

## **Vulnerability Studies: An Introduction**

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### **Aging and Vulnerability in Literature**

Hello, and I'm Anna Kurian, and I teach at the Department of English at the University of Hyderabad. Today, we will be talking about aging and vulnerability, and we will be speaking about vulnerability at some length in how it is represented in literature. We'll begin with a couple of definitions as to how we think about or how we have come to this understanding of the word vulnerable and vulnerability. The word vulnerable comes to us from the Latin *vultus* meaning mood, and this is of course something which would have been covered in your initial lessons in this course. Now vulnerable means that which is capable of being wounded, which is capable of suffering physical injury.

Now, of course, we also use it in a metaphorical sense when we speak about the fact that we can be vulnerable or we are open to being vulnerable to somebody else. That is that we can demonstrate our own willingness to be hurt and show ourselves at our weakest and at our most vulnerable because we trust somebody. However, vulnerability in the sense that we are using it today is in the sense that it was used from 1947 onwards when to be vulnerable is used to designate a person who is in need of special care or support or protection because of age, disability, the risk of abuse or neglect, etc. This, I would think, requires a little bit of unpacking because when we think about designating people as vulnerable, we are identifying people groups on the basis of age or disability, physical characteristics, but sometimes also in terms of social phenomenon, which then designates them as a special group or individuals who stand higher chances of being abused, neglected, etc.

When we think about old age, and as a category, people who are old, do they stand in at risk of being abused or neglected? Think about it, because in India, we believe that the old have to be respected, taken care of, etc. But that is to neglect this idea that they can also be at risk for abuse and neglect. And if you were to look at news reports, almost every week, we see a news report, which then tells us that somebody has been uncaring of their parents, neglected them, that they have suffered hunger, or they have suffered want of various kinds, and so on and so forth. So the question of being vulnerable when it relates to old age is also then a question of care. To go to the other term in our title, aging and vulnerability, we will now speak about the distinction between aging and old age.

And aging is the process whereas old age is in some senses the product. So when we think

about aging as a process, actually aging begins the minute you are born, because from that point onwards, you're growing older, you are aging. However, we usually use the word to think in terms of or to speak of people who have crossed a certain age bar. And that depends upon the person who's speaking more than the person who's being spoken about if you think about it, because for the very young, even somebody who is 40 years old is said to be aging, whereas for those who are 40, it would be somebody who is maybe 80, or at least 65. But aging is usually something that we speak about when we speak of gray haired, wrinkled people who have crossed their 50s and are heading into what we think of as old age.

There is of course a question that how do people react to their own aging and that of those close to them. Think about this because in societies, and these are across the world now, which prioritize young people, which prioritize activity. When we think about aging, we are thinking about those who are slowly losing their abilities to keep up in terms of agility and activity with those who are young. So how do people react to their own aging? Usually with a degree of fear. People are, and this is of course a generalization and all generalizations have exceptions, but people are usually afraid of old age.

And those close to them, when they look at the old, what do they look at them with? Sometimes pity, regret, sorrow, but also with a consciousness that soon enough they will be in that place. And that sometimes leads to a discomfort with those who are old, because nobody likes to be reminded of their own capacity for growing old and of their mortality. And in some ways aging is to do with the idea of mortality itself, isn't it? Because when we speak about aging, we are also speaking about a slow movement towards death, extinction, annihilation, etc. And because of that, the fear of aging is connected also to the fear of death. So whether it is the person himself or herself who is aging, or whether it is the person, the persons who are close to them, when they think about aging, they are also dealing with the imminent arrival of death itself.

So when we think about aging, to go back to the question which we began, how do people react to their own aging and that of those close to them? We are looking at aging as a phenomenon, which causes discomfort, which causes worry, which causes grief. So for the person who is growing old, they are usually a little sad about it, because they fear the losing of their own independence, the loss of their own independence. They fear the declining abilities of old age, and they worry about what will happen to them in their old age. Those who are associated with them, family members usually also look at the old and think about how difficult it is going to be as they grow old. So we are then thinking in terms of aging and aging and old age, not as a period of life, which is great, something to be happy about, but something that brings with it worry.

