

**Literary and Cultural Disability Studies: An Exploration**  
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**Lecture – 17**  
**Metamorphosis: A Critique of the Politics of Abandonment**

Welcome back all. This is part two of my lecture on Metamorphosis. I call this metamorphosis a critique of the politics of abandonment. So we all metamorphose sometimes to our disadvantage and when it happens there is abandonment. And abandonment is of various kinds. A field such as Disability Studies has plenty to say about it because one on its own it has generated excellent schemes of knowledge connected to it. And second it has the rare privilege of borrowing from other fields such as Feminism, Postcolonial theory and much more.

So let me read the first paragraph of the story. When Gregor Samsa awoke one morning from troubled dreams, he found himself transformed in his bed into a monstrous insect. He was lying on his hard shell-like back. And by lifting his head a little he could see his curved brown belly divided by stiff arching ribs on top of which the bed quilt was precariously poised and seemed about to slide off completely. His numerous legs which were pathetically thin compared to the rest of his bulk danced helplessly before his eyes. What has happened to me he thought? Right, so that is the quote and this is what happened to our young man Gregor as he awoke from a dream and this can happen to all of us.

Well, we may not get up like as an insect, but we may get up feeling like one as I told in my previous lecture our existence is punctuated by illnesses, accidents, unknown events, reveries, delusions and external slaughter, punishment, torture and debilities of various kinds that can make us undergo this peculiar feeling. And when that happens when people slowly drift into such a condition what happens?

One possibility that can happen is abandonment by abjection, abject poverty. Abject poverty, the poverty that in a sense which cannot be imagined but which can be kept out of sight nevertheless, build a wall so that the slum is not visible, in the worst case

demolish them and just send them off somewhere, so out of sight out of mind that kind of abjection can happen.

Julia Kristeva, feminist philosopher is great because she has offered us very useful tools in understanding abjection. How? Well, consider the following incidents or case studies as it were. A person died, now before a minute he or she was a living person, now she is a corpse. So we start talking about that corpse, he was, she was a great person. So for the dear ones it is loss, passed away, she passed away, so how do you separate?

How do you start distancing yourself, ourself from that corpse? First you call that person now a corpse and all human civilizations have invented rituals to make that happen, otherwise look at this if such rituals do not exist then it is entirely possible that we do not let that corpse go, we will still treat it as he or she as dangerous as that. So this is one example.

Consider the second example when I come to this lecture I put on my jeans and I mean comb my hair and come with my best fit; and the best fit there no one definition of best fit and it can be million varieties but nevertheless we all would like to present our best self to others. However, if I am critically unwell and is not able to handle my own body and my own personhood which I want to project to others, then I might look disheveled.

My body may be leaking, meaning saliva drooling, lack of control over urine, feces, sweat, tears and my posture and so on. Sometimes if there may be no control over thoughts, mind emotion and rational thinking and the sense of I may also disappear with dementia and so on. All these things can happen and when they happen when people do not consider that person who is undergoing these things altogether or one of those. They may consider that person as less human, dehumanization and at that moment abjection can happen. Kristeva also talks about sense of control over our inner objects such as saliva, feces and so on. So once they come out, we quickly would like to dispose them so that we maintain one cleanliness hygiene for sure but more importantly a sense of difference from animality.

For example, we make bathrooms and other architectures to hide ourselves doing certain things which we do not want other humans to see, do not make it explicit and so on and that makes humanity possible and that thought keeps evolving, sense of privacy,

humanness and sense of dignity all keep changing time to time and it is a historical cultural idea. Nevertheless, a loss of grip over it, a slight fall from that human position, a dip into animality as it were is also seen as abjection. So taking these cues what happens here Gregor after being reassured that his body is no more the same and it looks odd and different and animalistic. He is still human inside, he is still thinking about his work and work-related worries, he is still thinking about working for his family.

He still wants to integrate go and hug his mom, he is still holding on to the picture of a beautiful girl whose photo he is keeping onto on the mantelpiece out there. But he is able to appreciate the most exquisite piece of music violin played by his sister but at some point, he reconciles to his new non-human body. In part two of the story, he in fact would like to have more space in the dark room, dingy room.

