

It is Not All in the Mind : Refutation of Myths about Depression in Gayathri Prabhu's *If I Had to Tell It Again*

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Abstract. Catherine Prendergast mentioned that when one is speaking as a mentally disabled subject then society sees that person as an invalid subject who is incapable of making rational decisions. And that is why others decide what is best for them without fathoming their state. So, life writing of mentally disables not only presents personal experiences but also educate the society about the struggles of mentally disables in an ableist world. These writings are momentous in situating mentally disables as the sane members of society. In Indian society, mentally disables are often blamed for their situation. It is important to mention that depression, a major mental disability, is often disregarded in our society. Depressed people are often advised to 'be happy', 'stay positive', 'do exercise' and 'it is all in your mind'. Albert Ellis asserted that depression is actually the result of the ideal 'should' and 'musts' a person is supposed to adhere to in a society. In a country where mental health is the most neglected health care system it becomes arduous for a depressed person to seek help. The false notions and stigmas attached to depression makes it gruelling to understand it and it is because of this reason there are scarce representations of depression in Indian English literature. By writing an honest account of her father who internalized the stigmas attached to depression and blamed himself for his situation as well as her own battle of overcoming depression, Prabhu has written a gem. Acknowledging Prabhu's brave attempt, this paper will limn a critical study of how Prabhu's memoir delineates depressed individuals' plight and discards the myths associated with depression.

Keywords : Mental disability; depression; stigma; Ableist world; struggle.

Gayathri Prabhu writes, "the story of depression is hard to tell, always in fragments, hard to cast in words, hard to tell when it seeped out of him [SGM], into and through me [Prabhu]. Like that legacy of storytelling" (Prabhu, 9). In Indian society, depression is not accepted as a health problem. Depression is a mental disability which limits an individual's one or more activities. It makes us wonder whether a depressed person is having any problem or not. In this disability one experiences an incessant

feeling of sadness and loss of interest. Since interpersonal relations and communication are less affected by depression, so it becomes arduous to identify depression in individuals (Chaudhary, Dekka and Chetia, 100). On a surface level a depressed person may seem completely fine yet it affects one's overall functioning on individual level.

Healers, philosophers, and writers of all ages have written about the existence of depression throughout ages. Initially it was called 'melancholia'. The earliest accounts of melancholia were found in ancient Mesopotamian texts in the second millennium B.C. At that time, all mental illnesses were seen as an effect of demonic possession and were cured by priests. In Indian society, mental disabilities are perceived as wrath of God, effect of previous life sins, and influence of evil spirits. From the times of Ayurveda psychiatric illnesses and disabilities are treated under the rubric 'bhootvidya' (demonology). Because of such false notions and practices, people suffering from mental disabilities are hesitant in seeking help. The World Health Organization pointed out in a report published on 30th January 2020, that more than 264 million people all over the world were suffering from depression ("Depression"). But the acrid truth is we are still not vocal about it. In fact, depression is not seen as a health problem or disability. Andrea Nicki in "The Abused Mind" asseverates that mental disabilities like depression are subject to discriminatory assumptions such as it is nothing but 'all in your mind' assumption. Hence it becomes even more important to address the issues and myths related with depression so that it can be acknowledged as a real health problem. And that is exactly what Prabhu does in her memoir. In her momentous memoir, Prabhu unravels the plight of depressed people and endeavours to question the myths attached to depression. This paper celebrates Prabhu's audacious attempt of delineating a truthful account of the misery of depressed individuals and abolishing the myths attached to depression. The paper is divided into two sections. The first section of the paper deals with the agony of depressed individuals in Prabhu's memoir. The second part discusses how Prabhu refutes the myths attached to depression.

I

If I Had to Tell it Again is a moving memoir. In this memoir, Prabhu pens an honest account of her father's battle with depression and her own struggle of combating the same disability. Her father, referred as SGM in the text, grew up among several siblings. Being the brightest kid among all of his siblings, his grandfather saw potential in him and helped him in

getting education. SGM wanted to be a doctor but family responsibilities and expectations landed him into B.com course. He graduated and moved to a town with a clerical job. He was a talented man. He could write, play drum, sing, and was popular among friends and neighbours. He was epitome of a selfless man. But something happened in the middle phase of his life and he could not come out of it. He had great expectations from himself but he could not live up to those expectations. And that was probably the major reason that led him towards the path of depression. He started drinking too much, became abusive, and hit his daughters until his anger calmed down. He raised his daughters in an unconventional manner. He liked his elder daughter Gayathri more than the second daughter and bestowed on her all the expectations which he had from life. He just wanted her to accomplish everything he could not achieve. And when she could not gain those things, he shattered. From here there was no going back. He indulged himself more into alcohol. He started talking about suicide frequently. He never accepted his disability and did not seek aid. For him it was his misfortune and failure. In the later phase of his life, he did want to quit alcohol but it was too late to turn back. He died as he promised; without troubling his family.

