

Unveiling Modern Realities: Mental Wellbeing, Survivors Guilt and Societal Pressure in  
Durjoy Datta's *The Boy Who Loved*

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ABSTRACT

Mental wellbeing is an overseen crisis despite having great awareness in modern society. Many people struggle in silence about their anguish, depression, survivors' guilt and societal expectations without any means of support. Battling repressed trauma, familial pressure and cultural rigidity leads to development of suicidal tendencies in the protagonist of the novel, *The Boy Who Loved* by Durjoy Datta. Through Freud's and Cathy Caruth's' Trauma Theory and Durkheim's suicide Classification, the psychological and societal pressure leading an individual towards self-destruction can be analyzed. This

paper advocates for better mental health awareness, need for having open conversations within a family and institutional reforms to support the struggling individuals before it is late.

Keywords: Wellbeing, Awareness, Depression, Self - destruction.

Mental health has become a global phenomenon, yet many cultures continue to overshadow it, pressurizing an individual to succumb to societal, academic and familial expectations. The Indian writer Datta foretells the modern realities through his work *The Boy Who Loved* and brings out the bitter truths of the Modern Society through Destructive Narration, presenting it to the elite community. Modern world is brimming with scientific and technological advancements, especially in the field of communication. The increase of advancements in communication decreases interpersonal relationships among fellow humans. Kierkegaard states that, "Life is not a problem to be solved, but a reality to be experienced". Datta pens realism with fictional elements to illuminate modern realities in society through his novel.

Datta presents the journey of Raghu Ganguly not as an isolated story, but as the representation of the silent battles undertaken by several thousands of teens in contemporary times. In *The Boy Who Loved*, the protagonist Raghu grapples with profound guilt after witnessing his friend's drowning. Datta talks about the short-lived friendship of Raghu and Sami. The latter succumbs to an accident in the swimming pool. Raghu reflects, "Did they scream like Sami had? Did they look at their father hoping he would save them like Sami looked at me that afternoon he drowned? Yes, he looked at me. He begged me to save him" (9). Raghu's trauma begins from the drowning incident in which Sami seeks his help, but a panic-stricken Raghu is unable to save Sami, resulting in his death, which leads to develop survivors' guilt in Raghu. Instead of receiving emotional support, Raghu is asked by his parents to move on and focus on his future. Raghu's parents prioritize education and societal image over their child's wellbeing. This mindset mirrors with the internal turmoil faced by many young individuals who are burdened with unprocessed trauma.

Datta enumerates constructive ideas through extreme decisions taken by the protagonist and several characters in the novel, "There was nothing left for me there" (292). This line tells us about the thought process of a teen who throws away the hope of living by succumbing to loneliness and lacking parental support. Thus, Datta showcases the importance of optimism required in the life of everyone to move on from a tragedy or a life shattering incident.

Sigmund Freud is well known for his Psychoanalysis and the death drive is a part of Psychoanalytic theory. The following quote "Two years since my best friend of four years died, one whose friendship I thought would outlive the two of us, engraved forever in the space time continuum. But as I realized nothing lasts forever" (Datta 1) showcases the experience of Raghu. It is aligned with Freud's *Theory of Repression*. It suggests that unresolved trauma manifests into self-destructing tendencies within an individual. Instead of processing his guilt, Raghu blames himself, leading to isolation and depression which results in accumulation of suicidal thoughts. Datta showcases the emotional numbness faced by many traumatic victims in this society who struggle to articulate their pain, through the life of Raghu Ganguly. Death Drive is being depicted through the minds of Raghu and Brahmi in this novel. According to Freud, "Thanatos – Death Instinct" (*Beyond the Pleasure Principle*) showcases that people will take risks, show aggression, reexperience their trauma and aim to die. In the life of Raghu, who suffers from traumatic past and is surrounded by memories involving his friend Sami's death, it serves as a catalyst in Raghu's mind and urges him to commit suicide. The following lines from the novel depict the drive towards death, "it's just a seven-storey drop from the roof top, a quick slice of the wrist, a slip on the railway track, a playful ingestion of pills or the accidental consumption of rat poison away" (Datta 2). Predominantly the drive towards death leads an individual to have various thoughts and disorients them from the society. Their end point is not to live but to end their life.

Sociologist Emile Durkheim classifies suicide into different types. They are as follows, Egoistic Suicide, Altruistic Suicide, Anomic Suicide, and Fatalistic Suicide. Among them two are relevant to Raghu and Bhrami in the novel. The first one is about 'Egoistic Suicide.' This discusses the young people in modern society who feel disconnected despite having opportunities to hyper connect through social media. The following quote expresses the state of Raghu's disorientation from society,

"I didn't talk to anyone, didn't make new friends. I picked the empty first bench, sat there alone, stared at the blackboard and waited for the day to end. Just 700 – odd days in my new school, 1200 days in whichever college I go to and then some more days and then some more and then some more.....and then I die...." (Datta 6).

