

Vulnerability Studies: An Introduction

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Week- 07

Lecture- 02

Childhood and Vulnerability - II

So, to continue as to what exactly it is that makes a child vulnerable, we will now look at how the vulnerability, which is inherent in the child, is in one sense just like the vulnerability that all humans possess, but is far more acute in a child. And this fact that a child is more vulnerable is primarily because of the physical weakness of the child, the dependence that a child has upon adults to take care of it, its mental development, and its emotional and intellectual vulnerability. But there is also, in addition to these which are inherent identity-based vulnerabilities of the individual, there are also the structures within which the child is placed which make a child vulnerable. And these include of course primarily the family in whichever form it may be. So, whether it's a nuclear family, it's an extended family, it's a joint family, whether there is no family at all.

All of these are facts which make a child vulnerable. There is also the child's reliance on social systems, which may or may not prioritize the needs of the child. And an example for the last would be to think in terms of the legal systems because the legal systems are formulated and the example which we looked at at the beginning of the previous lesson where we said that laws are framed differentially based upon whether they are labor laws, whether they are marriage laws, etc. Now in that is it primarily the rights of the child which are being prioritized and privileged? Or is it that there are other needs which are being prioritized and privileged? So, these are the questions around which the idea of the vulnerability of a child is built.

And we will be looking at in this section, we will be looking at what makes a child vulnerable and examples of it drawn from literature. First of all, of course, physical vulnerability, physical weakness. And this requires no explanation that all small children are completely dependent upon their caregivers. Now, far more so than animal children are, right? So human children, especially infants are completely dependent upon their parents, primarily their mother, usually, but let us go with parents for the time being. And what happens to them if their caregivers are negligent or neglectful of their children? And examples for this proliferate across literature.

So there is Shuggie Bain in Douglas Stuart's novel of the same name, who is a recent example amongst a long list of young children, who has a parent who cannot perform their parent to role. Now, an early example of this, in Victorian times, would be Silas Marner, written by George Eliot, where you have a little child called Eppie. Eppie has golden curls and is a delight and so on, so forth. But she's also a small child, she is a toddler. And she nearly dies when her mother falls into a ravine into a quarry.

And she's of course, the mother is of course, under the influence of both opium as well as alcohol, she's completely addicted to both. The child because she is able to toddle, toddles into the home of the titular character Silas Marner. But Eppie demonstrates the vulnerability of a child whose parent is unable to look after it. Now, Shuggie Bain's mother is likewise. So, she's a woman who is also alcoholic, who in her alcoholic cases can do extremely cruel things to her children. And where the role of caregiver and the recipient of care which should be the child is inverted, Shuggie Bain who is a small child will be the caregiver to his mother who is unable to care for him.

There is of course, when we speak about physical weakness, there is also the fact that when it intersects with systems such as slavery and colonialism, and then you have the fiction of slavery and colonialism, fiction which is inflected very strongly with race, such as Toni Morrison's text, then you read about children who cannot survive because the systems within which they are placed are not conducive to life. So, the foremost example is of course Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, which features a mother who will kill her daughter. But there's also Jesmyn Ward whose *Sing, Unburied, Sing* features a man who will kill a young boy who should not survive into a world which is racist, slave, inflected by slavery, and so on. So texts such as these show you physical weaknesses of the child who can be killed easily by an adult or who is rendered vulnerable because of their youth, their childhood, right.

The very fact that Eppie is a small child, she can be hurt, she can be harmed, she could have died. The fact that Shuggie Bain, because he is small and because he is different, he can be victimised both by his mother, by his family, some members, random members of his family, and of course by the outside world. Now because of the complete dependence of small children on their caregivers, when the caregivers are negligent, neglectful, like Shuggie Bain mother or Eppie's mother in the early George Eliot's *Silas Marner*, we look at one version of this. But there is also the fact that their physical weakness makes it also easier to kill them.

