

CULTURAL REPRESENTATION OF CLINICAL DEPRESSION IN THE NOVEL 'VERONIKA DECIDES TO DIE'

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Abstract: This paper focuses on the importance of mental health and how the author has tried to portray the unknown lives of people around us. Clinical depression has been found as one of the major mental health disorder that has affected a vast majority of people but has been ignored for a very long time. Clinical depression, also known as major depression, is a mental disorder characterized by the loss of interest in life and daily activities. The monotonous routine would become meaningless to people suffering from this condition. As time goes on the person would feel sad, hopeless, disconnected from everything around and an emptiness in his/her mind. It changes a person's energy level, daily behaviour, concentration and self-esteem. *Veronika decides to die* by Paulo Coelho depicts the life of a young women suffering from clinical depression. This paper analyses the mental health disorders of characters of the novel and the causes for it.

Index terms: Clinical depression, mental health, society.

I. INTRODUCTION

Mental health is among the things that society has stigmatized. People fail to understand that mental health is as important as physical health. A good mind helps us maintain good health. So being mentally fit is the key to a happy and long life. People are so absorbed in their run after money, power and other external pleasures that they fail to look inside themselves and the people around them.

In the modern times, people are so busy and they are divided by the walls they have built themselves. They are more concerned about themselves and fail to see or help people who are struggling. Everyone is on a quest to show that their lives are far better than others while they are breaking inside. Being happy and cheerful has become so normalized that gloomy or moody people are considered to be abnormal. People fail to understand that there are bad days just like good days and mood swings are normal as it shows we are human with emotions. The stigma that revolves around mental health propagated by the society has made it difficult for individuals who wish to seek help through therapy and counselling. Life seems hard at times. People struggle. We fall down and it is fine to be tired because the process of doing it over and over again is tiring. It is high time we realized this fact.

II. CLINICAL DEPRESSION

Clinical depression is characterized by mood swings and the feeling of worthlessness or guilt. The person suffering from it would have frequent thoughts about death and suicide. Self-harm is another symptom found in those individuals suffering from the same. This affects people of any age no matter how fulfilling or successful their life looks to an outsider. It changes a person's energy level, daily behaviour, concentration and self-esteem. Clinical depression can be caused due to the combination of biological, psychological and social distress. According to research, these factors can cause changes in brain function including altered activity of certain neural circuits in brain. Brain region that regulate mood and cognition including prefrontal cortex and hippocampus reduces in size and neural synapses decreases in the area.

Clinical depression can only be cured through therapy, medication and giving love and support. Having someone to talk to about how you feel and your emotions makes a person much happier and less burdened. Through therapy and counselling, individuals can understand and evaluate their own life with the help of a professional. This makes it easier to treat it and return back to their normal life. Society has made it difficult for individuals suffering from this disorder to seek help and change their life around. This leads to the increased rate of suicide happening around the world with youngsters being the majority. They are branded as useless or sometimes as attention-seekers. They are excluded from the society and are constantly criticized for their behaviour. The struggle of these individuals suffering from clinical depression is portrayed in the works of writers who wish to see a more empathetic crowd than a judgmental society. They want to show how expectations and suffering can change a person's life. They aim to portray the life of unknown individuals who suffer quietly because they are afraid of being rejected by the people they love. Eventually these sufferings would turn into frustrations and reaches a stage where one loses himself and falls into depression. The attempt of writers to bring out these unseen realities should be appreciated.

III. ANALYSIS OF *VERONIKA DECIDES TO DIE* BY PAULO COELHO

Veronika decides to die, a book by Paulo Coelho, portrays the life of a young woman who is deemed happy and successful by the society. The book has everything needed to make a great tale – history, tragedy, philosophy, spirituality, love, intensity, emotions, disease, and death. The book delves into subjects like existential crisis, social injustice, and self-denial. As you dive deeper and deeper, you begin to see life from various perspectives. It talks and teaches about finding yourself and overcoming your ego through the situations that Veronika goes through. Seeing Veronika grow and discover more about herself is intriguing and the whole way through, you feel a deeper connection to her and want her to become happy. The other patients in the hospital are also fascinating and unpredictable. The interactions, conversations and experiences she shares with them are what makes her figure out more about herself. She tends to learn from them and start to understand what it means to be free and be happy.

