

## **Vulnerability Studies: An Introduction**

**Prof. Pramod K Nayar**

**Department of English**

**University of Hyderabad**

**Week- 06**

**Lecture- 02**

### **Aging and Vulnerability II**

Hello, back again and we continue with aging and vulnerability and we will be looking at some representations of the old and through those representations we will examine the idea of vulnerability for the old and the aged. Most of my examples in this segment are drawn from Shakespeare, but there are some others as well. So, let's begin with the idea that not, this is like basic, we've already gone over it once, not all cultures react to the aged in the same way. But in the contemporary world most cultures look at the aged as having done their job and so now they are on the margins of society, the fringes of society. The emphasis is always upon the young and those who are mature in their prime as opposed to old age.

We begin with a quotation from Jacques in *As You Like It* which is that he says, “so from hour to hour we, ripe and ripe. And then, from hour to hour, we rot and rot; And thereby hangs a tale”. That actually tells us something about how we think about aging, isn't it? That as we age up to a point we are seen as aging into ripeness, into maturity, a good thing and then we cross a point and from that point onwards we are, the rot sets in, we are rotting and as we rot, as the fruit becomes ripe, but after it has passed the best point of its ripeness it begins to rot and thereby, he says hangs the tale. That tail of course is the tale of mortality of man. He also says and this is something which it's in the seven ages of man speech by Jacques and it's one of the most famous with the one which begins with “all the world's a stage”. In the final part of it he gives us two representations of old age.

One is of course of the sixth age as he says it is “the lean and slipper'd pantaloone with spectacles on nose and pouch on side. His youthful hose, well sav'd a world too wide for his shrunk shank and his big manly voice turning again towards a childish treble, pipes and whistles in his sound”. The person has grown old and notice of course that it's a hint the person has grown old. He wears spectacles, he's lean and slippered, his pantaloons are loose, his youthful hose is loose for him because as people grow old physically, they shrink.

The big manly voice has now turned into a childish treble. That's one version of old age and as you grow still older there comes what Jacques calls “the last scene of all”. “There

ends this strange eventful history” which is “second childishness near oblivion. Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans every thing”. It connects, of course, to the “from hour to hour we rot and rot”.

As you grow older and older you lose the taste that you have in your mouth, your eyesight weakens, your teeth fall out and finally what is left of what defined you as a person? Nothing at all. Sans everything; without everything. And that's the age, knowing about it is also not about just old age, because as you grow older, one you become weaker, thinner which was the sixth age and the last scene, the seventh age, you've lost everyone at all. What can be more vulnerable than that? Jacques offers us two modes of thinking about old age and both of those are still prevalent today. We do think about old age as not you don't go from your prime to that stage where you are sans everything. You go from your prime to the very old stage of old age via a period when you still have some control.

So you are thinner, you've got to have spectacles, you've lost a lot of what made you, but you're still a person and then of course comes that final stage. So, there is mental and physical weakness which is on an increasing scale and as the human and this is in the contemporary world we try to fit into a world which has been built for speed, agility and equity, for energy. How do you cope in that world if you are somebody who is wearing, who has been worn down by life and is wearing spectacles, cannot hear very well, is in a state of in-bed physical abilities and as an individual ages, and this is across society as well, in every level of life you are replaced by those who are younger and most rightly. So, whether it's at work where as you grow old you retire or whether it's in the family where, think about old people, as they grow older their role is the things that they do in their everyday life are taken over by those who are younger. So, whether it is their children, whether it is their grandchildren, somebody takes over those roles.

So for a woman it might have been cooking, taking care of the house at home. For a man also it might have been cooking and taking care of the house, but it would also have been say doing DIY chores around the house. All of that is taken over by his son managing the finances, taken over by the children. So, what is left? *As You Like It* shows you that one of all three that as you grow older you diminish until you become “sans teeth, sans taste, sans every thing”, without everything. It also, *As You Like It* play, also offers you a portrait of the old as people who are replaceable who are unnecessary and this is right in the beginning of *As You Like It* where you have an old servant Adam who's speaking to his master Oliver and Oliver tells him “get you with him, you old dog”.

