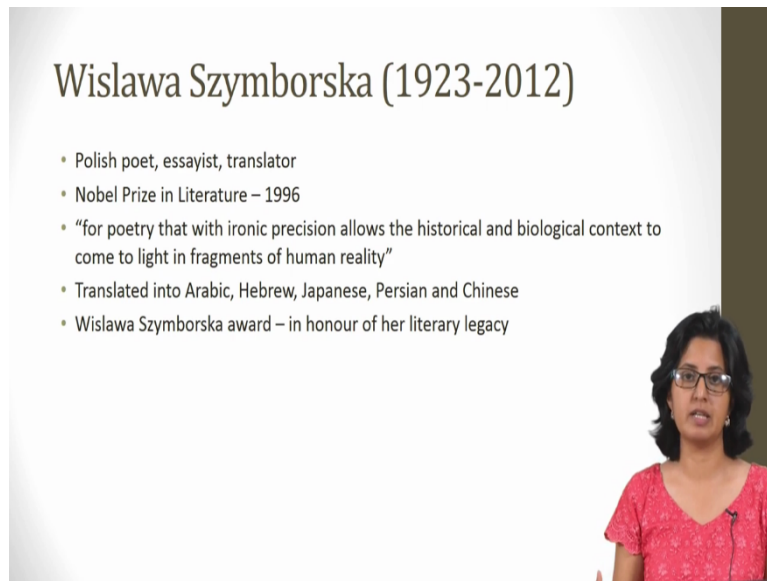


Introduction to World Literature
Professor Dr. Merin Simi Raj
Department of Humanities and Social Science
Indian Institute of Technology Madras
“Tortures” by Wislawa Szymborska

Hello everyone, I am happy to welcome here to a session where we discuss Wislawa Szymborska’s poetry and we particularly taking a look at this poem title “Tortures”.

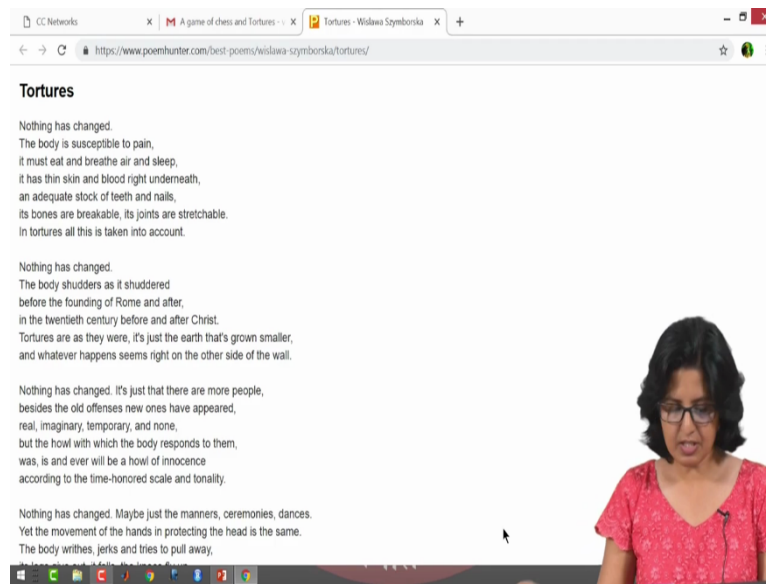
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Wislawa Szymborska is a Polish poet who lived from 1923 to 2012. Her fame rests largely in the kind of poetry that she produced, she is also renowned as a standard translator. She won the Nobel Prize in literature in 1996 and this was for the poetry that with ironic precision and love is the historical and biological context to come into light in fragments of human reality, in most of our writings we do find this getting reflected in very intense terms.

Her work could be considered as truly world literature because from a Polish it was translated into Arabic, Hebrew, Japanese, Persian, Chinese and of course English which is the language in which we access Szymborska’s poetry. And there is also a Wislawa Szymborska award which has been instituted in honour of her literary legacy.

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Some of you may be familiar with one of her poems published in 2005 which was titled "Photograph from September 11", you may be familiar with this image of a man, an unnamed, unidentified person falling from the building from the top floor and going to hit the ground and this photograph was captured right in the middle with him in midair and falling down with the buildings as the backdrop.

