

Lecture for valedictory session of the course  
'Forced Migration, Racism, Immigration and Xenophobia'  
Mahanirban Calcutta Research Group  
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### **Drawing Lines, Erasing Lines: Feminism as a Resource in Opposing Xenophobia and Separatism**

It's a great privilege to be asked to join the Mahanirban Calcutta Research Group for the last day of your course on Forced Migration. I would like to try and bring a perspective from other places and other times on one factor that occurs in different ways in most conflicts and forced movements of people: and that is *the political manipulation of identity*. On your course you've been addressing mainly the humanitarian issues in displacement, I shall be looking more at certain political and social processes that lead up to displacement, and that flow from it.

I've called this talk *Drawing Lines, Erasing Lines*. In forced migrations people have been literally driven across a line of some kind, have they not – across a mountain range or a river that marks a tribal territory, across a national border, across the line that divides a rural area from a city, or through the wire that fences a camp.

But using the word 'line' is also my way of inviting us to look at the lines we first draw in our imaginations, the ideas that later call those material lines into play. Partitions with their checkpoints, the walls of concrete going up in the West Bank today, come to being first in our minds. Refugees, before they were uprooted, were first conceptually placed the wrong side of some social line (a category of persons not wanted, not belonging, dispensable and movable). They've been subject to a process of identification – of differentiation and exclusion from certain categories, the right ethnic group, the right religion, the right economic class - and will eventually have experienced connection and reinclusion into other identity categories labelled 'refugee', 'IDP'.

In the last few years I've been doing research in the little island of Cyprus, where a total of around 300,000 so-called Turkish and Greek Cypriots were identified, named, set against each other, and finally driven from their homes by force of arms or by fear, to go and live in – no, *to go and constitute*, an ethnically pure part of the island. I've been told many personal stories that illustrate these identity processes in painful reality.

I'm going to argue, something that I learned in Cyprus and in other places, that a certain kind of feminist thinking can be very useful to us in addressing these issues of hatred and exclusion of others. This is because the process of the construction of ethnic difference and that of the construction of gender

difference as perceived by feminist theory (I shall come to this in a moment) is similar. In both cases a politics identity is involved.

### **Identity in social science... and in women's activism**

There are a quite a few bodies of literature and learning, and quite a few practices and interventions, in which ideas about identity have been formulated. Each has developed its own particular language for talking about it. Psychologists have one 'take' on the subject. Conciliators and conflict managers have another take on it. Philosophers do too. Psychologists and psychiatrists often address identity in the individual client. Conflict transformation specialists address identity in collectivities. Philosophers think in more abstract and general terms about personhood. All these, and a lot more, are valid and interesting ways of making sense of why people differentiate and categorize, define and separate, themselves and others on the basis of collective 'name'.

My own take on the subject is grounded in sociology and political science. But much more to the point, it comes from empirical research. In the last ten years I've done a lot of listening to women, specifically women in women's groups in war-devastated regions, talking about themselves and each other: Who do they think they are? Where do they feel they belong? Who do they feel safe with? If they feel alienated - why? Who can they form alliances with - with other women? With men? Which women, which men? And on what basis? Most of what I've learned about the drawing, crossing and erasing of lines, I've learned from them.

### **The contradictory nature of identity**

I think one reason identity is such a rich and rewarding theme for study is that it contains inherent and terrible contradictions. Identity is irreducibly unavoidable in human society. Building a sense of self is a necessary part of every person's growing to maturity. A functional human being has to put together step-by-step an internal picture of where she stands, what makes her unique, what connects her to others. (Or him.) So identity's unavoidable - but it's also an *achievement*.

The trouble is, we can't have identity without difference. And difference is both delight and danger. It's a huge source of pleasure. We fall in love with difference. But we also hate and kill for difference. We seem to have a deep need to belong. But there's no getting away from the fact that every time I say 'I belong' I'm liable to say someone else doesn't belong. For every self there's an 'other', a non-self. In one sense the process is wonderful - after getting born at all, a baby's first success as a person is recognizing herself as not part of her mother - as a separate being. The contradiction lies in the fact that we aren't also born with a guarantee that all identities are going to add up to some harmonious whole.

