

“No excellent soul is exempt from a mixture of madness”—Aristotle.

In a particularly distraught moment, I logged on to my Facebook account and reached out to all my friends who I knew battled with one or the other form of mental health issues. Some were going through troubled marriages, some disappointing their parents, some struggling adults, some unable to go to grad school and all battling their minds.

It was in those moments of deep despair and utter panic, that I was flooded with assurances and at least a million advice—knitting, writing journals, finally getting on to writing fiction, drawing, painting, sketching, baking or dancing. The list of activities made sense since I grew up reading of the almost bizarre obsession linking mental health illness and flairs of creative spurs.



The Scream by Edvard Munch

Writers, painters and even famous chefs have often knowingly or unknowingly resorted to creative outlets to tackle bouts of depression, anxiety or other forms of mental health problems. In Bangladesh, the scope of using art therapy as a mode of mental health counseling is a still much unexplored arena.

In a country where there are so few psychologists and mental health counselors being added to the workforce annually, it comes as no surprise that this field is still in its infancy.

But there is an age-old link between the arts and struggles with mental health problems.

Linking the mad mind with mad creations

“Sunflowers”, “The Scream”, “Starry night”, “The Spirit of the Dead Watch”, “The Decorative Cat”—what all these names have in common is that they are all artworks, some so famous that they have been produced and reproduced in various mediums hundreds of times and all of the paintings have been created by artists who have struggled with depression, anxiety, schizophrenia or some other form of mental health issues.

Second only to Leonardo da Vinci’s “Mona Lisa”, Edvard Munch’s “The Scream” may be the most iconic human figure in the history of Western art.



The Bachelor Party by Louis Wain

ART FOR THE SOUL AND MIND

Exploring the link between creativity and mental illness and art as a form of therapy

ABIDA RAHMAN CHOWDHURY



PHOTO: ROBINA RASHID BHUIYAN

Essentially “The Scream” is autobiographical, an expressionistic construction based on Munch’s actual experience of a scream piercing through nature while on a walk, after his two companions, seen in the background, had left him. No one could have created the painting without battling inner demons, as Munch did. The celebrated Norwegian artist’s life was fraught with anxiety and hallucinations.

Vincent van Gogh’s struggles with

mental health problems are no secret either. Gogh, who cut off his ear after an argument with his friend Paul Gauguin, and later killed himself, swayed heavily between genius and madness.

Even Gauguin is thought to have fought battles in his mind. The influential painter is known for working through the media of painting, sculpting, ceramics and prints. He was involved in the development of French Post-Impressionist movement. However, Gauguin, who at one point of his life attempted suicide, suffered from severe bouts of debilitating depression. He is credited with creating some his most iconic paintings after he moved to Tahiti.

Not just painters or illustrators, history is littered with writers and musicians and other artists who have struggled with mental health problems as well. The most famous of them is possibly Sylvia Plath. In a time and age riddled with anxiety and modern-day troubles, Plath’s *The Bell Jar* has found new meaning. There are others too. A cursory glance through the internet and names such as Ernest Hemmingway, Leo Tolstoy and Virginia Woolf pop up. The link between mental health and creativity has long captivated philosophers and scientists.

According to an article on the Scientific American published in 2013, a 40-year study of roughly 1.2 million Swedish people, found that with the exception of bi-polar disorder, those in scientific and artistic occupations were not more likely to suffer from psychiatric disorders. So full-blown mental illness did not increase the probability of entering a creative profession (even the exception, bi-polar disorder, showed only a small effect of eight percent).

However, siblings of patients with autism and first-degree relatives of patients with schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, and anorexia nervosa were

significantly overrepresented in creative professions, the article added.

Popular opinion has often tilted towards linking mental health illnesses and creative spurs. True or not, creativity can be an effective method out and a point of engagement for those suffering from mental health problems. Creating can be therapeutic for those who are already suffering. For instance, research shows that expressing writing increases immune system functioning, and the emerging field of post-traumatic growth is showing how people can turn adversity into creative growth.

'As I bake/paint/draw/write, I heal'

“I bake every weekend. Sometimes, late into the night. Most days when I start baking my thoughts are disheveled. I am very anxious and usually feel either disoriented or panicked when I am unable to process my thoughts in a constructive manner,” says Robina Rashid Bhuiyan, a 29-year-old professional, and a home-baker.

“Baking is precision work, when I get to it, I have no time to second guess and cannot leave anything for the next moment. Your thoughts are completely channeled in trying to get the measurements and the technique right. It is not relaxing at all but when after all the work I see my final product, I feel it is worth it.”

As Robina measures the creamy white flour, melts the ebony dark-chocolate, grinds the earthy cinnamon bark, I see a transformation happen. She is more focused, her energy channeled in one direction as her creation comes through in the form of cinnamon rolls, a retro chocolate cake or an artisanal bread—a crusty shell enclosing spongy air pockets of starchy goodness.

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Ruby does not know entirely how is it that baking makes her feel better in moments of crisis, but she does it nonetheless and she believes it is because of her intense love for baking.

“For many of us suffering from different mental health issues we are often plagued by thoughts of failure and that is why I feel creative outlets have so much impact on us. When I am able to create something, it makes me feel accomplished. I have ownership over it and there is something intensely beautiful about that,” she opines.