So, this poem that she wrote "Photograph from September 11" it was extremely popular and it was considered as one of the most significant renditions of that event. So, before we get into this poem "Tortures" I will read out this very small poem "Photograph from September 11" which was translated by Clare Cavanagh, this was published in 2005, is from a collection by Szymborska titled "Monologue of a dog". So photograph from September 11-

They jumped from the burning floors-one, two, a few more, higher, lower.

The photograph halted them in life, and now keeps them above the earth towards the earth.

Each is still complete, with a particular face and blood well hidden.

There is enough time for hair to come loose, for keys and coins to fall from pockets.

They're still within the air's reach, within the compass of places that have just now opened.

I can do only two things for them-describe this flight and not add a last line.

So, this was a very fitting tribute to that iconic image of a man falling from the two Towers and the picture taken before he hit the ground. Now, we come to look at the poem that we are discussing today “Tortures”. Szymborska has often been referred to as the Mozart of poetry and that is a way in which she could bring to life the many things that she saw around her regardless of whether she witnessed them or not, the intensity with which she felt the many things which were happening in the contemporary society was very very remarkable.

So if you look at this poem “Tortures” it’s divided into different stanzas and what we shall do today is go through this poem and try to look at the important elements and the important themes which are being conveyed over here. “Tortures”-

“Nothing has changed. The body is susceptible to pain, it must eat and breathe air and sleep, it has thin skin and blood right underneath, and adequate stock of teeth and nails, its bones are breakable, its joints are stretchable, in tortures all this is taken into account”.

This is a poem which refers to the materiality of the body of human existence, it is talking about tortures which is very very material and wit affects the body in a physical direct way. And the fact that she begins with nothing has changed it, distinctly sets the tone for the entire poem. It clearly indicates that things might have changed, governments might have changed, regimes might have changed and the way in which we live our daily life might have changed but there are certain things which remained unchanged. For instance, the body, the way in which she describes body we can see this is certainly universal, certainly timeless things were always always like this, the body is susceptible to pain, it was susceptible to pain and it will always be susceptible to pain and that is what makes torture pretty much timeless and also a constant thing in this world in spite of how modern it gets, how progressive it gets and how different and how entertaining it gets.

She is deliberately drilling this point that irrespective of things whether it is prehistoric or modern it really does not make a difference. Whether it is urban or rural, whether it is archaic or modern it really does not make a difference because the human body has remained the same and nothing has changed for this same reason tortures the way in which tortures are inflicted, that way in which tortures would continue to be inflicted politically, socially, historically, personally it would continue the same.

And look at some of the very simple things that she is highlighting- It must eat breathe air and sleep, regardless of what, regardless of within what framework you are placed unless the

body gets this things-food, air and sleep the body will just decay and disintegrate and think about torture in this context as well, how torture could be the denial of good food, the denial of good air to breathe and even depriving one of sleep and here she begins with the simple point and as the poem progresses we will get to know that she's actually talking about the violence which is part of the modern world, the violence which was always part of all kinds of civilization, how it was used? How torture was used as a tool to get things done politically, socially and even at a personal level?

And by highlighting and by reinforcing, by underscoring the fragility of the human body at the outset, in the first stanza itself she is setting the tone for this that there is no way in which one can wish away the fact or get over the fact that the human body is very very fragile and any kind of lack, any kind of deprivation can affect the human body very very intensely and that as we know the violence inflicted on the human body it continues to be the most standard form, the epitome of torture then and now irrespective of the changes that have come about.

And I also want you to pay attention to some of the words-bones are breakable, joints are stretchable tortures all this is taken into account. She is also drawing her attention to perhaps them violence in the battlefield as a poem progresses we will know that it is more about war, it is more about battle, it's more about these fights for territories which at the end of it we realize that in these fight, in these territorial conflicts, in these conflicts for superiority for conquering for gaining something which rightfully does not belong or not what gets affected at the end of the day is human bodies, human bodies of various ethnicities, of various nationalities it is never the territory which gets affected but the human bodies which are inhabiting those territories. She is trying our attention to this ageless, this timeless fact which continues to remain, which refuses to change irrespective of the refinement and the sophistication and the progress that human civilization, the human society and the human mind itself seems to have achieved.

