

Literary and Cultural Disability Studies: An Exploration
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Lecture – 24

Kubla Khan by Samuel Taylor Coleridge: A Classroom Discussion

So, we will start the class today with Kubla Khan.

Professor – student conversation starts.

Did you all read the poem once? Yes sir. Did you like it? Yes Sir. Great. So, you know what I thought of playing this video for you and it has nothing to do with a poem. Maybe it has a lot to do with the poem, we do not know, we will explore it. You have all seen this movie Beautiful Mind. Yes Sir. Yeah, some of you. Okay.

Professor – student conversation ends.

So, I am going to ask him to play the final climax scene which is the Nobel acceptance speech by John Nash. I see lots of connection between both the poems in some way and it is a long legacy of the history of genius if you like, poetic genius or mathematic genius and so on. But let us see how and why there is a connection and let us spend the rest of the hour teasing out the meaning.

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Beautiful Mind - John Nash's nobel prize acceptance speech

Youtube Link: <https://youtu.be/w5ToctbuBtc>

Great. Did you all like the video? Well, let me put it this way. I see connections, but did you do also see the connection between this poem that we are going to read and this video.

Professor – student conversation starts.

Some. Yes sir. In what way my dear? He questions reason how we perceive reason in everyday life. So, I think Kubla Khan is also a celebration of the beyonds of reason that we perceive every day and in that sense, I find that they are connected. Fantastic.

Anyone else wants to chip in? Okay, others, please. Rashi. Sir, there was this actually caught my attention. It is only under mysterious equations of love that ideological reasons are found. And I think it relates to Coleridge a lot because even he had histories of love, and then his histories of wonderings where we see his addiction to opiates and his trans that we find in this poem. Fantastic. So that is the point.

Professor – student conversation ends.

Actually, we have been doing this course for a while. Now in some sense, we have come to a point where we are able to see a long intellectual history. See this movie came 10-15 years ago, what do you think? 10 years ago? Yeah, 20 years ago. And Kubla Khan in some sense 200 years ago. So in a sense when we do this connect, we do a connection of a long tradition, intellectual tradition or history from Coleridge to John Nash.

We have in some sense want to understand the reason as Rashi identified it very clearly. In some sense, reason has its shades. Reason is not one plus one is two. Gone, that is not how life works or even math does not work. If you ask a mathematician what is one plus one? Maybe if you ask a PhD in math what is one plus one is, maybe that person may be thinking oh my God, he is getting me into a trap. Maybe he is talking about the problem of infinity that is why he is trapping me. Then he or she will think 50,000 times before answering because that is that domain and math involves a lot of intuition. In John Nash's case in the mysterious equations of love, he found reason and he points at his wife most gratefully and says you are my reason. Well, you may call this cinematic melodrama, Tamil masala stuff, maybe.

But what is more important is he talks about his journey between the physical that is the table, desk and all this, math and all that count things, geometrical shapes, metaphysical that which lies beyond this physical such as intuition, emotion, irrational and delusional that is a strong belief in something that exists and back is that is the foundation of his talk. You know what? Incidentally, this poem Kubla Khan comes under what people call mystery poems.

It is good that Rashi pointed us to mysterious equations of love and so on. This too, Kubla Khan too is under what is called “mystery poems.” The other one being conversation poems. The 18th century was an important century and is still an important century for us because it is when disciplines started getting bifurcated, famous Western universities like Oxford and Cambridge and beyond started developing. Even Cambridge Royal Society of Sciences started recognizing specializations, chemistry, biochemistry, physics, biology, anatomy, math and so on. That means science was no more just a philosophy of nature, but a discipline in itself. Naturally, those who were in the creative field or even logic field or math field, were really reading a lot on science as discovery.

Just as we would in a general way know about genetics, they were knowing a lot about specializations and chemistry of the mind and chemistry of the body, blood and so on and Coleridge was not an exemption. Did you get me? So he was in some sense reading about addiction, apart from being addicted, who tried opium a lot.

Professor – student conversation starts.