Paulo Coelho is a Brazilian author. When Coelho was thirty eight years old, he had a spiritual awakening in Spain and wrote about it in his first book, 'The Pilgrimage'. It was his second book, 'The Alchemist', which made him a world renowned writer. Paulo Coelho has written many interesting and thought provoking books that tell stories and ideas of life through fictional characters and their journey. He determined early on that he wanted to be a writer but was discouraged by his parents, who saw no future in that profession in Brazil. His parents responded to his artistic aspirations and to his introverted personality by committing him to a mental institution and approving shock therapy for their son. Coelho's rebellious adolescence spurred his parents to commit him to a mental asylum three times, starting when he was seventeen. Paulo Coelho has a special connection to the main character of this book though because he was put into a similar situation as Veronika.

This novel questions the meaning of madness and celebrates individuals who do not fit into the pattern society considers normal. People are expected to behave in a particular way or follow a certain pattern. The way of working a job from morning till evening, earning money, getting married and raising a family is considered normal. People who choose to live their lives according to their own rules, expressing their emotions are considered mentally ill or unstable. This novel questions standards or criteria that the society has imposed to mark someone as insane. Is the definition of sanity given by the society true? Or is it just a way of controlling people with a different mind and outlook? People who do not fit into the description are treated as castaways.

Veronika seems to have everything youth, beauty, loving family, and a fulfilling job. For an outsider her life seems perfect. But for her, she is missing something from her life. She had lost its meaning. She is surrounded by people who love her but no one seems to understand her. Being in a room full of people you know but still being lonely is an awful feeling. In this novel, the character Veronika feels intimidated by the societal pressure on her which forces her to suppress her true self. She feels like she has lost herself while trying to make others happy. She doesn't know what she wants or what she wants to do with her life. So she decides to end it. Veronika worked as a librarian and had a routine. It never changed. Nothing excited her anymore. She had forgotten how to live. She does not even know the reason for her sadness. She was suffering from existential crisis and depression without even realising it. She feels that this was going to be her condition for the rest of her life. The feeling of living the monotonous boring life scared her because it was not what she wanted. She hated disappointing her family which was the reason that kept her going. But everyone has a breaking point. And she had reached hers. So she decides to commit suicide by overdosing on sleeping pills to end the misery. She was done trying to be sane in an insane place like that.

But things started to change when she wakes up in a mental hospital and is told to be suffering from a heart condition with her days numbered. At first, she was repulsive to others but soon started connecting with them. They were also victims of the rigid systems of society. Veronika takes on a path of self-discovery and while doing so she touches the lives of others around her. She forms friendship with some of the fellow mates which helps her find the old spirit of hers. After a failed suicide attempt, she was told by the doctor that she had just a week to live because her heart was damaged by the sleeping pills. As days goes by she finds herself experiencing life more than ever before. She had nothing to lose. Her actions were unaffected by other's opinions and expectations. She felt as if she regained the control of her life and wanted to make the most of the time she was left with. She finds the reins in her hands rather than her family or the society.

She forms a bond with a fellow mate Zedka, who suffered from depression. She talks about how people are mistaken for being mad or insane just because there are living there in their own worlds. This is a reference to the author's own life experience. Veronika finds herself happy and returning to her old life when she interacted with people who are branded as insane by the society. In this novel, the character Mari, a lawyer by profession, suffers from anxiety and panic attacks. It changed her life. She lost her job because she was deemed mentally unfit to continue in the field even after her recovery. Her husband, her greatest source of support, decides to leave her

because of her past mental state. She becomes a reality avoiding patient because it was too painful for her to accept her new reality without her job and her husband. This shows how the stigmatization of mental health and recovery can ruin an individual's life. She was viewed as insane or mad even after her recovery. She was judged by the mental condition she suffered. People who went beyond the boundary drawn by the society are permanently condemned.

We become our true self when we realise that self-love, self-acceptance and making yourself a priority makes us happy. Living for others will ruin your peace of mind, happiness and also makes you lose yourself. Veronika falls in love with Eduard, a schizophrenia patient. He came from a rich, influential family. He was a lover of Arts but was expected to become a diplomat like his father. So he worked hard to fulfil his family's dream. But ended up in the mental asylum. He gave up his dreams and aspirations for his family and ended up losing the control over his mind.

Veronika and Eduard realises the reason for their unhappiness. They tried pleasing others and loved others more themselves which ended up forgetting about themselves and their passion. Veronika regains her interest in playing the piano. She and Eduard fell in love and rediscovered their lost passion for life and wished to build a new world for themselves. She decides to cherish the moment and make memories with the time left. With her regained passion and her love Eduard she went on to discover herself. She wished to change the mistake of deciding to take her life. She regrets her decision. But at the end, it is revealed that Doctor Igor had lied about her condition and she was not dying. It was an experiment conducted by the doctor. The treatment included inducing a shock to the patients by telling them they were dying so as to bring back their will to live and he succeeded. Veronika rediscovered her passion for life and began a new life with Edward away from the societal expectation. They goes on to live their life at their own pace with no one to dictate. They recover from the shock and pain society had inflicted on them.

