

Vulnerability Studies: An Introduction

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Discussion On Childhood and Vulnerability – II

Hi, so let's get to the next set of points on this and that has to do with what both of you have noted as the necessity to rethink, say, spaces of safety when we are talking about child as the ultimate victim or as vulnerable and we'll start with questions of the home itself as a space traditionally conventionally associated with safety, with security, with happiness and what happens to this when we start rethinking the child in terms of victimhood, in terms of vulnerability and extreme conditions. Atul, you take off first, thank you.

In the context of the home, I want to go back to the point I began with because the environment of nurture and nourishment is central to how we have understood childhood but what happens when the idea of home itself turns into a source of vulnerability, what happens when that very environment of nourishment is denied to the child. The space of the home then becomes what Michel Foucault would call heterotopia, a place that is meant for something becomes something else altogether, becomes barely recognizable. So what happens when a space like the home or its equivalent like a school for example or some familiar space turns into a source of trauma or abuse and I would think of a text like Ismat Chughtai's well known short story "*Lihaaf*" the English title being "The Quilt". Well, this text has for several years been well known for as in the major theme has always been lesbianism which it is but very rarely do people talk of this text as a survivor narrative or a child abuse narrative. So, what happens there is the house of the relative of a familiar person turns into a space of abuse for the child narrator. So, it has to do with a denial of the environment of care and nourishment for the child and in that position the vulnerability of the child is at an extreme because the defenselessness becomes extreme. So, it's a question of degree rather than kind. So, the vulnerability which is always present with a growing child becomes, it reaches extreme proportions when the environment itself is denied to the child.

So, what we are talking about is again context where the child's location in the home which is a designated safe space, secure etc. modifies is inverted into something else which is what you are referring to by proposed heterotopia that, over a period of time the space of the home is the space of horror and nightmare and which is like you pointed out

in the case of Chughtai's text and several others. So, what we are seeing here is a demarcation of spaces primarily factory spaces of the kind that we see in Victoria and England. The child has labour in the case of say chimney sweeper poems, Blake's "Chimney Sweeper" poems and so on so forth and then the space of the home. But there are other kinds also that we would be interested in exploring which would be the child in say and a space which enables adventure but that's of a different kind of vulnerability too. But Prateeti your response to what Atul is saying about space since you have also got an extended point on this.

Yeah. so first and foremost I'd like to begin by talking about how meanings of a space are created. So, it is a space gets its meaning when the user is able to think about the space and imagine the space in a particular way and then practice it in that way right. So that is what enables the space to get a meaning. Now in the case of a home the space is considered as a safe space primarily because it has been imagined and it has been conceived as this space of nurturing as a space of safety right. So, the home is not just a space of nurturing but it's also space that prevents you from external elements right. So, safety in the most primal sense. Now in such a space when there is a child who is, when this safety of the space is questioned, so then the child becomes the ultimate victim right because what do you do when the space of the home is wrecked by say an abusive parent for example. So, one of the texts that I am working with it's called *Her* by Felicia Johnson and they're one of the step siblings is sexually abused by their father. So, all these kinds of different cases make the space of the home a very vulnerable space right. It's not a safe space for the child to stay. So, or there are other instances where the space of the home does not provide nourishment or nurturing to the child. For example, when the child is bullied in school how is the how are the parents dealing with that. So, the space of the home becomes this sort of an alien space where the child is unable to talk about the bullying issues that are happening in school right. So, then also the child becomes a vulnerable victim and in such cases, what happens is it's the status of vulnerability continues to exist. So, the child who has this identity as a vulnerable entity their identity of vulnerability continues to exist from the school to the home. So, there is a spectrum of vulnerability that we see that continues to travel across locations, depending on where the child is inhabiting and how the child is practicing the space. So yeah, that was one thing that I had to say here.

It's interesting that you are mapping a continuity here in the sense that safe and unsafe spaces secure and non-secure spaces but in the continuum that you are mapping the child's movement say home to school and you do mention school at some point in the list the argument that you sent out to us first that you and the instance used of bullying at school, abuse at home. So, the continuity of it is actually what we are talking about is that there's a there's a certain degree of uniformity of context in which the child's vulnerability

remains vulnerable, exacerbated, amplified in some cases, maybe diminished in a small way in other cases. Atul, what do you have to say to that?

