

Impact of Art Therapy on Emotional Wellness among Incarcerated Women

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Abstract - The paper is developed with the objective of exploring the effectiveness of art as a therapeutic tool for understanding and managing emotion among incarcerated women. Art is viewed as a medium of their expression to perceive and facilitate the thought process. Emotionally healthy person can understand and cope with stress and adapt to change with the circumstances. The emotional balance enables an individual to identify the heart's desires, take affirmative actions, and make changes in life devoid of worries, stress, and lead life with vision, inspired action, and an inner state of creativity. Using purposive sampling method 60 incarcerated women were selected from prisons by obtaining permission from the concerned authorities. These women were the sole bread winners for their families, and their imprisonment orphaned their children and elderly parents who are dependent on them. The art form chose as an intervention for this study was Tanjore Painting and these paintings are known for their surface richness, vivid colours, compact composition and especially the glittering gold foils used to give the paintings their rich look. The art programme was conducted by arranging several sessions enabling them to learn and develop art form. After learning the art in depth interview techniques was used to obtain data, Thematic analysis of the responses on art therapy gave rise to four broad themes as Mindful practice; Clarified feelings; Catharsis and Explore relationships.

Key words: *Art therapy, Emotional wellness, Impact, Incarcerated women; Tanjore painting.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Emotional wellness is considered as a potential factor in everyone's life. Emotionally healthy means to realize our potential and being productive in life. Wellbeing of a society is definitely correlated to the individual wellbeing. "A state of well-being in which the individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life and work productively to make a contribution to the community" (WHO 2014) [29]. Emotional well-being reflects the happiness and general satisfaction of an individual which enable him or her to use their abilities in harmony with oneself and others. An individual's ability to recognize, express and modulate his or her own emotions, as well as empathize with others; ability to cope with adverse life events, to be part of the society and perform social roles; also ability to achieve harmonious relationship between body and mind represent important components of wellness which contribute, to varying degrees, to the state of internal equilibrium (Galderisi et al., 2015) [10]. Emotional wellness helps individuals to identify their own emotions and emotions in others and act accurately with situations when faced with challenges both pleasant and unpleasant.

An emotionally well balanced individual can monitor and reflect on emotions (Mayer, Caruso, & Salovey (1999) [19].

Incarcerated women

Imprisonment as a method of punishment has evolved over the centuries in India, and most of the world today, prisons are viewed as centre for the reform of criminals, rather than just a means of punishment. Women confined in a jail or prison, among the incarcerated peoples in prison the number of women imprisoned are less in number comparing to men Criminal justice systems across the world move towards gender-blind sentencing, this has resulted in a tremendous increase in the rate of female incarceration. Concurrent elimination of parole and toughening of penalties for parole violations in many areas of the world also contribute to high rates of re-entry and re offending, further driving up rates of incarceration of women.

Despite progress toward a more humanized system emphasizing "rehabilitation", incarceration for most people entails painful deprivation, there are five areas contributing to the "pains of imprisonment": loss of freedom and social acceptance; loss of material comforts and personal belongings; loss of heterosexual relations and family and

friends; loss of personal autonomy and responsibility; and loss of personal security and privacy and loss, leave most damaging effect on prisoners in the jail setting (Sykes, G. 1958/2007)^[27]. Women convict are more susceptible for poor emotional wellbeing due to number of reasons, they have to wait for the long period of time to obtain reunion with the family and especially who are separated from their children. In regard to the support system first comes family then friends where we get support, happiness, company, help, recommendation and many more but in the case of convicts' imprisonment grab this support system.

Especially many women live in prison are separated from their children or without any adequate arrangements are made for the care of their children or family members. Re-integration in society is a challenge for many women prisoners, as they face severe social stigma, loss of family ties and employment, lack of economic independence and so on after release. Steps need to be taken to ensure that women receive all basic services while in prison, are protected from violence and supported after release to effectively take a place in society.

