



Comics and Infertility: Visualization of Medical Autobiography

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Abstract

Leo Tolstoy's configuration of 'true art' as the 'art of the people' that present the individual experience of the artist has been prevalent in the world of medical humanities where the artworks forecast the first-hand experience of the artists affected by certain diseases and epidemics provide psychological relief from depression and anxiety, besides the sympathetic illustrations by established artist or narrators. This cathartic function of artworks is fulfilled by some contemporary 'barren' women to bring their psychogenic disorder, both at home and at hospitals, into non-verbal representations as found in the channeling of pain into comics by a mom and comic artist Alison Wong from California, in cartoonist Jessica Olien's sharing of her infertile journey in "An Infertile Story" and "May be, Baby?", and Christine MacDonough's comic illustrations of her actual experiences as an infertile woman in her webpage entitled Infertility Illustrated. With the help of this 'intersection between the medium of comics and discourses of healthcare', this paper aims to vitalize the comics and autobiographical cartoons by the aforementioned artists in the study of graphic medicine and document how their arts helped them to cross the infertile pathways of their journey in life.

Keywords: comic, cartoons, infertility, graphic medicine, motherhood



Gender Equality

The cathartic function of art, following the Aristotelian doctrine of Catharsis as an outcome of tragic drama, becomes more prevalent when an artist expresses their anguish, pain, and suffering, as experienced by himself/ herself in his/her creative arts. The sharing of individual experience through 'true art', the 'art of the people' as defined by Leo Tolstoy (1995, p.9), has become more demanding with the development of medical humanities in which "the arts and humanities are used to provide insight into

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the human condition, and issues such as suffering, personhood and our responsibility to each other, as well as to offer a historical perspective on healthcare practice itself" (Crawford et al. 2015, pp. 18). Autobiographical Pathographies describing 'pestilence stricken multitudes', as tuned by P B Shelly in his "Ode to A Skylark", have been the foremost medium to narrate not only the Athenian Plague (430 BC), disease "emptying the House of Cadmus, and fills black Hades with groans and howls", as narrated by Sophocles in *Oedipus Rex* (429 BC), but also "The Dance Macabre" during the 14th Century Black Death, "a privee thief men clepeth Deeth,/ That in this contree al the peple sleeth. . .", as treated by the Pardoner in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* (1392), and also in many vernacular narratives throughout the ages. The present pandemic has also been creating pathographies, both in verbal and non-verbal forms, sharing the deadly experience of the pathographers of the Covid-19 as exemplified by Rani Chitrakar, one of the Patuas of West Bengal, India, narrating the demonic advancement of the virus, or the mural paintings in different parts of the world. But, the comic representation of diseased body has been a motif in the Graphic medicine, a version of Pathographies that "uses drawing and comics and its rich vocabulary of narrative conventions to communicate illness and wellness experience" (Jana, 2020) as defined by Sathyaraj Venkatesan in an interview with the author.

