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This Close to Happy: An Exploration of Maternal Trauma, Emotional Neglect and Depression

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Abstract:

Emotions, an essential human trait is pessimistically deployed for centuries either to mock or denigrate women in particular. In other words, being emotional is constructed as a sign of femininity and weakness. However in recent times, with the advent of neuroscience interventions, which highlights the interconnection between the significance of healthy emotional regulation and longitudinal well-being, the perception of comprehending emotions changed drastically. Emotion is no longer a gendered phenomenon and turns out to be the focal of different disciplines like affect studies and psychology. Within this broad context, the growing trend of cosmopolitanism and the impacts of war and immigration elicit critical attention. There are ample of studies reflecting on the difficulty of the brain in getting adapted to the host country culture from the first generation perspective. Whereas the second generation nuanced complexities and struggle in terms of sustenance and adaptation often goes unnoticed. Set in this context, this paper is an endeavor to study and analyze the American writer Daphne Merkin's memoir *This Close to Happy: A Reckoning with Depression* where the narrator becomes victim of her mother unprocessed war trauma and gets afflicted with depression since childhood phase. The study by drawing from the theoretical framework of neuroscience and attachment studies interpret the memoir to underscore how unprocessed maternal trauma could distort the development of sensitive bonding thereby architecting neurobiological changes in their children and make them vulnerable to severe psychological disorders in the adulthood.

Keywords: maternal trauma, insensitivity, attachment, neglect and depression.

Emotions are pivotal for the sustenance of human beings irrespective of gender as it navigates the well-being of both individuals and society as a whole. Nevertheless, the animosity of patriarchy against women has deployed it as a negative trait to belittle and tame the latter. That is being emotional is construed as a sign of femininity, therefore if a man articulates his emotions, he is perceived as a butt of ridicule in the society. These societal, cultural and gender construction of emotions on one side, neuroscience renders new insights in interpreting and comprehending them in an altogether different perspective. Neuroscience states that emotions are defined as “a complex pattern of bodily and mental changes that includes physiological arousal, feelings, cognitive processes, visible expressions (including face and posture) and specific behavioural reactions made in response to a situation perceived as personally significant” (Gerrig and Zimbardo 418) are the focal point in determining the physiological and psychological health of an individual. In other words, emotional health is not only confined to the release of neurochemicals influenced by neurophysiological changes instead intervenes in regulating and shaping the behavior and cognition in an individual.

Emotion is not biologically programmed rather cultivated since childhood phase by observing the primary caregiver facial expressions and behaviors. That is caregivers function as an external psychobiological regulator for the construction of emotional health in children. These early relationships with the caregivers and family members determine the emotional competence of the individual psychological well-being in the longitudinal phase. The unprocessed trauma of Merkin’s mother deprives her optimal spacing in terms of developing secured attachment base, healthy emotional regulation, and positive coping mechanisms during the sensitive phase of brain development. The consequence of attachment disorganization is such Merkin becomes a victim of chronic depressive disorder and loses the vital force in her life.

The absence of maternal warmth and love in Merkin’s mother can be interpreted in two ways. On the biological aspects, an individual role as a caregiver is influenced by his or her childhood encounters and experiences. That is how a caregiver is acknowledged and nurtured as a child becomes a replication of his or her caregiving characteristics. Merkin’s mother being a girl child in an orthodox Jewish family is denied of parental attachment given to their cultural ideology which values boy child over the girl. Although she has not explicitly acknowledged her insidious childhood neglect, it becomes apparent from the way she monotonously comments on the joyful celebration of the birth of her elder son to Merkin, where her husband

and father “did a jig in front of the hospital nursery, weeping for joy, sending crowing telegrams to far-off relatives, announcing the great event” (p. 41). Her observation subtly emphasizes on the lack of emotional generosity as a child. Whereas, the second incident is that Merkin’s mother despite being academically sound is forbidden to pursue higher studies given to her father hatred against secular education during the period of holocaust. Her tragic childhood experiences coupled with the pent-up emotions of lost opportunities transforms her into a hardened personality by fostering trauma and makes her to develop attachment disorganization towards her children.