The Honourable Supreme Court has advocated for a "therapeutic approach...as an effective method of punishment¹, Advisories by MHA on prison administration have further stressed on the need for a positive prison environment - the atmosphere of prisons should be surcharged with positive values and the inmates should be exposed to a wholesome environment with appropriate opportunities to reform themselves. The courts in India have purported the need to recognize the rights of prisoners and improve their conditions² They have affirmed the basic rights of prisoners – "there could be several factors that lead a prisoner to commit a crime but nevertheless a prisoner is required to be treated as a human being entitled to all the basic human rights, human dignity and human sympathy."³

Art therapy

Art is a powerful channel of communication and a vehicle for self-expression. Art gives them clarity about their cognition and emotions and aids in articulating concepts which are otherwise difficult to express (Withrow, 2004).^[31] Arts have consistently been part of life as a healing method throughout the history of humankind (McNiff, 1992)^[20]. Egyptians have a history of encouraging people with mental illness to engage in some artistic activity (Sacks, 1982).^[23] Art form or any activities enable

an individual to express their thoughts and feelings in a manner that is different than strictly verbal means and have unique properties as intervention. 'Any art therapy based on the principle that such activities help individuals to use art, music, dance, movement, drama, poetry, creative writing, play, drawing and painting within the context of psychotherapy, counselling, rehabilitation or health care, we call it expressive therapy. It can even be considered as an integrative approach when we mix it up with treatment. Art therapy utilizes art media, images, and the creative process and respects patient/client responses to the created products as observations of development, abilities, personality, interests, concerns, and conflicts" (Malchiodi, 2005)^[17]. The creative art therapies became more popular during the 1930s and 1940s when psychotherapists and artists realized that self-expression through nonverbal methods such as painting and music creation might be helpful for people to balance their emotions. In Europe during the Renaissance, English physician and writer Robert Burton theorized that imagination played a role in health and well-being (Kothari, 2015).^[16] When talking is impossible and impractical, art therapy found its place in the treatment for improving wellbeing (Gladding, S.T and Newsome, 2003) .^[10] The literature in the area of art and healing is in an effort to determine the creative therapies most often employed and creative processes are used during intentional interventions to foster health (Stuckey, H. L., & Nobel, J. 2010)^[26]. Art therapy can be used as medium for the synthesis of visual art activities to understand an individual's conscious and subconscious feelings, thought process. It is a healing form of settling emotional conflicts, nurturing self-awareness, boosting social skills, managing behaviour, solving problems, reducing anxiety, bringing realism and increasing self-esteem (American Art Therapy association, 2019).^[11]

Tanjore Paintings as an Intervention: Tanjore painting, also known as Thanjavur Oviyam, is a major form of classical South Indian painting from the town of Thanjavur in Tamil Nadu. The paintings of Thanjavur have travelled a long way, from the fresco paintings of the Chola and Nayaka Dynasty, to the wall hangings of today. Tanjore paintings are mainly panel paintings done on solid wood planks, and hence referred to as palagai padam in local parlance (Appasamy, Jaya. 1980).^[2] The paintings are known for their surface richness, vivid colours, compact composition and especially the glittering gold foils used to give the paintings their rich look. The motifs depicted in Tanjore paintings are much inclined toward elements related to Hindu mythology (Daljeet, and Vyas 1972).^[7]

Pablo Picasso made a provocative statement about the therapeutic power of art after viewing the first exhibition of African masks in Paris at the turn of century. Men have made those masks for a sacred purpose, as a kind of mediation between themselves and the unknown, to overcome their fear and horror by giving it a form and an

¹ SC Order in Re - Inhuman Conditions in 1382 Prisons dated 5th February 2016. W.P.(C) No.406 of 2013

² <http://mha1.nic.in/PrisonReforms/pdf/PrisonAdmin17072009.pdf>

³ SC Order in Re - Inhuman Conditions in 1382 Prisons dated 5th February 2016. W.P.(C) No.406 of 2013

image (Gowan, 1975)^[12]. The concept of turning fear into image offers insight into the process of art therapy. (Dissanayake, 1992).^[9] Believes that art comes from the wish to do something in response to problems and fears we face. We find emotional satisfaction and calm in the controlled behaviour of shaping time and space, of putting these into comprehensible forms (Appleton, 2001)^[3]. Art can very well aid in maintaining internal equilibrium by overcoming fears. Research findings indicated that mood valence was significantly more positive after drawing than writing and more positive when individuals reported using distraction rather than venting to regulate their emotions. (De Petrillo, L., & Winner, E. 2005)^[8].

