

Disability Studies: An Introduction
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Lecture 18

Disability Passing: The musings of the blue Jackal

This lecture is part of a lecture series on *Disability Studies* under the *Key Concept series*. Today, I am going to talk about *Disability Passing* and I would like to title it 'Disability Passing, The Musings of the Blue Jackal'. Oh, what is the jackal doing here? Recall your old Panchatantra, the good old Panchatantra story of a Jackal that is chased by dogs and so on.

So, when the jackals chased it runs and gets into a washerman's house and jumps accidentally into a vat of dye. What happens? The jackal gets immersed and it comes out completely blue, the dye sticks to the body everywhere. And as it comes out the dogs could not recognize it and thought of the jackal as a new animal. The jackal wants to make full use of its new identity now. So, it gets into the jungle and all the animals including the lions admire it, treat it as a god and so on. One day it hears other jackals and it starts howling like them and then get caught.

So, in some sense this great Panchatantra children story is about an imposter pretending to be someone other than one is, that is, an impostor. That is what *Disability Passing* primarily is about. Well, blue jackal and do not get me wrong; I do not call people less blue jackal than those who are passing and so on. A twenty first century reading of this great Panchatantra story tells us many things about passing, about why disability passing happens and what is/are its nuances. That is what this talk is about.

But before getting into the disability scenario, let us focus on why passing happens at all. What are the great examples? Let me cite the following examples. Take the case of single women, it is very hard to be single women in our society. So, many choose to pass on as married women maybe they wear visible markers say such as a pier(?) (3:26-27) and so on to announce around "I am not available". Well, ours is a rigid patriarchal society and this is one of the strategies some or many women can adapt for survival.

Take the example of *Sanskritization*. M N Srinivas famously coined this term. Many low caste people in the upper caste dominated community in, say a school or a college setting or even some office environment try to dress up, speak, adapt body language that seem like upper caste, it is known as *Sanskritization*. So, one is basically passing as someone than what one is.

Hiding one's age can be another example of passing. Somebody who is forty actually says he is thirty because our society and many societies for that matter have developed cold feet about ageing. When abroad, someone can pass for nationality or ethnicity, maybe change one's accent or looks, change even the color of the skin because of racism (Michael Jackson famously with lots of millions of dollars changed the color of the skin). Changing accents can happen; some people who go abroad can for sake of assimilation change their accent and so on. So, the point I wanted to state here is that passing is not disability specific.

Well, let us talk again about why it happens. Passing could be an antidote to stigma. It seems some identities are stigma ridden; the identity of a widow, the identity of a disabled, the identity of a religious minority in a religious majority place, the identity of a linguistic minority. Integration, for example as I mentioned in an earlier example about how some people like to integrate into the mainstream. And there is nothing wrong in it, and in status gaining. Well, we talked about the instance of *Sanskritization* for example.

So, what are the shapes of passing? In what forms does it take place? To put it briefly, passing is a kind of a performance; how picture for example, how the jackal would have presented itself in the jungle where survival of the fittest is the norm. Disabled people and other minorities, stigmatized groups, subalterns and so on need to do endless amount of performance. And what is the performance? It is an expression shaping one's body, facial expressions, behaviour. Orchestrating your surroundings, looking at things around in a peculiar way, shaping friendships all these are performance. Performance need not happen on the stage.

For example, Judith Butler would say gender is a performance, that there is nothing natural about male and female sex. She would argue that being male or female is a performance. The moment one is born one is named as a boy. So that means, one has certain notions about being born as a boy child. Maybe it may include the color of the skin, the nature of

genital, it could be the lineage of the boy, the shape and size of the mother's pregnant body and the emotional investment that family and society has on a boy.

So, many modes (?) (10:00) of performance can come. For example, when I go to my classroom I modulate my voice in a way in which I am available to thirty or fifty students in front of me, or when I need to get something done from a friend then I have a polite voice or a pleading voice. When I want to pretend then I hide my face. Many performances we do mostly unconsciously. You know automatically when to be silent and when you have to make noise. When your principal walks on the veranda you do not necessarily do mischief to seek attention for example.

So, these are all performances. Passing in some sense is being other than one is, it is a kind of performance and that performance is a necessity. Very many times it is a necessity. And such kinds of performance will differ from context; from your classroom to a bedroom to your society differences and all the while performances will differ obviously.

Having laid the ground here let us get into the problem of *Disability Passing*. *Disability Passing* happens all the while, because disability is one of those most stigmatized identities that people with disabilities and people without disabilities do consider passing. Why is this so? Let us consider the following examples.

The first case I would say is the management of the spectacle. Spectacle is the visual, the flow of the visual. The visual system is very powerful. Let me give the following example. The visual system that is spectacle decides how you dress up when you go to your college, how you dress up when you go for a date for example. Some standardizations do get established in the process. For example, our societies are notoriously obsessed about sizes of bodies, especially bodies of women.

