



Research Paper

Exploring the notion of Pain and the process of Healing, through the practice of Ecopsychology.

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ABSTRACT: This paper attempts to draw a relation between pain and healing through nature and human intersubjectivity. Central to this discussion, is hence, the concept of Ecopsychology, which has gained focus over the years through the studies of human beings in relation to nature, and how the internalisation of the ecology around us can help in healing ourselves and thereby, also perceiving nature allowing nature to heal. Science and technology in the world today, has not only alienated human beings, but has also turned nature into the significant “Other”, the “Other” that allows us to thrive in it, yet remains distant in our everyday lives.

KEY WORDS: Healing, Nature, Ecopsychology, Pain, Intersubjectivity.

I. INTRODUCTION

Healing through nature, and healing in nature, has been an intriguing concept, where the body and the concept of pain, come together to communicate with nature. Central to this, has been the study and practice of Ecopsychology where, within the practice of psychology an attempt to reconnect and engage human beings, with the environment is made. According to Theodore Rozak, as mentioned in his book, *‘Voice of the Earth: An Exploration of Ecopsychology’ (1992)*, with the gradual degradation of the environment and rapid technologization of life, human beings have lost touch with the environment that they are a part of, and thereby, the cause of human degradation and environmental degradation is proportional to each other. Hence, it is of absolute necessity for human beings to come in contact with the “planetary”, which restricts the separation of the human body from the larger environment. The technologization of human lifestyle, has not only caused an ecological crisis, but has also resulted in extreme anger, grief, pain and alienation of human beings in this racing lifestyle. Human beings, in order to survive, damage and presuppose a superior position to the natural world and in their attempt to dominate over the ecological lifeworld, they end up causing its destruction. Hardly do they realise that their existence is relative to the well being of the natural world, because according to Ecopsychologists, the human body is not separate from the life world, but in fact, a part of it, where they thrive and get conditioned to the ways of living. Andy Fisher (1996), who has presented works on his extensive research on ecopsychology mentions how **“Ecopsychology is a psychological undertaking that essentially says, we too are nature”**, where the human psyche is made to consider itself as an *internal* aspect of the natural world, without considering it as “non-human”. Fisher also goes on to mention that for human beings to consider themselves as a part of the environment and experience themselves as a part of the ecological space, the emphasis of this is given to the relational and participatory factors of the nature-human relation. Thereby, Fisher aims to bring together the psychological and ecological spaces where therapeutic intervention takes place on the body, through nature. However, on the other hand, Shierry Weber Nicholzen (2002), focuses on how, it is of absolute necessity to not only focus on the separate entities of the human body and nature. Ecopsychology is a realm that promotes the psychological thinking of human beings to consider themselves as a part of nature and communicate with it, instead of viewing it as a resource bank to supplement their survival and causing dominance over it. This in turn, helps them to nurture themselves as well as the environmental surrounding, which could cause lesser ecological degradation and thereby distinguishes this from the private interest group of Environmentalists. Hence, for Nicholzen, it is important to communicate and speak to the natural world, focusing on the factors of language and experience, which act as the **“talking cure”** or therapeutic natural healing, in the realm of ecopsychology and addresses the emotional contents of fears, grief, suffering, pain and love in relation to how we perceive and respond to the environmental issues of ecological degradation. For a society that is more focused on economic and technological factors of living, the ecological crisis has been taken a backseat. While there are attempts made by Environmentalists to heal the planet, but Eco-psychologists on the other hand raise the psychological concerns behind the “wounding of the planet” and emphasis on the psychological distress of human beings, in order to help them reconnect and revive the natural world. The

contributions of Ecopsychology is therefore two fold, where the first is to present a model of human psychology where the planet is not only a resource bank, but a “living matrix” out of which we are born and where we form an understanding of our self in relation to the larger environment. In this case, Andy Fisher goes on to give us examples of how children bond with nature in various ways which helps in the development of their consciousness and relationship to the human and natural world. The second contribution is that of locating a deep psychological condition that often causes and results from ecological degradation. In other words, the emotions of grief, pain, suffering, emptiness, consumerism, love and other such emotions, are also rooted in the fact that we live in a **“deeply wounded society that has trouble facing up to the reality of our contemporary crisis, and that is in need of radical healing”** (Fisher, 1996). Hence, for example, our need to constantly consume and dwell in materialistic commodities, is a potential threat to mental well-being and is termed as “materialistic disorder”, according to psychologist Sarah Cohn.