Now Toni Morrison's *Beloved* or Jesmyn Ward's *Sing, Unburied, Sing* work because it is not that the parents or the adult figures, the caregiver figures are neglectful. It is because they care so greatly that they eliminate their children because they would rather not have them brought up in a system which is so inimical to their lives. So actually, both work,

isn't it? Then of course there is the fact that all small children, when they are small, have a very limited understanding of the world around them. And this is primarily of course because they are children and they do not have a wider knowledge or understanding of the world and its many features and the ways in which people can present one face and actually be something else. Again, I will revert to Victorian fiction at this point and speak about Charles Dickens' *Oliver Twist* because it's one of those very commonly read novels. And it features the eponymous character Oliver who when he is in an orphanage, a boy's home, you have all sizes of boys.

So there are the big boys and then there are little ones like Oliver Twist. The older boys tell and they of course have very little food. There is like extremely limited quantity of food which is rationed out to them. Everybody is hungry perpetually. However, what happens is that because everybody is hungry perpetually, the older boys tell the younger boys, including Oliver Twist, that if they cannot get more food, then the older boys will have to start eating the younger boys. Now anybody who knows the world will understand that this is obviously not on. This is not going to happen. But Oliver, because he doesn't understand the world, because he's so small, he's so young, he then, believes them. And as a result, he's catapulted into a position where he has to ask the warden, the cook for more food, right? So, he asked for more food and of course, he gets into a whole lot of trouble. There are other examples within the book as well.

And one of the most prominent is the fact that when he runs away and he goes to London, he falls in with a bunch of young boys who are all of them pickpockets and teats. Now they are organized as a small crime ring by somebody called Fagin. He is also taken to Fagin, he's given food, a place to sleep, etc. But again, there is this problem that he doesn't understand that these are thieves, that these are pickpockets, even though he's been tutored to be a thief and a pickpocket, he doesn't quite figure it out. So, the inability to understand the world around them also renders children vulnerable.

Oliver is rendered vulnerable in the orphanage, later on, at the undertakers where also he is unable to understand how people's interactions are and what they signify. So again, he will make mistakes. Then again, he has to run away from there as well. And when he reaches Fagin and the crime ring, he doesn't understand that he's being taught how to thieve. And when finally he does thieve, he's still confused as to what exactly he's done and why he should be in trouble.

So the fact that you become vulnerable because of a very limited understanding of the world around you is one of the ways in which childhood vulnerability is portrayed. Emotional vulnerability, and this is something that, again, my examples are primarily drawn from 19th century fiction, but we also have one from contemporary or recent past

in Indian writing in English, but also require care, some degree of affection, and if not even affection, acknowledgement of their place in life and some warmth. So, you have the kind of vulnerability that a child has because of this lack of emotion. Examples would, manifold examples would include Jane Eyre, who at her aunt's house is dependent upon the maid Bessie for a kind word because her aunt and her cousins detest her and they are cruel to her. I mean her boy cousin John Reed, he throws books at her. Her aunt locks her into rooms and leaves her starving for a couple of days. So, what you see is how children are rendered vulnerable because of the fact that they do not have affection, love, care and that is in terms of the emotion and not just in terms of the physical.

At Lowood school, and this is one of those examples which is again very famous in literature where she is sent to a school for orphans and the unwanted and the owner and the principal shall we say of them, not exactly the principal, the owner of the school Mr. Brocklehurst designates her a liar. At that point, she becomes distraught because she believes that all the other people in the school will believe her to be a liar and ungrateful.

Now emotional vulnerability for a child and you can see this, like I said you can see it across examples, *Mill on the Floss* where Maggie Tulliver is emotionally vulnerable, *Wuthering Heights* where Heathcliff, Catherine later on Hareton, all of them are vulnerable. But to use a more recent example from the Indian context, there is Rahel and Estha in Arundhati Roy's *God of Small Things* who are both of them emotionally vulnerable because the world in which they live of their uncle and their great aunt and their mother Ammu is a world which is not welcoming of them, where they do not have the same standing that Sophie Mol has. Sophie Mol is of course seen as this wonderful little child, whereas Rahel and Estha are seen as interlopers. Rahel and Esther being seen as interlopers makes them emotionally vulnerable also damages them in various ways which continue throughout their lives.

