
CONTESTING THE SELF: MENTAL HEALTH AND MENTAL ILLNESS IN URVASHI BAHUGUNA'S NO STRAIGHT THING WAS EVER MADE: ESSAYS ON MENTAL HEALTH

Anupama CV*¹

*¹Research Scholar, Government College Malappuram, Malappuram, Kerala, India.

DOI : <https://www.doi.org/10.56726/IRJMETS72635>

ABSTRACT

Mental health acts as the state of mental well-being which influences how people think, act and feel throughout their lives. Mental illness explained through literature investigates the human condition including the individual struggles and attitudes. Both mental health and mental illness have been significant themes in literature throughout history. Literature provides the space to explore the concept of mental health in myriad ways. Starting with the authors, literature delves deep in to the human mind and provides insights into the various issues people struggle with. Beyond individual experiences, literature uses mental illness as a metaphor for broader existential societal struggles, often delving in to trauma, resilience and the pursuit of connection. This research paper tries to investigate the portrayal of mental health and mental illness in literature by focussing on how these issues are represented and explored in works of fiction. The study will examine the work No Straight Thing Was Ever Made: Essays on Mental Health by Urvashi Bahuguna.

Keywords: Literature, Essay, Mental Health, Memoir, Mental Illness.

I. INTRODUCTION

Mental health includes the complete well-being of an individual and is the foundation for emotions, learning, hope and self- esteem. It is not only the lack of mental disorders but it also influence how people think, act and feel throughout their lives. World Health Organization defines mental health as “a state of well-being in which every individual realizes his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to her or his community(8). Mental health plays an important role in the life of an individual like the ability to have independent thoughts and action, happiness in their lives, relations with family, friends and society. Any disturbance in the mental state can adversely affect them and can cause changes in their individual to a broader scope of relationships. Mental illness are health conditions which can involve distress in individual or social activities. People around the world had mental illness since time immemorial and the view towards mental health and mental illness has changed as they came to understand the reality and importance attached to mental health. Various authors from different parts of the world has dealt with mental issues in their works implicitly or explicitly. According to the psychologist Nicola Morant, a person with any mental illness is considered as an alien one and she puts it

Otherness arises from a sense of alienation and an inability to imagine what the experience of mental illness is like. The mentally ill are represented as different and Other because they are thought to experience the world differently and have a different way of being, which representors feel unable to understand using their own models of the world and past experiences (Morant, 1995, pp.7).

Even authors were affected mentally and it is evident through their works. Writers like Virginia Woolf, Sylvia Plath and Ernest Hemingway are a few names who faced mental challenges. It can be said literature which dealt with mental health issues influence the society as a whole. Memoir, a literary genre, is defined as a narrative written from the perspective of the author about an important part of their life. It presents the realities behind mental illness where the personal accounts serves as a tool to connect with the writer.

This paper tries to analyse the portrayal of mental illness in a literary work. The memoir titled No Straight Thing Was Ever Made: Essays on Mental Health by Indian poet and author Urvashi Bahuguna portrays her experience with mental illness in a detailed manner. Bahuguna, in her later teens, had mood disorders and the ten essays in the book showcased her personal accounts of how she dealt with it. She was the first person from her family to seek help for mental illness. The various phases of living with mental illness, like the personal,

familial, and social relations are explained by the writer. Through personal experiences of the writer, the book moves with the journey that believes in hope in the end.

The autobiographical style of writing recounts the sense of dread that characterize her lived experiences and anxiety associated with it. Writing for Bahuguna is a coping mechanism and a form of advocacy as through her writing, she heals herself and extends a way of escape for others. The author directly moves to the problem in the opening of the book, she quotes

When I was diagnosed with major depressive disorder in February 2014 (and later with generalized anxiety disorder), it was about a year and a half after I first began to notice that I was feeling poorly mentally and emotionally. In the beginning, in late 2012 and early 2013, it appeared to be a temporary sadness, lack of interest and loss of appetite that I could ascribe to passing circumstances- a break-up; a fight with a friend; exhaustion with the university where classes were routinely cancelled and professors frequently shuffled. But even when those seasons passed, my state of mind remained listless, tired and unwaveringly melancholy. (Bahuguna, 2021, pp.7)

In the book, Bahuguna explains the process she undertook. "These essays are not meant to be prescriptive. What works or doesn't work for me may not apply to others. I do not have it all figured out, and lives vary considerably. I am continuously learning and adapting. As I waded through the lowest times, I drew strength from reading material online and in books". (Bahuguna, 2021, pp.11). In the first essay On Family, the readers are introduced to how family can affect an individual being the primary space for each one of us. The view the author had is different, we find her not worshipping family for their wrongs. Just like any normal Indian household, mental illness is just not something to be talked about.

