

Tracing out Toxicity: Prioritising Life over Relationships

Amrutha Hari

Integrated MA Student

Central University, Pondicherry

Email: ammuharisree1@gmail.com

Abstract: Contemporary discourses on family, relationships or society bring in terms such as toxicity, narcissism, stonewalling and gas lighting among others into limelight. But these terms often fail to come out of the domain of intellectual perusals. Dr.Lillian Glass in her work 'Toxic People' attempts to delineate a toxic person. Though her work finds its essence in the western context, it dissects toxicity, thereby pinpointing its characteristics. Usually, toxicity plays its wicked game within intimate, dependent and confiding relationships and there might be several reasons that drive a person's mental state toxic. Victims often forage the reasons for the misbehaviour of the toxic person, only to end up blaming themselves. A toxic relation is so complex that anyone who views it from outside would never comprehend what the victim is going through. Societal attitude and opinion too has a role to play in exacerbating the torment of a toxic relationship.

A movie dubbed 'Ammu', released of late, had taken genuine effort at candidly depicting a toxic marital relationship between Ravindranath (Ravi) and his wife Ammu. The film, which is a brainchild of director Charukesh Shekhar, could be considered as very sincere attempt at introducing the concept of toxicity to the Indian audience or in the Indian context as such. It currently serves as a reference to those trying to comprehend the multitudinal dimensions of toxicity. It is not only in the Indian context, but globally too, nominal discussions take place on the topic of toxicity and toxic relations. Dr Lillian Glass' 'Toxic People' and Charukesh's 'Ammu' had been the only sources that had come handy in the endeavour to discern toxicity and they tend to scrutinise the topic through western and Indian lens respectively thereby offering a varied sense of toxicity, its manifestations as well as solutions. Before the concept of toxicity finds space in our everyday discussions, there is a lot of ground work to be done. The right to life is inalienable. But it is always up to you to decide when to actually start living it.

Keywords: Toxicity, Gaslighting, Toxic People, Relationship, Life, Society.

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary discourses on family, relationships or society bring in terms such as toxicity, narcissism, stonewalling and gas lighting among others into limelight. A multitude of videos marking the traits that define a toxic personality abound in online platforms. Remarkably, of late, the Merriam Webster Dictionary has also made 'Gaslighting' the 'Word of the Year'. But these terms often fail to come out of the domain of intellectual perusals to find space in a normal communication among laypersons. Being contained to theory, the real life manifestations of these terms are not even recognised by those who are doomed to perpetually pocket it.

Literature Review

Dr. Lillian Glass in her work 'Toxic People' delineates a toxic person as "anyone who has poisoned your life, who is not supportive, who is not happy to see you grow, to see you succeed, and who does not wish you well. In essence, he or she sabotages your efforts to lead a happy and productive life". Further elucidating the concept, she states:

"A toxic person is someone who seeks to destroy you. A toxic person robs you of your self-esteem and dignity and poisons the essence of who you are. He or she wears down your resistance and thus can make you mentally or physically ill. Toxic people are not life supporting. They see only the negative in you. Jealous and envious, they are not happy to see you succeed. In fact, they get hostile whenever you do well. Their insecurities and feelings of inadequacy often cause them to sabotage your efforts to lead a happy and productive life."

Though write-ups and research papers on toxicity and toxic relationships are negligible in the Indian context, a movie dubbed 'Ammu', released of late, had taken genuine effort at candidly depicting a toxic marital relationship between Ravindranath (Ravi), an extremely toxic husband, naturally enacted by actor Naveen Chandra and his wife Ammu, dexterously portrayed by actress Aiswarya Lekshmi. Their marriage life which begins on a fine note turn for the worse once Ravi begins exhibiting his toxicity as Ammu becomes so intimate to him. Ravi uses every opportunity to belittle Ammu, insult her, make her feel guilty and insecure, thereby evincing a slavish mentality towards his wife. The very first time when the physical assault she endured reached an insufferable extreme, Ammu shows the fortitude to leave for her house, only to come back midway from the railway station. The conversation she has with a mendicant is pertinent in drawing out how a victim of toxicity is by and by slips into submission. All through the talk which almost seems akin to that of a soliloquy, Ammu is predisposed to vindicate Ravi's behaviour. She reflects on each day of their life from the day of marriage and reaches the conclusion that they are in fact a happy couple, keeping apart Ravi's occasional tantrums. Hence she becomes resolved to go back to her husband and change his behavioural defects by proffering love and care to him. This episode evidently depicts the usual mental state of victims of toxicity who constantly tries to rationalise the behaviour of the perpetrator, simultaneously sticking to the relation, hoping in vain that everything would change for good. Later, this mindset of the victim is substantiated by the statement made by a police woman who works in the police station where Ravi is the Sub-inspector. His college oblivious of how her superior college treats his wife, comments that all those women complainants of domestic violence who show up in the police station has a proclivity to rationalise their husband's misbehaviour as they narrate the incidents. Further, many a time, in the course of the movie Ravi reassures Ammu that he loves her and his behaviour is due to momentary anger or just because she irritates him, a classic example of how toxic people deceive the victim into trusting him/her.