And in she says it has thin skin and blood right underneath an adequate stock of teeth and nails, the reference nails is very important even if a nail is broken we know that it will grow back. So, here pattern this one stanza is also this resilience that there is torture but also this continuing process of a growth, you can continue to torture, you can continue to attack anyone, continue to completely annihilate but there is also this power this resilience which forces the body to grow back, the regenerating power of the human body in spite of

everything, all of these things are being pattern to the single stanza to set the tone for what has to follow.

And come to think about nothing has changed and thing about tortures in that sense. Whether it is from the prehistoric times onwards or even if you're talking about the contemporary that today we know that the forms of torture didn't have to evolve radically in radically different terms because human body has remained the same. To attack the body, to slay the body, to mutilate the body the tools used in prehistoric times they are still handy. The method used to completely rip a human body apart they continue to remain the same to. This is something which she is trying to communicate in this very very matter of fact tone that the fact that the human body has remained the same also aids the other supportive element that the means of tortures, the different kinds of tortures they also didn't have to change they will remain pretty much the same.

Coming to the second stanza, she begins this with the frame-

“Nothing has changed. The body shudders as it shuddered before the founding of Rome and after, in the 20th century before and after Christ. Tortures are as they were, it's just the earth that's grown smaller, and whatever happens seems right on the other side of the wall”.

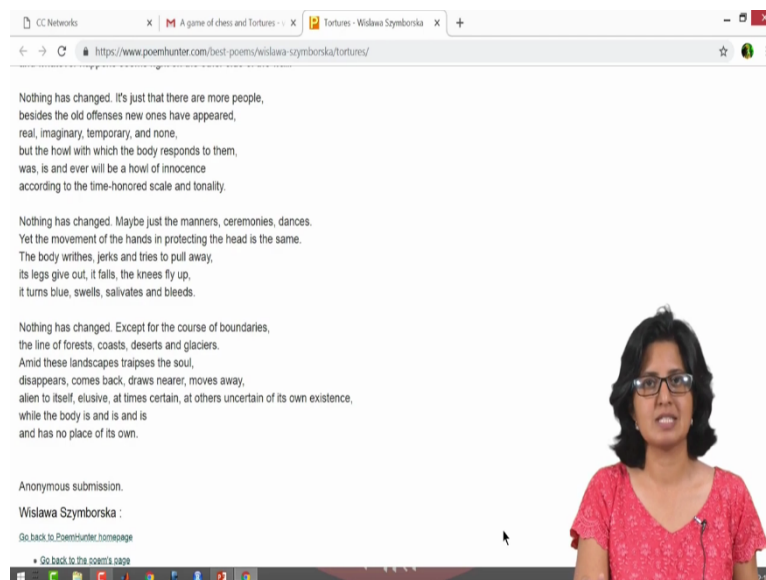
Whether it's a Roman times or if it's the times before Christ all we are talking about the contemporary it's it is always been the same. And she's also pointing our attention to this very well-known fact but little do we realize that, that many things have evolved in the last many centuries the human body has remained pretty much the same, maybe there is technology to aid the way in which we take care of our own bodies, maybe there are newer things happening in the field of medicine, in the field of technology which would prevent certain things, which would it certain things but at the end of the day the body, the materiality of it, the way in which it can engage with torture, the way in which it can respond to pain to pleasure all of those things have remained pretty much standard. That has been no significant evolution in the way human body responds to torture or in the way human body can take and continue to engage and negotiate different forms of torture.

And pay attention to this last line- Whatever happens seems right on the other side of the wall. Perhaps this is a very very direct reference to the Berlin Wall. This was the time when the, there was a time when the entire world considered communism to be respawn of all evil and it was automatically assumed that life in East Germany was Horrid and for that reason

whatever seems right would be practiced on the other side of the wall which is best Berlin and this was particularly common for the ones who grow up in societies where they were taught about, they were introduced to the only the repressing and regressive nature of communism. And to them the capitalist philosophy was more liberating because communism seemed like the evil one because it was happening on the other side of the wall it was torturous, it was bad, it was something unacceptable and capitalist philosophy seem to be more about the well-being and now we know how things have changed, now the tables have turned and how we get to know specially after the Cold War that it's pretty much the same everywhere that there is nothing inherently evil about an ideology but it is also about the people who make these policies and how that can make a huge difference.

