

Literary and Cultural Disability Studies: An Exploration
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Lecture – 15
Critique of Trauma via Cynthia Ozick's *The Shawl*

Welcome back. Now I will be talking about the story. We will close examine, close read it so as to see its relevance to disability studies and how a disability studies framework helps us to critique the trauma in *The Shawl*. So, I call it *The Shawl* the story of debility and attachments. Let us tease the notion of debility. You might hear somebody say I had a debilitating illness; it is a debilitating blow on my life and so on.

So basically, debility refers to some kind of attack which can cause serious debilitation that is serious diminution of one's capacity, health, well-being and life itself. Jasbir Puar, she talks about debility in the third world see it is great to say and important to believe that disability is socially caused by an ill-formed social organization. At the same time, it is also important and practical to see the debilitating impact of certain bad structures that do the rounds.

For example pollution, intense toxicity of our land and water resources. Two days ago I was listening to news and somebody said formalin in fish when children and people eat they can get debilitating neurological conditions if one eats fish with formalin. So, there is state violence, there is structural violence, there is a familial violence, there is violence of environment, I mean environmental damage and so on.

So debility is a useful concept to understand for a story of this kind. Imagine Rosa here recalling the story or for that matter a writer talking about holocaust violence in 1980 when post-traumatic stress disorder was also being talked about. So, what is happening here? A person who survived a major diabolic event like that can talk that could be psychological damage, that could be damage of personhood, relationships, injury to body, mind, the, breakage of language and the breakage of social communication.

Any kind of debility can keep happening and thanks to this story we know that debility is not only structurally cost but it can keep renewing itself. It can be a progressive

degeneration of a personhood and one's life. Debility can also be a sense of attachments that you have.

Look at this story. Let me read first couple of sentences for you to understand what I am talking about. Stella cold, cold, the coldness of hell. Just one sentence will do, look at this. Stella, cold, cold the coldness of hell. Gosh let me tease the meaning for you. Stella, stellar, star, 14-year young woman brimming with energy, hope and beauty that is not Stella. In the story if you see, Cynthia also writes Rosa's breasts; they are nothing but dead, they do not exist, it is like a volcano, it is sore, it is dead. There is nothing but pain, seething pain inside.

Stellar, star perhaps a spent star, cold, cold, the coldness of hell. Well you might wonder hell is hot, it is fiery in biblical imagination in many religions too. But if you see in Dante's Inferno in the concentric circles of fire the innermost circle of the fiery rings is the core where the people who committed the worst of sins reach there. At the core she is cold meaning without life without any meaning.

Look at the images Cynthia manages to give us about Stella further. Her knees were like tumors on sticks, her elbows chicken bones. There is nothing, no energy left. About the little infant Magda look at it the most powerful thing was here look at the imagery. An elephant tombstone of white marble, what is it? Magda's tooth. Elephant tombstone. Look at the debilitating image that we are given about Magda's tooth, I mean baby tooth.

Baby tooth facilitates chewing a little bit, nimble on mom's breast and take food, little language, baby babble, it enables all. But elf, elf is an angel; tombstone marble. Imagine baby having a tombstone and that is what Magda tooth is. So we have death everywhere in the symbol, symbolism of the story. Rosa is like a walking cradle. So whatever shawl if not for the shawl the baby would have got killed and she is almost dead.

I mean she might die any moment and therefore her tooth looks like an elf, angel's tombstone, marble white. So one of the reasons for the persistence of trauma is the debility stuff, structural, extreme structural violence and the frameworks that make trauma a retelling possible frame that gives it also is debility and is the debilitating stuff, the structures that enable images like this to persist, keep going, going around.

Freud talks about unconscious, the subconscious, the conscious mind. Unconscious is the stuff that it is totally inaccessible, maybe it is the impressions of our body, tormented body, perhaps elf tombstone is an unconscious imagery we do not know. Otherwise, I cannot imagine anyone giving a picture of a baby's tooth resembling a tombstone, elf tombstone unless otherwise it comes it belongs to an image of the unconscious and which can potentially cause nightmare.

It is the most painful way of understanding debility. Chicken legs, knees wear tumors on sticks, it is like tumor is pain, did you not say in the first lecture that trauma is wound. This is tumor on sticks, it is like attaching tumor on stick like lollipop, actually this is the kind of imagery we have here and I do believe that writer of trauma literature should have access of this kind symbolism, imagery, simile, things that look unrelated. But nevertheless stay float afloat in your unconscious and you need access to it and that is what is happening. Because holocaust is not something you would like to keep recalling because the society around you has moved on but you are stuck with those images inside and this one of the ways fictionalizing helps is it through act of reverie, did Ozick not talk about hallucinatory madness which we call writing.

Through that act you access images like this, which otherwise cause nightmare but put that in writing and there we go it says as a fictionalized representation of a diabolic event where a child is thrown into an electric oven and that is the act. This is the first part of my analysis of the story. There are many more images, I strongly recommend that you read the story.

