


Maintaining Mental Health through Poetry

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ABSTRACT

Poetry is the passion that a poet possesses in genes, and through poetry, mental health and peace of mind can be maintained at a pace immeasurable. The waves of passion that run through the poet's sensibility soothe the readers' senses. Poetry reading, writing, and listening cast good therapeutic effects. Poetry provides peace, calmness, and comfort to the minds by elevating moods in distress and duress. Studies show that poetry therapy has proven a boon to patients suffering from serious ailments, augments their emotional resilience, and brings joy. Our brains are electrified with the rhyme and rhythm of the poetry to give emotional reactions to joy and sadness. Like the sweet melody of music, poetry heals our emotional hurts. The metaphors embellish the poetic lines with magical brilliance and glitter with astute meaning and message. Diction plays a very decisive role in discerning the poet's leanings. Reflection, perception, and attachment are interwoven in diction so inextricably that they turn the poet's mouthpiece and roar and rave with perfect resonance to poetic experiences. Through the intoxicated taken-for-grantedness of the laidback reading public will take a turn at the melody of the tone and exquisiteness of diction.

The paper, however, explores how poetry can be a natural tool to heal mental stress, trauma, and agony and maintain mental health. We will examine some poetic utterances of great poets like Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, Emily Dickinson, Kamala Das, etc. Moreover, we will also examine how nature can extend peace, purpose, and poise to the mind.

Keywords: *Poetry, poetic therapy, rhyme, rhythm, stress, nature.*

Poetry is the healer of hurts and emotional wounds. Since the time memorial, the world has witnessed humans undergoing mental trauma, and poetry has played a remedial role in curing it. For ages, literature has been a tool to absolve patients of their mental and psychological disorders. The paper, however, explores the healing and therapeutic potential of poetry in general and literature composed to address the pain, plight, and psychological problems of the people in particular. Art and literature have resolved the issues of solitude, depression, agony, anguish, and many problems related to mental health invariably. The poems hovering around the themes like the serenity of nature and mind, hope, love, aspirations, forbearance,

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redemption etc., showed miraculous effects on the readers' minds to combat the scathing attack of pain, agony, and anguish. The lines of Earnest Harms are quite worth quoting here:

If we turn our view back into History, we find in the world of primitive men, as in the other cultures, knowledge of and time adapted practices of applying art and aesthetic elements as means of healing (Harms Ernest, 241).

People believe poetry reading, writing, and listening can have a healing and therapeutic effect. It has very soothing, quietening, analeptic, and redemptive attributes. Soothing words rotated in silky rhyme and sweet rhythm diminishes depression. The poet can vent inner feelings, which is impossible in plain saying. Studies establish that patients suffering from serious ailments improved their emotional imbalance by listening to poetry. Poetry elevates mood during the time of stress and duress. Our minds are very much attuned to the poems' rhyme, rhythm and meter. Like music, it electrifies the hearts of the readers. The melody of the verses stimulates the cerebrum of the readers to find their voice of joy again. In India, Shamans and saints used poetry therapy to maintain mental health. They believed that poetry imparted a realization and expression of the natural interconnectedness of reality and, thereby a healing effect. The melody of the verses heals the hurts of the people fast. Poetry has the power and potential to trounce the trauma of its readers, writers, and listeners. Poetry can be a remedy to heal the readers' minds, hearts, and souls, diminish the agony, and end our woes. Brian E. Wakeman in his book *The Poetry as Research and Therapy* ((2015), says, “the idea, that there can be a therapeutic power to poem, is at the heart of the poetry pharmacy. But the therapeutic power only exists if you can find the right poem for the right state of mind.” (27).

