

MADNESS AND GENDER: A STUDY OF MENTAL ILLNESS IN THE TEXT, A BOOK OF LIGHT

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ABSTRACT--There is a wide variety of literature on mental illness mostly in western countries. Mental illness is widely stigmatized and is perceived in different manner in society since earlier times. There is lack of awareness of different kinds of mental illnesses in Asia and in other developing countries. Though people try to eschew to talk about their mental issues and are misinterpreted, awareness is being created in western countries through various ways and use of narratives can be said to be one of such means. Writers are contributing significantly to enlighten the society and helping those who are suffering from different categories of mental illnesses. People with psychological problem are usually misunderstood, which make them unable to seek help for their problem. This further distances them from their social links. Even closed ones fail to understand their sufferings and their condition, the reason being lack of knowledge of the malady in Indian society. Studies suggest that women are mostly affected by mental illness than men, as 'madness is a female malady because it is experienced by more women than men' (Showalter). This paper attempts to explore mental illness or madness in terms of gender in India through close reading of the book, *A book of light* written by Jerry Pinto.

Keywords--Mental illness, stigmatization, gender, depression.

I. INTRODUCTION

If not all but some of the human diseases carry with it some social implications. For instance, in eighties when a major *communicative* disease of AIDS was surfaced, the world bodies including WHO, different sorts of distinct countries had waged war against this deadly disease on two fronts that is medically and socially. The world bodies had to spend huge funds to tackle the ever increasing threads of this deadly disease.

Besides government bodies, NGO made a major role in spreading the awareness among the public that not to panic and also made the public behaviour accommodative towards the AIDS patients. In India one could see on the hoardings even on electronic and print media, the awareness about AIDS but we find nothing or negligible about the people with bipolar disorder. We also observed in our entire life that mentally instable persons become tool of entertainment in streets and on different occasions and diverse gatherings of the public resulting into the execration of the patients.

In Jerry Pinto's book *A Book of Light*, I tried to dive deep to study the happenings with the lives of men, women, old and young.

A Book of Light is nonfiction, which describes the sufferings of the patients as well as their caregivers irrespective of their gender. These are the stories of different people from different areas, which are edited by Jerry

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Pinto and composed them into a book. Jerry Pinto's first book was based on his mother's bipolar disorder. The other book, *A Book of Light* depicts mental illness of the sufferer as well the sufferings caused to the closed ones. Both active as well as passive sufferers of mental illness face various kinds of difficulties. Mental illness is a condition that involves changes in emotion, thinking, behaviour and is associated with distress or troubles in social, work or family activities. Depressions, PTSD, schizophrenia are some of the mental illnesses that are not accepted by the society particularly in South Asian society. Mental Illness is one of the many taboos that are not talked about widely. Mental illness has been considered ignominious and an ill-omen throughout the human history. Some communities associate it with the work of devil or Satan. This lack of awareness has led to horrific and ill treatment of patients suffering from mental illness. These are very common nowadays but people fail to recognise and understand the graveness of these illnesses. The societal pressures and the fear hinder the person to share the problems related to their illness. It is usually stigmatized, which restricts the sufferer to open up about his/her mental health even to his/her near and dears. The person suffers silently which often leads to fatal consequences. The reason for this could be the lack of awareness of mental illness. Though people try to eschew to talk about their mental issues but the waves of change are quickly spreading across the globe. Efforts are being made to eradicate the stereotypes and superstitions surrounding mental illnesses in Asia and in also in developing countries. The stereotype is not only in the developing countries but the developed nations around the globe are as much going through this urgency. The need to talk about the mental illness has become the point of utmost importance. Awareness is being created in western countries through various ways. Different modes of communication are used to reach out to people from all parts of the society. Use of narratives is one such means which is effective in building up the ground for the discussion of many sensitive issues pertaining to the society. Writers have partly taken up the responsibility to prepare the society about this upcoming long journey to talk about the taboos, stigmas and superstitions about the mental illness. They have contributed significantly to enlighten the society and help those who are suffering from these types of mental illnesses. There were not many direct writings that highlighted these psychological problems. Using various artistic techniques and methods they brought the subject on the tables for the discussion. When the editor of *A Book of Light* asked people around to write and share the experiences of the problems faced by them or anyone in the family or anybody amongst the friends, many hesitated and refused to talk about it. There could be many reasons for it. Out of many such reasons one has a major role to play in degrading the open discussion about mental illness-taboo. People are afraid to discuss their mental problems feeling that they will be labelled as 'mad'. The problems and difficulties are not just faced by the patients but also the caregivers of these patients. The stories of this book by Jerry Pinto are heart rendering, one that arouses sympathy not only for the active sufferers but also for their family. Jerry Pinto's mother suffered from bipolar disorder. He wrote a book on it which aroused a question by a friend that doesn't he feel guilty that he used his mother to write a book (Pinto, 2016). This question made him uncomfortable and this shows the plight of the caregivers who too suffer somehow along with the patients. The pain of the sufferer and their close ones is wholly neglected. Nowadays writers are sharing their personal experiences or of people around them which is effectively playing a significant role in creating awareness about mental illness, its causes, effects, treatment and recovery. This paper will try to analyse and explore the mental illness of the patients as well as their caregivers in the text *A Book of Light* by Jerry Pinto.