And Wislawa perhaps carry these same sentiments because she lived in Communist Poland herself and maybe she is really talking about that divide that she grew up with, the capitalist communist divide and how those two worlds seemed very very different. But she is also trying to tell us that irrespective of that human body has remained the same and the tortures of a really grave kinds or even a minor kinds they have also remained pretty much the same.

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“Nothing has changed, it’s just that there are more people, besides the old offences new ones have appeared, real, imaginary, temporary, and none, but the howl with which body responds to them, was, is and ever will be howl of innocence according to the time honored scale and tonality”.

Of course, human population has exploded, if you are familiar with the history you would know that there were times back in the centuries where a plague could wipe out the entire population of a city and that could bring the city to a standstill because manpower was extremely important. And after the Industrial Revolution, after many significant changes came by we also know that human population has exploded. The average age expectancy has gone up massively.

But in spite of that the offences that are continuing to be inflicted against people, against communities, against different ethnicities they remain pretty much the same, there seems to be very little progress in that in terms of when we compare it with the sophistication and refinement that human history has achieved on the other hand. And look at the way she is drawing our attention to how new offences have appeared, just think about the way in which warfare has changed, earlier it was just bows and arrows perhaps and now it's bullets and bombs and we know that technology is evolving, look at the amount of money which is being invested into arms and ammunition into the nuclear race by every single developed and developing country. And also think about the chemical, biological warfare the many things which were part of a the Vietnam War and what happened in the aftermath and what the various crimes committed against humanity just for territorial disputes, just for ensuring that certain kinds of hierarchies remain intact.

So, we will not go into the details of those but look at the way in which the poem also uses the term howl and the word howl cannot be dismissed as being very very incidental, it's also a significant part of Beat poetry as you would know. It's also about the scream that the humanity responds with when it has to face this tremendous kinds of tortures and the things which were hitherto unseen or hitherto to a part of an everyday life. And what the significant here is that, while the human body remains the same, while the human body and its capacity to negotiate the pain remains the same. The means of tortures, the method of tortures and new offences which are being committed, that tools which are aiding that process they seem to be evolving in a more nuance way. There are newer things being developed there and newer techniques being thought about while the capacity for the human body to endure the pain, to engage with this torture remains pretty much the same with nothing, as she says nothing has changed.

And when we talk about war it's not just the soldiers which are part of it, it's not like the old times where they all went out to war and fought and came back, it's also but the civilians

which are getting affected, it's also about the bombs which are falling on different parts of the world even as we speak now killing soldiers, civilians the ones that are part of this and not part of that, the ones which are getting caught in certain situation in different parts of the world and this is what is Szymborska also wants us to think about when we think about tortures of different scales happening across these borders and across these spaces and time as well.

Moving on, "nothing has changed, maybe just the manners, ceremonies, dances. Yet the movement of the hands in protecting the head is the same. The body writhes, jerks and tries to pull away, its legs gave out, it falls, the knees fly up, it turns blue, swells, salivates and bleeds".

The only thing that is changed perhaps is time, rulers, different regimes but whether we are talking about the Roman era or the time before Christ or the Victorian era or we are talking about the contemporary the only thing that has actually changed is perhaps the values, the ideas, the norms that each society believes in, the policies and the governments under which various thing has happen.

But beyond that the composition of the basic composition of humans the capacity to endure pain, their ability to respond to situations, their ability to showcase affection to convey their feelings that is not really radically changed. And this is where literature and these kinds of intervention really makes a contribution because it is timed again reminding us that there are certain things which stand the same, which has remained the same irrespective of where we belong, irrespective of how we live our lives, irrespective of the situation within which we are placed.

And torture as Szymborska tells us is one of those things which will also act as a level up irrespective of the category within which humans are placed. There is perhaps only a series of standard ways in which men and women across time, across space respond to torture and various ways of pain being inflicted on the body. And when she says "the movement of the hands and protecting the head is the same", she's clearly indicating the raw nature of the human soul which was still remain the same, the protective instinct and the way to the various ways in which one attempts to preserve one's self, one things that belong to one those things have remained very much the same.

