

Vulnerability Studies: An Introduction

Prof. Pramod K Nayar

Department of English

University of Hyderabad

Week- 02

Lecture- 05

Group Discussion - Vulnerable Bodies

All right, welcome to our group discussion on vulnerable bodies. So, we have today, Nayana, who graduated from our MA program recently, Prateeti Chaudhuri, Megha Mohanty and Atul Nair from our doctoral group. So, in this group discussion, we'll focus on questions of vulnerable bodies. And, I noted from your points that all of you have something to say about both intrinsic vulnerability, that is innate and vulnerabilities introduced because of contexts, often called extrinsic or situational vulnerability. So, we'll start with that and I'll ask Nayana to go first on questions of vulnerability, intrinsic and fungibility of those bodies. Over to you Nayana.

Thank you, sir. So, I would like to begin this discussion by outlining some of the features or characteristics of bodies that make them intrinsically vulnerable. For example, I would like to start with the most basic characteristic, that is the mortality of the bodies. And by mortality, what I mean is the perishable nature of these bodies. So diseases are one of the elements that make the bodies vulnerable. Bodies can develop diseases that can destroy the integrity of these bodies. Diseases make bodies vulnerable in more than one aspect. Health is the most obvious aspect, but it spirals into many different forms of vulnerabilities as it affects a person's capacity to work and interact with the surroundings. Diseases, especially contagious or genetic, are associated with a stigma causing alienation of the affected individuals and their families. The social ostracism leads to poor medical and financial support, doubling the vulnerabilities of the already vulnerable bodies. Another aspect of mortality is related to the upkeep of these bodies. Bodies are not just vulnerable to diseases alone. Lack of proper nourishment can make these bodies perishable and mortal, that is, a body's dependence on external elements for survival. If these resources that the bodies depend on are limited, then the exhaustion of these resources will eventually affect the survival of the bodies. This kind of vulnerability is often seen in siege narratives where resources are limited and people have to fight one another for the sake of survival. Limited resources that we have on earth makes our existence similar to that of a siege narrative where all bodies are equally vulnerable to deprivation, but because of the social, economic and political factors, some are less vulnerable and ready to exploit people who

are more vulnerable. So that much is what I have on the mortality point. I would like to move on to another characteristic of bodies that make them vulnerable, that is fungibility.

So, the term fungible is an adjective used to describe commodities or products that are exchangeable. The term “fungibility” comes from economics where it is used to describe products that are mutually exchangeable, products that are not intrinsically valuable, products for which we assign, the external agents assign some value. So, to explain this more clearly, I would like to bring in the example of slave bodies in plantation narratives. In plantation narratives, humans are reduced to their bodies and the labor that these bodies can provide. In such a case, it doesn't matter who is doing the labor. There is no individuality for this kind of labor. So the only requirement of the plantation owners were bodies that could fulfill the need for labor. As a result, these bodies were not given any value other than the cost incurred by the slave owners in purchasing them and these bodies are always replaced by other bodies that are capable of doing or fulfilling the need for labor, making them fungible. Aside from bodies as a whole, biological matters that constitute a body have also become fungible with advancements in medicine. In a context where kidneys, hearts, tissues, etc could be replaced if needed would definitely cause a demand for these organs, making some people more vulnerable to organ harvesting. I would like to give the examples of certain texts, actually Manjula Padmanabhan's play *Harvest*, Margaret Atwood's *A Handmaid's Tale* and Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* are some texts that portray the vulnerability of the bodies as they become fungible. Apart from the bodily or the bodily fungibility or like the nature of fungibility caused by the bodily nature or the bodily matters, another point that I want to discuss is more contemporary, something that we are all facing today. The unemployment that haunts many is another aspect of human life that stems from the fungibility of bodies. Division of labor that drives people to focus in developing one skill alone makes them easily fungible as Chaplin portrays in *Modern Times*. With the development of technology to an extent where AI can do certain jobs, people become vulnerable to not just to other humans but machines as well. So that much is what I have on fungibility.

Thank you. Yes, it's interesting that you brought in labor towards the end and slave bodies because slave bodies are usually referred to as a pair of hands. They are not persons in their entirety but they're just hands as in economically productive hands. Prateeti also had something on intrinsic vulnerability in her point. So over to you now Prateeti.