Veronika is revealed to us as having lived a thoroughly repressed life, one in accordance with the norms set by society. And so, the unabashed authenticity of the lives of the supposedly insane shakes her entire understanding of reality. Here, Coelho joins life, death and madness in an inseparable knot which leads us to question whether true freedom lies in the realm of madness. Life-and-death is central to the book, as is madness. Through Veronika's interactions with the inmates of the asylum, we glimpse the vast limits to which the human mind can invade. The way insanity is weaved through the narrative questions the supposedly solid basis of sanity.

A person truly becomes happy when he finds himself doing things he love rather than the things others want him to do. This is exactly what is depicted in this novel. The Author, Paulo Coelho, was marked mentally unstable for his different perspective of life. This is what inspired him to write this novel. Being different was deemed unstable by the society. To live as a 'normal person', one had to follow the recipe provided by the society. The true success of life is when one finds himself enjoying and experiencing life. But society sees money, status and profession as the measuring factors. It has ruined the life of many. Colourful minds have been turned grey and dull due to the societal standards. Parents are so concerned about the position, wealth and influence rather than the happiness and mental health of their children.

A person has to be treated as an individual with ideals, opinions and dreams of their own rather than a puppet to be played with. Everyone needs their space and a nurturing environment to thrive or else they will end up getting broken off at the very beginning. Understanding boundaries and interest of children is really important for their future because the first community everyone is exposed to is family. So it is the responsibility of the parents to make sure that the child is brought up in the right environment beneficial for the child's future. Psychological control refers to intruding into children's emotional and psychological development. Controlling parents are nonresponsive to their children's emotional and psychological needs. They constrain, invalidate, and manipulate the kids' psychological experience. They also stifle independent expression of emotions. These controlling parents manipulate children's feelings, thoughts or ideas through the parent-child relationship using guilt, love withdrawal, showing disappointment, disapproval and shaming. In addition, they want to keep their kids emotionally dependent on them. Psychologically controlling parents are experienced by their children as being intrusive, overprotective, possessive, directive, and controlling through guilt.

When the control is at a high level, the negative impacts on children's development can be long-lasting. At high levels of behavioural or psychologically control, adolescents feel that they are incompetent and that they don't matter. Parents who are very behaviourally controlling undermine their children's confidence in their abilities. These children's compliance is driven by a desire to avoid feeling guilty or losing the parent's love. So when they are rejected by the parents, they feel resentment. This mixture of ambiguous and conflicting feelings towards parents creates a sense of inner tension. Children of psychologically controlling parents are more prone to suffer from low self-esteem and mental health issues, such as anxiety and depression. Adults having a controlling parent can make them feel disrespected and incompetent.

Negative family relationships can cause stress, impact mental health and even cause physical symptoms. Research has demonstrated that non-supportive families can detract from someone's mental health and or cause a mental illness to worsen. Children can show clear characteristics of anxiety disorders, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, conduct disorder, depression, and posttraumatic stress at a very early age. That said, young children respond to and process emotional experiences and traumatic events in ways that are very different from adults and older children. Toxic stress can damage brain architecture and increase the likelihood that significant mental health problems will emerge either quickly or years later. Because of its enduring effects on brain development and other organ systems, toxic stress can impair school readiness, academic achievement, and both physical and mental health throughout the lifespan. Circumstances associated with family stress may elevate the risk of serious mental health problems. Young children who experience recurrent abuse or chronic neglect, domestic violence, or parental mental health or substance abuse problems are particularly vulnerable

IV. CONCLUSION

The characters of the novel are the representation of the unheard stories of many individuals who are left hurt and unnoticed. It also spreads awareness about the importance of mental health. We need to be more empathetic towards other individuals around us as we do not know what battles they are fighting in their own life and how hard they are trying to put on a smile every day because they do not want others to know their suffering. They are afraid of seeking help as they are afraid of causing inconvenience to others. In this fast moving world, it is high time we took a step back to analyse our own lives and the people around us to know if we had lost the old spirit that used to make us truly happy. These novels also tell us how seeking help can make us feel better and how life can turn around if we open up to others and form relationships. Being oneself brings out the best in us and makes us happy. So strive towards being a better human without losing the real 'you' due to the pressure induced by the society and our own family.

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