



Repercussion of Ignorance to the Mad Voices: Understanding Epistemic Injustice in *How to Travel Light: My Memories of Madness and Melancholia* by Shreevatsa Nevatia

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Abstract: Literature, through the creative medium of language, reflects society with clarity, depth and emotional precision. Contemporary literature is more focused and clearer about the objective to discuss the societal issues. With the growing trend of self-writing and first-person narration, literature often gives way to explore what is hidden behind the human psyche and mind. The core aim of this research paper is to talk about mental health, which is a serious concern of 21st century that needs the attention from the government, society as well as researchers and educators. Hence, this paper critically examines the delineation of mental health in *How to Travel Light: My Memories of Madness and Melancholia* by Shreevatsa Nevatia, an Indian English memoir published in 2017. Specifically, it seeks to understand the 'epistemic injustice' done to 'mad' individuals in the society, which is a key characteristic of doing 'mad studies.' This memoir is analysed as a cite of mad knowledge production that challenges the dominant biomedical psychiatry, centring lived experiences of mentally ill in society. It candidly provides glimpse into the world of Shreevatsa Nevatia, who is a survivor of mental illness. Nevatia, a young journalist, was diagnosed as bipolar at the age of twenty-three. A very close textual analysis reveals that his portrayal is not linear but an ongoing process of struggles for a decade within cycles of depression and euphoria and not a condition that leads to cure or recovery. Rather than looking at it as a clinical or diagnostic account of mental illness, this mad studies reading portrays it as a narrative of lived psychological distress that resists pathologization and medicalization. In a nut-shell, this paper is an attempt to present the repercussions of ignorance to the mad voices through understanding the testimonial and hermeneutical injustice done to 'Mad,' as reflected in the memoir, which sincerely contributes to the field of mad studies that contends madness not as a pathological condition to be cured but as a complex, lived condition. In addition to that, it adds to mad studies scholarship by illustrating how literary memoirs can lead to non-clinical, experiential understanding of mental illness as well as social, cultural and political factors affecting the individual experience of distress. This study is an attempt to make society consider 'Mad' individuals as credible 'knowers' and 'interpreters' of their own experiences and knowledge as well as to give voice to their oppression, discrimination and marginalisation in all the spheres of society.

Key Words: *How to Travel Light: My Memories of Madness and Melancholia*; Mad Studies; Epistemic Injustice; Memoir; Mental Health; Shreevatsa Nevatia.

1. INTRODUCTION: THE SILENCED INDIVIDUAL

Literature often serves as a cultural and social artifact that functions as a reflective medium through which social realities are represented, interrogated as well as transformed. In Contemporary era, the trend of self-writing is emerging gradually. Being specified, many a time, it works as a tool of communication for the silenced individuals, through which they can tell their real-life stories. In recent times, the tabooed subjects like mental illness, needs our attention and empathetic understanding. Aiming at discussing the delineation of mental health in the Contemporary



Indian English memoir by Shreevatsa Nevatia- *How to Travel Light: My Memories of Madness and Melancholia*, this research paper contributes to the endeavour to rethink human mental wellbeing and to revive our understanding and responses to it. The whole course of the paper is carried out with the specific focus on understanding the discourse of epistemic injustice, which is a key characteristic of mad studies, an emerging and interdisciplinary critical approach to mental health. This paper draws on Miranda Fricker's concept of epistemic injustice, as it provides a theoretical and critical framework for analysing, understanding, critiquing and challenging the subjugation of mad knowledge(s).

In this present study, *How to Travel Light: My Memories of Madness and Melancholia* by Shreevatsa Nevatia, a memoir published in 2017, is analysed as a cite of mad knowledge production that prominently challenges the dominant biomedical psychiatry and centres the lived experiences of mentally ill in society. The memoir is centred on the life of Shreevatsa Nevatia, a survivor of mental illness, that candidly provides glimpse into his psychic world. Nevatia, a young journalist, was diagnosed as bipolar at the age of twenty-three. Through this memoir, Shreevatsa Nevatia narrates the lived experiences of bipolar disorder within the contemporary Indian society. While most of the scholarly practices try to read the mental health narratives through the medical, psychological or confessional frameworks, understanding epistemic injustice is a medium to render the suffering and struggles of mentally ill individuals.

