

Trauma and Literature
Prof. Avishek Parui
Department of Humanities and Social Sciences
Indian Institute of Technology - Madras

Lecture – 36
Heller’s Catch–22 – Part 9

(Refer Slide Time: 00:16)

CHAPTER 40 - CATCH-22

There was, of course, a catch.

'Catch-22?' inquired Yossarian.

'Of course,' Colonel Korn answered pleasantly, after he had chased the mighty guard of massive M.P.s out with an insouciant flick of his hand and a slightly contemptuous nod - most relaxed, as always, when he could be most cynical. His rimless square eyeglasses glinted with sly amusement as he gazed at Yossarian. 'After all, we can't simply send you home for refusing to fly more missions and keep the rest of the men here, can we? That would hardly be fair to them.'

'You're goddamn right!' Colonel Cathcart blurted out, lumbering back and forth gracelessly like a winded bull, puffing and pouting angrily. 'I'd like to tie him up hand and foot and throw him aboard a plane on every mission. That's what I'd like to do.'

Colonel Korn motioned Colonel Cathcart to be silent and smiled at Yossarian. 'You know, you really have been making things terribly difficult for Colonel Cathcart,' he observed with flip good humor, as though the fact did not displease him at all. 'The men are unhappy and morale is beginning to deteriorate. And it's all your fault.'

'It's your fault,' Yossarian argued, 'for raising the number of missions.'

'No, it's your fault for refusing to fly them,' Colonel Korn retorted. 'The men were perfectly content to fly as many missions as we asked as long as they thought they had no alternative. Now you've given them hope, and they're unhappy.'

This is an NPTEL course entitled “Trauma and Literature” on Joseph Heller’s novel “Catch-22”. Chapter 40 is called “Catch-22” and it talks about the phrase in very flippant details, but also quite politically as well. Previously, we saw how Catch-22 becomes free floating signifier for all kinds of law and lawlessness.

The difference between legality and illegality blurs away in this novel as do many borderlines like life and death, friendship and enmity, hostility and intimacy. All these notional binaries blur away quite dramatically and sometimes in very tragic comic ways. There is a pseudo-comical quality about this blurring of borderlines. The first time we combined the phrase Catch-22 is about where Yossarian was assigned the job of censoring letters.

Letters that people send or soldier sent back to their homes, and striking off confidential details that was supposedly the job. But then we also saw how he just made a mockery of it by writing little flippant details, taking off adjectives, taking off words, taking off letters, taking off articles, etc. and then inserting new names of “Catch-22”. Even at that

point of time at the beginning of the very first chapter, we saw how that became an exercise in purposelessness.

That became an exercise in complete darkness and no one has any meaning about it. It becomes an activity in absurdity. But that activity in absurdity also takes up more sinister associations, more negative disruptive nihilistic associations as was the case in the previous session when we read the chapter called "The Eternal City". It was talking about Rome, the heavily bombed and destroyed Rome and this place for fallen woman.

Yossarian goes there and the old woman talks about how a group of strange men had come and chased them away without arresting them and they had not shown them any legal paper because the law protected them from expressing the legality. "Catch-22" becomes this self-circulating unit of self-interest and meaninglessness.

The whole circuit through which meaninglessness can be produced and preserved and perpetrated that becomes an exercise and metaphor, real activity as well. At a very novelistic level, it is to blur the borders between matter and metaphor because "Catch-22" is matter. It is some law written somewhere, but at the same time it is a law which protects itself from being expressed and exposed and being displayed. But it is also metaphor for uncertainty.

It also is a metaphor for unknowability. We do not get to know what Catch-22 is and that is precisely the point and that makes it quite dark and sinister in quality as well. At some point in the beginning, it has transcended from being a work of fiction to be a cultural metaphor.

A metaphor of uncertainty, a metaphor for double bind, a metaphor for the flip side and the front side merging together. It has become a metaphorical presence in the cultural imaginary "Catch-22". It is one of the most impactful novels ever written especially in 20th century postmodernist fiction. We come to this point where Colonel Korn and Colonel Cathcart agitated with Yossarian and again we see how the production of paradoxes work over here.

This is the section where Colonel Korn motioned Colonel Cathcart to be silent and smiled at Yossarian. “You know, you really have been making things terribly difficult for Colonel Cathcart, he observed with flip good humour as though the fact did not displease him at all. The quality of the difference between the humour and agitation seems to have disappeared. The men are unhappy and morale is beginning to deteriorate. It is all your fault.”

