

Exploring the Healing Potential of Creative Expression

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Abstract

Not being understood in the domestic sphere and its associated forms of depression are yet to be widely acknowledged and accepted as a mental health issue in India. The gendered programming of domestic/familial roles often relegate the woman into functions that are monotonous, laborious and daunting. Much of the household work is associated with the procuring, preparation and serving of food. The Kitchen invariably becomes the centre of all activity – a place where nourishment for the entire family emanates and aspirations of the individual woman, are put on the burner. The seething emotions often bubble over, simmering in a cauldron of ignorance, ingratitude and a sense of obscurity bestowed upon by the family. Sacrifices are aplenty; rewards and recognition – zilch. This insensitivity and indifference leads to a vortex of emotions that build into a volley of issues ranging from anger, irritation, pain, suffering, loneliness and depression. A woman becomes lost in the process of nurturing the lives of her loved ones while yearning for love, respect, identity and realization of her dreams. The mental balance is lost. This is where Poetry comes in handy as a medium of expression. Studies have proven the healing effect of words. This paper is an attempt at unravelling the cathartic and therapeutic essence of poems on mental well-being. The scholar, through a reading of poetry by Hiba Ashraf, Vimala and others, aims to provide an analysis and interpretation of select poems that establish a cathartic and restorative relationship between poems and mental health.

Keywords: Poetry, Mental Health, Catharsis, Therapeutic, Healing, Relation

Introduction

Poetry heals. Poems stitch up the wounds of time and inflictions of the heart. Be it a terminally ill patient or a forlorn lover; a soldier guarding the borders at a remote distance or a truant child dealing with life's little battles, a woman in the kitchen invoking the aromas of spices or be it the hand that serves, words have a way to tug at the heartstrings and reverberate in the deep corridors of the mind and soul. Food by itself is comforting; always evolving and is the essence of life. That it affects physical health is clearly known but food has a direct bearing on mental health too because in India, Food is not just sustenance but a cultural and traditional ethos. Like the assimilation of myriad tastes – sweet, salt, spice and tang, words combine with the flavours of sentiments to concoct a palate of experiences that

reveal what otherwise get stored like spices in a jar. Studies have recorded the therapeutic impact of poems that elevates the mind and enthuses the soul. And when the poet brings in an amalgamation of food and letters, a sizzling appetizer presents itself to be relished. This study proposes to examine the relationship between Indian food poetry and its impact on mental health.

Hypotheses

The following research questions guide this study:

- How does poetry affect the emotional and mental well-being of human beings?
- How can poetry provide solace and a sense of vigour for women and their families?

It is hypothesised that poetry can significantly enhance the emotional well-being of individuals particularly women, by providing a medium to express and process their feelings. I propose that poetry will help cope with frustration, anger, pain and loneliness to achieve emotional reconciliation. Poetry's benefits extend to the families and readers as well, offering comfort and comprehension amidst the taken-for-granted milieu of the domestic space. It is expected that readers who are women, men, individuals, society, will recognise the benefits of poetry and support its integration into social setting fostering hope and optimism in women. By exploring these questions, this study aims to contribute to the literature on the therapeutic use of poems in emotional and mental healthcare. It is hoped that the analysis will provide reassurance and confidence in poetry's potential to enrich living experience.

Literature Review

The teaching and healing power of poems date back to ancient times. Be it the Vachanas (11th/12th century, Kannada Literature) or Doha (6th century, Hindi/Urdu Literature), the verses have always reflected the social, emotional and psychological well-being of individuals. Some of them are philosophical and divine in nature. Nursery Rhymes, full of imagination, are thought-provoking, inspiring and informative. Indigenous cultures used poetic chants and songs in healing rituals, providing spiritual and emotional solace (Kleinman, 1980). Shelley writes in *Defence* that poetry acts in a way that "awakens and enlarges the mind itself by rendering it the receptacle of a thousand unapprehended combinations of thought". Aristotle in his *Poetics* has mentioned that the function of art is to provide aesthetic delight, communicate experience, express emotions and represent life. In the 20th century, the therapeutic potential of poetry was formally recognised. Pioneers like Jack J. Leedy promoted poetry therapy for mental health, emphasising its healing power (Leedy, 1969).