Gayathri Prabhu's story of depression begins with her father's exceptional expectations and beatings she received from him. She avers "it was exhausting, damaging, infuriating to be his favourite" (Prabhu, 22). She had several encounters of child abuse and since her father always neglected her; she could not raise her voice against the sexual predators. The grim reality is these sexual predators were led into her life by her own father. Since SGM had the quixotic ideals of goodness in humans so, he could not sense the ulterior motives of these relatives and friends. Prabhu was expected to accomplish marvellous things in life. She tried her best but she could not do better in life. She lost her first child in miscarriage, got divorced from her husband and did not find any new path in life. She did not have anyone to share with the vortex of darkness she was in. But unlike her father, she sensed her problem and took treatment. It was gruelling for her but she did not let depression end her life.

Both SGM and Prabhu endured the same disability. It is intriguing to note that both were coerced to attain astounding things. SGM's family wanted him to be a successful man and since he could not become one so he wished that his eldest daughter will obtain that. Talking about the expectations of her father, she writes, "and because he had declared himself a failure, there was no room for me to be anything but a success" (10). Thinkers like Albert Ellis have accentuated in their writings that

depression is the outcome of constant societal gaze and expectations of society from individuals. Though it is difficult to trace the beginning of depression in an individual but Prabhu and SGM were the victims of persistent societal gaze that made them believe that they are not worthy. No matter how hard they strived but they could not fulfil these expectations.

Karla Thompson in *Depression and Disability: A Practical Guide* asserts that people who had too many bad experiences and too few good experiences are likely to have depression. In Prabhu's case it was many bad experiences of child abuse, beatings given by her father, and ignorance by her father. SGM too had many negative instances in the form of failures and disappointments. Because of the enigmatic nature of depression, it is not easy to identify it in an individual but this does not negate the fact that it affects one's entire life and can lead an individual to nearly ending his/her life. Both SGM and Prabhu had suicidal tendencies. To limn her father's condition, she writes, "he talked about killing himself more and more frequently towards the end" (19). Though SGM did not commit suicide but he did end his life because of alcoholism. Prabhu captures her helplessness by writing, "we begged our father to seek help, but he would not. I just want to die, he said, don't worry, I won't be a burden on you" (31). In his depressed state, SGM sought refuge in alcohol. But instead of giving him any relief, it ended his life.

In this gripping memoir, Prabhu addresses one of the vital issues related with mental disability i.e., stigmatization and ostracization of mentally disabled people. Depression may not be regarded as a serious health problem but when one gets treatment for it then society labels that individual 'abnormal'. The very idea of getting treatment for mental disabilities is perceived as a sign of 'madness' because mental disabilities are seen differently from other health problems and disabilities. In 'Leap', a one act play, when character W tries to reveal that she is depressed, M cautions her that "they[society] will never look at us [depressed people] the same way again" (63). M's assertion raises pertinent question that how disclosing one's mental disability can lead an individual to ostracization. Prabhu's close friends and family started treating her abominably. She mentions "those around me stepped away, as one does when a life starts to unspool, and there was nothing to do but accept what that implied. Perhaps they saw the confusion, the mess, which had grown roots in my head" (117).

When an individual deals with depression, he/she is left alone and expected to get rid of it by doing exercise, being happy, going out, developing new hobbies, staying positive but getting treatment. That is what SGM and Prabhu were advised. SGM himself neglected his disability but Prabhu had to toil to get treatment. It was excruciating for her to convince her own father that she is not unfortunate and her disability can be cured. The memoir not only portrays the plight of SGM and Prabhu but raises pertinent questions as well and tries to situate depression as a serious health problem that should be addressed.

II

Writing in “Disability and Life Writing” Sara Newman avows, life writing of disabled people is crucial in registering disabled people’s side of the story. The identity markers bestowed on mentally disabled people by society are not always acceptable for these individuals so, it becomes even more pressing to write one’s own narrative. These writings help in situating mentally disabled people as the sane members of society. On the one hand, these narratives delineate the plight of mentally disabled people and on the other hand they clear the misconceptions about these people. Prabhu’s memoir is a phenomenal text in limning the state of depressed people as well as in expunging the myths related with depression.

