

TAMING THE DEMON IN YOU : A STUDY ON TALKING CURE IN ANITA NAIR'S THE BETTER MAN

Divina S Rose *

ABSTRACT

The paper entitled Taming the Demon in you: A Study on Talking Cure in Anita Nair's The Better Man, throws light into the inherent power of communication. The novel depicts the journey of the protagonist, Mukundan into a better self.

Mukundan is a person with suppressed emotions who never had a friend to share this with. These suppressed emotions evolve into insomnia and hallucinating his deceased mother trying to kill him. When Mukundan met Bhasi, a local painter and a practitioner of unique way of healing, he finds in him a friend who he can trust. Bhasi become an active listener with whom Mukundan could vent out his pain to, this process of speaking out makes him into a better man. The paper gives an outline to the theory of "Talking Cure" – developed by Sigmund Freud and Josef Breuer -and its relevance today in the society. The major conflict in the novel is the sudden change in Mukundan's character after undergoing talking cure. Mukundan betrays Bhasi and Anjana his lover to gain recognition in his village. This behaviour is explained by Abraham H. Maslow's hierarchy of human needs. The conclusion of the paper prove how talking cure is beneficial for both the speaker and listener using Bhasi as an example. Also about the Taboos related to speaking out repressed emotions. The paper aims to strengthen people to be strong enough to speak about their emotional turmoil and lend an ear to others who have to share theirs.

Keywords: Talking Cure, Mental health, repressed emotions

* *Department of English, Deva Matha College Kuravilangad.*

INTRODUCTION

Human mind is an enigma. It is strange how people behave in different situations. Being a writer, it is difficult to depict these strange human emotions. Anita Nair in her debut novel *The Better Man* has proven her skill by fathoming the deepest recess of the human psyche. The book is about every human's attempt to find and fathom the depths of inner peace and happiness. Here this is achieved via talking cure.

The theory of "talking cure" is as strange as the method. This was formulated by a patient named Anna O [the pseudonym of Bertha Pappenheim] a woman suffering from Hysteria. She was treated by Josef Breuer, a distinguished physician. Anna did not allow Breuer to use hypnosis but suggested that they work via talks, the procedure which she mockingly called the chimney sweeping. Instead of Breuer using hypnosis to implant suggestions, he allowed Anna to unburden herself, a kind of cathartic release which showed a cure for her illness. Breuer along with Sigmund Freud documented their discussions of Anna O and other case studies in their 1895 book, *Studies in Hysteria*. These discussions paved the way to further psychoanalytical practices, including what we know today as counselling.

American psychologist Carl Ransom Roger in his book *A Way of Being* spoke about the importance of being heard. "When I have been listened to and when I have been heard, I am able to re-perceive my world in a new way and to go on" (Roger, 26). Listening is not an easy task mainly when the speaker fears being heard, so we have to extract from them what they have to speak. Carl Ransom Roger has mentioned this clearly in his book *A Way of Being*:

. . .prisoner in a dungeon, tapping out day after day a Morse code message, "Does anybody hear me? Is anybody there?" And finally one day he hears some faint tapplings which spell out "yes." By that one simple response he is released

from his loneliness; he has become a human being again. There are many, many people living in private dungeons today, people who give no evidence of it whatsoever on the outside, where you have to listen very sharply to hear the faint messages from the dungeon(Roger,24).

Habits are best developed during childhood. Talking about emotions is also a habit, in Mukundan's case this was not well developed. His parents did not provide him a space to talk about his emotions. Mukundan first meeting with his father has a lot to do with their troubled father-son relationship. His father Achuthan Nair was out in Burma working, so he was not involved in Mukundan life until he was four. Mukundan felt strange and frightened meeting his father. This fear only escalated as years passed by and Achuthan Nair became an epitome of fear in Mukundan's life. Achuthan Nair was a critical parent who used to humiliate Mukundan for his small mistakes. Mukundan tried his best to find ways to please his father; but always ended in vain. Mukundan's mother, Paru Kutty was also intimidated by Achuthan Nair, so when Mukundan tried to talk to her all she could do was mouth some fake consolations. This made him suppress his troubles from childhood.

