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Unfolding the secret of poetry as therapy

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Abstract

There is something ennobling, purifying, and mysterious about poetry which provides a soothing balm to the aching minds. A poet sows the seeds of bliss and hope in the hearts of readers and takes them out from the abyss of melancholy and emptiness through the appropriate beautiful words. To the unlettered, poet's creation provides the same effect when poetry is transmitted to him through melodious music. The poetry enables all people to appreciate and enjoy life and they get an aesthetic pleasure.

Keywords: Psychoanalysis, neurotics, perennial delight, psychology

Introduction

Scholarly interest in Poetry as a positive therapy continues unabated. What goes on in the deepest recesses of a poet's heart and mind is all fascinating. A psychiatrist who himself happens to be a poet is the only appropriate and competent person who can truly understand and interpret the subtle tinge of sadness, pathos and passion permeating the literary works (of high and higher order) of a poet. He has his own pains and sufferings, but he suffers more because of the agonies of society and its culture. He thinks more and more of less and less and that is why normal and negatively abnormal people pronounce him (the poet, the thinker) as 'mad or insane'. No doubt the poet/the thinker are abnormal beings, but their abnormality is of a positive character and it is only such people whose contribution to the entire world is vital (e.g. Newton, Einstein, Lilawati, Pundrik, Ramanujan.....). A very powerful expression of a poet helps people of all hues and they get rid of their miseries and feel deep delight.

Material & Methods

We undertook a study of English literature (including Indian English Literature) ^[1-12] and writings of Sigmund Freud- a pioneer in psychoanalysis to explore the efficacy of poetry as a therapy.

Poetry cures human apathy and activates human senses and spirit. A poem is sometimes a dialogue of the poet with himself, sometimes with his readers and at times with the unlettered through melodious music. It produces a cathartic effect, purifies undesirable passions, gives mental and emotional health by release of pent-up emotions. Poetry adds charm to our life as we are fascinated by the mastery and mystery of rhythmical words of poets who lift us on the wings of their fancy and mitigate our miseries.

Goethe is not off the point when he says,
"And who the Voice of poesy disdains
Is a barbarian, be he who may."

He who shuns poetry and its rhythm, in fact loses the rhythm of his life and becomes a disordered personality. Such people are generally lost in transcendental meditation, relentless pursuit of spirituality, superstitions, wild fancies, chaotic sensations and impulses. It is here that psychiatry comes to help such abnormal personalities. It investigates into their various disorders and strives for finding out the real cause of their abnormality and tries to help them to get out of their inner turmoil, depravity, callousness, wretchedness, helplessness, loneliness, burdens, woes and worries which come in battalions. The demonic brutality and sadistic viciousness of life is horrible and horrifying and psychiatry enables them to appreciate, explore and enjoy life with courage and confidence.

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Poetry and psychiatry are considered supplementary and complementary. Each inquires, probes and explores the complexities of human existence, perception, emotion and behavior; each assesses the impact of environment and personal relationship on an individual. Each contributes to the understanding of disordered personalities. Sigmund Freud^[3], the father of psychoanalysis, has said, "The poets and philosophers before me discovered the unconscious; what I discovered was the scientific method by which the unconscious can be studied." He showed us that unconscious has an incredible capacity to store experiences, thoughts and memories inside us that we are not aware of. We often serve as medium to our unconsciousness and suddenly find ourselves thinking and doing something without really knowing why? P.B. Shelley^[4] remarks, "Poetry is not only useful but essential in enlarging the social sympathies of human kind. We want creative faculty to imagine which we know ...we want the poetry of life." Marcel Proust in his "Remembrance of Things Past" echoes the same idea. To quote him:

"Everything great that we know has come to us from neurotics. They alone have founded our religions and created our masterpieces. Never will the world be aware of how much it owes to them, nor above all what they have suffered in order to bestow their gifts to us."