That is the reason the morale is deteriorating; the men are unhappy and that is ascribed to Yossarian. “It is your fault Yossarian argued for raising the number of missions.” Yossarian argues that the military was just sending them for more missions and that is making them exhausted and hence they have been unhappy because of that.

(Refer Slide Time: 05:29)

Colonel Korn motioned Colonel Cathcart to be silent and smiled at Yossarian. 'You know, you really have been making things terribly difficult for Colonel Cathcart,' he observed with flip good humor, as though the fact did not displease him at all. 'The men are unhappy and morale is beginning to deteriorate. And it's all your fault.'

'It's your fault,' Yossarian argued, 'for raising the number of missions.'

'No, it's your fault for refusing to fly them,' Colonel Korn retorted. 'The men were perfectly content to fly as many missions as we asked as long as they thought they had no alternative. Now you've given them hope, and they're unhappy. So the blame is all yours.'

'Doesn't he know there's a war going on?' Colonel Cathcart, still stamping back and forth, demanded morosely without looking at Yossarian.

'I'm quite sure he does,' Colonel Korn answered. 'That's probably why he refuses to fly them.'

'Doesn't it make any difference to him?'

'Will the knowledge that there's a war going on weaken your decision to refuse to participate in it?' Colonel Korn inquired with sarcastic seriousness, mocking Colonel Cathcart.

'No, sir,' Yossarian replied, almost returning Colonel Korn's smile.

The paradoxical point where Korn retorts. “No, it is your fault for refusing to fly them, Colonel Korn retorted. The men were perfectly content to fly as many missions as we asked as long as they thought they had no alternative. Now you have given them hope, and they are unhappy. So, the blame is all yours.” We see a situation where hopefulness produces melancholia.

Hopefulness produces discontent at a great notional experiential level that is what has been said. Before, they had no hope, so they were just content in terms of carrying out orders which were given to them, they were just executing orders, following orders. Yossarian came in and seems to have given them some sense of agency, some sense of

decisive quality that can decide and they have been hopeful because they are aware of the rights, etc., and now they are unhappy.

This becomes quite political. “So blame is all yours. Does not he know that there is a war going on Colonel Cathcart, still stamping back and forth, demanded morosely, without looking at Yossarian. I am quite sure he does, Colonel Korn answered. That is probably why he refuses to fly them.” It is because there is a war going on they should not fly and that again undercuts the notional understanding of flying and bombing in war.

Yossarian’s defense here would be that because the war going on we want to save as much as many human lives as possible in terms of not letting them fly. It is precisely because there is a war going on, we should not let them fly. The undercuts, see the heroic sentiment of the war and as we have discussed earlier, this is a very anti-heroic novel.

It completely deconstructs the notional idea of military heroism or military masculine heroism. It becomes almost a parody of that in a certain sense. There is definitely a travesty of the entire heroic march of the military masculinity and the glory of war, the glory of triumph, the glory of victory and all of that and there is no victory is quite evident in the novel.

There is almost like a black hole that everyone gets sucked into and everyone dies at different levels during the war and the laughter that is produced in the novel is the empty laughter which is post death. It is an empty laughter which is post exhaustion and that makes the laughter quite hollow in quality, quite cynical in quality but also quite subversive in quality. This is the politics of laughter in this novel.

It does not it make any difference to him. “Will the knowledge that there is a war going weaken your decision to refuse to participate in it? Colonel Korn inquired with sarcastic seriousness.” There is a juxtaposition sarcastic seriousness, mocking Colonel Cathcart. “No sir, Yossarian replied, almost returning Colonel Korn’s smile.”

(Refer Slide Time: 08:42)

'I was afraid of that,' Colonel Korn remarked with an elaborate sigh, locking his fingers together comfortably on top of his smooth, bald, broad, shiny brown head. 'You know, in all fairness, we really haven't treated you too badly, have we? We've fed you and paid you on time. We gave you a medal and even made you a captain.'

'I never should have made him a captain,' Colonel Cathcart exclaimed bitterly. 'I should have given him a court-martial after he loused up that Ferrara mission and went around twice.'