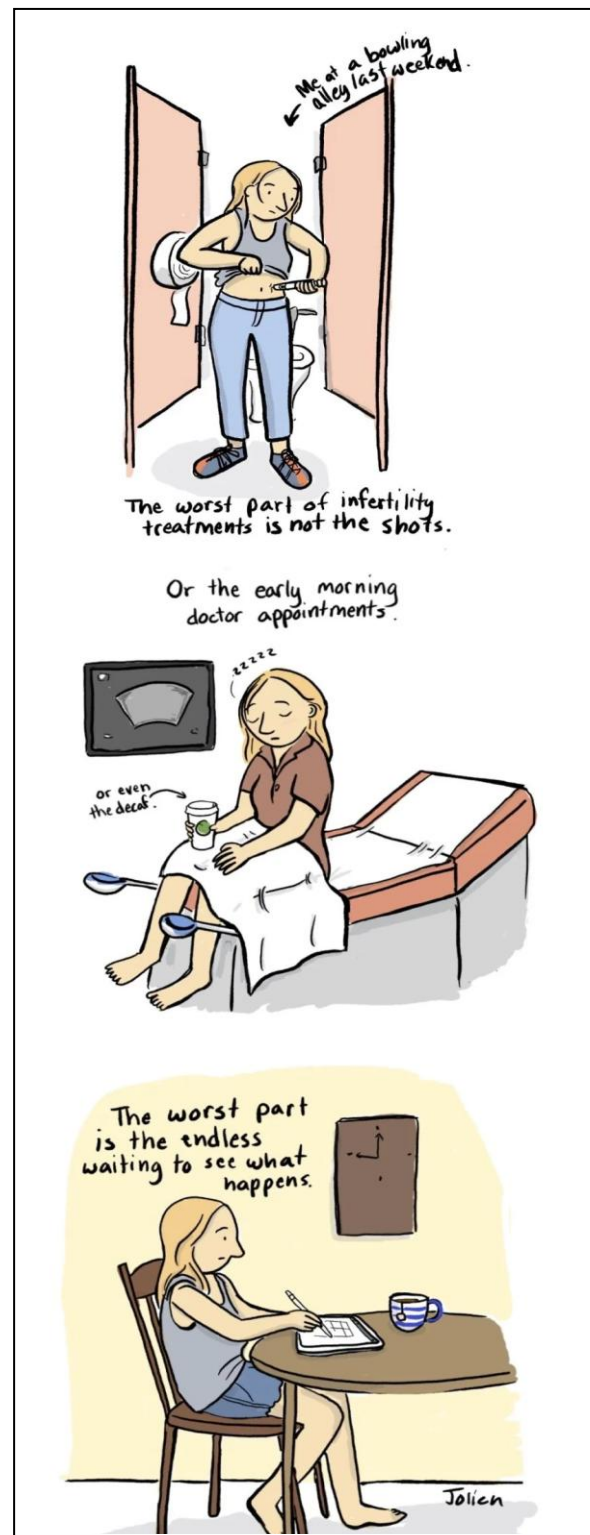
Coined by the British doctor and graphic novelist Ian Williams, and popularised by Michael Green and Kimberly Myers in their article "Graphic Medicine: Use of Comics in Medical Education and Patient Care" (2010), the term graphic medicine refers to "the intersection of the medium of comics and the discourse of health care." The interrelationship between comics and health issues has been popular either with the presentation of diseases in comics like James Tynion IV and Eryk Donovan's "Memetic" in which Good Time Sloth is representing both a comic figure and a colour blind person suffering from myopia, or with the presentation of healthcare professionals as heroes and heroines in comics as found in cartoonist Bruce Plante's "Super Doctors" as Batman figure fighting against the demonic Covid-19, or by picturizing the condition of a diseased society in a comic manner as done by famous Patua artists Anwar Chitrakar in his *Patachitras* (scroll paintings) on Covid-19. In a virtual exhibition entitled "TALES OF OUR TIME | এইসময়েরপট Recent paintings of Anwar Chitrakar" organized by Emami art from July 5, 2020 to July 31, 2020, the artist has exhibited thirteen paintings like "Bhalobashar chotto jaega" (A tiny space for love) where young lovers



are making love in their car as public parks and restaurants are closed in the lockdown period; "Hot Hero" where the hero is depicted as a smart cook in this time of lockdown; "Gari asche" (The car is coming) where the artist satirizes the policemen upset for not being able to take bribes from the drivers as there is no vehicle on the road due to the lockdown and ask a village woman if any car is coming.

