

## **Vulnerability Studies: An Introduction**

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**Week- 02**

**Lecture- 02**

### **Willed Vulnerability - Endurance Sports**

Hi, I am Rahul De. I teach Economics at Azim Premji University. Today I will be doing a lesson on Willed Vulnerability in Endurance Sports. This is part of a larger course being coordinated by Dr. Pramod Nayar on Introduction to Vulnerability Studies and this class comes in week 2 on Reading Vulnerable Bodies in Literature and Culture.

What is Vulnerability Studies? Vulnerability Studies focuses on studying dominant cultural discourses and representations of humans caught in risky, painful or life-threatening conditions, which test both their physical and mental limits. One of the spaces, cultural spaces in which discourses of vulnerability come about is what is considered extreme cultures. Extreme cultures is any kind of cultural space, it could be a movie, a documentary, a story, a photo which highlights how humans are dependent on the physical world around them and how within their environment they can be in place positions of vulnerability or helplessness. Today, we will discuss discourses of vulnerability in one specific cultural practice which is extreme sports.

Extreme sports is essentially sports which put athletes in extremely difficult conditions. Dr. Nayar has written about two such examples of extreme sports in his book. One looks at base jumping which is where athletes jump from very high distances, another called rope-less climbing where athletes climb very high peaks without using ropes. In both, it is highlighted how vulnerable or how much danger the athletes face.

In today's module, we will look at cultures of discourses, we will look at discourses of vulnerability in another kind of sports, another kind of extreme sports called endurance sports. We will look at two specific endurance sports called cycling and boxing. Endurance sports are sports where athletes wilfully or voluntarily test their endurance by putting their minds and bodies into conditions through which they have to endure pain. It is interesting to see how endurance sports are different from other kinds of sports. We all know about team sports such as cricket, football, volleyball or individual athletics such as running, jumping.

Endurance sports are different from this. How are they different? Most sports are goal oriented. That means the main aim of athletes is to try and achieve a goal in a certain time limit or in a certain constraint. So, in a football match, a team who scores more will win. In a basketball match, a team who scores more baskets in the time period will win.

In athletics or individual sports, there is a certain distance in which the fastest athlete wins. So, in sprints for example, 100 meters, whoever covers it, the fastest wins. In high jump, the person who jumps highest wins. Endurance sports are different in the sense that these are also sports which put athletes into aim-based games which they have certain amount of time. But the fundamental quality here being tested is not skill, technique, speed but endurance.

Let us take two examples of endurance sports. First, we look at cycling. The most famous event in cycling is the Tour de France. This is a 21-day event where many cyclists around the world compete for. It is the most watched cycling event and unofficial reports claim that this is one of the 10 most watched events in the world.

In the Tour de France, cyclists have to cover many different tracks, routes, conditions and the winner is the one who can survive through 21 days of very grueling cycling. Another kind of endurance sports is heavyweight boxing. Heavyweight boxing, unlike other forms of boxing, has no limit to the weight of the boxer. Anybody who is above 102 kgs can participate in heavyweight boxing. And there are two ways of winning.

One is that the boxers compete over 12 rounds and if both boxers are standing, then they are ranked based on certain rules of the sport. Otherwise, if one boxer knocks out another boxer for the count of 10, then they win. Heavyweight boxing is a good example where boxers have to face extreme amount of pain in order to win. And usually, the winner is the one who has managed to endure pain for a longer period of time. Now, why are we interested in looking at these endurance sports? There are two primary reasons for this.

The first is that unlike other sports, you know, other popular sports like cricket, football, which is very easy for the viewer to watch because if you watch a goal being scored or a wicket being taken, you immediately know. It is something you want to celebrate. It is very straightforward to see who has won because the way the game is played, you can see who is winning. If you watch cycling or boxing, it is much harder because it is very hard to tell what is going on. If you look at the Tour de France, it is just cyclists riding for a very long period of time.

If you look at boxing, it is people boxing at each other. There is no particular movement which measures, let us say a goal or a basket or a block. There is nothing that measures.

