

## A LAPSE INTO THE DARK TUNNEL

Late one evening, there was an unusual sensation in the newsroom – busy footsteps, excited conversations. This kind of hold-your-breath suspense is usually evoked by a sudden political crisis, a terror attack, or a stock-market crash. But the buildup in the spaces between the computer terminals that evening was for something entirely different. A supermodel, who had set fire to the ramp until the other day, had been living rough, acutely depressed, sleeping in temples or in the parks, at times with strangers for drugs or alcohol, begging, working as a maid. She had posed for a photographer from a tabloid of this media group the previous evening and promised to give more time for the hungry camera before disappearing into the dark. Her stunning looks that had fired up fashion shows were now beaten, layered with signs of the sudden fall; her long, lustrous hair now matted with the aftershock of mutiny. For the newspaper, this was big news, quakier than the cracks in a ruling coalition.

Television cameras trawled the city for Gitanjali Nagpal, to know more about her, her slip into the dark tunnel. She had by then been tracked down by the authorities and admitted to a psychiatric hospital for treatment. This story of sudden lapse is from a time when issues of mental health had guilt associated with it. It was a no-go zone, both feared and forbidden – an uneasy, invisible silence.

Gitanjali, Gitu to friends, had everything that the glamorous fashion world needed. Daughter of a naval officer, she was from the elite Lady Shri Ram College. After a two-month treatment for depression, she recovered and lived down the memory of the collapse to get back to normalcy. She later settled in Europe, unwilling to revisit the past. Her case, however, gave the issue of mental illness a new focus. A new debate started.

The inexorable process of urbanization, along with the complications of a technology-driven age, has taken its toll on the human mind, fraying the nerves and weakening people's ability to cope with newer situations and challenges. What was considered an elite ailment affecting only the top end of society – the powerful rulers and sensitive writers – now knocks at the door of the common man. Depression is as common as diabetes and cardiac problems. This certainly has not happened in a single day.

A king fully in command of his situation, presiding over his court with absolute authority, a doting father, suddenly lapses into insanity, confronted with the rude shock of betrayal by those he has trusted – his own children. *Filial ingratitude* – every undergraduate student of literature reading *King Lear* comes across this term. The storm on the heath when Lear moves around challenging nature to do its worst to him adds an elemental dimension to Shakespeare's play. The disquiet in the human world finds its echo in the wilderness. And it is also the time when political turmoil shakes the kingdom. The unmistakable message is blatantly simple: don't create a structure – political, social, material – you cannot bear. This is truer than ever before. It concerns an individual as much as a culture or a political system. The mind, an integral part of the body, cracks up like any other organ when the pressure is unbearable.

The creative community – writers, artists, actors, musicians – is particularly vulnerable to mental illness. Every student of psychiatry must read about Sylvia Plath, the American poet and novelist

who, diagnosed with clinical depression, committed suicide after several failed attempts in 1963. She was only 30. The morbidity in her writing offers the surest clue to the torment inside her.

‘Something else  
Hails me through air –  
Thighs, hair;  
Flakes from my heels.’

These chilling lines from her poem “Ariel” leave the reader in no doubt about the idea of death she was toying with.

Analysing the cause of Plath’s death, Brian Cooper, a well known psychiatrist, writes in a medical journal:

‘There was a constant dissonance between the bright, buoyant, high-achievement persona whose ideals of success, social status and domesticity are conveyed in the letters to her mother, and the dark sense of isolation and inner emptiness that finds expression in her journals and poems. “No matter how enthusiastic you are,” she wrote as a young student, “...nothing is real, past or future, when you are alone in your room”, and later: “I look down into the warm, earthy world... and feel apart, enclosed in a wall of glass.”’

According to Dr Arnold Ludwig of the University of Kentucky, who probed the relationship between mental illness and writers in a study, ‘people in artistic professions are more likely to have mental illnesses than those in non-creative professions.’ More recent research has pointed to neurological similarities of mental illness and the creative mind.’

Both Virginia Woolf and Ernest Hemingway were diagnosed with depression. Woolf, who had suffered from mood swings, insomnia and hallucinations, finally committed suicide in 1941. Rebellious by temperament, Hemingway resorted to alcoholism and risky adventures as a way of coping. That was the way he was – defiant to the core, intolerant of conventions. When his bipolar disorder and psychosis got severe, he finally agreed to electroconvulsive therapy.

I once visited his house on the outskirts of Havana. It was a sprawling estate with lawns and an outhouse. In the outhouse had lived the writer’s mistress, the guide, a young Cuban woman speaking flawless English with a faint American accent, told me. The writers’ world is morbid, hallucinatory but rebellious as well.

For an article I was once working on, I needed a UN report. When I called one of their offices in Delhi, the voice on the other end was friendly. ‘The report is right here on my desk; do come and collect it.’

The man who greeted me looked very familiar. Bhaskar Bhattacharya, a Doordarshan newsreader from a time when that was the only television channel available. When reminded of his news-reading days, he played it down. ‘There was not much competition those days, so we guys had a little fun.’ He laughed amiably. A man from Allahabad, he loved mountains.

We never met again. About a year later, I read in the papers about his death – jumping off the terrace of the Oberoi. He was suffering from acute depression. The suicide note left behind said he was ‘fed-up’ with the things around him.

This is the new killer stalking each one of us. The good thing is mental illness is no longer a subject pushed behind the screen. Everybody is talking about it. Bollywood actor Deepika Padukone openly talked about her depression and her struggle to come out of it. Now, she is a campaigner for mental health and an inspiring story herself. The mind needs care, and this was as much true about Plath and Woolf then as about Gitanjali or Deepika now. •

Bhaskar Roy