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Intersecting Aesthetics of Suffering: Emotional Expression and Clinical Realism in “The Stories of Shanti” and “The Steel Windpipe”

Bhup Raj Joshi

Assistant Professor

Far Western University

bhuprajoshi330@gmail.com

Abstract

This article builds on the complexity of suffering as manifest in the two texts, “The Stories of Shanti: Culture and Karma” and Mikhail Bulgakov’s “The Steel Windpipe” that foreground the interaction of emotional expression, culture, clinical realities, and ethical concerns. It explores the conflict of traditional healing paradigms in relation to contemporary medical practice. A comparative textual analysis approach to illustrate how suffering is constructed, defined, and experienced across different cultural worlds and how, by extension, medical practitioners navigate ethical duties amid cultural safety concerns regarding biomedical requirements has been used. Bringing together the religious readings of suffering, personal testimony, and elements of medical realism, it argues that suffering is not only an individual pathology but is relational, culturally mediated, and spiritually interpretive. The representations of Shanti and Lidka illustrate how meaning-making, emotional resilience, generosity, familial involvement, and medical ethics (both patient-centered and in relation to their caregivers), can shape the lived experience of illness. The concluding remark of this paper is that suffering is not just a physical state but also rather an integrated state of mind, body, and spirit, influenced by different cultural perspectives.

Keywords: *Suffering, spirituality, medical ethics, clinical realism, pain, interpretation*

Introduction

It is not merely a lack of the desired things and physical pain that cause suffering in men but it also results from suffering when one is unable to make the life purposeful. Absurdity-induced pain in life gives birth to sentimental, intellectual, and soulful sufferings. Despite the commonality of the primary needs of humans to achieve the meaning of life, the way of fulfilling them vary subjectively. These personal sufferings appear more intense challenging in the life of a person. Suffering, in its most encompassing form, describes the state of being in pain, distress, hardship, or mental anguish. However, even though it permeates our daily lives, suffering, as a construct, eludes simplistic definition. Suffering is not simply one thing; it is a complicated constellation of body, mind, spirit, physical, emotional, social, existential, and psychological aspects. In everyday language, the phrase suffering is often merely shorthand for physical pain, but this interpretation disregards the interplay of mind, body, and spirit that creates human lived experiences of illness, adversity, and suffering. The significant challenge in existing social and medical systems is the seeming difficulty in integrating human suffering holistically. Modern societies have fractured human experience into distinct components, separating the body from the emotional or the spiritual, and effectively losing the holistic nature of suffering.

Literature, especially illness narratives and accounts of medical experiences, is an important way to examine suffering in all its intensity. “The Stories of Shanti: Culture and Karma” and Mikhail Bulgakov’s “The Steel Windpipe” are two case studies that illustrate suffering not simply as a biologically-based experience, but rather, a culturally and spiritually mediated phenomenon. Both narratives illustrate the nuanced tensions between cultural understandings of sickness and biomedical models for understanding illness, drawing attention to the moral complexity that arises in the clinical encounter.

The article closely examines these stories, ultimately studying the experience of suffering as a complex, multifaceted phenomenon. The authors state that suffering cannot be adequately conceived without considering the ways in which culture, spirituality, emotive expression, care, and ethical decisions have great roles in the human troubles in its various forms. As comparative studies, the authors emphasize the differences and connections in suffering in Shanti’s Hindu Worldview is compared to Lidka’s medical crisis. The stories provide rich illustrations of how individuals and families experience the multiple dimensions of suffering, including pain, uncertainty, fear and existential fear, and how, as health care professionals, we experience the moral dimension of care. The aim of this research is twofold: first, the research endeavors to investigate the expanded aesthetic, cultural, psychological, and clinical dimensions of suffering, and second, to demonstrate the overlapping concerns of literature and medicine in understanding human pain. By taking theoretical perspectives, narrative analysis, and ethics into account, the discussion views the ways suffering is both investigated and represented in this influential work of literature and the practice of medicine. In very simple terms, the state of undergoing

pain, distress, or hardship is called suffering. The inability to empathize with human pain is a major crisis of the present-day society. Sense of psycho-sentimental pain is more complicated than mere somatic suffering as there is the intricate connection of mind and emotions. Therefore, suffering has a holistic formation of mind, body and feelings. People always suffer as complete human beings when they experience pain. It is impossible to fully isolate human emotional, cognitive, and spiritual pain from all other types of suffering, including that caused by detrimental natural, ecological, political, economic, and social circumstances. In actuality, they communicate and have an impact on one another.

