

Literary and Cultural Disability Studies: An Exploration
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Lecture – 20
Tradition and Individual Madness: A Few Remarks
(Part of the Madness and Literature:
Virginia Woolf's Short Fiction The Mark on the Wall)

Hello, good afternoon all of you. Today, we are going to focus on madness and literature, that is the broad theme. To work on that I choose Virginia Woolf's famous 'The Mark on the Wall', a short story written by her. Well, in the first half an hour we are going to focus just on madness. Well, at the outset it is easy to fall into a kind of a circuit where one defines madness as a medical condition or as 'somebody is cranky, fit for the loony bin, nutty'.. that kind of description. In Tamil they say 'nut loose', 'somebody has lost their integrity' and so on. Well, these are all stereotypes and it is more easy to draw clinical support and then draw huge narratives and stories and anecdotes around a perceived loony person. So that is not what we are going to do. We are going to see madness as a creative act.

For example, one of the things madness has been invoked historically is the idea that one falls away. One rebels against the stranglehold of tradition. So in a way, I call this talk 'Tradition and Individual Madness: a few remarks'. A literary kind like me who would immediately recognize that I am sort of twisting the famous essay by TS Eliot, 'Tradition and Individual Talents'. Well, why do I mess up with Eliot's essay? For the following reasons:

Madness can come as a fight and rebellion against tradition. How? Let me walk you through Eliot's point about tradition and individual talents. Well, he wrote this essay in the early twentieth century (in the second decade). Let us make few points clear about tradition and individual artist's craftsmanship. According to Eliot, tradition is not something you can escape. Even if you want to write and speak and rant about and escape from tradition, you can do that only within the frameworks offered by tradition.

And what does he mean by tradition? Well, it could be a convention of writing such as tragedy, comedy, essay, prose, lyrical ballads, lyrical poetry and so on and which has been epic, which has been passed over to you over a period of time by great authors of the past. And one can only formulate and sort of juggle with it; one cannot escape from it. He calls it a kind of archaeology.

Tradition is also some kind of a historical sense. It is the worldview that one lives in and fights. If at all there is a rebellion one wades through it in doing the rebellion. Well, in that sense tradition cannot be innocent. For example, if you have to write into tragedy tradition, then you have to follow the cultural grammar set into tragedy - that a hero is made up of normative high values. The hero will undergo some kind of compulsion inside which will make him commit a flaw and then he will have to fall with grace and there is an invoking of pity and fear in the audience. So, this is a western notion of tragedy. Take for example, an essay. An essay should have an introduction, a middle where you write arguments and then you end with a conclusion. A song should have an introduction, pallavi, anupallavi, and then conclusion. Maybe if it is Carnatic music a long alapana and followed by a song with typical features of pallavi, anupallavi and then mridangam vidwans and ghatam vidwan doing a kind of accompaniment, feet and then conclude it. So, that is a structure. We are talking about tradition and individual madness. Well there is one thing you can call madness: knowingly violating something, although you know that you will be harmfully treated. Even the tradition will not treat you kindly.

An example is the art world. People who inform the art world - critiques, your teachers, students, family circle and those who like the old and conventional are going to throw tomatoes and eggs on it. But still you knowingly go the spiral path that takes you down out there and which may make you isolated, rob all the future successes as an artist. But yet you take that route, knowingly embrace chaos, knowingly embrace alienation, knowingly embrace the negative side of tradition.

That is madness. So, in a sense individual talent may come in the form of madness. That is point I am trying to get in here. Well, so interrogating tradition will involve being aware of tradition,

but putting yourself upside down, going away from the rational, going away from a logical connect with tradition. So in a sense (twisting Eliot's individual talent), individual talent could be madness.

Well, we have to understand what individual talent is. In Eliot's language, individual talent means the peculiar essence of the man. Eliot was a man of his time, so he only said 'peculiar essence of the man'. But, in the twenty first century we will say the individual idiosyncrasies, and that may be leaky, could be excessive, could be volatile, it could be a dissolution of the strict binary between mind and body. You can call it an individual bodymind chaos.

So, you let the control go, you let yourself spill over in all directions, you let yourself write something that does not come under the stranglehold of tradition. Well, lots of writers have to embrace this kind of madness to rebel. Let us go with the following examples. William Blake voluntarily embraced a mystical mind or a 'mad persona' to understand God's purpose on Earth.

In fact, he has to embrace a nonjudgmental personhood, namely childhood, to understand the dynamics of power equation between the tiger and the lamb, the enchanting character of nature around, God's rule and its idiosyncrasies. Suppose if he were just yet another rational poet like how Eliot wanted him to be, then we would not have got the kind of great poem like Tiger which Blake remarkably gave us.

That was a poetic example. Let me give the example of Kamala Das. Well, she rejected English hegemony, the language that comes with language. She said that "English is mine, it is mixed with Malayalam. It is mixed with my feminine self. It is mixed with my upbringing. It is all broken up: the narrator's sexuality, femininity, language. It is all mumbo jumbo and yet it is mine". So voluntarily, she embraced mumbo jumbo and said, "that is my language, who are you to say that is not logical?".

