

Literary and Cultural Disability Studies: An Exploration
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Lecture – 14

Studying the Notion of Trauma via Cynthia Ozick's Short Story The Shawl

Hello, good afternoon everyone. Today we will do a world famous short story it is called The Shawl by Cynthia Ozick. It is one of the finest piece of writing ever, but at the same time it is not a pleasant kind, it is about profound trauma and memory and all that stuff. Well, Cynthia Ozick she wrote novels, stories, poems. Her particular great contribution is about holocaust. Holocaust is I mean of course you all know but let me just restate it.

It is a mass genocide inaugurated by Hitler against European Jews at least 6 million people Jews were killed and maybe one more million children disabled especially mentally disabled, homosexuals, women they were all burnt alive. So we the humanity is capable of such diabolic acts and that is what we realized; holos means whole, Kaustos is burning, whole burning which is ancient Greek ritual, sacrificial ritual was given that name for this diabolic act. So, there were several remembrances of it. This particular short story it is called The Shawl by Cynthia Ozick. The Shawl, it recounts the story of a young mother Rosa, her niece Stella and Magda her tiny little infant. So, there is no much story but it is about the recollection of the diabolic events holocaust. In this case Magda's death by Auschwitz worker, he takes Magda and puts her into electric fire.

So Ozick, Cynthia I would call her from now on, she says about writing. Well, she says that writing is hallucinatory madness, you will do it no matter what, you cannot not do it she says. She wrote this famous short story The Shawl, she published in 1980 in the New Yorker. You will be able to access the story from the New Yorker 1980 edition and the link will be given.

Famously, I mean it is not of a coincidence in the year 1990 American psychiatry association which publishes the diagnostic and statistical manual of mental illnesses came up with what you call PTSD, post-traumatic stress disorder, it is heartening to know that The Shawl was written at that time and PTSD announcement was also a main entry in the DSM-3 also came at that time.

Well, I am not saying *The Shawl* the story can be read in a medically reductionist way, this is an example of PTSD and so on but both are watershed moments in culturally collectively talking about trauma, acknowledging it and trauma's enduring presence in humanity. Well trauma means wound in Greek, but in contemporary situation it is more of a psychological influence.

Cathy Caruth's definition of trauma is very particular for a story like this. In trauma what happens according to Caruth there is a response sometimes delayed to an overwhelming event or events which takes the form of repeated intrusive hallucinations, dreams, thoughts or behaviors stemming from the events along with numbing that may have begun during or after the experience and possibly also increased arousal and avoidance of stimuli recalling the event.

Well, let us tease it a little bit. Trauma can cause the story taken and the theme taken about the holocaust is an extreme event is an event unsurpassed in human history okay. But trauma can happen everywhere in the family, in a war situation, natural calamity, in torture, prisons and so on. The psychological injury can happen, but it is not as though people experience pain when experiencing event.

When people experience pain, they can become numb; too much of pain can cause numbness. At the same time, they can relive it, how? By way of nightmares, dreams, hallucinations, recurrent recalling, enacting, performing and so on. And this can as an individual, as a group, as a community, as a large group of village and so on. Famous Bhopal gas event, the Bhopal gas tragedy as they say methyl isocyanate gas was a freak accident. A few thousand people were killed and even now the generations who came after the event those who survived the tragedy and their generations do remember, do recall, do hallucinate the tragic event okay. So, it can happen anywhere, anytime and it cannot be, it need not be just out there somewhere in some other part of humanity okay. So the story in some sense *The Shawl* recapitulates that kind of trauma.

Well, is that all we have to say about trauma? No, not really. What happens during trauma recollection? We know that Cynthia Ozick has done a great job. Actually, *The Shawl* is one of the stories published, the series published with the same name. It is

about a mom, I have told this already but let me repeat Rosa and her infant daughter. Infant daughter we do not get to see her much. She is hidden in the shawl which mom wears on her bosom and Stella the niece they all keep going but in the concentrationary universe where they are in the Auschwitz arena what happens is it is also very cold outside, so Stella takes away the Shawl from Magda so leaving Magda exposed. So, unfortunately Magda comes out of the darkness to the bright side and it is noticed by Auschwitz worker one of them, the soldiers. And he takes her and puts her, casts her away into the electric oven where she is fried to death.

And Rosa has choice to run after Magda in which case she will be killed, but she chooses to self-preservation over an instinct to serve, to protect to run after her daughter which will be futile again. So she retreats. I mean only to suppress her loud moaning; she puts shawl in her mouth so that she can hide the weeping. So, this is the first story.