And that is something which we shall be looking at in some detail as we go through these lessons on aging. Next, we should be looking at the linking of the two, vulnerability and aging. Now, when we speak about the old, those who are aged, when we speak about them,

we usually think of them as a category of people who are in need of special care, as the Oxford English Dictionary in our edition said, that these are people who are at risk and who need special care. So what are the special needs of those who are growing old, those who are aging? They usually fall into three spheres. There is of course the physical, that there is the mental and there is the emotional.

Associatedly, of course, there are also other categories in which they need special attention. These would be in terms of maybe their finances, these would be in terms of the socio-cultural ways in which people relate to them. But primarily when we think about old age, we think about it in terms of the physical. Now, this is of course because aging and old age brings with it changes to the body. This is something that we are all familiar with, because the abilities of the human body slowed up as age advances.

There is a debilitating rather than a strengthening of the human body. And people who have been used to doing certain things effortlessly suddenly find that it requires a lot more effort to achieve the same ends. So as people grow older, their strength lessens, their speed lessens. So say a woman who could cook an entire meal in an hour suddenly finds that it takes a little bit more time. A person who was capable of walking a few kilometers in half an hour now discovers that they can only do so in an increased quantity of time.

And there is also the fact that as age advances, there are medical problems that come with it. So there is of course the weakening of the human body in terms of strength, but sometimes there is also there are small aches and pains which begin and which continue. She cannot do anything very much about because it's part of the debilitating effects of both age. Alongside the physical, there are the mental effects of aging and these are initially of course primarily to do with memory that as you know older people have what they call a senior moment, which is that they forget briefly whatever it is that they wanted to do. And this is usually seen in people who say go into a room thinking that they were going to pick up something and then when they reach the room or when they open the fridge, they can't remember exactly what it was.

Now it begins as this, but there is also memory lapses which are larger and these are of course to do with ailments such as Alzheimer's and dementia. These are illnesses which afflict people in their older years and these are associated with memory lapses of course, but far more severe than just forgetting what it is that you went into a room for. And these make the old vulnerable, especially mental ailments such as Alzheimer's. They are responsible for a great deal of vulnerability for the old because it can wipe out entire caches of an individual's memory, leaving them prey to a lack of understanding as to who they are or who the people they live with are, so that some days they might just not recognize the ones who are closest to them. There is of course the emotional vulnerability that accompanies old age and this begins fairly early for people who are heading into their late 50s, early 60s as the family structure changes either due to the death of a partner or due to the children leaving home, getting married, setting up their own families, family structures

change.

People who have been used to being needed all their lives suddenly find that they have a lot of free time and nothing much to do in it. The change in family structures is also a company for those who have had a very active working life by changes in those structures as well because you retire from your workplace and the whole day stretches ahead of you and there's nothing in which with which you can spend that day. Now the changes in family structures are also accompanied of course by the changes in abilities that we spoke about physical as well as mental and all these put together lead the old towards a feeling of emptiness, a fear of being not necessary, unnecessary, unwanted and it does not necessarily follow that those who are not needed to do something are unwanted but the old fear that and because all our societies are geared towards if not youth then definitely productivity, the old become vulnerable because what is it that they can do which can be seen as productive. They are no longer working, they are no longer active at home in cooking and keeping house. There's nobody to cook and cook keep house for at the most there is your spouse, your partner but your children have all left and suddenly you are all alone and there is nobody and nothing.

So the emotional vulnerability which comes about due to being reduced in circumstances in terms of the numbers that you are keeping up with accompanies the mental and the physical vulnerability that is a part inherent part of old age and all these put together render the old unhappy and vulnerable also to the fact that as their lives progress they are no longer at the kind in the kind of situation, position, condition that they once had making those adjustments becomes really hard for them. We will now move on to the literature of aging and how it connects with real life aging. In real life aging and how the aged are treated is in the in the realms of three discourses or outcomes for usually. So you have law of course, you have social and cultural norms, you have religion and medical discourse. Now if you were to think about and if you were to argue or if you were to state that actually these are not necessarily determining how the old are treated think about how when you look at say news reports about neglected parents who are old and who have maybe signed away their property then the law has to intervene and make it a matter of law that children will take care of their parents.

This would have been in prior times a social and cultural norm that parents were looked after by their children. However, now it is also legal matter that children are by law required to look after their parents. We also think about old age and its vulnerability in terms of how medicine and the medical profession interacts with those who are old. Now we read about, we read medical reports of health issues that plague the old and these are of course frequently found in news reports but also in journals. People who are interested in old age will also think and write about the fact that old age has particular demands that it makes of the medical profession.

