

## **Vulnerability Studies: An Introduction**

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### **The Aesthetics of Vulnerability - III Melodrama**

Let us continue our discussion of the aesthetics of vulnerability. In this particular session, we shall be looking at melodrama as one of the key aesthetic strategies adopted in communication of vulnerabilities in genres such as torture films, horror fiction, war literature, graphic medicine. All these genres depict vulnerability through very melodramatic representations of the body, bodies that are very obviously in pain and suffering. Melodramatic representations of vulnerable persons, vulnerable bodies are marked by three principal characteristics. One is that there will be a very strong emotionalism as Peter Brooks would describe it when these descriptions, when these aesthetic models of representation are presented to us. There will be a considerable amount of silence and muteness.

The silence itself is symbolic of a condition where language proves to be woefully inadequate to capture what is going on with them. There will be a strong emphasis on embodiment or the body which is expressing agony, pain, suffering, where language has failed. Melodrama whose principal expressionist example would be Edward Munch's well-known painting 'The Scream', 1893/1895, highlights the singularity of life, especially at moments when life is, say, about to be extinguished or about to reach a situation where it is more or less untenable. So, genres such as horror linger on bodies, people in the moments leading up to their death or extinction or extinguishing of life.

So let's take it one by one. Strong emotionalism our first focus and you can see a few except scrolling on your screen. The examples I have taken are from autobiographical accounts of people diagnosed with Huntington's disease and these capture different moments. Some are post diagnostic, some are wondering about whether they should go in for the test or not because the test would confirm whether at some point they will be afflicted with Huntington's disease. So, "each visit to the hospital brought my fears to the surface as I was reminded of my potential fate. The feeling I tried to push as far down into my boots, an ocean of sadness and tears". Note the emphasis, the dramatic nature of the description "that sadness became a part of my natural state and stayed with me for many, many years". That's Deborah Goodman in

*Hummingbird: A Heartfelt Account of One Woman's Emotional Journey Through Life.* Then there is Stephen Beatty who in *In Between Years: Life After a Positive Huntington's Disease Test* asks a question which is primarily rhetorical. "How could I cope with the knowledge that unless a sufficient treatment came along soon, this disease was going to kill me in the not too distant future?"

Then of course there is the terror of not knowing and the urgency of knowing in Jean Barémas autobiographical memoir, *The Test*. "What good would it do to know? But now as in, for now, terror, I must know." So, note the very melodramatic account. Look at Sarah Foster's *Me and HD*. "Ever since I tested positive for Huntington's disease, I have felt it looming over my life", etc, etc.

What is it we see about each of these excerpts? In each of these excerpts, the diagnosis and recognition of the ailments that has afflicted them or will potentially at some point imminently affect them results in a narrative that is rooted in, steeped in strong emotionalism. Vulnerability of such an extreme nature, such as Huntington's disease can only be documented, talked about, described in very emotional terms. And this is done in order to heighten the despair, the terror, the hopelessness, of course, and the anxiety of being afflicted with the disease or the completely certain condition of recognizing that one day you will have this disease because the test reveals that you have a 50% chance of having inherited the genetic material from your HD afflicted parents. Though many memoirists of Huntington's disease memoirs do talk about the disease in biomedical terms, the most dominant mode remains the very emotional. So that's the first mode, first element of the aesthetics of melodrama in the memoirs that we are looking at in the representation of vulnerable bodies.

Note here this vulnerability is from within, as in it is rooted in the genetic material of the person. It is not an extrinsic vulnerability as inflicted by, say, natural disaster or industrial disaster. Our second example is silence, muteness and symbolism. The representation of the mother's body in this Dana Walrath's graphic text about her mother's Alzheimer's disease, the book's title is, *Aliceheimer*, which is a cross portmanteau term between Alice as in Lewis Carroll and Alzheimer's, which is the name of the condition. Note the way it is represented.

There is the representation of the old mother with her hair all over the place unruly and she seems to be wearing what looks like news prints. The lines from Lewis Carroll actually constitute her costume. This is melodramatic because Walrath gestures at the primary condition of her mother afflicted with Alzheimer's, the loss of words. The muteness of the patient is actually represented in the expression of the words on her, as in on the clothes she wears. Whether it's clothes or fabric is a moot point, but you can also

think in terms of the symbolic power of the etymological root of text- links to both textus  
and textile and also of course texture.