2. A DISCOURSE OF EPISTEMIC INJUSTICE

The people of mad community often face discrimination, oppression and violence based on their identity and diagnosis as a mentally ill. A philosopher named Miranda Fricker, in 2007, coined the term "Epistemic Injustice" for describing "the harm that results when, because of prejudice, a person is deprived of her capacity as a 'knower' or 'interpreter' of her own experiences" (White 77). Literally, the concept of epistemic injustice is concerned with the negative socio-epistemic experiences of people with psychiatric conditions. As epistemic injustice is a key concept under the interdisciplinary field of mad studies, mad studies scholars Stephanie Leblanc and Elizabeth Anne Kinsella aggress upon the fact that the oppression and marginalisation of the experiences of mad people and resultant knowledges constitute a form of epistemic injustice, which may be seen as an infringement on mad people's basic human rights (61). The very broad field of mental health study, under which epistemic injustice can be placed, mad studies, according to survivor researcher Angela Sweeney, is a "unifying theoretical framework that has as its central goal the critique of biomedical psychiatry and the development of critical and radical counter discourses" (Beresford 8). A term generally attributed to Richard A. Ingram (2008), "Mad studies is an emerging interdisciplinary field, mainly in the social sciences and humanities, that expresses a radical new voice in academe about madness" (Gillis 2). Mad studies is generally a medium, through which the real life-experiences of mentally ill people in society can be critically looked at. Several lives in Indian society face discrimination and marginalisation on the basis of their identity as "Mad", for those, mad studies works as a tool to give voice to the injustice done to them.

This memoir *How to Travel Light: My Memories of Madness and Melancholia* is actually a goldmine to analyse from the context of epistemic injustice imposed upon Shreevatsa Nevatia, as a very close textual analysis reveals that his portrayal is not linear but an ongoing process of struggles for a decade within cycles of depression and euphoria and not a condition that leads to cure or recovery. Nevatia was diagnosed as a bipolar in 2007, at the age of twenty-three. He has been a victim of epistemic injustice for at-least a decade, most prominently in psychiatric institutes as well as at his work place. Despite of being a journalist and an editor, a professional knower, he is silenced by the psychiatric system.

Epistemic injustice is comprised of two fundamental discriminatory forms:

1. Testimonial injustice
2. Hermeneutical injustice.

2.1 TESTIMONIAL INJUSTICE: THE DIAGNOSTIC SYMPTOMS VS. THE LIVED EXPERIENCES

"Testimonial Injustice," specifically, occurs whenever prejudices and stereotypes cause the hearer to "give a deflated level of credibility to the speaker's word" (White 77). Basically, Testimonial injustice is the core disbelief with which the mentally ill people are often treated when they share their own experiences of madness, emotional turbulence, anxiety, stress, and haunting thoughts. The way 'Mad' people are disbelieved on the basis of their lived realities, they are stuck in the hell of testimonial injustice. So, the discrediting of mad persons in their capacity as legitimate knowers represents what Fricker's epistemic injustice means (Leblanc and Kinsella 63). Leblanc and Kinsella have argued that



this “testimonial injustice occurs as a result of *negative identity prejudice* stemming from sanist thinking, which tacitly distorts judgements of Mad people’s credibility as speakers (63).

In the memoir *How to Travel Light: My Memories of Madness and Melancholia* by Shreevatsa Nevatia, his experiences of trauma, childhood experiences are disbelieved, ignored or ridiculed, not only by the family members, friends and society but also by the psychologists as well as practitioners, because of prejudice against mentally ill people in the society.

• FORCED TREATMENT AND LACK OF AGENCY

Forced treatment or lack of agency is a leading factor of testimonial injustice in Nevatia’s memoir. In the very beginning of the story, Shreevatsa Nevatia was institutionalised in Starlight. Before that, he had spent three and a half months at Fortune Foundation, a rehab on the very outskirts of Delhi. In Starlight, he met Jonathan. While talking, Jonathan asked, “but tell me, did they give you shocks?” (Nevatia 9). Nevatia said they hadn’t and this gave Jonathan comfort. Jonathan then exclaimed with sigh, “I wish I was there and not here” (Nevatia 9). This shows the forced treatment and lack of consent from the side of patients for their own treatment. They are merely treated as tools for experiments and not cared with empathy. Further, he keeps on explaining to Nevatia, the reasons behind his dazed and confused behaviour. He exclaims that on some mornings, “I’m given electroconvulsive therapy in the ICU. They want me to forget” (Nevatia 10). After this discussion, the journalist in Nevatia wanted to expose this torment done to mentally ill people in psychiatric institution, but it left him with fear of pinning down to bed, seizing uncontrollably, while a nurse would stuff his mouth with rubber and another strangled to his neck. This shows the silencing of the voices of mentally ill people in the society and even, in the mental health care system where they are supposed to be understood and cared.