'I told you not to promote him,' said Colonel Korn, 'but you wouldn't listen to me.'

'No you didn't. You told me to promote him, didn't you?'

'I told you *not* to promote him. But you just wouldn't listen.'

'I should have listened.'

'You never listen to me,' Colonel Korn persisted with relish. 'That's the reason we're in this spot.'

'All right, gee whiz. Stop rubbing it in, will you?'

Colonel Cathcart burrowed his fists down deep inside his pockets and turned away in a slouch. 'Instead of picking on me, why don't you figure out what we're going to do about him?'

“I was afraid of that, Colonel Korn remarked with an elaborate sigh, locking his fingers together comfortably on top of a smooth, bald, broad, shiny brown head.” The series of adjectives which are used to identify this one organ, the head and some of the adjectives were just used for that purpose. “You know, in all fairness, we really have not treated you too badly, have we? We have fed you and paid you on time. We gave you a medal and even made you a captain. I never should have made him a captain, Colonel Cathcart exclaimed bitterly.

I should have given him a court-martial after he loused up the Ferrara mission and went around twice. I told you not to promote him said Colonel Korn, but you would not listen to me. No, you did not. You told me to promote him, did not you? I told you not to promote him. But you just would not listen. I should have listened. You never listen to me, Colonel Korn persisted with relish. That is the reason we are in the spot. All right, gee whiz. Stop rubbing it in, will you?”

This conversation over here, instead of one line exchange that we can see happening. It has some kind of a Samuel Beckett-like quality when there are two people talking to each other in a setting which does not really have any meaning. It is a purposeless setting, is a massive spectacle of purposelessness. They try to dig up some rationale, try to resurrect some rationale by looking at small, fragile narratives where who told, what to whom and the person should listen to, so they are trying to retroactively resurrect some kind of rationale for that which is a futile mission, this is a Sisyphean quality leading to “The Myth Of Sisyphus”.

Where someone is doomed to push a stone up the hill and then when they reach the top of the hill, the stone rolls down and the person will have to push it up again all the time and that just goes on at infinitum so that is the Sisyphean purposeless quality, it is very much there in this novel.

(Refer Slide Time: 10:50)

'I should have listened.'

'You never listen to me,' Colonel Korn persisted with relish.
'That's the reason we're in this spot.'

'All right, gee whiz. Stop rubbing it in, will you?'

Colonel Cathcart burrowed his fists down deep inside his pockets and turned away in a slouch. 'Instead of picking on me, why don't you figure out what we're going to do about him?'

'We're going to send him home, I'm afraid,' Colonel Korn was chuckling triumphantly when he turned away from Colonel Cathcart to face Yossarian. 'Yossarian, the war is over for you. We're going to send you home. You really don't deserve it, you know, which is one of the reasons I don't mind doing it. Since there's nothing else we can risk doing to you at this time, we've decided to return you to the States. We've worked out this little deal to -'

'What kind of deal?' Yossarian demanded with defiant mistrust.

Colonel Korn tossed his head back and laughed. 'Oh, a thoroughly despicable deal, make no mistake about that. It's absolutely revolting. But you'll accept it quickly enough.'

'Don't be too sure.'

“We are told that they are thinking of sending him home. We are going to send him home, I am afraid. Colonel Korn was chuckling triumphantly when he turned away from Colonel Cathcart to face Yossarian. Yossarian, the war is over for you. We are going to send you home. You really do not deserve it, you know, which is one of the reasons I don't mind doing it. Since there is nothing else we can risk doing to you at this time, we have decided to return you to the States. We have worked out this little deal to. What kind of deal? Yossarian demanded with the defiant mistrust. Colonel Korn tossed his head back and laughed. Oh, a thoroughly despicable deal, make no mistake about that. It is absolutely revolting. But you will accept it quickly enough. Do not be too sure.”

The deal has been described in very cynical details and then we also told that Yossarian will accept it and then we get to know what the sentiment is without knowing the deal. So, what the deal would produce as an effect that becomes more important than the content of the deal.

(Refer Slide Time: 11:39)

'I haven't the slightest doubt you will, even though it stinks to high heaven. Oh, by the way. You haven't told any of the men you've refused to fly more missions, have you?'

'No, sir,' Yossarian answered promptly.

Colonel Korn nodded approvingly. 'That's good. I like the way you lie. You'll go far in this world if you ever acquire some decent ambition.'