So the muteness of the patient that is Dana Walrath's mother, Alice, is symbolic. It circulates across her. The words seem to circulate across her when there is no other language to describe the loss of her mother's language. How else do you represent her mother's loss of language? As in what is the language in which we can talk about the not having language? So, there is no adequate language and muteness is the only way you can do it. Let's take another example and this is from Katie Green's memoir, *Lighter Than My Shadow*. This is a memoir about her anorexia. And if you look at the image there, this is a dinner table scene and a girl is sitting and staring at a food unable to even prepare herself to eat it. Her parents are there and the mother says, "come on, at least try, please try". And she says, "I can't do it. I just can't do it".

And then you see the dark cloud over her head. Is it a cloud or a threatening object? Maybe like a hairball or something? We do not know. And she notes also the father silence and the silence in most of this particular pathography. Pathography is a term used to describe graphic texts about illness and medical conditions. And this cloud is matched by the silence, the inability or in some cases, the unwillingness of the vulnerable person to speak.

Other examples follow. The image now that you are seeing is from Pratik Thomas and Rajeev Eipe's *Hush*. It's a 11, 12 page graphic text minus words. It's a non-verbal text about child sexual abuse. And if you notice the girl terrorized with a, on her face, being silenced very literally so. All right. And then she's sitting and crying under a shower. Look also at the quote from Audre Lorde, *The Cancer Journals*. "Faith is the name of the war against despair, the battle I fight daily. I want to write about that battle, the skirmishes, the losses, the small yet so important victories that make the sweetness of my life". Think about how Audre Lorde here is attempting to capture her treatment, her pain, her suffering from cancer.

The military metaphors capture the embattled state of the body. The capture of the embattled state of the body because the body is under siege. In the case of the *Hush* illustration, the very inability to speak, the silence around child sexual abuse is symbolized by the silencing of the victim. So, this symbol actually connects also to the social taboo on speaking about the unspeakable, that is child sexual abuse. Moving on to another example, David B's classic work of graphic medicine, *Epileptic*. And here, if you notice, this is a horrifying creature which seems to have grasped the boy and as you know, he's struggling with it. He's trying to get out of it. And the creature, whatever it is, strange snake like dragon like thing has trapped him. The epileptic fit is symbolically

here, the creature that grasps and it is literally and metaphorically a seizure. The boy has been seized by the creature.

He experiences seizures. Alright? So that is one more aesthetic mode within melodrama of how symbolic silencing, mutinous is communicate a way of the world that we don't talk about some things, child sexual abuse. It speaks about the inability of the victim to speak, Katie Greene and others. Our third model or mode, more accurately, is embodiment. And the example here is from Tings Chak's graphic account of migration and migrant people's lives specifically to do with their incarceration within so-called camps. Notice here Chak's depiction of humans or rather human forms, exercising, standing up, stretching, lying down.

Just before this set of panels, these are faceless. You cannot identify a person there. She has actually drawn panels with specifications of heights, the height of people, et cetera. And here you see the human being as completely fitting the box, the carceral. So, the preceding page, which is not here, but you can of course look up the book, shows the dimensions of the cabin or the cell. And here you have the person in the cell. And if you note, the cell is almost exactly the same dimensions as the person incarcerated. It's almost as though you cannot think of these people except in terms of their measured dimensions, the physical confinement of their bodies, that the box in which they are is just the right size. So, you cannot stretch beyond a certain point.

You of course cannot walk. The person who's been incarcerated is trying very hard to keep a certain fitness regimen going by doing the necessary exercises. But Tings Chck seems to suggest that the fate of the incarcerated, whom she calls the undocumented because the migrants, the refugee seekers, the asylum seekers are in camps and they are not documented. Tink's Jack seems to suggest that the fate of the incarcerated can only be understood and measured in terms of the physical confinement of bodies. From that kind of extreme incarceration to something more powerful or symbolic on the visual here, we are looking at an image from Shrividya Natarajan, S. Anand, Durgabai and Subash Vyam's fantastic memoir, biography, autobiography. It's a genre that is difficult to define, *Bhimayana*, based on the life and work of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar. Now note here that Ambedkar is speaking apparently to a mic, but the mic and whatever he's saying seems to also operate through a set of sprinklers sprinkling water on the people.

And if you look carefully, the people there are receiving the refreshing water of his words, of his ideas. Why is this image so potent, so powerful? It is because, as some of you may know from the history books and the life of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, this particular book itself begins with him being denied water at the common water pump in his school.

And water is denied to him because he was an “untouchable” within quotes. He was of this quote unquote lower caste and therefore is not entitled to the facility of drinking water. Now here, if you were to read the whole text, you will see the connection very powerfully put together. That in the first instance, Ambedkar is denied water and here Ambedkar's words are refreshing sources of water for the life of the future generations. So, these people are looking up to him and they say, note the angle also, they are all looking up to him as Ambedkar speaks the water functions as, words function as sprinklers.