Fatigue can be said to be the common and significant symptoms of many mental illnesses, mainly anxiety and depression. Feeling mentally exhausted is a key indicator of potential mental health issues and in the essay titled On Fatigue, the author reveals her true condition of tiredness where her mother constantly inquires "Why do I always hear you saying you're tired?" (Bahuguna, 2021, pp.17). She explains:

I have whole weeks where I sleep. I have days where I am tired by noon. All I want is the world's deepest cup of tea to fill me awake. There is so much to do and so much to stay awake for. But there is no reasoning with fatigue. No pleading with my body to fit in one more activity before it needs to rest. I fight with my friends instead. I can't make it. I know it is early, but I need to leave now. I know I promised, but I have to cancel. I know I'm walking slowly and making us late; I am trying. There is no other body. There will have to be other friends. (Bahuguna, 2021, pp.17)

Now we live in a society marked by the ravages of a global pandemic and even if the physical health of millions of people has been severely affected, we should not make the mistake of disregarding the implications of this pandemic on many others mental health. According to the World Health Organization, the COVID-19 pandemic has triggered an increase of 25% in the development of depression and anxiety, which has become one of the most frequent causes of disability and the fourth leading cause of death among the youth (World Health Organization, 2022). Bahuguna's essays moves from gentle spaces to uncomfortable ones and she writes with candour about being concerned about weight gain in medication in the essay titled Everything For This Beauty:

The body is told she won't fit into a pair of export-surplus jeans she wants to buy, and so she contracts. The body is asked if that is fat rounding out through her swimsuit, and the body is too young to know how to contract. Does the man who said that to her remember that it was a small pool, it was late afternoon, she was eleven, and the swimsuit tied at the back? (Bahuguna, 2021, pp.22)

The writer shifts from the first person narrative in Everything for This Beauty and personifies the human body. The unreasonable beauty standards are questioned by the writer

I find stories about hating one's body often end in one of two ways- with correction or with acceptance. What happens to the stories without either? Carmen Maria Machado wrote about her body, 'I do not hate my body, because such a thing would be pointless, short-sighted.'...when the anxious voice speaks, I ask, as Rilke suggests, '[A]s often as it wishes to spoil something, why something is ugly.' (Bahuguna, 2021, pp. 31)

Towards the end, the chapter On the Natural World As a Space for Healing on birdwatching and gardening provides a healing atmosphere. She writes "A writer I often turn to, Tianan Clark, told me, 'I am writing to save

my own life first. If my work helps someone else, that's wonderful too.' The forest and nested words on the page in front of me read back to me that way. I am not trying to be creative in any conscious way in these moments. I am trying to save my life."(Bahuguna, 2021, pp.79). She tries to seek the outside world as it calms her and the sights and sounds surrounding it helps to cope up the things affecting her. "The 'small unsullied things' of the earth have become my quiet conduits for repair."(Bahuguna, 2021, pp. 80). The book ends with hope with the essay Ammahood: On the Possibilities of Parenting while III where the author talks about her family tree and speaks on coping and living with mental illness in a positive manner.

II. CONCLUSION

Urvashi Bahuguna bridges the gap between individual experiences and collective understanding by challenging the stigma surrounding mental illness through her personal narratives. Through her work, she advocates for a systemic change in fostering empathy and inspiring action. Literature has always provided a space for social change and by shedding light on the realities of living with mental illness, Bahuguna contributes in providing mental health advocacy in India. In the changing contexts, Bahuguna's work emerges as a necessary intervention advocating for a compassionate and informed understanding of mental health.

III. REFERENCES

- [1] Bahuguna, Urvashi. 2021. No Straight Thing Was Ever Made: Essays on Mental Health. Penguin.
- [2] Morant, N. 1995. What is Mental Illness? Social representations of mental illness among British and French mental health professionals. Papers on Social Representations. 4(1), pp.1-12.
- [3] World Health Organization. (2022, March 2). COVID-19 pandemic triggers 25% increase in prevalence of anxiety and depression worldwide. <https://www.who.int/news>