Methodology

This project uses a qualitative textual analysis approach to investigate how the concept of suffering is illustrated and understood in both “The Stories of Shanti: Culture and Karma” and “The Steel Windpipe.” Textual analysis is particularly suitable to investigate constructs such as suffering, because it cannot be examined as a measurable outcome, such as how well a patient engages in narrative (study examining the patient’s history), emotional expression (emotional disturbance), or a cultural lens in validating suffering. The textual analysis method showcases multiple layers of close reading: identify suffering pattern, analyze cultural/spiritual beliefs, understand emotional/psychological responses, and ethical implications of medical decisions.

The primary materials are the narrative accounts of Shanti, a Hindu woman diagnosed with terminal breast cancer, and Lidka, a child receiving an emergency tracheotomy in a medical narrative by Bulgakov. The secondary materials consist of various literature about suffering, medical ethics, spirituality in health care, and various cultural understandings of pain and illness. Various authors, including Cassell (1982), Coulehan (2012), Currow and Hegarty (2006), and Gelfand et al. (2005), provide theoretical framework for interpreting the multilayered experience of suffering and ethical dilemmas for clinicians.

Utilizing a phenomenological-cultural hermeneutic interpretive framework, this study looks at suffering not as an event but as a lived experience. Phenomenology offers strategies to examine how someone perceives and interprets suffering, and cultural hermeneutics elucidates how belief systems and cultural frameworks support meaning-making. Combining this analytic framework will provide a broader understanding of how suffering is expressed in more than just feelings as it is accounted for in their spirituality, their medical experiences, and their relations.

Results and Discussion

Suffering is a difficult-to-define, global phenomenon with many facets. The concept is not uniform. Rather, it is a term that characterizes the myriad ways in which individuals cope with sadness, suffering, loss, and hardship. There are several definitions of suffering. It is known as “extreme anguish” (Gregory & English, 1994, p. 18), “soul pain” (Coulehan, 2012, p. 227), and even “being less than whole” (Currow & Hegarty, 2006, p. 134). The state of extreme distress brought on by

circumstances that jeopardize a person's integrity is known as suffering. Suffering starts when a person perceives that they are about to be destroyed, and it lasts until either the threat of disintegration has passed or the person's integrity can be restored in some other way. Pain is one aspect of suffering, but it is not the only one, and medicine has a duty to alleviate suffering. However, its transcendent dimension the spirit of human life has been ignored by modern medicine (Cassell, 1982). Thus, the spiritual aspect of suffering needs to be taken under consideration while talking about this issue.

Another equally important issue that comes along with human suffering is the issue of healing and medicine. Though the modern biomedical system overlooks the importance of the spiritual or psychological aspect of healing, it is an unavoidable reality that traditional logics of healing based on spiritual system has a lot to do with the medical system even in the present time. The multifaceted nature of human suffering and how suffering and healing are inextricably linked with body, mind and spirit with special reference to the “Stories of Shanti: Culture and Karma” and “The Steel Windpipe”. Human Suffering and Spiritual Searching

People not only suffer because of external causes viz. economic, ecological, natural, social and bodily pain. Even within these external causes there is certain element of spirituality. Traditional Eastern society where the cultural system of healing still exists in many parts of the area strongly adheres to the spiritual belief and follow both the systems simultaneously when they feel unwell. But, “Western health practices fail to recognize the conjunction of human suffering and spiritual searching” (Coleman & White, 2009, p. 12). Westerners only focus on body and do not realize that body is only the location where the soul dwells. Suffering and pain often goes beyond the level of the body and hurt the soul. In this situation one cannot get rid of pain and suffering only by treating the body rather one needs to heal the wound that is deep down into the soul which requires spiritual searching.