Various studies and research have established Poetry's expressive and cathartic powers in environments such as healthcare, industry, prison, academia and society in general. *Reimagining Femininity: Sylvia Plath's Poetic Odyssey into the Realms of Gender Identity, Fluidity and Intersectionality* by Bazila Ehsan, Research Scholar at Department of English, Central University of Kashmir, examines how Sylvia Plath's poetic discourse sheds light on the intersection between varying forms of sexual oppression, gender discrimination and identity formation.

Maintaining Mental Health through Poetry by Mirza Sibtain Beg, Professor, Dept. of English Shia P.G. College, Lucknow, U.P explores how poetry can be a natural tool to heal mental stress, trauma & agony and maintain mental health by examining some poetic utterances of great poets like Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, Emily Dickinson, Kamala Das, etc.

Danielle Feller from the University of Lausanne, Switzerland, has explored on *Food and Love in Sanskrit Poetry: On the Margin of Desires*.

The Indian Journal of Psychiatry has a comprehensive list of articles that establish Poetry as therapy. Words – spoken, read or heard have a comforting allure. Poet Psychiatrist, Dr. TM

Raghuram explores the interconnectedness of poetry and psychology and its function of soothing the frayed mind in his article Poetry as Therapy.

Research Gap

There is evidence of research in literary, medical and science journals that link poetry and mental health. Yet, there is hardly any work that combines food and poems to explore its impact on emotional and mental health. Food is to body just as poems are to the soul. They are basic and work at a level that is elementary to understanding human experiences. The domestic arena in the Indian context, especially spaces such as the kitchen is to a great extent, the woman's domain. It is not by choice but by a diktat of the stereotyped gender roles and cultural practices. This set-up often lacks acknowledgement, restricts communication and leads to bottling up of all that needs to be said and understood. Eventually, it starts impacting attitude, behaviour and relationships which many a times culminate in a breakdown. As my research topic for Ph.D is interpreting culture, gender and identity through select Indian food narratives, it becomes imperative that this perspective be explored.

Methodology

This study uses a qualitative approach to explore the impact of poetry on mental health of women in particular. Poetry is a tool through which they speak their mind and thereby find catharsis. The qualitative component includes a close reading of select poems and an in-depth analysis to capture the emotional, social and psychological experiences of women that also lends a universal appeal. The scholar has engaged in conversations with a few women over the select poems. This has not only been cathartic for the persons spoken to but has also provided insights into the recuperative power of poems and has paved way for a robust inter-textual analysis and integration of descriptive acumen by treating food and women as texts.

Discussion

Poetry communicates at a level that can move us to tears or lift us in joy, inspire us or save us from destroying ourselves. The poet recreates a world which has its own meaning and beauty elementary to the soul. Food is basic, it feeds and nourishes; a source of sustenance. It becomes a language, an expression of love. But it often leads to hunger – hunger of the heart, of emotions seeking reciprocation. It is not the absence of food but the presence of indifference and ignorance in a relationship that creates a void giving rise to loneliness. This is perhaps the story of many a household in India where the woman is caught in the cycle of cooking, serving and cleaning every day. Her world shrinks into the Kitchen where all attempts are aimed at securing emotional validation. The following poems and analysis explore how speaking about it becomes cathartic.

The Great Indian Kitchen - Hiba Ashraf

“this was the legacy of the great Indian kitchen, here, only stomachs were filled in the attempt to fill hearts.”

I could smell the spices floating through the verandah from the kitchen
And hear the sizzle of meat being
thrown into hot oil.

