OFF CAMPUS

DOES SUFFERING MAKE GREAT ART?

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When the app Tumblr was still relevant and a safe space for 11-year-old wannabe writers to encounter quick literature, I came across a poem by Emily Dickinson titled "I Felt a Funeral in My Brain". I remember thinking, "How much grief does a person have to wallow in in order to articulate such words?"

Thomas H Johnson's 1955 biography *Emily Dickinson: An Interpretive Biography* established the 1861–1865 window as Dickinson's most creative period in her identity as a poet and that there is a degree of obsession one needs to possess to create such works. Needless to say, I was panicking. Not only was I unsuccessful in being unhappy, but I had also failed to produce any other emotion worth writing about. The critic's words stayed with me as I grew into writing and left one question: to what extent is suffering necessary for great art?

Indeed, there exists a consuming desire — in emotion or way of life — needed to be remarkable, to reach the height of creativity and skill that truly stands out. The blueprints of our music, literature, and theatre have been drawn by devoted figures in history who help us believe so. Writers like Sylvia Plath produced canonical works shaped by intense suffering and grief and helped establish the title of a "tormented writer". While figures like SM Sultan showed immense dedication to their art by choosing a reclusive lifestyle, allowing their environment and solitude to shape their creative practice.

The idea of an obsessed artist is explored numerous times in cinema as well. Movies like *Black Swan* and *Whiplash* show a similar theme of resorting to extremism in order to reach the illusion of perfection. Misery being an antidote for great art has been explored beyond poetry as well. In Imtiaz Ali's *Rockstar*, the character of Khatana Bhai guides the protagonist Jordan towards artistic depths by telling him that pain, *dukh*, is an inherent trait possessed by all great artists. He doesn't refer to light or feigned *dukh* but emphasises that his inner turmoil should be felt through his music. Consequently, Jordan reaches stardom — driven by an obsessive pursuit of love, loss, and emotional extremity.

Morbidly so, I had a sudden appreciation for every song, movie, or story that was a product of sadness or fixation, at times both. Without the fracture of grief, after all, how could we have gotten works like Rabindranath Tagore's *Nastanirh*, or have Mahmoud Darwish write after a tumultuous heartbreak: "Out of my ignorance, I called you a homeland, and I forgot homelands are taken away."

Along with the desire to create work with emotional depth and psychological layers, there is also a fear of remaining ordinary, which often drives this pursuit of intensity. This fear comes from the belief that artistic value is tied to emotional extremity, making it seem like a requirement rather than a choice.

In contradiction, it also raises the question: does joy not make a meaningful contribution as well, compared to *dukh*? Not all creative work comes from pain, of course, and not every piece requires grief-heavy metaphors. However, it is in human nature to seek solace in the arts, with pain often becoming a prerequisite for understanding love and loss. It reveals a paradox that suffering, while painful in life, often becomes a source of pleasure in art. We feel seen in certain songs or stories, and the experience of relating to them brings relief, or what I'm fond of calling *sukoon*, the Arabic word for peace and tranquillity.

Ultimately, suffering and obsession may not be the sole requirements of great creative work, but they remain powerful forces in shaping it. Such memorable creations give a canvas to unsaid, unrequited, and buried feelings. It allows us to make sense of the intensity of human experiences and at times, helps turn them into something bearable. Perhaps that is why such works stay with us long after we encounter them, because they give form to what we often struggle to express ourselves.

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