

Vulnerability Studies: An Introduction

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Childhood and Vulnerability - III

So our final segment is continuing with the theme of children, childhood and vulnerability. And we will begin with the idea of not children in the family, which we were dealing with in the previous segment, but children in and society. First of all, we'll begin with the idea of the child worker. Now, children work in our homes also, we asked children to do small jobs, pick things up, put them away, clear up their toys, we asked them to do some small work or the other. That's how you also bring them up within the family.

But when you think of children as working children, then it is a question of labour, labour rights, but also exploitation. Now, in the late 18th and early 19th centuries and through the 19th centuries, child labour was seen as part for the cause. And one of the early works on child labour was Henry Mayhew's *London Labour and London Poor*, which dealt with and interviewed children from the labouring classes. Now, why is it that we think of the child as somebody who should be exempt from working for a living? It's also because we think of the child as a privileged category that they should be educated, that they should have a life which is not spent in various forms of hard labour, which then destroy them physically as well as mentally.

So, we have an excerpt from there and this is one of the most famous excerpts from Mayhew's *London Labour and London Poor*. It has to do with somebody called the Watercress Girl. The Watercress Girl who speaks about herself and she says, as she goes about the streets with watercresses crying, "four bunches of penny watercresses" and she says, "I'm just eight years old— that's all". Now, when we think of an eight-year-old in our contemporary society, we are thinking in terms of a child who is in say class four, maybe not even class four, maybe class three, class four and yet here is a child who says, I've been very near a 12-month in the streets. That's been she's been working and selling watercresses for over a year or nearly a year and then she goes on to say that "before that I had to take care of a baby for my aunt. It wasn't heavy, it was only two months old but I minded it for ever such a time— till it could walk". So, before that, her job was as babysitter looking after a baby for her aunt. Then she goes back "before I had the baby, I

used to help mother, who was in the fur trade and if there was any slits in the fur, I'd sew them up. My mother learned me to needle-work and to knit when I was about five. I used to go to school too but I wasn't there long. I forgot all about it now, it's such a time ago; and mother took me away because the master whacked me though the missus used never to touch me”.

Now, in that small space she has actually given us a description of her life which also demonstrates vulnerability. The fact that once upon a time she used to go to school but the teachers there beat her, the master beat her though the master's wife never touched her. Then the fact that her mother taught her needlework and taught her how to knit when she was about five and that she helped her mother in the fur trade. After that she did the babysitting and now, she sells watercresses in the street out there.

Now all of this is seen as helping the family but as the text continues she says, “when I get home after selling creases I stops at home” so she doesn't go out working anymore. “I puts the room to rights, mother don't make me do it, I does it myself”. She cleans the chairs, she takes a tub, she scrubs the floor, she does that three to four times a week and then you have the description of their dinner. Two slices of bread and butter and a cup of tea for breakfast and she goes till tea time and has the same again. So, we are looking at a child who is a working member of society.

She has two meals which comprise two slices of bread and butter and a cup of tea that's it and then she tells you what she does with the money she earns. She puts it in a club and draws it out to buy clothes with. The last part of her statement which is about spending it on sweet stuff, she says it's better than that because I have a living to earn. A child who is a member of society and who should be taken care of, here, is instead speaking about the fact that she has a living to learn and as she says, she excused childhood, she says “it's like a child to care for sugar-sticks, and not like one who's got a living and vittals to earn. So she has to earn if she has to eat; “vittals” being food. “I ain't a child, and I shan't be a woman till I'm twenty but I'm past eight, I am”.

If you think about what is this watercress girl? She ain't a child because she earns her own money with which she buys clothes, she does not buy sugar stuff and she eats very limited quantities of food, she keeps her house clean, she helps her mother etc. Is this a child or is this what we recognize as being a child? And the answer of course is that, in societies which were not yet governed by laws which regulated child labor, there was no distinction between a child laborer and an adult laborer. So here you have an example of the vulnerability that a system can make possible for a child. Moving on from that and the Victorian era of the 19th century is full of these kinds of examples.

We look at a text from Elizabeth Barrett Browning who wrote this poem called “The Cry

of the Children” and this is one stanza from that where the children are the ones who speak and through much of the poem. "For oh," say the children, "we are weary, And we cannot run or leap — If we cared for any meadows, it were merely To drop down in them and sleep. Our knees tremble sorely in the stooping — We fall upon our faces, trying to go ; And, underneath our heavy eyelids drooping, The reddest flower would look as pale as snow. For, all day, we drag our burden tiring, Through the coal-dark, underground — Or, all day, we drive the wheels of iron. In the factories, round and round."