I found this point of continuity quite interesting and I was reminded of Shyam Selvadurai's *Funny Boy*, the novel which is not really about childhood, it's more of a bildungsroman in many ways, a coming-of-age story but then what happens when the child is homosexual? What happens when the father of the child itself casts aspersions from the child as in he's somehow different from other children and he's like he's a funny boy. What happens when the child is bullied by other children in school, by his own siblings and is seen as somehow different by his own father and what happens when that particular child is in a fractured marriage for example, what happens when the parents themselves are in an abusive relationship. So, there are degrees of vulnerability which get, as you said exacerbated, and the degree subject to the particular social and political situation that the child finds him that the childhood itself is centered on, the child himself or herself is in. So yeah.

And to keep this argument going, but we know of extreme situations where for instance we see child soldiers, this was Sri Lanka, many countries in Africa where the children are placed in situations that clearly are unimaginable for most of us, that the child actually goes to war. So, what we are looking at is also since you mentioned the word a bildungsroman which is for what of a better word, twisted in some sense, the child does grow up but what is the nature of growing up and because the question of war is a question of extreme situations, moving far beyond abuse, domestic friction, things like Prateeti, something on this?

Don't you think in these conditions the definition of growing up itself changes? The whole idea of growing up as something which is linear, which happens over a period of time, which happens with care and nourishment, all those definitions are wrecked and all of them change when we think of child soldiers and we think of growing up too fast, too soon. So that is also kind of interesting. So then how do we, so does that, then, form a different kind of vulnerability?

But also, the question that you people have been constantly bringing back into the loop, if that is the place where the child is growing up and traditionally that is called home, then what is the nature of that home in which the child is growing up? For example, if the child is a child soldier and the child is a part of a militant group or a military cartel or something like that where violence is endemic and a daily routine, this is a place of growing up but also interesting and worrying is the fact that it is a source of identity for the child. That's where you hide yourself with, that is the place where you say you belong. Now, we will say immediately as a kind of reflex response that surely you cannot think of that as home. But if that is where they believe they belong, if that is where they think and affiliate themselves as belonging to, then what is the nature of the

Bildungsroman itself? You grow up in a space endemically marked by violence, scarred by death, destruction, pillage on a daily basis. You no longer play with toys, you play with guns. Whatever you staged as or pin children under quote-unquote “normal” circumstances, staged as battles with toys and figures is real-time and you know the stories of the Somalian children with their arms cut off at the elbows and things like that. It's a Bildungsroman of sorts. What is the nature of the Bildungsroman? So, I think the point Prateeti is making about continuity of spaces brushes up against this problem where this is the only home the child knows, kidnapped at a very early age, recruited into the army, forced into doing things that would be unimaginable but that's the only life the child knows. So, if that is the case then you have to think a little bit about the process of growing up also. Atul, would you like to respond to the point that Prateeti just made?

When children grow up in extreme circumstances whether it is war torn Sri Lanka in Selvadurai's case or for that matter in and around as in becoming a pawn in the “Great Game” between imperial Britain and Russia in the case of Kim in Kipling's text. As you said, I mean what is the nature of the home the child is growing up in and what is the nature of the growing up itself? In that context one gets a sense of the fact that the whole idea of home itself is called into question as in the idea of the home itself becomes very shifting, very elusive in that sense. I mean the conventions that are generally built around the idea of home, around the idea of childhood and growing up they tend to give away in circumstances such as you mentioned Somalia or for that matter Sri Lanka or British India, the whole construction of an ideal childhood and idyllic childhood or for that matter childhood surrounded by friends and family and loved ones that tends to give away and also I mean across the world wherever there is conflict, there is no as in the conventional idea of the home does not really hold. So, the very idea of home itself becomes vulnerable, the idea of home and growing up they themselves become vulnerable to social and political circumstances.

Prateeti, do you have anything to add to this?

I'd like to add. So, I was thinking like when we're questioning the nature of home and growing up right, so there's one idea that comes to my head is the idea of precariousness and precarity that is growing up and home they both become very precarious, don't they, in a situation where the norm is to live dangerously right. So, what then happens to the life? The life itself is always in mortal danger. The child is living in situations which are not considered quote-unquote “normal”. So, I'll go back to the first argument that I started with which was the whole idea of looking at the child as this ultimate vulnerable victim and these ideas stemming from the enlightenment period and the enlightenment thinkers right.

