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Knife, Aesthetics of the Wounded: Vulnerability and Beyond

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ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to read Salman Rushdie' Knife: Meditations After an Attempted Murder (2024), as a representative text for the newly emerging, dynamic, interdisciplinary field of Vulnerability Studies and analyze the different interacting vulnerabilities found therein. Theoretical concepts such as Michel Foucault's heterotopia, Derrida's hostipitality, Giddens's fateful moments, Judith Butler's ungrievable lives and Elaine Scarry's meditations on pain and imagination have been utilized to achieve the desired end. Recalling Butler, this paper also seeks to show how vulnerability is not synonymous with passivity, is not the opposite of resistance but one that actively sources the practice of resistance.

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Introduction

"… books can blind and bind" (Sambhanda,2024) says Sreetilak Sambhanda in a riveting article on the dubious nature of books. The saying probably can find no other better claimant than Salman Rushdie, who quite literally experienced both the agencies (if we can call it so) of the book: 'to blind' and 'to bind'. In fact, the journey from "blind" to "bind", from being rendered vulnerable to transmuting that vulnerability into strength, is what brings his 2024 memoir, Knife: Meditations After an Attempted Murder, within the ambit of the newly emerging field of Vulnerability Studies. Vulnerability Studies is a dynamic, rapidly evolving, interdisciplinary, area of inquiry, an eclectic field drawing generously from a variety of disciplines, such as sociology, economics, anthropology, and such other related disciplines, in an effort to examine the numerous forms and degrees of threat to the integrity of human individuals, communities, non-human lives and the environment. Ever since eminent American philosopher Judith Butler's theorizations on vulnerability came into currency, a host of scholarly probing along the same line but from myriad perspectives, say, war, disability, human rights, climate change and ecoprecarity, came pouring in, from Patrick Brown, Ani.B.Satz, Bryen S Turner, P.K.Nair, Barry Hoffmaster, Ewa Plonowaska Ziarek and others, thereby consolidating the ground of Vulnerability Studies discourse. A humble attempt is made here to read Knife in light of Vulnerability Studies.

Vulnerability in Rushdie's Narrative

The Book commences with scenes prior to the sudden knife-attack on Rushdie on 12th August,2022, at the amphitheater in Chautauqua, where he went to deliberate on the importance of keeping writers safe from harm. Though the homicidal intent that affronted him therein, now colours his stance with rich irony, yet he was totally unaware of the brutal future that was to befell him soon. In these initial sections of the book, Rushdie labours to impress on his readers, the sheer unknowability of the ensuing violence. Also, the space and the occasion that called for his part in Chautauqua was a discursive one, bespeaking authorial prerogative and strength, making the attack further implausible. Rushdie was at the helm of things, or so he thought, cloaked in something of an epistemic certainty, about to narrate the laudable achievements of the City of Asylum Pittsburgh project that offered refuge to writers, made vulnerable in their own countries, but was in turn rendered vulnerable therein. The knife went through not only his corporeal framework but also metaphorically through his authority as a writer-politic, toppling the writer-activist to general public equation, in the cultural space of the auditorium. The apparent incompatibility of the crime with the liberal Chautauqua Institution that every summer ushered in fervent crowds intent on self-improvement to lectures and screenings and whose legacy had borne imprint of Franklin Roosevelt's passionate denunciations of violence, in his iconic "I hate War" speech,_____explain perhaps Rushdie's shock, when confronted with his assailant. The apparently cozy and cloistered space of the Chautauqua Institution suggestive of liberal, intellectual exchanges, now comes to embody the dual, counteracting, at once known and unknown space of Michel Foucault's heterotopia. True to a typical heterotopia that converges multiple incompatible realities on a single stage, the auditorium on August 12, 2022, coalesced paradoxically both avowal and disavowal of safety rights for authors. Given the barbaric attempt on Rushdie's life that unfolded on the day, the seemingly peaceful institution hosting him instantiated what Derrida had termed "hostipitality", affirming the inherent

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dialectical opposition between hospitality and hostility. Thus, vulnerability is all-pervasive. Despite the difference in the degrees of vulnerability that each one of us may be exposed to, we are, nonetheless, all vulnerable. Professor Patrick Brown fittingly argues in his volume, On Vulnerability: A Critical Introduction (2021), that "vulnerability is intrinsic to our everyday social lives" (Brown 13). To be alive is to be vulnerable. This leads us perhaps, to a not-so-audacious thought that vulnerability writes us, in the same vein as the poststructuralist platitude: 'language writes us'. And for vulnerability to write us, it should be as divergent, various, multilayered as lives and their processes of interactions are. This book stands at the intersection of multiple vulnerabilities: the real and the supposed, objective and the subjective, of being rendered vulnerable and drawing strength from the same, individual, shared and collective vulnerabilities.

