

Literary and Cultural Disability Studies: An Exploration
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Lecture – 5
Themes of Attachments, Blindness and
Infrastructures of Care in Mehta’s Intimate Worlds

Part 2 of this lecture on Ved Mehta, I call it “Attachments, blindness and infrastructures of care” the story of Kiltiken. So, the written sample from his autobiography is with you now and it is called Kiltiken. This is a playful way of calling each other at Oxford during Mehta's generation, so maybe they call each other Kilti with a suffix ken, Ved ken how are you Kiltiken and so on.

So that is the name and Kilti is one of Mehta’s person whom he had a romantic love with and that fell out. The excerpt with you is all about how they meet each other and how they fall in love and then lead to situations where they almost decide to get married and then there is something that went wrong and a plan for wedding does not take off. So that is roughly the story.

But here I thought I can come with this story because disability in general and blindness too reveal a lot about human intimacy and that is why it is good to close read this excerpt. One of the ways in which one can approach intimacy involving disability is to seek recourse to two concepts. One is infrastructures of care and the second is attachment. Let me talk about infrastructures of care.

Caring is what we are, we either give care or take care and also we involve different institutions of caring. Several cultures do it in different ways. For example, infrastructures of caring include family, friendship, hospital, different learning environments, coupledness, romantic love and different kinds of friendship. So, several societies involve infrastructures of care differently.

Why disability can be a distort to look at infrastructures of care? Because one, different kinds of disability require different infrastructures of care. For example, a person with a wheelchair may include a level playing field where there is proper ramps, toilets or accessible and then a free-flowing floating facility in the university to go from one place to another, in a recreational

environment like dance an open attitude that dancing in a wheelchair is as aesthetically appealing and elegant as much as dancing with your legs intact. So that is the kind of infrastructure I am talking about. And because disability can speak a lot, how does it speak about infrastructures? For example, it will talk about infrastructures connoting a level playing field, it can connote intimacy where things happen.

For example, giving a bath to someone because somebody is not able to do it oneself. That person could be a partner or a paid assistant. Here in Mehta's case, he has two notions of a care infrastructure. One is his childhood family in India, you know childhood family memory in India is about a huge joint family like a banyan tree all interdependent, noisy, chaotic. And in India, his memory also includes siblings, parents and competing or different attitudes of his mom and dad. Mom in some sense believes in pre-modern ways of doing things, take Mehta the child, Veda, Veda the blind child to magicians, ayurvedic practitioners, soothsayers and so on. His father who was a medical doctor trained in the western world believes in individualism. He wants his son to become a proud cosmopolitan individual who can you know crisscross continents and be a person of his own, designer of his own destiny. So these are two competing infrastructures, one the pre-modern and the other cosmopolitan which he had in India and the new care infrastructure in America which he is you know exiled into or he has made a home of his own in such infrastructures as well.

And what are those infrastructures? One of the infrastructures in America is individualism. Well, you need care, one needs care in America like anybody else but that care comes with the notion of individuality. My right to caring, my negotiations with caring, me as an individual negotiating social contracts that involve caring. So even for example going to psychoanalysis for that matter is about an adult sorting out one's problem with a professional. You do not have to reveal that you are going through something bizarre and disastrous to your friends all the time, for an event you can just go to a shrink, get it done and which is as legitimate and unique as the infrastructures of listening and caring available elsewhere like Veda's childhood India where people you know,, it is like a banyan tree of relationships, one is dependent on the other and there is nothing called private transference and countertransference happening.

So as a blind individual and a writer, he needs and rightly navigates through these competing infrastructures, one in social life and one in his own self which involves every atom of his body and mind okay. So those are two competing infrastructures. And why blindness should also be a powerful distort to understand attachment? For that, I need to explain what is attachment in the first place.

Well as people, we evolve human relationships right from infancy to the grave. We are sentimental people. We are a baggage of emotions, but we make a tiny cluster of relationships on which we depend upon for infrastructure for our sentiments, emotions, irrational side of self, affections, affectations to flourish and make what we are and that is called attachment.

And attachments for example could be one's parents, one's other half, person whom you are in love and attachments could be one's favourite teacher in a learning sense okay. So, these two blindness can reveal a lot when these two systems attachments and infrastructures of care are looked at through the prism of attachment and infrastructure. Let me illustrate this through this essay. Let me take first the attachment problem.

We feel when we become close to somebody or when there is an intimacy between two adults, the attachment relationships begin and when one person feels close to the other in an intimate relationship there are three things one may like to think that they share. One is the self, you include another person in your own self and how do you get that impression. When you share resources that come with both, perspectives and identity. Let me explain.

Resources; when two people are together in intimacy, in an intimate relationship they both assume in various degrees they are sharing resources. Kiltiken the reflective piece here reveals as much but with a difference. Here young Ved Mehta when sharing his inner resources with Kilti likes to pretend that he can see as much as other sighted colleagues.