Significance of the study

One of the investigators of this study is a teenager who had watched a show on National Geographic Channel about the hardships faced by incarcerated women, how the arrest of these women destroys their household and their children. In most cases the women are the sole bread winners for their families, and their arrest orphaned their children and elderly parents who are dependent on them. Many women lived in prison with their children (below 6 years of age) in cases where no other adequate arrangements can be made for their care. Spending their formative years in prison can have a huge negative impact on children and thus special care needs to be taken to ensure their physical and mental health, education and recreation. The health of pregnant women and mothers also needs to be taken care of. A human life is a right mix of positive and negative emotions; hence, gauging mental health only in the positive light is rather incomplete. Mental health is understood in three different dimensions; emotional well-being, psychological well-being and social well-being (Bauer & Hämmig, 2014)^[4].

While at school the researcher got the chance to work on a social cause, she decided to help the incarcerated women and wanted to study the aspects to create better emotional wellness of incarcerated women with the help of the intervention Tanjore paintings as an art form. Therefore the investigator wanted to work for their cause.

The present study analyses how the unique characteristics of art therapy, the Tanjore paintings are aiding emotional wellness (Galderisi et al., 2015).^[10] The expression of the dynamic state of internal equilibrium is meant to reflect the fact that different life stages require changes in the achieved equilibrium in life crises, marriage, becoming a parent, retirement and so on and requires an active search for a new mental equilibrium. The healthy people may experience appropriate human emotions such as fear, anger, sadness, and grief while at the same time possessing sufficient resilience to restore the dynamic state of internal equilibrium. Thus the study uses Tanjore paintings as an art form to facilitate the emotion control and channeling the enhancement of their emotional wellness. This study

was conceived from a constructionist perspective that emphasizes individuals actively constructing skill through engaging in experiences, reflecting upon them, and comparing their current experiences to pre-existing experiences (Cohen1973).^[6] Thus the study uses Tanjore paintings as an art form to facilitate the emotion control and channelling the enhancement of their emotional wellness.

II. METHOD

Research question

Can art creation be used as a therapeutic tool for improving emotional wellness of incarcerated women?

The present study used Phenomenological, qualitative analyses to address this question. Most of the studies in art therapy use qualitative approach, case studies (Kim, 2010; Talwar, 2006; Heenan, 2006; Appleton, 2001)^[15], conceptual paper (Withrow, 2004)^[31], literature review, (Slayton, D'Archer, & Kaplan, 2010; Stuckey & Nobel, 2010)^[24] and qualitative study with in-depth interviews and observation (Spandler et al., 2007; Wikström, 2015).^[25]

Purposive sampling procedure adopted for this study and the sample consisted of 60 women from two prisons, who were willing to be part of the study and expressed their interest in getting trained in Tanjore painting.

Procedure

The first step towards this was getting a letter of permission from the school to work at the prison for the school project. With the consent letter from school, approached the concerned authority of the prisons requesting access with detailed plan and design of the research and obtained permission to work with the women convicts at the particular prisons.

Tanjore Paintings as an Intervention

Painting is a mode of creative expression, and the forms are numerous. "Murals are paintings on wall and have to be considered as part of interior decoration. South India and the Tanjore area in particular, boast a long tradition in the painting of murals though few of these survive today" (Appasamy, 1980)^[2]. Tanjore paintings refer to the distinctive visual elements, techniques and methods that characterize the movement or school that an artist is associated with. This can stem from an actual group that the artist was consciously involved with or it can be a category in which art historians have placed the painter. The intervention the Tanjore painting expresses the universal values and spiritual images indicates respect and care for oneself and other living beings; recognition of the connection between people; respect for the environment; respect for one's own and others' freedom and respect for culture. This is where the role of colours in art therapy comes into picture. Through the use of colour, the client can release a variety of moods and emotions she may not be

able to express verbally because, in art therapy, all moods and emotions are seen acceptable, each embodying its grace and beauty. The colours used in this art helps clients to immerse in art creation and facilitates the shifting of focus from left brain to right brain mode. Art therapy owes its success to the right brain, the true source of emotions; only by actively using and exposing the right brain can one get in touch with deepest, innermost feelings. The art as therapy course was credited with improvements in self-esteem and self-confidence. It provided a safe space for reflection on mental health issues (Heenan, D. 2006).^[13]

The scheduled interview was carried out with semi – structured pattern. Questions were designed open ended. Every interview initiated with the question as what painting means to you? That question was wide enough to elicit the answers without any constraints and direction. Further, they were asked about the emotions and emotional experience they went through while painting. The responses collected then were thematically analysed to identify if any of the dimensions of emotional wellness found in their responses.