So, I was initially looking about, looking at the word etymology of the word “vulnerable”. So if you're looking at the etymology, the word “vulnerable” stems from the Latin word “*vulnus*” and which means wound. And then from there we have “*vulnerare*” which means wounding. So basically, the stem or the stem of the word vulnerable is the stem of the word vulnerable. Stem, the root of the word vulnerable

comes from the fact that it is a physical affliction upon the body. So, on that elementary definition, we have different factors right such as aging, illness which of course cause vulnerability on the body. But then I would also like to point out how these different factors which cause intrinsic vulnerability upon the body also manifest outwardly onto the body, onto the skin in the form of symptoms. Or if we are talking about mental illness patients who have intrinsic vulnerability, right, due to the neurodivergent conditions. So, it appears outward onto the symptoms which also, so basically vulnerability is not always intrinsic as in it is not always within the body, but it also has a way of projecting outward which makes the subject appear vulnerable.

So yeah. Yeah, so makes the subject appear vulnerable. That's a nice turn of phrase. Megha, do you have anything to respond to in terms of what Nayana and Prateeti have said?

So, it is also, I mean it's also like sort of situational in the sense that it is ontological, yes, in the sense that all of us have bodies, all of us are vulnerable to like external things. Like we're open to gaze, to touch, to violence. But also, it is also very situational in the sense that our socio-economic position, our, say, ethnic origins, our religious background, all of it also makes us a sort of vulnerable to, this is different, places us in different kinds of vulnerable situations. Like say for example in terms of the migrant labourers that had to walk back home. So, it's also, they're also like vulnerable bodies in the sense that they are in the middle of a global pandemic, they are susceptible to a certain virus that is making everybody's bodies vulnerable. But it's also the socio-economic position that they don't have access, they didn't have access to modes of transport that sent them back home. They didn't have access. So many of them even died of starvation, many of them even got run over by trains. So, it's also like a sort of like each kind of each of these categories of vulnerabilities also spill over onto each other. So, that is how in real life it's all very messy, each category spills over doing that.

All right, thank you. Yes, those of us who are not speaking will mute their mics, that's going to reduce the intrusion. Yeah, Atul what do you have to say by way of response? Because Megha drew it all the way to the contemporary as did Nayana to talk about migrant bodies and labour and labouring bodies that were made more vulnerable precisely because they're labouring bodies. So, there was a very clear class angle to the vulnerability that Megha is pointing to in the case of the pandemic. So over to you Atul.

Yes, just to respond to Megha's idea of the situational nature of vulnerability, I would propose that the very idea of vulnerability is, therefore, entangled in nature in the sense that she mentioned how vulnerability spill over to various kinds of vulnerabilities. It undermines the whole idea of the human body being either sovereign or autonomous, which is a very conventional notion of the human body. I mean, one having a human body being able to take autonomous decisions being sovereign in itself, it undermines the

whole idea, it tells you how, A, the human body is intrinsically vulnerable to processes happening within the body as in biological processes within the body, like vulnerability to time, the fact that the body undergoes irreversible natural decay. So that leading inevitably towards the death of the body. That is one factor, the other factor is also that the human body is vulnerable to man-made processes such as war, political disturbances, government policies, for example, and even things like pandemics, which are obviously natural, but extraneous to the human body. So this would be my response to Megha's point about vulnerabilities spilling over from one form to the other.

Nayana has something about the... Prateeti, you have something to add. Yes, please go.

Yeah, so I was in continuation with Atul's point about different... of how vulnerability is spilling on to different forms, right? So, I would like to extend this point to talk about how vulnerability here is... when we're talking about vulnerable bodies, we're not just talking about the human body, but also other forms, other bodies, other non-human bodies, which are also rendered vulnerable because of human actions. So, because this is the age of the Anthropocene, right, where human driven actions are also manipulating or shaping nature to a certain extent. So, we also find that these human driven actions also render the non-human bodies like plants and animals vulnerable, as can be seen in a lot of industrial disasters like the Bhopal gas tragedy or Chernobyl or even the Minamata fish, where a lot of fishes were killed, right, because of the Minamata water poisoning. So that was what I wanted to continue, that vulnerability. ... when we are talking about vulnerable bodies and how everything spills over. So, if we are not just talking about one... primarily the human, but also what does the human do to make other species vulnerable as well?