So we then see that literature portrays children as physically vulnerable, yes, as vulnerable because of their limited understanding of the world and also as emotionally vulnerable because the world is something which does not give them what they require. There is of course the fact also that within the space of the family, the structure of the family which is supposed to be one which guarantees and I use the word "guarantees" advisedly, the family is supposed to guarantee care for those who are vulnerable in various ways. But family spaces can also be spaces which render children vulnerable.

Now again my examples are drawn from a range of literary texts. So you have Toni Morrison's *Bluest Eye* wherein the child is eventually raped by her father. You have Prateek Thomas and Rajiv Eipe's *Hush* which is a graphic novel, a wordless graphic novel wherein the child suffers sexual abuse within the confines of the family and you have Tara Westover's *Educated* which is a memoir comparatively recent wherein she is shown as somebody who suffers a variety of abuse, not sexual but physical abuse and

other forms of abuse within family spaces because the parents and the adults in the family actively work to damage and render her life precarious and at risk.

Now, those are situations of abuse and neglect within the family but sometimes it is not necessary to be abused for a child to be rendered vulnerable within a family and this of course shows in places, spaces wherein some children are prioritized and privileged as opposed to others. My example this time is from an Agatha Christie's *Crooked House* where two of the children are seen as golden children. They're beautiful, they are intelligent, they are well behaved whereas the third child, the youngest child is seen as an unclean goblin and as a result the mother refers to her as a goblin and treats her not too badly but the constant comparison between the beauty of the others and the goblin-like nature of this youngest renders her vulnerable in ways which of course then also make her into a little monster. They call her a monster; she turns into a monster.

But parental prejudices against one child and for another can render both children vulnerable as well. There is of course the fact that within the family, when there is parental infirmity or illness then the child is the one who suffers and the example is from Jerry Pinto's *Em and the Big Hoom* which has a mother who is mentally challenged, mentally ill at the center. She is in many ways what holds the family together but she is also what renders the two children vulnerable within the text and their vulnerability is at various levels from the fact that their neighbors and their friends refer to them as the children of the mad woman to the fact that the mother them herself when she is annoyed, when she is angry, when she is unstable will speak of them as burden. So the fact that they turn to her for affection and instead are turned to for care that they have to take care of her and then of course there is also the terrible fact that she chooses to try and commit suicide and the other ones who find her time after time.

So, when we think of families as safe spaces, a family is stereotypically spoken of as a safe space. It could equally stereotypically be spoken of as a space that renders children vulnerable if the adults in the family are themselves unstable or are prejudiced in some way or are abusers and people who prioritize themselves over the child. Now in addition to these modes of vulnerability located within the family we might also like to think of the fact that vulnerability is highlighted within a family in terms of finances as well as social instability and if a family doesn't have a place in the world in which they live then there is social instability and the example though I have given other examples over here one example which might be familiar is again to think in terms of Rahel and Estha and Ammu, who are a family parent to children but because the world in which they live, in Kerala, is a world which is severely patriarchal their family is socially seen as socially unstable. There is no father over here.

There is of course the fact of financial instability and most poignantly seen in *Jude the Obscure* where you have Jude's son who is referred to as Little Father Time. He then kills

his siblings and himself and leaves a note which says “done because we are too many” because the fact that they had so many children renders Jude and Sue unfit as tenants. Most people are not willing to rent a place to them. They don't have the money even if they have the money they are not seen as a stable family because one, there is no marriage two, they are too many and so as a result the little child little father time he kills his siblings and himself.

There are also other examples so in Sashi Deshpande's *Small Remedies*, you have the singer Savitribai Indorekar. Her child finds herself not having a place in the world because she's unsure of her parentage as in her father and she's unhappy with where she is and of course her mother is more fixated upon her career rather than about a child. There is also this that if a family is not seen as accountable, then they can do whatever they like with their children. The example I have is from *Wuthering Heights* where Heathcliff is able to treat his son, Hareton, as almost as an animal he doesn't give him an education he just leaves him to his own devices there is neither affection nor warmth nor civility in their household and as and because there is no social structure or there is no structure in their society which makes the father answerable, the child grows up like an animal. There's also the fact that if strong patriarchal powers can render small children vulnerable and you see this in Shakespeare's *Winter's Tale* where you have a little girl, Perdita, as a baby she is abandoned because the father believes that his wife was unfaithful to him and as a result he wants her to be killed but because nobody is willing to actually like kill her they abandoned her on a seashore. So, vulnerability can come about in various ways however within the systems and the structures of society which are meant to keep a child not vulnerable the text in literature demonstrates that vulnerability however will continue.