Poetry has the potential to substantiate mental health and therapeutic usages. Words, symbols, imagery, rhyme, and rhythm can stimulate the senses to sublimate thoughts and emotions with an evocation of positive energy. Poetry imparts aesthetic delight purifying emotions and ultimately giving cure and relief to our trauma. Poetry rejuvenates the mood of depressed readers to a healing height. Poetry therapy is in vogue these days. Poetry serves two purposes: first, it purges the angsts, ennui, and stress of the writers and the readers who are on the same boat of emotions as the poet. Both undergo the purgation stage, curing their emotional sickness through catharsis. Metaphors play a significant role in splicing the consciousness of both the poet and the reader in an ebullient way. The poem with a positive message can extend readers a reprieve from agony and anguish. Dr. Kirti Sengupta, a dentist, aptly feels the healing power of poetry. See her words:

The importance of healing and the power of the spirit can never be hyped or ignored, for it is as integral to our living as breathing. In times of crisis, one may approach the issue(s) in more than one way: we can demand remedial measures, or we can opt for a therapeutic course that will alleviate our sufferings (Kirti Sengupta, v)

Poetry writing is a form of self-healing and rewarding for good mental health. Confessional poetry has impeccable therapeutic effects as it provides an outlet for our pent-up feelings of poets experiencing mental anguish. The confessional poems of Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath, Emily Dickinson, and Kamala Das help the readers identify their emotions with those of the poets. Poetry therapist J. Leedy in his book *Poetry as Healer* (1985), avers, “Plagues of mental problems and suicides now parts of literary history were addressed by Confessional poets became a palliative measure for poetry therapy.” (Leedy, 33). Anne Sexton, an American model turned poet, found poetry a safe door to ooze out her suppressed emotions immersed in her experiences that she felt during mental illness and life spent in an asylum. Her psychiatrist advised her to pen poetry to recuperate from the depression. She imparted a centripetal force to poetry by touching taboo themes such as suicide, menstruation, sex, adultery, addiction, eroticism, sexual abuse, race, religion, and death, etc., and employed them in poetry bravely and brazenly. She uses very striking and appealing metaphors and extends symbolical meaning. The metaphors endow the lines with magical brilliance and sparkle from different angles, creating rippling effects on readers’ minds. Her poem “Wanting to Die” from the book *The Bedlam and Part Way Back* (1960) can help the patients undergoing mental turbulence, for they identify their agony with that of poet:

Still-born, they don't
always die,
but dazzled they cant
forget a drug so sweet
that even children would
look on and smile. (The Complete Poems of Anne Sexton, 142)

Though Anne Sexton’s life met a tragic end, she gives a message to survive and live to its fullest. In her poetry, she endeavors to express her mental anguish pirouetted in the silky diction of survival. Dr. Benjamin Bush, the pioneer of American Psychiatry advocated use of poetry and music to heal mental disorders. Poetry can play a pivotal role in helping readers to recuperate from mental illness. Poetry helps both clinicians and patients to reflect on their experiences concerning medicine. Anne Sexton’s poetry gives space to readers battling mental

trauma to reconcile with the experiences and emotions of the poet. She elevates the readers' moods by instilling a verve of joy in their minds. See the following lines of the poem "From the Garden"⁶:

Come, my beloved,
consider the lilies.
We are of little faith.
We talk to much.
Put your mouthful of words away
and come with me to watch
the lilies open in such a field (The Complete Poems, 84)

Anne Sexton's poetry matures into deep dark colours of scarlet. Taking mouthfuls of in satiated red cups of angst and agony, poetry radiates colourful and fragrant neck of rose. In "Briar Rose," Anne employs a classical fairy tale to apprise the readers about sexual child abuse and its vestiges haunting the mind. The poem seems a remedy for the people whom an incident has become an anathema haunting repeatedly. The poem carries such ailing patients in poet's mind, thereby curing them. The poem starts showing the king christening a newborn girl child as Briar Rose. The Thirteenth fairy predicts that she will injure one of her fingers at a tender age while spinning the wheel and die. The twelfth fairy reverses it with her somber sleep for hundred years. After her 15th birthday, the fairy's prophecy proves true and she injures one of her fingers while spinning the wheel and goes into sound sleep for a hundred years. A prince forays into her bedroom and kisses her. She awakens from sleep crying, "Daddy! Daddy!". The metaphor extends healing touch: "arms limp as old carrots/ into the hypnotist's trance/speaking with gift of tongues (The Complete Poems of Anne Sexton, 290). Momentary perceptions in their translucent rich variety, the images seem like John Keats' sensual images.