They say the way to a man's heart
is through his stomach.
Is that why most woman toil days

and nights in the kitchen,
Trying to make all sorts of concoctions
hoping to crawl into their husbands' hearts?
Is it worth it even if they have filled
the wombs of other women
when their wives scramble to fill their stomachs?

I have seen my mother work around the kitchen
like she was Ma Durga,
with many hands roaming around
trying to make that perfect Rajma.
Is this why my mother never left the kitchen
to crawl into abba's heart
which had been crammed
with his love for food and anything
besides ammi?
As years went by my father's belly grew
and my mother's heart shrunk.
Trying to crawl into abba's heart,
Ammi had crawled into the tiny kitchen
for the rest of her life.
But it didn't matter
for she could only reach his stomach,
and I guess she was on the way to his heart
when his stomach called for her again.
But Ammi never gave up,
she kept making new dishes
hoping for a day,
when he'll look at her
and invite her into his heart.

But the day never came.
When I was bathing ammi's lifeless body
I noticed her hands were stained with haldi,
Even after bathing her in milk
she still smelled like jeera and rajma.
Almost as if she was still trying to call out to abba,
to look at her one last time
and tell her
that she'll live in his heart.

Even when death took her away
She was still trying,
Trying to remind abba of rajma
and haldi and jeera
and her.

Maybe this was the legacy
of the great Indian kitchen,
here, only stomachs were filled
in the attempt to fill hearts.

Analysis

Hiba Ashraf is a young woman poet born in Dubai to immigrant Indian parents from Kerala. Her poem strikes a chord and tugs at the heartstrings. It resonates because it has a universal appeal of yearning for love and acceptance. The layers of cultural conditioning and indoctrination of gender roles is clearly visible in the lines:

*'Is that why most woman toil days
and nights in the kitchen' and in these lines:
'...abba's heart
which had been crammed
with his love for food and anything
besides ammi?'*

One can read the callous insignificance meted out to the woman who slaves over in the kitchen for an ounce of love. An entire life is spent in the gamut of nourishing the other while her own self is impoverished. The emotional and mental imbalance is palpable.

A colleague who I spoke with, on reading the poem, found the lines by Hiba Ashraf so evocative that she burst into tears and a volley of memories unleashed. It was cathartic for her to reminisce and acknowledge the efforts her mother put into the family, especially for her father. A close family relative expressed that she identified with the poem as it is her story in Hiba's lines. It made her resolve to rewrite the narrative. Poems do not just express, they heal.

Kitchen - Vimala

I remember the kitchen's
Flavor upon flavor,
A mouthwatering treasury,
Pungence of seasonings,
And the aroma of incense
From the prayer room
Next door. Each morning the kitchen awoke
To the swish of churning butter
The scraping of scoured pots.
And in the center, the stove,
Fresh washed with mud, painted
And bedecked, all set to burn.

We saved secret money in the
seasoning box, hid sweets too,
and played at cooking with lentils and
We played Mother and Father,
In the magic world of kitchen
That wrapped childhood in its spell.
No longer playground for the grown up girl
Now trained into kitchenhood.

Like all the mothers and mothers' mothers
Before her, in the kitchen
She becomes woman right here.

Our kitchen is a mortuary,
Pans, tins, gunny bags
Crowd it like cadavers
That hang amid clouds of damp wood smoke.
Mother floats, a ghost here,
A floating kitchen herself, her eyes melted in tears,
Her hands worn to spoons,
Her arms spatulas that turn
Into long frying pans, and
Other kitchen tools.
Sometimes Mother glows
Like a blazing furnace,
And burns through the kitchen,
Pacing, restless, a caged tiger,
Banging pots and pans,
How easy, they say,
The flick of a ladle and the cooking's done
No one visits now.
No one comes to the kitchen except to eat.
My mother was queen of the kitchen,
But the name engraved on the pots and pans is Father's
Luck, they say, landed me in my great kitchen,
Gas stove, grinder, sink, and tiles.
I make cakes and puddings,
Not old-fashioned snacks as my mother did.
But the name engraved on the pots and pans is my husband's
My kitchen wakes
To the whistle of the pressure cooker,
The whirr of the electric grinder.
I am a well-appointed kitchen myself,
Turning round like a mechanical doll.
My Kitchen is a workshop, a clattering,
Busy, butcher stall, where I cook
And serve, and clean and cook again.
In dreams, my kitchen haunts me,
My artistic kitchen dreams,
The smell of seasonings even in the jasmine.

