



Reading William Styron's *Darkness Visible* through Mad Studies perspective

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Abstract

The process of meaning-building is quintessential to conferring power to voices. Narratives, particularly autobiographical narratives depict life experiences in all its subtleties. William Styron's *Darkness Visible* is a memoir that recounts his depression. Mad Studies highlights the importance of individuals who experience the condition of madness to actively engage in the knowledge system related to it. Drawing on Mad Studies, the paper attempts to explore how Styron's memoir can be read as an articulation of depression giving a more nuanced understanding of the condition, in contrast to the medicalised perspective that often overlooks the personal stories of those with lived experiences.

Keywords: Narrative, memoir, Mad Studies, madness, depression

Introduction

William Styron is an American writer who has endured depression. Styron's *Darkness Visible: A Memoir of Madness* (1990) ^[4] narrates his experiences of dealing with depression. Styron describes his condition of depression as, "a disorder of mood, so mysteriously painful and elusive in the way it becomes known to the self – to the mediating intellect – as to verge close to being beyond description." (I. n. pag) this is Styron's note on his mental state which is self-reflexive in nature. The memoir is a roller coaster of intense emotions and depression swings. His account also sheds light on the lives of the people who have experienced the same condition.

Mad Studies is an emerging discipline that began as a vision of those deemed mad, crazy and denied voices to acknowledge their expertise on their condition by drawing on their experience. Although its inception was in Canada, Mad Studies has since spread internationally as a phenomenon. "Medicalized individual models of mental illness have dominated all aspects of madness and distress in the Western world since the 18th century Enlightenment." (Beresford ix) The experiences and struggles of ex-users and survivors of psychiatry are in stark contrast with the reality of medicalisation. Mad Studies initiate's critical conversations to acknowledge and appreciate the voices of those deemed mad. Kathryn Church in "Making Madness Matter in Academic Practice" mentions her motivations to act for mental health associations while operating in different roles as an organiser, a doctoral student, an independent researcher and a university professor remarks that,

My commitment has roots as well, in personal experiences of "breakdown" and ongoing attention to constituting health. Because I was never formally marked by psychiatry, I do not identify as "Mad." I think of myself as an ally of the Mad movement (Bishop, 1994)- not as an achievement but as a process of lifelong learning. (181)

Memoirs are personal stories that detail important moments in an author's life. In *Darkness Visible: A Memoir of Madness* (1990) ^[4], Styron provides a poignant portrayal of his battle with depression. While travelling to Paris to receive a literary award, he realizes that he is suffering from

clinical depression. He had been overlooking his mental struggles for several months. After a gap of thirty-five years, Styron's return to Paris stirs up the challenges of facing both his memories and the current reality of depression. Depression does not necessarily dawn upon an individual as a spontaneous event, but it grows slowly within a person gradually. "In ancient times, the word melancholia rather than the word depression was used to describe mood disorders characterized by despondency" (Tacchi and Scott 1). Recently, depression has garnered growing attention owing to its significant role in deciding the harmonious functioning of both individuals and society.

The famous cultural theorist and writer Susan Sontag discusses the distinction between depression and melancholy in *Illness as Metaphor* (1978) ^[5]. In her words, "Depression is Melancholy minus its charms" (6). Depression could be considered a silent monster that feeds on our minds, affecting the quality of all physiological and psychological functioning. In the foreword to his memoir, Styron explains that *Darkness Visible* originated from a lecture he gave in May 1988 at a symposium on affective disorders hosted by the Department of Psychiatry at Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine. The title, "Darkness Visible" alludes to the reference to an iconic phrase from John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Book 1, where the profound severity of Lucifer's fall is described with the oxymoronic expression "Darkness Visible." Through this title, Styron effectively conveys the overwhelming intensity of the harrowing experience of mental depression.

Mad Studies foregrounds the first-person understanding of madness and as a discipline seeks to validate the experiences of those who have endured madness by criticising the biomedical model that is essentialist in nature, which reduces the severity of the condition into just symptoms. Styron, while communicating the anguish and distress of having gone through the fluctuations of his mood temperaments, poignantly illustrates the chaos that he had been in while coming to terms with the reality that he was depressed. That realisation and his innate angst should have prompted him to represent it through his memoir, a creative act to combat the inconsistencies and imbalances within himself.

Writing is quintessentially an act of recollecting memories and construing meaning out of them. The purpose of writing is also political in itself as it attempts to voice the act of resilience. Chris Cox notes the social relevance of Styron's memoir through his article "Illuminating Depression", which appeared in *The Guardian*. "The publication of *Darkness Visible* helped to break the silence around depression, which many suffered in solitude". Styron confronts the growing anxieties and sadness that he had been neglecting and repressing through the memoir by reflecting on renowned litterateurs and philosophers who, at various stages of their lives, had shared the struggle with depression.

Memoirs, though they are personal narratives, remarkably impact social understandings and perceptions. Styron's memoir of depression being a pioneer of its kind, which narrates the first-hand experiences of being a clinically depressed person not only engages in individual articulation but also contributes effectively to the process of knowledge production in a sociological purview. Though it is the personal suffering that the narrative aims to represent, it is also sociologically relevant and constructive in its scope for initiating awareness of the complexities of the condition.

References

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