They energize the land because water revives the land and here they freshen the people's minds. This actually reconfigures the embodied suffering that Ambedkar had because Ambedkar is shown as a schoolboy, extremely thirsty but denied water. So here, change and hope, new ideas, even revolution, radical revolution are embodied. All of these are embodied because Ambedkar, his ideas, his words nourish the thirsty, depressed and oppressed classes. The next example is from Ho Che Anderson's biography of Martin Luther King Jr. titled very simply *King*. And this is the arrest scene of Martin Luther King. He's been accosted by the policeman and is about to be arrested. The policeman are of course white. It opens with this close up of his very frightened eyes and the forehead. You can see the perspiring forehead and it asks, this anxiety forces him to ask this question, “where are you taking me?” And he repeats this question.

And note here the close up of his face and the faceless jail with just a name on it, Montgomery jail. The contrast is very clear. The embodied nature of a person and the faceless nature of an oppressive system. So the wide eyed black pupils of the frightened King, which is the first panel on the page that is in front of you, the wide eyed pupils capture the very corporeal or corporealized impact and consequence of racism. Here is writ on the body of Martin Luther King Jr. and the face of the jail suggests a very impersonal but unrelenting system in place. And here he has been reduced to a quivering black man. The next image is also from Ho Che Anderson's biography, except that this illustrates an entirely different context. And this is the famous Rosa Parks incident where Rosa Parks, who was an African American woman refused to vacate her seat for white women because she said she also holds a legitimate bus ticket, which entitles her to a seat. So, the first panel is focused on the inside of the bus, of course, and there's a black woman.

We do not know that she's black because her back is towards us. And there are two frowning white women who are looking down at her. Another woman in the seat bespectacled is a little more scared. But the two women are actually glaring, the two women who are standing white are glaring at the black woman who will remain seated. And the one who has got up is looking very scared and looking at the black woman who's

sitting,                      who                      continues                      to                      sit.

And Rosa Parks also is, “yeah, so what is it?” And the other woman pleads, “Rosa, don't. Okay, don't.” And Rosa Parks stands up when, in a very threatening situation where the two white women are abusive towards her and the black woman, the threatened black woman, Rosa Parks stands up to face off. Now, initially, when she's sitting, you do not know what kind of a person Rosa Parks is. We do not know her personality. We do not know her physical attributes. She's apparently very diminutive because she's placed, as you can see, in the corner of the panel and she's looking up like this. And these two women are glowering down at her. So the height difference is very clearly shown. But in the next one, she's just stood up. And we discover that she's approximately the same height as threatening white women. And the first black woman who has vacated her seat, because she's very scared, is right in the middle. And she's looking at both people because the black woman who's staring at us out of the panel is actually seeing the white women, the black woman, that is Rosa Parks, and us. So it's almost like she's a witness to history, but also like a certain kind of a referee. So the panel captures in a very brilliant fashion, I think,                      a                      very                      historical                      conflict.

And positioning the antagonist in these ways, almost like a fight is about to happen. Her body, that is the black woman's body, is threatened, rendered diminutive in the midst of white women until she stands up for her rights. So as you can see, through these symbolic representations, through the focus on the loss of speech, and of course, the fact that the body is at the heart of all potential threats, potential vulnerabilities, but also of potential resistance, which is why my focus in the concluding slides was on both Martin Luther King Jr. and Rosa Parks, the famous Rosa Parks incident, where the body suddenly stands up, puts on a certain fierce combative expression, doesn't shy away, doesn't stand with lowered eyes, but instead stares at the white person or white persons. Then there is of course, Ambedkar, who also is not diminutive here, not looking as though he has been threatened, but becomes a source of something larger, hope, revolution.

In all these cases, the embodiment, which is the source of our vulnerability, as we have already looked at in previous sessions, this very embodiment becomes the means of battle, becomes the site of resistance. So, it's not like your embodiment is only going to grant you or bestow you with vulnerability. Embodiment also gives you a space of resistance. Of course, when you do that, you put your body on the line for further damage, for further harm, for further vulnerabilities. So, it's not like when you use your body as a weapon of resistance, as a means of resistance, people will respect it all the time.

It's more than possible that the people who have been threatening you before, the

conditions of vulnerability that have existed before will then impinge even further on the body. But the body is where the mobilization of grief, to borrow a phrase from Judith Butler, begins. If you look at the melodramatic imagination, the melodramatic representation, the utilization of the body as a space of resistance, as a space where vulnerabilities have been exacerbated or symbolically captured, then you recognize quite quickly the earliest argument we have made about vulnerability, that vulnerability is intrinsic to us because we have a body. More later. Thank you.