(Let me say here that I'm going to be drawing on a lot of thinkers and writers in this talk. Some of you may see that I'm paraphrasing William Connolly here.

His book *Identity/Difference* – some of you may know it well - has been enormously important for me. But I'm not going to burden you with references to the writers whose ideas have helped me. I've got a written version of this talk and have footnoted my borrowings, and referenced the texts, in case anyone wants to read them.)

### **Transcending the contradiction: thinking about 'process'**

If that was a depressing start on identity, it's important to add right away: there does seem to be a way of transcending the contradictions. We can do it by shifting to a meta-level, above dichotomy, and working at *process*. There's no avoiding making and marking difference between us. The key political question is *how* we do it, the process, the *mode of differentiation*. We can achieve transformative change in that. I know, because I've seen people doing it.

You do it yourselves, every one of you. Because you work with refugees. You daily confront a group of people with a pejorative label that's used to differentiate them from you. And for sure you've worked hard at the identity process, and learned to see the person in the refugee. You've seen the surprise with which he or she hears that name: me? a refugee? I never imagined I would be one of those! So you know the label is useful to tell you about circumstances, but not about selves.

Lines of differentiation vary in their rigidity. Think of ethnicity – it can be intransigent or relatively flexible, relatively permeable or impermeable. It may be sharply dichotomous, a matter of us and them, or involve pluralities so that one sees oneself as belonging to just one among many comparable communities. The other it separates from the self can be a little different or profoundly different, interestingly different or threateningly different, merely alien or a terrifying enemy.

We can define the other as a collectivity who must be reduced, annihilated, expelled, if we're going to survive. Or we can define them as a collectivity with whom dialogue and engagement is possible and necessary, who may be capable of adapting to our needs if we're capable of adapting to theirs, whose very survival and flowering is necessary if we ourselves are to be fulfilled. (I like to think that way about men and women.)

That calls for a special kind of political imagination, being able to envisage change. I worked for some time with women in Northern Ireland in an alliance of women across particular ethnic identities that have been politicized, fought over and killed for, for three centuries. I once asked Marie Mulholland, who still called herself an Irish nationalist and republican, how she could retain that identification and yet work constructively with women who called themselves protestant unionists. She said 'it's because I can imagine a future when those names won't mean the same thing'. She lived identity as provisional, not essential. As contingent necessity, not as truth.

## **Feminist thought as a tool: gender and other kinds of 'other'**

Feminism at it's best is a way of thinking that transcends the contradiction of identity.

I realize that need to be very clear here that there isn't only one kind of feminism. Unfortunately, the term 'feminism' is applied to a lot of different theories and practices. For instance, essentialists who think women are all different from and superior to men call themselves feminists. So do women who want to individually climb the career ladder, in business, the state or the armed services – to get equal with men, uncritical of the world they're aspiring to join and neglectful of the women they leave behind.

So I have to specify which feminism I'm talking about here. What I mean by it, very briefly, is: a collective feminism, with a project of transformative change, that perceives oppressively interlocking dimensions of power in all of which gender is implicated. It's a feminism that sees the world we live in as bad for men as well as women, and its institutions not as things we want to get control of but as things we want to dismantle and reshape. That's the sense in which I'll be using the word 'feminism'.

From this perspective, gender differentiation, like ethnic differentiation, is a political project that involves drawing a line between people conceived of as types, reductive, inescapable categories. By 'political' I mean that it involves power, purpose and collective action. The patriarchal gender order, like the ethno-political order, involves the exploitation of certain material facts together with stories from the past, to dichotomize men and women and to create privilege and dependency.

Feminism (defined this way) is a critique of the politics of gender identity – it perceives that *different modes* of gender differentiation are possible. We see it in everyday life: we see that different forms of masculinity and femininity exist within a given culture. One may be hegemonic – let's say the military man, or the successful entrepreneur, others are clearly subordinated or marginal – the 'subaltern' masculinity of colonized people, disabled men.