Writing and reading helps a great deal. It becomes a part of the healing process for the sufferer. It also becomes the source of learning for the people who know nothing about the issues related to such psychological problems. This narrative can be assistance to the society who never took this type of illness seriously leaving many to suffer in their own manner. The stigma attached to mental illness is so strong that a person for example in

depression fails to get treatment and cure. The Person is left untreated and is pushed into the abyss of exclusion. He/she feel guilty and anxious as nobody listens to his/her real pain. The stories remain unheard and remain close to the chest of the sufferer. This increases his/her suffering and hence ends up in a mental chaos that eventually leads to fatal accident or suicide.

A Book of Light: when a loved one has a different mind powerfully reconstructs the different and personal account of many sufferers of mental illness. This book is written so that it “would illuminate these areas of darkness in the Indian middle-class family (Pinto, 2016)”. It shares stories of many who have not told their stories but can identify themselves with these people in book. Pinto says, “the function of a work of art is not to heal the artist but to heal the world (Pinto, 2016)”. No doubt that it heals the world but it can be helpful to the artist as well. Artist too expresses their pain and sufferings through their art. It too vents out their miseries and agonies. They make their stories heard to the different societies of the world where someone else too must be going through the same. It can encourage many people around the world.

The stories in this *book* are quite a good example to point out the seriousness of mental illness prevailing in the society and it is received in an Indian society. Swadeshi Deepak was a professor and a writer who was diagnosed with bipolar disorder in 1990s. He attempted suicide many times when at last he left his house and never returned to relieve his family from the daily woes and worries. His wife did take care of him but she too was finally exhausted with his illness. It has been seen that women often are the most effected by depression than men. But here a man has bipolar disorder and his condition too is not that good but his family feels they also have to suffer with him and prayed to get rid of him.

II. DISCUSSION

Leela Chakravorty's mother is a professor who was suffering from depression was not recognised until when Leela went for her own counselling. She describes her childhood times and her some part of life surrounding her mother and family. She shows her closeness to her mother and how her mental illness developed. She portrays her plight when thinks of her mother as, “You're the sad old woman. I'm the one who's fighting my way out (Chakravorty, 2016)”. This shows the hard condition of the patient and her caregiver, her daughter they were facing because of her mental disorder. Mental disorder not effects mentally but physically and socially as well. Leela wants to get *away* from her ill mother but she was her mother and she loved her, therefore could not do so. It's the love that keeps caregivers to care for their sick family members. Her mother was suffering from mental illness since long time but she was never taken for treatment. This illustrates the lack of awareness and ignorance to mental illness which is also serious like other disease.