Sylvia Plath, a cult figure in American poetry, is a remarkable poet of nature. She employs the theme of nature on the canvas of loneliness and longingness in a remarkable way. Nature provides her an outlet to discern and dissipate a gush of deep and violent feelings and emotions, and she swerves and swirls stoutly in the mystery and wonders of nature. "Tulips" is Plath's very popular and poignant poem wherein she channels her feelings of dejection, depression, despair, and obsession with death. The poem escapes in the rich bowers of her reverential attitude and love towards nature. The poem catches the flight of her imagination from insipidness to dynamism, hatred to love, emptiness to fulfillment, etc. The poem explicates her

experiences at the hospital and her loneliness. Tulip flowers symbolize her dejection and deteriorating health and present cul-de-sac of her plight and pitiable wretchedness. She is a staunch follower of John Keats and turns an image into the central metaphor of the poem. The sight of the red tulip flowers reminds and binds her to earthly pleasure and detracts her from the thought of hurt and humiliation she was subjected to. She thinks of herself like little pebbles which the sea waves carry effervescently to the shores. The anguish is writ on her brow and is augmented to see the coaxing of tulips. She shows her life wish, consecrating to the hospital officials to be propped up and cared. After the surgery, she gains consciousness and grumbles hostility of tulips towards her, that they diminish her chances of survival and engulf the oxygen earmarked for her. She draws a parallel between the redness of tulips to her own crimson mortification and suffering. The description of beautiful tulip flowers with a sprinkle of vivid colours catapults her as a skilled painter and adept craftsman. The poem can be a cult poem for maintaining mental health. Mark the lines of the poem8:

The tulips are too red in the first place, they hurt me.
Even through the gift paper I could hear them breathe
Lightly, through their white swaddlings, like an awful baby.
Their redness talks to my wound, it corresponds.
They are subtle: they seem to float, though they weigh me down,
Upsetting me with their sudden tongues and their colour,
A dozen red lead sinkers round my neck (The Collected Poems, 161).

“Lorelei” is a lovely nature poem, escapes in the valley of her obsession of death. The poem first shows her desire to end the precious life but soon ejects her preference for life to death. She delineates a beautiful escape of the river flowing calmly, imbibing gurgling pain at night. The poem describes her earnest wish to develop a communion with the outer world. Sylvia Plath regards the life considerably under water immersed in hope, full of promises, and a reservoir of peace. “The Disquieting Muse” is also a very florid nature poem, perspicaciously projects her conception of nature and art. The carries us down the memory lane when she witnessed a hurricane in her childhood on the New England coast. The poem exhibits her proclivity and panache for the muses and their world, as her love for fresh flowers, bluebirds, bees, balloons etc. The poem also pinpoints the estranged relationship of a child with the mother. Mark the following lines of the poem9:

I woke one day to see you, mother,

Floating above me in bluest air
On a green balloon bright with a million
Flowers and bluebirds that never were
Never, never, found anywhere.
But the little planet bobbed away
Like a soap-bubble as you called: Come here!

And I faced my travelling companions (The Collected Poems, 76).

Another beautiful nature poem “Water Colour of Grantchester Meadows” reflects her reverence for nature, the process of vegetation, and her cogent concern for living beings. The poem extends a healing effect to the readers identifying their emotions with those of the poet. She avers that we are unable to gauge the mysteries of nature. She showcases the grandeur of the landscape; the calmness and tranquillity seem mocking at her fiercely. The poem unravels her brooding self and tries to show a boisterous bond between her ‘self and nature. The beauty of nature and the grandeur of the landscape don’t render her peace nor satisfy her emotional appetite. The imagery of the moon shows her dissatisfaction and detraction from her love life. The cruel sand callousness of the wicked world is symbolised by the savagery of animals like rats, cats, and owl. Her craftsmanship serves as a microphone to amplify and glorify her emotions, and she presents the finest blend of allusion, archaism, and colloquialism. To validate this point, the following lines are pretty apt to look into:

Cloudwreck and owl-hollowed willows slanting over
The bland Granta double their white and green
World under the sheer water
And ride that flux at anchor, upside down.
The punter sinks his pole.
In Byron’s pool
Cat-tails part where the tame cygnets steer (The Collected Poems, 112).

