

Mental Health Issues in Literature and Cinema: A Historical Perspective

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Mental Health as a field of Inquiry: Historical development

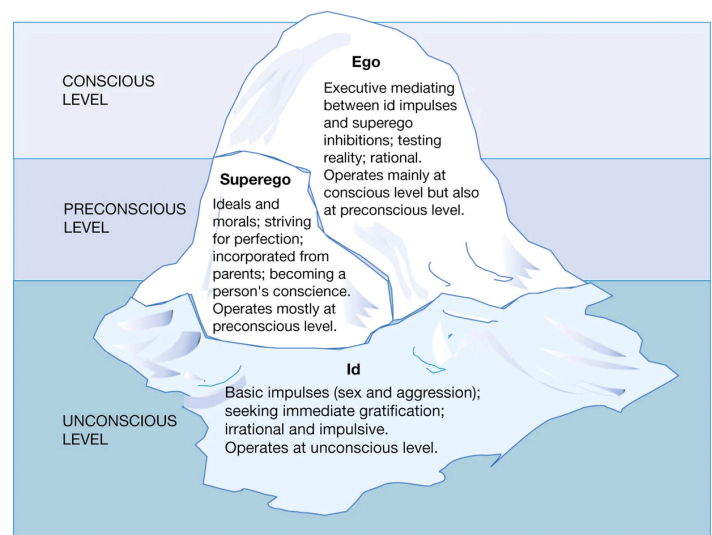
In ancient times, understanding of human beings about their environment was limited. This was also the case with abnormal behaviours. Ancient humans, around 3000 B.C. knew that the brain is the site of mental functions as it is written in *The Edwin smith papyrus*. The other book *The Ebers papyrus* gives us the accounts of incantations and magic which was used for explaining and curing diseases of unknown causes. In ancient times, abnormal behaviour or mental illness had a direct correspondence with demonic behaviour and temperament or possession by gods, specifically in European society. Exorcisms were performed to cure the person of these abnormal behaviours, this included magic, incantations, prayers, noise making, use of horrible tasting things made out of excreta of animals in wine, flogging etc.

Greek physician Hippocrates (460-377 B.C.) denied the belief that demons and gods possessed human beings and was causing mental illnesses. Brain pathology (injuries to the head etc.) was the cause of mental illness according to Hippocrates. Daily clinical observations of his patients and dream analysis were his methods to understand the mental illnesses. His methods were revolutionary but he wasn't always right. Hippocrates also believed that hysteria was limited to women caused by the uterus wandering to various parts of the body, pining for children. Plato suggested humane ways to deal with mentally disturbed individuals. According to Plato these mentally disturbed individuals should be taken care of by their relatives and they should be fined if they fail to do so. Mentally disturbed were also given different types of punishment as they were not responsible for their acts.

In dark ages, they were expected to be taken and treated in monasteries. Not very surprising, mostly were women and hence were named witches. Later asylums were made and the situation got better for mentally ill people. Mental health was not a wide and looked upon

concept at that time. People like Dorothea Dix and Phillipe Pinel are renowned names in this field. Contemporary turn came in psychopathology, where biological origins were emphasized in the beginning. Hence, treatments were made medically driven- e.g. ECT and further hospitalization and observational treatments. Psychological approaches to psychopathology began with Mesmer. He introduced "magnetism" to treat hysteria (late eighteenth century), then Breuer came with a cathartic method in his treatment of Anna O (late nineteenth century).

Sigmund Freud was born on May 6th, 1856, at Freiberg in Moravia, a small town in what is now Czechoslovakia. He was born into a Jewish family. Freud worked with Breuer on hysteria, later both parted. Mental health- the concept came with the advent of psychoanalysis. Freud believed that humans were deterministic and did not change throughout their lifetime. Freud introduced his method of psychotherapy so that individuals can understand the mental condition



he or she is in. Freud did not see the psyche as a whole but rather saw a set of 3 parts. He named these parts as Id, Ego and Superego. These parts of the psyche can be represented by the Iceberg model (See figure 1).

The Id is the primitive and instinctual part of the mind that contains sexual and aggressive drives and hidden memories, the superego operates as a

moral conscience, and the Ego is the realistic part that mediates between the desires of the Id and the Super-ego. A healthy person according to Freud is governed by Ego, the person will not let Id or Superego dominate.