The second part of my analysis concern the idea of attachments. My dear friends, we are basically made up of people and stories that is it. The rest of the things are periphery stuff. Well, I am made up of my parents, their talk, their caring, made up of my partner, made up of my friends, students, the larger world. From each there is an impression inside me and I relate to this impression based on my security requirements, my sense of belonging.

We all want to belong, none of us want to be alone like a lonely star. Donald W. Winnicott is a famous psychoanalyst. He talks about attachments. One of the attachment relationships he talks about is the dyadic relationship. What is a dyadic relationship?

Dyadic relationship is a dependent relationship, for example mother and child. Look at the dyad, mother, all moms need their children as much as children need their mom.

Children need their mom for nourishment, milk, care, safety, support, reassurance, everything. When a mom goes away for a minute child looks around and then when she believes that oh mom is not going to come then give a cry, she will come. In Tamil there is a saying you know (**FL**) meaning the baby that cries get the milk that's the idea. So, the baby is heavily dependent on mom. What if the mom is not around?

What if she has gone to do some laundry or some professional work? Then it is entirely possible that the baby invents a substitute mom in the form of a teddy. What does a baby do to a teddy? It can hug, it can kiss it, it can give it a royal bath, soap, powder, comb, all the stuff that mom does to the baby the baby can do it to the teddy. What else? Give it with showers of kisses, kicks, maybe throwing it away, carousing, drooling, oh my god we do not know maybe infinite babble to the teddy.

The baby is slightly older maybe infinite conversations with the baby. So whatever mom gave the sense of security she could easily derive it from the mom's substitute until mom arrives and the mom substitute is a teddy. Donald Winnicott calls it transitional objects, this teddy kind of thing because all we need is security, some sense of belonging. For example, my profession could be my teddy, it could be something else at some other moment.

When I am down with illness, I can hold on to a mobile like a teddy when my dear one is not around, you see it is entirely possible. So Winnicott talks about the notion of play, play is what we do for our life. I am not talking literally about the volleyball event and that too we juggle with ideas so that we make sense of this life. Some seek recourse to writing, some seek recourse to 9 to 5 job, some seek recourse to some kind of friendship, romantic love.

To see the larger picture we need to play with things, ideas, conversations and people and that will happen when there is a security. Look at this story. The shawl which mom wears, she sorts of hides Magda, well it protects like a hiding tool but if you read the story it is magical. What way? When Magda is not able to extract milk anymore, she

extracts milk of love perhaps from mother's non-existing breasts but also the shawl she starts tasting the shawl.

Cynthia says sometimes the shawl is Magda's own baby or sister or the play thing. It is magical, it smells cinnamon, I mean Jewish sabbath, reference to Jewish sabbath. But it also smells mom, it also smells security, it protects her from cold. Mom Rosa relies on Magda who is almost an elephant tombstone but still she seeks meaning from them. Otherwise, she has been raped and experienced unnamable violence, rape and much more. Her only identity is this baby whose tummy is filled with air. Minus Magda we do not know what kind of life she will live without a central meaning. Again, Stella becomes a spent force because she does not have the shawl, not necessarily the shawl, a sense of security for which she is profusely jealous with Magda. Stella given an opportunity she will seize away the security stuff from Magda. Look at the extreme violent plays.

There is nothing, no other human stuff present. The guy, the soldiers who took Magda away are described as a helmet and a black stuff and the way she is burnt away is described like a butterfly on a silver line. All childhood imagery which involves play and so on. What else Winnicott says which is relevant here well transitional objects I was talking about teddy he also talks about transitional phenomena.

What is transitional phenomena? Well, it is like this. We always talk about things as though they are dual mind and body, the two sexes, good and evil and so on but transitional phenomena do not work like that. Suppose we want to create something half the time we will be in a state of reverie, semi-dreamy situation. Imagine you want to say something to someone, a boy would propose a girl or vice versa.

The ideas are here until here, it does not come to mouth, weeping, want to say something, it is between out and inside, many ideas are created that way. We want to play, at the same time we want to be secure, we want to make sense of our inner self and the sense of what others want. Behind the inner meaning and the meaning that we want to give others we create something and that is called transitional phenomena.

We always mutate something in our head before telling others. We always mediate our thought. We always censorate if you like it want to call it spin. So, something in us something outside and something gets created within the two and that becomes literature, music, love, call it anything; all human phenomena happen there, even creativity happens there.

So in collecting a trauma of this kind Rosa, Magda, Stella you see the images of pain suffering extreme suffering body and mind. If you like there is no plot in the story. It is these images that almost linger here, it is like a lump between the heart and the tongue and all are vivid images. My little nephew asked about moral of the story. If you like what is this, why to talk about this in a disability studies lecture? I would say the following.

One; we are incomplete people; we suffer one debility or other. To make the incomplete complete we fill it up with attachments, memories of people, impressions of people, narrations, stories, and many dyadic relationships such as the teddy that is number one. Two; disability studies is a great critique of, it is the most important, even the most dynamic critique of trauma, trauma management and most particularly the connection between trauma and literature.

One way to understand Stella, Magda and Rosa and in fact our relationship with books that we prefer and the books we do not prefer is our own sentiments concerning good, bad and the ugly. I leave it there. Thank you.