

Vulnerability Studies: An Introduction

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Week- 08

Lecture- 01

Imperial Vulnerability - I

Good morning. We will continue our discussion of vulnerability in Vulnerability Studies with a slight twist here in this final set of lessons on vulnerability. We will be looking at conditions of vulnerability and risk in a historical context and the context here is British India and Imperial vulnerability first and then we shall move on to questions of posthuman vulnerability as well. So, we are actually encompassing a wide range of a wide temporal range starting with colonial India and bringing it up to the present and contemporary literature in which a certain kind of vulnerability of the posthumans has been documented particularly with reference to questions of their bodies, biocapitalism and others, some of which we have already discussed and thought about in our previous lessons. So, let's think in to the question of Imperial vulnerability and what it means.

So, Imperial vulnerability is actually our shorthand term for conditions of risk, conditions of vulnerability and injurability in British India. My examples are all from British India although some of it might be relevant to and connected with similar contexts of colonialism and empire in other parts of the world. So, if you look at the image up there a famous painting by Elizabeth Butler which portrays William Brydon as a surgeon by training in profession returning to Jalalabad fort and the only survivor of a very large army. It was titled "The Remnants of an Army" and you can see in the distance a fort from which a group of soldiers on horseback are coming to receive this man.

William Brydon was the sole survivor of a very large army that had been massacred in the Anglo-Afghan Wars and badly injured, tired. It was the horse that brought him back because he had no longer any energy or weapons to fight the people who are attacking him. So that is an iconic image and we will look at one more over the next few lesson minutes and so on so forth. But let's first think in terms of organizing Imperial vulnerability across multiple heads, just for our convenience. So Imperial vulnerability can be studied as the vulnerability of the Englishman or Englishwoman in India.

Please note that this lesson is entirely built on colonial India and like I said a few minutes ago it could be expanded to include others the Europeans in the colonies studied majorly by Linda Colley in her book on the subject. So, the vulnerability of the

Englishwoman or man in India is in sharp contrast with the traditional image we see in their literature of the confident the triumphant Englishman or woman. The injurable, vulnerable, at risk Englishman or woman is in contrast with the triumphant, conquering Englishman that we have seen in traditional colonial literature. This is not that kind of an English person at all. Then the English writings on this subject of their vulnerability actually depicts even within this horrific or terrifying condition a certain mode of appropriating it for their purpose and here the vulnerable English document depict and represent the “true” within quotes English character that emerges in even adverse conditions or particularly in adverse conditions.

That is, the English writings on the subject actually make use of the adverse conditions whether it is war or strife of some kind or rebellion in 1857. These become contexts wherein the English are portrayed as gritty, courageous, loyal of course and a certain sense of British character. So, the inimical setting, the troubling, terrifying setting becomes the launchpad for a certain kind of English characterization. So, the vulnerable Englishman or the vulnerable Englishwoman remains truly “English” within quotes with truly English they will document their grit, their staying power, their endurance, their courage and valor above all else and therefore their resilience. If you recall the early lesson vulnerability and resilience actually go together and resilience is seen as a virtue whereby an individual or a community manages to bounce back from conditions of terrible oppression, terrible disaster and continues to survive.

So the settings of war or genocide or strife become the context in which true character specifically two English character emerges. The third is also the utilization of settings in which the English man or woman finds himself or herself where the English becomes saviors to the vulnerable natives. Whether this is getting rid of a man-eating tiger in the forests, whether it is the battle against the thugs to save the natives or even in the case of Sati the English efforts to save the Sati, the woman from being made a sati. Here it is the savior role or the messianic role which the Englishman or woman presents in the writings.

