

Literary and Culture Disability Studies: An Exploration
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Culture of Hearing in Thirukkural, a Classic Tamil Book of Couplets

Welcome all of you. Today is the last day, I cannot believe that 6 days we were together even on cloud, I felt I got used to this. Now, I will be missing this tomorrow most definitely. In the brochure, I mentioned “Culture of Hearing in Thirukkural: A Review.” It is interesting that we are doing that on the final day. Until now we had solid examples and reviews of sign language, deafness, deaf culture, but it may be good to understand the culture of hearing, what is hearing and its implied meaning on deafness for deafness. There are many ways to do that. I could have chosen a contemporary film maybe Sound of metal and do a film review but I thought of becoming a bit adventurous and I took this topic. By no means I know Thirukkural very well. I read it when I was in school after that I let it go and now I am coming back.

As you all know Thirukkural is a classic, it belongs to classical antiquity. It is made up of couplets and the authorship is attributed to Thiruvalluvar and it is a Tamil literary masterpiece. So that much I think we all may know about it. How do we understand or how do we look at hearing culture? And what do we mean by hearing culture? So that leads to that question. So in other words how do we study classical antiquity or the ancient past and make some meaning out of it. For the present there are two ways to do it. Well, there are hundred ways to do it but broadly looking at ancient past from the contemporary perspective, in the 21st century say gender equality is something that brings together whatever one knows about gender equality. Based on world 20th century reading theory sociological reasoning and then assess it from that point of view the distant past.

The second is to look at ancient past in its own right go to make an archaeology make you know go past past meaning study around any literary text, and go to you know stone inscriptions read together. And make a meaning based on that read literary text folklore historical materials some

manuals and everything and make some meaning out of it. And the third one is some kind of a mish-mash of both.

I am going to take the mishmash approach but by and large inferential meaning I just infer things. And by no means it is a finished research paper it is just an exploration. Even I would even call it is just a loud thought for the sake of this workshop. I do not have extensive reading on the subject I just want to try it aloud with you all right. What model I have? What is the example?

I am not looking for any example but there is a wonderful essay written by Michele Friedner and Stefan Helmreich. The essay is called "When sound studies meet deaf studies." Basically both the people explore a simple idea. The simple idea is that a lot of people assume wrongly that deaf people have nothing to do with sound. And second deafness and hearing are opposites, opposites so much that they look like antonyms for opposites they look like they have nothing to do with each other. Both Friedner and Helmreich challenge this by looking at sound in different dimensions with reference to deafness. I am particularly taking these 2 examples as they recall an anecdote. There is this one deaf person working for a coal mine in America. This is during the early industrial early part of the twentieth century I believe. This guy has to get up early morning at 5 o'clock and there is no there was no alarm clock for him. So he made an arrangement with his neighbour hey can you wake me up at 4:30. How? They made a rope arrangement near the window and early morning 4:30, the neighbour used to pull the rope, violently mean to the extent that it may make shuttering sound in the window. And it makes good enough vibrations and then this guy wakes up and he will go to the coal mine work until late night and come back and crash so that was the arrangement.

Later on, they both figured out something instead of this me pulling the rope maybe we can tie an iron bar to the clock. And when the clock strikes it will make a huge vibration on the floor in your room. And then you can get up then that worked it seems the whole community around him is home they woke up to the huge vibration sound and they found it very loud vibration sound. Sighting at a doubt both of them asked the following questions what deaf people have some inferred knowledge about sound apart from the visuality of the sound.

For example, when I clap like this it is also visual both the hands coming together and making a thought. So that means this third has a visual meaning and it has an inferred meaning you can make something out of it. And something depends on the age of a deaf child or a man or woman we do not know there may be a million permutations of meaning one can make out of it. The second is the vibration well i can, I am tuned to this sound but there may be a lot of people who may be tuned to the vibrations created by the clan. This may sound abstract but let me give a practical example. Take this anecdote. A mom is there she has a little baby in the crib or in her lap. And she is singing a lullaby-like this and it is rocking movement and when she is rocking like this with the baby in hand gently singing a beautiful lullaby. And the baby feels the rocking vibration of both the rocking and the sound of lullaby and the child happily sleep. This happens million times every day across continents and maybe the lullaby may be different with the rocking vibration is the same and which connects beautifully the mother and the child and the lullaby for the sleep and it is happening. So like there is maybe there are millions of possibilities where sounds transfer, itself and deaf people because of their unique cultural experience connect to sound.