In “The Stories of Shanti: Culture and Karma” a 64-year-old woman named Shanti, who suffers from breast cancer and is spending the last days of her life writhing and groaning with intolerable pain and suffering in the death bed, thinks that suffering is the best way to get redemption in the next life. She believes in reincarnation and power of Karma in her life. For Shanti “The pain and suffering she was experiencing were given to her by the gods to be endured. Relief from her pain would produce bad karma, and would have negative ramifications for the next life” (Gelfand et al., 2005, p. 178). She thinks that pain medicine would not help her soul progress toward perfection, but would instead stop it. For her, suffering is will of God and to try to overcome it is to defy the god.

A young man's valiant fight with illness and his spiritual development during his experience are also powerfully depicted in the 2016 film "Until Forever." It is based on a true story of Michael and Michelle Boyum, demonstrates the power of love in the face of fear, the tenacity of hope in the face of loss, and the truth of faith in the face of uncertainty. The bond between Michael and Michelle is based on a deep faith and is full of love and humor. However, Michael's diagnosis of a rare form of leukemia shatters the young couple's hopes for a future together. Because of her spiritual idea, Michelle is constantly optimistic that

Michael will recover from a rare and deadly illness.

Theorizing Suffering

A person's real feelings are that he undergoes is suffering rather than an abstract idea. Painfulness, personal and unpleasantness are the concrete marks of suffering.

Generally, suffering is understood as a "loss of the self" or an unpleasant experience but we often forget that every negative thing has also some bright aspects. Leknes and Bastian (2008) propose "to move beyond a view of pain as simply unpleasant" (p.28). the unpleasantness of pain can also lead to motivation and valor relieving a person from other and further sufferings.

In "The stories of Shanti", along with intolerable pain and suffering, Shanti is also experiencing some sort of relief and pleasant experience that she is on the way of Nirvana. She seems to be happy inwardly because she is determined not to go against the will of the God. Due to the same strength Shanti doesn't seem to have been experiencing pain. Even until the last moment of her life she endures all the suffering believing that, "Pain is symbolic, the result of past actions, given by the gods to be endured, purifying the soul for the next incarnation" (Gelfand et al., 2005, p. 185). Similarly, in the story of small girl Lidka, all the people who were directly affected by the illness of the girl including the parents, the doctor, hospital staff and the girl herself, get a sort of great relief when the operation succeeds. It is also based on the theory that without experiencing the unpleasantness we cannot have the true realization of pleasantness. Unpleasantness is the emotion expressed by individuals either due to physical, social or psychological suffering. Suffering and emotion are directly linked to the system of human mind since one's suffering is determined by the nature of emotions one develops within one's mind.

The same event might cause various types of emotions to develop in the mind of different individuals and experiences the same level of suffering. Emotion and suffering are such fluid concepts that they vary from individual to individual. Some people are like this who suffer even in the most enjoyable situation and some others who enjoy even the most frustrating situation accepting it as natural. The same sort of situation can be experienced in "The Stories of Shanti" and "The Steel Windpipe". Shanti's story explicates how the meaning of suffering, disease and dying is socially constructed. For Shanti, Anxiety arising from neglecting from religious strictures...exceeds any bodily pain. Religious and cultural convictions are something more important for her and the family than the suffering itself. At one point in the story, it is mentioned that, Shanti's husband may have wished to see his wife free from pain but not have been willing to become involved in a process that he regarded as a violation of important cultural and religious tenets.

