

Literary and Cultural Disability Studies: An Exploration
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Lecture – 18
Anjali: A Watershed Moment in Care Ethics – Part 1

Good afternoon all. Great to talk to you again. Today's topic I call it 'Anjali: a watershed moment in care ethics'. Well, I consider this lecture as a sequel to my lectures on governmentality. Meaning this lecture 1 and 2 on the film Anjali will in many senses demonstrate how useful Foucauldian framework is for understanding multiple ways and means by which governmentality works.

So, 'a watershed moment in care ethics' is what I call the film. In 1990 directed by Mani Ratnam, this was the story of a young couple Chitra and Shekar. They have two children, I think Anu and Arjun, and when the third child (Anjali) was born, she was hidden from mom by father Shekar because she was declared mentally disabled and would not survive for long. He wanted to protect her from anxieties and worries about the child.

So, eventually the child comes back to the family and mother Chitra takes to her very warmly and both make a great diode and Anjali also becomes a point of contention among the neighborhood. They do not accept her at all for most part and then her siblings take to her and the film goes on until the baby Anjali as declared by the doctor, dies because of her chronic condition as a child. Her sister waking her up is a very moving scene, when entire neighborhood discovers that how great Anjali was, she taught them as a baby as a little child the values of compassion, forgiving and many other traits and so on. So that is the story in a nutshell. Well, in 1990 many of you may not have been born at that time but for me and my cohort and cousins, friends and so on we were little those days and it was so moving.

We did not understand the philosophical - well certainly not care ethics - but it was certainly moving but I feel certainly privileged to talk about this movie from a Foucauldian perspective

and see where it goes. It is an exploration with you that is how I take with this course. So can we ever consider watershed moment in care ethics? Certainly yes, but how to apply Foucauldian framework?

First of all, like a jail, something like a grill comes and appears and goes, keeps appearing like a frame where you know window rails appear and it is as though everybody is jailed in some sense, imprisoned in some sense. The frame appears and goes, one should watch the movie carefully to see how camera projection works that way. That said the movie happens in a burgeoning Indian middle class apartment.

The 1990s were also the time when the enclave culture - hiding away in enclaves - started appearing. Those were the burgeoning moments. So, this was an apartment where many flats are stacked on each other and middle class, typically nuclear families, they hide themselves inside that. I mean that is how most of us make our lives as middle class and the couple do that, but what happens?

In the apartment lives an ex-prisoner, a woman beater and so on - that is how it appears in the film characterizations. So, this ex-prisoner becomes a favorite of Anjali, but much to the dismay of her mom. But the point is these marginalized sections in this story they, Anjali and her family, ex-prisoner, many other subordinates, many other people from marginalized communities, they live in the flat.

And they all given to some kind of disciplining and punishment in a Foucauldian sense. Do you remember panopticon, the surveillance structure where the people who are doing this surveillance sit at the top or assuming to be sitting at the top so that people at the prison cells always feel that they are under surveillance and this is how exactly everybody feels in this apartment especially the prisoner, Anjali's family and the rest.

There is soft power moving on and it is a kind of productive power that puts them in their place as it were. So the thing goes on, several plot structures go on side by side especially the story of the prisoner, crime, infidelity, many things go on as though in intellectual disability and other forms of marginalization, they feed on each other and they undergo some kind of disciplining by productive power. Meaning that the ex-prisoner will have to be in that place and he has to be. If he is not in his place he will be put in his place by the community, the law, the cultural systems, community expectations and other things and so goes the community life.

What about family care? Did I not start the course with ‘a watershed moment in care ethics’? Let me come to that point. Well, in India disability care happens very interpersonally. It happens like that everywhere but more so here because of the interdependence. For one, the family is intimately involved in care ethics of children with disability; mother, father, siblings; they play a vital role. And well not in equal terms: moms play a more taxing role if you like, and neighbors have their role. ‘It requires a village to raise a child’, they say. More so when it comes to a disabled child. In some sense what is technically called dyadic bonding is kind of an interdependent relationship. For example a mother is dependent on the child as much as the child is dependent on her - that kind of dyadic bonding, many of them is common to disability care.

In that dyadic bonding several members of the family are given to or subscribe to dyadic bonding in different ways. For example, let us take moms; mothers give their fuller emotional affective universe and make them fully available to the child. They do sacrifice career, they do sacrifice other desires to be spending more time with their spouse, going out and so on. I have given links to the movie film clips on YouTube, kindly watch it. It will support, it will certainly justify what I am saying today. In fact, there is a moving anecdote in which baby Anjali is so cozy with this prisoner guy but sort of pushes her mom away, and mom says “I sacrificed everything for you, why are you not recognizing? Why are you not even acknowledging my presence?” That mother’s role is ably played by Revathi madam.

So it is a very moving anecdote in which she expresses all emotions, dynamics about motherhood with a disabled child. So this dyadic bonding is a productive power. I am not saying that the mother has affection for children because she gets some power out of it, that is rubbish. It is all about how care works as a productive force and it keeps carrying on that is why I brought this.

Even dyadic bonding is part of the productive force that circulates in several institutions including family. Fatherhood is also an object of dyadic bonding. Well, in traditional sense fathers do not spend as much time but the rules are changing now and for the good. Thanks to the realization of the negative influences of patriarchy, in the young generation fathers are becoming more available like moms.

