

Therapeutic Effects of Poetry During Lockdown: Using Catharsis and Expressive Art Theory in Context to Students and Women

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Abstract

Poetry is a personal expression of experiences and repressed feelings put into words. It can be a therapeutic and cathartic process for people struggling with psychological issues. The arrival of the Covid-19 pandemic forced the governments to shut down the economies and enforce lockdowns. When this fear of a virus, the anxiety of uncertainty, and broadcasting of deaths on news channels began, the ability of the brightest minds to comprehend the situation started failing them. The usage of social media added to the troubles of the youth. In such a situation, people started going back to their areas of interest, this included attempts to go back to the love of painting, singing, reading writing, etc. Writing, specifically taken, helped people express their repressed feelings during tough times. This paper attempts to find the answers to 3 questions; (i) How poetry brought out the repressed emotions of people stuck at home during lockdown? (ii) For people who write poetry, does it become an involuntary response when they are disturbed? (iii) Are all types of poetry therapeutic? The psychological state of mind of people during lockdown and the change in their behaviour after writing poetry will be analyzed through the expressive theory of art and catharsis.

Keywords- Lockdown, Therapeutic effects, Poetry, Expressive theory of Art, Catharsis

Introduction

On 23rd March, the world's biggest lockdown was announced in India in order to stop the transmission of the coronavirus but this step hampered the mental health of the people stuck at home. The uncertainty of tomorrow along with the fear of a virus lurking outside took a toll on

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people. It is a proven fact that the worries of the parents during pregnancy can affect the nature of children. According to a UN report, India produced the most number of pregnancies during the first nine months of 2020.

Apart from this, a research cited that the effects of being in such a disturbing environment will show the effects among children in the long run. What people did during such times was to turn towards their hobbies, namely drawing, painting, singing, and writing. Writing poetry got a major backing from social media because of which people were not uncomfortable or scared with sharing their work online. Poetry formed the bridge during the tough times for people struggling with mental health issues, whether they were diagnosed or not is a different issue, to reach towards a better state of mind through their continuous investment in poetry, either as a reader or a writer.

Condition of Students during the Pandemic-

The pandemic forced the students to shift to the online medium, something the Indian education system was not ready for. The struggle was something the students and the teachers had not experienced before. With time and initial setbacks, everyone started getting used to the 'new normal'. The presence of the ubiquitous factor helped students to access the classes easily even if they were away from their homes.

The problem arose when the students started getting frustrated due to the monotonous practice of switching on the class every day and sitting in the comfort of their homes. The mind started wandering off to other places added with the fearful environment created by the media, news of acquaintances getting infected and the feeling of getting suffocated inside their comfort zone, all this started deteriorating the mental health of the students. The turn towards poetry at this point, be it reading or writing or both, provided an outlet for these emotions. The students could express everything in words, including things they couldn't talk to their parents about. The poem mentioned below talks about such emotions-

Watching Flowers Grow

My home is now a cage,
Where time seems to wait,
For something unknown,

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For an untold date.

The birds fly outside,
Up in the sky,
I watch them soar,
With a sadness in my eye.

I miss the freedom,
Which used to be mine,
Now I just sit indoors,
Come rain or shine.

I didn't appreciate,
Freedom back then,
Now I would do anything,
To have it again.

I miss my friends,
Their laughs, their smiles.
To see them once more,
I would walk for miles.

Our memories together,
Fun times with them,
The thoughts stored away,
Like a precious gem.

Everything has changed,
Before I can blink.
And I ask myself,
Are we on the brink?

Do we have a future,
And what does it hold?
What will we see,
When we grow old?

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Will things ever be the same?

That's all I want to know,

As I sit by the window,

Watching flowers grow.

JC (Sidcot *Lockdown poems*)

The writer, a 17 year old school student, calls her home as a cage in the first stanza, this depicts how she sees her surroundings as she waits for an unknown date, a date at which things become normal. The thought of walking miles just to see her friends smile shows how terribly she misses their company. This poem contains those emotions which millions of people felt being stuck at home. The uncertainty of a tomorrow haunted them along with the feeling of being in a cage inside their own homes. As the people in power pushed the date of normalcy again and again, the feeling of being anxious became permanent. Through the application of psychoanalysis, it is evident that the writer suffered from claustrophobia. The wait for an unknown date made her realize the importance of freedom which seemed long lost, just like the times when meeting friends every day felt normal. All this going inside a mind of a 17 year old could only be understood because of the cathartic power associated with poetry.

Women and domestic violence

With a surge in the Covid-19 cases, India witnessed a 100% increase in domestic violence complaints within a fortnight of the imposition of the lockdown as reported by the National Council of Women. The fact to worry about is that in India, many cases still go unreported due to the fear of public humiliation.

Poetry gives a torch in the hands of these repressed women to march forward by telling the tales of their sleepless nights and the pressure which they felt during such times. This characteristic of poetry acts as therapy which many people may not be aware of. The element of expressive theory of art steps in such scenarios and concentrates on the part relating to poetry acting as a medium for giving words to the unheard feelings of the writer.

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Poetry for a Writer-

It has been felt by writers that writing poetry greatly helps in bringing out the repressed emotions of a writer in an artistic way. Robert Frost once said, "Poetry is when an emotion has found its thought and the thought has found words." It helps a person to dive into the layers of their conscious and unconscious mind to bring out the hidden treasure of feelings and experiences, which are the fuel for poetry.

It has been proved through MRI scans that writing is cathartic for the writer as it has proved to significantly affect the right hemisphere of the brain which is linked to rewards and emotions. Psychologists do not feel differently, the usage of poetry as a supplementary form of treatment for people suffering from anxiety, borderline personality issues, depression, and other serious mental health issues is common today.

