

Vulnerability Studies: An Introduction

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Discussion On Childhood and Vulnerability – I

Hello, so this is our session on childhood and vulnerability. And today in the group discussion are Atul Nair and Prateeti Chaudhury both from the doctoral program of the Department of English. Good morning Prateeti. Good morning, Atul. So, we will take it in the format that we have already discussed. I will open with the point that Prateeti makes that the child as the model of the ultimate victim and the ultimate vulnerable body actually originates in the enlightenment notions of childhood and that the biological dependencies of the child is where many of these things begin. So Prateeti, would you like to enunciate this a little bit so that Atul can take over and when not speaking we will mute so that the extraneous sounds can be limited. Over to you Prateeti.

Yeah, so this whole idea of the child as the ultimate victim or and subsequently the body of the child as the ultimate vulnerable body. So, all these ideas find traction in the enlightenment especially during the especially with the thinkers of the enlightenment period. So, I was reading up on this article by Adriana Benzaquen and she talks about the history of the study of childhood and how that has shaped up during the enlightenment period and how that has even influenced the ideas of childhood in the romantic period further on. So, it's interesting to see how different thinkers think about childhood in different ways. So there are like author, sorry thinkers, like Descartes and Condillac who think that childhood is an obstruction on the way to rationality so they can do away with childhood altogether. But then there are thinkers like Rousseau who wants to strengthen the human being right from the childhood. So Rousseau gives the example of Spartans as well, how Spartans used to train their warriors right from the childhood. So you know considering childhood as the first stage of training to be invincible but then there is also a thinker called Buffon who says that the child or the body of the child is the most vulnerable body because the child when it's born it's completely helpless and therefore he justifies the entire notion of caregiving and mothering a child through these conceptions and he the interesting thing about all of these arguments is how there is a certain element of moral value that is attached to taking care of the child. So, if the child is this ultimate vulnerable victim, then taking care of the vulnerable other is a sign that makes you a human being. So, these are the ideas that primarily shaped enlightenment studies of

childhood and then, you know, it goes on and influences further ideas of childhood in the romantic period where childhood becomes the sign of ..., sorry, childhood becomes a sign of innocence and purity.

Yeah so. it's interesting to see you locating it on two axes. One is the biological vulnerability of the "helpless" body but there's also a little conflation between the helplessness of the infant versus the helplessness of the child, they're not quite exchangeable in terms of location and the second is the access of moral values being inculcated that you ought to care for them. I told your responses to that about these two acts.

Just to begin where Prateeti left off, she mentioned the enlightenment period and also the romantic age. It is interesting to look at how historical events impinged on the idea of childhood itself. I mean I was thinking of "The Chimney Sweeper" in William Blake's poetry or for that matter how childhood is front and center in the entirety of the *Songs Of Innocence and of Experience*. How the child becomes the body on which moral values are centered or even the suffering of children in romantic and early Victorian England is centered for that matter the street urchins and vagabonds in Charles Dickens's text like for example, *Oliver Twist* for that matter. How children were made to work during the industrial revolution. So how major historical events such as the industrial revolution affect influence the idea of childhood itself and also if one looks at the Raj, the British Raj in India. How children often by the major wars that the British were involved in in India, in modern day Afghanistan. How that comes to influence the representation of childhood in English writings in India. I was thinking of text like Kipling's *Kim* for example, how the young Kimbal O'Hara is an orphan and this is also one can also look at the large number of schools and orphanages that were set up by the British in India. So, the basic point being those major historical events like the industrial revolution or the British Raj in India, in many ways, they influenced children and children were vulnerable to such events across the late 18th and the 19th centuries.

But this also means noting the social context of say changing structures of the family where parents went out to work in factories, the shift system in Victorian England, child labor being employed and which is of course at the heart of someone like Blake or Dickens and then the pure innocence that Prateeti spoke about in the case of Wordsworth. Anyways, what we are seeing here is a biological vulnerability to which we have now added a component and that is a child within the so-called "protective" structure of the family. When the nature of the family begins to change like that old one about "it takes a village to raise a child" but the child and the parents the family they have moved to the city to the urban squalor of say London or Manchester and in the midst of say factory workers.

Hi, so we will leave it to the NPTEL people to edit as required.