In the public sphere, Ravi is initially shown as altogether a respectable policeman with social commitment. He is so pleasing to Ammu's parents and even behaves so passive as to ask her permission to drink in a gathering, only to insult her later amongst his male colleagues and wives. Ravi even abhors seeing Ammu well-dressed and callously humiliates her by questioning to entice whom she had dressed so aesthetically. He is infuriated to find Ammu earning for herself by passionately engaging in a bit of tailoring work. The toxicity reaches extend where she is being constantly monitored by Ravi in-person or through the audio devices concealed inside their house. It is as if her dignity, privacy, rights and liberty are all at stake. But in

deviation to the real life scenario, the movie puts Ammu among people who relates with, supports and console her once she gathers the fortitude to open up. Still, she is so mentally debilitated that Ammu becomes helplessly non-reactive when Ravi traces her out at the Inspector General's office when she first venture to lodge a complaint against him with the assistance of one of his women colleague. Ammu is quick to realise that in actuality it is not Ravi but her own fear and insecurity that prevented her from lodging the complaint. Armed with the realisation that it is she herself who has to act for her cause, Ammu takes the time by the forelock to expose Ravi when she encounters a prisoner on bail at her husband's police station, who is treated so contemptuously by him, much akin to the manner in which she is dealt with. But it is this inner force to act, by being audacious enough to let go of the toxic person that many people are devoid of when entrapped in a toxic relation. As Ammu aptly puts it, the thought of 'what's next' prevents a person from putting a halt to the toxicity that engrosses them. The film also brings in the currently relevant question of bodily rights of women. While Ravi perceives Ammu as just a body ordained to gift him a child, the movie conjures up the notion that 'the decision to not have a baby doesn't make a woman detestable'. A support system that Ammu had around her is a pre requisite to reinvigorate a victim of toxicity to action. Ammu is seen to initially report the first instance of physical harassment to her who trivialises it. By and by, she feels obliged to keep up the pretext of 'all is well' in front of her family and this further curtailed chances of exposing Ravi. The film, which is a brainchild of director Charukesh Shekhar, could be considered as very sincere attempt at introducing the concept of toxicity to the Indian audience or in the Indian context as such. It currently serves as a reference to those trying to comprehend the multitudinal dimensions of toxicity, thereby initiating further studies on this particular matter.

An editorial titled 'Still a Nightmare for Domestic Violence Survivors' underscores the reasons behind specific response of those victims or rather 'survivors' of domestic violence. Jointly authored by Philippa Williams, Swarna Rajagopalan, Girija Godbole, Ruchira Goswami, the article observes:

"When it comes to help seeking, we found two main groups of women - those who shared experiences of violence within six months, and those who shared after five years or more. The first group of women mainly turned to their parents who, in a majority of cases, insisted on their daughter preserving the family environment which they should do by 'adjusting' to, or accommodating their husband's (and his family's) needs better. In a minority of cases, the daughter's welfare was prioritised over the well-being of the 'the family' and steps were taken to help mediate or exit the relationship, and much more infrequently approach the police and lawyers".

It further remarks, "So ingrained are social norms about gender inequality that NFHS-5 data reports that women are more likely than men to justify a scenario in which it is acceptable for a husband to beat or hit his wife."

