

Literary and Cultural Disability Studies: An Exploration
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Lecture – 4

Autobiography and Disability: A Review via the Writings of Ved Mehta

Today the topic is autobiography, the theme actually, under the broader rubric of disability literature and genre okay. Today the topic is very exciting. The first part of this lecture is called “Autobiography, Blindness, Lives of Intimacy: A Review via the Writings of Ved Mehta.” So that is the topic. As you know every literary form, autobiography, letters and so on reveal something unique and idiosyncratic about disability.

Autobiography, well it is stuff about oneself and one’s place in the world okay, so that is what autobiography is. As an example, I am going to take the writings of Ved Mehta and as you know autobiography, well is a mode of self-expression, self-exploration and introspection can be about lots and lots of themes actually. This time it is going to be about lives of intimacy, interesting stuff. Now, who is Ved Mehta?

Ved Mehta is an Indian-American writer. He left India in the late 1940s and ever since remained there. He has written 11 autobiographical volumes fondly nicknamed by the author as ‘Continents of Exile.’ Please note the word exile and he has written at least 13 other books that crisscross across fields like philosophy, history, politics, film and much more okay. So, we are talking about a dynamic writer and for our purpose he is blind.

He lost his sight due to meningitis before the age of 4. Before the partition his family hailed from Pakistan. After the partition, they were one of those who fled to India, the Indian side of Punjab and he did his schooling in the Dadar school for the blind, for primary school in Bombay, which is one of the early schools for the blind in India. Then he went to America for good where he joined Arkansas school for the blind and then did his higher degrees in Oxford, Pomona, Harvard and then he became a staff writer for the New Yorker and so on. So that is a quick intro or CV if you like and now let us get into work. Continents of Exile, what is it? Continents in Mehta's

oeuvre is a very dynamic term, it does not just reflect the dictionary sense of the word continent, a huge landmass and so on. It is much more idiosyncratic.

For example, what are the continents of exile that inform his autobiography? Well roughly 6 in number India, Britain, America, psychoanalysis, [see look at this, psychoanalysis is conceived of as a huge system, a continent] the culture of the blind and the New Yorker. So, these are the 6 continents that we are talking about and each of them gives him in some sense a sense of exile. Exile is there are many meanings to the word exile.

You may consult Edward Said who gave a fantastic purview of exile. One kind of exile is forceful banishment, you see lots of people lose their livelihood, lands, houses because of deforestation, maybe building dams. So some people are evicted forcefully, banishment. The second kind of exile is voluntary you see, for example, you may withdraw from active evening extravaganza just to get to write your term paper or exam. You need to withdraw to do some writing so it is a kind of voluntary exile from active evening life, say Friday-Saturday evening extravaganza right. And there is a third kind of exile which is you know you kind of remove yourself from yourself and withdraw a little bit and look at your own self okay. So that is continents of exile Ved Mehta's huge oeuvre, a compendium of autobiography talking about different things like psychoanalysis, blind culture, America and so on.

But today because I took autobiography and disability as a theme today, why autobiography? Because autobiography can reveal certain things that other literary forms, for example, fiction cannot and autobiography can also bring a notion of authenticity about one's self-expression. So that is why the black pride movement, gender activism, disability activism, LGBT activism they hugely draw on life writings in general and autobiography in particular.

This does not mean autobiography is more factual than others, instead, it is a more authentic literary form than the others actually. So in that sense when you talk about intimacy that is the best form to seek recourse to actually, right. So having said that why intimacy? Well intimacy is private and because it is private it is pushed to the margin, everyone is interested in social

contracts, public life, public performance, performativity, interpersonal relationships that look conspicuous and measurable.

However, the realm of intimacy is as important as other relationships because it shapes people. Intimacy shapes who I am and intimacy also informs the stuff of our cognitive orientation, emotional orientation and behavioural orientation. Which part of continents of exile is more about intimacy? Yeah, you guessed it right, it should be continent of psychoanalysis.

Because psychoanalysis is the stuff about our emotion, sentiments, thought process, reflective processes and attachments and love, sex, relationships, friendships and secrets okay. As a system of thought, it is not much old, maybe 100 years. You can consider Freud's "Interpretation of Dreams" published in 1900 as a landmark moment and the beginning of psychoanalysis. And well as a system of thinking about the private lives of people it began spreading across very widely.

Now it is almost there everywhere in the world but it is more famous, more popular in America, Europe, Latin America and so on okay. Why? Because of historical reasons the way psychoanalysis spread in these parts of the world growing consumerism, individual lifestyles and so on okay. Mehta underwent deep psychoanalysis in the late 1960s and 70s to make sense of his failures in getting the better half of his choice and we want to make sense of his failures in getting his love life right.