So imperial vulnerability has three components the vulnerability of the Englishwoman or man in India which contrasts with the image of the all-conquering triumphant English. The English who make use of the conditions of vulnerability, the conditions of injurability in order to depict the staying power the endurance and the courage of true English character and finally the Englishman or woman who treats the colony as a space where they can behave as saviors to the vulnerable native person.

and we will start with the vulnerable English body and here you have on your screen a small excerpt from Thomas Herbert *A Relation of Some Years Travels* it is a travel document published in 1634 where the document by Herbert says “My desire to see, took

away my sight, as it fares with those who are suddenly taken with a killing beauty, or gaze upon the sun. Yet some glimmerings I have observed, like an ill-sighted man, who sees with spectacles or perspectives.”

This little excerpt from a travelogue, an early travelogue 1634, he travelled, Thomas Herbert travelled in India around 1626-28 presents the English body as suffering as traumatized in the pursuit of knowledge for the greater good of England. So, this is a vulnerable English body where vulnerability is sought after is pursued so that the Englishman acquires knowledge for the country back home his home his countrymen. Here the Englishman's body is threatened is unsure is in some kind of fright but all this in the larger interest which means there is a certain air of sacrifice that I will put up with all the suffering so that I can bring back knowledge for the people back home. Then, here is the landscape itself which threatens. Here is India the colony which poses a considerable amount of threats to the vulnerable English body and if you look at the first passage which is an excerpt from Edward Terry *A Voyage to East-India* published in 1655. Edward Terry was the chaplain on the Thomas Rowe expedition to India 1616-1619 and the second one is from John Fryer who was a physician and his account of his travels was published in 1698.

Now if you look at this description there are harmful beasts of prey, there is violence, there is a lot of noise, hideous noises and there are ravenous creatures, the rivers have many crocodiles and overgrown snakes. What kind of landscape is being described here? And if you look at the second excerpt which is from John Fryer the mountains have fenced with horrible gulfs can people as an English who are standing there begin to have strange vertigos there's this terrible sound and echo. What is this kind of description doing? Now note here this is not a touristy description and in contrast to the tourist description of a beautiful of a picturesque pretty as a postcard landscape the English traveler Edward Terry or John Fryer is fascinated by a landscape which is profuse overpopulated but also wild.

John Fryer, for example, has his imagination triggered by what he sees by the presence of various sounds of various creatures and the landscape itself mountains and gulfs silence and roars echoes and growls all of which combine to unsettle him and which perhaps would drive his imagination and he begins to wonder what kind of land is this and what am I doing here? What will happen to me? This is the Englishman whose body is threatened simply by virtue of being in that landscape. And if you look at the Edward Terry description which is full of multiple beasts and multiple species of dangerous creatures which he describes as ravenous. Is this a pleasant description? Far from it.

So this is the Englishman's body which is not a confident, conquering body. It's a person who's hesitant and tentative and even outright afraid where he looks around and what he

sees is oh my god there are so many of these. The profusion is not a pleasant sight it's an excess as I've argued elsewhere. So here is a landscape which by virtue of being profuse of being overpopulated becomes the source of some kind of threat. Now, here, we continue with the Edward Terry description except that this is not a description of nature it's a description of a military camp and this is Edward Terry on the Mughal's Lashkar the camp and if you read this description carefully, he's speaking about a vast number of people spread over five miles as he says approximately and there are 100,000 soldiers. 100,000, it's a very large number and then he says the men have brought their families they have brought their servants and look at his description "a broad passage continually filled with passengers and elephants and horses and asses and oxen". It's a very great number of people and it seems they have all spread across the land.

But note something he says at the beginning of this excerpt which I put up for you. "These", he says "are very beautiful to behold, from a distance". What's Terry doing? What Terry is saying is it's a grand sight but the grand sight is grand when you view it from a distance because you note distance implies safety you are not in the middle of that army you're not in the middle of a very large number of people you're viewing it from a distance from a distance of course it's perfectly fine and safe this unease this unsettled feeling that Edward Terry captures is the Englishman who feels not quite confident. Rather the Englishman feels vulnerable when surrounded by people by people of a different race. This has to be kept in mind. So, it's not just a number of people, it's a large number of people of a different race now.