Religious and Cultural Interpretation of Suffering

In "The Story of Shanti", there is a long-term conflict between biomedical concepts of illness and cultural or religious beliefs. Biomedicine values personal independence in terms of taking medical decisions. But Shanti, who is brought up in a traditional Hindu culture cannot accept it. In the story, the hospital staff make the effort to consult with a nurse experienced with Hindu beliefs and rituals who can help

the staff adapt their care to better meet the family needs. As Kodiath and Kodiath (1995) affirm that, “Hindu persons’ age and their quality of life is defined more by spiritual aspects than physical functioning” (Gelfand et al., 2005, p. 180). For 64-year-old Shanti, as her physical health declined, it became increasingly important for her to focus on her spiritual journey even if it meant enduring physical pain that would seem intolerable to others. The concept of karma is the most crucial to understand the mystery of the suffering in the stories of Shanti. The doctrine of karma teaches that “all experience is the reward or punishment for previous actions” (Bhungalia & Kemp, 2002, p. 180). She tolerates all the pain and suffering being fully optimistic that she is getting redemption and her next life would be better enough. Even the death of Shanti is “beautiful” because of spiritual integrity and wholeness. Surrounded by all the family member she dies a meaningful death because of her strong faith in Hindu belief system and reincarnation. Ethical question regarding the pain, suffering and the system of medication is another crucial issue that requires thorough discussion. The questions like, whether the sufferer should know about his/her illness or prognosis, whether to provide extensive relief from pain or not, whether the doctor should intervene against the will of the patients or guardians in order to cure the disease, to what extent the cultural and religious beliefs matter while administering a medical treatment.

In “The Stories of Shanti”, it is not thought ethical to inform her about her illness. As per the request of Shanti, “The physicians and nurses were not fulfilling their professional responsibilities to provide adequate pain relief and a clear disclosure to Shanti about her diagnosis and prognosis” (Gelfand et al., 2005, p. 181) realizing that both pain control and preferences for disclosure are cultural factors. Shanti thinks it ethical to tolerate the pain and suffering because it is God’s wish and it leads us towards Nirvana. In ethical explanation of suffering “Some participants experience transformation through suffering and evolve coping skills such as gaining more spiritual perception to life, self, and suffering” (Ellis et al., 2015 p. 203).

In the story “The Windpipe” by Mikhail Bulgakov a small girl named Lidka is taken to Muryovo Hospital for the treatment of diphtheria. The great ethical question comes in front of the doctor when there is no other alternative left except going through a difficult throat operation of the girl but the mother and grand-mother of the girl go strictly against it. On one hand it was really difficult for the parents to let the doctor cut the throat of their girl because there was only little chance to succeed, on the other, the professional ethics of the doctor could not leave the girl dying without doing the last effort to save her life. When the doctor decides that, “I’ll have to cut open her throat near the bottom of her neck and put in a silver pipe so that she can breathe” (p.271), the mother refuses to hand over the little girl and there is a sort of ethical struggle between the parents of the child and the doctor. No one is sure what will happen after operation but both of them are performing their best possible moral responsibilities until she is alive.

Suffering as Multidimensional Phenomenon

Somatic suffering

Main cause of bodily stress is pain. Suffering arises upon inadequate

addressing or disregard for the pains and symptoms. In one case study, a man tried to solve his problem of chronic pain on his own without support and understanding from health professionals by drinking alcohol (Berglund et al. 2012). In “The Stories of Shanti”, Shanti who suffers from breast cancer has to tolerate the intolerable physical pain. She suffers from, “...anorexia and weight loss, digestive problems, headaches, and pain in her shoulders, chest, hips and back; she grimaced when she moved; she had shortness of breath and a persistent cough” (Gelfand et al., 2005, p. 177). Though she is very sick and she is having various types of physical pain, she never wishes to know about her illness because she is preoccupied with the religious explanation of suffering that present painful condition is the outcome of the past deeds or it is the punishment given by God. So, Shanti endures the pain without expressing it publicly and even without taking any pain killers.

In the story “The Steel Windpipe” the little girl is dying of diphtheria. It is really traumatic situation not only for the child rather for the whole family that, “The child could not breathe. She will be dead in an hour” (Nadelhaft & Bonebakker, 2008, p. 270). The little girl undergoes a very difficult throat operation where the doctor has to transplant a steel windpipe in her throat replacing the natural one. In this way in both of the stories we find the elements of physical suffering most pervasive throughout the text.

Psychological suffering.

