



LISA GENOVA'S BRAIN NOVEL, MALADY AND ROMANTIC SCIENCE: A CRITICAL REFLECTION

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ABSTRACT



The neuroscientist Lisa Genova has recently become famous for her fictional writings in popular setting of America. In her novels, she eloquently tells stories about patients suffering from rare neurological diseases. Since the conceptual framework of Genova's narratives has been widely unacknowledged in literary studies, this research article pursues a general approach to her work. She is generally acclaimed as a contemporary to British neurologist and novelist Oliver Sacks, hence this research will analysis Genova's works in association to the features illustrated by Sacks towards the concepts of Neurology of Identity, that is basically concerned with the diseased personality and subjectivity and understanding the disease from fictional perspective. This article also explores Lisa Genova as an author, and her association to the world of Romantic Science defined by Sacks. For the author, her novels maintain balance of the two cultures, not as a mere reduction to scientific fact about the illness, but they constitute aspects of artistic world too. She characteristically uses symbolic, psychological and social standings in her narration. This research article also elicits some important aspects of the author's narrative approach that involves her realistic presentation and diverse interpretation. Nevertheless, the author is compared to Sacks who engages medicine back into the fictional world, but unlike him opens it for many thoughts that amalgamate the two separate streams in contemporary times.

Keywords: *Clinical Narratives, Medical Hermeneutics, Pathography, Illness, Neurology and Literature.*

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INTRODUCTION

Lisa Genova is an American neuroscientist and novelist, authored five novels till date. She started her creative career with her self-published debut novel *Still Alice* (2007). As the book gained popularity, it was acquired by Simon & Schuster, spread out Genova's popularity throughout popular platforms. The central framework of her novels revolves around neuropathological themes. The attempts to write a literary research article exclusively about Genova's literary ambition is worthwhile and novel. Many critics only associate her work with a neuroscientist who writes fiction to empathize reader on neurological degenerative illnesses in the style of popular culture. Conversely to her vast popularity in fictional world, she gained limited attraction in literary studies. Genova's novels have involved in research journals for her scientific temperament and neurological interest typically by medical personnel and caregivers and rarely by literary scholars. The main contribution of the author's reception can be picked up in the online platform, her awareness campaigns and conferences.

In this paper, the analysis on Genova's position in both fictional and scientific consciousness is chosen as a starting point for the study of her work, their contents and contribution to medicine, neurology and literature. After a short introduction on the biography and works of Lisa Genova, I will explain the terms 'Romantic Science' and 'Neurology of Identity' that are fundamental concepts of Oliver Sack's approach. Thereafter, these concepts are applied to the work of Genova. Some critical reflection on her hermetical attitude shall be concluded with more general comments of the approach towards the author's work. Nevertheless, an exploration into Genova's fictional work of this kind will provide motivations to future research in both literary and non-literary circles.

AUTHOR'S BIOGRAPHY

Lisa Genova is born in America in 1970, has Bulgarian and Italian ancestry. She received her degree in biopsychology from Bates College and a Ph.D. in neuroscience from Harvard University in 1998. She did research in neurology at Massachusetts

General Hospital East, Yale Medical School, and the National Institutes of Health. She even taught neuroanatomy at Harvard Medical School in 1996. Since 2015, she has been engaged with travelling around the world, raising awareness on dementia and related neurological illnesses. She turned into a fulltime fiction writer from 2007 with the self-publication of her debut novel *Still Alice*. So far, Genova authored five novels dealing with brain and neurology in a broad sense, where all her protagonists are plagued by rare and severe neurological illnesses.

Marking herself as a neuroscientist, speaker, yogi and an empathy warrior, Genova tells stories about sick people, their perception of illness and the surrounded world (*Lisa Genova*). The author's interest is directed towards raising awareness on the specific neurological conditions and the individual's construct around it, their personal experiences and ways of coping mechanism. Genova has regard for both conventional and non-conventional neurology, where she is seen to illustrate human conditions beyond classical medicine, for instance, autism, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder etc. In that way, she broadens her scope beyond neurological interests and competence towards psychological kind of human phenomenology that is associated in altered brain functions. Genova's writings are also seen passing the conceptions of neurology, which also crosses on themes of fine arts and spiritual culture, especially in her novels, *Left Neglected* (2011), *Inside the O'Briens* (2015) and *Every Note Played* (2017), where a rare connectivity between rare neurological conditions and mental well-being were merged. Genova's narratives introduce a unique metaphorical expression of neurological concepts, which she thinks is "a way that we human beings communicate and understand and feel and make sense ..." (Vohra). There is also a significant shift in the author's narration with passing time, which is no longer confined to individual's suffering that forms the central theme of the novel. The author insights on interpersonal relationships, positive philosophical thinking about physical and mental well-being, crisis management parallels the disease is another typical attribute about her



narration. In short, she does not limit to neurological themes alone but also demonstrates the qualities as a professional efficient fiction writer.