He's just thrown his younger brother out of the house and he throws out the old servants as well and Adam is like “is old dog my reward? Most true, I have lost my teeth in your

service”, connect that to losing teeth due to old age. He's lost his teeth in the service of the family. “God be with my old master! He would not have spoken such a word” for Oliver, who's young who's just taken over his inheritance. The old servant is an old dog has no relevance is of no use he's lost his teeth. Losing your teeth for the dog because the dogs were kept to guard.

Losing your teeth was a disaster because how would you guard if you cannot fight and as Adam says he's lost his teeth in the service of his family. So, you can serve a family all your life and then in your old age you can be thrown out; that's also a version of old age and the vulnerability that accompanies old age. If you go to *King Lear*, Lear says “I confess that I am old; age is unnecessary; on my knees I beg that you'll vouchsafe me raiment, bed, and food”. Now, when we think about old age, the phrase that he uses “age is unnecessary”, is that really so? Think about how when the young treat the old cruelly, when they neglect them, they need not necessarily abuse them but when they neglect them when they claim that “you're old, sit aside, we'll take care of stuff”, what happens to the old? They think of themselves as unnecessary. Lear of course pushes it a little bit he says “on my knees I beg that you'll vouchsafe me raiment, bed, and food”.

It's a terrible thing to say but he claims to be in a position of so much neglect and abuse that he has to beg for clothing a place to rest his head and food. But it is also, even though it is a literary representation, it is also something that is familiar to us in our everyday lives where the old are neglected to the point where they are given a little food, they are put into a bed and they're not treated like they were when they were younger. He, of course, goes on to speak later on when he is out in the storm and he's battling the elements he says over there that “I tax not you, you elements with unkindness” that the elements are not for unkind because he says “I never gave you kingdom, I never called you children, you owe me no subscription; then let fall your horrible pleasure: here I stand, your slave, a poor and infirm weak and despised old man”.

What he says here and it's something which we might like to spend a minute thinking about is that even as his daughters are unkind to him so also are the elements, nature itself unkind to him. Because I cannot claim that you are unkind, I cannot blame you for that you elements because I never gave you anything you are not my children. But he says you also side with the young “let fall your horrible pleasure, because here I stand your slave”. What is he? He is poor he's infirm he's weak and he's despised and he's an old man. what he says when he says that is that nature sides with the young against the old because he says, “Yet I call you servile ministers, that have with two pernicious daughters join'd your high engender'd battles 'gainst a head so old and white as this”. That the elements have colluded with his daughters who have been cruel to him and what have they all colluded together, what have they done together? They have fought their

battles against a head as old and white as this. Lear, in the play, is of course extremely old. His daughters are cruel to him and now the elements of nature is cruel to him. So even nature is in the on the side of the young rather than on the side of the old. As he says “age is unnecessary” therefore you have to beg he is a poor infirm weak despised old man. Is all old age despised?

It's an open question but it is, as he claims, unnecessary as well. So what happens when you are old and you're unable to care for yourself? You have to find somebody who will care for you and again we go back to King Lear who right at the beginning play says that “’tis our fast intent to shake all cares and business from our age; Conferring them on younger strengths, while we unburdened crawl toward death”. So as you arrive at a new age as a person reaches old age what does he do? He shakes all cares and business from that age and that's the idea of retirement that you then are no longer involved in doing the work that you have done all your life. He, of course, is king so he's claiming that he's giving up his kingship instead he will confer his kingship on younger strength and he, unburdened, will crawl towards death. Now this idea that as you go towards death as you go towards extreme old age and impending mortality, you crawl unburdened that the burdens of life you shed.

But can you shed those burdens if somebody is not there ready to pick them up? And that's the Lear idea when he speaks about the fact that he “thought to set my rest on her kindness” really speaking of course about his youngest daughter Cordelia and he hopes to retire and she will be the one who will nurse him in his old age. Lear’s “nursery” speaks to the idea of care and concern protection to vulnerability but also the alleviation of vulnerability in old age. The fact of course remains that he does not get that nursery instead he moves in with his elder daughters and he's treated cruelly. But the idea that he has is one that is pertinent to the idea of old age, that as you grow older, as you crawl towards death, you shed your cares and as you shed your cares, you also then look for a nursery, you look for a place wherein you can then be old in peace. you will have somebody who will take care of you, who will protect you, who will look after you.