Methodology

Examination of the work 'Toxic People' by Dr. Lillian Glass and analysis of the film 'Ammu'. Additionally, observation of real life toxic relations as well as personal experiences coupled with the understanding from one or two videos and newspaper articles that pinpoint the traits of toxic people.

Objectives

The research titled 'Tracing out Toxicity: Prioritising Life over Relationships' aims to bring about the topic of 'Toxicity' into mainstream discussion and also makes

an attempt at pinpointing its characteristic traits. The study also traces the reasons that prevent the victims of toxic relationships from coming out and drives in the fact that the concept of toxicity is personal. Further, it asserts the need to treat toxicity as a psychological problem and simultaneously encourages those who suffer such relations to prioritise their own life over relationships.

Discussion and Findings

Albeit being unable to precisely pinpoint 'this and these' constitute toxicity, one can tacitly decipher its elements in a person's behaviour, after getting to know the concept of a 'toxic person'. This is what exactly Dr.Lillian's work intends - to help figure out the toxic person or rather people in our lives, to teach us how to efficiently deal with them, to purge us of all the negativity injected into us and on top of all that, let us know that we aren't anyhow responsible for the 'toxicity' that victimises us, which is the primary realisation a person needs to have while managing a toxic relation.

Victims often forage the reasons for the misbehaviour of the toxic person, only to end up blaming themselves, devoid of the sense that he/she has nothing to do with the pernicious mental state and behaviour of another person. Usually, toxicity plays its wicked game within intimate, dependent and confiding relationships and there might be several reasons that drive a person's mental state toxic, ranging from traumatic childhood, negative personal experiences, insecurity, and low self esteem to common human vices such as jealousy and superiority complex. These factors which kindle toxicity are complementary and are often overlapping. Toxic behaviour is also elicited by those having mental aberration, even though toxicity in itself hasn't be designated as a psychological disorder. The phrase 'toxic mood contagion' illustrated by Dr Lillian glass' book underscores that an exposure to people with toxic traits can evoke the toxicity within us. This is also to covertly state that every person has seeds of toxicity within them which may remain dormant if not nurtured by negative factors. There are myriad forms in which it could manifest. Constant criticisms, belittling remarks and taunts, sniding statements and physical violence are some of the explicit characteristics. But the more gruesome attributes are those inconspicuous, cause its genesis is in the toxic person's mind and might involve lots of mind games. For instance, The person may very often play the victim, pretending unexplained distraughtness, to leave the real sufferer confused as to what has gone wrong from his/her part or on another occasion they might brazenly lie or offer a distorted picture of an event in such a way that the victim finds it difficult to contradict openly thought he/she might doubt its veracity. This would evolve into gaslighting which amounts to "psychological manipulation of a person usually over an extended period of time that causes the victim to question the validity of their own thoughts, perception of reality, or memories and typically leads to confusion, loss of confidence and self-esteem, uncertainty of one's emotional or mental stability, and a dependency on the perpetrator" or to a 'mental process by which people attribute to others what is in their own minds' which is termed as projection. Certain perpetrators find it unbearable to see their victims being happy or at ease and may have Narcissistic personality disorder which 'is a mental health condition characterized by a high sense of self-importance and a lack of empathy for others'. An observer who analyses the perpetrator-victim dynamics would ask why isn't the victim pulling herself away from the toxic person. But this is easier said than done. First of all, it takes a lot of mental preparation and contemplations on the part of the victim to open up to someone and that alone a person who is reliable. The trail of harrowing experiences would render

the victim psychologically frail, consequently creating a 'drained-out' feeling by the time they realise that it's high time to let go of such a noxious person. This hampers their inner vigour to act. The lesser they acquiesce, the more they are coerced into submissiveness by the perpetrator. In the conundrum of having to segregate the lies and the truths, right and the wrong or the voice of the conscience from the indoctrinated self, coupled with the burden of having to weave out a dignified life, the victim is sapped off their vitality to save themselves from such a relation. If in case the relationship is marital, often the existence of a child becomes a factor in pulling oneself back to continue as sitting ducks to the vagaries of the toxic partner, every time they make up their mind to jump out.