Raghu distances himself from everyone and activates suicide as the escape mechanism which he believes will be helpful. Datta reiterates disorientation from society in the novel through the life of Raghu, who isolates himself due to his wounded past, from his family, friends and society. "I ate because I believe the easiest way to fool anyone into not looking inside and finding the throbbing mass of sadness is to ingest food. A person who eats well is not truly sad" (Datta 4). Raghu facades his sadness in front his family to cope with reality. 'Fatalistic Suicide' talks about Brahmi who suffers from loneliness and depression even though being a class topper she is unable to escape from societal expectations, loneliness, abuse and harassment. These elements culminate into an inescapable death net which is designed to end her life. Cathy Caruth, a leading theorist in Trauma Studies says that "Trauma survivor does not narrate their past as a completed event; rather, they live in the constant echoes of their trauma." Guilt manifests itself into self-blame and it leads to disconnection from society. "I was always a goner, a bit crazy, mental as my relatives always thoughts of me. I died the day my parents died. After that it was just a matter of time" (Datta 296). The whole world of Brahmi shatters when her parents die and she is unable to recover from it till her death.

Trauma is an event that resists representation yet there is a need for intervention to prevent the individual from making a wrong decision. Caruth also opines that “Trauma repeats itself” herewith memories from the past, flashbacks, dreams and voices. This draws Raghu towards Bhrami who seems to have suicidal tendencies, “They thought the lack of friends in my life was my school’s problem and had nothing to do with the fact that my friend had been mysteriously found dead, his body floating in the still waters of the swimming pool” (Datta 3). Datta also presents the protagonist who shuts himself off from society and never shares his guilt or requires help for his mental wellbeing.

The burden of parental expectations is shown through the lives of teens suffering in the novel. Datta puts forth familial measure of success by grades, careers and social status by disregarding emotional wellbeing. Raghu’s parents are concerned about their child’s future accomplishment rather than caring about his present mental health. Datta deals with real issues which reside in modern society, in which a student is forced to outperform everyone in extreme situations, while their passions have been uprooted from them, leading to breakdowns.

Inter-religious marriage is always ousted by parents who are deeply rooted in their culture and traditions. In modern society, it remains a topic of debate. As the younger generations welcome it with a warm heart the older generation is rigid and not yet in the mind to accept them with an open heart. Datta points out that parents are rigid in their customs that were created for the people in society. As the years pass, customs should evolve. But they haven’t. Anirban, Raghu’s elder brother, marries a Muslim woman leading to his exile from the house. It shows the religious intolerance that prevails in this modern society. Parents’ intolerance towards other religion is also explored through the following lines, “Never make a Musalman your friend. We are not same, remember that” (Datta 92). Even at the end of the novel when Raghu’s brother Anirban is partially accepted by their parents, it is due to his unborn child. Anirban’s eventual death and kidnapping of his son to force Zubeida, Anirban’s wife, to forgo her Muslim roots further

fractures Raghu and it intensifies his despair to end his life, “Maa – Baba had made her bow down, killed her spirit, did the worst that could have possibly happened to her. She looked... dead. Her child was all she wanted. No matter what I said, it wouldn't have changed things” (Datta 291). The integrity of being humane with a fellow human being is neglected due to religious intolerance and it indirectly affects the minds of people.

Modern health crisis is related to social media which influences a person to keep his or her outward appearance pleasing to the public and pretend to be happy while suffering inwardly. The influence of social media has created a huge isolation in interpersonal relationships, especially among teenage children. Cyberbullying is one of the factors of mental struggle. Unwanted comparison with his or her fellow peers and unrealistic beauty standards cause deterioration in mental health, which in turn results in alarming rise in suicide rates among the students due to academic failures, unemployment and cultural pressure. Among these elements Datta has made use of cultural pressure, unnoticed children's care and educational pressure, and discusses the need for intervention to prevent adverse incidents in society.

The stigma around mental health can be broken with proper intervention in the lives of the people who require help from depression and suicidal tendencies. Families must prioritize mental health along with physical health. It is also equally important in a person's career. Therapy sessions should be normalized, and mandatory counselling services should be provided in institutions. Awareness programmes should be organized for students in schools and colleges. Parents should take initiatives to tackle problems along with their child. Success is not about a successful career, but about fulfillment in one's life. Parents should not enforce a predesigned path for their children but must make them choose their future in which they can facilitate with their options.

Globally, youngsters find it difficult to overcome societal isolation and trauma which deteriorate their lifestyle. In *The Boy Who Loved*, Datta resonates with the voices of younger generation about the

contemporary world and urges the need for mental health reform. Parents and educational institutions should advocate with those individuals and set up a platform where they can open up about themselves and break the stigma about mental health and religious intolerance. It is society that should make them recognize that surviving is not about existing in a certain reality, but it is all about living a complete and meaningful life.

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