Did you listen to that lecture that I sent about Nancy Anderson? Some of you. What do you think my dear, was it interesting? What were the reactions of and they were constantly playing Kubla Khan in the background, right? Who listened to it? Aswathi did you? Yes sir. Yeah. What do you think? How did you think it was, what do you think about creativity? Sir I was trying to comprehend the word, the context of discussing Kubla Khan in the context of series and disability or how we deal with, our mind deals with reason. Yeah. It is a kind of creativity, right. Yes. So how you associate creativity with, say in last classes we talked about autistic genius those kinds of children. I was trying to connect with the disability class in particular just thinking

about how we are going to discuss it in a context like this. Correct. Correct. Very good.

Professor – student conversation ends.

So, in the western world from Coleridge to John Nash, they have a puzzle about what is creativity and where does creativity emerge in the first place.

In the Indian side of matters which we will discuss in another class, in Indian scenario it is about aesthetics, what sort of emotion give rise to what sort of creative work for example karuna or compassion what is it gives rise to for example or what kind of erotic love, what kind of literary forms it gives rise to. So, the Indian imagination about creativity is about all that which we will not bother about at the moment.

In the western world, they are always thinking about where does creativity come from in the Nancy Anderson, you remember she cites the example of Coleridge having opium and he gets a grand vision of Kubla Khan more than 370 lines. He has this grand idea, doing the rounds in the head and suddenly somebody knocks on the door, everything vanishes, and then he ends up writing these 54 lines.

Professor – student conversation starts.

Did you hear that part? So, well he is a legend. These are the myths doing around Kubla Khan. It may be true; it may not be true also. I think he wrote it in some of his preface to the book he published. Yes. His Sibylline Leaves. Correct.

Professor – student conversation ends.

Some say he made it up. He was reading a lot about opium. Reading a lot about Mongolian Empire tourist books and so on, so he made it up as though he is a genius just like that. But some say it could be true, but that can never be true. But what is true is this kind of discourse around creativity that is what we should be concerned about. So, make no mistake. Coleridge suffered from immense pain, opium withdrawal and opium addiction and several other conditions.

The problem with this kind of discussion about creative genius in John Nash's case, you either attribute everything to his schizophrenia. Oh, yeah he was schizophrenic and therefore he was able to come with game theory. In this Coleridge's case, you attribute everything to his opium but that is basically nonsense. Nash could have done without schizophrenia, he could have become a mathematical genius and contribution.

But we cannot otherwise also deny that he drew intellectual sustenance from schizophrenia as much as his work on math. So, we have to recognize that part. Having said that, let us do some close reading of the poem and then tease out what it has to do with disability studies or alternatively said in what way a disability studies framework enable a rich literary understanding of Kubla Khan. Very good.

Professor – student conversation starts.

Can one of you read the poem aloud for the class so that we can take it forward? What do you think? Aswathi, do you want to do that? Yes sir. Yeah. All of us should follow Aswathi now.

In Xanadu did Kubla Khan
A stately pleasure-dome decree:
Where Alph, the sacred river, ran
Through caverns measureless to man
 Down to a sunless sea.
So twice five miles of fertile ground
With walls and towers were girdled round;
And there were gardens bright with sinuous rills,
Where blossomed many an incense-bearing tree;
And here were forests ancient as the hills,
Enfolding sunny spots of greenery.

But oh! that deep romantic chasm which slanted
Down the green hill athwart a cedarn cover!
A savage place! as holy and enchanted

As e'er beneath a waning moon was haunted
By woman wailing for her demon-lover!
And from this chasm, with ceaseless turmoil seething,
As if this earth in fast thick pants were breathing,
A mighty fountain momentarily was forced:
Amid whose swift half-intermitted burst
Huge fragments vaulted like rebounding hail,
Or chaffy grain beneath the thresher's flail:
And mid these dancing rocks at once and ever
It flung up momentarily the sacred river.
Five miles meandering with a mazy motion
Through wood and dale the sacred river ran,
Then reached the caverns measureless to man,
And sank in tumult to a lifeless ocean;
And 'mid this tumult Kubla heard from far
Ancestral voices prophesying war!
The shadow of the dome of pleasure
Floated midway on the waves;
Where was heard the mingled measure
From the fountain and the caves.
It was a miracle of rare device,
A sunny pleasure-dome with caves of ice!

