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CARTOGRAPHIES OF UNHAPPINESS: SILENCE, PSYCHIC PRECARITY AND THE PURSUIT OF WELL-BEING IN CONTEMPORARY INDIAN FICTION

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Abstract : Contemporary Indian fiction provides a powerful mapping of psycho-social vulnerabilities. In this paper we will undertake an interdisciplinary comparative analysis of two contemporary Indian novels: Arundhati Roy's The God of Small Things and Jerry Pinto's Em and the Big Hoom as representations of traumatic experience, psychosocial fragility, and contested well-being. Through drawing on Cathy Caruth's Trauma Theory and Rita Charon's Narrative Medicine, the paper uses comparative close reading to examine how silence, fragmented memory, mental illness, caregiving and family relationship provide models for experiencing the mind. While Roy represents trauma through time-disrupted narrative, vulnerable childhood, and inexpressible pain; Pinto represents mental illness through a therapeutic narrative of self-disclosure and relational care, and through the portrayal of familial resilience. Ultimately the paper suggests that contemporary Indian fiction has a unique ability to reimagine psychological well-being based on recognition, narrative agency, compassionate care and ethically-sustaining relationships in times of fragility.

Keywords: Psychic Precarity; Trauma; Narrative Medicine; Psychological Well-being; Familial Resilience.

1. Introduction

In recent years, contemporary literary studies are coming to recognize psychological well-being as a socially constructed cultural condition and not solely a clinical phenomenon. In health humanities literature provides a way to make sense of psychic suffering by depicting the familial, social and institutional systems in which vulnerability is created and navigated. Cartographies of Unhappiness, Arundhati Roy's The God of Small Things and Jerry Pinto's Em and the Big Hoom map out the world of trauma, mental illness, silence, memory, caregiving and precarious selfhood within the realm of intimate family life. Roy's fractured timeline indicates that trauma disrupts chronological coherence and continually invades the present; this has been shown to be

consistent with Caruth's theory of trauma as belated and unassimilable (Caruth 1–10). Similarly, Outka shows that temporal disruptions are central to the novel's depiction of traumatic experiences (Outka 21–53).

In contrast, Pinto depicts mental illness using narrative, family intimacy and the ethical aspects of caregiving. As such his portrayal of Em does not reduce diagnosis to a singular view of personality, vulnerability or agency. Rather his narrative demonstrates a commitment to recognizing suffering in ways that extend beyond a biomedical model for illness (Charon 131–54). This study will use comparative close readings to demonstrate how both novels take psychic fragility and create it into forms of narrative knowledge. It argues that achieving well-being requires acknowledgment, relational care, agency and dignity.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Critical scholarship on Arundhati Roy's "The God of Small Things" continually emphasizes the interconnection of the traumatic memory of a violent event in the past, fractured time, violence against caste and fragile subjectivity. In contrast to those who focus solely upon the disruption of chronology that occurs when trauma occurs, Outka argues that Roy's chronological disruptions create an approximate form of representation for the temporal displacement caused by trauma; the past is always affective within the present (Outka 21-53), as opposed to being contained by memory. Using this viewpoint, Herrick also illustrates the connection of psychic injury to forms of violence based upon caste and collective history; therefore, recovery cannot be achieved without social and cultural constructs which produce the traumatic experience itself (Herrick 583-598). This type of reading establishes Roy's narrative fragmentation and silence as epistemologically relevant to wounded selfhood.

Comparatively, scholarship on Jerry Pinto's "Em and the Big Hoom," highlights mental illness, medicalization, care-giving and family vulnerability. For example, Singh and Mujral illustrate Em's psychological suffering as a result of her experiences of both her illness and motherhood; they demonstrate the inability of strictly biomedical interpretations to account for her suffering (Singh and Mujral 533-540). Additionally, Nag and Chattopadhyay critically investigate the dynamics between psychiatric surveillance and authority, therapeutic interventions, patient autonomy and discipline of the subject (Nag and Chattopadhyay 182-191). Therefore, these studies situate Pinto's narrative within larger debates about health humanities regarding illness, agency and relational care.

This research will synthesize these critical directions using three theoretical frameworks: Cathy Caruth's trauma theory; Rita Charon's concept of narrative medicine and Carol Ryff's definition of psychological well-being. According to Caruth, trauma is an experience that overwhelms its victims and their understanding of it often surfaces at a later time through repetition, memory and the ruptures of the narrative (Caruth 1-10). As an alternative approach to the abstraction inherent in diagnosis, Charon advocates for a compassionate listening and reading of illness narratives as an ethical practice that recognizes suffering beyond abstraction (Charon 131-154). Furthermore, Ryff defines psychological well-being through six dimensions: autonomy, environmental mastery, having positive interpersonal relationships and personal connections, finding purpose or meaning in life, experiencing personal growth and acceptance of oneself (Ryff et al., 1069-1081). By integrating these viewpoints into one comparative framework, this study views psychic fragility not simply as individual pathologies but as culturally and relationally mediated vulnerabilities. Thus this study examines how narrative can serve as a possible site for the expression of potentialities for recognition, agency, resilience and human flourishing.

