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PORTRAYAL OF MENTAL HEALTH ILLNESS IN CONTEMPORARY FICTION: A LITERATURE REVIEW

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ABSTRACT-

The growing concern for mental health has become an increasingly ubiquitous theme in modern fiction. The representation of mental health illness through fictional narratives plays a significant role in shaping the cultural perception of mental illness. This review aims to explore the representation of mental health illness through fictional narratives further and examine the approaches and themes that emerge. This review argues that modern fictional narratives have progressed from the sensationalized representation of mental health illness and that this concern for mental health illness continues to be at the forefront of fictional representation through the themes of representation and responsibility. While fictional representation has significantly reduced the stigma associated with mental health illness, the concern for representation and responsibility has remained at the forefront. This review argues that the fictional representation of mental health illness has continued to provide a cultural space for the representation of the lived experience of mental health.

Keywords- Mental Health, English, Literature, Contemporary fiction; Literary representation

INTRODUCTION-

One of the most dominating social and cultural preoccupations of the twenty-first century that has dominated public discourse in the fields of medicine, psychology, media studies, and the humanities in general, is mental health. In tandem with the gradual rise in public awareness and advocacy about this concern, literature, specifically fiction in recent years, has had a huge influence on reflecting, deconstructing, and reinventing experiences of mental health illness. Indeed, fiction mirrors societal attitudes about mental health but at the same time influences how readers interpret and misunderstand experiencing mental health illness¹. As such, the representation of mental health illness in recent fiction deserves critical attention.

The portrayal of mental illness problems within literature has long been characterized by stigma, sensationalism, and moral judgment¹. Characters suffering psychological problems were often portrayed as being dangerous, tragic, or socially deviant, rather than being related to real-life experiences and serving a more dramatic narrative purpose². The theme of madness was also used extensively within literature as a vehicle for a lack of morality,



inspiration, or social turmoil, rather than it being viewed as a complex biological, psychological, and social construct that constitutes a mental illness problem³.

However, with the advancement of modern psychiatry, changes in societal thinking, and awareness regarding mental issues, fiction has gradually shifted away from simplistic treatments of mental illnesses. Contemporary literary efforts today reflect a rising emphasis on psychological realism, focusing on the subjective experiences of people living with depression, anxiety disorders, bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, and post-traumatic stress disorder⁴. Mental illnesses in contemporary fiction are more likely to be examined as an integral component of identity, relationships, and social environments, rather than just a tool for storytelling⁵.

One of the characteristics that define contemporary fiction is its focus on interiority. Writers chose to use first-person narrative, the stream-of-consciousness technique, and the unreliable narrator to encapsulate the fractional, non-linear, and emotionally complicated character of psychological distress⁶. Writers have used symbolism and metaphor to express the experience of dissociation, intrusive thinking, and emotional numbing, given the difficulty in depicting such experiences literally⁷. The narrative above attempts to describe the psychological conditions faced by people with mental illness, given the objective to define mental illness, its characteristics, and its manifestations.

The modern depiction of mental health is gradually being influenced by an intersectional approach. It has been shown that factors such as gender, race, class, and sexuality can affect both mental health and how it is portrayed in literary works⁸. For example, feminist criticism has analyzed how women's mental health is associated with societal demands and restrictions, while postcolonial studies explore how forced displacement, psychological shock, and inequality affect mental health⁹. This approach to analyzing literary depictions of mental health emphasizes that it is society, not individuals, that affects psychological well-being.

Yet despite such progressive trend, the concerns on the one hand and the criticisms directed on the other hand concerning contemporary fiction represent a quandary. Some contemporary works of fiction have been noted to aestheticize mental illnesses in a manner that potentially reinforces damaging tropes¹⁰. Some might argue that intense themes expressed through fiction, as powerful as they are, tend to oversimplify recovery and the experience of suffering as an inevitable and definitive fact¹¹. This review will synthesise the current body of existing knowledge around the representation of mental health illness within contemporary fiction, exploring the themes, methodology, and critical discussions surrounding the discipline. By examining the representations of mental illness within a broad number of texts, this review will aim to assert the role that contemporary fiction can play within the destigmatisation and discussion surrounding mental health within contemporary culture.



EVOLVING NARRATIVE APPROACHES IN CONTEMPORARY FICTION-

Modern fiction shows a significant change in the way that mental health illness is dealt with, and this mirrors wider cultural, medical, and ethical practices about psychological distress. Former literary practice tended to concentrate upon a third-person perspective, where mental illness could be observed, for example, through a care provider perspective, an institution, or society as a whole. Modern practices, however, place greater emphasis upon narrative, where persons with mental health illness are story narrators or focalises of that narrative².