So the failing human body and as age advances a body that has been in its prime also

begins to break apart. So when we speak about the failing human body we are also speaking about the multiple minor physical health issues that plague the old. There is of course religious discourse and all religious discourse exports us to look after our old people and to treat them well because then of course the kingdom of heaven is available to people. But associated with religious discourse is also the cultural discourse that teaches us to think about the old in particular ways. One example which you might like to think about would be to look at Adol Gavan Dey's initial introduction passages in *Being Mortal*, his book about old age wherein he speaks about how in India old age was not seen as debilitating but the family because it was an extended joint family looked after the old in particular ways as opposed to American ways of taking care of the old which primarily involves the old living alone or moving into an old age facility where then they take care of themselves.

So cultural norms, social and cultural norms which structure old age in different ways in different cultures would be one way of thinking about it but undermining underlining those are also other discourses such as religious discourses, medical discourses as well as legal discourses. If all these are there in real life aging or are ways which determine how real people age in the real world then how does literature engage with the topic of aging? Literature of all kinds whether we are speaking in terms of the genres of poetry or drama or fiction whatever it is the essay of course all of it speaks about aging and they treat it imaginatively even as they are tethered to the cultural norms and the context from which that literature emerges. So if we were to speak in terms of Indian writing in English and how they speak about old age it would be in terms of Indian context as opposed to say American context we speak about old age or British context English context will speak about old age. So all literature and as we proceed with this lesson you will discover that we will speak about poems, we'll speak about of course plays, fiction, everything which deals with old age but we cannot speak of an old age which is not tethered to the cultural context from which it emerges. We also should keep in mind that literature as in the case of old age as in all other cases in some senses holds a mirror up to the way in which the old are treated in that society from which that literature emerges but also is a way of thinking about the old and charting new ways to think about them which are not necessarily yet seen in society.

So even as they represent old age in maybe the stereotypical or the typical ways in which society treats the old they also work and offer us some ways of subverting those representations, they work against the prevalent modes of seeing old characters and they shape the ways in which we might in the future look at the old. This is just a sample of the kind of stuff that is available which in literature treats of the old one of the most famous in fact for me of course it would be the most famous representation of old age in literature is Shakespeare's *King Lear* but you also have a comparatively recent book which was the *Hundred Year Old Man Who Climbed Out of the Window and Disappeared* which came out during the early 2000s and which was a fascinating book because it gave us humor as opposed to *King Lear's* tragedy, it gave us ways of thinking about the old which did not restrict them in terms of what they are capable of. There's of course the poetry of old age

and here there is a representative sample of that poetry there's Dylan Thomas who writes, do not go gentle into that good night.

There is W.B. Yeats who speaks about when you are old and gray and full of sleep and that's of course a stereotypical representation of old age as opposed to those there is Ulysses by Fenson which speaks about how even in old age it is possible to strive to seek to find and not to yield and that's of course an exhortation as to how you can be old. Compared to all of that is Jenny Joseph who in her poem Warning says that when she's an old woman she will wear purple and she'll do all kinds of outrageous things because she has played a very conservative normal shall we say within quotes life all her years and when she's old she's going to break out of that and she's going to have a great time doing exactly what she wants. So she'll wear purple and she'll wear a red hat and she'll go around spitting and she'll sit on curbs and she'll do all kinds of crazy stuff. We'll come to that poem in a little while. Now traditionally the study of aging and old age was a part of the medical and sociological disciplines.

In terms of medicine it was called geriatrics, in terms of sociology it is gerontology. Now gerontology studied the experience of aging as seen across public policies and programs in terms of economic status, social support and health status. If you were to think about all of this it's also a way of looking at the old in terms of all the parameters. How do public policies shape the life of the old? What are the programs that are available for them? So are there places where they can meet, where they can interact with other old people? How does economic status change the life of the old? And this is something which we are speaking of the old as a unified category. There is no unified category for the old because those who are poor even in their old age will work as opposed to those who are well off will can hire people to take care of them.