Psychological suffering is another important aspect of suffering. Since different aspects of suffering are closely interlinked, we cannot totally ignore the other several related aspects of suffering while talking about psychological aspect of suffering. There is the chance of physical pain affecting one’s psychology and vice-versa. Physical disabilities, pain and suffering obstruct the normal course of life in any one’s life. It changes the individual from independent from dependent on other people for several causes. One has to bear the load of high medical expenses on one hand and cannot work or earn on the other. He/she gets changed unexpected reactions from the people with whom is in relation with for long and even start ignoring completely.

Consequently, the sufferer suffers much psychologically and mentally showing the additional health complications. In “The Stories of Shanti” Shanti goes through psychological suffering along with physical one. In “The Steel Windpipe” not only the child rather her parents and grandparents go through complicated psychological stress. Her mother is so tormented psychologically that sometimes she bangs her forehead on the floor, saying that “I will kill myself if she dies” (Nadelhaft & Bonebakker, 2008, p. 271). In this way psychological suffering seems dominant in both of the stories.

Psychological suffering can be interpreted from another perspective too. Most often people suffer psychologically caused by the suffering of one’s nearest and dearest ones. In both the stories of Shanti and Lidka, the family members, relatives and the hospice staff who are in direct involvement with the patients suffer psychologically even more than the patients themselves. Doctors and the Nurses treating Shanti are much worried because she rejects to have any medicine. In the same way Lidka’s mother, grandmother, doctor and other hospital staff seem to be in

a high psychological pressure while performing complicated throat operation. In this way psychological suffering has its root in all other kinds of suffering since it can be emerged due to either physical, social, cultural or psychological suffering itself.

Societal suffering

Next view of suffering is social. The acts of friends are tremendously valued. Unsparing love from significant others is often seen as a gift to individuals in pain. At the same time, when care and support from family and friends is insufficient; one sees the effects of a troubled relationship, ungracious speech, and the anxiety of being neglected by our loved ones and friends. Social relationship of any individual play vital role to accelerate or deaccelerate the intensity of suffering. Love, respect, affection or warmth of members, in family relatives help to heal one's suffering whereas the indifference, humiliation and torture intensify the pain and suffering. In "The Stories of Shanti" Shanti is the character who feels isolated and, "Shanti and her husband were upset because their son did not live with them because of job related reasons" (Gelfand et al., 2005, pp. 177-178). She was grown up in an extended family but now she is destined to live a lonely life in the old age away from her dear children. Though this sort of social isolation might necessarily be hurting her emotionally, however, being the diehard follower of Hinduism, she is confident that all of her suffering has its roots to the earlier deeds of life.

Existential suffering

In this aspect, sufferer feels driven to get involved in taking action and even in health choice due to existential angst. Participants express lack of freedom to decide and participate in their patient-oriented care (Berglund et al. 2012). Consequently, this could increase feeling of insecurity, forcing the patients to carry on an undignified fight for themselves provoking existential suffering (Arman et al, 2004). In "The Stories of Shanti" there is overt struggle between Shanti and the hospice staff. She suffers from breast cancer and it is spreading rapidly throughout her body but when hospital staff suggests her to go through medication, she rejects it. In this sense there seems to be an existential suffering on behalf of Shanti because she thinks that she should be given the freedom to bear the suffering in the name of God.

Conclusion

To sum up, human suffering is a very complex multifaceted phenomenon. A main concern in the present-day world is its inability to understand what suffering is in real sense. Since it is beyond mere physicality, suffering has its connection to thoughts and feelings. It includes spirit, psyche, emotion and physic which altogether form holistic experiences of a human. It is crystal clear that the literature written by the people who are the veterans of suffering give the true idea of what is suffering. The stories that I have selected for this paper also express the first-hand experience of the victims and the doctors. There is the suffering of the patients Shanti and Lidka, the suffering of the relatives of the sufferers, and the suffering of the medical staff who are directly involved in the treatment of the patients can be interpreted in different levels in both stories. In this way it is obvious that suffering is multidimensional and to a greater extent it is relative to culture, time and place.

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