A damsel with a dulcimer
In a vision once I saw:
It was an Abyssinian maid
And on her dulcimer she played,
Singing of Mount Abora.
Could I revive within me
Her symphony and song,
To such a deep delight 'twould win me,

That with music loud and long,
I would build that dome in air,
That sunny dome! those caves of ice!
And all who heard should see them there,
And all should cry, Beware! Beware!
His flashing eyes, his floating hair!
Weave a circle round him thrice,
And close your eyes with holy dread
For he on honey-dew hath fed,
And drunk the milk of Paradise.

Thank you.

Professor – student conversation ends.

Okay, very good. So let me read a few lines. I mean line by line and do some close reading. Will you all follow with me? In Xanadu did Kubla Khan, a stately pleasure-dome decree. Where Alph, the sacred river ran through caverns measureless to man.

In Xanadu did Kubla Khan, a stately pleasure-dome decree. See it seems Coleridge was reading a lot about this Mongolian Emperor Kubla Khan who lived in the 13th century. He had lots of recourse to tourist notes, stories, fantasies and so on. In some sense, this poem takes away straight to an imaginative place called Xanadu. Well anglicized pronunciation, that is alright.

It seems that a place like the biblical creation let there be light and there was light right, a similar process it was created by an act of decree. Do you see that decree, a decree is a formal word that is usually associated with the state, the decree of the emperor. It is an order. Let there be Xanadu and there was it Xanadu that kind of a stately, again a stately pleasure dome. Well, a dome full of pleasure inside.

In some sense an imaginative world where only pleasure can exist, pleasure of all kinds okay, maybe heaven where even the milk of paradise “*amudham*” in Tamil, elixir, if you like, is there.

After decree there is a colon, mind you, which means lots of things are going to follow. Like what where Alph the sacred river, ran through caverns measureless to man down to a sunless sea.

Gosh, it is going to the bottom of everything, down less to a sunless sea. bottom of the ocean, the bottom of imagination, caverns, the bottom of the mind, caverns measureless to man, hitherto unforeseen place. Look at the structure. So, this is why people say well, Coleridge might have said he is written out of opium addiction or opium influence, but look at the formal structure of a stately pleasure-dome decree.

A stately pleasure-dome decree, Iambic tetrameter.

Professor – student conversation starts.

What is an iamb?. One stressed and unstressed sir. Very good.

Professor – student conversation ends.

Short-long, short-long, short-long that kind of like an emperor walking with one left foot he will keep, a long right foot, one left foot, one long right foot; tuck tong, tick tong like that. Why? It is see, you have to understand this.

See, we need to look at why this kind of tradition emerged in the first place in the western world. It is a rhythm. If you can see western dances are usually couple dance, minuet, from minuet to salsa, good salsa dances here. Well, so and each for example if we take a classical minuet students of western music will know it has to be carefully orchestrated in a couple.

When one couple is doing short-long, short-long rhythm, the other couple on the other side should be doing long-short, long-short, long-short so that both meet face to face and withdraw. It is a kind of orchestration. But in the Iamb which Rashi pointed as short-long it is also called rhyme royal an emperor's feet as it were, majestically walking. Tiger, tiger burning bright, like tiger majestically walking.

So, all these romancers grabbed this Iamb so that anything that has to do with the majesty Xanadu's empire you use short-long, short-long majestic feet, the sound of majestic feet as it were with a colon, stately pleasure-dome decree I am saying colon, you all listen I am a title of the essay, I am the title of this empire, I am everything. Let that be Xanadu and there was Xanadu with pleasure dome.

Emperor says that with reasons might, there is no second opinion to emperor's reason okay. So naturally, this guy thinks, I mean this guy meaning Coleridge even during influence opium, let us assume he is influenced. Still this rhyme royale pattern. Tetra meaning for four, four iambs, a stately one, a short, short-long, a stately pleasure, dome decree. One word is not one syllable, it has to do with the sound. So what happens?

