

Disability Studies: An Introduction
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Lecture – 14
Blindness ad metaphor

Welcome back again, this time I am going to talk about blindness as a metaphor; keeping lived reality and modern thought in mind.

Now let me just relax and talk about Blindness as a metaphor and I call this “Blindness: A hide and seek game”. Well, whether you know a blind person or not or whether there is blindness in our life in some significant way or not, we always look for blindness in some kind of a metaphor. I got this title after becoming curious about children's game; hide and seek, basically. If you tell a child, hide your face like that and ask where uncle is or say uncle is gone, the child may really think that uncle is gone because he is not able to see my face.

So, that kind of game we play all through our life and blindness becomes an interesting metaphor for that; that is the point I am trying to get it here. Let me take romantic love as an example. Blindness as a gift for lovers, let me call it that way. Since I am a student of literature let me go to literary examples straight away.

In this case, let me take Merchant of Venice by Shakespeare. Let me read here, "But love is blind and lovers cannot see the pretty follies that they themselves commit. For if they could cupid himself would blush to see me thus transformed to a boy." Forget about the story of Merchants of Venice. Forget about the context in which this is said, but just do not forget this phrase.

Love is blind. Oh God! Lot of champs say that out there; I have been told this when I was younger. Why do they say that? One of the things that they mean is when a person is engrossed and gripped by love, particularly passionate love, it seems they literally stop logically judging the other person. The trust of the hormone and the attraction that happens is more gigantic and predetermining than one loses logical capacity.

So, this is why traditionally one hears around 'love is blind'. That's one way of interpreting or one metaphorical iteration of blindness metaphor or one way of dealing with it. But then there are various things that people say about romantic love, for example, they say, when one is in love, one not only loses the capacity for logical judgment, one loses oneself in it .

Lovers may play games and a practical example for that would be somebody may bring a gift and they may ask their partner to close their eyes to give the gift. And make that person feel the gift; recalling Molyneux will be helpful. Look at this, we have love, on the one hand, requiring logical disconnect and, on the other hand, logical connect again. A temporary withdrawal of a guard, in some sense, is desirable, but not fully — on and off into blindness.

Well, talking this way about romantic love, there are very problematic things about blindness being connected in this way. For example, because somebody cannot see, he/she can be told that that person lacks a sexual connect with the other person or even lacks sexuality or is completely asexual. On the other hand, if there is also a perception that a person cannot see means that person is overtly sexual because they have nothing else to do — autoeroticism, as they say.

So, blindness in romantic love may also mean giving rest to the sight; indulging in other senses, such as touch and so on. Well, lots of romantic poems are about these themes, i.e. feeling intimacy, visually and non-visually or with blindness and without blindness. John Keats calls for the capacity to look beyond senses, i.e. looking beyond the sensory beauty of the beloved as blindness keen.

Endless example from films show that a lover would like to lead or would like a partner to lead her or him blindfolded, metaphorically or even literally. This kind of fascination with blindness, both negative and positive, grip discussions about romantic love. And I would call that, citing Shakespeare, blindness as a lover's gift. And that is how mediums such as literature and films have treated blindness in a romantic love.

Coming from Shakespeare to Indian tradition, let me cite Bhakti tradition here. It is very long tradition, spanning over several centuries. Blindness, here, is again a principle of hide and seek. This is one more example of blindness as metaphor. Instead of talking you through various strands of Bhakti tradition, let me just say a little about Advaita.

Advaita means 'not two'. That is, the human and the God are not two different people or two different persons. God is the human and the human is God; *Paramathma* is not anywhere else, not up there, but here on the table, here and within me and so on.

This might look very abstract, but let us see how in the long Advaitic tradition Bhaktas or devotees handled this problem through songs, poems, pleading or crying. My favorite example is from M.S. Subbulakshmi, one of the greatest Karnatic vocalists. She sang a song by Rajagopalachari *Kurai Ondrum Illai, Marai Moorthy Kanna*, meaning, I do not have any deficit, I do not have any problems. But I have this problem, maybe I do not have a problem. The problem is this, *Kannukku Theriyaamal nirkinraay kannaa*, meaning, I cannot see you but I know you are there. This is the typical emotion of a Bhakta (including Bhakta Meera and Surdas). It's quite a long tradition actually, too big to count here. Bhakta is blind, the blind seeker. She will do anything to seek the Paramathma's presence. They could even say, 'I am touching the fire, hoping to find you there. I cannot still find you fully, but I get some pleasure because I am feeling your presence, indirectly. Through anything, other than the sight.' The matter of Darshan is supposed to happen inside, not is the visual presence of God. In blindness and in the absence of a very conspicuous deity, Darshan is supposed to happen. That kind of a broad metaphorical thinking happens here. So, it seems, Bhakti or romantic love, and all emotions in some sense have this curious metaphor, i.e. 'love is blind'. Now, I am also saying that Bhakti is blind. That is how the metaphorical tradition has evolved .