So as I was saying the context in which the child is embedded changed rapidly from the time of enlightenment to the industrial revolution and the context that Atul highlighted the British in India where for instance the family structures, the family income levels all of them fluctuate when the family say migrates and therefore the vulnerability in terms of its degree and kind both change. If you were to move this further along, what is it, we get, say contemporary structures, social contexts in which this can possibly be read thinking in terms of say the 19th century onwards when we think of slavery, the plantations and the children there on. There's something about the child being rendered into an object for as commodity for sale. Generating an entirely different kind of vulnerability as well. Would one of you want to comment on that?

When you mentioned 19th century slavery I was reminded of historical fiction such as Tony Morrison's *Beloved* where the children, in many ways, suffer because of things like slavery in the sense that children become commodities who are exchanged and they lose parentage in many ways in the sense that they lose the atmosphere of a home in the sense that they do not grow up in a context which is conventionally associated with that of childhood. An environment of nurture and nourishment, that is taken away from a certain group of children, in the sense that children who belong to people who are exchanged as slaves and that need not be true of white children. So, children who are born to certain kinds of people in the sense that children born to slave to those people who are treated as slaves for them the environment of nourishment of care which is essential which is conventionally seen as essential to childhood that is lost to them.

I think that's quite interesting because Prateeti has a point later on where she speaks about the child as the symbol of vulnerability because of their position as depending on parents but that the parents themselves are not autonomous agents in, say, slavery. What happens? Prateeti would you like to spend a couple of minutes talking about it?

Yeah, so just to build on the first ideas that we were talking about of how the whole family has moved to the cities and ideas of the disintegrating family and so I was just thinking about the 19th century how all of this has led to the idea of adolescence. So basically, in the 19th century William Hall comes up with his book called *Adolescence*. So, it is interesting to trace how adolescence itself is a product of the concept of the child and the child who is without dependency, who is without parents and these ideas kind of then form the whole basis of looking at the adolescent as a separate unit which is separate from childhood but they're not completely adult and this adolescent is also as we have seen in a lot of Charles Dickens's fiction. So, they do have adolescent characters and they are working as child neighbors in the industries and so on. So, this concept of adolescence itself stems from these contradictory ideas of what is a child, who takes care of the child, is caretaking at all possible. So yeah, and then to build on to the idea of what

Atul was talking of that when parents do not have autonomy themselves what thus happens of the child. The child then becomes a doubly vulnerable entity, does it not? Because the first layer of social protection that a child gets that is from its family is also then lost. Then so yeah, what then becomes of taking care of the child or growing up as such like how do we then look at conceptual ideas of growing up.

And you know something about the full rights of the child and the conditions in which the child grows up which is true because if the parents themselves lack autonomy or economic stability what kind of protection or parental care is available to the child. So, in all these cases we are primarily focusing on the context, aren't we? And the context of upbringing, the context of nurture is what it is. So, it's an interesting trajectory that you have pursued because you are talking both nature and nurture. Nature because of the biological condition of the child helpless, dependent of whatever urges and queries it might have requires somebody else to come by and fulfill it and then there is a question of context in which this occurs. So, the point is also that the representation of helplessness or dependency invariably demands a certain kind of response. The child being portrayed as vulnerable, dependent, helpless, fragile demands a certain kind of response and this response has usually been very varied and multi-layered. Let's spend a couple of minutes talking about this. So there is a certain kind of ethical demand upon the world to take care of the child, demand placed upon individuals to care for the child but I am thinking in also terms of what Prateeti has referred to as "visceral responses". Prateeti, would you like to take a shot at that first before we move on to others?

Yeah, so I was thinking about how the image of the child, how that as the image of the child as a vulnerable entity, how that elicits responses from the adults. So, I have been thinking about visceral responses primarily because of the fact that adults when they look at images of child, when we are looking at the child in this helpless vulnerable state, the child is not considered as someone who is at the same level as the adult. So, the child is already considered as an other figure, right? So, it's not the adult grown-up self who is viewing. So, it's not in that state. So when you are seeing an other figure but then this other figure has also been a part of themselves because an adult also was a child when they grew up. So, there is this dichotomy that is at work here. One is the othering but then also a sense of resemblance that the adult sees when they see a child, right? So, this dichotomy, I think, is what enables visceral responses because there is the idea of fear when you see something that resembles yourself so closely, right? So the human child as the ultimate vulnerable object, it resembles the adult so closely that it elicits fear in the adults but then there is also a certain degree of sympathy instead of empathy when you are looking at the child because the child is an other. So, a lot of and this sympathy factor works a lot when we are dealing with representations of the adolescent vulnerable victim that we are looking at because the adolescent is clearly not the adult and not the child. So

there's always an othering that works when we are thinking of the adolescent vulnerable victim. Yeah, so I think that's all.