'Doesn't he know there's a war going on?' Colonel Cathcart yelled out suddenly, and blew with vigorous disbelief into the open end of his cigarette holder.

'I'm quite sure he does,' Colonel Korn replied acidly, 'since you brought that identical point to his attention just a moment ago.' Colonel Korn frowned wearily for Yossarian's benefit, his eyes twinkling swarthily with sly and daring scorn. Gripping the edge of Colonel Cathcart's desk with both hands, he lifted his flaccid haunches far back on the corner to sit with both short legs dangling freely. His shoes kicked lightly against the yellow oak wood, his sludge-brown socks, garterless, collapsed in sagging circles below ankles that were surprisingly small and white. 'You know, Yossarian,' he mused affably in a manner of casual reflection that seemed both derisive and sincere, 'I really do admire you a bit. You're an intelligent person of great moral character who has taken a very courageous stand. I'm an intelligent person with no moral character at all, so I'm in an ideal position to appreciate it.'

'These are very critical times,' Colonel Cathcart asserted petulantly from a far corner of the office, paying no attention to Colonel Korn.

“I have not the slightest doubt you will, even though it stinks to high heaven. Oh, by the way, you have not told any of the men you have refused to fly more missions, have you? No sir, Yossarian answer promptly. Colonel Korn nodded approvingly. That is good. I like the way you lie. You will go far in this world if you ever acquire some decent ambition.”

Lying as we have seen since the beginning of the novel, lying becomes a performance in the novel, not just at a verbal rhetorical level, but also at a very physical corporeal level. Someone is pretending to be sick, someone is pretending to be diseased. Lying becomes the performative; almost spectacular collective activity.

“You will go far in this world if you ever acquire some decent ambition. Doesn't he know there is a war going on? Colonel Cathcart yelled out suddenly, and blew with vigorous disbelief into the open end of his cigarette holder.” He just goes on about the war.”

(Refer Slide Time: 12:51)

lightly against the yellow oak wood, his sludge-brown socks, garterless, collapsed in sagging circles below ankles that were surprisingly small and white. 'You know, Yossarian,' he mused affably in a manner of casual reflection that seemed both derisive and sincere, 'I really do admire you a bit. You're an intelligent person of great moral character who has taken a very courageous stand. I'm an intelligent person with no moral character at all, so I'm in an ideal position to appreciate it.'

'These are very critical times,' Colonel Cathcart asserted petulantly from a far corner of the office, paying no attention to Colonel Korn.

'Very critical times indeed,' Colonel Korn agreed with a placid nod. 'We've just had a change of command above, and we can't afford a situation that might put us in a bad light with either General Scheisskopf or General Peckem. Isn't that what you mean, Colonel?'

'Hasn't he got any patriotism?'

'Won't you fight for your country?' Colonel Korn demanded, emulating Colonel Cathcart's harsh, self-righteous tone. 'Won't you give up your life for Colonel Cathcart and me?'

Yossarian tensed with alert astonishment when he heard Colonel Korn's concluding words. 'What's that?' he exclaimed. 'What have you and Colonel Cathcart got to do with my country? You're not the same.'

'How can you separate us?' Colonel Korn inquired with ironical tranquillity.

We come to this interesting bit about patriotism where Yossarian's patriotism has been questioned. "Has not he got any patriotism? Would not you fight for your country? Colonel Korn demanded, emulating Colonel Cathcart's harsh, self-righteous tone. Would not you give up your life for Colonel Cathcart and me?" We can see even the narrative of patriotism is being described over here in the Second World War American setting.

A symptom of flippant and dwindled activity. First of all, they say would he not fight for his country which is the United States of America. America is the country over here and then in the very next sentence they say would he not give up his life for the two Colonels. It dwindles through some type of private loyalty. From a collective loyalty to the country of the United States of America, it just comes down to these two colonels.

In a way, deconstructs the myth of patriotism around the time of war because this is Second World War and the kind of patriotism whipped up for that every American soldier must die for America, etc. This also reveals is the fact that at a certain level with these two colonels it is all about men dying for them is a personal thing, is a personal ownership. It undercard the myth of the fantasy of patriotic belief, patriotic commitment.