However, nature is all pervasive in her works; it becomes a potent prerequisite force to hone her skill and creativity urge. Nature serves as a microphone to amplify and glorify her emotional outburst. She endeavors through her poetry to heal the emotional bruises of the mind. She regards poetry as a means of self-revelation through images, similes, and metaphors. Most of the poems of her maiden collection, *The Colossus* (1960), are invariably nature poems establishing and exhibiting her love and reverence towards nature. “The colossus”, “Poems

for a Birthday”, “Two Views of a Cadaver Room”, “Mushrooms”, “Maenad”, “Manor Garden”, “Polly’s Tree”, “Dark Wood, Dark Water”, “Moonrise”, “The Beekeeper’s Daughter”, “Lorelei”, “Elm”, “Lesbos” etc. are the poems that establish earnestly a bond between her ‘self’ and nature. William Wordsworth renders poetry that is highly subjective, egoistic, and natural. Wordsworth regards nature as a mentor and philosopher, but Sylvia Plath’s poetry differs entirely from Wordsworth and other romantics. We witness an undercurrent of serenity, sublimity, sensuality, sadness, and sacredness in their works. We see images of dejection, despair, and death in Sylvia Plath's poetry. William Wordsworth considers nature a source of joy, while Sylvia Plath regards it as a source of melancholy and hostility. Her attitude towards nature coincides and conflates with that of her contemporaries, Emily Dickinson, Robert Lowell, and Anne Sexton. Thus her poems can play a pivotal role in curing people's hurts and emotional loss.

Emily Elizabeth Dickinson is an accomplished and astoundingly acclaimed American poet. Poetry offers spaces whereupon readers can react and reflect on their own experiences and see their images in the works of the poets. Emotional healing culminates in the restoration of voice and sense of belongingness through the mirrors of poetry. Reading, writing, and listening to poetry can bear therapeutic fruits. Poetry may be regarded as a process that readers find involved and taken care of. She has emerged as an ace emotions healer by dint of her beautiful poetry. She employs a diverse theme in her poetry to extend relief and reprieve to her readers, her favourite themes’ spectrum shows wavelengths of love, nature, pain, suffering, death, immortality et. al. She internalizes and externalizes experiences arising out in both centripetal as well as centrifugal spells that entice readers to have an affinity with the poet. In the Poem “Hope Is The Thing With Feathers,” she uplifts the readers from their doldrums. Through hope, we can survive and overcome all kinds of hurdles triumphantly. The following lines are so rejoicing and refreshing 11:

“Hope” is the thing with feathers-
That perches in the soul-
And sings the tune without the words-
And never stops- at all- (www.globalgreybooks.com. p-264)

Emily Dickinson gives readers to find them in her literary venture and identify their feelings therein. She entices her readers to be absorbed in the idea of immortality. They can feel the sweet and soothing sensation of immortality. The poem “Behind Me-Dips Eternity-” imparts

serenity and calmness to the mind and offers a remedy to the readers bearing the personal earthly loss. It is one of the finest poems imbued with a philosophic tone. The poem hovers around the time of death when the soul is torn between its loyalty to earthly life and its desire for eternal bliss. The poem airs the same tone as we see in William Wordsworth's famous poem "Immortality Ode." The poem starts with a hallowed metaphor and moves showing her faith at the threshold of eternity to see the light of heaven. She uses the image light of the dawn and night glittered with moonlight diminishing the despair and blackness of death. She regards immortality as a miracle and healing effect on readers' minds. Mark the following lines of the poem "Behind Me-Dips Eternity-":

Behind Me-dips eternity-
Before Me-Immortality-
Myself-the Term between-
Death but the drift of Eastern Gray,
Dissolving into Dawn away,
Before the West begin- (www.globalgreybooks.com. p-762)

Emily Dickinson is a wordsmith par excellence. Her poetic craftsmanship is impeccable and embellished with artistic beauty. She uses proper words in the proper places. Her connotations are subtle and sublime and impart implications and associations. Diction is more emphatic, poignant, down-to-earth, and pithy. "This Is My Letter To The World" is one of the most charming piece of verses with universal appeal. The poet feels callousness and indifference to the world towards her. She lets readers closer to her who undergo the same apathy as the people. The poem puts her vision of nature before us and extends the message of nature. By the miracle of metaphor and rhythm, she electrifies us. Poems have emphatic emotional power and serve as a light pole to heal our hurts. In the poem "I Never Lost As Much But Twice," She talks about her losses, two in the past and one she is coping with in the present. The poem can heal the hurts of the people who can't bear the losses and succumb to prevailing circumstances, but the poet is trying to spring back their resilience. She pays obeisance to Almighty to replenish her losses and imagines the arrival of two angels from heaven to fulfill her desire:" Angels-Twice descending/Reimbursed my store-(www.globalgreybooks.com, p-56)