Some masculinity/femininity dyads, couples, may be more dichotomous than others. A man may have a lot invested in a masculinity that's sharply differentiated from femininity. It could be he's proud of embodying, or trying to attain, qualities he and others in his culture admire as specifically masculine. On the other hand, he might startle traditional opinion by distancing himself from the cultural norm of masculinity. He might value quite other qualities he finds in himself. He may look on a woman not as someone complementary to himself but as, actually *like* him, a member of a category called 'people' whose senses-of-self are infinitely varied and mostly don't fit the binary gender norm.

In our Women in Black group in London we were surprised to hear of other Women in Black groups that include men. But I understand this better having just spent a week with Women in Black in Belgrade. In Serbia, from the start

of the Yugoslav wars there was a partnership between the women and some men who refused to fight in nationalist wars. They sheltered deserters and the men in turn helped them in a lot of ways. The men who were 'let in' to the circle of WiB, so to speak, were admitted not on the basis of gender but of values – they were those who understood and supported feminism as well as antimilitarism. They saw the patriarchal system as implicated in the pressures on them, as men, to be soldiers, to be loyal to an exclusive masculine and nationalist identity.

Currently there's a young man living in small room at the back of the WiB office in Belgrade. He's gay, as it happens. But I learned something important from him and the women he works with. Just as ethnicity, being Serb, Muslim, Croat is *not the point* in that space (what is the point is being anti-sexist, anti-xenophobic and antimilitarist), so in that space being gay or heterosexual is *not the point* (the point is being anti-homophobic). It's the values, not the identities, that count when you choose your allies. I'll come back to this crucial point.

### **Identity and sense of self**

To think about identity in this way, at a political and social level, in relation to armed conflict, war and expulsions, calls for a particular way of conceiving of identity at the micro-level, the individual self. I need to say a little about this. I'm sure you're familiar with this kind of thinking. Not so long ago the prevailing belief was that in each human being there's a pre-existing identity. The task of the child, the parent, the teacher, is to discover this kernel and nurture it. Today we're more inclined to use a metaphor that works better, to think of the self as a production, something composed like music, written like a book, always *in process*, never complete.

We (I mean in the social sciences) also emphasize more today that the way the person takes shape and changes over time is *relational*. There's no specification of selfhood we can even think of that doesn't have reference to other people, people we know or people we imagine. And since the world around us involves a lot of different kinds of relationship, the self is very *complex*, it's shaped through not one but a whole variety of attachments.

Selfhood also involves a tussle between the choice, the *agency*, of the individual and the demands and constraints of the social and political world around her. The state models the idea of the proper citizen, the military of a proper man, the church of a proper woman. 'Models' isn't strong enough: they project, propagandize these identities. The advertisers suggest a proper teenage identity, or a desirable middle class lifestyle. Your peers project a sense what you should look like in order to be one of us. Your neighbours or compatriots or fellow churchgoers put about what kind of a person is worthy of 'our culture' or 'our religion' or 'our people'.

In fact, I find it useful to keep the word '*identity*' for these projections, representations, voices and images, that address, call out to, persuade us from the social world. I prefer to think of my 'identity' or yours as simply a

'*sense of self*' – something painfully and provisionally achieved by negotiating, accepting, falling prey to, modifying, rewriting or refusing the names on offer. I don't think we can ever talk confidently about a *person's* identity. We can't guess how many names and which names go to make up a real-life complicated person. Even less can we make an assumption about how any collective name is actually lived and felt.

### **How freely do we constitute our selves?**

Of course each of us exerts our agency partly free but partly bound. The factors that limit an individual's agency derive partly from the social formation she lives in. Before a gay rights movement has occurred and been named, a woman can hardly identify as a lesbian. If she calls herself anything it's likely to be a freak, a misfit, a discontent.

Likewise, where an ethnic group hasn't conceived of a national project, it's members won't feel a national identification. In the Yugoslav republic of Bosnia before 1989 people today called Bosnian Muslims were much more likely to think of themselves as undifferentiated Yugoslavs. It was the upsurge of aggressive nationalism in Serbia and Croatia that evoked, at a certain definable moment, a responding Bosnian Muslim national project and a Bosniak identity that some, but not all, then took on as part of their changing sense of self. I remember Nudzjema telling me how it was only when she was being attacked as a Muslim she began to feel herself a Muslim.