There is a certain airiness, certain painful airiness that we begin to feel in these descriptions. “The body writhes, jerks and tries to pull away, its legs gave out, it falls, the knees fly up, it turns blue, swells, salivates and bleeds” it could be about any human being irrespective of their ethnicity, the sexuality, the ideology irrespective of any given temporal thing because body as Szyborska tells us here that becomes the ultimate reality, that becomes the ultimate thing which does not change at all it remains static and the static nature is empowering as when it’s frightening in multiple ways.

And we come to the final stanza, “nothing has changed, except for the course of boundaries, the line of forests, coasts, deserts and Glaciers. Amid these landscapes traipses the soul, this appears, comeback, draws nearer, moves away, alien to itself, elusive, at times certain, at others uncertain of its own existence, while the body is and is and is and has no place of its own”.

Szyborska is again repeating this in the final stanza that nothing has changed and she and this by now we realize that it successfully creates, there is some kind of a chanting experience throughout it’s like a trance and it also heavily reinforces that absolutely nothing has changed. This seems to be a very very simple idea to begin with, but we, when we think about the gravity of it how the fragility of the human body to endure pain remaining the same that is of course it opens up multiple possibilities, it’s also very very frightening in a way.

It’s also going against the grain of this dominant, compelling, feel-good idea that things are not the same any more that everything has changed, yeah, that it is, it used to be in a certain way in prehistoric times but it’s not the same any more. So Szyborska is totally shattering this idea that one cannot live under the illusion that things have changed then times have changed, this is a reminder that there are many things when you practices and many realities and many material things which continue to remain the same and one cannot comfortably sit back under this illusion that things really have changed it is not the same any more.

And when she is listing out the some of the natural features such as the line of forest, coasts, deserts, glaciers, she is also again very interestingly drawing our attention to the fact that even no real natural changes have come about in this physical world ever since the inception of the earth. There are of course a number of man-made things which have been inserted in terms of institutions, buildings real and unreal there is even the virtual which is unvarying our physical reality in very very real terms.

But irrespective of that in this reminder that human body and the natural earth the habitat which this body inhabits it is pretty much remains the same, nothing has changed except for a few insertions here and there. And when she is talking about the boundaries being changed she is also talking about how there are different nation states now perhaps what was not there 500 years before, newer states, newer nations and newer communities and in a sense she is trying to tell us that there is nothing new about it, it is just the boundaries being redrawn in some significant ways and that gives us the illusion that things have changed but they really have not and we know about a number of ways in which many writers have engaged with this theme of the boundaries how to suggest Shadow lines that it really does not make a difference whether you are on this side or the other you are caught in some predicament or some situation which is peculiar to each one's life.

I felt the last two lines very compelling and very beautiful- "while the body is and is and is and has no place of its own". It is reminding us of the image of a wanderer without any place that one can call as home. This is extremely important and even in the contemporary when we look around whether it's a natural calamity or whether it's man-made destructive thing like a war or a genocide whatsoever it is, we find that all of a sudden the place that one called home is gone forever, what remains even then is only the materiality of this physical body just this body with the limbs and the torso and the many parts which make a body very physical, very material and there is hardly anything there we realize ideological or elevatory about it.

Most people have chosen to read this is a poem which represents the battlefield about soldiers experience at the battlefield because there are many many direct references to boundaries and about torture, about the reality of the human body and how each one is caught in those situation when nothing really changing. But I would encourage you to also see this as a depiction of the human predicament in general, torture not necessarily in the battlefield but also at the personal level, on a daily basis while negotiating with a many things that are changing in and around us.

I would let leave you with this thought that this is a poem of our times of the modern times which also perfectly captures the idea of human existence, I wouldn't really use the term that if it's a futility of human existence but she's also drawing our attention to the immense possibilities in spite of this fragile nature of the human body in spite of this unchanging material nature of the human body and how perhaps subtle messages one of the unsaid messages here is also about how this body also equips us to transcend these boundaries and

also engage and negotiate with these changing realities at various levels socio political, personal, historical and even emotional. I live with this poem, I hope you enjoyed reading this and I hope you will also be encourage to take a look at more of Szymborska's works, thank you for your time and I look forward to seeing you in the next session.