Embodied and Disembodied Pains

Vulnerability, in a way, records both priori and posteriori states. In Knife (2024), Rushdie records both pre- and post-attack impressions. He recounts suffering from multiple nightmares, over a span of some thirty-three and a half years, following Ayatollah Khomeini's 1989 death sentence against him and those involved in the publication of his controversial book The Satanic Verses (1988). His nightmares direct us to the anticipatory dimension of vulnerability, of the burden of persistent fear of being attacked all of a sudden that Rushdie had to bear on his soul, for decades, following the khomeini's homicidal directive against him. In those horrid dreams, Rushdie had often seen his assassin emerging out of some public forum and charging at him, in a manner quite akin to how it actually happened on that fatal morning. Thus, the source of his vulnerability lies far past this memoir, into some indistinct past, characterized by book-burnings and displays of violence born out of the fatwa fury. Therefore, vulnerability as a condition, as a state of being belies neat description, defies calculation and is therefore very hard to 'get at' or pinpoint. In other words, vulnerability may or may not always have a definite beginning or end. It is a vulnerability continuum that lives us. Nonetheless, ontological vulnerability, that which strikes at the very heart of our lives and identities and denudes us, many-a-times, of our social roles, say vocation or avocation (vocation more than avocation perhaps), is sculpted by few key events or phases in time, something that English Sociologist Anthony Giddens calls "fateful moments" (Brown 32). These moments often bear the stamp of a peculiar situatedness within the spatio-temporal framework. The twenty-seven skit of violence staged by the Lebanese attacker that left Rushdie groveling on stage, qualifies for the label. This near-death experience strengthened the author's disapproval of the Cartesian superiority of the mind over the body, and made him suddenly aware of himself as a body-subject. "My body was dying", Rushdie observes, "and it was taking me with it. It was an intensely physical sensation". His habitual, taken-for-granted certainty vis-à-vis, his body was shaken. The several injuries he suffered, such as the one on his salivary channel, that left him drooling at a stretch, the stiff left hand or the damaged right eye that wholly quit service____all made Rushdie suddenly alive to a newer facet of corporeal reality (or should we say corporeal dysfunctionality?), working, in separation from the willing mind. Herein truly the author comes to experience 'body language'. His medical condition brilliantly illustrates the vulnerability at the level of organs, tissues, at the cellular level. This disjunct between the mind and the body, this sheer inability to work the body on terms of the mind-subject usually lead to feelings of helplessness and inadequacy, which are integral to the vulnerable condition. An identical mental framework is conspicuous, early in the book, when, Rushdie is skeptical of whether he would ever write again, whether his disability would come to define him henceforth, as the fatwa had unfortunately done before, despite his efforts at projecting, propelling and upholding his writerly self. The several references to knife-attacks that the author accumulates in the book, prominent among them, for instance, Kafka's Joseph K, who is killed "like a dog "____tether the author to a history, literary or otherwise of wounding and being wounded.

Subjective experiences of vulnerability may sometimes differ greatly from objective experiences of the same. While witnesses at the auditorium recount seeing the author 'wailing' in pain, post-attack, he remembers bothering instead about such less urgent things as his house keys and credit cards. In fact, the readers cannot help smiling when Rushdie feels bad about having his cherished "Ralph lauren suit" cut up, to allow his rescuers a look at his wounds or when he feels ashamed to voice within earshot his weight, that has in the recent years, "ballooned out of control." (Rushdie, 2024) It is possible that the delirium of the shock made him impervious to pain. Nonetheless, it is curious to observe how different individual experiences of vulnerability can be when compared to objective accounts of the same.

Physical vulnerability often makes one open to other forms of vulnerability. Rushdie relates how he compromised his body's privacy to live. His experience with the catheter, Rushdie confessed, felt like the most gruesome ignominy ever inflicted on his person. While cultures of trust, Professor Brown avers, are vital in availing oneself of professional care, these help-giving systems or agents themselves are not totally devoid of irregularities. Iatrogenesis is a condition wherein the patient shows new medical complications due to inaccurate professional care or negligence. In Rushdie's case, a medicine made it difficult for him to micturate which in turn gave him severe urinary tract infection. Thus, trusting bodies, in their performances of trust towards help-giving bodies may sometimes become adversely affected in the process. In other words, trust involves the paradoxical practice of opening to the possibility of further injury so as to recuperate from wounds already suffered. His inability to articulate pain through language, post-attack, evident in the words written in hind sight: "My voice sounded far away from me, croaky,…blurry, inexact"(Rushdie, 2024)_confirms the unique dimension of the experiences of physical pain, its apparent irrelevance and untranslatability for those outside the vicinity of pain and how in the words of Elaine Scarry, it actively "destroys" language, bringing about a "reversion to the pre-language" stage of "cries and groans"(Scarry, 1985).Language at once runs dry when asked to externalize pain. Knife as a documentation of embodied vulnerability, foregrounds the complexity, ambiguity (in terms of pain's presence, at once there and not there; acutely present for the sufferer but something to be doubted about, by all others, according to Scarry) and the singularity of physical pain, which "unlike any other state of consciousness had no referential content" (Scarry, 1985). Knife however does not stop here, but also records how passage of pain into speech, into literature (via resorting to imagination), actively transforms it, even eliminating it in some cases. Though Scarry mainly focusses on the politics of pain in connection to war, yet her theorizations vis-à-vis pain (which in isolation, she says is wholly objectless) and imagination (which she says, is wholly its objects minus experienceable sentience) as complementary actors, each supplying the other's missing part and together coming out into the world as "work" (Scarry, 1985) applies to Knife too. Knife is the "work", the "verbal artifact" (Scarry, 1985) that effected coming together of pain and imagination, making these hitherto private occurrences sharable and social.