The factors limiting agency are also a question of individual circumstance. Whether a person's born into wealth or poverty counts. So does her education and her work, how mobile she is, whether she has children or not (if's she's not actually a 'mother' she may be less prone to respond to appeals to identify with 'motherhood'). Contingencies like this will suggest some identifications and rule out others.

### **The manipulation of identity in war**

In studies of Forced Migration I imagine we're very often looking at wars, at armed conflict anyway. And I think maybe we need to think a bit about the extent of the role of identity processes in war. It's important not to overstate their importance. Especially it's important not to see identity always as a *cause* of war, as opposed to a manifestation of it.

First, some wars, or all wars to some extent, are about economic power and control – they're wars for valuable resources (like oil reserves) and for strategic territories – like vulnerable frontier regions. Other wars, maybe all wars to some extent, are about the power of certain elites who benefit from the political control they have, or hunger for the control they might gain. Identity may have relatively little to do with such wars – at the start anyway.

I think this may be the case in Colombia today. It's a country where women have begun to organize on an impressive scale to bring an end to violence. In that region there *is* ethnic difference – there are people of mainly Spanish

origin, people mainly of African origin, and indigenous tribes of South America. But these are not the groups fighting each other. In fact all three groups suffer from it. The violence the women are campaigning against isn't ethnic, but a three-sided political conflict. There are left-oriented guerrilla forces that originated in a movement for social justice several decades ago but who've lost a lot of popular support due to the means they use. There are the paramilitaries, who fight the guerrillas. They're effectively private armies of the drug barons and serve the interests of the rich and the rightwing. And third, there's the state, backed by the USA's anti-narcotics policy. The Army is brutally repressive and punish the population for the sins of the guerrillas – while some of Army units are suspiciously close to the paramilitaries.

The effects of war on Colombian women are terrible. They say that war has deformed everyday life and is using women's bodies as booty. The slogans of Ruta Pacifica are 'Neither war that kills us nor peace that oppresses us' and 'We won't bear sons or daughters for war.'

But you don't have in Colombia collectivities of different cultures, different religions, different names who hate each other so much that they'll wage war for their identity alone, for 'history'. Not at all. On the other hand the Yugoslav wars do look on the face of it as if they were caused by ethnic identity. But I think even here this kind of story about 'ancient animosities', in Yugoslavia and in other places, when you look closer, doesn't hold up.

I learned a lot about this from a colleague Dubravka Zarkov. I remember being really surprised when I first heard her say "violence is productive". At first I couldn't accept it. Surely violence is essentially destructive? But of course! She showed me how the problem for the political elites in Serbia and Croatia had been that there wasn't *enough* ethnic difference in Yugoslavia in the 1980s to suit their ambitions – which were that each would control an undisputed nation state inside unchallengeable borders. There was too much intermarriage going on! How could you create a Serbian state or a Croatian state out of people who not only couldn't tell an orthodox church from a catholic one but didn't bother to go to church at all? How could you make war against Muslims if they won't read the Koran and go to the mosque? We have to remind them 'who they really are'.

The war was designed to do just that. You don't forget who you are if you've seen your friends and relatives massacred in a given name, by people of another given name. The women of the Association of Mothers of Srebrenica and Zepa who are looking for the bodies of the ten thousand men and 600 women murdered there by extremist Serbs, are not in any doubt now that they are Bosnian Muslims. War is productive. War produces ethnicity.

But what Dubravka and I went on to explore together was how war produces gender too – proper active warrior men, proper victimized submissive women. And how in patriarchal terms it is designed for that, it's productive in that way too, Simultaneously, while it's establishing proper ethnic lines, it's drawing proper gender lines too, through rape for instance. It doesn't work smoothly. It runs into contradictions, because women sometimes have to take on

'masculine' responsibilities when men leave to fight. But the effect of periods of militarization, overall, is to reinforce complementary and unequal gender relations.