Creating something from scratch, putting it together painstakingly piece by piece, almost imitates the nuances of life.

For Nahar, it was painting that helped her get through intense moments of despair. “I have painted the insides of my wardrobe, painted the corner of my bed and of course the traditional canvases.

“But I have to admit, it is not that I always paint or create something when I am going through my bouts of depression. Of course, I have sought professional help. I have gone to counselors and also taken medication. Painting is just possibly one of my many coping mechanisms.”



PHOTO: NAHAR KHULSHI

EVENT

DU ORGANISES SECOND CONFERENCE ON ROHINGYA

A three-day international conference on the Rohingya crisis, which came to an end earlier this week, was organised by the Department of Criminology at the Nabab Nawab Ali Chowdhury Senate Bhaban at Dhaka University. It was entitled: “Rohingya: Politics, Ethnic Cleansing and Uncertainty.”

Various dignitaries present in the programme voiced their opinion regarding the ongoing crisis. Former Chief Justice, Mohd Mozammel Hossain said that he was doubtful about the success of the repatriation agreement signed between Myanmar and Bangladesh as Myanmar had the authority to decide whom to take back under the agreement.

University of Dhaka Vice Chancellor, Professor Dr Aktharuzzaman said that the Myanmar government’s response to the initiatives of the Bangladesh government for repatriating the Rohingya was frustrating and it was clear that the Myanmar authorities did not want to take the Rohingyas back.

Referring to a recent statement of Myanmar’s de facto leader Aung San Suu Kyi, in which she alleged that Bangladesh was prolonging the repatriation process, Akhter said that Suu Kyi was making fun of a serious humanitarian crisis.

Professor Salimullah Khan also took part in the conference. He opined that the Rohingya persecution has been taking place over the decades and there has been a complete denial of their citizenship in the process. International recognition of a “Rohingya state” is a prerequisite to resolving the crisis according to him.

Dr Abul Barakat, Department of Economics, University of Dhaka, said

Art therapy in Bangladesh

Art, in any form, be it writing, cooking, baking, drawing or painting can be a therapeutic tool in coping with mental health issues, says experts in mental health counseling in Bangladesh.

“Art is one of the many used tools in therapy but is not widely deployed here in Bangladesh,” says Dr Kamal Chowdhury, program director, Nasirullah Psychotherapy Unit (NPU), Department of Clinical Psychology, University of Dhaka.

Drawing or painting or everyday acts of creativity helps in venting.

Robina rightfully points out how ingrained and how valuable everyday acts of creativity were in our tradition, “We possibly do not remember it, but our aunts, grandmothers, and mothers growing up in the village were also engaged in artisanal pursuits. They would make mats, weave hand fans and make *nakshikantha*. And they took immense pride in their creations.”

“The use of art as a form of therapy is not so widespread in Bangladesh like it is in the west but then again counseling itself is a new field here. We use art to some degree but it is only limited to children and is not used for adults and cannot be considered as art therapy,” said Dr Kamal.

Formally, there is no place in the country that provides art therapy.

When asked whether there is any scope at all in implementing art therapy in Bangladesh, Dr Kamal says “Of course there is. It is a good tool but with all tools expertise is required in implementing it and we have to be cautious that this tool is not misused.”

Meanwhile, Nishat Fatima Rahman, assistant professor, Lead Psychosocial Well-being Unit at BIED of BRAC University is of the same opinion “Art as a form of therapy is not as commonly used in Bangladesh but to say it is completely not used is also not true.”

“It is mostly used in case of children, especially those who have suffered some kind of trauma and have developed PTSD. These children often find it difficult to express themselves or do not have the language capacity to express their feelings can use this form of therapy.

“But we do not have expertise in this field and more work is required to truly make this an effective tool,” she opines.

Whether art can heal a troubled mind or a troubled mind can make art and eventually help the healing process will probably always be up for debate. But that art and the mind are forever tied with one coincidental string is no question.

The names of some interviewees have been changed at their request.



PHOTO COURTESY: DEPARTMENT OF CRIMINOLOGY, UNIVERSITY OF DHAKA

the root cause of the crisis is that the economic transition of Myanmar has turned into a political transition. “Myanmar is one of the richest countries in the world in terms of natural resources. 90% of the resources are in the hill tracts area where Rohingya minorities live. Most of the resources are in Rakhine state. So, to grab the land or property – the best way is to erase their existence and this is what is happening there,” he said.

Praising the Bangladesh government’s efforts in giving shelter to the Rohingya, Papa Kysma Sylla, deputy representative of UNHCR, said to resolve the crisis its challenges have to be addressed properly.

The conference witnessed scholars, academicians and stakeholders from the USA, England, India, Nepal, Brunei and Bangladesh. A total of 70 papers were presented at the conference. The goal of the conference was to address the historical, political reality, gender and environmental issues, persecution and the atrocities that have taken place against the Rohingya community and find out solutions to the crisis.

Ms Kelley Loper, Associate Professor and Director, Center for Comparative and Public Law, Faculty of Law, The University of Hong Kong, was the keynote speaker.

Content by Department of Criminology, University of Dhaka