novel shows her tuberculosis standing for the way her culture was taken from her and led her to realize who she is. Because of this illness, Hira sees more clearly how her Pakistani background is different from rural American life which helps her understand what to focus on after her changes. Readers can see in this that being sick away from home can make people feel removed from their life there. Because people in America are afraid of Hira's disease and Pakistanis feel ashamed of it, she goes on feeling alone. Hardship, according to the author, makes her question her home, belonging and identity and in her culture, illness is a major difference compared to her past life. What kinds of strain and anxiety are involved in getting sick away from your usual support?

Reductive depictions of illness as either tragedy or weakness are rejected in Amna's book. Rather, it presents disease as a condition that is paradoxical: a place of both limitation and innovation, of marginalization and fortitude. This paper highlights how diasporic disease narratives go beyond the personal to expose systemic injustices and persistent colonial legacies by interpreting *American Fever* through the prism of postcolonial disability studies. They also draw attention to how embodied vulnerability can lead to new kinds of self-awareness, agency, and cultural criticism. By doing this, Amna's work expands the critical reach of Postcolonial Disability Studies in literary studies while also enhancing the body of illness tales.

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