

Vulnerability Studies: An Introduction

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Childhood and Vulnerability - I

Hello, I'm Anna Kurian and I teach at the Department of English at the University of Hyderabad. Today we will be talking about the many vulnerabilities that a child is subject to and we will be, in the course of these lessons, thinking about what it means to be a child or how does one define childhood, who is a child. We'll begin with this question as to who is a child. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child defines a child as "every human being below the age of 18 years, unless under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier". You might like to think about this briefly because even as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child takes as a given that a child means every human being who is not yet attained the age of 18, it also says that unless there is a law which is applicable to the child under which childhood ends earlier.

Alongside this let us look also at the APA Dictionary of Psychology which defines childhood as one, "the period between the end of infancy about two years of age and the onset of puberty marking the beginning of adolescence which is about 10 to 12 years of age". So, you have approximately 8 to 10 years of childhood for any individual or and it gives you another example another definition as well: "the period between three or four years of age and about seven years of age. In this context childhood represents the period after weaning and before children can fend for themselves".

If you look at both of these, one, childhood is calculated in terms of years, in terms of age. Two, the first one speaks about childhood in terms of legality, the second one speaks about childhood in terms of stages of life. So, the end of infancy, the period at which a child is weaned from its mother. Three, the period at which a child enters puberty. Four, the period in which a child can and I quote, "fend for themselves".

Now all of these become crucial when we think about childhood because what we can notice is that childhood cannot be defined in one term which covers all eventualities. Different countries end childhood for their citizens at different ages and it exists also differentially in terms of as the APA Dictionary of Psychology said depending on when

you're weaned, when you are able to take care of yourself, when you attain adolescence, when you enter into puberty etc. But childhood also exists differentially in terms of labour for payment. So, at which age can a child go out and work and be paid for that work? There are laws which determine that. Childhood ends at different times in terms of the sexual activity which is permissible for a child.

In terms of marriages, when are you old enough to stop being a child and enter into marriage? In terms of drinking, liquor, alcohol, when is it legal for a young person to drink liquor? In terms of criminal liability and prosecution, when we think about this you might say that all children below the age of 18 are tried as children in juvenile court. However, in different countries there are different ages at which a child is seen as criminally liable and for different crimes as well. So, you see there is no consensus on what it means to be a child.

As an example, the PPT gives you several examples of how in India there are different ages at which a child enjoys different powers. So, you have the Child Labour Act, which says that a child is a person who has not completed his 14th year of age. So, until you have completed 14 years of age you cannot work for payment but after that you can work for payment. Whereas if you remember the United Nations convention said that below the age of 18 everybody is a child. So, the Child Labour Act of India then is different because we say "that if you have not yet completed 14 you're a child. The minute you've completed 14 you can work, you're part of the labour movement, labour force and therefore no longer a child". The Plantations Labour Act of 1951 says that a child is a person who has not completed his 15th year. So, notice the difference between Child Labour Act 1986 and the Plantations Labour Act of 1951 where the difference of a year in terms of who is a child and who is not.

And then of course there is the Prohibitions of Child Marriage Act and this is fairly recent 2006 where it says that a "child means a person who, if a male, has not completed 21 years of age and, if a female, has not completed 18 years of age". You might like to think about the fact that at this point gender comes into play as well. So, for men, childhood extends till they are 21 and for women it stops when they are 18. So, after 18 a woman, I mean a child is deemed to have become a woman and can get married whereas a man or a child, a male child becomes a man who can get married only when he hits 21 years of age.

All these are intended to demonstrate to us that childhood or a child is not something which we can think of in terms of in terms that are applicable to every individual across contexts, across cultures, across nations. So, when we think about how we define a child, one there is no certainty about who is a child then independent of context. So, in context of labour markets a child is somebody who is 14 years old. In terms of marriage, a child is somebody who a girl child is somebody who is 18 years old.

In different countries different ages for childhood. So, in some countries you can drink alcohol when you turn 18 as opposed to other countries where you can drink alcohol only when you have crossed 21. Similarly, criminal liability: So, some of the more advanced countries think about criminal liability very differently from how we think about criminal liability maybe. So, a child who is even as young as 10 might have the notion of criminal liability in some of the more developed countries.

So there is a distinction, then, in the way in which the western countries, developed countries think about children as to how they are thought of in underdeveloped or developing countries. And even within underdeveloped and developing countries there is variance because if you were to think about how this works, some of us differ from other countries in terms of the kinds of constitutions we have, in terms of whether we are a religiously defined nation. So, say Afghanistan as opposed to India which is secular, socialist, democratic etc. as opposed to Afghanistan which considers itself an Islamic country as opposed to Nepal which defines itself as a Hindu nation. So, the culture of the place also then has a certain impact upon who is a child and who is not a child. That is in terms of law that how do we define a child.

But to go back to our APA definition, psychological definition, childhood can also be defined in terms of the years aligned with developmental goals. So, what would be the development good developmental goals for a child? The physical, the emotional, the mental and the intellectual. So, at which stage of life do you think of yourself or does a child think of itself or does the grown-up think of a individual as physically a child, emotionally a child etc. So, the distinctions between whom we consider a child and whom we consider an adult differ in terms of the law, differ in terms of developmental milestones which can be measured in terms of the physical, the mental, the intellectual etc.