And maybe it is worth exploring this with that spirit I explore ancient antiquity Tamil antiquity particularly Thirukural with my preliminary cursory little knowledge of the field so, that is the statutory note of coffee all right. Hearing cultures, how do we think about hearing cultures? Thiruvalluvar live long ago there is no way i can know about hearing culture of hearing. But we have some clues from the context of Thirukural right.

Thirukural is didactic means it has moral messages moral codes it is a text that will guide people in the art of living. In ancient antiquity, Tamil and beyond the art of living was influenced by a large by different notions, one notion that was unique to that age and is not necessarily inactive our age is the presence of God on earth. Well we do believe in faith we do believe in god but there is a difference. Suppose I complain suddenly some pain here as I am speaking now you may not sit you know sit on a chant or kneel down or pray to the almighty people alert and probably authorities here will be around hey miss is complaining some chest pain, let us pause for a while and let him be taken to a hospital what we will and then still we may pray that is another matter. So the pre-modern or the antiquity is shaped by the presence of God.

So much that a god has a consultative conversational relationship with people why am i saying all these things? Well, the context of hearing to understand the hearing culture we need this to be understood we need to understand how they conceived of the good life. A good life the context people who lived in the context of Thirukural imagined as a life with dharma, artha, kama, moksha.

Well, what is that? Aram, porul, inbam 3 but dharma is a notion, dharma, aram, porul, inbam I will come to that very quickly but broadly dharma means some kind of harmony. In Tamil it can proximate to aram means living a righteous life with harmony. Artha, a search of wealth and material, porul in Tamil seeking life wealth and so on. Kama well it has to do with happiness, pleasure, pursuits of pleasure, sensory and otherwise. And moksha, the other world, the god again with Thirukural context it comes under aram leading a good life in a way you should be good here when you are here and when you, where if you are good here you will also earn sufficient maybe it is like charging your credit card for the life out there above. If you are good you will reach there if you are not good I am afraid you will reach somewhere else. If you like their lifestyle that is how I like to explain it to my students it is their lifestyle. So integrating dharma, kama, artha, moksha is their lifestyle. And kural, that is couplets that i have distributed to you somewhat cater to it and not only that I distributed to, not only the ones that are distributed to you. But the entire couplet tradition and these couplets as I told already they are didactic they are moral instructions that didactic is a fancy word for moral instruction.

Where is hearing culture? You are saying all these things, I remember. Gaining, moralizing requires people to listen know i am speaking you are listening now that is a literal act ears. I am using somebody may use the camera like eye to see or mic like ears to listen. But when it came to moral connection ears or hearing it is much more than listening, much more than the sensory experience of hearing or listening it is much more than that.

If you like it is a connection it is an interpersonal relationship so in other words twentieth and 21st century or even 19th-century modernity modern life is based on the literal division between senses. There are professions that would involve a lot of seeing maybe this is not suitable for blind people maybe there are a certain lot of jobs like call centres were a lot of hearing and speaking maybe they are not useful for deaf people.

You know that kind of literalism did not almost did not exist I am sure discrimination existed in the, ancient past. But productivity related discrimination did not almost exist why? Because the moralizing moral instruction the moral view of life involved cross sensory thinking how? That sounds abstract but let me talk through it a bit practically. Well, I said about dharma right so leading a good harmonious life for example would involve equal amount of caring to people.

You need to establish harmony then; you have to interconnect with your people around. So you cannot lead a harmonious life if you listen a lot to some people and if you neglect some people. So proportioning interpersonal connection and interpersonal connection hearing becomes some kind of a metaphor for harmonious inter connectional in that part of the world. So hearing is not strictly by a sense of idea but a kind of interpersonal connection.