That's important to note because in many ways, except decolonization of disaster itself, because we are expanding the notion of both vulnerability and disaster to include the non-human, but also if you were to push it one step further, it should include the non-living as well, because the damage we do to say soil or water or air and eventually to the non-human life forms that are part of that would also be disasters induced by humans, which would be called anthropogenic disasters. But over to you Megha, you have your hand up.

Yeah, so I wanted to add to what Atul talked about, the idea of the invulnerable self. So, I mean, so it was COVID that shattered any ideas of this idea of the invulnerable self that we had, which does not really exist in reality. Our existence is contingent upon a lot of other factors, nobody exists by themselves. So, this invulnerable self, which is characterized by, say, absolute autonomy, self-sufficiency and sort of impervious to be affected by any external factors. Because, COVID shattered this because it affected something that makes everybody vulnerable, the physical body.

So we saw this whole collapse of this idea that happened when everybody was sick and everybody was dying and the dead were in like a sort of plastic bags, you know, their loved ones were not around, they were just being buried and burnt and everything. It also sort of obliterated any physical markers of identity that like the dead have when they die. So that is something I wanted to share.

That ties in neatly with the point that Nayana had in her notes, which was to do with the loss of the individual when such a vulnerability reaches a point of crisis, which is basically all of us talking about the pandemic. And Nayana, over to you to just talk about the obliteration of the individual.

Yeah. So, as we're talking about vulnerability, I'm reminded of the definition or like an instance given by Judith Butler in one of her works. So, where she describes vulnerability as a way of imagining a community. So according to Butler, this very vulnerability is a uniting factor, like unifying factor. So, all of us are vulnerable. And that is like one common characteristic that we all have.

So but what is interesting is that how this very vulnerability becomes a dividing factor as well, as we try to exploit each other based on our vulnerabilities. So that reminds me of the one point or one characteristic of bodies that makes them vulnerable, that is the nature of the bodies that makes them prone to injuries like injurability. So, it is an intrinsic nature of the body and how it is exploited by humans, if we are like extending into non-humans like animals, then like how humans use the very nature of bodies that is injurability to exploit these bodies. So, for example, like injury can be so a pain can be inflicted on these bodies, so that if the bodies are pushed to a point where the bodies cannot take the pain, then the individuality is broken down. And as a result of breaking down of this individuality, all these bodies are entered just mere bodies in the sense without any individuality. And this makes these bodies that are subjected to pain, like vulnerable to the actions of the exploiter. In the sense, these exploiters tend to break these bodies so that the bodies will bend according to the will of the exploiter. So there the individuality of bodies are entirely stripped down. So, some examples are Abu Ghraib notes and the plantation narratives as well.

Yeah, and if you begin to see things only in terms of groups or populations, which is what we discussed yesterday when talking about biopolitics, then of course the individual ceases to matter. And it can be double-edged because welfare is also given based on that, but destruction of the groups can also be based on just numbers. Atul, do you have anything to say in response to Nayana's point about individualism and more accurately the loss of individuality.

Yes, just to respond to what Nayana said, vulnerability then becomes an extremely political concept in the sense that vulnerability could be weaponized in order to deny a

class of human beings their very existence as human beings. Their very humanity could be denied by virtue of the fact that their vulnerability is exploited. A, the vulnerability is first known and B, it is then exploited. So, vulnerability could very well be weaponized in a very political manner for gains of various kinds, could be commercial, could be political and so on.

Yeah, so the politics and the politicization, but even the mobilization of vulnerability can be seen as political, where the vulnerable come together to say, seek redress. For example, the Bhopal gas victims or the survivors from the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings. So that is also in many ways the mobilization of vulnerability, isn't it? So, I think Prateeti might have something to say on this particular issue.

