

Disability Studies: An Introduction
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Lecture 19

Coming out: a performance in Disability Inhabitation

Welcome back to our disability passing lecture module. This is the second part of the lecture, and I call it 'Coming out: a performance in Disability Inhabitation'. Passing is, as I said, a survival strategy. So, one pretends to be a non-disabled person or at least attenuates as much as possible the impact of disability and the stigma that it attracts.

But coming out is a different stuff altogether; it in some sense is an acknowledgement of one's own disability, in some sense ownership of it. One begins to own, begins to declare, begins to say, "well I am disabled and I do not have any qualms about it. I am a woman, I do not have any qualms about it. I am a Dalit, I do not have problem with it; I am a low wage person; I look black that is fine, black is beautiful".

Coming out denotes basically two things, telling oneself and telling others; both the aspects are involved. So, in some sense coming out is the opposite of disability passing or passing for that matter. So, now having said that let us see its nuances, how it works and does not work. Speaking practically, coming out has two modalities; one is the private mode, and another is the public mode or extramural mode. Let us see how.

First, the private mode. I told a minute ago coming out is about telling oneself. So, telling oneself involves inner speech. Students of literature will know about monologues, soliloquies, endless stream of consciousness, narratives and many more, but at the bottom of it, it is about sorting out ideas within one's own heart. The conscience speaks inside. I would call it inner speech. It involves coming out by way of inner speech and it may potentially involve guilt and other moral problems.

Let me give you examples. Suppose one has treated one's deaf mom without public exposure. And suppose you have been trained to treat your elderly father with lots of cover, then at some point in life you realize that it is bad behaviour and that realization can invoke guilt and it can invoke moral questions. Moral questions such as what is the value of caring,

who involves in caring etc. Other moral questions may include, what is truth, what is the value of human dignity, what is the value of interpersonal relationships, what is ethics particularly in the realms of learning, teaching and living together. All these problems do not necessarily have to be dramatized in public space.

I hate those TV shows, which emotionally exploit the emotions of poor people about their private life, where they come and say lots of things about their marriage, conflicts and so on and cry a lot. And these notorious TV anchors who say some nonsense about their private lives and most importantly get away with the nonsense. In a speech, the language of conscience, moral questions and the like require private space, a huge private universe to sort them out; it could be inside my chest or it could be with my favourite person intramurally within the four walls, we can go for counselling and so on, but it does not have to need public dramatization. So what am I saying? Coming out can happen quietly, it can happen within one's own head, it can be even louder inside, but it does not have to be demonstrated outside. That said, is there other dimensions of the private space coming out? Yes. Transformation; this is such a big word actually. What is transformation? Well, examples would include somebody becoming somebody else. A quiet and a timid girl being as bold as Jhansi Rani or any Olympic champion. Somebody who is called an idiot all the time becoming a great learned scholar. Somebody who is known to be quiet and frightened and gentle becoming a murderer; all these possibilities can happen. In some sense transformation is inner travel and then once the travel happens one says by action, speech and politics, "look, I am this, I am not that which you thought I was". Transformation, challenges, attributions...

For example, many of our slow learning children, we attempt to call them names like for example, in Tamil, they call them *mandu*; a blockhead or a clay head. But transformations do happen, they slowly change. In Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, somebody gets up to realize that one is a giant cockroach. Treating that as a big metaphor, we can discover that "ooohh I am not that person, which is what I have been thinking about all this while".

So, transformations can involve change of subjectivity. That means I have an inner voice and the nature of that voice can change radically. Right now, I may be something else, but who knows? By life situations I could become somebody else, that is totally possible. And why is it possible? It is possible because life is not static. It is like a flowing river, you cannot step

into the same river twice, they say. So, in some sense coming out is an acknowledgement of this fact of change of personhood, subjectivity, interiority, travel and so on.

So, coming out, involving both transformation and in a speech, it happens in a huge way. People, or parents particularly, or children with a disability give themselves hugely to this inner speech, go through guilt, denial, withdrawal and so on. They also travel significantly from inside and one day all these acts solidify, come together, collect together and become what you call transformation.

They become somebody else, they become very strong warriors in a sense, and declare, "well my son is autistic; yes I am a parent of a disabled child, let me face the world head on". That is it. And there are no shortcuts to these inner speeches and transformations. One can help them, but they have to do it themselves. The horse has to drink water itself and that is what coming out intramurally means; within four walls.

Let me come to the public domain now. I made this subtle distinction between private and public, because very often coming out is assumed to be just making noise. That is not true; very simple. Let us get into the public domain. Public is what is not within four walls; it is not private, it is where you need to behave well. There is nothing sacred about it.

So, what does coming out publicly mean? Coming out may be a structural commentary. The first aspect would involve structural commentary. What does that mean? Private or public human spaces are unequal. So, when disabled and non-disabled people from the margins make a structural commentary, they basically own up to their identity and make a critique based on that position for an open declaration that one is a Dalit, or one is a transgender, one is a homosexual, one is a disabled, and so on. All that happens, and when that happens in public space, say in one's college or one's school, one also makes a structural commentary.