The first part of the story where rhyme royale happens, the reasons some kind of a pleasure dome is established. At this moment, it is quite nice to make some distinctions. What is the distinction between imagination, fantasy, hallucination, delusion, fantasy, all that? Am I making sense? See, let us walk one by one.

Professor – student conversation starts.

Imagination; what is imagination may I ask? Sir I cannot quite phrase it. Yeah, I mean it is very hard to, how can you define? Suppose I ask somebody what is head, then it is quite difficult to immediately say. Anyone wants to try what is imagination? Very good, that is fine. Because if you ask about a simple word like that, it is very hard.

Professor – student conversation ends.

Let me try for you okay. Imagination is seeing something which is not here. Does that make sense? For example, I am imagining maybe I have dinner in Delhi, it is quite possible, but not happening at the moment. Imagination also has to do with coming up with something which is not there, all entrepreneurial activities are imagination, meaning creating new poetry. Before Coleridge, this poem did not exist right. It is an act of imagination. All rational sciences need the imagination to do new things, new formulas, new objects, new things and so on.

In which case, how it is different from other things? For example, hallucination; what is hallucination?

Professor – student conversation starts.

Hallucination can be defined as feeling something that is not exactly physically present to the viewer. Yes. Sir, there is some sense of, I mean agency in imagination and hallucination I think, it is just imagination out of your own control. Sanjay very good, have you come, very good that is hallucination. Did you get frightened? Some sense of cohesion. So, I was actually able to see Sanjay which you were not able to see and then I was acting on that with she said correctly, agency right you said, agency no? Yes sir. Yes, here full of agency is involved. The notorious Pokemon GO, did you all play it? No sir. No, good. My students are good yeah. But they are lying I know. Is that true Aswathi. No sir I have not even.

Professor – student conversation ends.

Okay, Pokemon GO. Whatever that means this Pokemon GO. I want to play, maybe you can help me to play. See there is a billion-dollar industry that is emerging now. Apple is going to come up with a virtual machine to tap into a human tendency to want to hallucinate. Indulge without being there in full sensory pleasure, pleasure dome as it were. So each Apple machine is going to be a pleasure dome where you actually live in something which is not there in its fullest erose and completeness, so that is hallucination.

So, we saw imagination. So, in an act of imagination what happened? Xanadu emerged. Let there be Xanadu and there was. And what is going to happen there down? Let me read the next stanza okay. So twice five miles of fertile ground with walls and towers were girdled round. And there were gardens bright with sinuous rills where blossomed many an incense-bearing tree and here were forest ancient as the hills enfolding sunny spots of greenery.

Ha, full description of this Xanadu. It was surrounded by hills, blossom, forests, sunny spots of forestry and so on. But now comes the interesting part. Just think about hallucination and all that okay. But oh that deep romantic chasm which slanted down the green hill athwart a cedarn cover

exclamation mark. A savage place as holy and enchanted as ever beneath a waning moon was haunted by woman wailing for demon lover.

Gosh, see, look at all these things. This guy now has created the pleasure dome by an act of decree from the Kubla Khan. But within that Xanadu, it is not a kingdom. King is not ruling, it is ruled by all acts of pleasure and creativity. And one of the male fantasy okay is woman wailing for her female lover. And from this chasm with ceaseless turmoil seeding as if this earth in fast thick pants were breathing.

A mighty fountain momentarily was forced amid whose swift half intermitted burst. Huge fragments vaulted like a rebounding hail or chaffy grain beneath the thresher's flail. It is kind of, he is talking about in some sense orgasm of this woman wailing for lover, orgasm of the earth, spewing, spitting, throwing away, swift half intermittent bursts, huge fragments vaulted like pre-bouncing hail.

A chaffy grain beneath the thresher's flail and amid the dancing rock at once and ever it flung up momentarily the sacred river. It is like the poetic narrator, the protagonist is already in that place. In some sense witness to male fantasy in all its rich, multisensory, overwhelming multisensory deluge right from female moaning to earth heaving to wince to the gust and rapidity of earth, water, fire, sun, everything.

