The seeds of creativity and the soil of poet Kannadasan

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ABSTRACT

The links between creative genius and insanity have been studied by numerous experts and famous writers. Recent studies by several psychiatrists have revealed an increase in psychopathology in creative artists, especially writers and poets. The cyclothymic temperamental traits of a Tamil poet, Kannadasan, are studied here.

Key words: Creativity, cyclothymia, genius, psychopathology

INTRODUCTION

The relation between creativity or genius and insanity has been debated since ancient times. Different views are strongly held by various authorities. According to Lamb,[1] “it is impossible for the mind to conceive a mad Shakespeare. The greatness of wit, by which the poetic talent is here chiefly to be understood, manifests itself in the admirable balance of all the faculties.”

According to Jonathan Richardson,[2] as quoted by Anthony Storr,[3] “the way to be an excellent painter is to be an excellent man... a painter’s own mind should have grace and greatness; that should be beautifully and nobly formed... a painter ought to have a sweet and happy turn of mind, that great and lovely ideas may have reception there.”

Sir Francis Galton in his book “Hereditary Genius” believed that great achievement was dependant on three gifts, all of which he considered were inherited, namely ability, zeal and capacity, for hard work. He entirely repudiated the notion that anything approaching mental instability was part of creative achievement.[4]

Havelock Ellis,[5] as quoted by Storr, says “the association between genius and insanity is not, I believe, without significance but in face of the fact that its occurrence is only demonstrable in less than 5% of cases we must put out of court any theory as to genius being a form of insanity.”

THE CONTRARY VIEW

In his speech on divine madness in Phaedrus, Socrates[6] said “madness, provided it comes as the gift of the heavens, is the channel by which we receive the greatest blessings,” as quoted by Jamison and Goodwin.[7]

In modern times, opinion has veered toward the positive links between creativity and mental illness. In the words of Kraepelin,[8] “the volitional excitement which accompanies the disease may under certain circumstances set free powers which otherwise are constrained by all kinds of inhibition. Artistic activity namely may, by the untroubled surrender to momentary fancies or mood and especially poetical activity by the facilitation of linguistic expression, experience a certain furtherance.”

William James,[9] as quoted by Burton,[10] says “when a superior intellect and a psychopathic temperament coalesce – as in the endless permutations and combinations of human
faculty, they are bound to coalesce often enough – in the same individual we have the best possible conditions for the kind of effective genius that gets into the biographical dictionaries.”

More recent studies by psychiatrists on the link between genius and mental illness bring this out more forcibly. Jamison’s study[13] found that bipolar disorder is around 10- and 40-times more common among artists than among the general public. Authors and poets who suffered (or are thought to have suffered) from bipolar disorder include the authors Hans Christian Andersen, Honore de Balzac, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway, Victor Hugo, Edgar Allan Poe, Mary Shelley, Mark Twain and Virginia Woolf and the poets William Blake, Emily Dickinson, T. S. Eliot, John Keats, Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath, Alfred, Lord Tennyson and Walt Whitman.

Above-average levels of psychopathology have been demonstrated in groups of outstanding individuals working in the arts.[12]

A recent Indian study by Pavithra et al, titled “Creativity and Mental health: A profile of writers and musicians,” of the Karnataka state examined 40 writers, 40 musicians and 40 controls.[13] They found that the majority of the people who were having mental illness suffered from depressive disorders (dysthymia, mild and moderate depression). Some of the studies had found more of bipolar spectrum among creative people. But, this was not found in this study.

This finding is contrary to the recent American studies: additional support for the association between mood disorders and creativity came from the work of the Harvard psychiatrist Joseph Schildkraut, who studied 15 abstract expressionist artists of the New York School who worked in the mid-20th century. Consistent with the Iowa Workshop study and the Jamison study, he found that about 50% of these artists had some form of psychopathology, which was predominantly mood disorder.[14]

Santosa et al, from the Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences, Stanford University, School of Medicine, CA, USA studied the enhanced creativity in bipolar disorder patients and found increased rates of creativity in them.[15]

It is proposed to study the extraordinary creativity of poet Kannadasan, who lived from 1927 to 1981, with regard to the psychiatric factors. He was an outstanding poet, lyricist, novelist, journalist and devout writer of Hindu philosophy. He was the “Kavi Arasu” (poet laureate) of Tamil Nadu and recipient of the first National Film Award for the best lyrics of Tamil in 1969 and Gnanpith Award of the Sahitya Akademi for his historic novel about the Chera kingdom (the present Kerala state) in 1980.