Mukundan had no siblings, his cousin Meenakshi was the person with whom he used to share his feelings. "They knew each other's bodies and minds as well as they knew their own" (Nair, 53). They were together from birth, and did everything together until they reached puberty. Mukundan was asked to stay away from Meenakshi, she was asked to learn cooking and housekeeping. Soon a distance sprang between them which they could not bridge. Their meetings became irregular and they started having secrets from each other. In this process, Mukundan lost the only friend he had in Kaikurussi and the place itself became a hell. All he wanted was to leave Kaikurussi and find a new life, which he eventually did to join the clerical post in an explosive factory in Trichy. In this new place, he followed a strict routine without free hours to distance himself from

his inner self. Moving back to his hometown after retirement he had no schedules to keep him occupied, he was alone in that big house. This brought back all his traumas and regrets he buried deep in his mind leading to hallucination and insomnia. At night he starts seeing all his dead ancestors and his mother who is trying to kill him. This was because deep down in his mind Mukundan believed he was responsible for his mother's death. Mukundan's mother was abandoned by his father for his mistress. She was lonely and begged Mukundan to take her with him to Trichy which Mukundan denied. She had an accidental death falling from the stairs which Mukundan believed could have been avoided if he took her with him.

In Helen Keller's biography *The Story of My Life*, she mentions how anger and bitterness preyed upon her. This was caused by the imprisonment she felt because of the inability to communicate with others. Helen's inability was physical but Mukundan's was mental. For Helen Keller this inability was cured by Anne Sullivan for Mukundan it was Bhasi. When Mukundan started opening up about the dark secrets that laid undisturbed deep in his mind to Bhasi he started getting better. Bhasi and Mukundan started hanging out every evening talking, Mukundan talked about his day and Bhasi listened to it. Bhasi was an active listener, that is he listened to Mukundan's troubles with an open mind, listening for meaning, listening beyond words to hear his feelings and observing his verbal and non-verbal signals for signs. Bhasi did not provide solutions for his problems or suggested what Mukundan must do. All he did was give him a listening heart.

...it is not the job of the helper to probe, to advice to "solve" problems. This is just too easy and often succeeds only in driving the other person away in frustration or despair. Any new direction ("solution", if you wish to call it that) will come not from the counsellor, nor from the counselee; it rather emerges from

the interaction of the two, struggling together to unearth the source of the distress (Currie, 16).

Mukundan and Bhasi met every evening to talk, this process was giving a cathartic release for Mukundan. A companionship arose between them where Mukundan could speak about everything and anything and Bhasi just listened. Mukundan's biggest regret was that of not being able to help his mother from his father. This regret was the reason for his hallucination of his mother trying to kill him. Bhasi made him enter an urn and made him meditate about being in his mother's womb. When he came out of the urn he was able to release her soul.

Through this process, Bhasi exorcised Mukundan's past completely and he became a person who is capable of so much that he had ever dreamed of. The changes in him after talking to Bhasi was clearly visible. He was no longer afraid of his father or anyone, he started enjoying life. Achuthan Nair was a dominating figure in Mukundan's life and he was afraid of his father even at this age. Achuthan Nair was staying with his mistress opposite to the ancestral house but came every afternoon to visit his son. Mukundan was very uncomfortable with him and used to shrink to a room when he came over. But after being listened to by Bhasi, Mukundan became confident to talk to his father upright. Their relation flourished and Mukundan was completely fine when Achuthan Nair decided to stay with them. Mukundan and Bhasi's evenings were usually the same. They started the conversation with some village gossips that Bhasi heard, while Mukundan listened to it enjoying his drink.

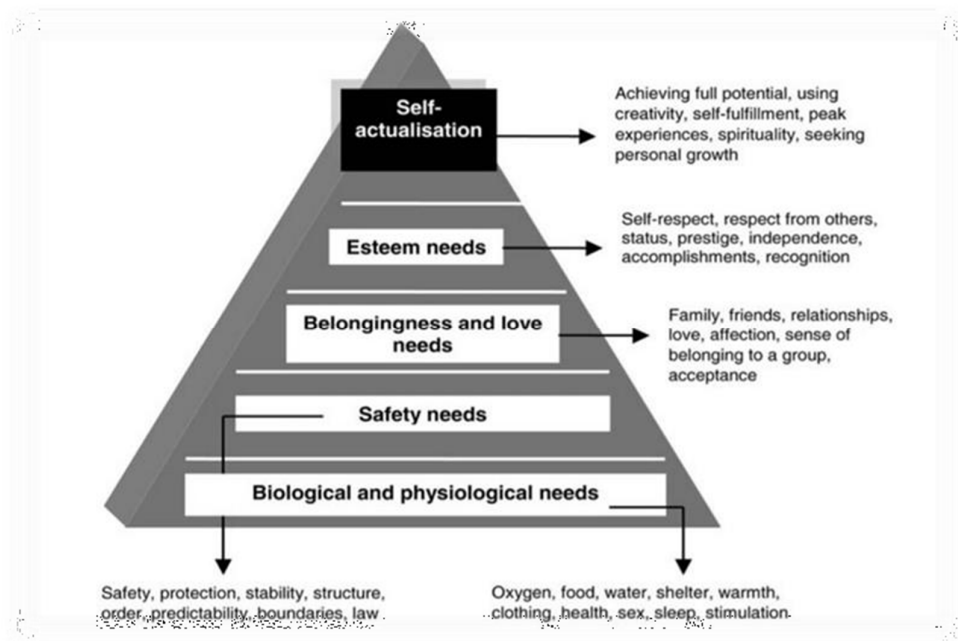
After the slight awkwardness is shrug aside Mukundan speaks about him. Mukundan talked himself out until he was clear in mind, calm and cheerful. "Later that night, at quarter to nine, Bhasi rose to leave. Mukundan put down his empty glass feeling completely at peace" (209). Mukundan talking about himself can be