3. Cartographies of Trauma: Silence, Memory and Psychic Fracture in *The God of Small Things*

The God of Small Things by Arundhati Roy depicts trauma as a long-lasting, psychic map in which vulnerability during childhood, family break-up, rape and violated sex and prohibited love are all deeply embedded on consciousness. Instead of viewing the pain experienced as something which can be recovered, Roy creates memory as repetitive and invasive and allows traumatic experience to disrupt the present continuously. Cathy Caruth explains trauma as an overwhelming experience that is incomprehensible when first occurring and then continues to return through repetition, memory and belated recognition (Caruth 1-10). The fractured time-line of Roy's novel represents precisely this temporal disruption of narrative form, creating an aesthetic representation of psychological dislocation. In addition to this, Elizabeth Outka also states that the novels' use of both past and present in its timeline demonstrates trauma's constant disruption of what is typically viewed as past and present (Outka 21-53).

In particular, Estha provides the most powerful example of this topographical description of his fractured psyche. His childhood violations of his sexuality, complicity in the events leading up to Velutha's death, separation from Rahel and subsequent disintegration of his family progressively render language insufficient for expressing his suffering. Ultimately, Estha's final decision to remain silent does not signify either emotional vacuity or passive acquiescence; instead he has become an embodied repository of traumatic experiences which are resistant to coherent expression. Consequently, trauma is displaced from speech to silence and in so doing transforms Estha's muteness into a paradoxical language of wounding subjectivity. As discussed in detail below, Margaret Herrick describes the irrelevance of separating individual psychological harm from collective violence against the socially excluded based on historically entrenched inequalities of caste (Herrick 583-598). Therefore, Estha's suffering is simultaneously personal and structural, illustrating how private injuries remain implicated in oppressive cultural structures.

Rahel's alienation represents a different mode of experiencing traumatic precariousness. Her mental disconnection and ultimate return to Ayemenem activate memories that she has never emotionally processed, demonstrating how traumatic experience resides in the present as much as it exists prior to it. This broken nature of their two psyches emerges through a complex interaction of memory, loss, guilt and disrupted sense of belonging. To reinforce this instability, Roy utilizes repeated images, linguistic repetition, fragmented timelines and narrative anticipation as part of her strategy for utilizing literature itself to create a mnemonic landscape of unresolved suffering.

From the perspective of the health humanities, these approaches to narrative prevent reducing psychological pain to a diagnostic category. Instead, Roy places emphasis on the relational and sociocultural factors which contribute to the development of the wounded self. Ultimately, the novel suggests that healing and well-being will only occur through acknowledgment, relational safety, ethically witnessable actions and confronting the systems which produce suffering. Thusly, The God of Small Things translates silence and memory into profound maps of the psyche's fragility in attempting to rebuild identity post-trauma.

4. Narrating the Unquiet Mind: Mental Illness, Care and Precarious Selfhood in *Em and the Big Hoom*

The narrative voice's recollections of his mother Em's psychiatric crises, hospitalizations, suicidal behaviours and emotionally unstable behaviours are utilized by Pinto to dismantle distinctions between illness and identity. Em does not lose her "irreverence", "intelligence," "contradictions," and "affective complexities" due to psychiatric classification. Rather, she experiences cultural mediation for how she was expected to be as a mother and it demonstrates that there are limitations to understanding mental illness solely from a biomedicine perspective (Singh & Mujral, 533-540).

The majority of the novel occurs within the context of caregiving. Em's children and husband, The Big Hoom, experience Em's illness through their love, fear, exhaustion and sense of responsibility; they are also left uncertain about what will happen next. Thus, caring emerges as neither a sentimental form of devotion nor simply a form of therapeutic intervention. Rather caring emerges as an ethically demanding practice in which one negotiates constantly between vulnerability and autonomy. In this manner, the family provides an important space in which mental illness is experienced, understood and survived (Poli). Moreover, resilience is achieved not through the elimination of vulnerability but through the repeated construction of a sense of relational stability by the family amidst the psychological disruptions caused by mental illness.

In addition, Pinto challenges institutional structures of psychiatric care. While hospitalization, medicine, medical monitoring and clinician authority represent forms of necessary intervention in response to psychological crisis, they raise questions regarding autonomy and the regulation of individuals who are mentally ill. Hence, psychiatric surveillance reveals the precarious relationship between the need for therapeutic intervention and the exercise of disciplinary authority (Nag & Chattopadhyay, 182-191). In this way, Em's selfhood continues to be constructed through her own subjective experience, the responsibilities she has towards her family, the interventions provided by psychiatry and the regulatory mechanisms employed by institutions.

