

Vulnerability Studies: An Introduction

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Discussion On Vulnerability and Aging – II

Hello, so let's start with Washington's point about the acceleration of the process of aging, which seems intrinsic to many of our concerns here. Over to you, Washington.

Not every people is the same. Aging is set by different factors like accessibility to resources, food and nutrition, environmental conditions, and life choices. This directly influences the factors that we discussed already, the social factors, the economic factors, and the pathological factors, which a person who is financially sound and who takes care of his body, who is able to take care of his body. The aging is not the same with a person from a lower income. With a person from a lower income strata, he is not able to procure the resources to take care of his body, either it is the food or the services required to keep and maintain his body in a pristine condition. So, with these people, as the process of aging is accelerated, their chances of getting employed, their chances of not contracting any diseases, the chances of committing themselves to new social relationships, the chances of being integrated into the social world, and as Arjun has pointed out and not become invisible, is quite less and is it aggravates the process of aging and vulnerability itself.

That's very interesting because one thinks of aging as a natural progression, but Washington emphasizes that there is an acceleration itself because of conditions not intrinsically biological, as in not just rooted in the body, which is very good to start thinking about another line of thought. And that brings me to Arjun's point that there is a question of subjectivity, which is what Washington is implicitly addressing also and questions of agency, which diminishes with age, but in some cases gets accelerated. So, let's spend a couple of minutes talking about the question of subjectivity and agency. Arjun, would you like to go here?

The notion of subjectivity is deeply rooted to our ideas of our bodies and to our idea of the relationship with the rest of the world. So, if we think of subjectivity that is a result of our real-world relationships, that we talk to people, they talk back to us, that there is a system of feedback, then what happens with aging is, as we talked about the problem of invisibility that comes with aging, so people start to disappear from the discourse that runs in society. For instance, there is this Gabriel Garcia Marquez novel about, like an

older individual who waits for a letter, it's called *No One Writes to the Colonel*. So, he is of a certain age and nobody writes to him. So, he always goes to the post office once the shipment comes looking for letters, but he never gets any. But his son who is also a colonel or a bureaucrat in the military, he keeps getting it. He is not there. He is still waiting for his son. So, he is somewhat invisible. He always waits for some address from the society there, but it does not happen. So, what happens is that there is no feedback with older people in the sense I work on witnessing. So, there is no response or address that happens in an adequate sense with aged individuals and this starts affecting their subjectivity. So, subjectivity is an expression of our worldview. If you do not partake in that discourse, if you do not partake in that dialogue, then what happens to your idea of yourself? Also, you start becoming dependent on a lot of different factors in society. There is somebody who takes care of you. There is a machine who takes care of you. There is an implant that assists in your living. Then what happens to you? Usually, we have a certain conception of our body on which the notion of subjectivity is based. When that sovereignty is breached, when there is certain sense of assistance that comes to our body or our sustainability, then the borders are breached in some sense. Then the larger idea of subjectivity itself is problematized. So, there are two points here. What happens to you when there is no proper dialogue with the rest of the body, when there is nobody to even write a letter to you? What happens to you when you are not adequately witnessed by the rest of the world and what happens to you when the barriers are breached that you have to always take assistance from the rest of the world to live but they are not adequately witnessing your existence?

Which is to say that your border with the world is simultaneously breached but also closed off, isn't it? And it's a point I think Washington makes very early also that, for example, Arjun, you spoke about ghettoization. You are cared for but you're simultaneously shut away. You are treated as a person who requires care, careful handling, etc., etc. And yet you are... So that's what I refer to as an oscillation. So, you're cared for and yet what kind of a person are you? And there's a diminishing sense of one's own self. This brings us to the point that both of you have put together and that is our sense of self relies upon a continuity of memories, of cognitive recognition or self-recognition. And the erosion of physical ontological conditions means that you begin to wonder about ways of preserving it. And Washington makes the point that the poet in, say, Shakespeare and others, authors, is looking to ask or enforce upon the world ways of keeping oneself alive. If for instance, Arjun, you said no one writes to the Colonel and the Colonel seeks a recognition from the world, would that recognition come if, for example, your memories are out there, your narratives are out there or as Washington might want to think about this, dwell upon legacies and children, for example. Washington?