Kamala Das is a doyen of confessional poetry in India. Kamal Das adroitly adjures the new Indian English Idiom to showcase her feminine self. She employs a new vocabulary to give vehement and vivid descriptions of her feelings of love, lust, and self. She has used the words

“ pubis,” “pubic hairs,” “womb,” “ menstrual blood,” scent of hair,” “musk,” “orgasm,” “breasts,” “sexual intercourse,” “puddles of desire,” “a good flamboyant lust,” “dusky breasts,” “weight of my breasts” etc. to render her poetry more evocative and erotic. The Poet purifies the emotions of women who underwent the same experiences as the poet, and thus she gives women an opportunity to reflect upon their experiences. The Poem has a therapeutic effect giving a voice to women to be heard, taken care of, and appreciated. In the poem “ Substitute,” she indomitably unfolds her frank and candid confession of her dry, dull and disparaging sexual life. The poem illustrates her promiscuity and perversity in explicating her unrequited sexual desire that love has turned ‘swivel door’, where one lover goes out, and his substitute stops. See the lines:

After that love became a swivel-door,
When one went out, another came in.
Then I lost count, for always in my arms
Was a substitute for a substitute (Selected Poems 49).

The Poem “A Freak” is woven around the theme of sex. She says that she is robbed of the desire to be loved as the peacock loves her peahen spreading all his feathers drowned in ecstasy, her husband sexually satiates her, but he falls short of kindling the spark she dreams of. Her husband, a recluse, doesn’t pry into her emotional dilemma, and consequently, they are unable to attain the conjugal zenith though living with him for so many years. She calls herself ‘a freak’ because of her feverish and flagrant lust. She rues that her husband failed miserably to arouse more dynamic passion in her. The readers who are incompatible with their soul mates can find some solace in going through the experiences of the poet expressed in the poem. The poem can adjure a cathartic effect. Mark the following lines of the poem¹⁵:

Desire... Can this man with
Nimble finger-tips unleash
Nothing more alive than the
Skin’s lazy hungers? Who can
Help us who have lived so long
And have failed in love? The heart,
An empty cistern, wating
Through long hours, fills itself
With coiling snakes of silence (Selected Poems 9).

“The dance of the Eunuchs” is a delicate flush of her feelings about the futility of her sexual encounters with her spouse and lovers. She finds an objective correlative in the dance of the eunuchs to represent the theme of sex. “The Sunshine Cat” is a very beautiful poem weaved wondrously around sex, ensconcing her utter desertion with all her partners she shacks up with. She strenuously tried to ignite the genuine spark among her lovers by clinging to their arms, caressing them, and giving them every warmth but lovers couldn’t reciprocate and respond to her effulgent emotional urge. She fights for the complete emancipation of women from the harsh bondage of male chauvinism through her confessional poems. The poems have a cathartic effect as they offer solace to readers who bore the brunt of the fiercely male psyche.

Thus we may assert that by dint of writing, reading, and listening to poetry, one may fortify a sense of identity, belongingness, and voice. Poetry procures a rostrum for self-expression and propounds a ‘connect’ with the readers, thereby giving them a remedy to identify their pain, plight, and predicament with that of the poet. It may or may not function as fast as medicine, but it indeed catalyzes the healing process. It may prove a healing and restorative phenomenon to maintain mental health in an ebullient way. The poems of great poets like Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath, Emily Dickinson, and Kamala Das are examined from a healing viewpoint and their giving stimulus to their healing process. These poets have created social bonds and carved spaces where susceptibility and forbearance are encouraged. Poetry has the power to bring scattered and shattered hearts closer. All the poems of the great poets mentioned above balm the hurts and wounds, heal the laceration and give solace. These poems have a therapeutic effect. Thus, the paper attempts to seek the role of poetry in maintaining mental health and analyses its various perspectives, potentials, and projections.

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