What am I saying? When one declares that one is a transgender, for example, in a school or a college, it is very difficult, and it does not happen all the time. And if it does not happen, you do not have to say that person is timid, that person is not bold. It is just that in that stage in life that person is doing lots of inner speeches and transformation. And the priority of the moment is that, instead of open declaration and involving structural commentary.

That is not the priority at that time, that is all it is. Or the situation is not ripe enough to do that; that is what it means.

So, what happens when somebody declares that one is a transgender or one is a dyslexic. Very often there are invisible disabilities which are not quite written on the face. Say schizophrenia or dyslexia. It can be absolutely invisible and people can give artificial attributions to that. So, when comes openly, two things can happen. One risks oneself of annihilation (basically removing them from the school, for example), another possibility is that that opening out can offer a critique of that school's incapacity to handle a person, a student like this; they are not equipped. So they need to be equipped, that is the idea.

Well, coming out publicly should and very often does involve, embrace or identify oneself with that marginalized identity. For example, if one declares that he/she is a Dalit or transgender or a dyslexic, that person has done enough of spadework inside, which I called inner speech. That person is now ready to embrace the subaltern. That means, the position of the marginalized is willing to put up face and even fight from that position.

So, in some sense it is a moment of reckoning, a moment in which one says, "look, I am okay with what I am, I am okay with myself. You may be great, but I do not have to be great"; that kind of a position. It is a very powerful position actually. Coming out in the usual sense, in the well-known public position, is quite activist demonstration. Chennai rainbow pride, for example, is LGBTcommunities coming together and demonstrating about their right, their existential situation and their value for human life condition in general in this part of the world. So, it is that moment when people say enough is enough, that we do not have to be divided and therefore ruled, that we can come together. And if we are stigmatized, so be it. Let us come together and make some demonstration so that the societies -the mainstream societies- start registering our presence, start acknowledging our presence and for the least put up with our presence, and possibly deal with it.

So, in some sense coming out can also mean declaration. Lastly, I would call coming out also as an activist turn. Well, why do I call it that way? Very often people do not declare anything, they just do it. And that doing it rather than saying it can also be coming out. I do the way I like to do. But there is also an activist position. What is activist position? Activist

position is taking a stand and in some sense living one's life or shaping one's immediate environment based on that position.

Suppose I am an environment activist, I would make a political statement by cycling to my class instead of going by car, reduce the carbon footprint; or it could be a well-orchestrated demonstration as well. Activism can happen in many million ways, it could be in a silent form or it could be coming out with colour, pageantry, brightness and noise. It can take the shape of a rant, protest, blogging and wide reach.

So, I have covered both the parts now, both the parts in the sense that they look opposite, though they complement each other. Let me revise. Disability passing can happen either way, disabled people can pass as non-disabled and non-disabled can pass as disabled; it is context specific. And very often passing happens as a survival tactic, as a management of hostile context, as a rhetorical implementation and in the least some favour seeking or just a management of the environment, say a visual environment.

Coming out, on the other hand is on the opposite side; it involves talking to oneself – acknowledgement; an inner acknowledgment that I am okay, I am fine with myself. It can involve protection. Instead of managing survival, here it involves an active position to protect oneself, to protect one's identity, legacy, thought and sovereignty; it involves not just the individual; it involves families, it involves friendships, it involves alliances between groups, it involves communities with a specific purpose and most importantly it involves a peculiar kind of language of coming out. And that could be intramural, within the four walls, quietly happening by way of transformation. And it could be extramural, where demonstrations, commentaries, embrace of the subaltern position and so on can take place.

So, these two positions form two of the key concepts in Disability Studies. And, as much as unique to Disability Studies, they are found in other identity based movements as well. For example, I cited the case of LGBT pride show in Chennai -coming out happens in gendered spaces. For example, girls coming out so that they voice protest against patriarchy; for example, some girls chop off their hair, just to make a statement, *look I like to do what pleases me, what looks good on me rather than what looks great for you.*

So, coming out is a performance as much as a speech act. And lastly, coming out can take many narrative forms; it could be a rant, it could be an act of writing. For example, Georgina

Kleege, a disability studies critic (and she is blind), talks about her autobiography. She is blind actually, but she says an act of writing made her blind. What does that mean? It means that only by an act of writing, she discovered inner speeches, transformations in herself, which she otherwise would not have discovered.

So, what am I saying at the conclusion stage? Well, coming out can be therapeutic. Lots and lots of people come out, not necessarily in the same way. Some have to just weep, some have to just laugh it away, some have to write an essay to come, some have to quietly write a diary, some have to confess with one's friend and some have to make a pride march; it totally depends. And these two are very complementary that way.