Secondly, you actually cannot see in any visible manner what is happening. If a cyclist is getting tired, you cannot really tell from outside.

If a boxer, unless they are injured or bleeding, you cannot really tell how much they are enduring. However, we find that these events are very popular. I said in the earlier slide also, the Tour de France is approximately meant to have 45 million viewers. That puts it in the 10 most watched live event in the world. Heavyweight boxing have had events which has been the most viewed ever.

So, a very famous match between Muhammad Ali and George Foreman called Rumble in the Jungle had more than 1 billion viewers. Today, the argument I would like to explore is, why is endurance sport so popular? Because when you watch these sports, it is not so clear what is the pleasure in viewing these sports. And a argument I bring in is that because discourses of vulnerability frame endurance sports, that's why people like watching them. In endurance sports, athletes willfully put their body in very difficult situations. For a normal person or a normal cyclist, it is impossible to manage the rigorousness of the Tour de France.

Similarly, for a normal athlete, to box for 12 rounds with another athlete who is so strong and heavy is almost impossible. These participants' training forced them to endure extreme amounts of pain in order to be able to compete. We will today study how their different narratives and frames are used to highlight the vulnerability of these athletes. And one of the pleasures of watching them perform is to see how they manage in such difficult situations. Or another way of saying this is, the viewers or the audience enjoys watching these participants survive or beat the odds and endure.

And endure against very difficult conditions and win. Another way of thinking about endurance sports is that they provide a cultural space or practice through which discourses of vulnerability can frame events. A lot of times what's happening in endurance sports is, from outside the viewer can't tell that the athlete is enduring pain or difficulty. However, different frames and narratives helps the viewer understand what the athlete is going through and how they are overcoming it. Many of the discourses around endurance sports is one of enabling athletes, which means that when an athlete overcomes a very difficult situation, both for the athlete as well for the viewer, you feel a sense of gratification, you feel a sense of pleasure of seeing someone overcome such difficult odds.

You have already studied in previous sections about how discourses of vulnerability place participants in inhospitable environments, which test the limits and resourcefulness. And then different narratives can frame this discourse in different ways. Most of the sport

narratives we look at are enabling narratives, the narratives which celebrate the ability of human beings to endure such difficult circumstances. How are discourses of vulnerability embedded in endurance sports? We will refer to famous or well-known critical theorist Judith Butler's work to understand this. Judith Butler had argued that norms that make the body vulnerable are enacted through visual and narrative frames, which means that when we look at discourses of vulnerability, to understand how they work, we look at how they are used to frame certain events or activities.

Today, we will focus on different narrative and visual frames used to embed discourses of vulnerability in endurance sports. One of the ways in which discourses of vulnerability can be found is both through testimonies or interviews of the athletes, or it could be through testimonies of viewers, or even the narrative frames which the commentator or newspapers reporting about the event produce. So, when you are studying discourses of vulnerability, you can study it through these different kinds of narrative frames. In the next part of this study, we will focus on some specific images and I will explain how these images can be used to understand discourses of vulnerability. And as a student, you can go and find other examples, similar examples, and this will help you sort of learn and understand how did discourses work and how as a scholar of this subject, you can apply this to understand other cultural objects. Okay, let's have a close look at a couple of images, iconic images from different sports.

In slide 11, I have put two images. The first is from the Tour de France where there is an accident happening and cyclists are falling over each other. This image highlights how the Tour de France or cycling is embedded in discourses of vulnerability. When you watch Tour de France, you end up watching for a very long time that cyclists are just cycling, just cycling, just cycling. How does the viewer know that they are enduring? It's so difficult.

What the media does or what the commentators do is they sort of highlight moments of danger. This frame where the cyclists are falling over each other and their bodies are in danger of being harmed highlights the vulnerability they face. So, during this particular race, this image was replayed over and over again both in the television presentation as well as newspaper reporting about this event. The second image is of two very famous boxers, Evander Holyfield and Mike Tyson. Both were the best in the field in their time and this event was one of the highest viewed and one incident made this match very famous which is the match is very close and Mike Tyson bites Evander Holyfield's ear.