So, I'm just thinking about like how this whole idea of forming groups together, right, on the basis of shared vulnerabilities that leads to the idea of the biosocial, biosociality of how we are forming a social group based on the biological, the shared biological vulnerability, or which we all share. And so, yeah. So, if I think that's, that's an interesting thing, way to think about it, like how are, how is this vulnerability then creating, so how is this creation of groups then bringing about the next step, which is resistance and resilience, right? So, you have a vulnerable body, and then a group of vulnerable bodies come together and form a biosociality. And then that biosociality then goes on to the next step to create resilience against said vulnerabilities in different ways. And that resilience can be maybe political resilience in the form of protests, as can be seen in the Gopal gas tragedy, or it can also be just living, trying to survive in whatever means possible as we read in Joe Sacco's *Palestine*. So, these are Palestine, Joe Sacco's graphic novel on Palestine, which, oh no, Palestine as well as *Safe Area Gorazde*, both. *Safe Area Gorazde*, yes, I'm sorry, I missed the text. So yeah, but then we saw those ideas of how vulnerability and that shared biosociality, which had, it also led to resilience, which was trying to make do with whatever resources they have, you know, because they have already faced this sort of situation before. So yeah.

Yeah, and that is important, because it is a rebuilding of the society by the vulnerable, when, for example, state intervention has been minimal, there's no welfare structure. Megha, do you have anything to say by way of response to both Atul and Nayana on this?

Yeah, so I want to add to what Prateeti said, in the sense that I would like to talk about this one case that happened. So, in the 1950s, there was, the British government conducted a sort of nuclear test, nuclear bomb test in this island state called the Republic of Kiribati. So the people who participated in this program, the technicians, especially, they later on went on to develop certain illnesses, because they had inhaled and ingested fallout particles from this experiment. So, it compromised their immune systems and altered their chromosomes, their genetic material, because of which later on, they started developing skin disorders and several types of cancers. Now, when they went back to the

government to ask for reparations, the government denied that all of these illnesses were because of this. So, this led them to sort of develop, to form groups, which were not only limited to only these people, but also, they made a sort of a transnational network, under which there were people suffering from similar things, but from different experiments, say people from Bhopal Gas Tragedy, who also suffer, who also suffer from similar kinds of things because of similar reasons. So, these biosocial networks, they were formed because firstly, they wanted people, other people to publicly know what they were suffering and why they were suffering it. And secondly, to demand the government to take responsibility. And also, the third reason is that they didn't want anyone else to suffer like they did, because these genetic mutations were inherited. So, they were transferable from bodies to other bodies throughout generations. So, the similar kind of network can be seen in case of the Bhopal gas strategy, such as Bhopal gas period, the Bhopal Gas Peedit Sangharsh Morcha or something and then there are NGOs as well, who are still fighting with the government to ask reparations from Union Carbide. So, this manifestation of sociality based on shared vulnerabilities also shows how these can be powerful motivators for political action as well as resistance.

Yes, and therefore, when the state fails or corporate exploitation makes it impossible for the NGO to recover, then what is it they do? They mobilize. I want to finish this off by looking at one particular subcategory, which would be refugeedom and displacement. And Nayana has something to do with, to say about Margaret Atwood and some poetry about refugees. So over to you Nayana, and then we'll move on to Atul.

So I'd like to begin by discussing two poems of Margaret Atwood. One is "Disembarking at Quebec", which deals with the fears and anxieties of first generation settlers in Canada. So, there is this one line in the poem "Disembarking at Quebec", I quote, "This space cannot hear or is it my own lack of conviction, which makes these vistas of desolation". So, what I'm trying to convey by quoting this line here is that, so when people migrate, there are like two scenarios, like they might be welcome in the new land, welcomed in the new land, or they might not be like, so irrespective of whether they're welcomed or not, the bodies that are pushed or like, you know, pulled in for like a migration or like a transfer to a new locality would definitely feel alienated. In the sense, even if there is no external agents causing the alienation, their own lack of conviction, as the poet puts here, would make them feel strange or would make them feel vulnerable. Yeah. So, talking about vulnerability due to displacement makes me want to talk about the loss of cultural tethering. It is this loss of cultural tethering that is making them feel alienated, irrespective of the condition of the new land that they've moved into. So, they are used to one way of life or like, you know, a particular way of doing things. And when they move into a new land, it's all different. And this is causing, you know, vulnerability, or this is making them feel vulnerable as they have to build their life from the most basic aspect of it.

