

Trauma and Literature
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Lecture – 27
Malabou’s The Ontology of the Accident – Part 8

(Refer Slide Time: 00:16)

to allow for resistances is to believe that everything is still possible, it is to believe in the wholly other origin and to hang on to this idea. Destructive plasticity prohibits envisaging precisely the *other possibility*, even if it were an *a posteriori* possibility. It has nothing to do with the tenacious, incurable desire to transform what has taken place, to reengage in the history of the phantasm of an other history; it does not match any unconscious tactical strategy of opening, the refusal of what is, in the name of what could have been.

The denegation that accompanies anosognosia—a brain pathology whereby patients are unable to recognize themselves as ill—is not denegation in the Freudian sense. When the patient does not see that his left side is paralyzed, when he feels neither pain nor anxiety after a major brain injury, he is not responding to an affective

This is an NPTEL course entitled “Trauma and Literature” on Catherine Malabou’s “The Ontology of the Accident”. This is a very important text for us, philosophically as well as in the level of conceptual understanding of how literature and trauma can be studied together.

There will be a concluding session on Malabou’s importance as a philosopher especially in the tradition of neuroscience, philosophy; continental philosophy and neuroscience that she is bridging with this text. It is to know how we could map this interesting convergence with neuroscience and cognitive philosophy and map that into an understanding of literature in original and new understanding of literature.

She talks about the idea of destructive plasticity and how because this entire book could be seen as a project to acknowledge and articulate destructive plasticity and to define the ontology of that category, outside of the ontology of the parameters of knowledge, so it is something outside what is classified and classifiable.

But at the same time, it is something that Malabou is positioning herself to engage with. In other words, it is trying to give an ontological framework to something that deontologizes reality, deontologizes the being. The idea of destructive plasticity is something which completely mutates the being. This is something we talked about, how it not a metamorphosis into something else or just a continuation from the original entity, but it is a production of something entirely new.

It is to know how this deontologization is something that can be given an ontological framework through philosophy. The equation or the interesting relationship between destructive plasticity and possibility or the production of possibility is talked here. Destructive plasticity prohibits envisaging precisely the other possibility, even if it were a posteriori possibility.

A posteriori is something that happens after the event. It is not something which happens after the change. The possibility of the being, you can replace the word possibility with being, the production of the being after the event. If we equate thus that way the being is connected to the earlier entity. There is an event which separates the earlier being and the new being, but then there is a continuity as well.

Destructive plasticity prohibits that, it prohibits envisaging that. If we go back to the medical case studies that Malabou had mentioned trauma, certain kinds of trauma which completely change the subject and that subject becomes something else entirely different person with an entirely different sense of personality and personhood. It becomes the concept of destructive plasticity, the experience of destructive plasticity.

It has nothing to do with the tenacious, incurable desire to transform what has taken place, to re-engage in the history of the phantasm of another history. It does not match any unconscious tactical strategy of opening, the refusal of what is, in the name of what could have been. This destructive plasticity is not a re-engagement in historical framework. In other words, it is not a re-engagement in our temporal sense, the subject of re-engage has become something else temporally speaking.

It is a complete departure from that temporal framework, is a complete departure from any tactical strategy of opening. It is not something that is opening up into a different kind of subject, it is away from that as well as a completely different thing entirely. And destructive plasticity is a potential for that difference which has nothing to do with a connection with the earlier subject, earlier state.

It is not the production of another possibility. It is an entirely different entity because the moment one uses the word possibility there is some kind of a connection we are making between an earlier state and later state, as the production possibility is temporal possibility; it flows with time and space. But destructive plasticity is a complete departure from any spatial temporal strategy, from any spatial temporal connection with any self.

(Refer Slide Time: 05:04)

of what could have been.

The denegation that accompanies anosognosia—a brain pathology whereby patients are unable to recognize themselves as ill—is not denegation in the Freudian sense. When the patient does not see that his left side is paralyzed, when he feels neither pain nor anxiety after a major brain injury, he is not responding to an affective imperative of unconsciously calculated blindness. He does not see because he cannot see, that's all.

Destructive plasticity deploys its work starting from the exhaustion of possibilities, when all virtuality has left long ago, when the child in the adult is erased, when cohesion is destroyed, family spirit vanished, friendship

The denegation of what accompanies anosognosia, so this particular pathology that Malabou talks about anosognosia which is a medical state where what happens essentially in this particular state of being that patients or subjects suffering from this, they fail to recognize themselves and this rejection of recognition, the failure of recognition that one cannot recognize oneself at all.

This is in a way becomes an extreme example of destructive plasticity. The last part of this book is also rejection of the Freudian understanding of denegation and there is something Malabou talks about. “The denegation that accompanies anosognosia, a brain pathology

whereby patients are unable to recognize themselves as ill, is not denegation in a Freudian sense.” Patients or subjects they can recognize themselves, cannot recognize their illness.