After repeatedly failing in love life at least four times, Mehta ends up on a psychoanalytic couch. A system where it's a classical Freudian system where you lie down on a couch and your analyst sits at your back and since the room is cut off from the rest of the world it is quiet. It induces, in fact Mehta calls his analyst's room, Mr Robert Bak, a Hungarian psychoanalyst settled in America, he calls his analyst's room a telephone booth without a telephone. Well, telephone booth consists of old kinds of telephoning before the arrival of mobile phone okay, right. So he sits there in a semi-sleepy, semi-drowsy, semi-dreamy, reverie like situation and keeps talking. An analyst slowly prompts him from behind. Why do analysts sit behind? Because eye to eye contact between the analyst and the analysand can provoke resistance on the part of the

analysand. And therefore classical Freudian system believed that one should be away from eyesight invoking images of blindness and careful hearing okay. So, he went there and the way Freudianism prompted him, it in fact introduced a special kind of nerve into his writing the way he thought about himself, his family in India especially his mom and so on. Look at the following example.

In one of the therapeutic sessions, classical Freudian sessions with Robert Bak, Mehta remembers the time early childhood maybe before four when he had some sight and that moment when he could see his Mamaji, that is mom naked as she was taking a bath. Mehta confesses to Bak that sight continues to torture him and that with guilt and that guilt continues to influence his love life.

Well, the scene of the nakedness of parents or parents' own sexual life when children are exposed to it Freud calls that primal scene and the guilt connected with naked Mamaji and the way it pursues him reminds us, is pretty much symbolic of the idea of Oedipus complex. Oedipus complex is based on the ancient Greek myth where the son Oedipus kills his own father so as to marry his own mom, make his mom his wife.

Well, Freud sort of universalized the story to arrive at the Oedipus complex. Is Oedipus complex nonsense because it is universalized? Yes and no. Yes, because you universalize a particular ethos, stories emerging from a particular ethos and it is from an aggressive male point of view. No, because there is a general if I put it like this, you may all agree girl children have more affinity with the dad and boys have more affinity with mom. And there is a general affection that crosses gender that way so as to you know support security, familial life and so on. If I put it that way it does not sound that crude and disgusting in the way one would put bluntly the story of Oedipus complex okay. Now having recalled that story the naked guilt complex associated with it Mehta unlocks a whole continent hidden in his head and mind and body that about the life of intimacy which is the stuff that we are concerned about.

So, this is the most interesting aspect of studying autobiography to reveal the hidden crevices of any identity or identity performance actually. In this case, Mehta's relationship with his

childhood, mom, it seems plays a crucial role in his future relationships and not the guilt complex alone, it could be a pattern of relationship, the pattern of caregiving which he acquired during his childhood.

The expectations of security, feeling, the expectations, desires, the nature of bonding that happens with his girlfriends and so on that becomes in some sense reflective of his relationship with mom. Look at this situation this guy settles in America and the trials and tribulations that come with desires, romantic affairs, fantasies, disappointments, aspirations that happen in America in some sense to make sense of it he goes back to his memory of his childhood.

In that sense, in the psychoanalytic system whether it involves lives of intimacy and otherwise, it looks like one's childhood becomes very crucial, that is I think is the nature of continent of psychoanalysis we come to be exposed to in the writings of Ved Mehta. How does that get revealed? Well, long memoirs, Mehta published memoirs all for love in early 2000, I think it is 2001. It is a very nice book with 4 stories each about each love affair in candid details, of course from Mehta's perspective and he has written it with explicit permission from people whom he was involved with his women in love and the last chapter is about 6-7 years of psychoanalysis sitting in a couch and what happened there and these psychoanalytic encounters enduring influence on his approach to writing.

Writing based on reflection, writing based on his understandings of attachment and so on okay. So that is the stuff that we are talking about. And how do psychoanalytic sessions do that? For that, we need to understand the concept of transference and countertransference. These are the two concepts that involve the stuff of psychoanalysis and the stories that it says about the world. Transference basically Freud says you go for psychoanalysis.

Yes, but why does psychoanalytic listening differ from other kinds of listening. Freud's answer is well in psychoanalytic listening the analyst makes himself or herself available like a mirror. What does a mirror do? It reflects back whether you have combed your hair, your makeup, your dress, your smile, suppose you go with some tears it reveals exactly what you are at least at the realms of appearance.

If you are tearful the mirror shows you to be tearful. If you are smiling and happy and jubilant, the mirror shows back as much. A psychoanalyst is trained to be like a mirror. Suppose you go to your friend and relay some disappointments in life about something, say a break in a relationship, the other person may begin actually talking about himself or herself which is very annoying.

Instead of listening to you about your trials and tribulations, they begin about their own story and then you know to give you a sort of advice, well you end up getting more disappointed than before, after that encounter. Here in the psychoanalytic mirroring process which is called transference, basically you project as a patient, you project all your fantasies, desires, disappointments, happiness, anxieties, fears come what may on the analyst who is now a mirror who will reflect back on what you bring to the psychoanalytic session. This is called transference. However, the analysts are not non-human, they are human. Sometimes they can exactly do what your proverbial friend did I was talking about a minute ago, basically he will talk about himself. So bringing one's own material back reflecting back without mirroring is called countertransference, one can reveal one's own.

So, what I have done now is how exactly Ved Mehta's autobiography talks about or goes to talk about intimacy through a psychoanalytic lens, okay and it is not a requirement that all autobiography follows that trajectory. People can write autobiographies without knowing anything about psychoanalysis. Since this is the thought that we are approaching I gave you a broad survey. Now in part two of this lecture, we will talk about blindness and intimacy and attachment okay. Thank you.