

Trauma and Literature
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Lecture – 28
Heller’s Catch– 22 – Part 1

This is an NPTEL course entitled “Trauma and Literature” on Joseph Heller's novel “Catch-22”. We would talk about the background of the novel and how it connects to a course like this and in what sense is an important novel for a course such as “Trauma and Literature.”

“Catch-22” by Joseph Heller is a war novel with the setting of the Second World War. It is an army novel with the protagonist Yossarian and other people around the Second World War. It is about the demography.

The characters in novel are mostly army people, army officers, and sometimes certain medical wards and sometimes certain civilian spaces. But the war is very much a presence, direct presence in this novel by Heller. This novel in this course is present because it offers a very different kind of perspective to trauma. There is a very distinct presence of PTSD.

There is a very distinct presence of post-traumatic stress disorder. It is represented that makes novel very complex as well as interesting. There is a certain quality of comicality in the novel. It is a funny novel which makes it interesting as well as strange because the theme of the novel is what trauma, the theme of the novel is the terror, the horror of the war.

We have accounts of people dying, brutally killed, massacred, mutilated, violently attacked, sexually attacked, all those themes, all those actions are there in the novel. But the overarching mood in the novel is one of laughter, which brings us to the very interesting location of laughter in trauma studies.

When we talk about trauma studies, we talk about trauma and literature, the more prevailing, the more prevalent model is to look at despair, depression, psychological confusion,

disintegration. In other words, very negative characteristics, very negative attributes of the mind which correspond to the traumatic situation that is the commonly consumed notion of trauma.

When someone becomes traumatic or traumatized, then the prevailing sentiment becomes one of sadness or terror or shock, any of these negative attributes, but where and how do we locate something like laughter in trauma studies because a very quick and immediate response to this would be the laughter is the opposite of trauma, laughter is the opposite of sadness.

If trauma is equated with sadness and despair and loss, the laughter cannot be a part of trauma studies. But we have very interesting examples in literature as well as scientific study which shows the laughter could be a very interesting instrument to investigate in trauma studies because the kind of laughter we are talking about is sometimes a tragic comic laughter and it is also laughter of exhaustion to a certain extent.

It can be laughter of cynicism, a laughter as an irrational laughter of liquidation, something as shutdown, shutdown has come to an end, is exhausted so that laughter could emerge out of that. In other words, it is not a laughter of production. It could be a laughter of nihilism, a laughter of annihilation, a laughter of exhaustion, a laughter of disintegration.

It can just be the only motor and nervous response in a situation of trauma where one is too numbed to be shocked, too tired to be shocked and then laughter is the only motor mechanism available. In a certain sense, we can connect this to what Malabou talks about in “The Ontology of the Accident” as well as “The New Wounded” as the entire concept or experience of cognitive flatness that one is too flattened out.

One is too numbed to react with any kind of consistent negativity or any kind of consistent response in terms of sadness or shock or whatever because the degree of trauma is such that it has numbed one completely. It is that kind of a cognitive flattening of affect is something which we can interestingly connect to when looking at laughter because laughter can become a very interesting agency.

A very interesting activity to look at in trauma studies because it can be a motor response, it can be a subversive response, it can be a challenge to authority, it can be a challenge to the situation of trauma and also it can just be a very irrational nervous and motor response to a sad situation. It can also be a reflection or index of irrationality, sometimes insanity.

Laughter can also be as a manifestation it could be a manifestation of insanity or irrationality or any situation. In that sense, laughter can be a darker form of representation than less of sorrow, a darker form representation than despair because it is that kind of representation where the rationality of senses, the logical causal quality of the sense perceptions.

The responses arising out of those sense perceptions that gets interrupted, whereas the laughter can be seen as an interruption of the causal logic of sense perception. In that sense a book like "Catch-22" by Joseph Heller, which is predominantly a funny book. We need to take a look at the funniness of the comicality of the book as very complex cognitive condition.