Yossarian tensed with alert astonishment when he heard Colonel Korn's concluding words. "What is that? He exclaimed. What have you and Colonel Cathcart got to do with my country? You are not the same. So how do you blend yourself with the country? You like just two military officers the country, the country is a different entity, a different construct. How can you separate us? Colonel Korn inquired with ironical tranquillity."

(Refer Slide Time: 14:51)

'That's right,' Colonel Cathcart cried emphatically.
'You're either for us or against us. There's no two ways about it.'

'I'm afraid he's got you,' added Colonel Korn.
'You're either for us or against your country. It's as simple as that.'

'Oh, no, Colonel. I don't buy that.'

Colonel Korn was unruffled. 'Neither do I, frankly, but everyone else will.
So there you are.'

'You're a disgrace to your uniform!' Colonel Cathcart declared with blustering wrath,
whirling to confront Yossarian for the first time. 'I'd like to know how you ever got
to be a captain, anyway.'

'You promoted him,' Colonel Korn reminded sweetly, stifling a snicker.
'Don't you remember?'

'Well, I never should have done it.'

'I told you not to do it,' Colonel Korn said. 'But you just wouldn't listen to me.'

'Gee whiz, will you stop rubbing it in?' Colonel Cathcart cried. He furrowed his brow
and glowered at Colonel Korn through eyes narrow with suspicion, his fists clenched
on his hips. 'Say, whose side are you on, anyway?'

“That is right, Colonel Cathcart cried emphatically. You are either for us or against us. There is no two ways about it.” This is very dualist understanding. “Either you are fighting a battle for us or you are going against us. I am afraid he has got answered Colonel Korn. You are either for us or against the country. It is as simple as that. Oh, no, Colonel, I do not buy that. Colonel Korn was unruffled. Neither do I frankly, but everyone else will. So there you are.”

This very clearly mocks the grandeur of patriotism, the grandeur of military masculinity and in certain sense as well this novel becomes a mockery of some of the tenets of heroism, war, especially American heroism, American heroic masculinity around the time of the war. The cynicism shows quite clearly. The soldiers, the army officers say we do not buy that either, but everyone else does and that is how it operates. Everyone just consumes this belief system. We have to subscribe to because everyone subscribes to it, but we do not subscribe to it because we know better.

“So, there you are. You are disgraced to your uniform, Colonel Cathcart declared with blustering wrath, whirling to confront Yossarian for the first time. I would like to know how you ever got to be a captain, anyway. You promoted him, Colonel Korn reminded sweetly, stifling a snicker. Do not you remember? Well, I never should have done it. I told you not to do, Colonel Korn said. But you just would not listen to me.”

We could see there is a recursive quality to the dialogues over here. It just repeats in cycles that is only in our movement and the cyclicity of dialogue. The cyclicity statements is reflective of the purposelessness and directionlessness of the entire narrative. There is no future. There is no direction to go ahead.

There is no point to go ahead. All these people can do is talk in cycles, talk in circles and roundabout ways so just keep going back to the same points because there is no linearity. There is no sequentially and that is something which is reflective of the general observed condition of this novel.

(Refer Slide Time: 17:24)

'Chuck,' Colonel Korn corrected reprovingly.

'I'm sorry, Blackie. Chuck. I can't get used to it.'

'That's all right, pal.'

'Sure, pal.'

'Thanks, pal.'

'Don't mention it, pal.'

'So long, pal.'

Yossarian waved goodbye fondly to his new pals and sauntered out onto the balcony corridor, almost bursting into song the instant he was alone. He was home free: he had pulled it off; his act of rebellion had succeeded; he was safe, and he had nothing to be ashamed of to anyone. He started toward the staircase with a jaunty and exhilarated air. A private in green fatigues saluted him. Yossarian returned the salute happily, staring at the private with curiosity. He looked strangely familiar. When Yossarian returned the salute, the private in green fatigues turned suddenly into Nately's whore and lunged at him murderously with a bone-handled kitchen knife that caught him in the side below his upraised arm. Yossarian sank to the floor with a shriek, shutting his eyes in overwhelming terror as he saw the girl lift the knife to strike at him again. He was already unconscious when Colonel Korn and Colonel Cathcart dashed out of the office and saved his life by frightening her away.