Trauma takes a tremendous toll on a person’s mental health when an individual refuses to confront and instead represses its complications as it would give rise to unresolved trauma effect where “experiences and memories that have yet to be integrated into the individual’s consciousness ... have an ongoing dysregulating effect on the individual’s mental stress” (Newman et al. 4). In other words, the unprocessed trauma would enable an individual to develop an insidious personality where one feel pleasure and gratification at the expense of someone’s distress. In the context of Merkin’s mother, the gratification comes at the expense of her children distress and affective turmoil.

Tactile sensations play a vital role in regulating the emotional circuits in the brain during the early stages of mother-infant relationships. The maternal affective touch sensitizes certain regions of the social brain and help to build positive behavioral traits in a child (Mateus et al 2021). Merkin since her infancy is deprived of such tactile maternal interactions. The impact is such she ends up as an emotionally baffled person and inclines to develop depressive symptoms at the age of eight. Her mother determined to give vent to her pent-up trauma inclines towards negative parenting traits in doing so. Cautious to be detached in nurturing her children and conscious that her children should not develop bonding with the caregiver, she hires a caretaker named Jane who possesses “a sense of chronic remove, and unwillingness, perhaps, an inability, to connect” personality (p. 87). In other words, Jane replicates her mother’s stoic personality. Merkin who is gripped in fear by the insensitivity of Jane and simultaneously unable to approach her emotionally barren mother feels baffled by her insatiate emotional impulses.

In line with the argument, there are two incidents in the memoir which vividly conceptualize the anxiety and emotional turmoil of Merkin rendered by her yearning for secured base. One is the photograph of Merkin as a one-year-old child in the playpen. Generally at such age, a child desires for rapid attunement and appreciation from the maternal figure even for accomplishing a simple task like to stand upright and hold an object. Merkin is not an

exception. After so many struggles, she successfully manages to stand upright in the playpen for the first time and desires for a warm gesture as a sort of appreciation from her mother. But to her dismay, neither her mother nor Jane cares to acknowledge her progress; therefore she curls up to sleep as she pathetically articulates,

It must have taken some effort to get myself into a standing position—I would have had to do it in carefully coordinated stages, pulling myself along with great concentration—and it would have been nice to be recognized for this feat but...felt stranded in the playpen, stuck with myself...At some point I must have dropped to the floor of the playpen and begun to cry;...I wonder how long I sat there before someone came along to offer consolation...eventually gave up and curled myself to sleep, perhaps with the help of a thumb or pacifier. (p. 26)

To critically interpret the above incident, a warm gesture from her mother not only renders her happiness by releasing the neurochemical oxytocin (pleasure hormone) for a brief period of time, but is interlinked to the construction of the emotionally and morally strong attributes in her brain, thereby encouraging “performance attributions to controllable causes, promotes autonomy and enhances competence” (qtd. in Jennifer 39). However, the absence of such emotional response renders her confusion whether she is doing the right thing or not and stifles her confidence in attempting new endeavors. Because the reward system is juxtaposed with emotional gratification.

Merkin’s inability to form attachment with her mother hurls her into a void of loneliness and instigates to question her sense of belonging in the world. Following the indifference from her mother and Jane in forging attachment, Merkin leaves no stones unturned and tries to make her next move with her siblings and father. However, everyone concerned in protecting their own orbit of security and comfort leaves her stranded to the circumstances. To elaborate further, Merkin’s siblings are paired up in their way to fight against the insensitivity of their mother and to regulate their sustenance. Therefore, the inclusion of Merkin in their smooth sailing relationship fosters them a sense of dread like what if she causes a breach in their rapport as she articulates, “most of the time I was treated by my sisters as the tag-along third, more of an annoyance than anything else... and my efforts to insinuate myself into my sisters’ affections usually ended in my being tearfully rejected” (p. 64). Feeling dejected from all ends and no means to articulate her emotional turmoil Merkin develops insomnia and nightmares. And as she grows up and learns to write, Merkin composes notes and slips it under the bedroom of her parents to spend a few minutes with her mother, only to be ignored by her, which she pathetically articulates as follows,