In a same way, Durga, another inmate, also wanted to compare Starlight’s care to other mental health care institutions. Nevatia talks about his experiences at ‘The Delhi Hospital’. He says that it was more of a nursing home than a Starlight-like sanatorium. Dr. Makhija, the psychiatrist there, didn’t even know what he was doing. Nevatia’s body rejected his medications. That adds on to the experiences of injustice done to him which complicates the process of recovery and makes him stuck in the loop of his bipolarity.

In July 2007, Nevatia was hospitalised. When he woke up, his hands were tied to a hospital bed. He didn’t have any memory of having been brought there. His glasses had been taken off. By looking at his surrounding, he felt like he has been arrested. He asked to the taciturn nurse, “Am I in jail?”. The nurse, preparing a syringe replied, “You’re in a hospital” (Nevatia 181). This suggests how Nevatia is being treated like a prisoner there in the hospital. This behaviour with the mentally ill patients is an important instance to note the epistemic injustice done to Nevatia. This reflects the agency of doctors over the patients and the lack of agency from the side of patients over their own lives. Nevatia has emphasised how the patients in the mental health institutions of India are not given the right to decide about their treatment. Even, his phone was also taken away from him. He implored, “I must have the right to make at least one phone call. I really need to call my sister” (Nevatia 181). Madhu, tucking Nevatia back said, “You’re not means to have any contact with the outside world, but you’re safe” (Nevatia 181). This shows how the patients are isolated from the outside world, instead of giving them warmth and support from the other people. This form of testimonial injustice often takes away the control of patients over their lives and makes them feel helpless.

Institutionalisation and confinement are believed to be the only tools for the cure of mentally ill, though it is not so. While in the hospital, he tried to make the sense of his confinement. He sighed, “I was being administered medicines around the clock. I was apparently ill, but strangely, this hospital had no visiting hours. No worried family and friends had flocked to my side. I knew I hadn’t been quarantined, and I soon grew certain I was being punished” (Nevatia 183). One thing to be noted here is the different attitudes society has towards the illnesses, physical or mental. For instance, if a person would be suffering from any kind of physical illness or disability, he/she would have at-least access to the right tools of treatment as well as family and friends by his/her side. But, on the other hand, people like Nevatia are often left alone to survive, in the darkness of mental illness.

Lack of agency is evident in the instances, where the mentally ill patients like Shreevatsa are given the fake labels so that the pharmaceutical companies can sell their drugs. It reflects that ‘Mad’ individual’s lived experiences are given less credibility over the diagnostic symptoms. In this personal life narrative, Nevatia has exposed the psychiatric system of India. He explains that,



“Almost everyone I know has had one major bout of depression in their lives, and nearly all these people have once felt unduly energetic. A psychiatrist will look at them and conclude they’re type-II bipolar. The diagnosis means they can write a prescription, and that means that pharmaceutical companies will be able to sell more of their drugs” (Nevatia 193).

Nevatia sighs that the most unhappy ones are the unsuspecting patient who is swallowing these debilitating pills entirely uselessly. This is the kind of hidden injustice done to those patients, who are not at all aware about this injustice done to them.

• **PATHOLOGIZATION OF ABUSE**

Shreevatsa Nevatia’s childhood abuse is pathologized by many clinicians, which is a key factor of testimonial injustice. On the evening of 16 June, Shreevatsa went to meet his aunt in Gurgaon. In her living room, he saw Dr. Ishita malik, who came from Fortune Foundation, waiting with a male nurse and two lanky orderlies. He sighs out loud, “Not this again” (Nevatia 199). When he tried to walk out of the room, he found the room locked from the outside. When Dr. Ishita calls his anger an abnormal behaviour, Shreevatsa defends it saying he has the reason to feel that way. He feels he has never been understood in his life, because, he has been working for an organization which is corrupt to the core and the medicines that he has been taking leaves him entirely numb. He believes, these are the core reasons for his behaviour. After submitting himself to Dr. Ishita’s will, he went with her at Fortune, “a plus farmhouse that was doubling up as a drug rehabilitation centre and a mental healthcare facility” (Nevatia 200). Shreevatsa describes the confinement of patients there, with institute’s high grounds. In their sixth one-on-one session, Shreevatsa confesses that many of his core beliefs are remnants from his childhood. Responding to this, Dr. Ishita says, “You can’t hide behind it forever. Your distortions are your problems, not your negative experiences” (Nevatia 205). The most striking instance of Testimonial injustice occurs when Shreevatsa describes his childhood experiences and Dr. Ishita refines his childhood abuse as “Incest” and not as an “abuse” (Nevatia 206). She asks him, “Did you ever say no to your abuser?” (Nevatia 206). When Shreevatsa responded with ‘No,’ She replied, “What happened to you was incest, not abuse. You were a consenting partner” (Nevatia 206). Here, Shreevatsa’s own trauma and experiences are pathologized with practitioners’ clinical languages.