Very geographical symbolism, the symbolism of human body, especially the female body, and meeting the fantasy of the male who is into Xanadu already. So now that makes me ask the question, what is fantasy? In some sense, fantasy is about daydream. It is about if you like as Freud had put it, it is a kind of wish fulfilment. The romantic ages imagination with female emotion, female matters about sexuality to birthing to and their intrinsic difference from a man's reason or decree.

You are able to see now and so on it goes. Let me also go. But you see the meter has shifted now. I was saying Iambic tetrameter. but now it has shifted to Iambic pentameter. What does it matter? What is the big deal about shifting meter? Well, it also suggests the chaotic orgasmic nature of

Xanadu's pleasure dome. It is irrational. It is beyond the decree. It is sexualized. It is a fantasy world and so on.

Let me go on. Through wood and dale the sacred river ran. Then reach the caverns measureless to man. He is talking about sacred river now, sacred. Again sacred is beyond reason okay. To me, something is sacred that is it, there is no question about it. But the problem is what is sacred to me may not be sacred to you. There should be tolerance, huge debates about cow when other things involved this kind of matters.

And sank in tumult to a lifeless ocean. And amid this tumult Kubla heard from far incensed ancestor voices professing war and shadow of the dome of pleasure floated midway on the waves where was heard the mingles measure from the fountain and the caves. Look at the size of the lines now, they have shrunk as though they were floating on water. So different fantasies actually.

One defined to wonder which in the larger imagination Xanadu, then the pleasures of Xanadu, then as though this thing is floating on water. It was a miracle of rare device, a sunny pleasure dome with caves of ice. A damsel with a dulcimer in a vision once I saw. Look at this word vision. It is about a poet. Did you see the shift in voice? In a vision once I saw colon, hereafter I am afraid it is going to be an autobiography. Do you all agree?

In a vision once I saw, until then, until now it was irrationality, fantasy, imagination; all in the shape of formal in introduction, formal rhyme patterns and so on. But now on it is going to be about the poet's own hallucination. In a vision once I saw, again it is the nature of poetic genius that we are talking about. Well, some children have a precocious vision, they are able to see numbers beyond their capacity.

At the age of 5, somebody may say Shakespeare upside down if that is possible. Mozart was autistic they claim and so on. What is the nature of the poetic vision here? It was an Abyssinian maid and on her dulcimer she played, singing of Mount Abora. Could I revive within me her

symphony and song to such a deep delight would win me that with music loud and long? I would build that dome in the air.

That sunny dome, those caves of ice and all who heard should see them there and all should cry beware, beware. See, again he is talking about one more creative process, how? Suppose you hear one music, most beautiful melody okay, say a beautiful Malayalam song or raga in a flute. You go away. It keeps ringing in your head. Do you want to recreate the happiness that you had while listening to that flute?

How can you recreate it? You simply have to replay it in your head, right. But if you have to convey the happiness that you heard by listening to the flute on paper, I am afraid that is going to be very difficult. Now, we are coming to the heart of the creative process. The creative process not only involves imagination, fantasy, delusion, it may also involve recreation, doing the god's work.

He heard the Abyssinian maid, I mean again all eastern references okay. Kubla Khan, Mongol, Abyssinia, again modern Europe, 18th century Europe, even now some fascination with the Orient; that Orient being the safe place of the sacred, the exotic, the charming, the magical, the orgasmic, the creative and the other variety Alokika. So, he wants to recreate that creative energy that this Abyssinian maid had.

And then what happens? If he could do that, then it is equal to creating the pleasure dome that Xanadu that Kubla could create by a decree, Kubla had one command, what is that? He is a royal monarch. He can create by the act of decree. But Coleridge, the poetic genius or poet or narrator of this poem has a different command; the art of recreation, the irrational power, the delusional and so on.

So, he can create or recreate a pleasure dome based on the song that he heard from the Abyssinian maid. Then if he could do that, what will happen? The audience will say and all who heard should see them there. And all should cry, beware, beware. His flashing eyes, his floating

hair weave a circle around him thrice. And close your eyes with holy dread for he on honey-dew hath fed and drank the milk of paradise. Look at this.