Amandeep Sadhu's mother suffered from schizophrenia. He expresses his mother's sufferings and his struggles to make her comfortable. Later she was diagnosed cancer bringing more responsibility for her son. He describes in detail the critical condition of his mother, how he tackled those difficult situations, and what all he learned as life lessons can be lessons for all the readers. Though Pinto said that the book doesn't try to answers the questions but for a reader it does brings lot of encouragement, understanding, knowledge and awareness. A son took care of everything of his mother in her illness crossing all the gender barriers. ‘I was a daughter to Mamman. That is what we became, genderless (Sadhu, 2016)’. This carries a powerful and deep impact on readers who shy away due to these illnesses. These kind of narratives become in a voice of every individual facing similar kinds of problems. Family and friends play a significant role in the life of a person going through such mental illness. This

narrative portrayed improvement in bitterness among relatives of Sadhu and erasing many misunderstandings. However, it cannot be ignored that her mental illness was not taken as seriously as it should be by her relatives as compared to her other disease that is when she got diagnosed for cancer.

Patricia Mukhim says, 'IT WAS ON a January afternoon in 2006 that I first heard the term 'bipolar disorder' (Mukhim, 2016).' This shows unfamiliarity of different terms associated with mental illness in the society. Patricia is a writer, who too was unfamiliar with the term 'bipolar disorder' when she first heard by a Chinese-American woman, Yang. She had heard about depression from her psychiatrist friends superficially rather knowing anything actual about it. It is not her fault but it has not much talked about linking it to abnormality as she mentions 'If we talked about it, we didn't have to listen (Mukhim, 2016).' Walker explains people commonly presume 'that depression is a choice of the sufferer.' Patricia herself wanted to keep herself away from any discussion about depression. This is quite evident when she writes that she felt relieved when she ended her talk with *Yang* who was suffering from bipolar.

Patricia is quite a good example representing a society who is afraid to be linked with any sort of mental illness presenting a huge stigma attached with it. When her daughter told her to publish her letter regarding mental illness, she did not do it putting it away. Because she did not want anybody to know or acknowledge her depression, she was *suffering* from. As depression is usually seen as 'a negative outcome of associating themselves with such an illness (Walker, 2008).' When she is informed by her daughter's friend that she is suffering from depression, she could not take in that and refused to believe the doctors. She knew somewhere that her daughter was struggling with herself but she denied to accept it especially because she is a mother who does not want her child to have negative effect on her future representing stigma attached to any kind mental problems.

III. CONCLUSION

'I denied to the world, to her and to myself that she needed help (82).' Patricia is seen ignoring the real problem her daughter Daniella was facing which she herself was not able to identify herself and nobody else could help her. After her *death* also, nobody dared to talk about her mental illness showing the fear of the society in microcosm. While writing the story, Patricia is trying to vent out her guilt of not doing much for her daughter to help her to cope up with depression. She kept ignoring the real problem in fear of negativity identified to the illness.

Patricia *mentioned* words of Australian Psychiatrist, 'Listen with empathy, the person with depression needs someone to talk to. She does not need advice. No unsolicited advice. Depressed people do not need it. They need an active, empathic ear (69).'

These *narratives* can compel a reader to ponder over severity of mental disorder and help in society to erase the stigma attached to it. This stigma further deteriorates the sufferings of the sufferer irrespective of their gender. They are *misunderstood* which make them unable to share and talk about their troubles. This further distances them from their social links. Even closed ones fail to understand their sufferings and their condition, the reason being lack of knowledge of the malady in Indian society. The writers through their narratives are thus helping in a considerable manner in creating awareness about all types of mental disorders using skilful approach. As the writings give them the courage to speak, freely voice their sufferings and go for some proper treatment.

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