There is also the fact of now moving to another system if you think of the family as one structure then the educational system would be another structure, right and it would be another system and within that the school as a structure. Now schools which are seen as places which nurture children and which help them to grow up in ways that render them moral citizens within society however if you were to have a school which prioritized discipline or which prioritized its ideology over the interests of the child then what would happen to the child and we will look at this in terms of a couple of schools and a couple of institutions in literature.

At this point in time we might like to think about first of all the Dickens' schools and here is a multitude of them but also in terms of other schools such as that in *The Prime of Miss Jane Brodie* by Muriel Spark or Stephen King's *Carrie* far more recent in time and Laurie R. King's *Speak*. Now Dickens's *Hard Times* has a school which is built upon certain ideology: the children are not supposed to have a good time instead supposed to learn facts. Dotheboys Hall in *Nicholas Nickleby* and we'll do read an excerpt from that in a short while would be another example as would Lowood school in Jane

Eyre.

Now Lowood school quick example is built upon the notion of charity and a charity which will make of the young girls who are admitted into that school people who will be good servants and good governesses, nothing more than that. So, the ideology matters more than the children. There are also of course schools in which children are at the mercy of either their teachers or their other children in the school and examples would be Muriel Spark's *Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* where Miss Jean Brodie has a small clique of students whom she indoctrinates after a fashion. She gets them to do what she wants as a result several of them find that they don't quite understand life. Stephen King's *Carrie* with bullying at the center and Laurie R. King's young adult novel *Speak*, which is about sexual assault within the context of a school relationship.

So the school which is like I began meant to nurture children, educate them, bring them up in ways which make them into good citizens can also be places of great evil and we can see from this example from *Nicholas Nickleby* by Charles Dickens where

He begins "He could not but observe" and this is Nicholas Nickleby he's just been sent to the school as a tutor and he says the text says "he could not but observe how silent and sad the boys all seem to be There was none of the noise and clamor of the schoolroom; none of its boisterous play, or hearty mirth". Now that of course also presupposes that schools are places where people are having fun while they are learning. Then you look at this description: "The children sat crouching and shivering together, and they seem to lack the spirit to move about. The only pupil who evinced the slightest tendency towards locomotion or playfulness was Master Squeers." Master Squeers is a child of the schoolmaster and his wife "as his chief amusement was to tread upon the other boy's toes in his new boots, his flow of spirits was rather disagreeable than otherwise."

Now it conjures up a certain atmosphere a school where children are shivering, where they crouch together, they don't even have the courage to move about but there's one child who's moving about who's doing his stuff and what is he doing he's stamping upon the other boy's toes in his new boots and even the detail of the new boots adds something because a child who's stamping on other people's toes has new boots. Whereas all the others are shivering, crouched together, there is no noise, no clamor and the boys are all silent and sad. So, you have bullying over here you have the fact of an oppressive schoolroom being highlighted over here.

The last example I have I think is from Lowood School from *Jane Eyre* Charlotte Bronte's where she says "Our clothing was insufficient to protect us from the severe cold we had no boots the snow got into our shoes and melted there." She goes on to how their feet are inflamed, their toes are raw and swollen and then she speaks about the food. "The scanty supply of food was distressing: with the keen appetites of growing children, we

had scarcely sufficient to keep alive a delicate invalid.” Hunger in a school which is meant as a charity institution and then she says there is also an abuse: “whenever the famished great girls had an opportunity they would coax or menace the little ones out of their portion”. Now the fact of bullying and the fact that these are children who are hungry who are cold there are no comforts in the school they're also bullied by their fellow students speaks about a vulnerability that children inflict upon each other and it is something that we will look at also in the context of how children render each other vulnerable.