II. NATURE-HUMAN INTERSUBJECTIVITY

David Abram in his book, *‘The Spell of the Sensuous’* (1996) also goes on to talk about how as human beings, we thrive in nature, yet we view the natural world as the “Other”. As human bodies, we get our perceptions and various modes of sensitivity from the natural world but we still consider it to be external to the human body. He goes on to talk about the “developed world” today, where many people are enrolling themselves in workshops for spiritual healing and for shamanic healing for personal curing, only to realise that their stress could possibly lie in the relation between human community and the ecological world. According to Abram (1996), the human body is designed to derive a host of sensations and perceptive abilities from the natural world. But with rapid increase in technology, the human body is devoid of the intricacy of these senses, which is resulting in his inability to deal with the suffering and tensions of the industrial world. It is only through reciprocation with the natural world and our experiences with it, can we help ourselves to attune with the functioning of the world and help in the ecological balance, without viewing it as an exterior dimension, since we are conditioned, as human beings, since time in memorial, to adapt and grow ‘in’ the natural world and not distance ourselves from it. In his book, Abram (1996) mentions, how, while conducting his research in Bali and by virtue of spending a long time there, he had gotten used to the non-industrial world, where nature was not commodified but often worshipped or considered as a **“co-human entity”**. In the initial chapter, Abram (1996) talks of how the people of Bali worshipped nature and its little “secret keepers” (which were usually small insects or worms), to heal themselves or worship their ancestors. For the natives of Bali, the human body is not a separate entity from the natural world, because one is born in the natural world and simultaneously dies or is buried or cremated in the natural world itself. This experience gifted Abram (1996) with the thought that how, distinct perceptions or senses of the ecological world shapes human bodies, wherein he describes how certain earthy senses of smell he had gotten used to, and how he went on to realise that people in the industrial world are today devoid of much of these senses since they thrive under the smell of chemical emissions from factories, which in turn cause the psychological degradation of human beings as well as natural degradation. Hence, in order to view the ecological world as a co-existing entity, it is important to reflect over the works of **Edmund Husserl and his notion of intersubjectivity**. According to Husserl, it is crucial to explore a subjective experience and recognise our body in relation to the appearances of other bodies and other “experiencing beings”. Husserl mentions that the body is “mysterious and multifaceted”, and the phenomenal field of experiencing and perceiving our own bodies is within a larger field of other bodies which thrive around us, and it is in relation to these bodies around us, do we locate and experience our bodies and its sensory and perceptive abilities. Husserl’s notion of “Intersubjectivity” goes on to explore the fact that in the presence of other such experiencing bodies, we resonate with our own senses through an “empathetic” approach and considering these other bodies as other “centres of experience.” Thus, it could be said, that this notion of Intersubjectivity as presented by Husserl, also substantiates the practice of Ecopsychology, whereby we recognise the experiences and nurturing of the natural world within which human bodies thrive and experience their subjectivity. It is also however, important to embark upon the concept of the “self” as stated by Merleau-Ponty, where he says that there is much more beyond the “physical body”, and the presence of an “experiencing self”, which poses to be the innermost essence of the body. According to him, “The living body is thus the very possibility of contact, not just with others but with oneself-the very possibility of reflection, of thought, of knowledge.” Hence, **Merleau-Ponty emphasises on the “sensuous and sentient life of the body”**, which consists of the experiencing self and the mind. For Merleau-Ponty, the “corporeal gestures” of the body do not only form its entirety, but also the emotions, the mind, the senses which do not separate the mind from the body, and hence he relates to how the happiness could result in the physical expression of the widening of the eyes, or how sadness could result in the weakening of the limbs. In both the concepts of **Intersubjectivity as given by Husserl and the Mindful Life of the Body as given by Merleau-Ponty**, we notice the key factors of reciprocation and participation as key aspects in the process of experiencing the phenomenal world and interacting with it.