Well, artha would involve managing rhetoric the art of persuasion if you are a trader you better do healthy bargaining give and take, speak and hear in many possible ways with the people whom you interact. Not necessarily just tearing people you have to rhetorically speak and rhetorically hearing you have to be deploying that power. In the pursuit of pleasure in fact the ancients including Thiruvalluvar himself was deeply suspicious about senses.

In fact, you would advise to withdraw your senses including the sense of hearing and speech when necessary deploy it carefully and when it came to god. God speaks through metaphors moksha the other world life. The other world life and its great wealth and its great grandiose life about devas gods asuras and all that the stories will come in metaphors. Therefore your preparation for the other world will involve.

You know giving up literalism and indulging in and getting on to hearing, speaking, touching the divine, tasting the divine, fearing the divine, seeing the divine beyond senses so what am i saying in simple words the ancients have one single good thing to tell us that is beta cross give up literalism there is something unique in a metaphorical journey across senses do not you dare just reduce ears to hearing eyes to seeing come to tasting they are interconnected.

They are much more than in your body they belong to the moral realm, they belong to the pleasure realm, they, belong to the otherworldly and this worldly realm. It is organic I seem to

see that much now let me, I have given lot of couplets to you that seem outrightly discriminatory to deaf people. I suggest that we look at those couplets in the following spirit discrimination against deaf people, blind people, people with intellectual disability we cannot rule out in any pop. They were there, they are there and they will be there. The whole challenge of our activism, academic enterprise, well-meaning conversations, they are meant to address. I am not ruling that out however we can think about the following Kurals or couplets to make some insights based on whatever I said. Take the following Kural in your hand, I'll read it out: When there is no food for the ear give a little also to the stomach. I read it again: When there is no food for the ear give a little also to the stomach. Look at one more couplet: As the Anichum flower fades in smelling so fades the guest when the face is turned away. Read it again: As the anichum flower fades in smelling so fades the guest when the face is turned away very nice.

When there is no food for the ears give a little away to the stomach. In this couplet the stuff that we listen here, the stuff that we eat for food for survival is food. And the conversations that we are learning, we do is conceived like food like a gustatory imagination, something like taste and food. See how you take food? Food you need to like it and it goes inside your digestive system like it, you taste it. And see likewise the knowledge has to be loud chew and digested. I am reminded of Francis Bacon's famous writing that so anyone who digests or looking forward to tasting knowledge and digesting is said to be a good listener.

Not necessarily the person who would fear the knowledge and take the knowledge through hearing. Look at this Anicham flower, is I do not know whether it exists now but in ancient antiquity the Thiruvalluvar says just my smelling the flower is so delicate that it fades away, vadi poratu. I mean it just stops doing and it dries up and dies. Similarly, if you have a wrong countenance, meaning wrong. Suppose I come to your home and you are busy and you start looking at your watch then I will get the message these people do not like my presence. Then I am going to you know you know I can I just pass by this place I am going to you know to go. So this couplet comes under the section of hospitality. Why did I introduce this idea? Just to tell you just to convey the idea that interpersonal connections involve synesthetic, that is cross-sensory conversations.

So it does not have to be centred on the eye or it does not have to be centred on ears alone. Body language, the whole setting, whole modality of connecting matters. And once we add knowledge acquisition it also depends on how we conceive it. If we conceive it as a great food then we will taste it, digest it. But if we conceive it as only a skill set as we do in the 21st century, then we will ask who is this skill set meant for? Is it for people who can see? Or is it for people who can hear? Or is it not for those who cannot see? Or is it not for those who cannot hear? That kind of dichotomy, but everybody likes food. Well, we may not all like sandwiches, some may like sandwich and some may like chicken. So what is the note I am trying to say here? Irrespective of the nature of knowledge, knowledge is synesthetic, the appreciation of it depends on how you look at its shape, not by how you perceive with physical senses. That moral view seems to be a democratic form of thought which I think did exist in the ancient past. It is something that we can adopt for our sensory politics in the 21st century. Let me read out another Kural couplet for you: Although a man be without learning, let him listen to the teaching of the learned, that will be to him a staff in adversity. Reading again: Although a man be without learning, let him listen to the teaching of the learned, that will be to him a stump in adversity. Well, the modern notion of teaching and learning is different, it is institutionalized. It is in the form of university, school in many of our setting a root learning happens and radical and very practical outstanding learning happen as we saw it yesterday. All right.