Damn all kitchens, May they burn to cinders,
Our lives, eat out days- like some enormous vulture
Let us destroy those kitchens
That turned us into serving spoons.
Let us remove the names engraved on the pots and pans.

Come, let us tear out these private stoves,
Before our daughters must step
Solitary into these kitchens.
For our children's sakes,
Let us destroy three lonely kitchens.

Analysis

Originally written in Telugu by Vimala with the title Vantillu, The Kitchen is an English translation by BBVL Narayana Rao. The poem is a realistic portrayal of the sufferings of housewives in the kitchen and their household responsibilities. Housewives have endured confinement and imprisonment in the kitchen for ages. The poet brings out the plight of women in ordinary homes in India by voicing out the frustration and angst. Through this, the poet becomes a representative not just for herself but for the larger section of women.

What was once a happy interlude of fun and frolic in childhood, playing 'Kitchen-kitchen' becomes a drudgery in adulthood. Kitchen was a happy space with its mouth-watering treasury, 'filled with a sharp, bitter smell and decorated with well-washed utensils, pans, and tins.' The girls would save up money even to play with kitchen toys but that joy vanishes the very children turn into adults. For grown-ups, the kitchen is no longer a playground but a training center where girls are trained to cook a variety of recipes.

The poet calls the kitchen a 'mortuary' and her mother a 'ghost' as the loving, caring woman is lost in the military like regimen of cooking. 'All the pans, tins, and gunny bags crowd like corpses that hang amid clouds of smoke' The poet's mother sometimes glows like a blazing furnace and works restlessly and at a great pace in a caged kitchen. The writer laments that no one in the family visits the kitchen except to eat, and expresses her anguish over not giving due recognition to their work. Though her mother was the queen of the kitchen, her father's name was engraved on the pots. The same thing has been repeated in her case as well.

The writer shows the change in kitchen gadgets and compares her modern recipe with her mother's old-fashioned snacks. She calls the womenfolk to remove the names engraved on pots and tins and destroy the lonely kitchens.

At last, the writer fervently appeals to establish a new kitchen, which was shared equally by all the members of the family, and warns not to step alone into the kitchen.

Silencing Silences - Sumedha Bhattacharyya

My grandmother never told me about this—
this kitchen where she sang,
what she sang,
why she sang.
That day, when she did not feel it anymore,
that very day when she stopped.
Does this mean that she never voiced?
The absence of sound
is also a presence.
When a sound sounds, silence silences—
almost like finding stillness in movement.
What remains is one breathing body,
witnessing the song that got stuck
in the blue-walled kitchen,

the oily exhaust fan,
and everything in between.

Analysis

Sumedha Bhattacharya's *Silencing Silences* is a poem that sings the song of an unsung hero – her grandmother whose presence is felt even in her absence. The kitchen where she spent most part of her life carries her essence in 'the absence of (her) sound' What her grandmother sang or why she sang was never known to anybody; it was as if she lived in oblivion. And when she's gone, her grand-daughter can feel her silence that now screams out. The grandmother's silence when she was alive is now silenced forever in her death. Her voice which once sang, remains as a remnant between 'the blue-walled kitchen' and 'the oily exhaust fan.' Between the grandmother and the grand-daughter, generations have rolled by but the kitchen stands as a motif, a silent witness to the unknown song that clings there.