One more instance of the care for the agent that we're speaking about is there in once again *As You Like It* when Adam, who has been banished by his employer Oliver goes with the younger brother, Orlando, to the forest of Arden at one point he will say “Dear master, I can go no further. I die for food! Here I lie down here lie I down and measure out my grave”. So he's also, of course, preparing for death. He's also like “cannot do this anymore, too old, time to die. I’ll just die here” he's tired and Orlando is like “why, how now, Adam, no greater heart in thee? Live a little; comfort a little; cheer thyself a little” and then of course he said, “hold death a while at the arm's end; I will be here with thee presently; and if I bring thee not something to eat, I will give thee leave to die... yet thou lies in the bleak air; come I will bear thee to some shelter” etc. “Cheerly, good Adam!”

Contrast this to what happens to Lear. Lear, who is not granted a kindness, who goes to his daughters who treat him badly and who eventually lands up outside on the heath, in the storm. Here is Adam who claims that "I'm all tired, I just want to lie down here and die" Orlando is like "No, live a little, cheer yourself a little. I will make you comfortable over here and then I'll go and get you food, I will bear thee to some shelter because here the air is bleak" and this is of course ideal care that somebody is there, a younger person will look after you and will take care of all your needs. So what is it then that prevents care for the aged why is it young people even family members at some point sometimes give up the idea caring for the aged? What is it that takes for a lack of care in families for the aged?

And again the example is that I draw upon is from king Lear, where he moves in with his elder daughters Goneril initially and then Regan and when he's staying with Goneril, she loses it with him she is like she can't do this and she says "I'll take care of you but I can't take care of all your retinue", right. And what she says is that he is being unreasonable in his old age. The old king has a hundred knights who wait upon him, who attend upon him but he does not keep them in order and when Goneril finally states up front that she cannot deal with it this is what she says she says "Not only, sir, this is your all-licensed fool, but other of your insolent retinue do hourly carp and quarrel; breaking forth in rank and not-to-be-endured riots. Here do you keep a hundred knights and squire men slow disorder'd, so debosh'd and bold, that this our court, infected with their manners, shows like a riotous inn, epicurism and lust make it more like a tavern or a brothel than a graced palace."

Now, he is old he has retired he has given his kingdom to his daughters Goneril and Regan, the elder two and he's living with Goneril. But he has retained also a hundred knights for his company. Goneril's unhappiness with her father is because she says "your hundred knights. What do they do? They fight with each other, they drink, they behave as if her palace is a tavern, they make it appear more like a tavern a place of drinking or a brothel." She says here "there is epicurism and there is lust and the manners makes it look like a riotous inn". If King Lear, who is old, who has retired, has to have these hundred knights then they should be here themselves so there is also of course the idea that Lear is, of course, being unreasonable in wanting a hundred knights and then not keeping them under control. And this is something that we frequently see when we speak about caring for the aged even in contemporary times that they are unfeasible in their demands upon the young that they have to learn their place in life. But you see, when a person is old that person does not have not been old all his life or her life, all their life they have known what they have to do. It is as they grow old and they give up several things it is difficult for them to come to terms with the fact that they can no longer behave in the ways that they used to and that's something that when we look at caring for the aged we see in king Lear, but also in real life.

One more aspect for caring for the aged comes with the idea that why would you care for the old? Two reasons, maybe, frankly: one is the fact that you love the person so you look after him, right, you care for them and this would be the Cordelia angle. Cordelia, who is the youngest daughter of King Lear and who finally returns to look after him so you care, you look after the old person because you love them. But care can also be about money you look after an old person because you expect an inheritance and notice, of course, here, that I have moved from Shakespeare to Agatha Christie.