That autobiographical narrative of illness is 'an inspiration', as concluded by Juliet McMullin in *Graphic Medicine Menifesto*, has been accepted by the cartoonists and comic writers to express their illness experience in order to relief themselves and other from the traumatic life of suffering when a diseased body is marginalized as the 'other' than the healthy body in social context as exemplified in the practice of detachment with patient suffering from infectious diseases and identifying a woman 'barren' for her inability to bear a child; in different literary and cultural texts as exemplified by the narratives of humiliation and rejection of 'barren' queens by the king, or the loneliness of aged and consequently mad Lear in Shakespeare's *King Lear* or the pathetic ending of *Lady Macbeth* for becoming childless. The therapeutic properties of graphic medicine that have been revitalized by Sarah Leavitt by stating that "graphic medicine has comforted and sustained me in hard times: both reading others' works and creating my own" (Czerwec, 168) have also inspired some contemporary 'barren' women to bring their psychogenic disorder, both at home and at hospitals, into non-verbal representations as found in the channeling of pain into comics by mom and comic artist Alison Wong from California, cartoonist Jessica Olien's sharing of her infertile journey in "An Infertile Story" and "May be, Baby?", and Christine MacDonough's comic illustrations of her actual experiences as an infertile woman in her webpage entitled *Infertility Illustrated*.

The 'nature/culture' difference defining a woman closer to nature for the sharing reproductive ability and a man associated with culture for his desire for cultural means of creation has been visualized by Jessica Olien while sharing her journey of fertility treatment through comics in her "An Infertile Story". To fulfil the stereotypical gender role of motherhood attributed to women in a patriarchal society where the socio-cultural construction of motherhood and people often unwantedly give free advice that "You should have tried to get kids sooner",