So identities may not be the cause of a war but creating 'otherness' is almost always among its tools and its products.

### **The dangers of identity politics**

Domination, whether it's imperialist domination, state authoritarianism, the systemic subordination of women in the patriarchal family, or heterosexism in society, has the tendency to call into being resistance movements that appeal to an identity: anticolonialist insurgencies in the name of a colonized people – let's say Palestine today; nationalist movements in the name of minorities that aren't allowed to express their cultures within the state – like Cataluna in Spain; women in a movement of women's liberation; lesbians and gays, bisexuals and transsexuals protesting against the tyranny of compulsory heterosexuality. There's a logic and legitimacy to this because the ruling entity has spoken in a universalist language that claims the only truth and obliterates all other speech, a singular experience that's blind to all other realities.

The trouble with political movements based on the interests of an identity-group is two-fold. First such groups tend to be themselves exclusive of other others. And second they tend to paint themselves into a corner: their identity becomes fixed and essentialized, members of the category become that and only that. The actual fluidity, multiplicity, complexity and ambiguity that would describe our individual senses of ourselves is denied. This applies absolutely as much to the identity group 'woman' as an identity group like 'Irish Catholic' or 'Croat' or 'Jew'.

It's just another expression of the contradiction of identity – we need it but it harms us. The challenge, some feminists would say, is to find ways of recognizing multiplicity within and without the named identity. Women come in a lot of different kinds; we differ in our relation to the family; in our class; in our sexuality; in our cultural attachments. We need to acknowledge this and, while not letting go of the name 'woman', not take it as a given either, but take pains to work out what it may mean in any given circumstances.

The same applies in terms of ethnic name: 'Palestinian' for instance. In Palestine, for instance, there are both Muslims and Christians, there are more and less exclusive and rigid forms of both religions. There are Beduin and settled Arabs. Some 'Palestinians' are 'women', and women and men experience the Occupation in gender-specific ways. And there's not a straightforward dichotomy Israeli Jew v. Palestinian Muslim/Arab, as some might invoke. Because there are Palestinians living in Israel, there are Arab Jews (the Misrahim) and so on.

### **Dealing with identity in our opposition to war**



The most effective kinds of movement then, have to be alliances of very varied people based not on identity but on political and moral values. And this is the practical issue for us, isn't it. How do we organize? Identity's a cause of a lot of suffering and struggle for each of us, and we can see it's playing a part in the conflicts all around us, and in the lives and chances of the displaced people you work with. So it matters quite a lot how we 'do identity' and 'think identity' in our political work, our organizations and our strategies for change.

I've learned most about this from women in Northern Ireland, who are among the most skilled I've met in negotiating identity in the midst of armed conflict. Women of Protestant Unionist and Catholic Republican backgrounds were working together by means of a group *process* that (as we mentioned earlier in this talk) transcends the contradiction, the trap, of identity. The process involved affirming identity – not denying it but acknowledging it. 'Yes, I'm a Catholic. I am a Republican and believe in a united Ireland.' But at the same time others of different identifications would be very careful not to make assumptions about it, not foreclose on it – instead waiting to see which of innumerable meanings this individual might ascribe to the name she acknowledges, the many ways she might live it, the many ways it might change.

They looked beneath the identity for the surer ground they might find for working together – political and moral values in common, a willingness to acknowledge past injustices. Being women gave them a certain commonality. But that needed deconstructing too. It was the values of equality, inclusion, non-violence and justice in addressing both gender oppression and ethnicized conflict that could enable them to create a reliable alliance.

When I was with the women in Belgrade last month they were organizing a seminar between women living in Serbia and women of both Bosnian Serb and Bosnian Muslim communities living in Bosnia. A lot of their talk together hinged around distinguishing between 'responsibility' and 'guilt' for ethnicized aggression. Acknowledging that certain things were 'done in my name', in my identity, facing up to them, asking what I might have done to prevent it, they were saying, is important. One woman said, with great honesty, for instance: 'Only when my husband was to be called up, then I supported his refusal to serve and went out into the street myself. But I ask myself now, why only then, when I was personally affected? Why not before?'