All right, so it's interesting you point to both resemblance and disruption when you look at the child slash adolescent where you do detect continuity or we were there too and then the question of fear as well. Atul, what would you have to say about this?

In response to Prateeti's idea of the visceral response, in my understanding the shared defenselessness of the child elicits an affective response and it's a range of affect that comes into being in response to the child's situation. It could be revulsion, it could be indignation, a feeling of violation in the sense that "how could you do this to something that is extremely defenseless, something that cannot defend itself, something that is dependent on others, on people around it to defend itself". So, in that sense, the vulnerability of the child at some point can even feel absurd in the sense that something that is that cannot deal with the vulnerability is put in that kind of situation and the range of the responses that I mentioned, they are dependent on the degree of vulnerability and the case of children that is extreme, the degree of vulnerability is often extreme simply because a child cannot do anything to mitigate the degree of vulnerability. So, I would say it's a range of affective responses that are elicited by the vulnerability of the child.

But does that also include an immediate sense that we must do something to ensure this doesn't happen? So because you mentioned "Chimney Sweeper" and the child figure in say *Oliver Twist*, there is the visceral reaction, petty thieves that they are or dirty bedraggled children and there's revulsion and horror which, of course, becomes the subject of much 20th century popular culture as well, the child as a villain or evil but that's a different trajectory, and in the case of the images that you have invoked from literary texts, the other sense you get is people responding as a matter of again visceral but also duty. There is a sense that we ought to be responsible for them and care. So, I am thinking of this balancing act which we all undertake of a very affective response but also an affective response which is clearly marked by an ethical, moral turn that it may be anyone's child, it's not just a question of my child or someone I know, but any child elicits the response. So, there's a certain universal category being invoked here which is part of not just viscera but also the affective, the responsible, the ethical also. What do you have to say to that? Prateeti first and then

Atul, can you start with this first? I'll think some more about it.

Yeah, no I was thinking in terms of colonial India in the sense that the whole moral imperative to elevate the condition of children in India, especially native children in India inspired a lot of the educational movements in colonial India, the setting up of schools, of charity schools which were modeled after such institutions in Britain. So Blake's *Songs of Innocence and Experience* also contain references to charity schools, schools, educational

institutions set up established for children of a particular social class who could not, who do not belong to the elite, to the aristocratic class and who, therefore, need to be taken care of either by the church or by the government who, in that sense, become a responsibility of the society at large. So, their upbringing, their moral upliftment would otherwise be in danger if the society does not step in either in the form of the church or in the form of charity organizations or the government at large.

So yeah, it's interesting when we're thinking of duty because I was thinking of where does this idea of duty come, right? So, there is, is it an empathetic response or a sympathetic response? Like how and secondly the thing that I was thinking of is how does the child react to seeing another child being to seeing another child in that vulnerable state? So how like basically I'm just thinking out loud right now but how does adult mediation work in these cases when we are talking about the child as the vulnerable victim? As a viewer, yes, it does work because we have, as a viewer we respond to it in visceral ways, we other it, we respond to it, we sympathize, we empathize. That is okay as a viewer but then when we are thinking of taking the responsibility to, you know, nurture the child and so how does the adult, how does this adult mediation work, especially when we also take into consideration the accounts of children themselves and we're like we become the spokesperson for children or adolescents. So how does that mediation work when we are looking at the child as the vulnerable victim? So, I'm just thinking out loud here perhaps anyone would like to talk about it.

Yeah that's quite interesting, it's a challenge because adult mediation is like you said a spokesperson-ship and we intervene because we believe this is what is right for the child and the child narratives might be at odds with what we envisage as the right way to tackle the problem of children and childhood vulnerability which is why there are often protests about the state being heavy-handed in the way it treats say family parenting methods. Recent cases from other countries have also come to the forefront of discussion here, intervening directly in family matters where the state believes there is a right approach to nurturing and taking care which again is contingent upon certain notions of not just the child as vulnerable victim but our responsibilities as adults towards them. So, it's interesting that we are looking at multiple layers here. There is a legal angle to the child as a person or a person in need of protection. Then there is the ethical angle that this is the right thing to do towards them. Then of course the affective.

So we will take a break here for now, we have reached the 25-minute limit and we'll be back in about five minutes. Thank you, Prateeti. Thank you, Atul. See you soon.