Now, however, while all these might be complications and these might be ways in which we can think about who is a child, one thing that we all might recognize is the fact that the child is a special category. Now this idea of the child as a special category of humans is a comparatively recent idea. Initially, across cultures, children were seen as miniature adults that they were small in size but otherwise you didn't have to think of them as emotionally immature, psychologically immature etc. No, they were just miniature adults as such they could be given tasks, they could be given responsibilities just as an adult was given tasks and responsibilities. These new ideas of childhood which, now of course, hold sway across the world or nearly always across the world began to circulate in the late 18th century, early 19th century.

So you have texts which contributed to the growth of this idea of the child. Rousseau's

would be a founding, Rousseau's *Emile* would be a founding text but you also have, across the 19th century, and because we were governed by the British we think in terms of British texts. So, people such as Wordsworth, the Romantics in the early parts of the 19th century and later on the Victorians all of them helped to consolidate this idea of a child as a special category not necessarily as a miniature adult. By the early 20th century, the first two decades or so of the 20th century this idea was entrenched that a child is not the same as an adult. However, to go back to something that I have been harping upon from the beginning of this class, childhood is different based upon the culture, the country, class within any culture, any country, race etc. Gender, also, as we saw in the case of marriage.

So would you for a minute like to think about how this differential understanding of childhood, this idea that the definition of childhood varies from culture to culture, continent to continent, country to country etc. How does this differential understanding of childhood render children more at risk? Does it render children more at risk and if so, how does it do so? These are questions which we shall be thinking about as we progress through this lesson. To go back to that founding question "who is a child?", one of the ways in which we all understand childhood is in terms of the vulnerability of children. We all think of children as people who can be hurt, who can be wounded if we were to think in terms of the definition of vulnerability coming from the word *vulnus* from Latin which means wounded that which is capable of being wounded, of being hurt.

When we think about children and when we think about who is a child, one thing all of us recognize automatically is the fact that childhood can be understood in terms of the vulnerability of a child and this becomes even more easy to grasp if we think of the many disasters that the world is always subject to. So, whether whenever you have a major disaster whether it's a natural disaster or whether it is a man-made disaster, one of the features is that pictures emerging from that disaster will always or nearly always feature a child.

So whether we're thinking in terms of the Vietnam war and you have somebody called the "Napalm Girl" who's fleeing from Napalm Bombing or whether you have the Bhopal Gas Tragedy of 1984 and the picture is up on the screen where you see a child being buried or you have Sudan and the extreme famine drought that afflicted the state of Sudan and the picture of a little child who is struggling trying to move and watching the child is a vulture prey vulnerability and of course Aylan Kurdi, which is a very recent example from 2015, a refugee who is washed up on the shores of the Mediterranean as he tries to flee his country along with his family and dies in the process. When we look at these pictures and of course if you were to look at any of the pictures emerging especially today from Palestine and Gaza, what you would see is that children are at the forefront, children who are liable to be hurt, children who have been bombed, children who

suffered the privations of hunger or who suffer when they are made into refugees or who suffer because of a man-made disaster of some kind such as a gas leak in the Bhopal Gas Tragedy. So, when we think of the fact that disasters and atrocities feature children, we are also then thinking or it is a common practice to think in terms of the vulnerability of the child and that is something that is inescapable across this world today.

When we think of vulnerability usually it is possible to think of it as in terms of inherent vulnerability which belongs to everybody. All individuals are vulnerable because we have a human body which is prone to being hurt, which can be hurt. Somebody outside can inflict pain on us, we can inflict pain on others, we can inflict pain on ourselves and so on and so forth that is the vulnerability which is inherent in the physical self. There is also vulnerability which is connected to the identity that each of us have but in addition to these there are also systemic and structural forms of vulnerability. Initially when we speak about childhood and vulnerability let us think in terms of the self of the child as being more prone to vulnerability and why is this so.

Now all of us human beings are prone to vulnerability. I mean think of yourself somebody pokes you with a pin, you will bleed. Somebody wants to hurt you in some form or fashion physically you will be hurt. Now how is a child more vulnerable than, say, an adult in terms of just the physical size and strength of the child. Children are smaller, especially when you think of infants. These are children who can be harmed because they have no way of warding off the violence that might choose to attack them.

So whether we are thinking in terms of texts from religion, whether we are thinking in terms of literary texts we see a range of children who are very small so infants onwards so if you want to think in terms of children whose brains are dashed out in religious texts, mythological texts, whether we want to think in terms, and write from Greek and Roman times. So, people who devour their own children would be one version. People who dash off the brains of their children, are the other version. Then in terms of the physical also think about the fact that children who are physically challenged who have challenges which are both physical as well as mental they are more prone to vulnerability. Why? Now anybody who is physically challenged is more prone to vulnerability this is a common place given. But a child who is physically challenged or who's mentally challenged becomes doubly vulnerable because the child is ,in addition to being challenged, is also dependent upon some adult who will keep him or her safe.