But at the same time it's not productive to take on collective guilt just because you bear a certain name. It's not easy to experience to bear the identity of a people that do crimes. Another woman at this seminar said, 'For years I have been ashamed of saying I am from Serbia, because of collective guilt.' 'Guilt' is terrible to bear and it often leads to more anger and more violence. What these women helped each other to see is that the single most important step out of the trap of collective guilt is to be clear about your values, about your responsibility, and then to identify the actual criminals who committed atrocities and call for their prosecution.

## Why feminism is useful in counteracting xenophobia

The reason I think feminism (defined as I've defined it in this talk) is a useful resource in counteracting xenophobia, racism, and aggressive and exclusive versions of nationalism is like this....

In one way, many exclusions and oppressions have a certain similarity, in that they involve an identity process in which the collective self is constituted in opposition to an alien, inferior and dangerous 'other'. A line has been drawn between the self and that other. Over there, the other side of the line, it has to be contained and subordinated. At the same time any reflections the 'other' remaining in the self have to be censored.

In this sense gender relations and ethnic relations are similar and connected. We see it in the way in patriarchy women are arbitrarily defined as (variously) weak, inferior, natural, emotional etc. and categorized as 'not men', while the feminine qualities in men are punished. It is a parallel with the way Muslims in the Western world today, especially since September 11 2001, are defined as dangerous, as an 'other' civilization, and the Muslim minority within the state are repressively policed.

A feminist understanding of identity has a particular take on gender: we argue that it's socially constituted, that it is fluid and various, open to different interpretations, subject to strong pressures from outside the self, and often problematic for the self. Anyone, any feminist, understanding this surely understands that ethnic, cultural, religious or national identities are socially constituted too. There's nothing essential, given or fixed about them, any more than about masculinity or femininity. She's also likely to see that each person lives her gender in an ethnicized way – we are always not just a woman but a woman who has to deal one way or another with 'being' a Serb, an English woman, or an Indian. And each person lives an ascribed ethnicity in a gendered way. Someone says 'Turk', for instance. You may feel like asking: a Turkish man or a Turkish woman? Especially given what Turkish feminist Ayse Gul Altinay is telling us in her new book about how Turkish boys are brought up to be the soldier heroes of a military nation.

I learned a lot about this studying the situation of women in Cyprus. I mentioned earlier how the Partition of Cyprus in 1974 produced huge forced migrations. They've lived a further three decades thinking of each other as the enemy, and teaching their children to find their selfhood in the hatred of that dangerous 'other'. A bi-communal women's group, called 'Hands Across the Divide', formed in 2002 to call for an end to Partition. But people asked them: Why women? What have women got to say about this political (ie: men's) issue?

Well, for one thing, they could see that the partition process, which happened at a point in history when a line was drawn on a map, but continues to happen each and every day in the lines scored in people's heads, was the creation of elite men in twin communities that were not only ethnic hierarchies but gender hierarchies. Thinking as 'women' they might have said (and indeed they did

also say): 'women suffer in a gender specific way in this appalling cold war and we want change'. But thinking as feminists they were able to say 'there's something wrong here with the system of power'. There's absolutely nothing illogical about women, as feminists, challenging a partition that's not a gender partition but an ethnicized one. Of course there is a gender partition too. The line between men and women runs through our parliament and political parties, our workplaces, our schools and our families. We challenge that. But the process that sustains ethnicized partition is the same process that sustains the gender partition. Political partition is a gendered phenomenon. What we want rid of is this power system and its whole mode of differentiation.

So the thrust of this talk has been that gender processes as well as ethnic and other identity processes, are at work in war and armed conflict, partition and separatism. A feminist gender analysis is relevant to war and peace in a way that war-makers and even peace-makers don't often recognize. I suggest that all of us, whether we identify as women or men, gay or straight, Hindu or Moslem – or whether quite precisely our sense of self resides in defying and reworking all such categories – will be more politically effective for 'doing feminism'.

5472 words

45 minutes

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