

Literary and Cultural Disability Studies: An Exploration
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Lecture – 21
The Mark on the Wall - Continued

Having talked about madness, tradition and individual talent and calling ‘madness’ a priceless talent, let me talk about The Mark on the Wall. I call it ‘Virginia Woolf’s madness narrative’. You know, there is one thing we need to recognize here. What is Virginia Woolf doing here in the story? It may not look radical but in early twenty first century this was such a radical literary feat. Tradition demanded that story has a logic; maybe a character is introduced, a plot is introduced, and there is a complication and then the complication is addressed in some way by some other third party and then the story comes to a close.

So for a story, character is involved and the character is important. And plot! Something happens, and after that something happens, and after that something happens... it keeps on going. In Bollywood movies, this seductive hero, and a heroine falls in love with him. There is a villain who comes and there is a popcorn interval and then after that the hero does something to the villain and therefore villain’s influence is removed and then they join, or they do not join - so one of these two happen. So, some kind of expectation and some kind of trope, some kind of plot structure keeps circulating and this is in the way of story. In The Mark on the Wall there is nothing happening. This woman sits and you know she is on a mind trip. She notices a mark on the wall; “hey! look, there is something out there. What is happening?” But then she ignores it. She goes into her mind trip, in a way she feels visceral. Her body and mind, everything is involved. So she goes on to a bright crimson light out there which makes her remember her childhood. When she remembers her childhood, all the violence... state violence, men’s rule, pageantry, color, royalty, rules, games, honors, everything go by in her head and then she comes back only to be alerted to the fact that she is on her own. And some person comes and says, “I will go and bring a newspaper”. Maybe, that person is a companion. So he - let us assume that it is ‘he’ - reminds her that all the events that happened in the story is her mind’s own travel. If

there is a reality, there are two things: he who appears in front of her, and so does appear the mark on the wall. Then after close examination she realises that it is the snail on the wall. Well, a symptom of the slow passage of time and it is not attended for a long time and so on. So that is the nature of the story. So there is no plot in a conventional sense. Stories and expectations around the stories that we say to each other project us as rational and sane people, but if we reveal stories that look unconventional - like the stories that do not fit into frames around the notion of womanhood or manhood or childhood - then they are going to be called a mad narrative. In that sense this story is a tradition breaker and a mad narrative.

How do I explain it more? Take the case of Plato's cave. A very old story, but still worth recalling. Plato comes with the case of six or seven men caught in a cave. The cave is dark. Imagine that they are all literally chained to a wall in a row. What they see in front of them is a kind of image which is projected on the screen or wall in front of them. They think, "oh my god! There are people like us out there". Actually it is their own projected image. Since these men are incarcerated and they have not seen any other reality, they think that this is the only reality in front of them, because they have not been allowed to go outside and are incarcerated forever. Now, if one of them is allowed to venture out and then come and report, "hey! The outside world is not like this. People roam around free, there are men and women out there, children can play. We are not static objects; we are dynamic". Let us suppose that this guy comes back and says this. Because one is grown up to believe that we ought to be like this and we have nothing but static images in front of us, that we are nothing but static images, this guy can be killed. This is the weight of tradition!

Let us talk about stream of consciousness technique. What is stream of consciousness technique? The idea that our mind does not rest in one place. In the twenty-first century there are thousands of books on mindfulness; that one should do meditation, one's brain and by extension mind is plastic. So just like you should go to gym to keep muscles healthy or do exercise, one should do the meditation to keep the brain and mind healthy. There is no problem with that, but to say this

is the only way to be healthy, that is where the problem is. So when we say that this is the only way to tell a story, there is a problem with that.

What is stream of consciousness? For example, somebody brings me a cup of tea. Suppose there is elaichi in it. Wow! I have a sip and then that reminds me of my grandma and my image of my grandma takes me to my childhood play with her, and my childhood play with her takes me to my neighbor boy Raja and then Raja to my kite play with him and suddenly somebody rings a bell, and that brings back me back to the current reality where I am standing and giving a talk to you. So if one were to keep concentric circles of narrative that involve childhood-grandma-elaichi tea-Raja etc without a logical and predictable structure then one would call it a madness narrative. So artists trying to capture it as circles of concentric flow of thoughts happen in the regular mind, that is called stream of consciousness.

So, Woolf and Joyce - early modernist writers - perfected it and that is why I am here to talk about it. I strongly recommend that you read *The Mark on the Wall*.

It is about such concentric circles, an intricate flow of thought from one thought to another and that has its own logic, and that logic violates traditional methods of storytelling. That said, this kind of plot structure embraces the uncertainty principle. The stories that the protagonist in *The Mark on the Wall* gets into, is uncertain. First she gets a reverie of what she sees in front of her, but it goes on and on because she goes into childhood and childhood takes to something else and so on. In Woolf's words, "the writer seems constrained not by his own free will, but by some powerful and scrupulous tyrant in who has him in thrall to provide a plot, to provide comedy, tragedy, love, interest and an air of probability involving the whole".

So she could have written something normative. The woman who was sitting there could have had a fight with this guy who was about to bring the newspaper. Then they could rewind together some conflict that they had in the past and then they reach some kind of understanding that they

should get along. But she did not do that. She embarked on this idiosyncratic journey of the mind.