But father time is generally associated with disciplining, supervision, enforcement and so on. But again to understand dyadic bonding we need to understand influences on women who are moms of disabled children, their emotional health, mental health, their well-being is subjected to many power equations. The chief among them is emotional burden - I mean they are faced with guilt like the anecdote that I was talking about, they are faced with the burden of conventional notions of emotional well-being. For example women - moms definitely - are expected to be more linked to affects, they are supposed to be emotionally loaded, their reactions tend to be or educated to be more affective. On the other for hand men, emotional reactions are more based on behavior, sometimes substance abuse, sometimes external aggression and so on.

Well for a subtle understanding of these differences about the ways in which men and women or moms and dads are bound to affective universes, you might consult Bhargavi Davar and Meenu Anand who have excellent exploration on this topic.

So what I was saying was that on the external front - on the apartment front - there are power equations working in the neighborhood, in the family, productive power through dyadic bonding - the ways in moms and dads work. Let us go back to Anjali again. There is a moving anecdote

that I would like to point you to in which Anjali's siblings Anu and Arjun will be talking to their father, asking “why on earth is Anjali born in our family? Why was she not born in the neighborhood? Why not in the top floor? Why not in the ground floor? Why not in their friend's house” and so on. What does the father do? He will gather his children closely and then you say “you know, this happened for a reason. There was a meeting in heaven. God decided to send Anjali here where there is care, since we are caring people Anjali require more attention, it is only we who can give care, God knows it very well that is why he sent her to us.”

That moment proves to be a watershed for the children. So from then on siblings take over. They celebrate Anjali, they take her, they parade her, they do mothering and fathering and it keeps going on. So back to the Foucauldian method, I mean these two lectures are a bit in some sense a demonstration of the application of Foucauldian method.

Here, spirituality is not opposite to power. Spirituality is not otherworldly or out there; it is this-worldly. Spirituality in other words is the ways in which people connect to and draw on emotional and subtle form of moral resources which we all have inevitably. So, drawing of those resources is nothing but spirituality. So here dad Shekar uses it in some sense to instill a very fine response to Anu and Arjun so that they become very responsible to Anjali, their mentally disabled child.

By the way, what the nature of disability is, what is its label, what is its name etc was more or less unavailable those days. The reviewers called it autism, some say cerebral palsy and so on. In any event, diagnostic and statistical manual became clear about autism and its spectrum roughly after the movie was released but not much before, although autism as a condition was known early in twentieth century.

So, we have become aware of community dynamic and family dynamic and men and women or moms and dads reflect differently when giving care and usually there is more emotional drag on women because of the histories of affect in which we operate, and I have already referred you to

more sources on that. Well on emotion, I would like to make one more point before drawing the introduction to Anjali to the close.

Emotion is a community response. Emotion is not intracranial, it is not by any means that what happens in my body and within my chest or my eyes. It makes both individual and communities possible. So in that sense again emotion is an organic power system. It makes individual and their places in communities very special, more so when it becomes bringing up disabled children.

Mind you! Bringing up disabled children is a matter of instilling, organizing, promoting and watering a sense of subjectivity. Subjectivity is not just a self, it is made up of our background, our histories, family. History is both personal, political and cultural. And also subjectivity is interpersonal, it is also made by care ethos in which we are raised.

So well Anjali does not survive long. But the subjectivity in which she is brought to the world and brought through the world via her family and community demonstrate that emotion is an organic system evolving through individual and community. A little bit of basics about emotion in the western context would do good. I am not saying at all that the western world does not see emotions publicly; they do have community programs, community health services, voluntary help and there is good amount of trust on community health.

But in the Indian ethos, emotions for sure is an organic entity. Beginning with Natyashastra we have emotions of various kinds that have been seen as being an organic unit. For example, let us walk through one or two emotions. The emotion called bhakti; bhakti roughly translated in English is devotion. Look at the kinds of bhakti that is happening here. Do not always associate bhakti with the devotion to god; bhakti can happen elsewhere too. For example, mother's (Chitra's) devotion to Anjali here, siblings devotion to Anjali, father's devotion to his daughter, community's conflicting devotion and so on. Bhakti can emanate in a crowd, a massive amount of people gathering together and they can be going on a pilgrimage. They can come together to celebrate a particular religious festival. They can visualize god in the form of a baby, say baby

Jesus, baby Krishna and so on. They can organize death rituals, funerals and so on. So, bhakti has many minuscule forms. So, we cannot just imagine that this is an intracranial matter.

Take one more example: sringara, roughly translated as love. But sringara has a romantic angle, an angle of profound happiness, an angle of general generosity, feeling good and so on. So, all those things, all those emotions can be community objects as much as individually oriented dynamics. So here in the film we have the care about Anjali as a disabled child happening in the family circle, the apartment life and beyond.

So, what is my concluding remark about Anjali as a watershed moment in care ethics? Well, this is the beginning of a moment where family's role in disability care was beginning to be accepted and acknowledged. A film like this was in that sense and is in that sense a watershed moment, but more important for our purpose is that it involves and demonstrates how power works as a productive force, and not necessarily as a destructive force. As a productive force in care ethos it works through dyadic bonding, community bonding, institutions such as family and the language itself. For example, Shekar's neighbors call Anjali as a 'mental case' and mentally retarded. Those words have not disappeared but attitudes to those words keep changing. In some sense this film has a middle class tinge about it, but yet it helps us to understand how power works. Thank you.

In the next lecture I am going to talk about how the film engages in a very sophisticated way about education, the notion of education, integrated education and so on. Thank you.