We look at certain selected passages from the novel, but we will keep looking at, we will keep examining the quality, the performativity, and the embodiment of laughter in this novel. Now, connected to this is the quality of narration because at the end of the day it is a book of fiction, literary fiction. The functionality of the novel is something which we need to look very closely because this is a course on "Trauma and Literature", hence need to take a look at the literariness of representation.

The predominant mode of narration in this novel is nonlinear. There is no linearity in space and time. The spatial-temporal causal logic; the linear logic that gets constantly interrupted. We have different kinds of merging of different temporal frames, spatial-temporal frames, and this merging of spatial-temporal frames makes the quality of the novel slightly carnivalesque in quality and that is one word that I keep coming back to, carnivalesque.

The word comes from carnival; the ancient classical tradition where from one day the pope would dress up as a pauper and the pauper would dress up as a pop. In other words, entire

social logic will be inverted and that was seen as some kind of a release phenomenon. All released rage, released repression and all gets vented out in a carnival.

The 'carnavalesque' is a quality that comes out of that kind of an event.

It is a term used by Mikhail Bakhtin along with several other terms such as 'polyphony' that is another concept which we will use looking at Joseph Heller's "Catch-22". A polyphony as many voices poly, as many funny as voices sound, so polyphony; many sounds, many voices, different perspectives, different points of view. The same event can be narrated, can be represented from different points of view.

In a certain sense "Catch-22" is a very postmodern novel, a novel about the breakdown of logic, a novel about the interruption of linearity, and a novel about the playfulness of points of view, with different focal points that are operating simultaneously. It completely deconstructs the ontology of the event.

But even when it comes to an event, something which happens, something which transforms things, something which emerges out of an existing situation and sometimes transforms that definition of the event even that gets interrupted and constantly deconstructed in his novel sometimes by laughter, but mostly by interrupted in retro styles, nonlinear in retro styles.

The other important quality in the novel which we will tap into in some details is a production of paradoxes. The paradox is a situation where we put together two contrasting logical narratives and produce a quasi-logical structure out of it. We have logic A and logic B, which do not quite connect and then we put them together and then we have some different alternative logical system emerging out of it.

The prevalent sentiment, the prevalent mood that emerges out of such paradoxes is laughter. But then again, it is a non-innocent laughter. Almost every laughter is not innocent. But it is a laughter which comes at the cost of something, sometimes the cost of life, sometimes the cost of hope, and sometimes the cost of optimism. It is more often than not the laughter of nihilism.

The laughter of nothingness, the laughter not of hope or aspiration, though the novel ends with forward looking sentiment as about the Yossarian trying to go to Sweden, Sweden emerging as something of a Utopia for him that is the final image of the novel. But throughout the novel we have different kinds of laughter emerging and true paradoxes.

The production of paradoxes in novel is very important, especially given the traumatic or traumatized situation because quite clearly the inhabitants of the novel, the characters of novel they suffer from PTSD, post-traumatic stress disorder, although that is not classified at that point of time. This is the Second World War and PTSD as a medical term, as a medical jargon, as medical classification only came into being in definite sense after the Vietnam War.

It becomes the war which changes the entire nature of war trauma and how it is perceived in medical discourses. "Catch-22" is a funny novel about trauma, it is a novel with paradoxes. It keeps producing different kinds of paradoxes. It represents the traumatic situation or traumatic event through reputation which is sort of frightening in quality, that trauma keeps coming back.

But then what also complicates that further is a nonlinearity of such representation, it sort of constantly produces its own interruptions to a certain extent. The production of paradoxes, the production of interruption, and the production of comicality which is situated against authority all these make the novel quite carnivalesque in quality, also quite postmodern quality.