At the end of chapter-40, Yossarian is on his way out. “Yossarian waved goodbye fondly to his new pals and sauntered out into the balcony corridor, almost bursting into song the instant he was alone. He was home free: he had pulled it off. Again, the performative quality is interesting. He pulled it off; his act of rebellion had succeeded; he was safe, and he had nothing to be ashamed of to anyone. He started towards the staircase with a jaunty and exhilarated air. A private in green fatigues saluted him. Yossarian returned the salute happily, staring at the private with curiosity. He looked strangely familiar. When Yossarian returned the salute, the private in green fatigues turned suddenly into Nately's whore and lunged at him murderously with a bone-handled kitchen knife that caught him in the side below his upraised arm.”

“Yossarian sank to the floor with the shriek, shutting his eyes in overwhelming terror as he saw the girl lift the knife to strike at him again. He was already unconscious when

Colonel Korn and Colonel Cathcart dashed out of the office and saved his life by frightening her away.” We can see; what we get a glimpse off in the end is how the real danger in this way is not something which happens in the battlefield, it can happen anywhere.

Every field is battlefield and every site can be site of violence and the person attacking him away just is a disguised person and then just appears in a uniform and then attacks him. It turns out to be a woman. It turns out to be someone who is stabbing him and then two colonels come and rescue him away. I mean, he is almost unconscious, but she is taken away.

Now, this being the conclusion and there is if we read the entire novel, there is similar open-ended conclusion as well. It is to stress how the novel is to look at the way in which violence and freedom they sort of merge into each other. we have this moment of freedom where he is about to be exhilarated, about to be ecstatic about the fact that he is free to go, etc., and then suddenly he is attacked.

The abruptness of violence, the abruptness of the sudden attack that is a norm, the normal condition in a way which is quite real as well. But there seems to be some kind of a flippant distributive quality about violence. It is not just about the usual violence of a soldier dying in the battlefield, a soldier dying while on duty to save his battalion or his country.’

It does not work in that grandeur narrative, but operates away is a quick stab of the knife in the military space and almost a civilian space. It has nothing to do with the battle, it has nothing to do with the war. But the psychological impact of the situations that it shows, it seems to reflect to us as readers that the war is in the head, the war is in intimate space, and the war is everywhere.

It is not just some battlefield out there where people are dying. It is just everywhere in the novel, it is a war with knowledge, it is a war with trust, it is a war with intimacy, it is a war with love. Every sentiment is being warred with; and borders between violence and safety, the borders between liberty and attack just go on disappear. It seems to be the cynical core of this novel if we can call that a call in the first place.

It is because there is a godless quality and we have talked about that in several sessions the godlessness of this novel and how the godlessness is reflective of the centrelessness. If there is any center at all, it is a very cynical hollow center and we did the several metaphysical, existential discussions about god and godlessness, etc. But the important point that novel tries to promote and describe is that in a situation of war, there is no certainty, there is no friendship, and there is no enmity.

It is just one entangled act of violence which can operate and emerge anyway. There is this emergent quality of violence and also it is connected quality of violence, everything is connected in a very violent way. All the vectors are violent vectors. It is a very dark quality that the novel is trying to describe and the comicality emerges from that darkness and that is the reason why the laughter in the novel is a very hollow laughter, is a very almost a sinister cynical laughter.

Sinister in a cynical way and that seems to be the sentiment in the novel which describes the godlessness in very dark terms. We conclude "Catch-22" and as mentioned, this novel has become just went on to become a cultural statement, a cultural metaphor of uncertainty and double possibilities which can contradict each other.

The success of the novel as a cultural document, as a cultural text is astounding that is absolutely marvellous and astounding how this novel transcended from work of fiction into a cultural metaphor. The metaphor emerged from a real situation which is described over here and that again goes on to show literature's ability to transcend metaphoricity and just become something which is not just fictional.

But also quite real in a sense how it enters the cultural exchange of not just that time but also in subsequent times. Trauma in the novel as we have mentioned is described in very complex terms, trauma is not really always tragic. This is comical quality about trauma as well and the tragic comicality of trauma makes it very complicated and complex cognitive category, which is described and focalized and embodied by so many characters in so many situations in the novel.

“Catch-22” is one of the most important novels written about the war around the time and it is just gone on to become a cultural document as well. It is strongly advised to read the whole novel for the purpose of this course and find out how it really contributes to the work of fiction to our understanding of war and war trauma and violence that emerges out of it.