Once I had learned how to write I would slip notes with urgent communication to my mother (“I can’t fall sleep. Need to talk to you. Will only take a few minutes, I promise”) under my parents’ bedroom door, in the mostly vain hope of getting my mother to emerge...In truth, I moved through the world in a state of moral dread: I worried about school, about friends, about my siblings, about my teachers, about the Lexington Avenue bus, about whether I was acceptable about being alone. (p. 65)

The insomnia coupled with psychological breakdown make her get admitted in the psychiatric institution. Nevertheless, it is not powerful enough to elicit the emotional response from her mother. Though Merkin desperately tries to escape from the clutches of her mother to evade the loneliness, she could not be successful in making the move. Merkin on the pretext of doing higher studies tries to leave her mother. But the moment she gets detached from her mother, a sense of homesickness and identity crisis creeps in. The reason behind Merkin experiencing such contradictory emotions is the impact of an abused childhood cling. To put in the words of Newman, Merkin experiences a “contradictory feelings towards the attachment figure, both fear and the desire to approach, resulting in high stress and a state of unresolvable conflict” (p. 4).

To critically interpret the event, two probable reasons are identified to be the cause of such strange emotions. Firstly, Merkin is anxious what if her absence is utilized by her siblings to replace her space and incline her mother to forget her permanently. Secondly, she could not navigate her life individually without being supervised by her mother, as she articulates “I saw myself going to pieces without my mother to glue me together, my voyage out ending in tragedy rather than triumph...She was my North, my South, my East and West. She had been larger-than-life for me” (p. 60-78). The incessant encounter of such emotional neglect at the sensitive phase of the brain development has deprived the construction of positive attributes like individuality and resilience in Merkin, thereby rigidifying the destructive synaptic spaces. As a consequence, Merkin develops chronic depressive symptoms at the age of eight and starts to contemplate on suicide.

Neuroscience states that there is a strong association between food and emotional gratification. Nutrition plays a vital role in terms of boosting neural development, stabilizing the established connections (synapses) and maintaining the long-term well-being. The neuropsychology of food often go unnoticed when it comes to interpreting the psychological trauma elicited by deprivation of balanced diet. Besides, it also neglects to study how it affects cognition and leads to contracting chronic depressive disorders. The brain development during

the sensitive period is directed by two components namely “experience-expectant” and “experience-dependent” (Greenough and James 156). Nutrition belongs to the experience-dependent factor because it is, “an aspect of the environment that is expected by the brain for normal development” (Prado and Kathryn 268). However, Merkin mother’s intergeneration trauma overlooks that aspect and bestows an insatiable craving and yearning for food. Adding up to this, the deliberate stinginess in terms of food and sanitation from her parents end makes her to question the fundamental existence of her living, relationship with her parents and identity.

Taking into account the family status of Merkin, she does not need to suffer from the lack of basic provisions and hygiene. Her family by lineage is part of upper-strata of the society, as her grandfather is a fur trade businessman and her father is a Wall Street Financier. Besides, her parents live a kind of sophisticated lifestyle given to their dining in royal splendor restaurant named Copenhagen and own everything in multiples and branded. Whereas, contradictory to their family status, Merkin and her siblings live in famishment.