Now, during the Victorian period children, child labor were engaged in two main areas one was in the coal mines and the picture on the slide shows you children and what they did in the coal mines so they were employed to push wagons and because the space was low and compact they labored on their knees pushing and shoving also pulling because the child in trunk pulls the child at the back pushes but they can't even stand up. If you look at the poem the poem says “our knees tremble solely the stooping we fall upon our faces trying to go”. If that is how you spend your day then can you stand upright it goes on to the fact that “underneath our heavy eyelids drooping the reddest flower would look as pale as snow”. That their eyes are red because one coal dust; two, the fact that they have very little sleep because they woke up at five and sent down into the mines and as the poet says for “all day we drag a bird and tiring through the cold dark underground or all day we drive the wheels of iron in the factories round and round”. They also worked in the mills the mills of Manchester and other places where they worked the wheels the small fingers were seen as useful for certain tasks those start certain tasks also endangered those fingers so they could lose a finger very easily but they had certain jobs which were exclusively meant for the children.

Think of a system and capitalism would be your system but the industrial revolution which made it possible for children to be earning members of the family so they went out to work, they were sent out to work, except that they worked in conditions which stunted their growth and that would be the coal mines, which made them lose body parts which would be the mills, and wherein they lacked an education because they could go to school only on say Sundays now Sundays are the one day of rest when they can have some rest some sleep. Look at the first four lines where they say that they are weary: “we cannot run” “only if we cared for any meadows it would merely to drop down and sleep”. Do they have an acquaintance with meadows? No and as the children and the poem say if we care at all about meadows it would be so that we could lie down over there and sleep. They are sleep they were right they don't have adequate food they work in extremely terrible conditions which stunt their physical crew their educational growth is like nil think about the vulnerability of children that is demonstrated by the poem the “Cry of The Children” by Elizabeth Barrett Browning.

There are of course labor laws in literature. Now, when we think about how in today's world and if you remember right at the beginning in the first module we spoke about how labor laws in India say that a child can work in partitions or can go out to work either when they're 14 or they're 15. Now labor laws such as these came about due to poems such as Elizabeth Barrett Browning's "Cry of The Children" but labor laws also came about due to texts such as Charles Kingsley's *The Water Babies* and William Blake's "The Chimney Sweeper".

Now, in *The Water Babies* you again have a chimney sweep, about whom Kingsley writes he cried when "he cried when he had to climb the dark flues, rubbing his poor knees and elbows raw". So the chimneys of the large houses of rich landowners, house owners had to be cleaned regularly and because it was difficult for adults to go up them they used to have small chimney sweeps, children who could be hired as chimney sweeps. Their condition is what is delineated by Kingsley in *Water Babies* when he speaks about the child who cries he cries when he has to climb up the chimneys he cries "when the soot got into his eyes, which it did every day in the week; when his master beat him, which he did every day of the week; and when he had not enough to eat, which happened every day in the week likewise."

So, in spite of all the labor, is it that the child has enough food to eat or that he lives a secure life and the answer of course is clearly no. Similarly, when Blake writes "The Chimney Sweeper" and there's of course *Songs of Experience* and *Songs of Innocence*. So, when he writes the poem "The Chimney Sweeper" "When my mother died I was very young, And my father sold me while yet my tongue Could scarcely cry " 'weep! 'weep! 'weep! 'weep! " So, your chimneys I sweep & in soot I sleep." "My father sold me" and here you see the coming together of two structures the family and work the father sells him the child and he sells him and his tongue can scarcely cry "weep weep weep", "so your chimneys I sweep and in soot I sleep".

So these are children who are neglected who have been sold into hard labor and the point goes on, of course, to tell us about "little Tom Dacre, who cried when his head, that curled like a lamb's back, was shaved", so the hair was shaved because otherwise all the soot will accumulate in their head and "I said, "Hush, Tom! never mind it, for when your head's bare, You know that the soot cannot spoil your white hair". And that is of course one small marker of the resilience of childhood that you see something positive in the fact that your hair has been shaved that at least your pretty white hair won't get blackened by the soot that is all around.