seen as an example of free association. It is a psychoanalysis technique that was originally devised by Sigmund Freud. It is a method of exploring the unconscious by freely sharing thoughts, words and anything else that comes to mind. This method shares some features with the idea of stream of consciousness, employed by writers such as Virginia Woolf and James Joyce. The free association gave Bhasi a key to Mukundan's unconsciousness where the real problem of his trauma laid. Bhasi never interrupted this conversation nor gave judgments. Interrupting the conversation make the speaker lose the idea of what they were speaking of. Usually the listener tend to interrupt the conversation to assure the speaker they are listening but it just stops the free flow of emotions of the speaker. A good listener is someone who is nonjudgmental. Being non-judgmental does not mean being valueless or without standards. It simply means trying not to mould others to fit into our value system. Our value system may be right for us but totally wrong for others. Judgmentalism evokes inhibition, guilt and distress which will make the speaker limit or stop sharing their feelings.

Mukundan after being heard finds love for the first time in Anjana. He met her while visiting one of his colleague K M Nair, Anjana was his niece. Anjana was married to Ravindran who worked for a pharmaceutical company. Ravindran changed different business and seldomly came home. He considered Anjana as a person who cooked food, kept house and satisfied his needs. Anjana was too younger than Mukundan but in him she found the affection and care she never received from her husband. Anjana brought her freedom back by applying for a divorce. Anjana and Mukundan decided to live a life together in Kaikurussi. But their plans are delayed because of the community hall committee. Power House Ramakrishnan a locally important man, decides to build a community hall, and selects Bhasi's land for this purpose. He threatens to destroy his business if he refuses to sell the land. Bhasi asks Mukundan to help him and Mukundan was happy to help. But when he met Ramakrishnan to talk about the matter, Ramakrishnan flattered him into accepting membership on the project

committee. Mukundan always dreamt of having a prominent position in the village like his father, he saw this committee as a stepping stone to his dream. But in this process he was betraying two people who helped and loved him. Mukundan's decision to join the committee made Bhasi lose his house, he had to move out of Kaikurussi. He asked Anjana to wait till the divorce was granted to move in with him. Mukundan is seen as very self-centered in making all this decision without considering others.

These actions can be explained by using Maslow's hierarchy of human needs to enhance your self-awareness. Abraham H. Maslow a US psychologist and philosopher, proposed that the primary goal of psychotherapy should be the integration of the self. Maslow postulated that each person has a hierarchy of human needs that must be satisfied.



The theory is that only as each need is satisfied are we motivated to reach for the next higher level; thus, people who lack food or shelter or who cannot feel themselves to be in a safe environment are unable to concentrate on higher needs. The first level need is biological and physiological. All human beings have a basic need like food, water, shelter, education, clothing and enough money to live are basic needs for a healthy life. The second level need is safety which includes personal security, emotional security. Financial security and well-being. The third level need is belonging and love. Each and every one of us, no matter what our upbringing or culture is, have an innate psychological need to feel part of, belong to, fit in with, and be accepted by our fellow human beings. The fourth level need is esteem. Maslow notes two versions of esteem needs. The lower version of self-esteem is the need for respect from others, and include a need for status, recognition, fame, prestige, and attention. The higher version of esteem is the need for strength, competence, mastery, self-confidence, independence and freedom. The fifth level need is self-actualization. This refers to the desire to reach the pinnacle of full potential. Being all we can, focusing our efforts on achieving all we are capable of achieving, following our dreams, using our gifts and talents, and maximizing the meaning of life.

