

Vulnerability Studies: An Introduction

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Lecture- 02

The Aesthetics of Vulnerability - II Traumatic Materialism

So, we are back with aesthetics and vulnerability. And in today's session, we will look at one specific form of or one specific aesthetic of vulnerability, what I call "traumatic materialism". Michael Rothberg, looking at the aesthetics of representing the Holocaust, argued that we have to locate the extreme within the ambit of the everyday. It is not something very unique, but it is within the ambit of the everyday. He called it "traumatic realism". And it is the aesthetic of documenting horrific extremity, focusing on the corporeal, as in bodily and economic materiality of the victim.

I have a slight modification to this. And I refer to it as traumatic materialism, which is the preeminent, in my view, aesthetic of vulnerability and has three specific components, corporeal trauma, (im)material with "IM" in brackets, (im)material labor and trauma and embodied resilience and hope. It has a corporeal resilience and hope. So, we will take turns, take each of them in turn.

First is representations of corporeal trauma. And I am reading out in the course of this particular lesson, a couple of excerpts from literary texts. My first is this. And I am reading a poem. The poem is "The Autobiography of a Bitch" by a poet called Vijila, right, "The Autobiography of a Bitch" poem.

We in the street amidst garbage, hungry, hungry smelling like chewing, smelling the chewing gum. Someone chewed and spat out. In their markets, we have neither milk, flesh nor skin. We are not offerings for the gods either. It is not the full poem, I have excerpted it.

Notice how the poem, Vijila's poem, focuses very firmly on the visceral, on the Dalit life spent amidst garbage, hungry, starving, or getting only rotting food, spat out chewing gums, and look at that description, everything is foul. Vijila also notes that the Dalit body is not even a commodity for the market. It is not even a sacrificial victim for the gods. The body has no skin, no flesh, is just bare bones, and not even that. My argument here is, since we are looking at aesthetics, traumatic materialism, which is the aesthetic I am

defining here, I have adapted this work from something I have published before, the traumatic materialism links the economic conditions to the actual body of the individual victim: poverty, caste, two things which produce a certain kind of body of the Dalit victim.

There is the materiality of the body, the starving body, the body which is eating putrefied food, it is barely able to live. And then there is a symbolic value of the body. It cannot be even taken as a sacrificial body for the gods. It has no symbolic value. That is, in effect, Vijila in “The Autobiography of a Bitch” is saying that the Dalit body really does not matter.

It does not matter because whatever matter it possesses, whatever flesh and bones it possesses in its overall structure is pathetic, is broken, brutalized. But it also has no symbolic value because there is no value of any kind, which will enable the Dalit body to be placed even for the gods. Can't do it. So read those lines. It is visceral, it is powerful, but it also makes the connection, like I said, between the material nature of the body, the economics, the economy in which the body is placed poverty and caste like I mentioned, and the symbolic cultural value of the body, which is zero.

That is traumatic materialism, where there is a very close link between the nature of materiality, which is skin and bones and flesh and hunger, the symbolic conditions, its symbolic connotation, symbolic value, and the economy in which these are located. Alright? So, what you can see is that you cannot deal with it as only one, you cannot speak about the Dalit body as body only. You have to account for a certain amount of symbolic value, a certain amount of cultural signification. For example, the question of the body being untouchable, un-touch-able, you cannot touch that body is material, but it is also symbolic. And the horror, the nightmare of the system that Vijila is describing has to do with multiple layers of vulnerabilities, multiple forms, all of which can be captured in traumatic materialism.

So there is, like I said, one, the actual matter, the material nature of the body, two, the economic conditions in which that kind of body is produced, which includes poverty and caste, and three, the symbolic value of that kind of body. None of it can be depicted separately, they are part of the system. I am going to read out another poem. Please look at the text scrolling on your screen as well. Two excerpts from two poems, Raghavan Atholi's “Kandhati” and Sukirtharani's “Poem of My Village”.

The first is from Atholi. “Tears dropping on the withered faces of famished babies nursed with milk and tears. Tears, dropping on the withered faces of famished babies nursed with milk and tears. The second one from Sukirtharani's “Poem of My Village”.

“The thick sulfurous smell of the fermented gruel. Our bare feet are drenched by the pain of cast that drips from our lips as we drink tea from palm leaf cups standing at an untouchable distance”. What is going on here? Note the emphasis on starving bodies, on deprived bodies, you know, bodies which are breaking down, which are hungry, which are of no, which do not have any material strength in them. For the babies there is no food, there is milk and tears. Surely, they are not sustaining nutritious food materials. In its body's starved state, the human body is tormented by the smell of food cooking.

In both cases, the traumatic materialism, like I said, links the body's material condition to the social condition, caste, to the economic condition, poverty. So, traumatic materialism does not separate them. They are part of the same unit. You cannot speak about one without speaking about the other. In all cases, there is also some emphasis, considerable emphasis in Vijila's poem on the symbolic value of the body.

If you know anything about the Holocaust and prison cultures, narratives exist, memoirs exist from them. They were forced to live like animals, scrounging for food. Remember the image from Vijila about the smell of rotting food and spat out chewing gum. People scrounging for food in garbage bins. People forced to eat off the floor because food was thrown onto the floor in prisons. Right?

Being made to live like animals was part of a system of dehumanization and debasement in concentration camps and is a common feature of prison life. When a human is forced to live and behave and function as an animal, you have not only made symbolic animals out of humans, you have also materially degraded them. What do I mean by this? A body meant to work and function in a certain way is made to function at a much lower level, what I am calling dehumanization and debasement. They are forced to function, live and behave like animals. This was part of the general strategy to demoralize the Jews, to demoralize prisoners.