So when we are considering children in such extreme situations, war-torn areas,

conflicts, refugees, workers, factory workers right. So, these ideas of the enlightenment ideas that the child is something that needs, that is the ultimate vulnerable being and the child is something that needs to be taken care of. All these ideas get completely questioned right and they have to be redefined when we are thinking of situations like this. So, in a way it also is remind, it's also reminding me of how Rousseau envisioned childhood as childhood needs to be this stage from where people have to, you know, if people have to survive. So, he did not consider human childhood as separate from an animal childhood, if I am using the words correctly but he gave the example of animals right just like animals start to develop by themselves right from the get-go right after being born. So, children also should do that and that's how they gain strength and that's how they become you know that's how the society as such will become more and more rational. So, these kinds of extreme ideas I think also reflect in the way modern day child as the ultimate victim is being thought of.

Yeah, I want to at this point turn to a slightly different document and that would be the "Declaration of the Rights of the Child" from the United Nations 1959 which says and I quote Principle Six, "the child for the full and harmonious development of his personality needs love and understanding. He shall, wherever possible, grow up in the care and under the responsibility of his parents and in any case in an atmosphere of affection and of moral and material security. A child of tender years shall not, save in exceptional circumstances be separated from his mother. Society and the public authorities shall have the duty to extend particular care to children without a family and to those without adequate means of support" and the key is this point about the full and harmonious development of personality. So, the question that we are also now faced with in extreme situations is what is the kind of personality being nurtured in extreme situations? You use the example of Selvadurai, yes and I'm thinking of one of our preferred texts for teaching my Eipe and Prateek Thomas's *Hush*, for the child the girl finally takes a gun to school. So when you say "full and harmonious development of personality" we are also determining the kind of person a child ought to become, the kind of personality the child ought to possess and it's a social construction, granted, that the child should become a full and proper citizen of a certain kind and things like that and this determines how we envisage the nature of the home, nurture, education principally, of course, and in extreme circumstances these are all completely eroded or the non-existent and therefore the question of direct harm as opposed to say neglect and this is interesting because negligence is something that is coming up again and again in public discourses about children, not a question of outright harm but a question of negligence. Would you like to speculate on that before we finish? Atul, first and then Prateeti.

I was struck by the UN document that you read, it was in many ways an ambitious document in the sense that it assumes a lot of things, it assumes the fact that a child ought to have, as an ought to or to stay with his or her parents ought to have an atmosphere of

care and nurture but then and it is telling that this document came out in the 1950s, years after the Second World War where countless children were rendered vulnerable across the world and not to forget the threat of nuclear war over the world and the vulnerability that stems from that. So, to go back to your idea to your point about vulnerability versus neglect, one could think of the Covid pandemic for example, when schools were not functioning around the world and the impact it has had on literacy because and not just on education but more specifically on literacy because children of a particular age, say, three to five years of age very often that is when they learn how to read and write in schools and across the world schools were shut and that affected primary schools as well. So, primary skills such as literacy work affected not really because of somebody's doing, this was not extreme circumstance in the sense of a war but because of the pandemic where people and governments were left with no other choice but to stop the spread of the virus and children in many ways became collateral damage. So, an opportunity to acquire basic skills like reading and writing like literacy was denied to them not by the express intentions of a particular government or group of people but because of the circumstances that the world was thrown into because of the virus, because of the pandemic. So, it need not be neglect in that sense but it could even be extraneous circumstances like disease and pandemic which affects children in ways like this.