While typically not so famous in literary studies, Genova's writings caused an enormous positive response among medical professionals and caregivers. She got awards and recognition for her novels that inspired artists and film producers. The critical reviews about her writing is positive and enthusiastic. At the first glance, Genova's narration demonstrates a general understanding of biomedicine. On the contrary to its rationalistic appearance, the medicine presented by Genova seems to comprise management, reliability, and care. As a representative of neurological medicine, it is purely adapted towards the victims of disease (*Lisa Genova: Left Neglected*). She connects the reader with eloquent, accessible medical knowledge. In brief, Genova can be considered as a neuroscientist and literary author, a perfect combination to be represented in the genre of Sack's romantic science.

LISA GENOVA AND ROMANTIC SCIENCE

Just like British neurologist and novelist Oliver Sacks, Genova writes clinical narratives, which are also called as clinical tales or paradoxical tales, characterized for their biological- biographical approach towards the suffering individual. For this reason, she is widely acclaimed as Oliver Sacks of contemporary fiction (*Lisa Genova*). Similar to him, Genova's focus of interest is the sufferer and their experience of illness, along with disease and its objectives. Though compared to him more often, Genova has not simply imitated his models. She converges both objective and subjective knowledge, extending towards third dimension of empathy towards disease and sufferer. Furthermore, her novels exemplify various rhetorical elements, which provide them with a unique affinity for the art of literature.

Lisa Genova not only draws her inspiration to write novels, but also her conceptual background from Sacks (*Writers on Writers: Lisa Genova*), who is indeed oriented towards the framework followed by neuropsychologist Alexandr Romanowich Luria. His posthumously published autobiography *The Making*

of Mind (1977), classified the approaches in the world of science into Classical and Romantic, which are two different but complementary to each other (174). Classical Science corresponds to traditional natural sciences, which searches for general causal explications and abstract models. According to Luria, reductionism is the basic feature of Classical Science. In contrast, Romantic Science uses individualizing and idiographic methods that lead into the concrete spheres of human-being. Romantic scientists want to preserve the wealth of living reality, and they aspire to a science that retains richness (Luria 174). Sacks defines his writings with romantic philosophy. The primary objective of his fictional writings is to humanize science and disease (Wasserstein 444). Similar double-sided orientation, constitutes the narrative reality of Genova's writings also.

The essential format of Sack's writing unlike Genova is dynamically located in the interaction between the patient and physician conjoining their two distinct realities and ways of experience. But the core concept of Genova's writing that is commonly associated with Sacks is access to medicine links, natural history and individual pathography, clinical signs and subjective symptoms. The central background of the two writers is the biological processes get re-historized as unique individual dramas. Genova also carries preferences towards Romantic Science that is defined by Sacks in many ways. Her style tends to be empathetic, dramatic and full of metaphor. She stresses the meaning of emotions, dreams and spirituality in the healing process. The integration of romantic aspects in Genova's novel makes it more touching for the reader and permits empathic insights into the situation of the characters. Not just limiting to these features, lets us explore in detail Lisa Genova as an author who can be associated to the genre of Sack's Romantic Science.

NEUROLOGY OF IDENTITY

Oliver Sack's approach of 'Neurology of Identity' is different from Classical Neurology in many ways. Classical Neurology explores illness in scientific sense in terms of anatomical and physiological association with nervous system. But Sacks Neurology of Identity



shall explore the broad connections between neurological diseases and personality. Sacks explains it as:

The patient's essential being is very relevant for the higher reaches of neurology and in psychology; for here the patient's personhood is essentially involved, and the study of disease and of identity cannot be disjoined. Such disorders, and their depiction and study, indeed entail a new discipline, which we may call the 'neurology of identity', for it deals with the neuronal foundations of the self, the age-old problem of mind and brain. (*The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat* x)

Neurology of identity is a concept used by Sacks to dirge on the critical aspects ignored by Classical neurology. According to this approach Sacks considered physical and mental phenomenon as "entwined and integrated at every point" (*Awakenings* 148). His approach appreciates the interpretation of brain, subjectivity, and phenomenal lifeworld. It introduces subjective dimensions of human experience into neurology. Similar approach is employed by Lisa Genova in all her fictional writings.