Some of you may be aware of the fact that in English writings or European writings on the colonies of Asia and Africa, the natives are often described as a swarm or a crowd there will be attention to some individuals but the overall emphasis is on the natives appearing in the form of a very large number of people, a crowd of people. It's a very traditional very conventional stereotype in colonial discourse and it suggests a certain frightening volume of people because as we all recognize a large group of people, at least notionally, can constitute a potential threat rather than an individual or two. So, the stereotype of the large crowd is something that you can see initiated in Edward Terry's passage on the mobile army and he speaks about the full passage being covered by people and 100,000 soldiers.

This is very clearly a matter of some unease and Edward Terry is not very happy and you can see a follow-up, not identical, but quite similar, in John Fryer, whose passage is also up there for you on your screen, where John Fryer speaks about a garden place and he calls it the Garden of Eden with an obvious biblical connotation and a place of terrestrial happiness and then he says but that place is loaded with "hardy cannon" and the bowers which ought to be dedicated to rest and ease are turned into bold ramparts for watchful sentinels to look out for. And what does he see and hear? Everywhere there is a "rebounding echo the alarming drum, and those slender fences only designed to oppose

the sylvan herd, are thrown down to erect others of a more war-like force". Now what is Fryer doing here?

John Fryer, like Edward Terry, is contrasting the natural beauty of the place with the huge martial or military structures there. So, you see it's easier to find pleasure in a place which is natural rather than a place which has military fortifications and structures. So, there is a considerable amount of unease in John Fryer that this place which should have been a bower which should have been fences to keep out the Sylvan heard is actually a military stronghold. Now why should the British are not be pleased by the sites? Why should the British surgeon John Fryer like Edward Terry before, Terry was a chaplain, a priest, why aren't these people pleased at the Mughal army or the Mughal fortifications?

The answer is obvious isn't it the Englishman who arrives in 17th century India is overwhelmed by the power, the might, the wealth of the Mughals. The Englishman doesn't appear in these early writings as a confident conquering Englishman, he's not the courageous warrior. He comes he looks around and what does he see the massive army the massive fortifications the military structures, in the presence of which, the Englishman is a small speck. This is the vulnerability of the English documented in the early writings on British India where the British who arrive here are not coming here as powerful statesmen and politicians and military strategists. That will happen much later, as we know, with Plassey and Buxar and 18th century conquests. But at this point in time, the British in India are unsettled, diffident, afraid, uncertain of themselves. So if you look at the two accepts here from Edward Terry and John Fryer you see very clearly that the Englishman is not confident.

Now I'm moving hundred years down the line and this is an except that you will see from a very famous document a prisoner narrative by John Zephaniah Holwell which is the black hole story being narrated this is a document that appears first in the 18th century 1757-58 and it's a description of the Englishman imprisoned in the black hole prison and of which very few survived and look at the description here of Holwell, who was a survivor. And the title of the text is given below *A Genuine Narrative The Deaths Of Englishmen* etc etc and 146 people "wretches" as he calls, were put into this small very tiny place and they died of thirst and heat, it's summer, all right, and there are not enough windows, there isn't enough air circulating and here is a description of what happens to them and he speaks about them being reduced to animals, everybody's thirst is intolerable, breathing becomes difficult and they began to become delirious and cry for water.

Now this, is a description of the conditions of the English who have been imprisoned in India now we are looking at the vulnerable English body remember so this is again not the confident Englishman if you look at the description carefully, it's about the Englishman whose body is in tremendous agony, there's no water there's not enough air

it's very, very hot, they're sweating and as we know several people died inside the black hole. Although there are several questionable points that a Holwell makes and there is an entire myth of the black hole which has been built up as studied in considerable detail by Kate Teltscher in her essay on the black hole and what it does also by Partha Chatterjee in his book on the *Black Hole of Empire*. So, what is Holwell doing?