Indian Kitchen - Veeraiyah Subbulakshmi

The smell from the boiling rice,
Knocks and enters the nose,
Not covered with the secured lid,
To collect the stressful steam,

The smell from the boiling dhal,
Mixed with wonderful Hing,
Pulls the nerve buds to scream,
A plate full of delicious meal,

Roasted potato with chili and spices,
Boiled guards with moong and peas,
Oiled brinjal with onion as companion,
The fritters and pickles to savor and enjoy,

Hundreds of plants and their toils,
May rest on my banana leaf as food,
How many best dressed fauna arrives
I will not let my queen plants as the salad..

Analysis

Veeraiyah Subbulakshmi's poem is a gastronomical delight, setting the olfactory senses sniffing about the smells in the poem. A delightful poem that tickles the senses, it has references to the farmer who grows food and to the 'toil' that brings food on a banana leaf. Eating food off a banana leaf is in itself a celebration; the variety of food a mirror to the variety of thoughts in a mind. Yet, the words 'boiling', 'knocks', 'scream', 'roasted' used to describe the cooking process, point to the jagged mind of the one preparing food who hopefully will 'savour and enjoy' the meal.

Chutney. (A Poem) - Chetana

Jul 1, 2023 The Soulful Nib

The sizzling sounds that beckon me,
With the indescribable aroma of

Fresh tempering: Mustard seeds, Red Chillies and Curry Leaves.
Is it Dosa? Is it Idli? I wonder
Well, does it matter?
Because the show stopper is the same always,
Chutney: The Condiment that tickles my tastebuds,
Making everything come together
In a frenzied dance on my palate.
Sometimes sweet, sometimes spicy
And every time flavourful,
A medley of spices and aromatics.
A crisp hot Dosa lands on my plate
Next comes a scoop full of Chutney
Oh yes, a considerable helping is a must
To do justice to this humble, yet glorious dish.
Chutneys that come in various colours:
Green Chutney, with coriander and mint
Having a dance of their own,
Parathas, Tikkis and Cutlets embrace them.
Red Chutney, fiery with the spice of the chillies
Making their mark on my tastebuds,
Chaats eagerly embrace this with arms wide open.
Sweet Chutney, my favourite of all,
The dates and the tang of the tamarind create magic,
Ain't no better pairing than Samosas with it.
Tomato Chutney, the rich and luxurious feel,
That makes me savour every morsel of it.
And of course, the original one,
The pristine White Coconut Chutney,
The most sociable of the lot,
Dosa, Idli, Vada, Fritters,
They are best friends forever.
No matter the ingredients, no matter the blend,
Culinary treasures are Chutneys,
The harmony that they create on our plates
Makes the joy of eating memorable.

Analysis

Not all poems have to be tinted with the suffocating ambience of the kitchen. Food has a magical way of bringing people closer spreading more than joy through shared meals and shared experiences. The poet Chetana pens a delicious ode to her favourite food: chutney. Food is known to release feel-good components such as dopamine, serotonin and endorphins that make a person feel happy. Consuming food that makes one happy is highly beneficial to one's personality. It fills one with energy and helps in dealing with the sometimes mundaneness of life. It is a cheerful combination of good food and good mood.

Conclusion

These poems explore the intersection of food, culture, and identity to delve into deeper human experiences. The unsung heroes do not remain unsung or unheard as they find a voice through the lines of poetry. The words often resonate with the larger population creating a sense of awareness and sensitivity. It can best be concluded in the words of Matthew Holloway's A Food for Thought:

A Food For Thought - Matthew Holloway

What food is to the body
Knowledge is to the mind
Feed each in the right way
And you will grow
The sustenance of the soul
Is a balance of pleasure and duty
A duty to the body to sustain
A duty to the mind to evolve
And still a duty to pleasure
To serve such joy
The flavour of sustenance
Must be equal parts
Joy and nutrition
That which we need to live
And that which inspires
Music, art, poetry
The seasons and landscapes
Are balanced to that
Which we need to survive
It is better to be alive
Than to simply exist

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