He gave the concept of Defense mechanism (rationalization, projection etc.) and psychosexual stages of development just like cognitive stages of development given by Jean Piaget. These stages namely are: oral, anal, phallic, latency, and genital. Freud brought focus to the open talk- free association, transference and its interpretation. It is conducted with the patient lying on a couch and with the analyst seated out of sight but close enough to hear what the patient says. The treatment sessions last 50 minutes and are usually held four or five times a week for at least three years. The primary technique used in psychoanalysis and in other dynamic psychotherapies to enable unconscious material to enter the patient's consciousness is that of "free association." (Britannica) Various studies confirm the effectiveness of Psychoanalytic therapy. In the paper 'The effectiveness of long-term psychoanalytic therapy: a systematic review of empirical studies' the authors concluded that long-term psychoanalytic therapy or psychoanalysis was an effective treatment, with moderate to large effects on symptom reduction and personality change that appeared to be maintained years after treatment termination (de Maat S, de Jonghe F, Schoevers R, Dekker J. The effectiveness of long-term psychoanalytic therapy: a systematic review of empirical studies. *Harvard Review of Psychiatry* 2009).

Jung and Adler both were psychoanalysts at first but came up with their own ideas about human Psyche. C. G. Jung was considered the successor of Freud. Jung's theory of psyche differs from Freud in multiple ways. Jung believed people can change and become healthy whereas Freud did not. Adler just like Jung moved in a different direction. Unlike Freud and Jung, Adler looked at the psyche in a holistic way. He did not divide the psyche in different parts. This is the reason because of which Adler is considered an early Humanist. Later came the humanistic psychotherapy, which puts therapist and the client at equal pedestals. This therapy is also known as Client centred therapy. In humanistic therapy the therapist does not look at past events to understand the present behaviour and believes

the person can change the conditions if appropriate guidance is given. Behaviourism came in the 1920s. John Watson, Ivan Pavlov, B. F. Skinner, showing how positive and negative reinforcement could shape behaviour. The study of cognition became popular beginning in the 1960s. Cognitive therapy was developed.

Mental health is not a personal possession but a public establishment. There is not just inner functioning but our mental health relies on what resides outside us. These external entities build our inner peace or chaos. The books, poems, essays I've read and movies I've seen are mainly about how external factors like situations, people and opportunities shape our mind. The mind which once was original and clean. Though for learning to happen, one must possess a vulnerable and polluted mind.

PTSD, Depression, Demonology

Jane Eyre set in the 19th century is an all-time classic. Yet, it shows a bleak view of high class European society. This book contained one character named Bertha Mason who was kept locked inside. She stayed in the attic with one female caretaker. She was not provided proper treatment and her condition was shown much worse. She was kept tied with either chair and was allowed to roam inside the four corners. Her clothes were old and torn. She was described as filthy and beast like. She was looked upon as a burden to the family, ultimately, she committed suicide by throwing herself out of the building. It was believed that women's uterus had been the reason behind their maniac and abnormal behavior. *Mrs Dalloway*, 20th Century novel by Virginia Woolf had an episode where a war veteran (Septimus Warren Smith) committed suicide. He was suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (shell shock). He was shown in seclusion, had no social life nor had any personal connections. He remained distant to his wife. He committed suicide out of guilt as he had nothing left to do in life. He was described as someone who had emptied himself completely. Such hollowness had taken place by self-destruction. He had detached himself completely. He was kept in a closed room. His health was overlooked.

In both the cases we can clearly see, the victim is kept under similar conditions. The difference is the way in which they were portrayed and described. In *Mrs. Dalloway*, the protagonist

herself suffered from depression and post-traumatic stress disorder but it was disguised under several layers. One of those layers was Septimus himself. Septimus was the mirror image of Mrs. Dalloway. She was anxious about her societal status. She threw parties because she wanted to maintain her status. She also showed glimpses of narcissistic personality. She was shown self-centred and never wanted to dig deep in the woes of others. What he did (the suicide) was had to be done by her. Their wheel of life was fuelled by pretence and multiple veils. Where in *Jane Eyre*, the patient was shown to be manic and demonic. In *Mrs. Dalloway*, the patients are seen helpless and people who are part of our society at a certain level.