So, this image shows him biting his ear. This is not allowed in boxing and Mike Tyson later confessed that he did this because he was frustrated and he couldn't beat the opponent. After the match, this image became iconic or popular and very few people

talked about what happened in the match itself but talked about this incident and both in media reporting, in newspapers, in the coverage, this image is shown over and over again as well as in interviews. Evander Holyfield and Mike Tyson are asked about this incident. This incident for me is one particular visual frame through which discourses of vulnerability are embedded in endurance sports because from the viewer's perspective, we know boxing is an endurance sport.

It's a difficult sport but this highlights how dangerous it is that it not only punches but it pushes athletes to do very extreme forms of violence. In this case, it's biting someone's ear. In another case, it could come out in another way. It highlights what kind of danger the boxer willfully puts themselves into. Now I will focus on three different newspaper or media narratives around famous athletes and show how discourses of vulnerability are embedded within them.

In slide 13, I have shown an image of a newspaper article showing that Muhammad Ali, who is one of the most famous boxers, suffered from Parkinson's disease and how there was good scientific evidence to show that he suffered from Parkinson's disease because of boxing, which is that through many head injuries he sustained during fighting, eventually led him to have Parkinson's and he died of Parkinson's disease. Now, this became well known for two reasons. The first was that Parkinson's disease itself wasn't well known in the public. So, this case was used to build awareness about Parkinson's disease. However, the second frame is of interest to us.

Muhammad Ali was by far one of the most well-known sportsmen, not only boxer, in the 20th century. He was known for many reasons, most important of it being he was an African-American athlete and he was fighting at a time when African-Americans were facing discrimination in America. Famously, he won the Olympics medal and he gave away his medal because he didn't want African-Americans to be discriminated. He also refused to be part of the Vietnam war. Muhammad Ali's life is known through many achievements and political statements he has made.

However, after his death in the media, this story became more popular, which is that he got Parkinson's disease due to boxing. And for me, this is a narrative frame of discourse of vulnerability because they are highlighting that Muhammad Ali, the best boxer ever, he himself faced so much pain, had to endure so much blows to his head that he eventually got a life-threatening disease. And even though he is an athlete, he is probably one of the best physical specimens, even he succumbed to Parkinson's disease. This highlights how risky boxing is and how much pain and suffering boxers put themselves into wilfully. And I think this has a lot to do with how boxing still endures being a very popular sport, even though it is very violent and has repercussions, long term health

consequences on the boxers.

In slide 14, I have an image of Lance Armstrong. Lance Armstrong is probably one of the most recognizable cyclists in the world. He dominated the Tour de France during the late 90s and through the 2000s. However, one particular storyline stands out over all the other achievements he made, which is that he was diagnosed with testicular cancer and he managed to overcome, that is he managed to win against testicular cancer and he got fully healed. It is very difficult for science to objectively say what led to Lance Armstrong fighting cancer successfully.

However, a lot of media framed it due to his rigorous training for cycling, because cycling is such a difficult sport because the human, the cyclist's body has to endure so much pain that they train themselves to endure so much pain. A lot of the training forces them into conditions which are very difficult for the body and mind and by doing it over and over, they learn how to thrive in these situations. These media framed that because Lance Armstrong went through these trainings, that's why he managed to increase his mental and physical endurance and that's why he was able to battle cancer successfully. So, this is a frame enabling narrative for how a vulnerable body and cycling can actually overcome the vulnerability.

In slide 14, I have put two images. One is a New York Times article talking about Lance Armstrong's training regimen. The second is his best-selling book about his training regimen. After Armstrong overcame cancer, there was a big popularity about how he trained, because for many viewers, they felt like if they trained like Lance Armstrong, they will be able to get similar benefits. And this translated into a huge purchasing of his book and many people trying to recreate his training regimen. This is also for me a discourse of vulnerability embedded in endurance sports.

And it's an enabling narrative which says that the athletes who are participating in endurance sports have to train their bodies and minds to be able to do it and others can mimic or practice their training regimen and gain the same benefits. Over here then the endurance sports or cycling is not just a representation of how difficult it is for cyclists to manage in such extreme conditions. It's actually framing it saying that the cyclist can overcome this difficulty. And from the viewer's perspective, this means that anybody using the same training regimen can overcome any kind of physical difficulties they are facing. So, for me, this is an enabling narrative of framing discourses of vulnerability in cycling.

