

POETRY AS THERAPY IN ANNE SEXTON

Rajesh Bojan

Dr. M.Muthukumar

The connection between poetry and medicine is very old and can be traced back to primitive man. Across cultures, there are numerous examples where people have used poetry as chants, mantras during rituals that aimed to heal illness or spells. Many scholars like Freud, Jung, Adler, and Reik have confirmed that poets pioneered the world of unconscious and science followed later. This kind of therapy was first used by Dr. Benjamin Rush, the father of American Psychiatry introduced literature and music for treatment for people who were suffering from mental illness. The term Bibliotherapy was popular during 1960s and 1970s that utilised literature books for treatment. Eli Greifer who was a poet, pharmacist and lawyer firmly believed that poetry played a great role in helping mentally ill persons overcome their problems. He is credited as the founder of poetry therapy.

Poetry therapy was not standardised by then, and it was not until 1980 with the establishment of National Association of Poetry Therapy that poetry therapy received much attention. Reading and writing have always helped people to cope with personal or behavioural problems. Those people who take it up as a form of therapy consider this process to be a kind of escape from reality. Writing especially helps the individual in exploring his self and express his trauma in various ways. The process helps the individual to release the suppressed feelings thereby providing a space to understand or cope with the problem in a better way. Poetry helps the patients to uncover their suppressed emotions and in turn helps the doctors to understand the kind of mental trauma the individual is undergoing.

Anne Sexton is a remarkable poet who took personal poetry to a level that nobody would dare to touch. She was writing about topics that were completely considered taboo and during her time many people warned her against such a kind of writing considering them to be too explicit. Sexton composed poetry on themes that no one would feel comfortable speaking or writing in public. She moved closely with Sylvia Plath, W.D.Snodgrass, Robert Lowell and others who were like her called confessional poets. Sexton, in one of her interview admits that she was majorly influenced by W.D.Snodgrass's *Heart's Needle*, a collection of poetry that speaks about the poet's separation with his daughter published in 1959.

Sexton experienced her first breakdown in 1954 the same year when her beloved great-aunt died. A year before Sexton gave birth to her first daughter. In August 1955 her second daughter was born. She attempted suicide multiple times during this period and was hospitalized. Throughout her life she kept consulting several therapists. Sexton did not aspire to become a poet until she met Dr. Martin T. Orne her psychiatrist. It was he who suggested that Sexton should take up poetry as a form of therapy. Dr. Martin came to know that Sexton was brilliant and creative and thus made use of her talent to encourage her to write poetry. Sexton had a very low estimation about herself and once during treatment when the doctor asked her what she was good at. Sexton without any hesitation replied that she was good at being a prostitute if at all there was anything good about her. But, her doctor acknowledged that she had the gift of writing and she could use poetry as a tool to overcome her illness and thus began Sexton's career as a poet. In fact, as much as we love Sexton for her writing, we should equally love her physician without whom we would have lost such an amazing and awesome poet.

From a confessional perspective, Sexton's poems speak about her personal and family struggles. Specifically her infidelity kept her bothering so much and this ruined her relationship with her husband. Like Sylvia Plath, she was attracted to death. Sexton like many other poets used poetry as a tool to overcome her suffering. Sexton started writing poetry at the age of 29 as a means to overcome her depression. Sexton strongly believed that poetry, "should be a shock to the senses. It should almost hurt." She states that poetry helped her achieved order. She further says,

"the writing put things back in place. I mean, things are more chaotic, and if I can write a poem, I come into order again, and the world is again a little more sensible, and real. I'm more in touch with things."

From her own words we understand how poetry helped restore her condition. It is important to note that Sexton as a poet spent a great deal of time revising her poems to make it sound better in form and content.

The ability to portray her feeling instantly through a poem gave her the freedom to express her pain or happiness which was very important from a psychological perspective. Repressed emotions trigger the trauma of an individual. In her first poetry collection titled *To Bedlam and Part Way Back*, Sexton expressed her struggles with her illness. The first poem *You, Doctor Martin* is about her physician.

“You, Doctor Martin, walk
 from breakfast to madness. Late August,
 I speed through the antiseptic tunnel...”

The words ‘walk from breakfast to madness’ probably refers to the doctor’s daily routine of attending his patients examining their conditions. In the above lines, Sexton indicates that she is making a quick recovery defending against her illness like an ‘antiseptic’ and trying to come out of the ‘tunnel’ of suffering. Here, Sexton uses the word ‘tunnel’ which symbolizes darkness or death from which she must escape. The poem provides an account of her struggles with depression, recovery and of her experience as a patient in a psychiatric ward. Dr. Martin Orne was the one who insisted in Sexton attending John Holmes workshops. Later, Sexton attended Robert Lowell’s workshops, Philip Rahv and Irving Howe’s literature courses.

Another interesting poem in this collection is *Music Swims Back to Me* that is based on her experience at the mental institution. The poem starts with the question

“Wait Mister. Which way is home?”

This is an indication that the speaker is in an abnormal state and away from home which could symbolise her mental illness. She admits in the poem saying that she is away from her home and is presently at “this private institution on a hill.” The only thing that she remembers is the music that keeps her moving. The poem expresses the speaker’s loneliness, state of confusion, despair. It also provides a positive note on an experience such as music and dance that could keep us tied to the past.

Maxine Kumin was the close friend of Anne Sexton. They came to know about each other during their study at the poetry workshop led by John Holmes. Their friendship lasted for almost seventeen years till the death of Sexton in 1974. Maxine Kumin in her foreword to Sexton’s complete poems notes:

I am convinced that poetry kept Anne alive for the eighteen years of her creative endeavors. When everything else soured; when a succession of therapists deserted her for whatever good, poor, or personal reasons; when intimates lost interest or could not fulfil all the roles they were asked to play; when a series of catastrophes and physical illnesses assaulted her, the making of poems

remained her one constant. To use her own metaphor, “out of used furniture [she made] a tree.” Without this rich, rescuing obsession I feel certain she would have succeeded in committing suicide in response to one of the dozen impulses that beset her during the period between 1957 and 1974. (Kumin, p. xxiii)

The world of poetry can never forget the long association between Anne Sexton and Maxine Kumin as close friends and collaborators. In fact, no other person could have had a better understanding of Sexton. From my understanding of the author through her poems, I strongly believe that Sexton relied on her poetry more than she believed in human relationship of any kind. There can be no doubt that, “God is in your typewriter.”

REFERENCES

1. Middlebrook, Diane Wood. *Anne Sexton: A Biography*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1991.
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