They cannot recognize the disease and that becomes a medical state. But it is not a denegation in a Freudian sense. There is a clear departure that Malabou is making from the Freudian idea of the unconscious, from the Freudian understanding of the uncanny, the unconscious of traumatic neurosis because the Freudian study of psychoanalysis or psychoanalytical study of trauma it looks at trauma as some type of a temporal category.

The subject moves from one temporal point to another temporal point. But there is a temporal continuity, even there is discontinuity, the discontinuity is accommodated in a particular temporal frame. But when it comes to destructive plasticity in a way that Malabou defines the discontinuity is perfect, there is no connection at all to any earlier state of being or any earliest state of recognition.

It is not a denegation in a Freudian sense, it is an extreme form of denegation where patients are unable to recognize themselves or their disease. They do not understand, they do not appreciate, they do not experience the fact that they are ill and that lack of experience, lack of recognition is something that Malabou wants to highlight, especially in terms of how that connects to the quality of destructive plasticity.

When the patient does not see that his left side is paralyzed, when he feels neither pain nor anxiety after a major brain injury, he is not responding to an affective imperative of unconsciously calculated blindness. He does not see because he cannot see that is all. We talked about in last session the idea of, the effective flatness, this pure indifference to anything around you and the inability to connect either positively or negatively to what is around one.

That becomes a clear symptom, Malabou says about destructive plasticity. It is a case, a real medical case Malabou is offering. It is a case of anosognosia where the patient does not feel any anxiety or any pain after any brain injury and that de-recognition of pain, that rejection of

pain, the rejection of recognition is not anything to do with some unconscious strategy of blindness or some unconscious strategy.

Some unconscious calculation of shutting down, it has got nothing to do with any unconscious motor. There is no motive behind it. He does not see because he cannot see, it is a physical imperative, he cannot see. It is a complete rejection. There is no unconscious strategy at work and that is the clear departure from the Freudian model that Malabou is making. The unconscious is a strategic space for Freud.

The unconscious is an intentional space, there is a lot of intention in the unconscious of Freud and he consider unconscious of Freud theorizes. When there is trauma, even when there is shutdown, there is some type of a motive behind that from the unconscious level that Freud always draws on that template. In the case of Malabou, there is a clear rejection that does not have motive.

This is a physical shutdown, a complete corporeal shutdown. It is just impossible to have in recognition. This is the clear case of destructive plasticity and that is exactly what Malabou mentions. This is the potential, this is the event, and this is the situation, the condition that needs to be articulated. Destructive plasticity deploys its work starting from the exhaustion of possibilities. That is a very important term and exhaustion of possibilities.

There is no strategy, there is no manipulation, there is no intentionality and there is no possibility. It is a complete exhaustion of possibilities; it is rather as we mentioned in one of our previous sessions is a liquidation of possibility. Shutdown, liquidation, and exhaustion; a closure. When all virtuality has left long ago, when the child in the adult is erased.

The child is erased, so in other words there is no imaginative possibility in destructive plasticity, is a complete shutdown of senses, a complete shutdown of any connect, any cognitive connect to anything around us.

(Refer Slide Time: 10:19)

lost, links dissipated in the ever more intense cold of a barren life.

The negative possibility, which remains negative until it is exhausted, never becomes real, never becomes unreal either, but remains suspended in the post-traumatic form of a subject who misses nothing—who does not even lack lack, as Lacan might have written—remains to the end this subjective form that is constituted starting from the absence from the self. No psychoanalytic development of negativity is currently able to approach this possibility.

Go find in the great chest of metamorphosis something to dress and embody this ego that emerges from unthinkable nothingness, this enigma of a second birth that is not rebirth. Herein lies the philosophical difficulty

When cohesion is destroyed, family spirit vanished, friendship lost, links dissipated in the ever more intense cold of a barren life. Malabou is almost poetic in quality. But what it describes the way is a complete barrenness, complete nakedness of life. There is no connect at any level. There is no kinship, there is no connect, there is no intentionality.

It is just the naked barren self with no possibilities left and that can happen over extreme case of trauma, an extreme case of brain injury, and an extreme case of shock where the subject completely disconnects with everything else and also from themselves and that becomes a pure case of destructive plasticity. In other words, there is no deeper framework left. There is no family framework left. There is no kinship framework left.

This is a very clear departure from the Freudian model of psychoanalysis, it just departs away. There is no kinship structure, there is no deeper structure. There is no economy of association left or available to the subject. The negative plasticity, which remains negative until it is exhausted and never becomes real, never becomes unreal either; but remains suspended in a post-traumatic form of a subject who misses nothing.