The first myth which Prabhu addresses is the idea that depression is not an illness and ‘it is all in the mind’. People suffering from depression are often held responsible for their situation. But depression like any other disability is not the doing of individuals. So, they should not be blamed for their state. It should be noted that depression is not just mood swings but a serious health problem and it affects an individual’s entire life. Erving Goffman highlighted in *Stigma*, that stigmatized people instead of opposing the dominant standards internalize the stigmas and see themselves the way these dominant standards define them. SGM too does the same thing; he internalized the stigma of seeing depression as the result of failures. Prabhu writes, “my father never acknowledged his vortex of darkness as depression. He said it was genuine suffering caused by his life’s unfortunate circumstances and that nobody in the world understood him...” (29). Prabhu’s mother too refused to accept that her husband was ill and her daughter needed medical help. She tells Prabhu, “Depression is negative thinking, and one should always ‘be positive’. If one believes in God and thinks positive, there can be no depression” (127). Prabhu challenges

this dominant ideology by getting treatment for depression and overcoming it too.

The second myth which is discussed in Prabhu's memoir is that only certain people are affected by depression. Observing her father's condition Prabhu often disassociated herself from him and never aspired to be like him but sadly she suffered with the same disability. It is not always the mediocre or failures who get affected by depression. Anyone at any point of time can suffer from it. When Prabhu's sister saw an interview of film actress, Deepika Padukone who talked about her experience of dealing with depression, she immediately calls Prabhu and says, "it must have been so hard for you, Akka, when you were ill..." (127). Earlier her sister could not fathom Prabhu's state but after watching the interview she realized that it was not easy for Prabhu. Disability studies critics define ableist world as temporary able bodied, so, anyone at any time can be affected from disabilities.

The third myth which is discarded is that depression is normal with ageing. In her memoir, Prabhu presents the way SGM and she began suffering from depression in their thirties. In Prabhu's case, it is quite evident that it was not age which resulted into depression but a serious health condition. In fact, it was unusual for her doctor to see a young woman suffering from mental disability. She records her doctor's reaction by writing, "the Gujrati doctor on the local NHS circuit looked deeply disappointed that a young Indian woman had mental health difficulties..." (161). So, through her honest account she makes it clear that depression has nothing to do with ageing.

The fourth myth targeted by Prabhu is the idea that only women suffer from depression because they are weak beings. From the beginning of the memoir, we are told that it is not just women who suffer from depression. The memoir records how a man, SGM suffered, struggled, and died because of depression. But since societal notions had inbuilt this idea in SGM that only weak creatures suffer from depression so he never accepted his illness. It is saddening that SGM, who suffered the same condition labelled his own daughter 'weak' when she was struggling with depression. Prabhu beautifully weaves the conversation between M and W about revealing one's depression and being called weak. She writes :

M : Hush. It was our lot to endure.

W : It is not too much to ask – to ask for empathy...

M: Hush. You are asking for the world! They will think you weak. Why plead?

W: It is the strong people who struggle, who pay a price for pushing against the current- the depressed are not weak-minded. (63-64)

The fifth myth addressed by Prabhu is the idea that it is possible to fight depression without taking an expert's advice. This is the most recurrent misconception about depression. Like any other disability, it cannot be cured by one's will and the so-called wise advice. One needs medical assistance for it. People suffering from depression often feel that they are not ill because society makes them feel in this way. Since these people are always under societal gaze so they too feel that they can be cured on their own. To limn this dilemma Prabhu writes,

The biggest hurdle is that the mind that is unwell and needs treatment will do its best to talk you out of it. No other organ in your body is capable of this...But the mind, even when it is rapidly sinking, will convince you at regular intervals that is actually not so ill and it is capable of recovery without intervention. The story of long-term depression often swings between these poles-denial and relapse. (129)

It is evident from the examples and discussion that major myths attached to depression are annihilated by Prabhu in her memoir. She not only discards the preconceived notions and myths related with depression but tries to situate depressed individuals in the centre so that their state can be acknowledged.

Conclusion

Alice Hall remarks that disability narratives written by disabled individuals are vital texts in delineating an insider's view of disability. Since there are scarce representation of depression in Indian English literature so it is imperative to create a legacy of disability writings that tell what it feels like to be suffering from mental disabilities and overcoming them. Prabhu's memoir is a commendable attempt of creating a space for addressing the sufferings, myths, assumptions, and preconceived notions attached to depression. She has written a memoir that talks about a community-community of mentally disables. She declares her intention of writing this memoir when she avers :

That is why, to be silent, I tell myself,
would be to collude with the collective

denial and discomfort about mental illness...the most valuable advice is to talk about it, to tell someone, and even though the telling is just a start, it is needed. Otherwise, the shame is muted and the muted stays shameful, slowly snuffing out one's spirit. This is why one writes a memoir. This is why one tells strangers. We carry the invisible, and perhaps the telling can honour it, make it real and seen. (131)

Through this memoir Prabhu weaves word by word the collective experiences of depressed people. Madhavi Menon acknowledges Prabhu's efforts and aptly points out that this memoir challenges our perceptions of depression. By the end of this memoir readers are compelled to see depression as a serious health problem and have an empathetic outlook towards depressed people.

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