It can be safe to say that the responses of people in each situation are different. Poetry, obviously, cannot be an automatic response to any type of emotion. Some people are not able to control their emotions and burst out, others cry, some hurt themselves, and the list goes on. The Law of Effect forwarded by Edward Thorndike talks about how a response produced in a specific situation, if deemed satisfactory, becomes the general response to such conditions. Turning towards poetry in tough times can gradually become a response due to the cathartic characteristics associated with it, but such a response has to be developed gradually by being mindful and giving an opportunity to poetry to help.

I had a conversation with an acquaintance of mine, Unnati Sahay regarding this. She felt poetry let her express those deepest feelings which she was unaware of, along with the violent thoughts which freely flew in her mind but she was too scared to counter. She presented me with one of her poetries that I have mentioned below, which she wrote during the lockdown.

An indoor life

Remember the times when we were free,
to move around in spree,
From going places to hustling around
Buddies with pizzas was where we were found!
Going places, visiting monuments, appreciating art.
Wow what a life!

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Then came the virus.
Not in much time it took over the world,
We were forced to stay inside our homes,
Many got affected, some died, most survived,
And when allowed to go out again,
We had a lot to maintain.
Eating out became a sin,
And going places was put in a bin.
A sense of responsibility acquired us,
Responsibility for family, responsibility for loved ones.
The fear was such,
We stuck to our indoor lives!

Unnati Sahay (Sahay)

Unnati writes regularly but after writing this, she felt a strange calmness surrounding her. She confessed to me that writing is something that kept her sane throughout the tough period. It made her feel productive which is an important reminder for her as it helps her steer away from the thoughts that question her self-worth.

This is one of the many conversations I had with my acquaintances regarding this topic. All of us agreed on one issue that the extent of help provided by poetry is unknown. This topic is out of my area of research along with the negative effects of poetry. It is another topic that calls for research.

Poetry for a Reader

From early childhood onwards, children are taught poetry to develop rhyme and rhythm in them. The texture and the power of language are made known to them by poetry. Looking deeper into the type of poetry that is taught in schools, one can find that they include moral and light humor in them mostly all the time. The aim is to enhance the feeling of compassion in kids with it. This evidence is enough to state that poetry shapes the moral character of people from early childhood. Genre of poetry has a role to play in this. The prescribed poetries do not contain dark feelings as that may give birth to unwanted traits in character.

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While having cathartic properties for the writer, poetry becomes a different entity once it is out in the open. It is open to all types of interpretations by its readers. It may invoke different emotions depending on their state of mind as well as their perception of the text. Not all types of poetry can be therapeutic, just like all types of text cannot be poetry. The poetry has to be chosen according to the mood. There are poetry reading clubs where people read out either their own poetry or something written by another person and share their views on the text. During lockdown, reading poetry that talks about people feeling stuck at home became important for people to connect with each other. The feeling of not being alone was fought like this. It helped in identification with thoughts living inside the mind which affected the behaviour of people.

Choosing the genre is an important step in the process. Just like the company one stays in is important for building character, the type of content one chooses determines their mindset. Giving attention to something that is capable of lifting the spirits of the reader is important. It can be related to nature, memories, childhood, motivation, or any other genre. There is no one-fit-for-all genre for people, as everyone is inherently different. The key is finding what is best for oneself and exploring it over time.

Therapeutic Effects

Poetry is not just limited to catharsis under the umbrella of therapy, the increase in confidence, self-esteem, and the feeling of accomplishment after reviewing one's own work is present. For some, it may even become a source of inspiration to others, which may go on to bring the feeling of oneness along with brushing the heavy effects of oppression. African American protest poetry which became a voice for the people to speak of their lives did not just talk about the pain they had been suffering through generations, but also uplifted those in their community who had lost the will to fight.

Anne Sexton was told by her psychiatrist that her poetry was important for the people who were going through similar mental struggles as they realized that there was someone like them. This has been believed to grant her a few more years of life in which she became a confessional poet.

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The instances are not limited to a few famous names as blogs and social media were filled with poems regarding how lockdown was affecting people at home. This sheds the light on the dark effects of being claustrophobic in one's own home and feeling helpless about it, and this light made everyone aware of the pain which no one had a monopoly on. The words didn't stop here, they made people known about the fire and also helped them extinguish it for some time at least because even poetry is not a magic bullet to all the worries but an outlet to take charge over it for the time being.

Are all poetry therapeutic?

There can be many divisions of poetry. One can go on to divide it according to their own understanding of the matter. Broadly speaking, the writer's decision on how to deal with this kind of art matters, which is also true for all types of arts. He can write it for publishing which is rarely raw and takes many additions and subtractions to make it worthy for it. He can write without worrying about anything and express whatever is going on with him. An artist can even go on to burn his poetry if he desires. It depends on the creator's state of mind, if he wishes to let loose of his emotions for fame, to impact lives or for both like Anne Sexton, Jackie Kay and many others did. Therefore it can be said that not all forms of poetry are therapeutic and this is how it is meant to be because art is a sword in the hands of an artist. It is the decision of the artist to use it in whichever way he wants to.

Conclusion-

A lot of work remains to be done in the field of poetry in India. Being ranked 139 out of 149 countries in the happiness index, poetry can help people express themselves better in a world where competition is increasing with each passing moment. If the investment of time in this noble pursuit can help people in one of the most mentally challenging times, then it is safe to say that it is worth the attention as well as a hidden treasure of knowledge to research about.

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