Who does not even lack as Lacan might have written, remains to the end this subjective form that is constituted starting from the absence from the self. This is a very beautiful and perfect way to put it. It does not even lack. Even the recognition of absence is not there that is what is

meant away. It does not lack, there is no recognition, there is no awareness of absence shall we say and his lack of awareness is so absolute that even absence not being aware of.

There is no awareness of absence or recognition of absence. It becomes a suspended condition between real and the unreal. It is not something which can be defined even through an absence. Absence can be a definition, but even that is unavailable, so it lacks lack, it does not even lack. There is no lack aware, there is no absence aware that is recognized. Even absence of signifier is unavailable, even absence of the coordinate is unavailable in this condition.

It is a pure absence from the self because the moment there is some awareness of the self, self will be able to understand what is absent, so even that awareness is absent. The absence of absence or rather the absence of awareness of any absence around the self. It just sounds a bit complicated, but actually it is quite simple. The subjects not even aware of its own absence or what it lacks and that is connected to the idea of cognitive flatness that Malabou talks about.

It is a complete flat state of being, is a flattening of cognitive possibility. No psychoanalytic development of negativity is currently able to approach this possibility. This is the poverty of psychoanalysis, the poverty of philosophy, the poverty of the continental study of mind or self. There is no study which is currently available to approach this possibility. This state of being is not something which is defined or studied by any school of thought at this point of time.

(Refer Slide Time: 13:52)

Ontology of the Accident

resolutely, that “it is dangerous to essenciate.”¹⁰¹ Not only because essentializing is a steamroller that levels accidents only imperfectly—so that accidents always threaten to damage essence itself *a posteriori*. But even more, and especially because, contrary to what Heidegger claims,¹⁰² the history of being itself consists perhaps of nothing but a series of accidents which, in every era and without hope of return, dangerously disfigure the meaning of essence.

At the end, she talks about the dangers of essentialism. With this idea of plasticity, it moves away from any idea of essentialism. It is a very post-structuralist study of trauma.

One of the earliest things when looking at Malabou, is that we need to look at Malabou as offering an alternative model to study of trauma which is a more post-structuralist model. And by post-structuralist, there is no equation between signifier and signified. No cat and the feline creature cat; they are completely dissociated in a post-structuralist frame, cat can mean anything.

This complete break of the delinking between signifier and signified is something that post-structuralism produces. Malabou and this is why she is interesting. She is someone who borrows the Derridan model, the Derridan theory and applies that to an alternative understanding of trauma which is an understanding of absence and how that articulation, that awareness of absence, true philosophical framework is an important engagement to be made.

There is no theory of that because at the moment, there is no articulation of that, and no philosophy about that. What she is trying to do is trying to give an ontological framework to the deontologizing event of trauma. If we look at trauma as something which deontologizes, breaks the subject, dissipates subjects, and completely destabilizes the subject, one gives an ontological framework to that event.

It is important to this attempt to engage with that kind of an understanding of the accident as something which breaks ontology that is how to give a theoretical, philosophical, or shall we say an epistemic framework to understand the accident. Therein lies the project and the title of this book “The Ontology of the Accident”. Not only because essentializing is a steamroller that levels accidents only imperfectly but also accidents always threaten to damage essence itself a posteriori.

There is a danger of essentialism because of essentializing is a steamroller. It levels away all accidents imperfectly and accidents in that interpretative framework, accidents begin to emerge as an a posteriori condition that something which happens after the event. But even more and especially because contrary to what Heidegger claims, the history of being itself consists perhaps of nothing but a series of accidents.

Which in every era and without hope of return, dangerously disfigure the meaning of essence. This is the final statement with which the entire narrative ends. But the final theory is very beautiful and very poignant. What Malabou is saying is that being itself should be seen as a series of accidents and that itself takes away any quality of essence, any quality of the essential self.

There is no essential self. The essential self is something which is mutable, which can be broken, which can be desubjectivize, which can be deontologize at any given point of time because being consists of nothing but a series of accidents. Accident is always a potential way to happen and there is a possibility of looking at this historically, there is a possibility of looking at this on a more macro framework to a political paradigm.

But the important thing is the most fundamental thing that Malabou is concluding with is this idea of the being as something which constantly destabilizes itself is like an auto-destabilization, that model of being is important for us to understand because it dangerously disfigures the meaning of essence. There is no essence to the self and this is the fundamental premise of the book.

It does not look at the accident as something which is a continuation of the essence in some sense. The accident is something which is complete departure from the essence and that departure clearly reveals that there is no essence in the first place, the idea of the being is always a series of accidents or potential accidents waiting to happen. In one sense, it is up nihilistic kind of a book because it looks at the complete absence of essence.

But that nihilism also contains the possibility of plurality in a certain sense that this possibility of producing different kinds of essence at different points of time. And that again makes it very post-structuralist in a way medical as well as philosophical sense. It is to conclude the session on Malabou's "The New Wounded" as well as "The Ontology of the Accident".