Yeah, that's interesting. The cultural tethering argument that once they're lost to their cultural moorings, it becomes a fresh start, which is not always possible. Atul, would you like to respond to this particular point and then Megha and Prateeti?

Yeah, just to add to that point, one reason for the alienation could also be that migrants often cannot participate in the national myth of the nation they end up, they land up in, in the sense that nations often are built on founding myths. Of course, they are homogeneous, monolithic myths, but the nations have their founding myths. But migrants often cannot, they don't share those stories, they cannot participate in those stories. They are, on the one hand struggling to be a part of the country they have migrated to, in the sense that they are struggling to get to know those founding myths, those stories. On the other hand, they are pulled back towards their home nations, trying to reclaim a lost home, trying to reclaim a lost past in that sense. And in this context, if I may quote, Salman Rushdie's well-known essay, "Imaginary Homelands", he says, and I quote, "Bombay is a city built by foreigners upon reclaimed land. I, who had been away so long that I almost qualified for the title", that is the title of the foreigner, "was gripped by the conviction that I too had a city and a history to reclaim". So, in that sense, these are these two opposing forces. On the one hand, they are trying to mingle with the people who they encounter in the nations they have migrated to. On the other hand, they are trying to reclaim a past they have left behind. So yeah, that was what I wanted to respond.

Yeah, Prateeti, do you have anything to add to what Nayana and Atul are saying about cultural tethering and both acculturation and deculturation of the migrant?

Yeah, I was just thinking about the entire process of migration and it reminded me of how migrating from one place to another is not always because of the fact that they are forced to, like, of course, displacement happens because they are forced to move from one place to another. But sometimes this cultural tethering is something that the migrants themselves wish to remove from. What I'm, what I want to bring to attention is the migration of North Korean refugees who willingly move to other parts of the world, braving different political, geographical, social dangers, right? So, what happens when the place where you are culturally tethered in, that is the land where they were born and brought up in, what happens when that place becomes too unsafe for you to continue to live in? So North Korea becomes an example in that sort, with the state sponsored dictatorial rules and poverty and lack of lack of, lack of pretty much everything at this point, right? So, in such an, in such an uninhabitable condition, what happens, what makes the person get rid of their cultural tethering and then move to a completely different place just so that they can live? So that was something that I was considering when thinking about cultural tethering.

Yes indeed, what forces people to abandon say a cultural tradition or cultural tethering or

a background that was at one point feasible, workable and then got lost? Megha, would you like to sum up with a couple of points here?

Yeah, so I was sitting here speculating that like why would, so when we talk about the loss of cultural tethering, why would certain people lose this and why would certain people not? Right, so why are certain people supposed to be refugees while the rest of the people in the country are not? So like Atul was saying that like there's this whole idea of the national myth, maybe some people don't fit into the idea that comes with this national myth and then they are just sort of like set aside from the rest. So as a Judith Butler talks about these frames that we look at people through, right, these frames of intelligibility. So, when certain people don't fit into these frames, so their precariousness, they when they're like excluded from these frames, their precariousness transforms into precarity. So, I was thinking about how certain people, maybe this national myth is a frame through which we look at people. So when certain people fit into it, they fit into this idea of the whole state that is there and then when certain people don't, they are just sort of discarded off and sent off to different places to find their homes.

Yeah, so we have actually moved quite a bit away from where we began about vulnerable bodies and then we moved via conditions of vulnerability to eventually speaking about cultural context in which our bodies slash individuals slash communities are rendered even more vulnerable. Megha seems to indicate that there sometimes might be a necessity to do so because they don't fit to the national myth or the national popular and have to reinvent themselves. But what is very clear in all that we have been saying is about the mobilization of potential vulnerabilities for various purposes, whether that is the search for a relatively secure safe space, which would be migration, or employment or whatever it might be, or that is bringing together people to think through what their vulnerabilities are and how to face them, which would be the point that Prateeti was making about resilience and resistance as well, that the society and the groups of vulnerable people come together because having no other option, of course, they need to mobilize their vulnerabilities. That's been a fascinating discussion. I'm going to stop recording here at this point. Thank you very much, all of you.