Kannadasan was a prolific writer of varied interests; he has 3000 lyrics and the scripts of more than a dozen films to his credit. His religious writings include “Meaningful Hinduism” with an introduction by Jagadguru Sankaracharya Chandrashekarar Swamigal, whose orations Kannadasan compiled as a book “God’s Voice,” an exposition of the Bhagvad Gita, some translations of short works of Adi Sankara, the epic of Jesus and more than 40 books of poems, dramas and plays. Kannadasan’s autobiography deals extensively with his political activities and there is also a biography written by his close associate, relative and friend, Thiru Muthiah.

The creative genius of Kannadasan is assessed by analyzing his life and works. The disadvantages of such studies are pointed out by Jamison: errors of omission and commission are likely; the lack of judgment and insight, especially during periods of excitement, are likely to bias such studies and bipolar II states go undetected. In an earlier study,[16,17] some of these aspects were alluded to. It is to be noted that Kannadasan was never admitted for treatment for bipolar disorder per se.

Most of his lyrics reflect the state of his mind at the time of his having written them.

A couple of pictures of depression are depicted below:
- Suspended am I in this stupor permanent
- Trapped with silence as my only vent
- My story is but one of turmoil and strife
- T's is a portrait of tears on the canvas of life
- Like a statue inverted its grandeur unknown
- Blooming amidst sorrow – my sad life has been borne
- A victim of myself – I stand lone and forlorn
- Where is that elusive haven of peace
- The refuge that my troubled soul seeks
- Far, far from the abode of man
- Blissful solitude, it is my soul's yen
- My cursed fingers evoke only tunes of sadness
- My tortured touch scorches the petal's softness
- How hellish is a soul in harness
- And my life – the birth of His thoughtlessness
- I will worship thee my God
- Give me sleep tonight
- Give me sleep tonight
- Give me sleep tonight.

Now, features of exalted mood and state are seen in these couple of examples:
- The Universe was created for me alone
- With its flowing rivers and blooming flowers
- The fruition of Nature and of Motherhood itself
- Were directed towards my existence alone
- In the sounds wafting across the breeze
- In the waves kissing the sandy shore
A Thousand relations have come – what is the use?
As you are the roots
I can't explain my state when I wrote the song "Let whatever happens happen" 
That was the consolation I told myself
Like the branches of the Banyan tree
A thousand relations have come – what is the use?
(whilst having a drink)

I would be writing the dialogues; a sorrow would be knocking at my doors
Flood in the river, fire on the banks
In-between the gods smile at me

I can't explain my state when I wrote the song "Let whatever happens happen"
That was the consolation I told myself
Like the branches of the Banyan tree
A thousand relations have come – what is the use?
As you are the roots
I escaped from falling

When we consider the clinical criteria for cyclothymic temperamental disorders as mentioned by Akiskal et al.,[17]
• Shaky self-esteem that alternates between lack of self-confidence and naïve or grandiose over-confidence.
• Periods of mental confusion and apathy, alternating with periods of sharpened and creative thinking.
• Uninhibited people-seeking (that may lead to hypersexuality) alternating with introverted self-absorption.

It is to be noted that this designation of cyclothymic temperamental disorder differs from DSM-IV criteria for the same. Akiskal has studied this aspect. He has used a semistructured affective temperament schedule called TEMPS-I for the interview version and TEMPS-A for the autoreviewed version to assess the cyclothymic temperament – artists have four-times as many cyclothymic traits as normal.[18]

On analyzing Kannadasan's biographic and autobiographic details, we can reach the indisputable diagnosis of cyclothymic temperament disorder. It is not surprising that this temperamental problem is associated with comorbid alcoholism, drug abuse and indiscriminate sexual behavior. Alcoholism was present throughout his life, although it was not so for his father and other first-degree relatives (his father indulged in pathological gambling and impoverished his family in spite of having found good fortune in Burma before returning to India). Drinking had become a ritual with him – after attending to business matters in the morning he would return home and begin drinking at noon, followed by a sumptuous nonvegetarian lunch, after which he would nap. In the evening he did his creative work, consisting of articles for his journals and lyrics and movie scripts. He would then return home near midnight and resume drinking. He did not need company for his drinking sessions but would drink alone; when he visited the Soviet Union with an Indian team of writers and artists, he relished drinking vodka to such an extent that he refused to go along with his fellow tourists around the various cities.