Yes, sir. What is I would like to call upon the depiction of the process of vulnerability, taught in literature. We can go back to the 15th century and there the French poet, Henry Ronsard writes in his poem, "When You are old", that when the physiological features of the woman that he wishes to court diminishes, there is no need to enjoy their life at that age. So, he is demanding the woman to agree to his courtship. With this we can carry on to a different thought. He is not only positing his courtship, but he is also positing an anticipated vulnerability, which is what the process of vulnerability leads to. This anticipated vulnerability troubles poets towards the easiest. In fact, W.B. Yeats picks up on Ronsard's poem and writes a poem with the exact title in 1891. Yeats is famous for developing this anticipated vulnerability with his poems like "Sailing to Byzantium", where he points out that there is no country for old men and where he even calls the old man as paltry. There he equates the choice of lives to the fruits of the youth. And this further brings on to what Ronsard has already talked about, like the regeneration of the self. In Shakespeare's poems, the first 17 in Sonnets are also termed as "procreation poems". It is because the nature in the poem is asking the young man to have a child and preserve his bodily features. The nature is afraid that if the bodily features are not preserved, the body features would die with the young man. But it is just not the bodily features that the nature is afraid of. In fact, the first line of Shakespeare's Sonnet starts like this: "From fairest creatures we desire increase". Here, "increase" did not necessarily mean preservation. "Increase" also means regeneration. If we don't regenerate, the nature is trying to say that it can lead to the loss of the one's self. And it can ultimately lead to the loss of the human existence as well. So, when we look in terms of aging, it also leads us to our imminent fear of extinction. If we don't regenerate, if we don't regenerate, if we don't create solutions to take care of our aging self, our aging self will become our normal reality. And ultimately, it will lead us to our extinction. So, the question of regeneration, then it's always pertinent when we talk about the process of aging in literary as well as in cultural politics.

It's interesting you point to the problem of anticipated vulnerability that you expected to happen. And it's imminent at some point that you will become, say, more vulnerable and questions like that. So, I was just wondering when, for example, we speak about the continuities of memory or continuities of the self or in the case that Washington pointed out, the question of legacy, who will take this forward and the possibility of extinction. Although I'm not quite sure extinction itself is vulnerability in that sense, but I see what you're getting at there. Arjun, would you like to respond to this point that Washington makes about anticipation of vulnerability? Because you also speak about the possible loss of the ability to become witnesses. That, for example, if there is graded loss of cognitive abilities, you know at some point that you will not be an adequately functioning witness. Your imminent extinction, so to speak, is the erasure of whoever you were or are from the world of the social order. And that is also something that Washington is referring to in his anticipatory vulnerability argument. Would you like to respond to that?

Yes, sir. The point of anticipated vulnerability or the demise of some sort is very interesting. Because we constantly hear people as they get old talk about how they lose memory, that "I've started forgetting things", "I misplace things a lot", "I do not remember as I used to". So, they start identifying there is a certain lack in the way they function as individuals. So, what happens here is that you first start identifying these things, but at some point, it becomes very evident. So, the loss of cognitive functions, whether it be the ability to remember things, it also does something in turn. What happens is the idea of yourself as a subject, the idea of the sense of the self comes from a complicated process of narration, that you string all the memories that you have to make a narrative of yourself and you are constantly reiterating it. And that is how you make sense of yourself. That is how we function in the world. So, if you look at autobiographies, we know that people write certain memories, they recollect memories, they remember, they re-member, and towards the end of it, you have a certain sense of somebody talking, there is a teller figure. So, when people start remembering things, this happens. But what happens when you start forgetting things that were core to yourself, then there is a certain breach in the narrative that guaranteed the sense of self for all these individuals. So, there is that identifying the first breach that something is there, the anticipated vulnerability starts from the loss of cognitive capacities. Obviously, physical decline is very evident. I mean, that is very apparent, but this also happens simultaneously. And what these amounts to is the narrative breach occurs. And this also in turn changes the subjectivity of the individual, the way you respond. That's why when you look at people, especially people who are old, from your family, we might all have come across such persons in our families, we sometimes think this is not the same person I talked to, my grandfather is not the same person, there is a certain change in the way he talks about things, the way they act, the way they respond. So, there is something that happened, which we are not quite aware of, but it was a gradual thing. At some point, it becomes very different to the point that the self is not recognizable anymore. And these persons who have gone through it might not be able to account for it completely, only the people around them mourn their loss, they can see it in lapses. So, this is that movie, *The Father*, which we were talking about, he is not able to understand when he goes through these bouts, he thinks that he is absolutely that sense that like that self, but everybody around him is capable of charting this lack, this erasure of self. And there are multiple selves that come and go, they're surface, it's like a fish coming out of water, it comes and it goes. So, this continuity of memory, the breach of it, I think, points to an anticipated vulnerability. And that is one of the first markers as far as I can see, that tells that something is going to happen.

Yes, but Washington's interesting take on this is also the anxiety about this, which results in injunctions and requests that you need to have children that will carry on the family line. And that has very different connotations based on class. For example, we know that

royalty has a different way of looking at anticipated vulnerability because their anticipated vulnerability is to do with the vulnerability of the throne or the positions they have come to occupy, which brings us back actually to the points we made about the social and infrastructural conditions in which we experience aging and aging related vulnerabilities. So, I want to now move on to the point that Washington makes that aging actually is a collective sense of our or a sense of our collective precarity. Would you like to dwell upon that in Washington?