Sigmund Freud counts poets in the category of neurotics. A neurotic is possessed by his fancy and remains ensnared in the web of his dreams and illusions but on the other hand a poet knows how to find a way back from the world of imagination to the world of reality. A poet sows the seeds of bliss and hope for neurotics when Shelly'said, "If winter comes, can spring be far behind?". He was applying poetic balm to the ailing minds to awaken them to the realities of ups and downs of life. Moments of depression go hand in hand with moments of delight. Shelley was near absolute truth of life when he uttered, "Our sweetest songs are those/ That tell us of saddest thought."

Poetry does not teach us, but it allows us to be taught, as life and universe permit us, if we are willing. The role of a poet, who transmutes his personal emotions or experiences into universally felt artistic experience is highly significant as poetry is life distilled which soothes the cares, sublimates the thoughts and expands the mind of a man. "The only thing that can save the world is the reclaiming of the awareness of the world. That is what poetry does."^[6]

Freud's influence is all-pervasive in literature, our life and our culture. The relationship between Freud's psychoanalytical theories and art has been reciprocal. The aim of psychoanalytical therapy is to treat those persons who have certain disorders with the self and enables them to cope with the real world, the world they live in. Poetry cures human apathy and activates human senses and spirits. It produces a cathartic effect, purifies unwanted passions, produces mental and emotional health and provides aesthetic pleasure. It is a kind of psycho-physiological treatment- catharsis. A poet peeps out of the window of his experiences and finds the fragrance of fresh air in the form of creativity. A poem springs up from the poet's mind, brain and soul- all in full perfection and gives perennial joy to all because of its music, melody, harmony and ecstasy. William Wordsworth^[7] in his preface to 'Lyrical Ballads' writes, "Poetry is spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings; it takes its origin from emotions recollected in tranquility." And further in 'Resolution and Independence' he comments,

"We poets in our youth begin in gladness but thereof comes despondency and madness." T.S. Eliot's long poem 'The Waste Land' which is a masterpiece of innovative poetic design and employs an original poetic technique, was written in a state of mind when he was recovering from physical and psychological breakdown. His personal relations with his wife Vivian (whom he had married against his parents' wishes) had deteriorated. The horror of his personal life, living with Vivian, the nightmarish experience of his first marriage had all gone into the making of this poem. The illusion to the likely collapse of the London Bridge in the last stanza "London bridge is falling down" (line 426) is derived from an actual hallucination Bertrand Russell had suffered. Bertrand Russell mentions it in his Autobiography (London: Allen & Unwin; 1964, page 7). John Keats^[8, 9] gave his finest poetry to the world – The Eve of Saint Agnes, The Eve of Saint Mark, La Belle Dame Sans Merci and all his famous and finest odes -To a Nightingale, To Autumn, On a Grecian Urn, To Psyche and On Melancholy- when he was under tremendous mental and physical strain. That was the most fruitful period and flowering of his poetic genius. His poetry has warmth of human relations and emotions and, as such, is the eternal source of life and wisdom.

There is no doubt that great poetry is a blessing and it gives immense joy to the people. When we talk of poetry and its creator, the poet, our intent is of meaningful poetry and not of debased poetry. Every writer of poetry is not essentially a poet. There is a difference between nature gifted poetry and poetry created through strenuous wisdom and scholarship. Good poetry is a sacred vehicle of the noblest thoughts and an eternal companion of psychiatrists who are devoted to the service of disturbed minds. Let it remain their constant source of sweet and sincere smiles, inspiration, support to cheer their disordered patients and provide them joy by ending their grief. The psychiatrists must keep in mind what great Urdu poet Mirza Ghalib^[12] had said in his unique style:

Ishrat-e-sohbat-e khoobaan hee ghanimat samjho
Na hooee, Ghalib, agar umar-e-tabee, na sahee
(In life it is not how long you live
But what you pack in your life
A moment's peak of happiness can
Out measure a whole life span).

Conclusion

Poetry provides a soothing balm to the aching minds. A poet sows the seeds of bliss and hope in the hearts of readers and takes them out from the abyss of melancholy and emptiness through the beautiful words full of music, melody and harmony.

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