



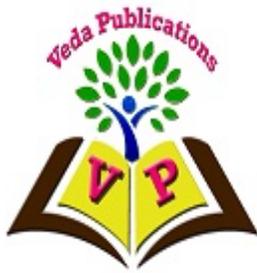
## RESEARCH ARTICLE

**REFRAMING THE CANON: THE SIGNIFICANCE OF VULNERABILITY STUDIES IN REIMAGINING ENGLISH STUDIES**

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Doi: <https://doi.org/10.54513/JOELL.2025.12307>**ABSTRACT****Article history:**

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Vulnerability Studies is an emergent interdisciplinary field that emphasizes the shared and structural fragility of human life, especially in the context of power, identity, and trauma. In English Studies, vulnerability offers a shift away from disembodied critique towards affective, ethical, and embodied modes of literary engagement. This paper explores how Vulnerability Studies transforms the reading, teaching, and theorization of literature, particularly through examples from Indian Literature and Indian Literature in English. Drawing on the works of Judith Butler, Martha Fineman, and Lauren Berlant, alongside readings of writers such as Saadat Hasan Manto, Mahasweta Devi, Bama, Arundhati Roy, and Perumal Murugan, this paper argues that vulnerability is not a mark of weakness but a critical site of agency and resistance. Ultimately, this framework enriches literary scholarship by enabling a more inclusive and empathetic English Studies and foregrounding voices and aesthetics that have been historically marginalized in the discipline.

**Keywords :** *Vulnerability Studies, Indian Literature, English Studies, affect theory, precarity, postcolonial trauma, ethical reading, embodied criticism, feminist theory*



## INTRODUCTION: THE FRAGILE TURN IN ENGLISH STUDIES

English Studies has historically centered notions of mastery, objectivity, and aesthetic judgment. The “scholarly” reader has been trained to maintain critical distance, privileging structure and style over affect, silence, or emotional expression. However, the emergence of Vulnerability Studies calls for a renewed focus on the precarious, the embodied, and the affective not as secondary but as central to our understanding of literature. Judith Butler reminds us that “to be a body is to be exposed to others, and this exposure is a primary way in which we are vulnerable” (*Precarious Life* 20). Literature, as a form of human expression, is inherently saturated with this exposure in emotional, political, and historical terms.

This paper proposes that Vulnerability Studies provides a generative framework for rethinking English Studies, especially when applied to Indian Literature and Indian Literature in English. From Partition narratives to Dalit autobiographies and ecocritical fiction, Indian literary traditions are profoundly shaped by lived experience, suffering, and the ethics of witnessing. In attending to these texts, a vulnerability-informed criticism brings into relief not only the voices that speak but also those that are silenced, fragmented, or incomplete.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: FROM AUTONOMY TO RELATIONALITY

The philosophical foundation of Vulnerability Studies lies in the recognition of the human subject not as autonomous and rational but as interdependent,

embodied, and precarious. Martha Fineman argues that “vulnerability is a universal and constant feature of the human condition” (8), challenging the liberal ideal of the self-sufficient individual. This perspective resonates with much of Indian literature, which foregrounds community, relational ethics, and intergenerational trauma.

Judith Butler extends this argument by emphasizing the socio-political conditions under which vulnerability becomes visible. “Some lives are grievable, and others are not; some are recognized, and others remain obscure” (*Frames of War* 1). These insights are crucial in literary studies, where questions of legibility, representation, and visibility are central.

Lauren Berlant’s concept of “cruel optimism” further complicates the analysis. As she notes, vulnerability is entangled with affective attachments such as the nation, family, or the idea of literary excellence itself that hinder flourishing (2). Reading literature through these frames allows critics to interrogate the affective economies that shape both the production and reception of texts.

Pramod K. Nayar offers a valuable perspective on vulnerability through his discussions of the “affective turn” in postcolonial criticism. In *The Postcolonial Unconscious*, he argues that “the experience of the body—its suffering, its mutilation, its dismemberment—becomes a legitimate site of critical inquiry” (Nayar, *Postcolonial Unconscious*, 142). This claim resonates deeply with the shift from an abstract, detached mode of critique to one grounded in embodied experience. He further



observes that affect “disrupts the neat alignments of postcolonial pride with nationalist narratives, and introduces a mode of reading that recognizes shame, fear, and pain” (144). Vulnerability, thus, emerges not as a counterpoint to strength but as a ground for ethical critique and political solidarity.