• **THE CREDIBILITY DEFICIT OF CRISIS**

It is often the case with the mentally ill people that whenever they share about their emotional struggles and feelings, it is considered as a manipulative or abnormal behaviour. In the summer of 2007, Nevatia tailored a performance, having Franz Kafka’s aphorisms as a manual. He frequently identifies himself with the mythical figures like Krishna and Shiva, which shows his internal realities and reflects his bipolarity and mania. Rather than to empathize with him and understand his condition, his behaviour is taken up as a symptom to be suppressed and treated. As a consequence of his behaviour, an acquaintance pulls him out of his living room by saying, “Stop thinking you’re some kind of Krishna. You’re just a really bad actor botching up his once-in-a-lifetime part as Casanova” (Nevatia 44). He felt sad that his dearest friends, that he once considered, are now being angry over his utterances. All these instances reflect that instead of staying by his side, and understanding him, society often chooses to walk away from his life by insulting or abusing him. That created burden on his mind and left him suffer in silence and guilt.

2.2 HERMENEUTICAL INJUSTICE: THE MARGINALISATION OF MAD

Miranda Fricker employed the term “hermeneutical injustice,” to describe what happens when prejudice denies a social group the opportunity to contribute to the pool of knowledge that allows human beings to make sense of and explain their experiences to themselves and others (White 77). Fricker conceptualizes this hermeneutical marginalisation as a prerequisite for a situation to count as a case of hermeneutical injustice. More importantly, the gap in understanding arises from a prejudice against ‘Mad’ people. “Hermeneutical injustice relates to hermeneutics, or the art of interpretation, which affects people’s ability to express themselves or to be understood” (Leblanc and Kinsella 67).

• **THE GAP IN UNDERSTANDING**

Mentally ill subjects are often overlooked or ignored in the society because the society lacks the proper tools to communicate with them and make them feel loved, cared and understood. There lies a major gap in understanding. At



Starlight, when Dr. Sen came to see Nevatia, she asked him that what is the one feeling he feels the most strongly. He replied, 'Anger' (Nevatia 28). Upon asking towards whom he feels angry, he said, first towards himself and second towards his parents for putting him there in the hospital. He exclaimed, "I understand the reasons why I had to be incarcerated, but was this dictatorial kindergarten the only option?" (Nevatia 29). This is evident that his anger towards his parents is caused by the lack of proper care and understanding he needed from them. His parents were not able to understand the mental condition of Nevatia, so the only option they felt right was his institutionalisation. But this misunderstanding is the hermeneutical injustice caused to him, that shows the society-wide failure to have the right tools to interpret the 'Mad' experiences of someone like Shreevatsa Nevatia.

Once, while conversing with Dr. Bharatendu Madeka, Shreevatsa tells him about his early life experiences that might have caused his mania. Dr. Madeka suggests him that your experiences definitely have precedents but you should never forget that you have to continue living in society and there are of-course your parents who care for you. Listening this, outraged Shreevatsa says,

"My parents do this each time. Each time I am on the verge of a realization that is momentous, they throw me into a hospital and strap me to a bed, like some animal that is a danger to the entire zoo. And none of this humiliation helps. I don't think I need to apologize or atone for how I think, for who I am" (Nevatia 197).

This rage is a result of the injustice done to Shreevatsa. Though unintentional, this hermeneutical injustice somehow added on to his mania. In addition to that, it also suggests how society lacks proper knowledge on how to treat mentally ill people and how to take care of them with empathy and understanding, so that they can live in the society being who they really are.

