

Scarcity of Emotional Care and Depression: A Psychoanalysis of *This Close to Happy* by Daphne Merkin

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ABSTRACT

Depression is the most problematic psychic disorder which comprises imbalanced life, uneasiness, grief, agonies, unhappiness, unpleasantness, the unsatisfied outlooks and the worries affecting the psyche of a person. Whenever, anyone loses something dear or loved, or there is any tragedy, difficulty, death, etc, the person feels depressed. The depressed person due to the feelings of helplessness and hopelessness deviates from the normal course of life and suffers from anxiety and pessimism. *This Close to Happy* is a deeply personal and intimate account of the life of Daphne Merkin. She has powerfully written the heartbreaking and illuminating life events to manifest both the symptoms and courage to overcome depression. She writes about the trauma in her childhood caused by the stay with her holocaust surviving parents leading her to depression later on. Though her family was financially sound, still Merkin and her siblings were made to live with some abusive caretakers leaving a scar on her psyche to push her into depression. Her mother would always almost all the time remain emotionally absent. Her father was extremely cruel and indifferent towards his children. She would have the thoughts of committing suicide and contemplate about death every time. As she came under the grip of depression, it became impossible for her to eat or talk properly even to her therapist. She underwent continuous therapy for almost more than forty years. This memoir is a significant attempt to break the stereotype of pretending to be alright and show all the inner and outer struggles to battle courageously the affects of depression.

Key words: Depression, Suffocation, anxiety, holocaust, abuse, trauma, psyche etc.

INTRODUCTION

This Close to happy is a successful attempt to describe what a person feels when he goes through the disorders of anxiety. Daphne Merkin proposes this memoir as a wakeup call to the depressives. Merkin's life became so suffocated due to the effects of depression that she was very close to commit suicide. She would wake up every morning depressed and contemplate about death. She had been admitted to psychiatric hospital thrice for longer periods than weeks. She finally managed to put the burden of anxiety off her shoulders due to her determination, will, hope, therapies and medications. The present study analyses the memoir by applying Cognitive theory of Depression put forward by Aaron Beck. Beck is of the view that dysfunctional beliefs give rise to negative thoughts and it is these thoughts or beliefs which become the primary cause of depression. The more severe the negative thoughts, more severe are the symptoms of depression. Beck says in his book, *Depression: Clinical, Experimental and Theoretical Aspects* that, "The affective response is determined by the way an individual structures his experience. Thus if an individual conceptualization of a situation has an unpleasant content he will experience a corresponding unpleasant affective response" (287).

Aaron T. Beck says that depression is grounded on three main dysfunctional belief themes or schemas, the process of thought in accordance to which one experiences one's life. These dysfunctional beliefs dominate the thinking of depressed people and they think that (1) they are defective or inadequate; (2) they think that all their life experiences are a failure though it may not be so, and (3) they are always pessimistic about their future. Beck says that a depressed person pays selective attention to the things around. The person thinks according to his thoughts only, whatever he thinks of the particular things seems right to him, even if the contrary evidences may be present in front of him. The

failure of proper and balanced attention is known as 'faulty information processing.' Beck says there are certain thought processes highly significant in the development of a cognitive state.

In the very opening of the memoir, Merkin very lucidly manifests the sources of her in-future depression. She demonstrates her childhood as a harrowing experience where she could not get the emotional support from her family. Her mother was almost a crazy kind of woman whose character to describe seems quite distorted even to Merkin. Whenever in her childhood Merkin need emotional support from her mother she would hear her saying, "your tears don't move me . . . You will feel my five fingers in your face . . . you just look hideous" (20). Her mother was indifferent not to only her but to her siblings as well. She called her brother as gay even though he did not exhibit any characteristic corresponding to gays. The envious and disparaging attitude of her mother set a negative environment for her children to develop in. she did not want her children to develop the sense of their being important any way. As Beck says that if an individual's conception of a situation has an unpleasant content, one will experience a correspondingly unpleasant emotional response. Same was the case with Merkin, who could not contrive a way out of the emotional bizarre at home. From a psychoanalytic perspective it comes to fore that the primary cause of her depression is her aggravated childhood due to her emotionally indifferent mother and detached father.

The story moves backward and forward in time. Sometimes Merkin is in her forties battling with her depression and sometimes it is her childhood where on every step she is discouraged by her mother. As Aaron Becks says that the depressives possess some dysfunctional beliefs that dominate their thinking. They think that they are defective and not qualified for the purposes in the world, all their life is a failure, and they always manifest pessimistic attitude towards their future. Merkin developed all the attitudes identifiable to Beck's description of depressives. She wanted to become an actress but while she would discuss it with her mother she would get the response that she would work at a store as a servant at Wool-worth's on Lexington Street, where everything cost just ten or five dollars.

Merkin took her seriously and developed a negative and unworthy view of her herself, thinking of herself as not qualified for any superior rank in the society. The memories of the past haunt her regularly and even in her forties she has to depend on the anti-depressants to pass a few moments in peace. She came under such a tight grip of depression that she had to be taken out of the school and get admitted to the Columbia Presbyterian's Babies' Hospital for psychiatric evaluation. While she went home from hospital, she got a special treatment; nobody said anything negative about her. Everybody praised her and tried to make her feel worthy. The only thing which still remained mystery to her was why her mother loved her only when she was sick.

Merkin is married eventually in her mid thirties. She initially fails to have sex with her husband but eventually it happens and she feels as if she has climbed the Mount Everest. After giving birth to a girl child she once again has to get admitted to the psychiatric hospital as her situation worsens. The negative thinking as put forward by Aaron Beck still dominates her thinking. Whatever she thinks it becomes reality foe her. She is not able to change her mind set. Her idea of her mother being antagonistic towards her never changes. She remains in the hospital for seven or eight days. Her father never comes to meet her though her mother comes once with a gift. Under the severe effects of depression she cannot decipher the positivity of her mother's relationship with her.

Her mother comes to meet her renouncing her business schedule and also brings a gift to her contrasting to Merkin's father who does not even think of meeting his daughter. Still Merkin is not able to compromise to the situation. She takes her mother's visit negatively and as a sort of punitive attitude. She values her father's one phone call more worthy than her mother's actual visit. She is so filled with pessimism that while from the psychiatric hospital along with her fellow patients she is taken to a movie in a van, she feels of herself as a sort of 'alien' who is watched by normal human beings on the way.

Dephne Merkin eventually somehow comes out of her depression and finds the lost love in her husband and her daughter. She now eats everything she likes, though still on medication. It is only due to the sheer force of determination, hope, family support, will, therapy and medication that she makes peace with her extremely troubled childhood, her depression, pessimism, negativity and mental agonies. Moreover the book proves to be an inspiration to the depressives that even such a severe depression can be overcome provided there is hope and determination.

WORKS CONSULTED

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