III. PAIN AND HEALING

Nicholsen (2002) asserts that **“The feelings of attachment and identification we develop early in our lives- the feelings that give rise to our sense of “home”- become the basis of our later recognition of kinship.....But it is only by suffering the loss of those early bonds....that we become able to feel concerned for what we love, a concern that includes the knowledge that we are also separate and responsible.”** In other words, from our nascent years we bond and thrive in nature, where we form our “selves”, but it gradually becomes an unfamiliar world to us and we distance ourselves from it. Here, it is crucial to embark upon the body and the concept of pain, in the realm of eco psychology, since it is important to recognise and locate our pain, in order to heal ourselves through nature, in nature, and also feel for the loss of ecology in order to prevent its degradation. Since Eco psychology focuses mainly on the human interaction with nature, and as Merleau-Ponty has also mentioned, that it is important to emphasis on the corporeal body as well as the mind, in order to address the pain, one is going through. **Talal Asad, in his book, ‘Formations of the Secular’ (2003),** raises a relevant question whereby he seeks to distinguish physical pain from psychological suffering. According to him, “Pain is not merely experienced in the mind.... but also generated by it.” Therefore, Asad goes on to mention how, in most cases, physical pain seems to be locatable, but mental suffering often emerges as pain in a physical form. He also mentions how, pain as an agent and object, turns the corporeal body into a subject under it, whereby, the attempt to control pain, is often metaphorised through language, music or poetry, and thereby creating a space for the interaction with pain, and thereby objectifying it as though it is external to the body, when in reality, it is not. This attempt to interact with pain, in order to control it, leads us to the work of **Arindam Chakraborty, in ‘Jibananda O Antarmukh Dehabodh’ (2008)** which deals with the metaphoric language of pain, and the various realms of consciousness or ‘*bodh*’. Here, through the works of Jibananda, Chakraborty mentions how our bodily experiences and subjectivity is not purely known by the “knower” and how an inward-looking sense of the body, or “*Antarmukh Dehabodh*”, helps us in acknowledging the presence of pain and suffering in other entities or bodies that surround us. However, he also speaks of how the notion of pain, eludes subjectivity because it becomes difficult to locate the pain in the layered surfaces of the body, until and unless one gains sovereignty of knowledge or control over his pain as an external agent and through clarity of thought, which the author mentions as “*Protyokkhochaitanya*” or the external knower. In this work, Chakraborty also mentions an excerpt from an essay by Paul Valery titled as ‘An Evening with Monsieur Teste’, where he gives a vivid description of pain, which finds clarity and sharpness in few seconds and immediately vanishes into nothingness and is untraceable, through the device of language and poetry and states how, the poet and yogi (healer), both have the ability to look inwards, in order to address their pain, and heal it. In order to gain the ability of looking inwards, is the key aspect of “*Shongbedon*” or sympathy, which allows us to feel what the other is feeling since we are all dwelling and interacting in a matrix of other bodies too. Hence, the human body experiences pain not only in terms of its Physical manifestations through sensory perceptions (“*Bajhoprotyokkho*”), but also how it goes beyond bodily perceptions into the realm of the unknowable (“*Manoshprotyokkho*”). This helps us to draw the conclusion that how the mind or consciousness, is not a separate entity from the body, but in fact a part of it, that helps in our perceptions of the world around us.

IV. CONCLUSION

In mentioning the works of Talal Asad and Arindram Chakraborty, it is crucial to notice how both the authors have spoken of pain which goes beyond the realm of physical perceptions and how the ability to address the pain in our “mindful body” also helps us to empathise with the suffering of other beings in the experiencing life world. In the project of Eco psychology, this could be said to be one of the central themes that help human beings to reconnect and interact with the ecological world around them. However, in order to heal oneself through the practice of eco psychology, it is also equally important to realise and locate one’s pain, which in turn allows the human body to empathise and consciously engage with the ecological world that they dwell in. As also mentioned by Arindam Chakraborty above, to locate and “know” about one’s pain, to realise the existence of the “breathing body”, allows us to acknowledge and empathise with other breathing bodies, which in this case, is the ecological world around us. The language of reciprocation and participation, in healing one’s own “self” and also simultaneously seeking to heal the nature, enlightens us on the knowledge of suffering and pain, which the nature has also been going through. Hence, in order to heal and address the pain in ourselves, to address the psychological and social suffering, it is equally important to interact with the ecological world, and to also allow it to heal. Once we gain knowledge of our own suffering, we attain the ability to understand and empathise with the concept of pain, and how ecological degradation also could cause us pain, when we start acknowledging nature as a co-existing breathing body and seek to the fulfilment of the project of Eco Psychology. Thus, to end I quote:

“How monotonous our speaking becomes when we speak only to ourselves....to the foraging black bears and twisted old cypresses- that no longer sense us talking to them, but only about them, as

though they were not present in our world....when the numerous powers of this world will no longer address us- and if they still try, we will likely not hear them....” [David Abram, 1996].

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