Finally, narrative serves as a counter-narrative to the abstracted nature of clinical descriptions. Through memory, conversation, letter writing, humor and reconstructing events after they occurred, the narrator constructs a multi-dimensional picture of Em that transcends nomenclature used in diagnosis. Similarly, engaging actively with stories of people experiencing illness makes suffering understandable in all its complexity while promoting awareness and developing ethical responses (Charon 131-154). Ultimately, Pinto converts story telling into an act of witnessing that maintains Ems' individuality without romanticizing psychological suffering. Consequently, Em and the Big Hoom re-conceptualizes well-being not as full recovery or stable emotions but as maintaining one's dignity, agency, relational ties and meaningfulness of being oneself even when experiencing vulnerability.

5. Comparative Discussion: From Psychic Precarity to the Pursuit of Well-being

Both authors map the terrain of psychic injury using different methods.Roy is working in a topography of trauma. She maps out where psychic injury occurs the violence of child abuse, the silences surrounding rape as well as how it is sustained (within families, by systems of oppression, in isolation). As such she depicts individuals whose capacity for emotional experience has been broken down.

In contrast, Pinto is working in the landscape of mental health. He creates a topography of the ways in which psychological injury can be created and maintained (by systems of psychiatry, by the way people respond emotionally to other people's injuries). His characters have been injured by those who claim to help them.

Despite differences in their use of narrative form, both authors oppose reducing an individual's pain or suffering to a simple pathological condition. Rather, each author illustrates that selfhood is constructed in relationship and that its construction is continuously contested within the web of social, family and institutional relations.

While Roy uses the late occurrence of traumatic memories to disrupt the continuity of time in her narrative (Caruth 1 – 10), Pinto shows how mental illness can create instability at once in the individual sense of self and simultaneously reshape the configuration of a family.

Finally, there are significant differences between Roy and Pinto in terms of how they mediate suffering in their narratives. Silence in Roy's novel represents the bodily residue of traumatic memory; when Estha withdraws, he does so because his experiences were so traumatic that words proved inadequate to express them. Similarly fragmented chronological forms allow for the recursive quality of memory; traumatic events become part of one's current reality. In contrast, Pinto mediates the complexities of mental illness primarily through narrative. Letters, reminiscence, conversation, humor all serve to attest to Em's irreducibility as a person despite her being subject to psychiatric diagnosis. This is similar to what Charon (131-154) advocates in Health Humanities, i.e., telling experiential illness stories as opposed to abstractly diagnosing illness.

Therefore, the concept of "care" is critical for understanding the difference between these two texts. While Roy describes the catastrophic effects of social contexts that systematically withhold recognition and relational support, Pinto frames caregiving as laborious and imperfect yet potentially life-giving.

Neither Roy nor Pinto idealizes resilience. Estha's survival does not automatically equate to recovery; neither do Em's recurring episodes necessarily imply linear trajectories toward healing.

As a result, these two authors emphasize a substantial distinction between enduring versus thriving.

Ultimately, this distinction fundamentally alters our pursuit of well-being. Well-being includes aspects like autonomy, meaningful relationships, purpose, personal development and acceptance of oneself as well as not simply the absence of distress (Ryff 1069-1081). When seen through this lens, both novels illustrate the fragility of persons deprived of stable environments conducive to psychological flourishing. Ultimately, comparative value rests in the transformation of misery from private misfortune to relational and ethical inquiry. Roy and Pinto demonstrate that true well-being involves recognition, agency, compassionate care and social environments in which vulnerable individuals can exist without losing themselves.

6. Conclusion

The comparative study of Arundhati Roy's "The God of Small Things" and Jerry Pinto's "Em and the Big Hoom", demonstrate that psychological well-being cannot be separated from relational, cultural and institutional environments in which selfhood is constructed. Although each novel presents suffering through different narrative structures; however, both provide evidence that psychic fragility exists because of causes beyond the confines of an individual’s pathologic state. Roy uses silence, fractured memory, and time displacement to represent unresolved trauma in her work. Pinto represents mental illness in terms of negotiations among vulnerabilities, caregiving, interventions provided by medicine, and endurance of family members.

Most importantly, neither novel associates resiliency with mere survival nor well-being with eliminating pain. Both narratives illustrate the fragile process for fractured self-concepts to seek out recognition, agency, relational stability and meaningful attachment. Each representation challenges limited biomedically-based understanding of psychological distress by emphasizing ethical and experiential aspects of existences characterized by vulnerability.

In the end, both works show how literature functions as a critical cartography of unhappiness capable of making visible suffering that would remain unseen. Through the illustration of the complex movement from fractured psyche toward possible growth and flourishing; Roy and Pinto have redefined the concept of well-being as it relates to the relational and contingent nature of compassionate recognition, dignity, autonomy and continuous interpersonal connections among vulnerable people.

7. Refernces

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