All the classic trait suppose modernism, nonlinear narration, multiple points of view, different focal points, the auto-deconstructive quality keeps deconstructing itself, sometimes meta fictionally. All these qualities in "Catch-22" are one of the reasons why it is a great comedy cited novel in postmodern studies. But it is also important for us to look at it and this course from "Trauma and Literature".

It looks at laughter and the whole idea of paradox, funny paradox as we have represented drama. This is not laughter of happiness, it is laughter of nihilism, is laughter of emptiness, is a laughter of nothingness. It is only available motor mechanism people can just laugh about

it. Paradox becomes the instrument to represent that state of being where we have different kinds of logical narrators coming together.

Logical narrators are contrasting which do not quite go ahead, do not quite connect and this disconnect and incoherence is exactly what is foregrounded in the novel, sometimes almost celebrated in a dark way. That dark comical quality is something which we need to put lot of attention to. On the surface, it has as a third person narration, so there is this omniscient third person.

But then there are all sorts of different points of view which come in and different characters are focalized to different points of views. There are separate storylines which come in together, sometimes out of sync, so the timeline of the novel develops along with a plot. The plot and the time they come together and they are sometimes out of sync. Different kinds of timelines are put together.

It is not necessarily always chronological in quality. This nonchronological quality of narration is something which we need to pay attention to. This is set in the Second World War specifically 1940 to 1944 and the protagonist in the novel is someone called John Yossarian. Yossarian is very commonly cited as one of the most famous anti-heroes in fiction, especially postmodern fiction.

Anti-hero is something which we will keep coming back to as it is sort of connected to the quality of laughter, is connected to the quality of paradox and carnivalesque and all the rest of it; the quality of the anti-hero. Certain questions arise like who is an anti-hero and why he is character of the anti-hero, the presence of the anti-hero an important quality in novel ideas.

An anti-hero is someone who deconstructs the quality of traditional heroism, someone who is not good looking, not chivalrous, not heroic, not glamorous but sometimes cynical, sometimes hollers, sometimes on the verge of villainy but not quite a villain, so that blurry borderlines between good and evil is quite. There in an anti-hero. He is not someone who is definitely evil, but he is not a glamorous hero either.

That kind of a suspension between good and bad, between evil and nobility is something which we find in an anti-hero. One of the common qualities of the anti-hero is exhaustion and a cynicism which emerges out of the exhaustion. So, exhausted person, someone who had once been a romantic, someone had once been idealistic, but through different fatal blows of time he or she have sort of come to a position of exhaustion, of emptiness of nothingness and there is a lot of cynicism which emerges out of that.

The quality of the anti-hero, especially the way it is represented and embodied by John Yossarian is important. Yossarian is a military soldier, is some someone who works in the US Armed Forces and that battalion this B-25, bombardier battalion is a very important presence in a novel because that is an old male space. We have different kinds of relationships emerging out of B-25 Battalion, the armed forces.

The Air Force of US Army operating in 1940 to 1944 and that is sort of based near the seas, near the Mediterranean Sea; and so the presence of the sea is quite symbolic. On one hand, there is a claustrophobia of the war where always men huddled together all the time, there is no possibility of freedom. On the other hand, there is this endless limitless sea surrounding them.

That spatial contrast is quite interesting and quite progressive and something which we need to pay attention to. The spatial complete difference, a stark difference in spatiality where the huddled claustrophobia of the squadron as against the endlessness in a free-flowing sea, so that becomes quite interesting. Now, what this means put together, so we have the tragedy of the war, the horror of the war, the brutality of the war, the casualty of the war.

We have this feeling of funniness which is not happy funniness but the funniness which comes out of tragedy, the laughter which emerges out of tragedy, morbid laughter, gallows humour, the kind of humour, the kind of job that is morbid in quality, it is about very close association with death and nihilism and emptiness. In that sense, it becomes a darker representation of horror and trauma than let us say melancholia.