Yeah, to build on Atul's point about extraneous circumstances like disease, I was particularly thinking of situations where the child has to become, has to take the role of a caretaker, caregiver especially when the adults are not quote-unquote "responsible" enough. So, then the question of negligence and vulnerability also comes into question, because the adult is being negligent towards their child. So, I was thinking of a text called *Mother, Come Home* by, I forget the author but it's basically a text where the mother dies and the father falls into a chronic depression and the child has to take care of the father. So, it's a graphic novel where the father slowly, towards the end he realizes that he has been negligent towards his child and the child. So, I'm also interested to think of how negligence by the parents or by the authorities also leads to, also leads to the vulnerability of the child, right? Because the child is not supposed to be in that state of caregiving for an adult who is suffering from a particular sort of an illness or disease but then they have to do because there is no one else to take care of it and they, therefore, become vulnerable because again that which we were talking of previously, the growing up happens a little too soon. So, how is the development of the child taking place in such a situation? Is it a harmonious development as the UN HDR has spoken of? So these were just questions like I was thinking of while considering the ideas of negligence versus vulnerability. I think negligence, on the part of the caretaker, also adds to the vulnerability of the child.

That's a lovely point actually about the shift in roles also. When we think of the child, the child is somebody who should be taken care of rather than somebody who is taking care of someone else and I know this graphic novel that you are referring in the child's

constant efforts to bring the father back into a semblance of normal life in their household and the father is indifferent to things that are going on but I'm also thinking in terms of larger context where for example, the UN declaration says that the child should be protected from practices that are racially, religiously and other forms of discrimination and should be brought up in a spirit of understanding, tolerance, friendship among people's peace and universal brotherhood. I'm quoting, he shall be brought up in a spirit of understanding, tolerance, a friendship among people's peace and universal brotherhood and in full consciousness that his energy and talents should be devoted to the service of his fellow men and that is really quite interesting because we have referred to the Bildungsroman and if you think of the context in which for example, the child is listening to propaganda on television because his or her parents or grandparents or somebody is listening to it all the time, hate speech, that is more or less lingua franca in places now and this is what the child imbibes and if the phrasing is very important, it says in "full consciousness" that is our, we should be fully conscious of the fact that their energy should eventually lead to better citizenship, better nature of citizenship. And if you think in those terms then what we are looking at here is a very deeply troubled Bildungsroman for children where even if they are not in positions of extreme conditions such as war, if they have been assigned the role involuntarily of course of caregiving then you again have a problem. It's not a question of understanding of peace any longer, it's a question of a whole burden of duties being assigned to the already vulnerable child being forced to grow up before their time. Prateeti mentioned something like this at the beginning of the talk. So, what we are looking at here is that practically all of our discussion focuses on the contexts and conditions in which the child arrives, grows up or leaves. So, this could be places of great comfort and security which have been inverted, the heterotopia that Atul spoke about. This could be places where the role of caregiving has been inverted, the child does not receive care but instead is the primary caregiver. Questions of extreme context in which the child no longer has a childhood which is how we normally define it, that their childhood was taken away from them is what we normally say, they were forced to become adults. So, all of these point to the question of ecosystems in which the children and their vulnerabilities are exposed, protected or amplified. So, they either become or they go through a process whereby the so-called Bildungsroman, the narrative of growing up is all entangled and jumbled up or inverted or they never reach a point where full consciousness, peace, understanding is available. Any concluding remarks from either of you Atul or Prateeti?

Yeah, just to add to the whole ecosystem point that you had made, I was very urgently reminded of this novel called *A Thousand Splendid Suns* by Khaled Hosseini where, so it's interesting of how it's not about the main characters but then the main character Maria and her son and we see this ecosystem and how they are working. So, when Maria gives birth to her, Mariam I think, so when Mariam gives birth to her son and she is, her first husband is an abusive husband, right? So, the son also imbibes those qualities and he

starts abusing his mother as well and even when Mariam, was it Mariam? The second big female lead, I forgot her name, but when she marries, remarries the second time with her childhood lover, right? So, he also, the child also is antagonistic towards the, towards his stepfather but then we see how these ecosystems that we are talking of, ecosystems of growing up, how they effectively shape and influence childhood and their ideas of how they are thinking of the world and stuff like that. So, it was just an example to elucidate the point.

Good. Atul, anything else?

No, I only want to conclude with the idea that as in just to take off from where Prateeti left off. In the face of such extreme vulnerabilities, the question therefore is how do we define childhood itself as in how do we define things like a home. It could possibly be who or what constitutes a home for the child or for that matter where is the child at home. So yeah, I mean it is difficult in the face of vulnerability, it becomes difficult to define ideas like childhood, like home and so on. So that is all I had.

All right, that was fun. Thank you so much and I'm going to stop recording here.