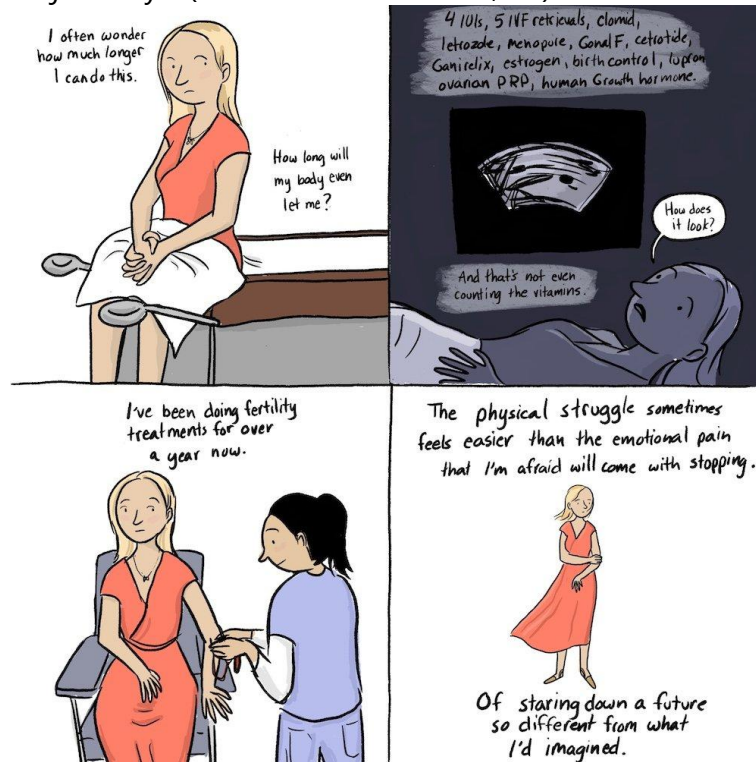


Jessica Olien and her husband 'Tim' started trying to get a baby soon after they got married. But their unsuccessful effort to get a baby made them follow a friend's suggestion to visit a fertility doctor and Jessica's self-indulgence in inferno started from that point. According to the cartoonist herself, "The worst part of infertility treatments is not the shots or the early morning doctor appointments. The worst part is the endless waiting to see what happens" (Olien, April 5, 2021) and the visualisation of the long anxiety (Figure2) begins the rebuttal against the worshipping of women as mother goddess, a notion that has been questioned by Joyce Burkhalter Flueckiger, professor of religion in her book *When the World Becomes Female: Guises of a South Indian Goddess* (2013): "Where do we get the idea that because there are goddesses, women will have higher status? It's a big assumption about the relationship between human and divine worlds". The notion has also been supported by Leila Passah in her article "Feminism for goddesses: does goddess worship empower girls?" Passah quotes Usha Vishwakarma, leader of Red Brigade in Lucknow, India, as follows: "Goddesses are worshipped merely as a ritual but in reality, women are generally never seen as their earthly representations," she says. "It is not inspiration or motivation that we look for. Sheer frustration from being ill-treated by men and unsympathetic responses from family drive us to rebel and make conditions better for ourselves." (Passah, 2014)

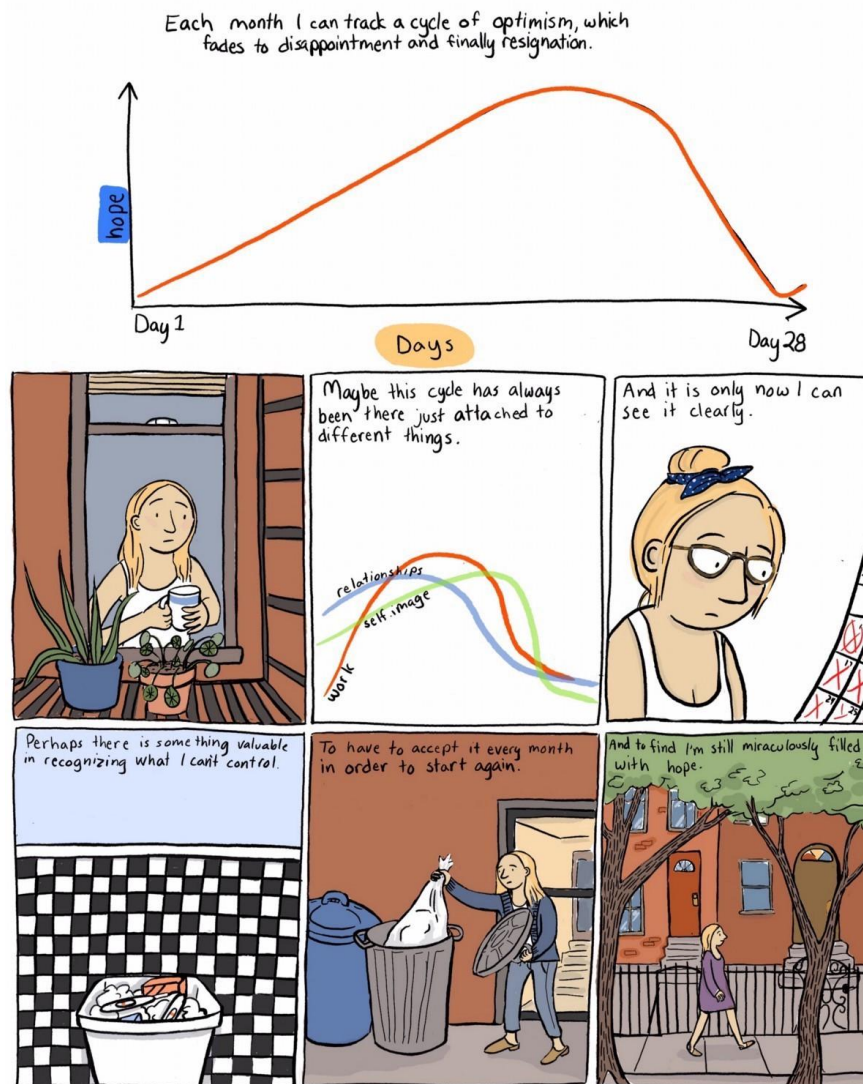


Despite the fact that many high dose medicines, different reproducing techniques like IUI, IVF have been invented, women having the inability to bear a child also suffer from psychological-emotional disorders including turmoil, frustration, depression, anxiety, hopelessness, guilt, and feelings of worthlessness in life (Azghdy et.al, 2014), and the comics of Jessica Olien narrate her 'emotional- affective reactions to infertility' as she underwent the fertility treatment with baskets of medicine and five times IUIs and