Where she says is we need to take a look at trauma outside the language model, outside the knowledge model, outside the framework of recognition as something which is completely outside of it. In one sense, it is impossible to define it. In another sense, it is also important to engage with it at some level because the moment we say it is outside the nervous system that it becomes a form of engagement.

We are not trying to bring it inside the knowledge system, we are not trying to bring it inside the language system. But we are trying to aware, we are trying to acknowledge his departure from that system and that acknowledgement is a first step towards giving in some kind of ontological framework. The acknowledgement of this complete departure from the normoactive narrative, the acknowledgement of this complete departure, absolute departure from the normal metabolic biological, linguistic narrative.

That acknowledgement itself goes a long way in understanding what accident is and how can we define it in a post-Freudian model, in a post-structuralist model, in a post-continental philosophy model. Malabou draws in neuroscience, she draws in figures like Damasio, Joseph LeDoux quite a bit and then she converges that tradition of understanding of the self with the philosophical tradition of Spinoza.

We spend some time with Spinoza and thus how Malabou looks at Spinoza. This convergence when it comes to philosophy and neurobiology is very important, especially for us looking at trauma through the lenses of literature. If we look at literature as a fluid medium of representation, the fluidity of representation of literature is something which we can accommodate the different discourses from philosophy, neurobiology, etc., through the frame of fiction.

If we take a look at fiction as a medium which can combine actuality with possibility, as a medium which can combine reality with imaginative possibility that itself becomes a very important medium to represent. In certain sense, fiction perhaps comes closest to representing this experience of an accident. Malabou talks about Kafka and she talks about Kafka's fiction as an approximation of destructive plasticity.

It is not a clear representation or a complete representation because there is some residual humanism left in Kafka. It comes quite close to representing the complete absence of agency, a complete absence of the body, absence of ontology, etc. Kafka's fiction can be seen as a very complex model through which this kind of accident, the ontology of the accident can be represented.

Therein lies the significance of fiction and trauma studies today because fiction can represent what Malabou does in philosophy. It brings in philosophy, brings in neurobiology and brings in psychiatric and then combines everything and just produces a free fluid medium which plays between possibility and reality, which plays between event and accident to a large extent and also blurs the borderlines of event and accident.

In the process, what gets revealed is that a being what we call it or the essence of what we call it is always already an accident and that is something Malabou concludes with the being or the idea of a sense always already contains the possibility of accident, the possibility of deontologization. Any ontology contains within itself always already contains within itself the possibility of deontologization and that itself becomes very post-structuralist understanding of the self.

A self which is always capable of auto-fracturing, auto-mutation, metamorphosis. That kind of a self which is fluid in quality, which is always breaking, possible to break away from any fantasy of origin that self becomes very important in Malabou's understanding. So origin is a fantasy; but accident is a reality in Malabou's study. Origin is a convenient fantasy, essence is a convenient fantasy that we have in our mind to have our sense of selfhood. But an accident reveals the fantastic quality of this.

The accident reveals that any knowledge of origin, any knowledge of essence is actually a convenient fantasy and therein lies the political significance of accident that when you have an accident in a sense of Malabou talks about what gets revealed in a certain sense and also very dramatically is a constructed quality of essence, the constructed quality of self that is something Malabou sort of brings in towards the end.

That makes accident quite political in quality as well because we talk about regimes of power, we will talk about the politics of governance, we will talk about the constructed quality of governance. So accident; it can be a form of a violent accident, it can be form of an epistemic accident or any accident for that matter which is clear departure from any essence.

It reveals the constructed quality of the essence and it reveals the essence as always already embedded in the accidents that becomes a very post-structuralist understanding of trauma, accident, injury and also identity; all becomes sort of connected categories. But not oppositional categories, but connected categories in a certain sense.

She is someone who needs to be studied rigorously especially if we are looking at trauma through the lenses of literature because she brings in philosophy and neurobiology and neuropsychology and mix it together and then we have something like fiction, something like "Mrs. Dalloway" or "Toba Tek Singh" or some other texts that we have covered in this course.

But this framework where all this convergence has happened in a complex way it becomes very interestingly mappable into fiction and there lies the possibility of newer reading in trauma fiction and looking at fiction, looking at novels, looking at poetry as complex

representation of accident or event, complex representation of identity and injury and “Mrs. Dalloway” is a classic case in point.

We could look at “Mrs. Dalloway” through the lens of Malabou how the accident is something which is always already happening in the self and how they disconnect the cognitive flatness, the cognitive disconnect that the subject experiences are the product of accidents rather than any recognition of absence. This model holds onto an understanding of literary fiction and also literary theory because when we are looking at a very post-structuralist model of trauma which is quite interesting and original in quality.