ALS has crawled its way into the motor neurons that feed the muscles of his legs, and walking three blocks is the pathetic molehill large enough to unmask its sinister invasion. He imagines his body's resistance to this attack, the molecular war in the fight against ALS at every neuromuscular junction, an invisible army, outnumbered and outgunned, deployed to fight this insidious enemy for as long as it can. The army holds its ground in Richard's legs when he is home, but when it has to divert half its soldiers to the mission of walking to the Public Garden, the resistance becomes compromised, ALS advances, and the enemy is poised to take control. His army calls back the

troops. Every soldier is needed in the trenches. No more walking! (*Every Not Played* 107)

According to Genova, her stories are not only about neurological illnesses but more of individual's altered neurological identity. As Sacks pointed about Romantic Science, brain functions are not analysed by abstract scientific categories, but they are understood individually and personally in relation to a phenomenal subject. Likewise, Lisa Genova also pens extraordinary stories about people living with diseases and disorders of brain in scientific sense but the central concept emphasised by the author is the association of neurological identity and self (*Architect of Change*). The vulnerable characters in her stories illustrates a sort of rearrangement of their consciousness of identities as a common feature of all her novels.

Genova's writing suggests an empathetic perspective of diseases and disorders. The network of neuro-biological, psychological and social contexts that she creates within her plots, dives deeper into the thought of knowledge and pathology drawn by Classical Medicine. Different from Sacks who undervalues the approach pursued by Classical Neurology towards diseases, she creates a perfect blend of both awareness and reductionistic thought style in Classical Neurology. For Sacks Classical Medicine devalues diseases to biological processes in the machine of body, which are only determined by natural rules without any reference to its carrier. "Yet modern medicine, increasingly, dismisses our existence, either reducing us to identical replicas reacting to fixed 'stimuli' in equally fixed ways or seeing our diseases as purely alien and bad, without organic relation to the person who is ill" (*Awakenings* 228). But Genova's writings are carefully crafted around the concepts of Classical Neurology, not ignoring the surrounded complex individual and subjective reality.

Another conceptual framework of Sack's Neurology of Identity that can be associated to Genova is thought of paradox of diseases. He stresses that "a disease is never a mere loss or excess – that there is always a reaction from part of the affected



organism or individual, to restore or to replace, to compensate for and to preserve its identity, however strange the means may be" (*The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat* 4). All his clinical narratives underline, that the individual handling of chronic disorders cannot be interpreted as passive habitation to the losses and limitations prescribed by the disease. Just like Sacks, Genova also hold those constructive meanings associated of disease that enriches the individual with new adaptive qualities. For example, Genova tells in her novel *Left Neglected*, about a high achieving urban woman who suddenly becomes a victim of a rare neurological condition Left Neglect due to a car accident adapts and rebuilds life to her new kind of perception and becomes fulfilled, that her once successful life did not provide.

And then I crashed my car. For the first time in almost a decade, I stopped barreling a thousand miles an hour down that road. Everything stopped ... it has given me a chance to lift my head up and have a look around. And I'm starting to wonder. What else is there? Maybe success can be something else, and maybe there's another way to get there. Maybe there's a different road for me with a more reasonable speed limit ... something inside me has changed and wants something different ... I don't want to go back to Berkley. I don't want to go back to that life. The same intuition that led me to Mike Green and snowboarding is leading me somewhere else. And I trust it. (*Left Neglected* 354)

GENOVA'S WORLD OF MALADY

Genova's language is directly seen to parallel Sacks Neurology of Identity investigates neurological diseases, therapies, and rehabilitations as existential events concerning the whole lifeworld of an individual. Impelled by a physiological change, the patients perform metamorphosis to other worlds (*An Anthropologist on Mars: Seven Paradoxical Tales* xvi). She also explores the neurological world defined by Sacks, particularly within the background of

'Neuroanthropology', that Sacks created in his stories away from the atmosphere of hospitals to spread out into the everyday life of his patients. He wants to explore the way his patients live with their diseases at home. His subject is not clinical pathology, but a neurological anthropology to sketch spaces of experience that are neurologically changed. He separates neurological diseases as altered worlds away from ontological or universalistic conceptions of diseases by relativistic approaches. Within this approach, Sacks questions the conventional distinction between disease and health. Genova's relativism just like Sacks depends on both subjective and objective criteria towards the disease and health. But her view on the diseases offers a general practical definition and empathy required to understand the disease and does not offer any personalised perceptive or criticism between health and disease like Sacks. As Sacks commented about the metaphor of diseased world, similarly Genova's writings are characterized ontologically with expressions for pressure and force.

He paces, and the white-hot rage consumes him, the pressure building and blistering and pressing against his every molecule, and he's sure he'll physically explode if the rage doesn't leave him in some other way. He paces, searching for a safe place to send it. (*Inside the O'Briens* 208)

This metaphorical view infuses her concepts with universal features. Hence, Genova's concepts of disease unlike Sacks is far from relativism but closely associated with universality, intermingling both subjective and objectivism, and this blending is skilfully maintained throughout her writings.