eleven times IVFs. According to her, "The physical struggle sometimes feels easier than the emotional pain that I'm afraid will come with stopping." But Jessica Olien has loosened her psychological stress by expressing it through her comics as "creating comics on illness and suffering not only allows the authors to creatively externalise their lived experiences but also equips them to make sense of their altered perceptions and embodied subjectivity." (Murali & Venkatesan, 27)



As the words 'woman' and 'mother' overlie, the concept of marriage, family, the home, children, and work are linked to women. In a patriarchal society, women who accept socially and culturally constructed 'female behaviours' – sexual behaviour, dress, appearance, marital status, motherhood – are rewarded as long as they conform to these norms. The social significance of a woman depends on her fertility and motherhood. Motherhood is a typical gender role that is socially attached to women. The thought that women who do not fulfil the socially attributed roles of mother and rarers of children are described as malicious or villainous pushed Jessica to a world of darkness and compelled her to have hope for every upcoming cycle even though motherhood makes a woman biologically and psychologically inferior to a man as considered by notable French writer, intellectual, existentialist philosopher, political activist, feminist and social theorist Simone de Beauvoir who thinks that pregnancy, childbirth, and breast-feeding all undermine the woman's health and even put her life at risk: "Childbirth is itself is painful and dangerous. . . Nursing is also an exhausting obligation . . . the nursing mother feeds the new born at the expense of her own strength." (qt. Moi: 2008)



The meanings of everyday activities are socially constructed in the following way as observed by Michael P. Johnson in his article "Patriarchal Terrorism and Common Couple Violence: Two Forms of Violence against Women": "... people encounter each other in an already constituted, meaningful, intersubjective life-world, which is the 'paramount reality' for human beings and advocates the study of how people experience this everyday life-world. The existence of others is taken for granted in everyday life. People orient themselves using typification ... through which meaningful interaction is effected". The meaning and value of motherhood are constructed socially.

Like Jessica Olien, another mom and comic illustrator Christine McDonough has created a webpage named "Infertility Illustrated" to "depict the little moments everyone struggling with infertility experiences - from the humorous to the sad and everything in between." Christine's graphic illustrations of infertility in the webpage not only helped her to psychologically cope up with PCOS (Polycystic ovary syndrome),

miscarriages and IVFs but also makes an important contribution to build digital health communities worldwide. Her comic representation of herself being suffered with PCOS helps the visitors and readers to find a solution of the chronic uncurable disease by changing lifestyles and use the digital space to "gather knowledge that is born from lived experience". (Beemer, 2016, qt in Fernham, 2020, p.36) Besides the socio-cultural discourses, 'the discourses and practices of reproductive medicine for its misogynistic, dehumanising, and estranging tendencies that affect the sufferers adversely' (Murali & Venkatesan, 108). The physiological and psychological effect of chemical drugs has been comically lined by Christine to visualize "childless women's psychic and somatic tribulations in a pronatal cultural scape."

WHAT I THINK WHEN SOMEONE SUGGESTS THAT QUITTING CARBS WILL CURE MY PCOS.



IF YOU DIDN'T LAY ALL YOUR DRUGS OUT AND TAKE A PICTURE ON DAY 1... DID YOU EVEN START YOUR CYCLE??