What are the social support agencies and structures that are available for the old and of course gerontology, sociological studies of the health status of the old. Now all of these are impacted by the class to which the old person belongs, sometimes the gender to which the old person belongs because if they are women who have been brought up in very patriarchal structures then they do not have an economic status of their own. Their economic status depends upon the status of their families, their spouses who might control all their money etc. Geriatrics refer to medical care for older adults and again my go-to book would be Govind is Being Mortal where he speaks about the physical mental conditions related to aging. Now geriatrics is also in one sense even as they take care of the old associated with geriatrics is the fact that as people wither and dwindle into old age how can you keep them mentally alert so that they are not afflicted by the mental ailments that can accompany old age.

So if these were the traditional ways of looking at old age geriatrics and gerontology the study of old age in literature is comparatively recent and how has old age been studied in literature in terms of initially of course in terms of the stereotypes that circulate whether

they are positive or negative. Comparisons of old age across societies or within societies based upon other identities and in the recent past so that would be about five to eight years the study of old age has also been impacted by medical humanities angles. So when we speak about the representations of old age in literature we are speaking in terms of stereotypes. Now when we think of stereotypes of old age you have the very positive stereotype which is one which conservative traditional societies endorse which is that old age is a period of wisdom. Old age is a period of calm and wisdom all passions spent wherein you can see clearly.

You have the negative stereotypes and those include old age as irrational, full of anger, unhappiness etc. There is like I was saying that all literature emerges from particular context so when you think about the socio-cultural context from which literature emerges and then you think about how books such as the hundred year old man who jumped out of the window etc. which comes out of the Nordic nations is different from a representation of old age which would be say from India such as Roman mysteries, family matters or Shashi Deshpande's small remedies. Now within a country it's also so using India as a test case we can think about how old age is also shaped by other identities so you have mysteries, family matters which gives you a Parsi family in Mumbai and Malifas family as opposed to Shashi Deshpande's small remedies which deals with an old woman who was a leading singer of a gharana singing classical music and who has built her life around that. So you look at old age and you study it not just in terms of positive and negative stereotypes but how they fit into or how they don't fit into the society from which they emerge.

In recent years we have looked also at the fact and Pramod Nair who is running this NPTEL course has written an essay on how Huntington's disease afflicts the old and what exactly it does to them. He's also written about dementia and old age in other writing. So those are the medical humanities actors which speak about the narrativisation of old age and illness. Now speaking about fears of aging and old age due to the increased vulnerability that accompanies aging, we might like to think about and this is also something that all literature that deals with old age also studies bodily decrepitude and the fear of physical changes. So we will be looking in classes in the next class or the one after that at how writers, literary writers look at how the body fails and what that failing body does to the idea of being a person.

Then of course there is senility, dementia, the loss of mentally equity and failing memories and we see that of course in Lear one of the most famous portrayals came here by Shakespeare one of the most famous portrayals of old age. There is this idea of old age as dwindling, the lessening self that even as you might be physically fit and fine as a person you become lesser and lesser. The position that one has in the world that becomes minor because when you think about old age and when you think about how at one point in time those who are now old enjoyed a position wherein they had control over other people, they looked after other people and now they are less and less they have one small room they cannot control. They are controlled by younger people rather than having control over

others is look at old age as dwindling and a text which are set in old age homes offer you this portrayal. There is of course old age as loneliness and the solitude of the old, a solitude which is also linked to loneliness because who visits the old and then of course and this is typical of old age that all old age is to do with death, mortality which is why being mortal as Gavant's book says but when we look at aging in literature is it also that in the face of the fear of aging and all the consequences that aging brings are we then thinking about ways in which we can stall aging and is that particularly a gendered phenomenon.

You might like to think about again a stereotypical idea about aging wherein we speak about the fact that when we look at somebody who's old especially when we think about women when they try to stall aging what is it that they do and this is of course the usual stereotype is that they have plastic surgery done so that they can continue to look young whereas for men it is that they continue to hold on to their jobs because their job gives them a sense of self and identity which is rooted in control. In the face of the fear of aging is it possible to have wisdom and calm acceptance as people grow older this is utterly totally a stereotype because usually you don't really see this play out in a text to do with old age as well. People sometimes rage against the dying of the light in Dylan Thomas's words in other words in other texts they try to continue to live vibrantly as they once did in a rituals fear maybe and for this you should think about a text such as Richard Osman's Thursday murder series because Thursday club which is a murder series and where they speak about how there are these old people who even though they're old are determined to snatch what they can from life and then there are those who are old and who completely withdraw they would rather slip away than be a part of life itself. We'll take a short break now and we'll come back with our next lesson in a little while from now.