If not pretend he would not at least talk about his blindness to Kilti why because he himself think that blindness is a liability and not a resource, that is the beginning of the problem. What is the price he pays? Well, the price he gets is he can present or perform a smarter side of him, share

his resourcefulness as a staff writer of the New Yorker for Kilti. Project a resource of him that he can walk, talk, perform without a prosthetic, no mobility cane please and he is as sexy as anyone else. So in some sense, an ability to see or an ability beyond typical blind people, the ability and sense of visual normalcy becomes a resource with which they bind together to evolve an intimate relationship.

For example, in Kiltiken piece you see that they are playful and talking in Oxford Oxonian English, they are talking about the duck pond, they are always talking about colours, they are always talking about you know the spectacular world. How much they can insert themselves into the spectacular. So, he creates a self in him that is visually resourceful that is the stuff he gives.

Well, you can call it ableism, an idea that ability alone and ability is the primary material on which anything is based. Without an ability to see, without an ability to walk, without an ability to perform and all that you are no one, that is the idea of ableism. An intellectual and emotional investment in the idea of ability. So that becomes a resource for them to bond together.

But the problem is why does it fail? Mehta looking at it in 2019 in the late 70s and so on he finds itself quite surprising why he did that and how he did that as a young person. What if he had revealed his blindness fully say carried a mobility cane and is not too much bothered about bumping into something revealed himself reading a braille book or revealed some things he cannot do. Without a fuller investment in the idea of ability if he had revealed his blindness, two things are possible. One possibility Mehta himself already said was that a lot of women who approached him about intimacy when they remind him about his disability he gets disappointed and either he moves away from them or they move away from him. The other possibility is that the theme of blindness will become an evolving care infrastructure between them. For example, he could give plenty of chances to his intimate partner Kilti to take charge to change the gender roles and to have a more practical and immersed descriptive relationship to expose each other's vulnerability more freely and to evolve robust romantic bubble among them by using all the structures of care available in America.

So this the second did not happen, Mia Mingus calls it “access intimacy” which is a kind of chemistry or intimate relationship based on access requirements where something becomes uniquely intimate. Another perspective about intimacy is when one feels that one is apart from sharing resources. I am talking about romantic love, heterosexual love, not yet talking about queer love and so on because I am specifically talking about romantic heterosexual love in the writings of Ved Mehta okay. Sharing a perspective and the perspective could be about your political point of view, your lifestyle, common concerns and so on, achievement, productivity and all that. It looks like each other's perspective sounds exactly the same, a transference and a countertransference relationship.

And the third thing people who are intimate share is identity, well they together make one identity, two bodies one soul that kind of thing or they respect each other's identity differences say racial differences and so on. And see stories, themes, narratives and desires that bring these two identities in some kind of harmony is entirely possible. But here look at two things that draw Mehta and Kilti about like the perspective.

For example, perspective as a model and a perspective about university education, Mehta tries to say yes when it is safe to say yes and says no when it is safe to say no to maintain the relationship in some sense false performance and that too does not last long. In evolving an attachment relationship much give and take happens, but when the gives and takes happen on illusory or fantasy-based resources that Mehta is as good as sighted.

I use good in the sense of performance. Mehta is sighted, Mehta is able to see with the ocular equipment of the eye and so on with the resources created by fantasy, perspectives created by fantasy and identity formation based on fantasy. It simply empties or drains one's resources inside and both feel that at some point something amiss between them is happening. In the case of Kilti the overwhelming character or negative character of patriarchy almost rips it apart.

In Mehta's case giving into ableism with the fantasy that he is not as much blind, I say it again as much blind becomes a drain on his intimate relationship. What else we can learn about intimacy and disability in this context? Well, when it comes to using disability as a knowledge resource to

understand intimacy we can jolly well know that disability can reveal can teach literature on intimacy, can give the following things.

The idea of self-revealing, the idea that one should be frank about care and one should give importance to normative consideration as much as individual differences. If there is something universal, if there is one theme that is universal, I would like to call it as vulnerability. Disability as a lens can reveal our vulnerable selves in a dynamic way and hiding those selves may be important sometimes, but not to oneself.

Disability disclosure to oneself and to others is a political act. Sometimes when I talk to someone on the telephone, I do not see the need to reveal my disability, but sometimes I need to do that so that it becomes important that the person is not taken aback by surprise and also as I maturely begin to understand my disability with all its limitations and pluses can be a powerful resource in a relationship.

Kiltiken is a fantastic autobiographical reflection, it is from a male point of view, however, it reveals a lot about vulnerability that gets hidden in a human relationship. We need infrastructures of care that differs from system to system. For example, in India family is still the primary infrastructure of care with all its plus and minuses. In America, it is the robustly built public institutions such as law, education, policing.

And many other public institutions are more or less robust and perfect and they prompt individualism and atomism introduce those elements in romantic relationships prompting a couple to disappear into their own bubble. But nevertheless, when disabilities are competent in both the infrastructures of care then it reveals some complications and even significance in striking or getting into intimacy because it gives us a unique perspective about sharing of resources, selfhood and personhood. Thank you.