The continuous application of newly invented reproductive medicines and medical technologies like IVF and IUI on the 'abnormal' body of women make them invisible as women. Their individuality and privacy become open to all. Karen Throsby in her book *When IVF Fails: Feminism, Infertility and the Negotiation of Normality* (2004) argues that in IVF "the body is not treated . . . as a natural 'thing' in opposition to cultural signification, or as the blank material upon which culture is inscribed" (p 21) and it has been narrated by Christine in the following comic:

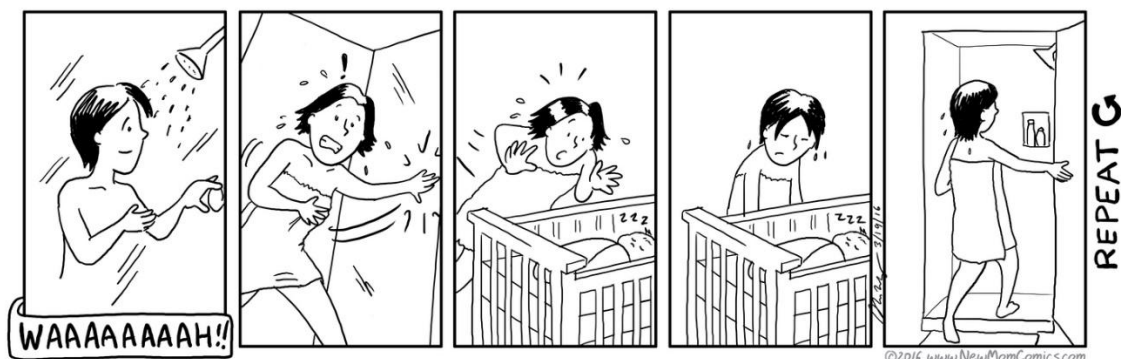


But unlike Jessica Olien, Christine has proposed an alternate life to the childless or infertile women. Her comics like 'Alternate Future', 'Cheers', 'Somethings gotta give' present radius of hope for a normal life of the infertile women. The therapeutic function of the comics enables the artist as well as the readers to "fully recognize their situation (which is characteristically accompanied by resistance and denial) and, through the ensuing process of acceptance, regain their emotional "balance"". (Gibson 1996)



Like Jessica Olien and Christine McDonough, mom and comic artist Alison Wong from California acknowledges that motherhood includes lot of stress and prescribes that drawing comics will help a woman to cope up with that. "If you can pull out something funny from a trying and frustrating moment, it changes your view on it", Wong stresses in an interview with Christina. Her book *New Mom Comics: The First Year* (2016) visualizes the adventures of being a new mom, as Wong herself confesses: "I created this series because it's what I wished I had during the first year – it's like a friend to tell you how it really is, with humor and love, and not fear and worry! My husband and I always try to look for the humor in each day, even in tough parenting moments, as it helps us laugh and remember them so fondly." (Wong, 2016) American poet, essayist and feminist Adrienne Cecile Rich in her 1976 book *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* explains how motherhood has been constructed as an institution which is imposed on them through society and the motherhood institution

establishes a woman's motherhood experience. Motherhood, Rich feels, is oppressive as it is not a choice for most women in a patriarchy. So, she suggests that women should have control over their own physic to get rid of the control of the aforementioned institution upon them. Again, American psychoanalytic feminist, Nancy Chodorow in her 1978 book *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* argues that the role of motherhood has a psychological influence upon a woman.



According to her, "Women's capacities for mothering and abilities to get gratification from it are strongly internalised and psychologically enforced, and are built developmentally into the feminine psychic structure." (Chodorow, 1978) She thinks equality between a male and a female can never be established as long as women are held responsible for begetting and bringing up children. The completeness of a woman depends on her becoming a mother. Women who are not able to be mothers are considered as barren and are tortured and humiliated by the family members and society, whether western or traditional.

Though infertility is a gender-neutral disease, in most of the cases, it is attributed only to the women, and the women without reproductive ability are abnormalized and exploited with the socio-cultural texts and biomedical approaches. But 'gynographics' present "a unique verbal- visual vocabulary for artists to demonstrate the misogynistic,

dehumanising, hurtful, and estranging nature of the clinical experience of infertility.” (Murali & Venkatesan, 109)

Conflict of Interest: The authors have no conflicts of interest.

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Bio-note

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