In melancholia, there is a consistent set of emotions, it just becomes sad to sadder, the sorrow that is despair. There is a consistency in terms of the sentiment operator, but when it comes to the carnivalesque representation of humour of tragedy, then it is more complex cognitively speaking because there is a sadness, there is a despair, there is a sense of having lost someone who is very dear.

There is the quality of laughing added which is almost irrational in quality and which pushes the suffering a notch further because that is what brings out the hollowness and emptiness of the sufferer. At a macropolitical level what all these means is that this novel also becomes a critique of the satire so to speak about the war and the way the war is represented we know quite clearly there is nothing heroic about the war.

There is nothing glamorous about the war, but instead it just appears as an absurd spectacle of suffering which is completely meaningless, completely purposeless. Hence, the irrationality of representation becomes a very interesting mode to represent what is happening. The manner and the matter are quite interestingly dialoguing with each other. The matter is absurd. It is about the absurdity of the war.

The complete spectacle of meaninglessness, the spectacle of purposelessness that is a matter of the war. The manner of representation is also absurd. There is no chronology, there are different points of view, and there is laughter at a sad situation. The manner and matter they are connected to each other in a very complex way. Both in certain senses are reflective of the absurdity and irrationality of the war and that just becomes the interesting quality throughout the novel.

There is a very distinct postmodern quality of the novel, the different timelines coming in together, sometimes merging, and sometimes disconnecting that disconnect becomes important as well. There are this constant production of paradoxes which are satirical and quality, which are nihilistic in quality and also which serves to disturb and rattle any linear or seamless narrative of time or sentiment or emotion that there is no stable emotional economy in "Catch-22".

But instead, we have a very unstable mercurial and mutable economy of emotions that is something which we will keep looking at. This is just an overview of the carnivalesque quality; the tragic comic quality of the novel, the farcical quality of the novel. We will talk about farce and some details later because there is a sense of reputation about farce in this very famous statement of Marx.

First as tragedy, then as farce. Farce scheme is seen as some super flattening out of tragedy, the tragedy which is beginning to lose is tragic grandeur, but beginning to become banal in qualities, beginning to become repetitive in quality because of and it just keeps coming back. After a point of time, it just become numbed and begin to laugh at it. There is no grand sorrow which emerges out of that anymore.

It is a function of repetition, it is a function of several recycling of the same thing. It just happens as a ritual, it is a ritualistic quality, a repetitive quality about it which takes away the tragic grandeur, the tragic poetry out of it. It just becomes a routine of loss, a ritual of loss which just becomes almost comic in quality because of its repetitive quality, because of its repetitive nature so that that farce is a very important thing, which is connected to the quality of comicality, carnivalesque.

Carnavalesque in itself contains a farcical quality that is something which we will keep saying throughout the novel, especially the way the anti-hero protagonist operates; Yossarian in terms of how he is always sort of suspended between the good and the bad, between the comic and the tragic, between the meaningful and the meaningless, between the heroic and the shameful.

That constant suspension, the constant liminal presence, the constant blurring of borderlines between the oppositional attributes makes them a very unique and appropriate embodiment of the sentiment of the knowledge, so entanglement of different kinds of emotions which are quite asymmetrical in quality and that asymmetrical is also important. We cannot quantify, we cannot have a symmetry of emotions because it is just a repetitive cycle of loss and so it just becomes farcical in quality and the end.

This is the background, the structural background, the qualitative background of the novel. We will start looking at certain selected passages and also refer to some of the scholarships, some scholarly articles and literature of this ground's novel. It is a very famous novel which is very heavily cited as we studied in academy circles, especially in a postmodern discourse looking at literature.

This is also an important novel to situate in a course like this especially in terms of how it brings, what it brings in terms of perspective. The perspective on trauma, the perspective on loss is a comical, a pseudo-comical perspective, a tragic comic perspective, a farcical perspective. It is that farcical focalization is something which we have to pay a lot of attention to as a cognitive quality of representation as well as being reflective of the broader political scenario around that time.