After this, I wanted to do a slightly different example, one closer from home about an Indian athlete. And I want to also use this to show that discourses of vulnerability can

have many layers or you could have vulnerability where there's intersection of different identities of the athlete. I want to focus on one of the most renowned female athletes in India today, Mary Kom, who is a boxer hailing from the state of Manipur and who in the last 10 years or over the last decade has won multiple medals for India in boxing. Now, Mary Kom was one of the first very visible female athletes in India.

In India, sports is largely dominated by men. And one of the reasons she was such a famous athlete was because she was successful in winning medals in the Commonwealth Games, in the Asiad Games and managed to achieve something very few Indians have achieved before her. However, it's interesting to note that Mary Kom is not the only female athlete who's successful. In fact, around the same time, Saina Nehwal, who is a badminton player, got far more success in Mary Kom in badminton. After Saina Nehwal, there have been other Indian female athletes also who achieved more in terms of sporting success. What explains Mary Kom's popularity in the media? I argue that Mary Kom being a woman and Mary Kom's athlete body being seen as a body of a mother and a wife frames her in different discourses of vulnerability.

In the next couple of slides, I'm going to look at examples of how Mary Kom has been framed as a vulnerable body. So, we've already studied how boxing itself is a cultural space which is used for framing discourses of vulnerability. In Mary Kom's case, there's a second level of vulnerability, which is that a woman is putting her body in two spaces where you have to endure pain. And from society's perspective, women's bodies are perceived as important because they produce children. So, when their bodies are put in the way of harm or threat, it showcases an additional layer of vulnerability.

When we look at newspaper interviews of Mary Kom, we find that she has been framed or narrativized as first a mother and a wife before being an athlete. There are two stories which stand out for me. First is, Mary Kom talks about how her father was a wrestling coach but she hit the fact that she was training for boxing. And the reason she hit this was because her father would refuse to allow her to box because she could damage her face while boxing and this would affect her chances of getting married. So, this narrative frames how Mary Kom is not only putting her body in danger but also putting in danger her chances of making a good marriage match.

There is also a lot of focus on how when Mary Kom had a child that she had to go off training and then in interviews they explore how did she sort of come back and become an athlete. There was a huge celebration of not only her achievements in winning medals but how she gave birth and still came back to fight. For me, this is another narrative which frames Mary Kom's body as being vulnerable because it can produce children and when you put it in a place of danger such as boxing, there is an added level of

vulnerability because she can not only harm herself but harm her capacity to have children or her capacity to have children in the future. So, this is another frame through which we find discourses of vulnerability in boxing. We look at one last narrative which is that there was a biopic or a Bollywood movie made about Mary Kom which had Priyanka Chopra play Mary Kom.

And while this is not about Mary Kom or the sport, this film also narrativises how we understand Mary Kom and boxing. Through the movie if you watch it, you will find that Priyanka Chopra is always shown as looking very tired while boxing, sweating heavily, blood streaked on her face. If you look at Mary Kom boxing, you will find that she boxes with great ease so you don't actually see her struggling physically like this. Why was Priyanka Chopra depicting Mary Kom to be struggling so much physically when in actual footage it was not true? That's because they want to let the audience know how much pain and difficulty she is going through. And because the audience doesn't know what the athlete's mind and body is going through, it is depicted by blood and sweat on their body.

In the last slide, I would like to highlight this. So, there is a photo of Mary Kom winning a medal where she is smiling and showing the medal. And there is a photo of Priyanka Chopra recreating that shot where she is holding the medal and she is crying and there is blood coming from her face. Now we know in the original event this did not happen. But Priyanka Chopra is crying and bleeding. It shows how difficult it was to win the match, how much pain she had to endure and it highlights how vulnerable the body is when they are involved in boxing.

Thank you for listening to me today on this lesson on willed vulnerability in endurance sports.