Where he is placed where he can do little bit of exercise of a kind that is unique to his new body such as standing erect to the roof with his worm body and cozying up under the sofa and so on. So you see when things become different, first of all nobody is willing to entertain him amidst themselves because the spectacle he looks like a worm, so he is bleeding, he is drooling all the time.

I cannot stand that spectacle people may say and then abandon a leper, a person with leprosy and they can say outrageous things in front of that person although that person does not exist because in their mind abjection has already happened. A leper is less than a human, is not same as me and that attitude has already crept in. So, they for sure will begin finding a dingy room for this guy like the one Gregor is cast into, correct?

So, this is a kind of human-animal continuum and if you are in the latter then abjection happens, abandonment based on that abjection can happen. So, this brings us a very important concept the humanity animality problem. You know what the differences the human and the animal is not that definite all the time. For example, I am using this braille paper now and if you give me another sheet but that paper will not have any value for me. Because this braille contains some notes and thoughts and scribbles that I have put down for this lecture, but if that braille note is something else say something in some other language, some poetry which is not relevant for this lecture I am going to cast it

aside or keep it somewhere and we will check out it later. So a room can be a dining hall, a bedroom, tennis a sport room or a gathering room it depends on how we look at it.

But when in abjection the kind of habitation that we do quickly disappears. You are assigned to something, you are molded into something which you do not want to, which you do not necessarily appreciate but that kind of distinction anyway that blind chap he cannot see, so I can switch off the light without his permission. Anyway, he is deaf, I do not have to care about him when I burst a cracker. Because these two people's position and their role playing is already decided by abjection. So those are the kinds of things I am talking about here. So let us move on.

So in abandonment politics which is what this lecture is based on abandonment can be also based on productivity. Look at the endless amount of abandonment that happens in real life. For example, people retire, men and women. When they do not earn anything anymore, they may alas discover that their home is not home anymore. Well, you are not earning therefore you do not have a say in running things. So you better find your easy chair out there and just pass your time. Productivity alienation, productivity driven human relationships, clock time, urban life, relationships based on use and throw norm all that fundamentally has at its core the abandonment norm.

Once you are not there you will never be there. Hey look at corona relief happening now, those in New Zealand a great success story people are talking about they could eliminate corona pandemic without much lockdown and so on. There is a great praise for that society, but thanks to disability studies scholarship we now understand that thousands of people disabled. Elderly and the poor died in sheltered arrangements as this success story was going on because they were kept out of sight and out of mind because they were non-productive and non-productive means you can be persona non grata, a person without any value. So all across the globe after Covid isolation based on skin contagion, isolation based on corona contagion can go, may go and will definitely go.

But not necessarily isolation based on systemic abandonment, based on systemic isolation where people who are considered nonproductive, they are hastened to sheltered arrangements and so on where they dwindle into oblivion. So the Gregor phenomenon, the Gregor's condition you know maybe looks like a reverie, a literature's big idea, a

piece of literature's big idea but I am afraid that is a phenomenon we need to reckon with when thinking about structural reforms.

Let me move on. Abandonment can happen when I call it limits of human generosity. Generosity is a big stuff, altruism is real, say when there is a cyclone rampage in Odisha people can contribute even from Kanyakumari or New York through our hearts go to people in hunger somewhere on other parts of the earth and there are people who offer a prayer, money, maybe a good word, a piece of teaching about that hunger it can happen.

So, altruism real, generosity is real, sense of fulfillment that comes with charity is also real. But what is real also real is that limits of human kindness is endless, I mean human kindness is boundless but human kindness is also limited. People can withdraw kindness; people can withdraw generosity. In fact, people can go jump on to the other side of the fence where they can be as cruel as they were kind before as simple as that.