#### **PARTITION, MEMORY, AND COLLECTIVE TRAUMA**

Partition literature offers a visceral example of national and personal vulnerability. Saadat Hasan Manto’s short stories, such as “Toba Tek Singh”, evoke the madness and displacement that accompanied the drawing of arbitrary borders. In “Toba Tek Singh”, the protagonist’s refusal to accept either side—India or Pakistan—symbolizes a psychic rupture that resists political binaries. Manto does not provide closure but rather insists on the enduring trauma of division. As Urvashi Butalia notes in *The Other Side of Silence*, “the silences of women, of Dalits, of the ‘mad’, have remained unacknowledged in official versions of Partition history” (Butalia 15).

Similarly, Khushwant Singh’s *Train to Pakistan* reveals vulnerability through the ordinary: the disintegration of a peaceful village, the moral confusion of its inhabitants, and the pain of impossible decisions. These texts do not merely narrate violence; they embody it in fractured temporality, broken syntax, and absences in speech. Partition literature, therefore, foregrounds not only the fragility of national identities but also the inadequacies of narrative itself in representing trauma.

#### **DALIT AUTOBIOGRAPHY AND EMBODIED CRITIQUE**

Dalit literature provides another crucial site for vulnerability-based readings. Autobiographies such as Omprakash Valmiki’s *Joothan* or Bama’s *Karukku* articulate the daily, bodily experience of caste oppression. In *Karukku*, Bama writes, “I had grown up in a world where the touch of certain people was considered polluting, and where our laughter, our food, our very existence was considered offensive” (Bama 26). Her writing is deliberately unadorned, almost raw, rejecting literary polish in favor of emotional immediacy. This is not a failure of style, but a refusal to cater to dominant aesthetic norms.

Valmiki similarly notes that Dalit life is marked by “an unending struggle to live with dignity in a world that denies you recognition” (*Joothan* 3). The vulnerability expressed in such texts is not individual but structural, pointing to the epistemic violence embedded in the very institutions that produce literature, education, and criticism.

A vulnerability-based reading also encourages scholars to move away from simply recuperating marginalized voices to engaging with the form, tone, and silences within these texts. As Gopal Guru and Sundar Sarukkai argue in *The Cracked Mirror*, philosophical legitimacy cannot be denied to Dalit narratives just because they emerge from pain and experience; rather, they demand a new ethical paradigm of reading.

Nayar’s work on Dalit writing, particularly visual and testimonial forms, underscores the importance of affective engagement. In his discussion of testimonial literature in *Human Rights and Literature*,



he contends, "Testimony compels a recognition of the 'wounded body,' where narrative serves not to beautify pain but to communicate it as truth" (*Human Rights and Literature*, 78). This is especially true of texts like *Joothan* and *Karukku*, where the physicality of caste violence is not abstracted but rendered in immediate, sensuous language. The reader is made to feel complicit, unsettled, and moved toward ethical reflection. This emotional disruption, Nayar suggests, is a vital part of literature's human rights function.

#### GENDER, SILENCE, AND FEMINIST VULNERABILITY

The intersection of feminism and vulnerability has been particularly productive in Indian contexts. Mahasweta Devi's *Draupadi* (1978) remains one of the most compelling literary critiques of sexual violence against tribal women. The story of Dopdi Mejhen, who is raped by the state yet refuses to be shamed, defies narratives of victimhood. As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak famously argues, "Draupadi, the tribal revolutionary, can only be known when she strips herself in front of the state's military apparatus" (Spivak 184). Vulnerability here becomes a site of radical resistance, not passivity.

In the realm of Indian English writing, Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* explores affective and intergenerational vulnerability through the character of Ammu, whose love, desire, and maternal grief are crushed by caste, patriarchy, and state violence. Roy's narrative is non-linear, fractured, and emotionally intense. She deliberately destabilizes narrative coherence to convey the multiplicity of pain. As Padmini Mongia observes, Roy's "narrative

ethics are shaped by a politics of vulnerability, where love and shame intermingle without easy moral resolution" (213).

In more recent fiction, Meena Kandasamy's *When I Hit You* portrays vulnerability not only as the condition of abuse but as the beginning of self-assertion. Here, language becomes the very vehicle through which the vulnerable subject reconstructs herself.