Let me give a third example now; the idea of forbidden knowledge again goes back to western world, especially Greek tradition. You all know the story of story of Oedipus Rex. He went on a long battle and because of an oracle, a curse, he ended up killing his father and marrying his own mother. It was predicted and he was told. He thought that it will not happen, but that happened and that knowledge was unbearable. What did Oedipus do? He blinded himself.

There is a long tradition of blinding oneself for different things; may be an act of sacrilege. People might think, 'Oh my God! I stepped on to divine territory; I should not have done that.' When I was a child, my grandma used to say, 'Hey, do not steal a pen' or 'do not make noise in the temple'. I used to say, 'why should I not make noise?' Then I will make more noise. Then she will say, 'Swami kannakuttiraon' meaning, 'God will wound your eyes'. Maybe that metaphor evolved because it's most painful to gouge one

eyes out. But that symbolism persisted. Maybe eye is seen as the pathway to soul and from cradle to grave. Therefore, we hear this metaphor. Usually, the punishment of a God involves some kind of gauging or wounding the eyes. And this again has a very long western tradition and equally eastern.

Let me come to the fourth example where, again, hide and seek game persists. In the third example is about the puzzle — Oedipus puzzle. He hid himself because of the oracle, he went around only to discover that he will be discovered and he again has to hide himself from the big truth that he has married his Mom. It is an unbearable truth, he has to remove the source of knowledge, that is his eyes.

By the way, people claim that 80 percent of knowledge is acquired by sight. That is my next topic, the problem of empiricism. Actually, that is not true. Let me tell why. This 80 percent or 70 percent is a statistical truth prompted by IQ testing, behavioral analysis and so on. But in life at large, whether it is childhood or middle age or old age, statistics is not the ultimate method of examining knowledge or acquisition of knowledge. For example, think about impediments to knowledge acquisition. Somebody may be from the rural side, maybe a girl whose parents are poor. She may be in the village and the Mom and Dad may say, 'Hey, Pulla, why do you have to go to school? Do some help for the mother, sit at home.' Is it not an impediment to knowledge acquisition? What has knowledge acquisition has to do with sight or touch? Likewise, access and accommodation, they all come in different shapes. By sheer sensory perception we are not going to acquire 80 percent of the knowledge. Whatever that means.

With this we come to the topic of empiricism . What is the big deal about empiricism? Most disciplines that work on observation/on the basis of observation have this curious attitude towards sight loss. Here I am talking about Blindness as medical category, not as a metaphor. Well there may be metaphorical ignorance underneath all factual problems; that will be some other topic for some other time. But let me take an example for you. Take the problem of science, it seems a lot of blind people do not make it to sciences, not because they do not have logic or they cannot understand math or they cannot do experiments. They are not able to make it because a lot of people say that science is observational knowledge and you need to observe to be a true scientist.

I used to argue and I still argue that observation need not be by oneself. For example, if I have to observe a chemical reaction in a laboratory, my wonderful students can do it along with me. And when they say, 'Sir, this is happening and I am getting a red color or it is turning into something else', then I will know almost for sure as a trained scientist what is happening here. The idea of interdependent observation is not accepted in most of the scientific establishments. And that is why you cannot see blind people making into sciences. And the same thing can be said about law, for example. There is one thing sacred about laws as a discipline or a field; it works on the idea of evidence. I may say thousand odd things, for example, I can say that someone came and knocked me off when I was sitting and having food. And when I go to the law court to sue you, I have to give evidence. And when it comes to evidence, law courts accept mostly anything that look self evident, that feels self evident, and that seem less controversial or less ambiguous. That is why many countries in the world do not appoint blind people as judges because of an assumption that self evident knowledge comes by the art of observation and that too only visual observation. Here, things like interdependent observation, intuition, cross verification by a board of people across the table, and such things are not easily entertained, to say the least. In some sense, the hide and seek game, the metaphor, all that is well good, but the metaphors can go only certain distance.

Lack of sight is seen to be a synonym for lack of autonomy and agency. That makes me ask the larger question at the end of this lecture, which is what is autonomy and what is agency? Well, to put it straight, one cannot have rounded self all the time and one cannot be in total control about ones agency all the time. And that is why we should seek recourse to blindness as a knowledge system and a metaphor to understand all these things. How? That is our last point in this talk. Blindness can be seen as a *gestalt* or a point of view or a way to look at things. In which case, it can become a framework to understand sightedness, excesses of the visual, negative capacities of sightedness and so on. For example, feminist scholarship is abound of the negative effects of gaze and staring. All women without exception have an intuitive knowledge about the workings of patriarchy through gaze and staring. I strongly recommend that you read Rosemarie Garland Thompson's book on staring; it is one of the finest books on negative capacities of the sight.

To conclude, whether you approach blindness from a modern scientific perspective or a metaphorical perspective, it gives a very useful critical framework on sightedness and visuality. But at the same time, it is a living reality of blind people who may not have fuller access to jobs, regular lives, sexuality and much more. Both have to be remembered in tandem, when seeing blindness in a critical perspective.