When he realized that his drinking was increasing and that his diabetes was worsening, he got the idea that taking pethidine injections would mitigate the former problems, and so began to abuse pethidine, reaching 1200 mg a day by the early '70s and, subsequently, suffered from severe withdrawal symptoms. He was hospitalized and was successfully rid of his pethidine dependence by methadone maintenance. At that time, methadone maintenance was practiced at the Government Mental Hospital, Kilpauk.[19]

Kannadasan was living amicably with two wives under the same roof, each having six children. He had many number of premarital and extramarital affairs, many of them lasting for a considerable time. He was considerate toward them and tried to understand their lives. When one of them died of some illness, he was very much affected. He describes in detail various peccadilloses in the metropolitan cities of India and the Soviet Union. It is interesting to note that he enquired into the personal histories of a Konkani, a Gujarathi and a Marathi prostitute in Mumbai. He has written a number of poems about a Thai woman. Kannadasan compares himself to Byron and his "other harlotry."

THE CREATIVE PROCESS

Many gifted persons have expressed their feelings when they achieved their goals of creation – a poem, a painting, a piece of sculpture or the solution of complex mathematical problems or scientific achievements. Andreasen has quoted a number of such introspective reports after conducting personal interviews in the Iowa Writers Workshop Study.[20]

For example, she quotes the famous American playwright Neil Simon:
"I slip into a state that is apart from reality."
"I don't write consciously, it is as if the Muse sits on my shoulder."
“My mind wanders – even as I talk.”
“I’ve always felt as if I’m invisible.”

Andreasen refers to Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s “Kubla Khan: or a vision in a dream” – one of his finest poems – which she says describes the creative process and the forces involved:

And from this chasm, with ceaseless turmoil seething
As if this earth in fast thick pants were breathing
A mighty fountain momentarily was forced
Amid whose swift half intermitted bursts
Huge fragments vaulted like rebounding hail
Or chaffy grain beneath the thresher’s flail
And ’mid them dancing rocks at once and ever
It flung up momentarily the sacred river.

Kannadasan introspects:

“Whenever I sit to write I don’t feel I am writing. An unknown energy, force possesses me. A new sensation arises from head to foot when new words, new similes fall in. There is gooseflesh without my knowledge. Telling becomes bliss.”

Sitting on the banks of a lake near his village at the age of 13, he scribbled his first creation in a notebook:

The tuning of veena was heard before dawn
That was sweet to my ears
I sprang from my sleep
And drank nectar lying in my bed

In another place, he alludes to creative work as if coming to him from his village deity “Malai Arasi,” whom he held in esteem throughout his life.

Andreasen says personality traits that define the creative individual include openness to experience, adventure-someness, rebelliousness, playfulness, individualism, sensitivity, persistence, curiosity and simplicity.”

Kannadasan’s openness to all experiences stood him in good stead in his various achievements. During his stay in the Tiruchi Central Jail for having taken part in the DMK agitation of 1958, he interacted with various criminals, including some who were to be hanged. He took deep humane interest in the vicissitudes and lives of his numerous female acquaintances. His persistence, in spite of many failures in the political arena and the film world where some of his ventures failed miserably and landed him in heavy debt and litigations that haunted him to the end of his career, was well known.

He was quite sure of achieving fame equal to the immortal Tamil poets Ilango, Kamban and Bharatiyar. This vanity, ambitiousness and excessive self-confidence approached levels of delusional grandiosity:

I rule the human race
If they die I would record in a song
I am immortal, I won’t perish
In whatever state, I have no death

Kannadasan’s childish playfulness and naivety are seen in his fallacious beliefs in superstitions, omens, astrology and the power to foretell the future and using mediums to talk to the dead. His impulsiveness in behavior and rebelliousness, especially in his political dealings, which labeled him as being acrimonious and vituperative, were probably responsible for his failure to achieve prominence in politics. Poor judgment as to the financial implications often led him to give away highly successful productions at nominal rates. But everyone, including himself, recognized his immense capacity for hard work. Prior to leaving for medical treatment in the USA, he wrote 75 lyrics and six movie scripts in just 2 days, which added to his reputation in the film world.

Kannadasan’s participation in the World Tamil Conference at Detroit, USA, was much appreciated. On his deathbed, as he could not attend the New York Tamil meet, he dictated the lyrics of the inaugural song over the telephone to the famed musician Seerkazhi Govindarajan.

The creative thinking processes and the hypomanic states resemble each other – fluency, rapidity and flexibility of thought and the combination of ideas or the categories of thought in order to form new and original connections on the other. All these features are seen in Kannadasan’s works, although it must be mentioned that some features may have been lost in translation to English. We have thus gone through the road map of poet Kannadasan’s mind and works.

CONCLUSION

We have studied creativity in the single case of a recent Tamil genius, unlike psychiatrists Jamison and Andreasen who have studied scores of such cases. The author hopes that future analyses by others would cover individuals/cases from the other parts and languages of the country.

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