#### POSTCOLONIAL PRECARITY AND THE ETHICS OF READING

Vulnerability Studies also reshapes our approach to postcolonial literature by emphasizing the precariousness of subjects who navigate multiple histories of colonization, migration, and cultural displacement. Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* examines the fragility of memory and the blurred boundaries between past and present, self and other. The novel's disjointed temporality reflects the uncertainty of identity in a post-Partition world.

Vulnerability, in this context, becomes epistemological: how do we know, and what does it cost to know? Ghosh's narrator is deeply aware of the limits of his own knowledge, suggesting that the act of witnessing itself can be fraught with complicity and failure. In *The Location of Culture*, Homi Bhabha writes, "to be 'post' is always to be 'in-between'—to occupy a space of liminality and vulnerability" (5).

Jeet Thayil's *Narcopolis* is another case where vulnerability permeates both as theme and form. The novel's drug-addled narrative voice, non-linear structure, and portrayal of addiction as both symptom and survival mechanism engage



vulnerability not just as condition but also as aesthetic. The text unsettles notions of a coherent self and invites ethical questioning rather than clear moral judgment.

In *The Indian Graphic Novel*, Nayar discusses how visual and narrative fragmentation in postcolonial texts dramatizes the vulnerability of both individuals and nation-states, “The fractured form is an analogue of the fractured self, history, and memory” (34). This is directly applicable to novels like *The Shadow Lines* or *The God of Small Things*, where nonlinear structures mirror psychic and cultural instability. For Nayar, such texts challenge the reader not just to understand, but to witness—to be ethically present to the pain they mediate.

#### ECOCRITICISM AND CLIMATE VULNERABILITY IN INDIAN FICTION

One understudied area where vulnerability is profoundly felt is ecocritical literature. Writers like Kiran Desai (*The Inheritance of Loss*) and Perumal Murugan (*One Part Woman*, *Poonachi*) explore environmental precarity, agrarian distress, and the entanglement of ecological fragility with caste, gender, and economic marginalization.

Murugan's *Poonachi* in particular presents the life of a goat as a parable for rural vulnerability. The goat, vulnerable to climate, predators, and human exploitation, becomes a stand-in for the silenced lives of Dalit and rural women. The novel's affective appeal is its quiet depiction of suffering through hunger, exposure, and dispossession. As Anjali Nerlekar notes, “Murugan gives voice to that which is often dismissed as background—the vulnerable, the

voiceless, the barely visible” (118). Vulnerability here is non-human as well, asking readers to reconceptualize care and ethics across species boundaries. In doing so, Indian ecocritical literature broadens the scope of vulnerability studies beyond the anthropocentric.

#### Pedagogy and the Vulnerable Classroom

Vulnerability does not belong only to texts—it extends to classrooms. In the Indian university, students often come from diverse caste, gender, and linguistic backgrounds carrying with them histories of exclusion or marginalization. When teaching texts like *Karukku* or *The God of Small Things*, the classroom must become a space where vulnerability is acknowledged, not erased.

As bell hooks reminds us, “the classroom remains the most radical space of possibility” (*Teaching to Transgress* 12). But this possibility can only be realized when teachers embrace not only critical rigor but also affective openness. Silence, emotional response, and even discomfort should be seen as legitimate modes of engagement.

Practical strategies include using trigger warnings with care, allowing for alternative assignments, and recognizing the affective labor students invest in texts. Pedagogy informed by vulnerability becomes less about producing the “correct” interpretation and more about cultivating attentive, ethical, and embodied reading practices.

#### CONCLUSION: REIMAGINING ENGLISH STUDIES

To reimagine English Studies through the lens of Vulnerability Studies is to reorient our practices around care, responsibility, and relationality. It



means valuing texts not just for their formal innovation but for their capacity to speak from and to human fragility. Indian Literature, with its deep engagements with trauma, caste, gender, and political violence, is a particularly rich terrain for this approach.

In invoking vulnerability as a critical category, we are also affirming what Nayar describes as literature's "potential to become a witnessing act, an address to the conscience of the reader" (*Human Rights and Literature*, 4). This capacity to witness, to be moved, to respond, is what makes literature central to both human rights and human experience.

Far from weakening the discipline, vulnerability strengthens it by grounding literary study in the ethical imperative to listen, to witness, and to respond. As Judith Butler notes, "when we are addressed, something is demanded of us... our very capacity to respond is linked to our vulnerability" (*Giving an Account of Oneself* 130). This call to be vulnerable and to respond may be the most urgent demand English Studies can answer today.

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