Look at this quote from Metamorphosis. He must go cried Gregor's sister that is only the solution father, you must just try to get rid of the idea that this Gregor the fact that we have believed it for so long is the root of all our troubles. Well, what is she saying? Gregor's sister Grete fed him with leftovers, you can say leftovers milk and cheese and rotten vegetables and so on who is now an insect. But at some point it was becoming too much, too much is too much. So now she wants to move on as it were. So, well this is not new I am afraid sometimes the famous celebrity case Pinki Virani's defense of euthanasia happened to, I am not able to recall the name, Aruna Shanbaug yes luckily. So, Pinki Virani wrote saying see she is undergoing pain, she is in a vegetative condition and there is no use in keeping her alive.

But sisters in King Edward Medical College said hello we want Aruna to be alive because we not only love, we not only serve her but she serves us I mean she gives us special meaning, but the fact is at the heart of this debate is also the idea that human kindness is not all that unconditional, well a dark truth. So as a consequence, people can abandon unwanted children, disabled people, elderly people who are not considered any more useful.

The people can abandon, societies, political systems can abandon, minorities and the list may be endless that which is considered not worth your generosity that can undergo abandonment of a cruel kind and that what it shows now. Abandonment based on the idea of othering that is my next idea from DS okay. DS is not just about disability, although that is the standpoint position.

DS is about structures of all kinds, structures ranging from family, learning systems, bureaucracy, international forums, organizations, literary structures such as poetry, novel and many interpretative communities. It is endless, it is a critique, it is an evaluation of those systems that is what a disability study's main role. Here the othering happens. Othering means somebody is other than it is not about other than I am, it is based on the idea of binary.

God, devil; beauty and ugly; black, white; great, small; beautiful, ugly; pleasing, disgusting all those binaries. So binary is there and the second for example good and bad, the bad is an inferior to the good. So when people get into that thinking my god he was so good that time, now he is very bad. So once you treat, once you cast that person in the second position that is the inferior set of the binary then other narratives come into the picture.

Well now he is bad, he is not only bad but he is a nuisance where he is not only nuisance, he is also ugly and he is also stinks, the stench in his room and so on. So here in the beginning Gregor's different appearance was tolerated, in fact he was not considered different at all. They were thinking okay something is happening Gregor will change, but slowly they thought okay he is becoming a nuisance.

Maybe he deserves a separate room, maybe he deserves different kind of food, maybe he can be semi-human, maybe he appreciates music, maybe he can know little language, human language, he cannot speak but understand. But slowly it comes to the point that he is the other, he is not anymore human, he is the animal that needs to be thrown away. So the othering is a slow process and it can happen and when that happens fully abandonment is a guaranteed consequence.

Lastly let me speak about this what Michael Rowe, I am giving a reference to this beautiful journal article. He calls it the Gregor Samsa problem. I was talking about

Aruna Shanbaug here, see you take care of the critically ill who is as critically ill as Gregor for very long, do not ever underestimate the pain the caregiver undergoes despite all affection, despite all caring and so on. They may undergo horror, pain, disgust and so on but based on that they may take an action and the action may include abandonment and sometimes annihilation. So Michael Rowe calls it the Gregor Samsa phenomenon. Gregor is the critically ill and Samsa being the immediate kin or caregiver and so on. So the emotions that they undergo they may be driven to take action much to the detriment of the person who is in care.

So therefore, care is not apolitical activity nor it is devoid of complex emotions. So, we do not have to treat interdependence as a virtue without any problem, so we need to take that seriously. So, the Gregor Samsa phenomenon that is a phenomenon caring with mixed emotions can potentially lead to abandonment where so and that needs to be resisted, this is what Michael Rowe.

Michael Rowe takes the Kafka's Metamorphosis example that runs through his complex emotions as a caregiver about his 17year old or 19, I forgot the exact fact who underwent liver transplant and was critically ill for some time and eventually died. So he is running through his emotions which were as varied as varied and rich and sometimes dangerous as it was in Gregor's family.

Conclusion; in a lot of senses disability studies gives us very useful tools to understand emotions, structural interventions and many registers of thought that go into people's sense of self changing realities and care and this is what we can learn from a literary masterpiece like Metamorphosis. Thank you.