When you actually realize that when the poet can actually build a pleasure dome based on the music he heard, the vision he had, the fantasies, then you will look at him with dread fear. Oh my God, he is a poetic genius. He is so different. He is so exotic. He is mine, but so different. If you like artistic vanity, and he is the one who drunk the milk of Paradise that is maybe messenger of creativity, a creative genius and so on. In some sense, we have finished, in some sense close reading the poem.

Professor – student conversation starts. What do you think about the poem? Did you like it? Confusing? What do you think? Aswathi, no idea. Sir we have done with this poem once. Sorry. Poetry class course last semester once Professor Ram, Madras University who took it for us. Okay.

So this is again like a revision of, revival. Yeah, this. The rendering was beautiful. Okay. I also like all the time I was trying to think about what kind of genius is a genuine genius like, I mean it is like saying the drug-influenced kind. So, really I am deviating from the topic, but this is one thing that just caught onto mind. Yeah, I know. I am going to come to that now.

Professor – student conversation ends.

Since we have finished close reading, maybe it is not such a bad idea to look at the connection. I can hear some voices. Well, not hallucination, right? Not such a bad idea to see what the hell about disability and disability studies to do with this poem? Well, let me say all these things. This is a winding-up remark. So in some sense, we are in the second part of our class dealing with the angle of disability about this poem.

The 18th century is a period where lots of travel was happening. Imperial Britain was expanding, ships were going, lots of chaps came from exotic places like India, China, spoke about women, food, exotic life, poverty, nasty, stench all that from that world. So, all kinds of imagination were

spreading. One of the things was about bodily deformity and looks. Anything that has a new look created or provoked poetic inspiration.

For example, the “Rime of the Ancient Mariner” begins with a different looking man somewhat east looking with a beard, telling the story long beard, so all the marriage party people coming close to him enraptured, hypnotized different look the beware, beware that kind of getting hypnotized by a different looking person. So, appearance and mutilations; the ill, the sick, the leper, the monster looking; Frankenstein's monster, mind you, it was written at the same time, the gargantuan, the grotesque.

They all invited attention and still, they attract our attention, okay. It is not as though it is lost. That is the first thing about. So that is the source of creativity and engagement, artistic engagement with the audience which we do not have to forget. The second thing Aswathi's session about hallucination and the drug influence well as equally important whether one uses for recreation or addiction or therapy, how does human mind work?

How does imagination work? How does fantasy work? What is the role of madness in creating poetry? Looking at it, there are two-three ways of looking at it okay. The first way is to create, see madness is a source of creative genius. Tyagaraja madly in love with Rama, Bhakta Mira as Mira's madness for Krishna, mystical poets, Aurobindo. Very long Indian tradition we have how madness is a source of bhakti, erotic love and other emotions.

It is quite a huge tradition actually. Similarly in the western world, drug-induced or otherwise mystical imagination to imagine a larger picture beyond the mundane always involved madness. And this poem and the video that we viewed audience, directors, the cinema world and the poetic world, the art world is directly and indirectly logged into this intrinsic connection between madness and creativity.

The other way is the second way is to look at this poem as total call it nonsense. Yes, actually this poem is nonsense, all fragments and so on. If I were to write, I will be killed. I am sure I would not write like this. So fragmented. What is there in the first stanza, some pleasure dome;

second, some rugs; and third some dulcimer music; fourth stanza. I will give him 1 out of 10 for the term paper, but that is the cool thing about it.

Celebrate nonsense in literature, there is a tradition called nonsense literature actually. It can invoke slapstick humour, it can invoke up unknown rationality, it can be a celebration of irrationality and so on. And third, reclaiming madness, meaning suppose I am called a madman, I say okay I am a madman, now I am writing you listen. A whole autobiographical tradition by mad people reclaiming madness and they write rich literature about it.

Professor – student conversation starts.

Sir, it is almost time. Yeah. just finishing up.

Professor – student conversation ends.

The last point is just about the influence or otherwise, schizophrenia and other things, reductionism, this poem is like this because of hallucination and so on. That is one way of seeing it. The broad way of seeing it is how our discourse of hallucination, schizophrenia, madness influenced readership and critical tradition. So, we have to understand all these things. So that is in a nutshell why this poem may be important for our disability studies course. That is all. Thank you.