And therefore, she came up with brilliant poetry. Now, let me give an example from autobiography. Let us take Ved Mehta. Ved Mehta passed away recently. And he was blind of course, but in rejecting the tradition he also behaved like a mad autobiographer. Let me explain how. Well if a writer is blind, you expect blindness-stuff from his writings. If a writer is a woman, you expect woman-stuff from her writing. If a writer is black, you expect blackness-stuff from that particular artist. Well, this is also the weight of tradition by the artworld. Ved Mehta rejected it. For example, he would go on interviewing people, then he would say, "I saw him and he did not comb his hair, he was wearing a blue coat and a broad smile, then we exchanged glances before I left his room...". And then his readers would say, "What on earth is happening? You are a blind, right? How can you lie in your interviews?". Mehta would go berserk, go mad, and would say, "well do not be so literalist, do not be so crudely empirical. Interviews can also happen where one can mix an identity that one would want. Who said interviews only have to be factual? They can mix fiction, they can mix imagination and one does not have to declare blindness-stuff in interviews. For example, if you want me to say that I went to his room and there was a problem, then somebody had dragged me to the chair and I have to sit there... and so on, do you want that kind of content? Well, I will give it when I want, do not dictate!"

So, what am I saying? Interrogating tradition, checking on tradition whether it is helpful or not to you or you want to distinguish yourself, in Eliot's words -individual talent. You have to be nonnormative, you have to say no!, spade is not always a spade, one can occupy realities that look appropriate to oneself and know whether that reality is sanctioned by others or not. So that would involve accepting the label of madness. So art world is full of such examples. You have to accept that this is going to be a problem, that madness can be the name of the game of art.

So, I am saying madness is nonnormative. Madness is the way one would call anyone who violates well-established convention which Eliot called tradition. Well, madness is also breaking the binary between conscious and unconscious. Eliot would say that the bad poet is one who is usually unconscious where he is ought to be conscious and conscious where he ought to be unconscious.

Well, but the problem is that the unconscious - conscious binary is again a convention established by social register, cultural register, and one's orientation, and one can break it. Eliot is informed by Freudian normative views, meaning that consciousness is what one sees around one's body, one's language, one's logical mind and unconscious is a force that dictates oneself from behind. Unconscious is like an iceberg, whose tip is tiny and when one goes down it becomes huge. So, what one sees at the outset is tiny, peripheral, little and negligible but the unseen is huge. So, one's unconscious can be chaotic, violent, humongously uncontrollable and beyond rational understanding.

Well, ideally Eliot would like people to leave the unconscious out there wherever it is and just present the conscious or talk about consciousness and external realities when one is talking, and talk about the unconscious when one is talking about. He would want us to never mix both. Those who want to rebel, those who want to break the shackles, they mix both across the binary.

So, apart from being nonnormative, the individual talent of madness could also involve intermixing and border crossing between both. And that happens more when somebody is in the margin because they are not able to afford strict borders between external and internal, public and the private, conscious and the unconscious and so on which we will come to discuss with Virginia Woolf's *Mark on the Wall*.

Finally, the idea that tradition will involve behaving well. So, tradition is not an abstract idea. It is practical everyday stuff. For example, you will always hear, "in our tradition women have long hair, in our tradition women take care of household, in our tradition we do not do this, we do not do that...". And there is always a division; in our public life we do this, in our private life we do that, and so on. So, there is always a strict divide between how much tradition allows oneself to be public and how much one allows an individual to act and perform in the private. Eliot was not complicating this, but our understanding of tradition and so on will involve this binary. Well, we are talking from the vantage point of view of disability.

Now look at all the four points that I have been talking about in tradition. The idea of nonnormative... What does disability do? Well, in terms of madness, one violates the neatness of register. Standards like “this is polite language”, “this is formal writing”, “this is informal writing”, “this ought to be used only in social media”, “I need to introduce the subject”, “I need to clearly arrange arguments” etc. Now in a normative way one can puncture a hole in it.

The second idea is that disability - particularly cognitive disabilities, intellectual disabilities, emotional disabilities - allows newer possibilities. I am not romanticizing suffering that comes with madness; I am only saying that madness can come with possibilities. So, in other words even if one is suffering, it gives a new insight into reality that is something we ought to accept.

So, conclusion. I took this idea from ‘Tradition and Individual Talents’ because Eliot’s essay is one of the literary feats that defends art for its own sake. It also defends the importance of respecting tradition. I am not saying that we ought to violate all that; but we need to understand the idea that tradition is not a neutral political idea, nor is talent. People have diverse bodies, minds, orientations, affects and they all do something to the dynamic between tradition and individual expression and we need to recognize that. In the next lecture, I will demonstrate that with *The Mark on the Wall* by Virginia Woolf. Thank you.