Mukundan was in the second stage before meeting Bhasi. After opening up to Bhasi about his traumas he was cured and free from his past. He reached the third level need where he found Bhasi as his intimate friend and Anjana as his soul mate. Joining the community hall committee he was being upgraded to the fourth level of esteem needs. In Mukundan's case he was undergoing the lower version of esteem needs. His father's death was an eye opener to understand the truth that it was not the fame or status that he truly wanted in life. This realization and revelation was the completion of the metamorphosis of Mukundan. He reached the fifth level of self-actualization. He visited Bhasi and gave him some of his own land to come back and stay in Kaikurussi. He met up with Anjana and

apologized for his early decisions and invited her to live with him. He was no longer afraid of people accepting or rejecting his decisions, he became a free man. Mukundan became self- confident, self-reliant and filled with independence and determination. He started seeing the positive side of everything that happens in his life. He started experiencing overall well-being and mental calm. The negative emotions he had are now in the past and he sees them as building blocks for a more positive future. He realized his unlimited ability in creating his own reality.

Mukundan was not the only person who received benefits from talking cure, Bhasi also became a better person himself. Bhasi listened to Mukundan's troubles with an empathetic understanding: so he was able to live in Mukundan's shoes. This opened a new perspective in his life. As the novel proceeds we can see Bhasi's approach to his wife changing. He became better as a husband and as a father. So talking cure is a win- win process for both the speaker and the listener. Bhasi is an ordinary man with his own mistakes and shortcomings, thus if he can cause changes in a person anyone can.

There is a science behind talking cure, when you are, in an emotional trauma, undergoing intense emotions your amygdala is managing your body. This is the part of the brain that among other things handles your fight or flight response. This is an automatic response to physical danger that allows you to react quickly without thinking. The fight or flight was appropriate for early humans because their threats were physical. But in the modern world, there is a lot of psychological threats caused by pressures and stress. When one is in such an emotional trauma, that evolves into feeling strong anger, aggression, or fear: the fight or flight response is activated. It often results in a sudden illogical, and irrational overreaction to resist or to overcome the situation. A psychologist named Daniel Goleman called this over-reaction to stress "amygdala hijack" in his 1995 book, "Emotional intelligence: Why it Can Matter More Than IQ".

Researchers suggest that putting your feelings into words-a process called "affect labelling"- can diminish the response of amygdala when you encounter things that are upsetting. This is how, as time passes you feel less stress over something that bothers you.

"Nature hath given men one tongue but two ears, that we may hear from others twice as much as we speak" (Epictetus). Listening and speaking are basic communication tools we use every day. But we are usually unaware of the inherent power it has in changing a person. In Mukundan's life, it was this talking cure that caused ripples for his metamorphosis into a better man. This change helped not only Mukundan but also the people around him. It is like a chain, reaction if you are happy with your life, you unknowingly bring positivity to other people surrounding you.

Bhasi made Mukundan into a better man, Bhasi evolves into a good husband and father himself and Mukundan gave Anjana a happy life. This is the aim of the talking cure to bring out the best in you.

Mental health issues were recognized by society when people started speaking out about them. Until that day many people were suppressing their feeling believing something was unnatural with them. But today education has made us realize that it is natural to get mentally sick just like being physically sick. Mental health issues are increasing day by day. One of the cause for this is the lack of meaningful conversation and communication. Social media surely have improved communication, but this communication usually tends to be hollow or fake.

Sometimes, it may have the opposite effect. High standards created by these platforms torture many individuals. Thus it is always important to have a real friend to talk to, than a virtual one. Parents should also develop a healthy relationship with their children in which they can talk about everything. Human beings are deep and mysterious, so are their problems.

Some people consider speaking about their feelings and emotions as a sign of weakness, especially men. Usually these people hide their emotions to appear bold. But these emotions start affecting their daily behaviour as anger and anxiety. A person becomes emotionally strong through verbalizing his emotions. It is a process that requires a lot of courage, so talking about your emotions is not a sign of weakness. Talking is a safety valve to release your emotional stress.

Sudha Murty in her anecdote Horegallu equates the people who listen empathetically to horegallu's. Horegallu is a stone bench used by travellers usually carrying heavy weight to rest and sit down for a while so that they can regain their energy. The listener in the conversation is like a horegallu who helps the speaker to regain his strength. The world needs more horegallus, so let us try to be one.

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