Ethnicity and Gender in a Modernising World[1]

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Frontiers and borderlands

This paper will begin by presenting two contrasting contemporary situations that serve to underline the way relations of gender intersect with relations of ethnicity. Both of them are concerned with boundaries and territories and thus the crucial difference between frontiers and borderlands.

A) The Serbia/Bosnia frontier

The attention of the world's press has focused on the tragedy of Yugoslavia for a long time now. Early reports emphasised the inhuman conditions found in Serbian concentration camps and the links made between nationalist ideology, ethnic cleansing, and particular forms of violence directed against women. Information carried by a Danish newspaper back in August 1992 can be noted in summarised form here:

The Serbian camps, renowned for their brutal conditions, use of torture and summary executions have come to house largely male internees, some 15,000 of them. At first, women and children had been taken to camps after their villages were destroyed but they were later deported to central Bosnia or the Croatian border, often under appalling conditions. Hundreds of women and children try desperately to get travel permits. But before the police hand permits over, women have to promise never to return and declare that the family's property belong to the Serbian state. The message has gone around that only if women sign will fathers, husbands, brothers and sons be released. At the same time, reports of the raping of Moslem and other non Serbian women by Serbian men are becoming increasingly frequent (Information, Copenhagen, 8/9 August, 1992).

One could have selected many similar reports (and not only from Yugoslavia). The point in taking this one is that it shows particularly clearly how the issue of gender comes to the fore when claims are made to an essential ethnic, racial, religious identity and when nationalism is constructed in the belief that nations can (and should) achieve ethnic homogeneity and racial purity. Differential treatment is being meted out to the men and women classified as belonging to "minority" i.e. inferior, groups. Men are locked up in concentration camps; women are deported. Both men and women fear for their lives and women face the humiliation of rape, which affects not only themselves but also their men-folk.

The reason behind female deportation, one presumes, is that a continued presence of "minority" women in itself constitutes a threat in that the children born to such women might at a later claim Serbian citizenship, despite their birth behind barbed wire.

B) The Mexico/USA borderland

Frontiers do not remain unchallenged, at least not for long. Challenging a frontier does not involve making territorial adjustments to include or exclude a particular population group; on the contrary, it involves making absolute frontiers into permeable borderlands. Such transformation often happens insidiously, subtly. The myth of the frontier may persist even though it is breached so constantly in everyday life that its meanings are changed. One notable example of this permeability has been the border between Mexico and the USA. Mexican men, women and children are constantly moving back and forth and finding ways of integrating into both societies and there is an increasingly out-spoken Chicano population demanding their own place in American politics and society.

The substitution of borders for frontiers allows cultural meanings of gender and ethnicity to be re-worked. Identities and relations become more fluid, are reconstituted and reshaped in the light of experience. The possibilities opened up are captured in literature and poetry as well as in social science. In this connection one can quote from the work of Gloria Anzaldúa, a feminist Chicana writer. These are taken from her book, appropriately named "Borderlands: La Frontera".

> The US-Mexican border es una herida abierta where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds. And before a scab forms it haem-

orrhages again the lifeblood of two worlds merging to form a third country - a border culture. Borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish us from them. A border is a dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep edge. A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in constant transition. The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants. Los atrevesados live here: the squint-eyed, the perverse, the queer, the troublesome, the mongrel, the mulatto, the half-breed, the half-dead; in short those who cross over, pass over, or go through the confines of the "normal". Gringos in the U.S. Southwest consider the inhabitants of the borderlands trans-gressors, aliens - whether they possess documents or not, whether they're Chicanos, Indians or Blacks. Do not enter, trespassers will be raped, maimed, strangled, gassed, shot (p.3).

...though "home" permeates every sinew and cartilage in my body, I too am afraid of going home. Though I'll defend my race and culture when they are attacked by non-mexicanos, conosco el malestar de mi cultura. I abhor some of my culture's ways, how it cripples its women, como burras, our strengths used against us, lowly burras bearing humility with dignity. The ability to serve, claim the males, is our highest virtue. I abhor how my culture makes macho cariaca-tures of its men. No, I do not buy all the myths of the tribe into which I was born... So, don't give me your tenets and your laws. Don't give me your lukewarm gods. What I want is an accounting with all three cultures - white, Mexican, Indian. I want freedom to carve and chisel my own face, to staunch the bleeding with ashes, to fashion my own gods out of my entrails. And if going home is denied me then I will have to stand and claim my space, making a new culture - una cul-tura mestiza - with my own lumber, my own bricks and mortar and my own feminist architecture (p.21-22).

C) Frontiers or borderlands?

By juxtaposing these two illustrations I want to suggest the exis-tence of opposing poles found within discussions of ethnicity.

At one extreme, ethnicity is equated with the notion of racial purity and can be understood as integral to nationalist expansion. Minority identity is being given real, physical substance; religion and race is something inheritable; it goes far deeper than custom, tradition and culture. When ethnicity is given substance in this way, then women's role as the reproducers and signifiers of an ethnic group becomes paramount. Racist ideology drives home the impor-tance of genealogy and heritage as well as the need to protect and control women. Blood frequently becomes the dominating symbol, under the imagery that the blood as a physical substance, is passed

on by mothers to their children in the womb, this denoting the transmission not only of hereditary qualities but also of purity in terms of race, religion or even social quality (see Stolcke, 1992).