Yes, sir. As Arjun has pointed out, the aging self is not aware of his vulnerable state, but all those around him are aware and the aging self stands as a confirmation of the vulnerability. As Arjun has pointed out earlier, the aging self is not aware of his vulnerable state, but all those around him are aware of this. And the body is a confirmation of the anticipated vulnerability as we have already talked about. And this confirmation is seen everywhere in our daily lives. When we go to places, as Arjun has already pointed out in metros, trains, everywhere, there are posters, there are infrastructural posters, advertisements towards our aging self. All of these points out, as I have already talked about, the collective anthropocentric precarity. So that is why we see all these posters about our health, all these posters about our nutrition, all these posters about our financial stability, all these advertisements about our well-being, all around us, plastered all around us. This has to do with, as I have developed earlier, our anxiety of regeneration and our anxiety of preservation. Sir has already pointed out about the different opinions of preservation and regeneration and bearing upon the class structures. But collectively, we are also plastered, we are also plastered and reminded of our aging vulnerability everywhere we go. So, this is the confirmation, this serves as a confirmation of our collective anxiety and our collective precarity.

I rather like that because it brings us full circle from self to community and back to community again. Because in many ways, what both of you have been talking about is, there's a social and a cultural imaginary around aging, which tells us that you have to take care of the future, you have to have your financials in place, you have to have this in place and that in place, etc. etc. Which also again, refers back to the point both of you have individually and together made in your discussion about structures, including technologies that will help us keep going in some sense, even when there is a deterioration of something. So, we'll conclude with this question of technology, which Arjun has some interest in, about what happens to the nature and the notion of selfhood, if we are in a state of machine assisted living. Arjun?

This goes back to the point that we made earlier, to have somebody assist you to do things that you used to do by yourself. And this starts from when we were a kid, I mean, there is certain sense of assistance that we have all received or garnered from people around us. But once you move to, but the response is different once you are older, and the reasons for it would be varied. But once you are an older individual, the moment a

machine is assisted, assisting your living, or if it's a person, what happens to the sense of self has to relate to the laws of agency. In some senses, the barrier that determines your relation with the world, the barrier that preserves your agency and sovereignty is breached. So, you can't live as a functioning individual all by yourself, there needs to be the presence of something else that sustains your life. And this radically changes the notion of our body. So, we carry about ourselves in the world, rooted on the notions of our body. This is a concept that is fundamental to us, we relate to the world primarily through our bounded self. So, the notion of the bounded self is breached with the introduction of something foreign here. So, there is a sense of contamination that happens, there is a sense of breach or invasion that happens. We are not the bounded self that you used to be anymore. So, the notion of self and subjectivity is rooted in this and what happens when something else comes into the picture. You are not a functioning individual, in the old sense, you are somebody who depends on something else to carry about your life. So there comes the vulnerability because you can't sustain yourself something else is totally taking control of your life, you are entirely dependent on something else. If it fails, I fail. If the implant does not work one day, or if the machine that helps you breathe does not work someday, or if the person that comes to help you to meet your basic requirements does not turn up one day, then what happens to you and this is very evident during the pandemic when people were deprived of very basic requirements, when care persons could not come to their homes, then they would not be given care in the hospital, then you can't go on living the life the same way that you used to. So, then the idea of our self also changes because this idea comes primarily from the notion of our body because the notion of our body has taken a radical change here.

Yeah, that's interesting because then we are talking about a different kind of dependency also, a techno assisted living, a techno assisted aging, and therefore a techno assisted subjectivity and identity itself. And it reiterates what we have been arguing that there is the intrinsic vulnerability of the human form precisely because we are a biological organism, but also because the biological organism is rooted in structures, whether it is the family or the economics of it, health services, insurance and things like that. But it's also interesting that what has come through in our discussion is that there's a cultural imagining of vulnerability, there's a cultural construction of vulnerability.

This has to do with the several literary texts that both of you cited from, but also cultural context such as insurance, the public health notices, the notices issued in public interest as they call it about insurance and other things, which constantly reiterate that we are vulnerable. But what I take away from this is that not only are we aware of our progress towards vulnerability, although at a certain age you don't think of your mortality, you don't think of your vulnerability, but as you progress in life in terms of age, this comes home to us. But it's also interesting because many of the other things that you have been talking about have to do with questions of social policy, the role of the state, the

responsive state and the responsibility, I think Washington used the word, what is the responsibility of the state towards the aging population? And we know that India is headed towards a Japanese kind of system or social order where there'll be far more aging and elderly population than anywhere in the world. Thank you both for this. I'm going to stop recording here and I will keep the mic on for a couple of minutes.