However, what is the message here in the couplet? To people who are conscious about disability politics, there are many things happening here. It is like staf, you know, the elderly carrier crutch so when even if somebody is not learned let him listen to the learner. And so that would come in handy. When and in what way it will come handy? It will be as good as a staff or a crutch for the elderly so, that is a kind of message. Well, we can understand. We can see this as outright modalities of discrimination existing across classes and all that. I am sure class differences play in the ancient past and caste differences too. And Thirukkural also has lots of traces of gender discrimination, caste discrimination and many other evils, it does ratify them. But that is not the point here. The point I am making here is about the idea of learning. In ancient that is antiquity learning until the recent modern happened, wise men, wise women too like Avaiyaar, people would go to them, sit with them, live with them, and learn under their supervision. One may call it 'Guru Parampara Prabhavam' or some kind of geographic learning.

What am I saying here? The idea is not about listening to the learned, the idea is to adopt the modes of the learner that is the guru or the wise. And then go by it, so that knowledge by living and learning with the teacher whether that model is good or not. That is see ancient models may not be good. Now the point is about different notions of listening that came out here. Let me give a few more kural couplets and then I will close.

Let me give one more kural here: What does it matter whether those men live or die who can judge of taste by the mouth and not by the ear. Let me repeat: What does it matter whether those men live or die who can judge of taste by the mouth and not by the ear. Let me read another couplet and then explain them together: The learned are said to have eyes but the unlearned have merely 2 souls in that face. So what is happening here? So, on the one hand, I praised the notion that one should appreciate the knowledge that comes in the form of food, it is more than hearing, it is more widely sensed, sensory sized and so on. But here he is saying those who just live for, living for food what is the use of their living. They should go with the taste of hearing but that is a clue there. Hearing the faculty of hearing or experiencing knowledge through hearing is not conceived merely by sensory performance, of hearing. But the way in which it is conceived here the taste of hearing the language is violent of course about what is the use of people who maybe in didactic literature take for granted they would not be politically correct. They will say by this kind of simple proverbs and anecdotes simple sayings and that would make all the difference. And the last Kural that I said the learned are said to possess eyes and those who are not, just having souls in their face. Now we can understand that metaphors matter in ancient antiquity, are not necessarily you know literalism of the senses. Literalism of the senses involves skill set modality of learning. Ancient modality of learning is metaphorical, synesthetic it is driven by aesthetics. I mean Indian rasa tradition we do not have to get there.

What is my attempt so far? My attempt so far was to make sense of these couplets which look outlandishly discriminatory and politically incorrect. In that attempt, I came to the following conclusion. One, discrimination does not die. They take different shapes across ages and cultures. Two, it is important to grow up from literalism. We need to understand that our human life has metaphorical meanings, synesthetic notions we can organically connect. And therefore

we can ill afford to say that people with certain faculty are suitable for certain kinds of knowledge and vice versa. That is nonsense. Like the ancients, it is good to understand knowledge, perception, experience, digestion, transfer of knowledge in an organic way. And third, we do not also have to conceive of senses particularly hearing as task-oriented. Hearing could be spiritual to the realm of moksha karma, artha and so on. Well, we do not have to subscribe to all these 4 notions now. We are in the 21st century but whatever pursuits we do, we do not have to be making very crude literalism. And secondly, we do not have to think and act as though senses work separately. And lack of senses, lack of hearing, for example, would lead to a total cut-off from that domain of knowledge. No that does not happen so that I would imagine that to be the lesson from a reading of classical antiquity. With these remarks, I close my preliminary cursory notes, thank you.