If you recall the first lectures on vulnerability and precarity, I spoke about vulnerability being the result of unequal and unjust social conditions, right? The natural sense we get is in a system like say prisons or concentration camps, the people who are inmates are in a pretty wretched position because they are socially at the bottom of the hierarchy and the wardens and others are at the top. And these people, as in the victims, the people at the lower end of the hierarchy are made to increasingly behave and feel and think of themselves as lesser humans, what we call dehumanization. And note the term itself, dehumanization, the removal of things human or the erasure, erosion of all those things which make us human. All those things that make us what we understand is our humanity.

Traumatic materialism does a good job of doing things. So that was the first aspect of traumatic materialism. My second category of analysis here is immaterial labor and trauma, immaterial labor and trauma. And again, read out a couple of things. You can see on your screens too, three bits of poetry, excerpts, not poems in its entirety.

“If my man was doing good, why would I send my adolescent daughter to sell idlis?” This is Kabilan in “If I Go as a Helper in a Construction Job”. “If my man was doing good, why would I send my adolescent daughter to sell idlis?” The next one from M.R. Renukumar, “The Silent Beast”, “Must cross the singeing stairs of the anglers on the canal bank while returning with the earthen jar against the hip”. Third, Kalesh, “Hairpin Bend”. “Fixing hairpins in her”, and this is the description of a woman getting ready to go out, “she leaves”. “On the way, even if anyone comments on the growing heaviness of her tiny breasts or the fine down on her limbs, she says nothing”. So as the woman goes to work, lewd comments are passed by the men hanging around there, making her more vulnerable of course. Her laboring body is commodified. It becomes the object of unnatural, unwanted, unacceptable representation, commentary and derisive comments.

The materiality of her labour, the young adolescent girl being forced to sell idlis, the young adolescent girl forced to walk on a route where people comment on her body. There is the material nature of her labour. There is the angry, horrific, degrading comments by people. All of it add up. So, the woman going to work is a misfit in the category of the labourer. The young adolescent girl is going to work. She does not quite fit and the labourers are all mocking her. Does she replace them? Would she replace them as labourers? Is she a threat to them? Possibly. She is also a commodity.

She is also an object. So, there is the materiality of her labour. There is the immateriality of these kinds of things, the symbolic value. Remember the poem I discussed a little while ago, Vijila's, “The autobiography of a Bitch”, that the body is unfit for even the gods because the body has no symbolic value. So, the category of the working Dalit woman or the working adolescent girl, that material labour is enmeshed in, is embedded in the symbolic, which is non-material nature of descriptions, commentaries and criticism. What is it that happens here? What happens is whether they like it or not, the young girls are forced to go to work, are forced to go and do labour.

They should be studying, getting a better life, but there is no chance, there is no option available to them. For the family to survive, she must go out to work. And in all these cases, it is not the question of labour alone. It is the immaterial nature, the non-material nature of derisive comments, objectionable lewd responses by the people on the route that also constitute her identity. So that is immaterial labour and the kind of trauma that is

induced in the victim. Third, we have looked at two aspects of traumatic materialism. My third is embodied resilience and hope. And the text on your screen is from Charlotte McConaghy's novel, newer novel, *Migrations*.

“The animals are dying. Soon we will be alone here. The Arctic Tern has the longest migration of any animal. It flies from the Arctic all the way to the Antarctic and then back again within a year. This is an extraordinarily long flight for a bird its size. And because the Terns live to be 30 or so, the distance they will travel over the course of their lives is the equivalent of flying to the moon and back three times. What happens when the last of the Terns die? Nothing will ever be as brave again... An exhausted little bird who has flown across the entire world with hardly a thing to eat because we have made the world impossible for them.”

The complete and utter fragility of the Tern is compounded by the effort it takes to fly across, the effort it makes to go through this migration, but compounded also by the fact that human activity has made the planet unsafe, has made the migration impossible in many ways. It is anthropogenic. Its genesis lies in the human, that is, human induced vulnerability. So, the Tern's flight is in and of itself a very difficult, nearly impossible actually, not just difficult and risky transition.

It is compounded by the fact that humanity has made this more difficult. So, traumatic materialism here plays out in not only the materiality of the flight, the materiality of hunger, energy, distance. It is the compounding of this material risk by what human induced vulnerability has been.

No food. The seas have been polluted. There is no fish for them. There is no resting place anywhere. That is it. So, it is the cultural practice of migration on the one hand, but it is also the nature of landscape that has changed, which adds to the vulnerability, but they are resilient as the next passage shows.

“ Hundreds of Arctic Terns cover the ice before me.” I am reading again from McConaghy. “Squealing and creaking their cries, dancing upon the air with their mates, caterwauling joyously”, and so on and so forth. And towards the end she says, “I sink awkwardly to the ground and weep. For the journey they have made, for the loveliness left behind”. The resilience here is embodied in the birds. It invokes trauma, but it evokes strong sentiments, affect.

Much traumatic materialism caters to sentiment rather than reason. It focuses very sharply on how we emotionally respond to the description of a tiny bird flying all the way from the North Pole to the South Pole and then back again. And this back and forth is done over territory, over water and land, which is completely inhospitable, completely

devoid

of

food.

They starve, but they will fly. They do. So embodied resilience because it is, remember what we said about resilience, it is entirely the individual's job to take care of himself or herself. In the case of the birds, it is entirely their resilience that sees them through. So traumatic materialism moves from talking about corporeal trauma, corporeal violation, corporeal injury to resilience, which is also embodied, resilience which is also rooted in the nature of the body. We will have something more to say about another form of aesthetic in the next one. Thank you.