If you look at Agatha Christie she has several books. I have put up a selection over there of several books in which the murder hinges upon the fact that there is an old person and that old person is possessed of a large body of wealth and there are men and women who are interested in either perpetuating his life because they hope to have a share in the inheritance or who want his life to end so that they can have a share in the inheritance. So, the idea of the rich old man or woman who has to be murdered because an inheritance is due for the killer. There is of course also that the fact that physical weakness increases for the very old that makes them usually prey. It is not so easy to kill a person in their prime as it is easy to kill an old person. So, when we look at the killings in Christie's many murder mysteries, it's easier to kill an old person because you can it's easier to kill an old person because you can switch medicines, because you can they are not capable of fending off a violent attack, right. So, physical weakness increases the position of vulnerability for an old person.

Then, of course, there is the fact that if you have no money that also makes you vulnerable. If you have a lot of money, that makes you vulnerable. If you have no money, that makes you vulnerable. So actually vulnerability is inbuilt in the idea of the old, right? Because if you have no money then why should we care for them? It is extra expense on our part, as in, on the part of the young. So, if the caregiver is mercenary then why should he or she expend their time their energy their money to look after the old so care hinges on many factors as we can see over here.

There's also the fact that as old age goes on there is the vulnerability that comes about because the patriarchal power that you have exercised all your life, for the men, is no longer possible. So, you have somebody like Desdemona's father Brabantio, who deplores the fact that his daughter is no longer in his control, as she has grown older, she has found a person whom she will marry.

There is, in Shakespeare representations especially this happens in *Hamlet* where you have a representation of the old Polonius as somebody who is talkative, who is silly, because he's feeble and he's old, as Hamlet says in reference to him, he's a "tedious old fool", right. They have undependable memories they are people who are garrulous and they talk too much. There is the helplessness of old age and this is seen by *Titus*

*Andronicus*. Titus, who is a victorious general who has secured Rome's borders all his life as a soldier, as a general, at the end when his children are being killed in several ways, as his children are being killed he speaks about the fact that his youth was spent in dangerous wars, but now he seeks pity, he begs for pity he says, "For these bitter tears, which now you see filling the aged wrinkles in my cheeks; be pitiful to my condemning sons". It is the helplessness he can no longer be what he was a general strong powerful all he can seek is pity for what he has now become.

There are also old women in Shakespeare's plays and we usually don't think about women and in their old age as distinct their vulnerabilities as being distinct from that of men. But you have two instances in Shakespeare not necessarily in the Shakespeare play as in a riff an adaptation of a Shakespeare play. So Gertrude in Shakespeare's play is settled for her son but if you were to look at Gertrude in Shel Silverstein's writing of *Hamlet*, the rap version of *Hamlet*, she speaks there about the fact that she had to marry again because she's old and as she says you have, her husband's dead, there is a new king on the throne and as she puts it "you have to heat the meat and act real sweet" that you have to once again pretend to be young and sexy because otherwise, as she says, she would have "wound up with her ass out in the goddamn street". What value is there for a old woman? So she says so it's "heat the meat and act real sweet, wind up with my ass out in the goddamn street, I got cellulite, I got varicose veins, I got a hip get stiff every time it rains" all of those indicators of old age. So when we look at Gertrude and usually Gertrude is spoken about in the play as somebody who's over sex here she gives you a backstory to that that as you grow old otherwise there is no place for you in the world but she's used.

There is also in Shakespeare's *Richard II*, a Duchess who is willing to intercede for a son who is a traitor, because as she said "Have we more sons? Or are we like to have? Is not my teeming date drunk up with time? And will thou pluck my fair son from my age, and rob me of a happy mother's name?". She is very certain that because she's old and there is no possibility of further children. This is the only fun she will ever have and therefore she has to preserve it. Thinking about old age women still see themselves at least in Shakespeare's plays in their traditional roles: mother, wife and that those roles are necessary for them as identity. Their roles are embedded within the patriarchal context in which they live and so the only option that they have for preserving themselves and seeing themselves in an identity which is not connected with the patriarchy and this you see actually in three plays you see it in *Pericles* you see it in *The Comedy of Errors* and you see them in *The Winter's Tale* is that even though they have been rendered vulnerable in their youth because of the patriarchal context within which they live, even in the old age they can find security and safety and freedom from vulnerability in religion or seclusion. Two of the women become abbesses in abbeys, they become nuns, and one retires into seclusion so those are the possibilities that you think of as escapes from

vulnerability for women because otherwise the vulnerability of patriarchy accompanies you into old age.