Now what depictions such as these did was that they made people aware of the fact that children were laboring their children were suffering and that that suffering was making them ill, was costing them their lives, their growth and that this was not how society should function. So when we speak about the vulnerability of childhood and we speak

about the vulnerability of childhood in the context of work which is determined by the society not by the family, then society also that stepped in to set about to bring about labor laws which then restricted the hours that a child could work and the conditions in which a child could work.

But if we think of society as regulating what happens to a child there's also this that sometimes a child can be outside society. Now how does this happen or can this happen aren't all children located within society and I'm not speaking about a child who is brought up, say, in in complete seclusion away from the world, no. I'm talking about children who even as they are located in society also are outside society. So, several examples and you have one of the famous ones would be to think in terms of William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* written about mid-century last century the 20th century where you have a bunch of children who are stranded on an island with no other humans and what happens to them when all the safeguards and the norms of society fall away. You have a breakdown of norms that occurs over there.

And you have these children who do not have anybody around them to regulate their behavior or to discipline them in any fashion they make their own groups except that after point you have some children emerging as leaders and in the book, you have Ralph and Jack who become the leaders. But you also have the other children who are either followers or people who stand outside and Simon would be an example of somebody who is not really an integral part of the group. Jack of course makes around himself a group of people who then obey him implicitly and who are led into increasingly anarchic forms of behavior. But the inbuilt vulnerability of the child that it edges into precarity and then, of course, leads to a total breakdown in the case of people like Simon as well as Piggy because these are people who are then victimized by other children.

So, the bullying that we saw in Dotheboys Hall in *Nicholas Nickleby* or in *Jane Eyre*'s Lowood school, here, then that blame, because there are no longer any constraints whatsoever, there were still school masters there were people around them who might be able to check it. Here, there are no checks and as a result, children die. That's one extreme form. There is also Jeanette Winterson's *Oranges Are Not The Only Fruit*, which is about the child who grows up in society in the sense that she grows up in a town with lots of other people she goes to church and so on and so forth except that her mother belongs to a community of Christians who, who have extreme beliefs and because of those extreme beliefs the child is isolated from the world around her. She is also rendered different from other children and so even as she is within society she is also outside society and at various points she demonstrates how she is outside society because the kinds of things that she does in school do not fit in with what the expectations are in school.

If you want to think of a variable example it would be to look at the childhoods in several of the Dalit biographies and autobiographies that we have in India. Bama's *Karukku*

would be one example where when the child goes to school she is then isolated and singled out because of who she is and as she makes clear all Dalit children face similar struggles in Indian context in schools where they are identified as being from the Dalit community and they are then victimized for it. So, the frames that operate within society work for certain children but also then make other children suffer in different ways.

Now, all this while we have been talking under the assumption that when there are adults children are reasonably safe. Of course, there are also adults who inflict abuse upon children but otherwise others usually keep children safe in some fashion or the other. Carol Ann Duffy has a poem which begins “Nobody hurt you”, which is about how others don't necessarily have to be abusive to hurt a child and it begins, “Nobody hurt you. Nobody turned off the light and argued with somebody else all night. The bad man on the moors was only a movie you saw. Nobody locked the door. Your questions were answered fully. No. That didn't occur. You couldn't sing anyway, cared less. The moment's a blur, a Film Fun laughing itself to death in the coal fire. Anyone's guess. Nobody forced you. You wanted to go that day. Begged. You chose the dress. Here are the pictures, look at you. Look at us all, smiling and waving, younger. The whole thing is inside your head. What you recall are impressions; we have the facts. We called the tune. The secret police of your childhood were older and wiser than you, bigger than you. Call back the sound of their voices. Boom. Boom. Boom. Nobody sent you away. That was an extra holiday, with people you seemed to like. They were firm, there was nothing to fear. There was none but yourself to blame if it ended in tears. What does it matter now? No, no, nobody left the skidmarks of sin on your soul and laid you wide open for Hell. You were loved. Always. We did what was best. We remember your childhood well.”