Schizophrenia, Hallucinations

The yellow wallpaper was a 19th century short story. It was about a woman again living under seclusion. She was also suffering from depression and saw different patterns and figures in the wallpaper. Those figures were grasping her from the walls. For her they became her companions. This revelation was disturbing to her yet she accepted it.

A beautiful mind, 21st century movie showed a Schizophrenic patient. John Nash's whole journey from revelation to acceptance. How do such issues affect others? Either they are family members or strangers. Also, the point where patients become so vulnerable and how they themselves deal with it. This movie showed the non-violent side of the victim. The intensity and over-powersness of the whole issue. Also, why in the end the victim had to take the situation in their own hand rather than completely depending on medical treatment.

In the *yellow wallpaper*, the reason why she became schizophrenic could be because of seclusion. Whereas in the latter case, John Nash became detached because of his problem. Also, the portrayal was more humane in the movie as compared to the short story. John Nash coped up in the end but the lady in the short story never recovered. She was shown overwhelmed by the whole situation she was in and became a sheer victim. This victimization has been shown differently. Where the *yellow wallpaper* victim strikes back and gets out of the protective cocoon. On the other hand, John Nash created a protective cocoon and got control of himself.

Bipolar Disorder, Anxiety

Fscott Fitzgerald's essay *The Crack Up* (20th century). It basically talked about his mental condition amidst fame and people. How it created chaos inside him. How he created a shield and went into seclusion. He described several incidents from his life and how they cracked him up ultimately. By 'crack' he meant mental disbalance, a split inside his daily routine, mind, relationships. Why he preferred seclusion and also, what kept him awake at night. Even though, he felt lonely but in spite of his condition, his mind craved for 'me-time'. He became restless, full of energy sometimes but there were times when he became empty. There was a turmoil which was not taking rest in any situation.

Silver Linings Playbook, a 21st century movie. There are two victims shown in the movie. Both are full of energy, restless and they both showed several emotions in a single go. That internal tornado, which ruins everything unless you find the source and give it a converged direction. Self-destructive thoughts like questioning one's abilities and giving no importance to close relationships or any future relationship. *Bojack Horseman*, is an animated series. It has a main character, again Bojack Horseman. He was a star in his 90s. But in the 21st century, he has left no occasion in proving himself an utter failure. There is no ray of hope and positive change in his life. His mental illness is somewhat disguised under his false actions which are harmful to others. Due to his actions, people have made several perceptions about him and see him as an unapproachable and spiteful human being/Horse. His actions and thought processes are the result of toxic upbringing and his relationship with his mother and father, being the only child. He is known for taking spontaneous actions to get out of a cocoon but then shuts himself away. He always ends up alone, even if he is surrounded by people who love him. He runs from responsibilities but wants to be in charge. For him, nobody can take his place either in personal or professional relationships. Apart from him, there are many characters who have shown tinges of depression and other mental disorders. But the way there is shown part of the society and how we all are vulnerable to those disorders, or maybe suffering from it is the question. These disorders are nothing but a subjective behaviour which is likely to contrast over normative behavior. This is why these are disorders.

Inside Out

This animated movie put fore the significance of emotions and feelings in our life. By keeping people covered of varied age groups, it showcased the universality of emotional turbulence. Whether you are a young school going child or a successful individual, emotions like sadness, disgust, anger and joy would surface and resurface in respect to various situations. To dig in details, I would like to point out one. It has shown that each character functions through emotions as named above. They control the mind, where the emotions reside and bring out various feelings. These emotions are given somewhat human embodiment, say red male cartoon is 'anger' and blue female cartoon is 'sadness'. It is significant to see where on one hand the child has such cartoons of varied genders, minds of mom and dad are shown rigid and organised where mom would have female cartoons inside watching

rom-com and dad would have only male cartoons watching sports.

Why does our mind divert us from our desired plan or goal, which we always aspired for? Not only diversion, but we tend to behave in an opposite manner. Like in the case of Fitzgerald, Bojack Horseman or the characters from Silver Linings Playbook. In both the cases, I saw a kind of contradiction. To their actions, wishes and what not. This pendulum of 'what if', keeps dragging us back and forth. They want to do something for their situation but are unable to do so because they are afraid maybe. Hence, we can see multiple dimensions of various characters, what we expect from the characters is different from what their constitution is. Nothing wrong in saying such characters are mere reflection of what "we" human beings are and sometimes they are more than us. These fictional characters are more coherent than the actual blood and flesh marionette.