The second story is about Rosa's own story. She survives Auschwitz and then the holocaust and she goes to America where she lives with traumatic memory of Magda. In fact, she continues to believe that Magda is alive, here Magda becomes a phantom, I think here I am obliged to recall the phantom limb phenomenon, neuroscientists including Vilayanur Ramachandran have extensively talked about the phantom limb phenomenon.

Basically, suppose I lose this arm by an accident, it is entirely possible that my brain rewires the presence, still continues to believe that my left arm exists and I might end up saying oh my left arm is paining, can you help me? But the fact is I lost my arm and it does not exist anymore. So, the belief in the left arm's presence that I may have is the phenomenon called phantom limb.

So, people who undergo extreme trauma of a kind can also recall the event and create a phantom of their own making which in a sense protect them from disintegration. So, there are many, many ways to trauma survivors do that. One of the possibilities that they get numb, they do not know how to react or they can be very profuse in recalling a trauma or they might be hallucinating or getting up from seeing nightmares and so on. This can happen from those who survive domestic violence and those who survived extreme mass genocide like holocaust can do that.

Here let us see what the literature on trauma recall does it. Starting from Freud, Freud worked on moaning and melancholia. He worked on people who recall trauma one of the ways he believed that trauma recollection happens is association. People can associate

one memory to another and then they recall. In a trauma event, dissociation happens. You do not know how to recall anything or the associations that you want to make between images they die, the language refuse to cooperate. After Freud there has been great work on trauma recall in which case the people have talked about not only the failure of language but the confusion about time and memory.

You know in some sense confused between past, present and future. You can jumble events or recreate events that never existed in the first place. The nature of the trauma is so much that you end up inventing new things and that is how trauma recall happens. So first critics talk about the failure of language, second the failure of memory, third the problem of memorialization.

Look at an event of that kind genocide or examine some family surviving the crime of untouchability or the crimes involved domestic violence. A family or a person can assume for themselves or for herself the responsibility of memorialization. Look if I die or if I let go of the memory how do I preserve this memory, if I do not preserve this memory then the part of who I am or who we are, the crimes of the past will go unaccounted or unresponded to.

Maybe it is part of my cultural memory; good, bad and the ugly and if I collapse or if I let go off the memory then it is entirely possible that I fail in my duty. So, this is a very important feature about memorialization when it comes to trauma. So naturally many responded to holocaust differently.

Some said like Adorno it is entirely obscene to write fiction or poetry about holocaust. Because it is such a horrendous event that took 6 to 8 million people's lives in a horrible way and you do not have to leech on such an event to make a novel or poem. It is a very obscene act. But that is only one response.

The other response says fictionalizing is part of memory making and fictionalizing along with memory recall is also a pedagogical event in itself. How do you educate the current generation if you do not recall? How do you educate current audience if you do not fictionalize it, transpose it, make it palatable and make it relatable? It is not as though trauma is over with holocaust. Several traumas keep happening for example refugee crisis, cross-border migration, displacement due to environmental destruction, capitalism has its own way of reducing people to the cog in the wheel.

And those things and the new versions of, new avatars of patriarchy can cause its own trauma and disability can be caused by human negligence, human excesses, structural violence and all that. So cognitive physical disabilities can be made manufactured and proliferated which also come with trauma and trauma recall and its reliving in the times to come.

So, we have to have a nuanced account of trauma so that we understand how things work. Alright, now before talking about Ozick I want to talk about the connection between trauma and literature. Trauma autobiography need not be the only way to recall, to work on. Trauma work may not happen only through autobiography. Trauma work operates through different genres such as poetry, autobiography, fiction and letters and even gossip and graffiti.

How because trauma's language, trauma's narrative form does not say well you have to only recall this way, there are many ways to recall it. For example holocaust, recalling it in terms of autobiography becomes a great challenge because in autobiography what happens is there is a protagonist and he or she recalls some things and after recall it looks as though some other portion of life is left and there is always a chance that something else is left for things to survive in autobiography. But here all things lead to death, so that is why trauma recall in autobiography is the most difficult thing. So that is why you have multiple forms coming and they together make the trauma work possible. So, Cynthia Ozick does these two three short stories and that is our concern and how am I going to do it? I am going to place it in terms of disability studies, this time I am going to use concepts such as debility and attachments to understand this great short story. Thank you.