So, what did I say so far? One is that madness in a literary sense could mean coming up with stories that feel unconventional, that feel unacceptable and that feel illogical. That is the first idea. Second, madness also celebrates out of the box thinking. Remember that during any time in the world, any epoch, folks who thought out of the box, out of their own epoch were always considered evil, dangerous, and mad and many were eliminated for that reason.

And usually, women are more vulnerable because traditional patriarchy finds it hard to digest women who say “enough is enough, I can think hundred years ahead of you”. So they can be potentially eliminated, that is the problem. Now, what else is happening in this story? What else can say about The Mark on the Wall as a madness narrative? Well, I have the following thing also to be explained about Mark on the Wall: madness as the edge of empirical reality.

Traditional empiricism is strictly atomistic, strictly logical. Two plus two equals four. What I see is what I know. If I cannot see what you are describing by way of sight, smell, taste, rationalization, then it does not exist. What I cannot feel at least by way of reading, it does not exist. That is empirical reality, that approach is called empiricism.

Every society has strict empiricist traditions in its fold. Indian thought also has its own. The famous Jain story about six blind men and the elephant, which is linked to morality and the knowledge of God and so on. British empirical tradition is also very old. If we consider modern empiricist thought, it starts with John Locke and Hobbes, then goes on to Hume and so on.

But in a nutshell, empiricism is based on the view that sensory perception, logical reasoning, and a verifiable reality alone exists; non-verifiable stuff cannot be admitted. That is the idea. If somebody is at the edge of this thinking, then it could be called madness. Let me explain. Let me read out how Mark on the Wall begins, “Perhaps it was the middle of January in the present year

that I first looked up and saw the mark on the wall. In order to fix the date, it is necessary to remember what one saw.”. That is a brilliant idea by Woolf. She does not go directly into a reverie and the musings of her mind. She looks there and then remembers looking at the wall in January of the current year. So she wants to give some empirical entry into the story. I am just recalling by way of stream of consciousness, The Rime of the Ancient Mariner. So there is a wedding party and people gather, children gather around, and one man with a beard will come and say something and he has attractive and magnetic eyes. So when he tells the story, he mesmerizes all the children and elders and all the guests to listen about his great adventures into seafaring. Like that, Woolf the narrator, she sees some mark on the wall and crimson brightness coming from the window and that takes her into a thought trip.

However, when I intermingle or intermix what I can see with what I make out of it in my mind and my own internal journey, then my story is going to be at the edge of empirical reality; and that is how The Mark on the Wall is. There is an external plot here. Two people are living in that house. Somebody else lived before in the house; that is why the reference to the previous tenant and their stories. This woman had a childhood and that childhood involved royalty, pageantry, cavalcade, war, and so on. So there is a plot there. But at the edge of the plot, something else is intermixed. The narratives of the mind, narratives, logical, illogical, fantasies, imagination, dreams, delusions, everything is mixed in a curious mixture and they have their own concentric circles.

So, if there is anyone who lives at the edge of the empirical - somewhere bordering it, somewhere not into it, but out of it at its edge - they will be called mad and the narratives that flow from it would also be called mad narrative. What else is the reason why I would like to call The Mark on the Wall a madness narrative?

I would call madness as a response to systemic and chronic violence; prisons torture houses etc. Famous critique and human rights activist Shoukoufeh talks about people pretending to be mad - people inventing themselves an alternative reality and living in the alter ego to handle something

like torture. I am not going to make such claims about this story. However, we have to acknowledge the idea that the concentric circles of narratives here, the narrative trip that happens from childhood to cavalcade, the masculine world, then the childhood world, then the pageantry, then the World War, then the patriarchal order, then back to the mark on the wall, then the guy who is going to bring the newspaper, then the tenants who lived before.. that kind of travel that happens here is actually a response to the weight of tradition on her. In what way is Woolf rebelling here? Well, there is this tall tradition by dead male writers like Shakespeare, Milton, Matthew Arnold and so on starting from Aristotle. They would say, “write into true tragedy, write into comedy, write yourself into the great essay tradition framed by Francis Bacon, write yourself into storied tradition. Do not violate the grammar. Find your individual expression, we do not have problems, but do not violate the grammar and the poetics that has been established.”

That is a huge stranglehold, similar to what I was saying about Ved Mehta. So, in other words, madness can come as a systemic response to a stranglehold in torture houses, jails and where people say incarcerated. I said that they create alternative realities to handle violence, and Woolf here develops a new form of literary reality to handle the violence of stranglehold of the limitations set by genre. Stream of consciousness method in Shoukoufeh’s words, “is a response ability to the violence of tradition”.

Now, let me conclude. Mark on the Wall is certainly a masterpiece. It was created in early twentieth century. It is still a mark on the literary wall. It gives us a sample to reinvent ourselves, to think out of the box, to be mad, and to reclaim madness so that people who think, react, breathe, and kick and strive alive out of the box will not be treated and pushed to the margins. Conclusion: my talk on Mark on the Wall and tradition is meant to provoke or invoke the idea that madness is not necessarily just a clinical phenomenon. Even if it is a clinical phenomenon, it cannot be seen in isolation. People's sense of madness can mean many things and with that recognition it also needs to be told that madness is definitely a way of out of the box experience, and it has been demonstrated time and again that it is in simple way for that - The Mark on the

Wall is a good example. I strongly recommend that you all go and read it and experience it.

Thank you.