One of the major trends observables in these texts is the rise in interiority and psychological realism. This can be observed in first-person narration, the use of stream-of-consciousness narratives, or free indirect narration that allows novelists to express the fractured patterning of thoughts, the invasions of memories, the state of emotional anesthesia, or perceptual distortions that may be present in conditions affecting the mentally ill⁶. This venture seeks simply to reflect reality rather than construct explanations that are rational or scientific in their presentation. According to Oye bode, there is an important way in which literature alone can illuminate mentally ill patients by grasping "emotional truth rather than accurate fact"⁴.

The other major storytelling transition is the way in which mental illness shifts from being a plot device to being the structuring condition of daily life. Instead of the portrayal of mental illness as the dramatic turning point that constitutes the spectacle of the story, the new form of storytelling is the long-term experience and ambivalence about recovery that has become common in the new wave of fiction.

Unreliable narration is a style that has become a common narrative strategy in recent literary and cultural representations of mental illness. By subverting the narrative voice, writers force the reader into a questioning about reality and perception that is itself uncertain. Such a method has become evident in contemporary representations of psychosis, dissociative disorders, or trauma where narrative breakdown reflects cognitive breakdown. These stories problematically leave the unreliable narrative voice as is rather than trying to repair or frame it.

Moreover, modern fictional accounts are increasingly embedding mental illnesses into social, institutional, and politicized frameworks. Mental health was no longer constructed simply within an individual or psychological domain but also in the context of health care provisions, family relationships, socio-economic considerations, and societal demands³. This mirrors closely the integration between literary studies and social theories of mental health.

COMMON THEMES OF MODERN MENTAL HEALTH PORTRAYALS-

1. Depression, Anxiety, and Emotional Alienation- Depression and anxiety disorders are still two of the most common diagnoses found in contemporary fictional stories. These stories tend to focus on the feelings of isolation, incest, self-doubt, and poor communication skills,



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which are more related to depression than a mere crisis¹⁰. The authors express the depression by considering it a condition that has no physical expression; thus, it combats the misconception that any mental illness must also have a physical expression in order to have legitimacy.

2. Trauma, Memory, and Post-Traumatic stress- “Trauma has appeared as a preeminent concern, especially in literary responses to child abuse, violence, displacement, and loss.” This view is particularly manifested in modern literary works, in which the experience of trauma is reconstructed as a disruption of memory and time, using non-linear storytelling, “repetition, and silence to signify Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)⁸.” This kind of literary work resists the conventions of narrative unity, with the implication that trauma can never be fully verbally captured. This view has also supported the idea that “literature has its own strategy of knowing, which complements psychological research on traumatic memory¹².”

3. Identity, Self, and Mental Illness- Numerous modern novels also address mental issues as constituting a primary aspect of identity development, as opposed to a challenge to individual identity. The characters within such narratives are forced to question what their identity is when they are diagnosed with a certain condition¹¹. The touching aspect is that there are no issues with stigmatizing this condition.

4. Institutionalisation and Power- Giving attention to the mental health care facilities—psychiatric hospitals, therapeutic sessions, and the concept of diagnosis—contemporary fiction often scrutinizes the different situations of power imbalance between the patients and the caregivers. Instead of simply representing care or cruelty in the mental health care facilities, fiction works often express ambivalence regarding the concept of mental health care.

5. Gender, Intersectionality, and Cultural Context- The concept of intersectionality is very important to the contemporary portrayal of mental illness. In fact, the utilization of gender and the impact of expectations and labor on women’s mental pain has been explored through the works of feminist critics¹³. Additionally, the way in which racism, migration, poverty, and displacement affect the struggles people experience concerning mental illness has also been explored through the works of postcolonial and minority fiction authors⁹.

6. Recovery, Resilience, and Recovery stories- Although existing in modern fiction, tend to appear with a complex tone. Contrary to expecting recovery stories that involve healing and resolution, many stories seem to show the process of recovery that is intermittent, fragile, and incomplete¹⁴. This goes contrary to the general cultural narrative that recovery is marked by success, triumph, and achievement.

NARRATIVE TECHNIQUES & LITERARY STRATEGIES-

Modern fiction involves a number of complex narrative methods that reflect internal experience and psychologies in its descriptions of mental health issues. One of the most



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common narrative methods in modern fiction is that of first-person narrative, whereby a reader is provided with immediate insight into a person's mental process. Such a narrative strategy offers a reader immediate insight into a mental experience of ill-health and thereby creates an immediacy of experience that places a reader at a far closer distance from a character².