Digital Vulnerability, Propaganda and Free Speech

Dissemination and access of fabricated information via social media platforms may again bring harm. Joel E. Dimsdale calls the lure of the social media as "dark persuasion" (Dimsdale, 2021), one that feeds on and promotes herd mentality, grants credibility to preposterous claims and sows discord. Its persuasion quotient is so high that it almost verges on being coercive. Knife (2024) succinctly hints at how distorted narratives and religio-fundamentalist propaganda, circulating over web platforms such as Youtube and Facebook stigmatized the author in the attacker's eyes, thereby indoctrinating the later into systems of terrorization. The propagandists who seek to manipulate the mass often bank on what can be called 'supposed vulnerability', where a fake, feigned vulnerability or feeling of being threatened is used as an incentive to resort to and legitimize violence. In this respect, Rushdie recalls the infamous Charlie Hebdo murders of January 2015, when some dozen journalists were shot dead for publishing mere cartoons of Prophet Muhammad and thereupon hurting muslim sentiments. In the pages of Knife (2024), Rushdie vehemently attacks the massacre thus:

Religious totalitarianism has caused a deadly mutation in the heart of Islam and we see the tragic consequences in Paris…I stand with Charlie Hebdo, as we all must, to defend the art of satire, which has always been a force for liberty… 'Respect for religion' has become a code phrase meaning 'fear of religion'. Religions, like all other ideas, deserve criticism, satire and, yes, our fearless disrespect.

In the same vein, he wrote in Joseph Anton:A Memoir (2012) that "if the right to free expression is qualified by the condition that you not upset someone, especially someone who is willing to resort to violence, it is no longer a right".

Vulnerability as Agency

However, vulnerability is not confined merely to states of unbecoming, it is also a poetics of re-becoming, as confirmed by eminent scholars as Judith Butler, Paul Ricoeur and Robert Castel, who deliberated variously along the same line on "enabling vulnerability", "autonomy as the task engendered by the ordeal of vulnerability" and "vulnerability as conducive to agency" respectively. The phenomenal Rushdie accomplishes this task of re-becoming in ways perhaps only he can. He retaliates against politicization of religion with artistic liberties and uses his pen, the author's knife-equivalent to imaginatively incarcerate and accost his assailant Q, in his own head, thereby fleshing out what can be called "poetic justice". Doing thus, he redefines trauma-memoirs by instituting within the locus of suffering, the fancy of empowerment. The performance too is not far-off. The memoir concludes with the author deliberately adopting practices of visibility and public appearances as a way of rewriting his victimhood. Rushdie, now performs resistance against the enemies of free speech, through both his body (the site of violence) and his pen. This memoir traces how vulnerability after all, is not an "excruciating" but an "exquisite" emotion. (Brown, 2012) Vulnerability also "functions as a catalyst for social contact, affiliative encounter" (Guerrero, 2023) and provides incentive for social change. Following the attack, there were gatherings of writers and supporters of Rushdie, everywhere in England, Canada and all over Europe, expressing solidarity with him with emphatic slogans of "Je Suis Salman" and "Standing with Salman" (Rushdie, 2024). This corroborates how in Marianne Hirsch's words, mobilizing vulnerability helps reinterpret the term "as a space of potential intersubjectivity and connection" (Hirch, 2019). All the love, adoration and empathy flowing in Rushdie's direction through Facebook post, emails, phone calls and active demonstrations in public places, testify the truth of the aforesaid observation. Perhaps, the iconography of the title too conveys a message: that the writer-Rushdie is as much whole as he was before the attack. The equal number of alphabets on both sides of the scar-like 'I' ('K' and 'N' before 'I' and 'F' and 'E' after 'I'), probably corroborates this idea of different but equipotent 'wholes'.

Conclusion

Judith Butler's Frames of War explores how media's portrayal of some populations frames them as specifically harmful for the rest and relegate them to a status of already forfeited lives, as lives not quite lived in the official sense and hence ungrievable, when dead. The attack on Rushdie, incited by the fatwa and its affiliated media platforms, attempted to cast him as an 'ungrievable life', but without success. Knife is a minuscule, personal attempt to resist the frames of war in our daily lives, frames that wrongly divide people into livable (hence grievable) and unlivable (hence ungrievable) lives, frames, now perpetuated more than ever by "groupthink-manufacturing giants" (Rushdie, 2024): YouTube, Facebook, Twitter etc. Again, drawing on Butler, we see Knife mobilizing vulnerability for the purposes of resistance, flaunting injury to resist further injuring.

Knife (2024) is thus a testament to humanity, a credo of fearlessness that the author lives by, and finally a humbling celebration of love, companionship and human solidarity against religious fundamentalism and the obstacles to free-speech and liberty.

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