Then of course there is the fact of children who are chronically ill and think about that as well because chronic illnesses which plagues children or will plague young children. Why is it that they are more vulnerable because of a chronic illness, than say a grown-up is? A grown-up is also vulnerable but a grown-up or an adult has access to maybe money

some control over the world whereas a child has little or no control. So, the self of the child as more prone to vulnerability comes about due to various reasons and those reasons are part of the inbuilt inherent vulnerability of the child. As an example let us look at the poem “Out Out– ” by Robert Frost.

Now this features a little boy who is working at sawing Wood. We enter the poem midway through so the speaker is somebody who is watching this a third person and as you can see, the speaker being, I mean, in the section that we have up on the screen: “Call it a day, I wish they might have said to please the boy by giving him the half hour that a boy counts so much when saved from work” and that's of course you have two or three things happening there. Half hour off from work for a child who has been working. Notice that it is a boy he's working and he would be happy if he was given half an hour shorter or half an hour exempt from working. “His sister stood beside him in her apron to tell them “supper”. So, it's also not that the child is working alone that there are others working with him.

“At the word, the saw” and now we come to the crux of the matter the boy was sawing, sawing wood. “At the word, the saw, as if to prove saws knew what supper meant, leaped out at the boy's hand or seemed to leap. He must have given the hand. However it was, neither refused the meeting”. Now the child is sawing wood his sister stands beside him in her apron and says “supper”. At the word, the saw, with which he sawing the wood proves that saws also know what supper meant and what was the source supper the child's hand. It leaped out at the boy's hand, or seemed to leap, he must have given the hand. Does a child give his hand to a saw to be cut? That's of course a question which we all know the answer to. Nobody wants to get their hand cut by a saw. “However it was neither refused the meeting” neither the hand nor the saw.

But the hand, the hand, what happened to the hand? “The boy's first outcry was a rueful laugh as he swung toward them holding up the hand half in appeal but half as if to keep the life from spilling.” And we begin to understand vulnerability. First of all, it's a child who's working at sawing wood. the saw leaps cuts his hand and the child's outcry is a rueful laugh. The rueful of laugh is also important because it points to the fact that the child does not really understand what has happened. He swung towards “them”– the adults “holding up the hand half in appeal but half also as if to keep the life from spilling” and think of vulnerability of a child where a grown-up might have been able to deal with the fact of losing his hand, his life is already spilling as the saw has cut his hand.

“Then the boy saw all– since he was old enough to know, big boy doing a man's work, though a child at heart– he saw all spoiled. “Don't let him cut my hand off– the doctor, when he comes. Don't let him, sister! So. But the hand was gone already.” Then the boy saw all and of course there is the pun on “the saw” the saw which has sawed all and the fact that the boy sees all. What does he see? He knows because he is old enough to know.

He's a big boy doing a man's work. So, you have again those gradations between a child at heart a big boy and a man's work. What exactly is this boy? He's somebody who is in size maybe a big boy who can handle a saw who can cut wood but he's also, at heart, a child and he sees all spoiled if you notice a number of times the word saw is repeated and so is of course at this point used in multiple senses what he sees, the instrument with which the wood is being cut he saw all spoiled. And then of course he says "Don't let him cut my hand off- the doctor, when he comes. Don't let him, sister!" There is the reverting over here to childhood because he appeals to his sister to stop the doctor from amputating his hand but the hand was gone already.

Think about what this does or what this little poem and it's a short poem what does it do in terms of vulnerability when we speak over here of vulnerability what we are looking at is first of all the fact that this is a boy who is performing a man's job. The vulnerability of a child who is included in a world which he doesn't quite fit into, he doesn't quite understand the ramifications of what is happening and the consequences of what might happen if things go wrong. Which is why he turns with a rueful laugh "he swung towards them holding up the hand half in appeal but half as if to keep the life from spilling". The boy sees he knows he sees he does and he is a child at heart and that child is the one who is vulnerable. He is the one who feels and fears the fact that his hand will be cut off: "Don't let him cut my hand off- the doctor, when he comes. Don't let him, sister!" and the appeal is to the sister, to somebody who's closer to him in age than the people with whom he's working. "That the hand is gone already." The poem of course ends with the child dying. That's the vulnerability of the child because the child loses his hand and in the process his life.

Now in addition to these we might like to think of some other texts which deal with disability these would include if you're interested in questions such as memoirs then there is Helen Keller, who writes *The Story of My Life*. There is a graphic novel about a deaf child which is *El Deafo* by Cece Bell, chronic illness, and this is a classic from children's literature, Frances Hodgson Burnett's *Secret Garden*, which features a child who is immured in a room where nobody is allowed in other than the nurse who looks after him because he can't bear people to look at his crippled self. there is of course also *What Katy Did* by Susan Coolidge, another of those classics of children's literature. Children on the autism spectrum and this would be mentally challenged children, who are still participating in everyday real life even though they are mentally challenged and the vulnerabilities that accompany that and the best example for this is a prize-winning book by Mark Haddon called *The Curious Incident of The Dog in The Night-Time*. So, across literature there is a range of portrayals of childhood vulnerabilities. We will examine some of those in the coming modules as well.