• **STIGMA AND THE SYSTEMATIC FAILURE**

In most of the cases, the stigma and stereotypes attached to the mental illness, makes the mentally ill suffer. The misconceptions such as 'Don't talk about it or hide it' shows the systematic failure to understand the 'Mad' subjects. In 2007, when Nevatia was first diagnosed as bipolar, his psychiatrist advised him to disguise his first episode of mania as a bout of cerebral malaria. Such life experiences of mental illness coupling with this stigma, do injustice to the mentally ill individuals like Shreevatsa Nevatia. Even after being a psychiatrist, he said such thing, which suggests the hollowness of psychiatry as well as the inability of the society to deal with the 'Mad' people. He further says to Nevatia that, "You might find that your colleagues don't take too kindly to the idea that you suffer from a mental illness that is persistent" (Nevatia 166). The same thing happened with him. Nevatia felt struck by the compassion of the editors at his workplace. But unfortunately, their empathy towards him came with a warning that, "Don't tell HR about this and please don't give up on those medicines" (Nevatia 167). This overemphasis on medication and ignorance to the importance of love, care and support creates barriers in the progress of recovery. This critique is central to Mad studies, which believes that the medication and psychiatry should not only be prioritized for the recovery and cure of mental illness, but also the society, peer support, care and understanding from the loved ones must play a huge role.

• **LANGUAGE AS 'OPPRESSIVE'**

When language becomes oppressive, it turns against the individual because it is often filtered through the lens of psychiatry and clinical labels. Nevatia feel, the worst part of his life is 'Isolation' and this loneliness became oppressive for him. "I have nowhere to go and no one to meet" (Nevatia 125). Out of his loneliness and desire for communication and connectedness, which was off-course a manic predilection, he created an account on Facebook with the suggestion from a friend. Soon he started to post so many things based on his moods and out of his mania. One day, he received a call from his hysterical friend in Delhi. She shouted, "Stop annoying the world with your status updates. You are becoming an imposition. I hope you know that" (Nevatia 135). Nevatia shouted back, "Then why don't you and everyone else block me" (Nevatia 135). This kind of unempathetic behaviour adds on to his mania. This led him to resist everyone who wanted to help him, including his ex-girlfriend, Mallika.

Once, while waiting at the airport for one of his childhood friends he met in Bombay, due to his abrupt behaviour and no luggage, the constable shooed him away with his stick saying, "this is no place for bums" (Nevatia 45). It feels



like his behaviour is hard to forgive or apologize for. This abusive and oppressive language suggests that such communication can actually turn against the subject with such condition when looking at through the lens of psychiatry.

3. CONCLUSION: TOWARDS EPISTEMIC JUSTICE

In a nut-shell, it can be argued that this moving contemporary Indian English memoir by Shreevatsa Nevatia entitled *How to Travel Light: My Memories of Madness and Melancholia*, at the core, reflects the epistemic injustice done to him. Through this memoir, Nevatia not only reflects his individual struggles of crippling mental illness such as bipolar disorder and depression, but also highlights the social, medical, familial and cultural structures and his systematic oppression and marginalisation being someone who is identified as ‘Mad.’ In this present study, the memoir is read through the lens of epistemic injustice, a key concept of mad studies, which illustrates how the society wide failure to look at mental illness beyond the psychiatry as well as the mental health care system and to treat ‘Mad’ people with love, care and understanding, denies to give ‘Mad’ subjects agency over their own lives. Testimonial injustice is illustrated thorough the frequent disbelief in Nevatia’s words, silencing of his own lived experiences by family, friends as well as society and psychiatric authorities, pathologisation of his abuse, forced treatment and lack of agency. At the same time, hermeneutical injustice is made evident through the gap in understanding and lack of proper tools of communication with which the sufferings of ‘Mad’ people can be understood in the contemporary Indian society, as he highlights how he has always been misunderstood by his family members as well as clinical practitioners. moreover, at the very end of the memoir, Shreevatsa has reflected how he discovered a rare agency over his own life while in a consultation with Dr. Mukherji, he said no to take Depakote as it takes away all his feelings as well as leaves him feeling numb and he is then kept on just lithium. This control over his own life gave him back a voice he had forgotten could be lucid. Thus, the memoir can be taken as site of mad knowledge production and a ‘travel from darkness to light’ that sheds light on a journey from epistemic injustice to raising voice for epistemic justice. This study is an attempt to make society consider ‘Mad’ individuals as credible ‘knowers’ and ‘interpreters’ of their own experiences and knowledge as well as to give voice to their oppression, discrimination and marginalisation in all the speres of society.

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