Ethical Consideration

Informed consent included the approval of department heads and the participants. The design of the study was described in detail and explained. The women who were competent to learn the art had the fundamental right to decide whether or not to participate in this art programme. Private rooms were used to conduct interviews. The study included in- depth interviews and observation about the Tanjore painting. Writing in publication, ethical aspects were discussed and consent obtained. Confidentiality, privacy; autonomy was explained to both the officials and the participants.

III. RESULTS

The verbatim responses generated from the in-depth interview thoroughly analysed and were categorized into four cluster themes. (Moon, 1999),^[21] (Kielo, 1991).^[14]

- **Mindful practice**
- **Clarified feelings**
- **Catharsis**
- **Explore relationships**

Mindful practice

Majority of the women expressed that when they started painting they were completely immersed in the task as they could find meaning and purpose in life. They are able to analyse what is important in their life and able to focus more on the Painting .The rich colours and the image painted brought serenity in their mind. The language of the colours helped them to describe their emotions such as feeling happy and hope in life .They could spend more time immersed in the act of painting forgetting about their unhappy state of mind. The mindful action of painting enabled them to deal with every aspect of their lives in the

prison and prepared them to face difficult situations in their major life transition.

Clarified feelings

About 80 percentage of the women claimed that art enabled them to find themselves with a desire for re-living, eventually; it gave them the real purpose for life. Deep thinking about the paintings in the form of an image gave them an objective perspective about their felt emotions. Art helped them to understand the world with more sense of the reality. Expressing emotions provides clarity to oneself. Instead of saying to oneself that “I am lost”; art attempted to represent that feeling through images give objectivity to it. Objectivity helps one to see the distance between ‘self and ‘emotions of self. Most of the women felt a deep sense of responsibility when they were involved in the activity. They felt the creation of art has brought meaning of life, and when they did not engage in art making for a some period, they felt they have wasted their time. Art has become an indispensable part of their life. Thus Art therapy is one way of developing such intuition and encourages lot of clarity on feelings. Positive mind-set is something which we can expect through art creation over time. All moods and emotions are seen acceptable, each embodying its grace and beauty on self-respect, self-confidence, dignity about oneself for a better performance.

Catharsis

Today’s world does not easily accept emotions, especially negative emotions. As we progress to adulthood, we learn to regulate our emotions and often, get pressurized to suppress unpleasant emotions. Most of the women expressed that, they chose to learn painting and came into this art creation process because they had plenty of emotions bottled up, which required a let out.” Generally, all emotions and all thoughts are acceptable in the art platform when we compare it with other forms of communication. As per Rogers' client-centred therapy, unconditional positive regard is one of the prerequisite for building a rapport with the client. When we get acceptance for our ideas when it is articulated in the form of an art, we tend to feel we are among the larger group. The Tanjore paintings helped them to have an emotional discharge through which they expressed that they were able to attain a state of spiritual renewal, and achieved a state of liberation from their negative emotions.

Explore relationships

Many art forms communicate through symbols and images. Painting divine emotions helped them to explore the relationship pattern and identity and the role of emotions in it. The paintings enabled them to use nonverbal communication, creativity, and movement to explore relationships and feelings. Expression of universal values indicates respect and care for oneself and other living beings; recognition of the connection between people; respect for the environment; respect for one's own

and others freedom. This is where the role of colours in art therapy comes into picture. The use of colour, through the paintings, they could release a variety of moods and emotions which they may not be able to express verbally.

IV. CONCLUSION

Emotions get more social acceptability when it is articulated through art medium. It helps an artist to maintain harmony with the societal values. Art facilitates the recognition, expression, and clarity of emotions. Art can be a powerful form of empathy. Art helps in coping up with adversity and take art as a therapy, we have excellent ways to establish a mind-body connection (Talwar 2007).^[28] From this qualitative study, we assumed that art therapy can be an intervention programme for incarcerated women to cope with adversities and live their life fully by being authentic about their emotions. The Tanjore painting helps them to earn their livelihood and intern a support to their family. 'A number of recent research publications have reiterated the important role played by supportive family ties in facilitating the successful community re-entry of ex-prisoners and in preventing reoffending. This, in turn, has led to increased official recognition of the value of supporting the family ties of prisoners.'"(Codd, H, 2013).^[5]

This article is limited in its scope as it was based only on qualitative interviews. The study has the scope of future research in the context of other prisoners too. Another way to add robustness in this present study would be doing an empirical study.

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