The poem is titled “We remember your childhood well”. What it does is it sets up a conversation it is of course a dramatic monologue where the person who's speaking is a parent and the person is speaking to a child, who is now grown up, who's arguing about the fact that her childhood was not idyllic. That first sentence “nobody hurt you”, which means the child said I was hurt by the parent dismisses it or the adult dismisses it saying “nobody hurt you”. “Nobody turned off the light and argued with somebody else all night”, so the child also has these memories of doors being locked against her and there was a bad man on the moors and that the lights were turned off and there were fights going on in the house and the adult goes on “your questions were answered fully. No. That didn't occur”. Now if you look at all the “no”s and the “nobody's right” if you look at stanza 3 where she says “nobody forced you wanted to go that day” so the child says “I was forced to go somewhere” and the parent turns it around “oh no nobody forced you you, wanted to go, you begged, you chose the dress and here are the pictures here is the evidence”.

Think about what it does to a child if what the child believes to be true is then called into question by the adult and this is a form of vulnerability which is not structural which is not exactly systemic which is not even inherent. This is built upon relationships and it is still embedded of course within the family structure but it is also to do with the idea that because a parent or an adult has power over the child whatever the child believes can be gaslit, you can turn it around. So when the adult says what you recall are impressions we have the facts. "Nobody sent you away that was an extra holiday with people you seem to like". So everything that the child says is negated by the parent and the last stanza where it says "what does it matter now? No, no, nobody let this left the skidmarks of sin on your soul and laid you wide open for Hell. You were loved always. We did what was best". And that one line "we did what was best, you were loved always" it encapsulates what a lot of parents say that "whatever we did we did what was best for you" but the child who is vulnerable to abuse by others who is put into situations where the child need not necessarily have wanted to go does not really have choice. The vulnerability of childhood is also embedded in the fact of the powerlessness of the child especially when there are assertive parents or assertive adults who know what is best for the child and who will then determine exactly what the child must do. Look at the last line of the second star of the second stanza on the ppt which says "there was none but yourself to blame if it ended in tears" the child's vulnerability also rests in the fact that the adult can exonerate himself or herself and place the blame upon the child and the child because of its powerlessness cannot argue about it cannot do anything about it.

You see additional vulnerabilities of the child in texts such as once again Charles Dickens's *Christmas Carol* where Tiny Tim is lame in Rick Riordan's *Percy Jackson* series where the hero is both dyslexic and suffers from ADHD, you have Firdaus Kanga's novel *Trying To Grow*, which is again to do with physical challenges, Bapsi Sidwa's *Ice Candy Man* children were physically challenged and yet their brains are fully functional and working but their bodies render them more vulnerable in a world which is arranged for able-bodied individuals, children as well as adults. There are certain situations wherein vulnerability becomes aggravated and these are of course situations of conflict, whether that conflict is between communities and races, between families, countries, children are often the victims who suffer most. So, one of the most famous examples is of course *The Diary Of Anne Frank* written during the Holocaust by Anne Frank but there is also Ranjit Lal's *Battle For No. 19*, which is set during the Sikh riots of 1984, Marjane Sartrapi's *Persepolis* Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* if you were to think in terms of conflict amongst families, Amitav Ghosh's *Shadow Lines*, which has children at the center and which is centered around the Partition.

Now conflicts render a child's life at risk but also have other elements which contribute to making a child more vulnerable and this includes the fact that traumas which are witnessed, which they have suffered during their childhood they cast long shadows over

the rest of their lives. Those traumas impact their life and impact the future as well the formation of their character so what they are as they grow into adulthood but also the relationships that they will have in the future are impacted by situations of conflict across the world.

We've talked so long about vulnerability but it should not be forgotten that children are also inherently resilient, capable of adapting to circumstances. Of course, if the risks that they face are particularly brutal they may not survive. But they can sometimes survive as well one of those iconic books about a child surviving is *Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain where Huckleberry Finn is vulnerable, he manages to surmount each of the obstacles that comes his way. But he also then grows up far faster. So what happens to a child who is vulnerable and who's placed in a situation where he is rendered more vulnerable? That child has to grow up quickly. The contrast is of course between *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, both of which are by Mark Twain. Tom Sawyer can remain a child Huckleberry Finn cannot because Huckleberry Finn is left alone in the world whereas Tom Sawyer still has adult figures who take care of him. Children can survive they can survive situations where in their vulnerability is exploited, where they are rendered precarious, where they suffer, they can still survive, but as Huck Finn demonstrates, there has to be some degree of nurture, some degree of security and affection. Only then is it possible for them to emerge whole and not to damage others in turn.