So, how a food is wrapped (or how someone looks) is more important these days than how it tastes actually. Don't you agree? I am sure you will. Such is the importance of spectacle or visual presence disability. People with a disability do consider passing as non-disabled as much as possible. For example, in my own case, in many situations I tend to hide my mobility cane. Ved Mehta, a great autobiographer and essayist, is famous for not carrying his mobility cane for decades. Even in the most difficult situations he insisted that he would

avoid mobility cane. These days he is seen with a mobility kit but that took a lot of analysis, coming to terms and so on.

So, the first case example would be called the management of the spectacle. People with hearing aid would like to hide their equipment. You would like your brand of the shirt to be displayed if it is an expensive one. If you have a scar here, you would like to hide it because of certain standards, certain uniformity about how things ought to appear has been established and you would like to meet up to that standard and live up to that. So that it seems in a nutshell the prom(?) (15:57) spectacle management, the management of the spectacle where disability passing happens.

In another instance I would call it roll valorization. Disabled people almost have enormous pressure to in some sense invent a modality of compensation for their disability. If one is wheelchair user for example, he or she is expected to be doing some role where that role is seen as a factor that would camouflage or hide the disability. For example, Roosevelt is known to give pose for photographs without his wheelchair. But in ordinary life disabled people are supposed to play a great role, take great roles such as being a great teacher, great mom, great this and great that. And in some sense such roles and valorization of such roles become a substitute or a displacement, a replacement for that disability that they have. So, there is another example of disability passing that happens that one in some sense hides the disability as he wills.

Fast forward to 21st century, in our times when half of our lives (sometimes sleeping hours) we are clicking away that mouse or mobile phone or some such device. So, what I mean is our other half, significant other half, the virtual identity (and virtual identities can be notorious) can be wide ranging, can be bold, can be more active than the real person, can be totally somebody else; a different avatar if you like.

So, I would call this identity simulation. And disabled people do this. Many of them, often chronically-ill disabled people who cannot access the outside world teenagers, disabled teenagers and so on, they are documented to have done identity simulation on the virtual site online mode, in online chat. Chat platforms are replete with such simulations where disability passing do happen. And mind you the online identity simulations and offline identity simulations are not just unique to people with the disability; it can happen

otherwise too, sometimes in such identity simulations nondisclosures can also happen. Sometimes when I am talking on phone with people I do not necessarily have to always disclose my disability; this is context specific.

Suppose I am going for a job interview I always face this dilemma, should I disclosed or non-disclose. Maybe my phone voice and the way I speak to the HR person should have sold me enough, but if I disclose maybe I will not get a job, maybe if I disclose I will get a job. Such kinds of decisions do happen all the time whether to pass or not pass.

Well, so this kind of simulations keep happening and they keep happening and when they happen they set up disabled people's mobility in and around their immediate social situations. What are the other modes of disability passing? Well, disability passing is a kind of special performance. It can be about personality building (I told you a bit earlier when I go to the class I have a different way of shaping my body language and so on, and everybody does).

But in disability side (?) (22:27) body performance is actually required of them because it is the most stigmatized identity and therefore people have to perform in a particular way to manage such stigma. Disabled women for example, need to do much more stigma management, first on account of being a woman and second on account of being a disabled. So, and the risks and challenges that come with it, they have to do lots of performance sometimes rhetorically, sometimes with actual change of body language and so on.

Disability performance also has a synesthetic character. I told earlier it is also about spectacle management. It does not mean that one have to always manage this visual. No, you have to manage language, you have to manage touch because you do not want to be manhandled, you have to manage hearing that is you choose how you are heard in what speech act, in what mood and so on. That kind of simulations performance do happen.

Well, welcome to India where things are very tricky. Well, tricky is a very mild way of putting things. You have to in some sense manage structural violence actually. So, in a typical Indian situation or for that matter developing societies like ours disability passing can also be in the form of fraudulent presentation. I call it disability fraud. Well, let us put it this way: certificates decide how much entitlement a disabled person gets. So, it is entirely possible

that someone with a mild disability or someone who is able to simulate disability can produce a certificate and claim entitlement. So, this is happening in the reverse way. So far I have been talking about disabled people passing as non-disabled, but here I am talking about non-disabled passing as disabled for the purpose of entitlement. From the above examples and situations I think you got a picture of how things work. So, let us conclude.

Well, disability passing and passing in general is about bodies, perceptions and social values. It is all dabbling with them. It is a conscious and an artful form of manipulation. It is a political storytelling, it is a political statement. It can be a rhetorical strategy. To say the least, it could be a survival method of the kind we saw in the case of the blue jackal. So, this is the concept and we will wait for many more.