Holwell's depiction is of corporeal trauma, of deeply visceral trauma and the important point is this trauma has been afflicted upon them, imposed upon them by the natives. So, this description of the vulnerable English body serves the purpose of documenting suffering inflicted by the natives and therefore, to show how the Englishman is vulnerable to the cruelties of the natives. You create a racial dichotomy as well because in this dichotomy you create the Englishman as vulnerable and the native as cruel. And Holwell's passage continuing into the next slide of screen offers something else,

Holwell here declares that he has been extremely thirsty and is deeply suffering but he endures. And if you look at this description, he speaks about how he sucked the perspiration out of his shirt sleeves and survived. He drank his own sweat and survived and it's intolerable but he manages. What is this doing? If you remember what I said a few minutes ago, there's a dichotomy between the Englishman who suffers and the native who's cruel to the English. But if you recall the early part of today's lesson, the Englishman also utilizes the situation of vulnerability to speak about the stoic, courageous, enduring Englishman and it becomes a test of character. The suffering becomes a test of character and the Englishman triumphs. He's sensitive as the Holwell document shows to the suffering of other people. He is self-conscious of his own suffering but he is worried about the others.

And if you look at the first paragraph on this slide “How shall I give you a conception of what I felt at the cries and ravings of those in the remoter parts of the prison”. Even in the midst of his own suffering he is thinking of the others. So here you have a brilliant strategy; Holwell uses the suffering of the English to speak about the cruelty of the natives for having imprisoned them he speaks about his own endurance, his own sheer will and grit to survive and the empathy of the English officer because he's the officer in the in the prison and others are all subordinates. “I've been concerned about other. I've been concerned about fellow sufferers.”

Moving on from Holwell is a famous image “Miss Wheeler defending herself against the Sepoys at Cawnpore”; this is the story of Miss Wheeler who was part of a family that was massacred in the Kanpur battle during 1857 mutiny and here is Miss Wheeler, who surrounded by the native mutineers and if you look at the expressions of the mutineers—violent, evil, but she's courageous, she's fighting them and she kills one of them obviously but she's fired with a pistol in her hand. Miss Wheeler's story has been of course become rendered into a myth and there are stories whether she survived or

whether she killed herself, which have gone around the English literary and historical discourse. But the point is that here is a young woman, and note the age, the young woman who's threatened by people around her soldiers around her enemies around her but she stands upright and is courageously battling. This was a story that will be repeated far into the future.

And continuing Holwell's account he speaks again about seeing people's distress and things like that. This is, as you can see and I will conclude with a particular slide in with an excerpt from Julia Inglis' *The Siege of Lucknow* which is a mutiny text. Here, again, there is an account of the British being under siege and they continue to lead their normal lives, as far as possible, there's an account of provisions running out people dying and, of course, the fact that they were trying to keep going in the midst of all the suffering and that they are trying to take care of the children, they are trying to make do with a minimum amount of food, they are trying to entertain the kids but also do their duty towards the soldiers. Now what does this kind of description or set of descriptions do?

If you look at Miss Wheeler, if you look at Holwell, and you look at Julia Inglis, in all three cases the emphasis is on suffering, yes, but the emphasis is also on the triumph over that suffering. So the vulnerable English body does not give up, the vulnerable English body doesn't simply curl up and die. The vulnerable English body fights, fights to survive, makes use of all the resources available in order to cope with the very extreme situations in which they find themselves. So, you see the contrast being put in place between the terrible cruelties of the native and the sense of solidarity of the English who are under siege but also that the kind of grit valor of the British. So, the vulnerable English body becomes then the launchpad for the discourse of English character. When under siege, when in conditions of extremity, the British don't give up the British fight. The British will triumph so in many ways the vulnerable English body is the preliminary to documenting and representing the triumphant Englishman or woman. It becomes the preliminary moment, the anterior moment where the English character emerges even more glorious and courageous than before so the vulnerable body is not about the weakness of the English body, it is about the weakness which has been transcended, it is about the vulnerability which has been overcome and what is produced at the end of the day is the courageous Englishman. So, vulnerability here serves the English colonial discourse. English representations of themselves in very effective ways to depict them as the conquering English. Thank you, we'll look at more of these later.