A toxic relation is so complex that anyone who views it from outside would never comprehend what the victim is going through. Hence, any attempt at making the society relate with this situation would go in vain. The person who is victimised is the only one who could comprehend the gravity of toxicity that they face. This peculiarity arises out of several reasons. Firstly, most toxic persons are watchful of whether their victims spill their guts to anyone and act so warm and courteous in public that no one would have the wildest dream of the person behaving in such awful manner. Further, as per Dr. Lillian's observation, what might be toxic to me may not seem toxic to others. Additionally a person who is toxic to me may not behave in the same way to others. This because, as aforementioned, toxicity becomes palpable in intimate, dependent and confiding relationships and it's more excruciating the more you share a vehement relationship with that person.

Societal attitude and opinion too has a role to play in exacerbating the torment of a toxic relationship. Once a person opens up to someone around, people tend to generalise the incidents or brush it away altogether as tiffs or silly spats. But the fact is that there arises no proper communication between the victim and the perpetrator, if not quarrels. It is for the toxic persons to occlude proper communication so as to create dilemma, anxiety and incertitude for the victim. This is a method intrinsic to stonewalling, whereby the perpetrator 'stop a discussion from developing by refusing to answer questions or by talking in such a way that you prevent other people from giving their opinions'. Since the onus of upholding the stability of the marital relation is entrusted with the females as per our Indian tradition, very often parents persuade their daughter or son to stick to this toxic conjugal relation fearing societal judgement and perception. They are blind to the reality that the relation is detrimental to their son or daughter and it is he/she alone who has to bear its brunt, not the society.

Limitations

Though Dr. Lillian's work finds its essence in the western context, it dissects toxicity, thereby pinpointing its characteristics, though not accurately defining it. 'Toxic People' is also to be relied in want of an authentic literature rooted in the Indian context which addresses the topic. The author's omission of a befitting definition for the notion of toxicity within the societal ambit' comes from the actuality that the term couldn't be defined in its exactness, which is one of the reasons why it is not easily discernible in our society. It is not only in the Indian context, but globally too, nominal discussions take place on the topic of toxicity and toxic relations. Hence awareness on the same is also scant.

International organisation like the United Nations or its auxiliary agencies such as UN Women or UNDOC neither have any data on this issue nor do they try to generate cognisance of the same. In India, there is no allusion to the toxic relations either in the NCRB Crime in India Report or in the National Family Health Survey. Further, very

few scholarly articles are penned on the this topic due to the paucity of both primary and secondary data. Due to the hesitation on the part of the victim to open, chances of obtaining primary information are minimal which further generates a scarcity of secondary data too. Dr Lillian Glass' 'Toxic People' and Charukesh's 'Ammu' had been the only sources that had come handy in the endeavour to discern toxicity and they tend to scrutinise the topic through western and Indian lens respectively. Hence the diverse social norms, culture and facets of relationships offers a varied sense of toxicity, its manifestations as well as solutions. 'Toxic People' seems to treat toxicity at a more superficial level as compared to Ammu, though it is precise enough to list out the traits of toxicity, which is certainly an uphill task. Moreover, comparative analysis of a literary work with that of a film possesses restraint as both has its own modus operandi and limitations.

CONCLUSION

Before the concept of toxicity finds space in our everyday discussions, there is a lot of ground work to be done. The Indian society hasn't accustomed so as to imbibe the notion of individuality. Hence it always fails to stand by the individual. It is to be understood that breaking free from an uneasy marriage has nothing do with mortality or the character of the individual rather the decision might come out of the realisation that you have the right to live your life instead of merely existing as a victim of toxicity. This applies not only to conjugal relations but to any other relationship in general. Additionally, toxicity must be tagged as a psychological aberration, contributing to behavioural disorder. The Mental Health Act must exhume this disorder into it, subsequently promoting counselling and other therapeutic remedies to treat toxic people. Moreover victims of toxicity may have suicidal thoughts which should be addressed in the National Suicide Prevention Strategy launched of late. Above all, the very consciousness about the concept of toxicity and existence of toxic relations would help in tracing out the toxic terrors - as described by Lillian Glass - amongst us. The right to life is inalienable. Therefore no one has the prerogative to dabble with another person's life in accordance with their whims and fancies, neither anyone have the right to decide how one should lead their life. But it always up to you to decide when to actually start living it. Everything else is secondary.

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