Unreliable narration is an important literary device, especially where psychoses, traumas, and dissolutions are portrayed. The presence of unreliable narrators, whose worldviews are disjointed, conflicting, and or distorted, prompts the reader to query narrative authority and notions of reality itself². Instead of clarifying where the unreliability of a narrator lies, current narratives tend to be ambivalent, postulating that uncertainty is a true attribute of experiencing these psychological phenomena and that it is not something that ought to be clarified.

Narrative structures that incorporate fragmented and non-linear elements tend to represent an experience of disrupted cognition and memories, as well as the confusion and disorientation experienced in relation to the mind's emotional states. Such narrative patterns tend to avoid the straight and linear format of a traditional narrative, as they represent an experience where the impact of trauma and serious issues in the mind affect the experience and interpretation of time and memories³.

THE ETHICAL AND CRITICAL ISSUES SURROUNDING THIS TOPIC-

Although recent depictions have become more sensitive, various ethical issues remain regarding the representation of mental illness within fiction. Firstly, the aesthetics of suffering is one major complaint raised regarding certain works that have been regarded as either trivializing or conferring meaning on mental illness as an indication of profundity or genius⁵. This colludes with myths depicting genius or profundity with psychological illness or other forms of outsider/outsider narratives that trivialize the experience of disability created by mental illness.

Another area of ethics relates to the use of trauma as a kind of narrative spectacle. It is argued that whilst traumatic situations, such as abuse, self-harming, or death by suicide, can push the boundaries of what might otherwise be considered a moral use of subject matter if considered in the context of care and recovery⁶. This brings into question how much artistic licence is required in literary representation in view of its potential influence on public attitudes with regard to mental health.

There are further issues regarding the issues of accuracy versus artistic license. Although fiction does not have to adhere to scientific representations, there are issues regarding inaccuracy that may perpetuate myths about mental illness and treatments⁷. It was asserted that ethical representation does not have to adhere to scientific representation but must adhere to social implications.



Lastly, the areas concerning voice and discourse become more scrutinized. Matters emerge regarding who has the authority to narrate stories on mental illness and whether someone is appropriating or reducing complex stories⁸. These questions and debates embody wider literary scholarship preoccupied with questions regarding authenticity and discourses on marginalized voices.

EXAMPLES OF MENTAL HEALTH REPRESENTATIONS IN MODERN FICTION-

There are some modern novels which illustrate modern trends in representation. Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*, though a literary influence on modern texts, remains a representation of female identity and uses first-person narrative to exhibit a struggle with mental health. *The Bell Jar* remains influential in modern narratives due to its female feminist and mental health concerns.

Caitlín R. Kiernan's **The Drowning Girl** presents a complex scenario regarding schizophrenia and the use of the unreliable narrator, which dwells on the boundaries between hallucination, memory, and reality¹⁰. This work challenges the conventions of narrative presentation by placing emphasis on subjective truth rather than objective reality.

Hanya Yanagihara's **A Little Life** has received a great deal of critical attention for its representation of chronic trauma, self-harm, and mental suffering. Although for its intensity and level of detail the novel has received great acclaim, there have also been criticisms of its potential to romanticize suffering and to overwhelm the reader through its representation of trauma¹¹. The debate surrounding this novel attests to the continued challenges regarding the ethics of representation in mental health stories.

In *"Poppy Shakespeare"* by Clare Allan, there's a critique of the psychiatric system to demonstrate the power dynamics that influence mental health diagnoses¹². This shift in narrative to address systemic problems in lieu of merely individualistic concerns makes this literary piece fall in line with socially and politically driven methods of illustrating mental health concerns.

CONCLUSION-

The representation of mental illness in contemporary literary fiction represents a profound transformation in the literary rendering of mental illness. Departing from more pejorative and sensational representations, recent literary portrayals emphasize interiority, psychological realism, and the social. By using innovative narrative strategies such as the unreliable narrator, fragmentation, and metaphor, the authors signify the complexities of mental illness beyond the boundaries of cultural presumptions. Nonetheless, ethical and critical discourse also emphasize the non-neutral nature of representation. The issues of romanticization, narrative ethics, and authenticity continue to figure predominantly within academia, pointing towards the manifest social power of fiction within the formation of public perceptions of mental illness. With the integration of mental illness within established paradigms concerning identity, trauma, and inequality, contemporary fiction finds its position



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within the process of de-stigmatization, simultaneously pointing towards the complexities and contradictions constructed within fictional representation. In conclusion, it appears that the literary discourse points to contemporary fiction being an essential cultural arena that highlights mental health, not merely a static state or a literary trope but an actual experience vis-à-vis relationships and social interactions. Mental health, which has remained at the forefront of social discourse and intellectual debate, is set to continue requiring literary studies of fiction in an attempt to grasp societal perceptions of psychological distress.

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