GENOVA AND MEDICAL HERMENEUTICS

Recent years have witnessed a growing affinity of contemporary literature towards hermeneutical approaches. Genova narratives particularly exemplifies the hermeneutical approaches demarcated by Sacks in Romantic Science. From this point of view Sack's writings focuses on the subjective interpretation of disease. His task as Romantic scientist is to grasp those



individual stories by putting different physical, mental and social interpretations coherently into a context of an individual's narrative. Sack conceptualized the mode of hermeneutical understanding as the fusion of different horizons, Sacks explains that "the inner and the outer narrative must fuse" (*The Island of the Colour-blind and Cyclad Island* 74). Here, Lisa Genova belong to Sack's Neurology of Identity, where her narratives implies to reconstruct medical facts, events, and personal experiences in both physical and mental, along with both objective and subjective categories.

Not limiting to these similarities, there are many differences that can be observed between Sacks and Genova's subjective narration. Sacks interpretations are typically one-sided and unbelievable. Because of an overflow of rhetorical elements, his narratives often advance to separate pieces of art that have left their factual basis and do not reach or reflect the patients' feelings. Genova's writings are also rhetorically significant, but her narratives are fact based near realistic stories and not exaggerations like Sacks. Genova novels revolve around the illustration of characters with neurological diseases and disorders but unlike Sacks, who towards the end portrays the characters with sinister and unreasonable tints, Genova captures the positive assets with more of realistic facts. Her characters are typically smart, pleasant and communal different from the Sack's characters who are often sympathetic, intelligent, charming and extraordinarily eloquent. Genova intend to interpret her characters and their experience with the disease under metaphysical, psychological and social aspects. On the other hand, Sacks narratives induces an unspecific and even over dramatization and glorification of chronic neurological diseases, but Genova's narration doesn't promote such inappropriate representation and lacks extraordinary metaphor like Sacks. Genova's narration digs deep into the personal calamity and tragedy of the disease unlike Sacks who is always in danger of treating patients only as passive texts and neglecting their own sphere of feelings and activity. Lisa Genova's competence for interpretation and narration is

masterful, well balanced and skilful and not personalised.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, Genova's neurological narratives contributes to unshackle neurological diseases and many other psychological and cultural phenomenon and social stigmatization. Her approach can be considered more concrete and coherent. She craft-fully blends the rhetoric aspects, pictures and metaphors for the illustration of her thought along with conventional scientific terminology like Sacks. She presents a vivid composition of descriptions, dialogues, along with social reflections, psychological analysis, and extensive quotations within the theoretical framework of Neurology of Identity. Lisa Genova is seen to evolve beyond Sack's variety, where she employed more unified methods and approaches than Sacks. Indeed, her writing belongs to the Sacks concepts of pluralism and postmodern style in a way, but she is seen more grounded, embracing the concrete neurological worlds. The author's neurological worlds provide common rules for medical acting and objective criteria to define the world of abnormal differs from Sacks subjective and objective views that lack clear demarcation.

Genova's novels are associated with Sack's concept of Neurology of Identity, but also departs from its criticism on Classical Neurology. His concept of Neurology of Identity is very insufficient. He invests only a few and often shadowy words for a theoretical demarcation and clarification. He even omits a critical reflection on his methods and attitudes. But alternative, Genova's views and ideas are more focused, well-defined and presented with limited ambiguity. The most conjoining aspect of both the writers is there interpretation of the concept of health and disease. Unlike Sacks, Genova deals with the concept of medicine at both metaphysical and subjective level, balancing the scope of science and rationality. Her metaphysical roots in terms of world of illness, and are more explainable and verifiable. She wanted to share the understanding of the disease and well-being.

In this paper, a general view of Genova's fictional writings in terms of Sacks Neurology of



Identity is analysed though not absolutely. Her novels provide a new kind of writing that are both similar and different from Sacks neurology and medicine beyond reductionism, but they contain many rich impulses for a new genre in literature. Despite of certain drawbacks, which is not discussed in this paper, as it itself is a scope of elaborate research, Genova's approach bears close resemblances to Sacks concept of Neurology of Identity. In terms of pragmatic view of the concept, it attracts the readers in respect to the neurological and phenomenological knowledge. She guided more understanding, empathy on the landscapes of human brain and diseases. Genova's novels attract all sections of readers from both medical and non-medical platforms for its practical and realistic dimensions. The author is closely seen to associate with Sack's approach but also unique in her way, which supports both science and humanity.

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