According to household norms, Merkin’s mother dictates the menu for the day and it is the job of the cook Iva to carry out the rest. To a great extent, menu do not undergo change based on the preference of the family members choice instead work according to the respective days in the week like Wednesday is for spinach, fried fish and mashed potatoes and Thursday for spaghetti and meat balls. On the surface level, these food might sound appetizing and tends not to lack in nutrition. However, the problem lies with the quantity, which would not be sufficient enough to satiate the appetite of Merkin and her siblings, as it is evident from the incident where they engage in a tussle to have seconds as she articulates, “There were endless arguments with my siblings over who would get seconds at dinner, especially when it came to chicken or meat, which always ran out early” (p. 57). Adding up to quantity issues, Merkin lacks balanced diet and ends up being the victim of nutrition deficiency. Because when it comes to lunch for school, Merkin box is regularly filled with butter bread topped by chocolate sprinkles which underscores the substandard nutrition. Likewise, Merkin’s mother is not in the habit of going to the supermarket and buying groceries and vegetables; rather simply prefers canned ones and tends to be stringent even in ordering fruits. Parents tend to be glad when children prefer fruits over junk food and confectionary but Merkin’s mother turn out to be different. Whatever might be the instances, she is unequivocal in marking off the boundaries in terms of what she deserves and never abandons her retribution. From her perspective, acknowledging and granting her children yearning for food would render space for self-assertion and self-esteem thereby distorting their spirit of dependency. When Merkin insists

her mother to order cherries she is reluctant and sarcastically comments that they are expensive. Thai is Merkin's mother indirectly indicates that she is not worthy enough to have them.

Merkin's experiences in terms of food contradict with her friends at school who bring "cut-up vegetables and fruit that accompanied their tuna fish or egg salad sandwiches, fitted out with lettuce and tomato and sometimes a pickle" (p. 57). One day Merkin pays a visit to her friend Mahla Kupferman on the eve of Shabbos and feels emotionally hurt seeing her family emotionally connected. Merkin sees Kupferman family members form a circle around the island in the kitchen and toss their favorite ingredients in the wooden bowl to make salad. Such personal encounters make Merkin to question why she has been deliberately made to starve and ponders why there is no such bonding in her family. Unable to ground valid explanations for such indifference and strange mentality of her parents, Merkin blames herself as the cause and develops adverse psychological distress. To elaborate further, if Merkin's familial economic status is inferior compared with her friend Mahla, her understanding of this scenario would take an altogether different perspective. Besides, Merkin could not open up herself and confide her feeling to Kupferman because of the traumatic distress rendered by embarrassment and shame. In line with the argument regarding nutrition, Merkin also lacks the rudimentary of being raised in hygiene conditions as she articulates,

our bath towels, ragged with wear...(Our parents' plush towels were kept in pristine condition in a closet in their bedroom.) We also wore undershirts and socks two days in a row, despite the presence of a laundress. I still remember the feel of those socks, stiff with dried sweat. The soap in the bathroom was always worn down to a silver and for some reason two or three of us shared the bathwater...instead of its begin run afresh. (p. 58)

Such noticeable difference in the kind of lifestyle between Merkin and her parents underscores how the unresolved trauma that is the "experiences and memories that have yet to be integrated into the individual's consciousness and which have an ongoing dysregulating effect on the individual's mental stress" (Newman et al. 4) and intergenerational attachment pattern could distort the traits of good parenting thereby enabling children like Merkin vulnerable and prone to chronic depression. The plight of Merkin in relation to sanitation not only threatens her in terms of contracting deadly infections but also creates an indelible imprint in her brain circuits about the futility of her existence. On one hand, Merkin with no ends to satiate her sensation of hunger starts to fetishize food. Whereas on the other hand, she desperately yearns to escape from the clutches of her mother but in vain.

By drawing from the theoretical framework of Neuroscience, the above arguments substantiate how parental war memories and unresolved trauma has ruined the life of Merkin by making her a victim of chronic depression. Besides, it also highlights how positive emotions act as a good feed for the brain in the early years of childhood in building long-term psychological health. The neuroscience and attachment theories have unraveled the impact and influence that emotions could have on the individual well-being, through the life experiences of Merkin in a negative context. Unlike the resilience neuroplasticity which could be fostered quite easily given an appropriate healing space and therapeutic interventions, destructive plasticity which is characterized by the formation of rigid neural networks at the critical period of brain development is hard to reverse.

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