Women are reduced to being reproducers of the race, nation or ethnic group. Their reproductive rights (such as right to abortion or even birth control) disappear and women are exhorted by state and religious authorities to bear many children for the fatherland. This is now happening in many parts of Eastern Europe.

Where ideas of heredity and purity of blood flourish, in no circumstances can a raped woman reproduce her own kind. She is defiled; a child born is an outcast, a non-person. One tragic aspect of rape is that in many societies women and their families carry the stigma and disgrace of rape all their lives. Rape is a common, virtually institutionalised, feature of warfare. It is the case in Serbia as it was in Vietnam. Systematic rape on this scale is a tactic to defile and degrade an entire people. And the efficacy of this "weapon" is especially potent in societies where women's virtue and chastity is related to men's honour.

In Yugoslavia, one is witnessing the re-emergence of nationalist ideologies and racist politics. The ethno-political maps are being redrawn and tidied up; the people who do not fit risk death or flight on the grounds of attributed racial inferiority. But the limelight should not stay on the Balkans. Fortress Europe is now surrounded by frontiers and the states within are unwilling to accept impoverished refugees trying to make their way from the periphery.

At the opposite pole, the concept of ethnicity has very different connotation. It signifies a painful, thoroughly modern quest to seek out the roots of individual being and the way forward for a collective, yet still highly personal, journey towards greater emancipation. This vision draws on the image of a borderland where social meanings and identities melt and are re-shaped. In this process, ethnicity can open up important spaces for women to contest and rewrite their own histories.

Both tendencies are present in contemporary social movements; maybe even in the same social movement. So whenever one hears an appeal being made to common ethnic origins or shared ethnic identities, one needs to listen very carefully indeed as to what is being said, or unsaid. What are the underlying ideas and legitimations being given for ethnicity? One very revealing clue in this regard is the position and status accorded women and the representation of gender.

Following from these two opposing cases, it is important to reflect further on the question of mobility and the selectivity of those who are enabled to cross boundaries. While territories and frontiers are horribly real for refugees and impoverished peoples, other social groups may face few, if any, constraints on their physical mobility. Frontiers do not generally stop the movement of UN forces, politicians, journalists or workers in development assistance. Nor do they seem to seriously impede the movement of drug dealers, smugglers or organisations supplying prostitutes. In addition, few frontiers have been made so water-tight as to stop the passage of goods; it has proved extremely difficult to make economic sanctions work.

One can conclude by suggesting that although much is still made of the phenomena of globalisation and transnationalism, nevertheless frontiers and localities, territories belonging to ethnicities or nations still matter; they appear to be as important now as they ever were in the past. The most significant contemporary frontiers separate states that are rich from states that are poor and they are as strongly guarded and policed as ever to keep the most needy from crossing.

Ethnicity and the idiom of kinship

Ethnicity has often been employed as an essentialist concept, used as a direct equivalent for "race" within an overtly racist ideology. But currently it is also being used in a much looser way as a signifier of various inter-locking expressions of cultural identity. In this latter sense, the term stands for a way of conceptualising and relating to the world which draws on a sense of shared history and community and lays stress on an amalgam of language, religion and regional belonging.

This image of ethnic community comprises two main elements. First, internal relations are rendered as relatively harmonious with significant social differentiation down-played because members play the same game, embrace a common cultural identity and share criteria for assessment and judgement. Second, as Barth underlined back in the 1960's, it is primarily the ethnic boundary that defines the group "not the cultural stuff that it encloses" (1969:15). But what Barth and his contemporaries did not discuss was how relations of gender and images of kinship were brought into play to govern the rules of group membership and group exclusion.

Even under the latter looser definition of ethnicity, there is an additional implicit quality often depicted in the idiom of kinship:

clan solidarity. Given the underlying clan image, it is hard for ethnicity to escape entirely from its racist overtones or undertones. Ethnic identity is linked inescapably with a sense of genealogical belonging where membership is perceived as something passed on by parents to their offspring, as a birth right. Members not only play by the same rules, they recognise the same forebears. By so doing, people can claim group membership or they may use heritage to explain the position given them by society. In the latter case, as Anzaldúa proclaims, people may take pride in being numbered amongst the dispossessed and the "mongrels", "mulatos" or "half-breeds".

The idiom of kinship and shared heritage apart from demarcating group boundaries also constitutes a living part of a group's cultural identity being revealed and celebrated in a multitude of ways. Members recognise and respond to what they find **familiar.** That useful word captures both the real and symbolic presence of kin (one's familiars) and the importance of more mundane routines and cultural practices handed down through one's kith and kin and which serves to structure and give meaning to everyday life.

One could go on trying to pin down definitions and abstract qualities of ethnicity but only when it is contextualised does it take us forward. Ethnicity is what people make of it and the interesting point is that at the present time, many people are choosing to use an ethnic terminology and discourse to communicate their thoughts and aspirations and take political action. It is this contemporaneity that prompts us to explore ethnicity from both cultural and political perspectives and makes it so important to pay attention to hearing and interpreting what is being said.

Ethnic politics

In the modern nation state, ethnicity has become a term commonly used to express cultural difference and legitimise political action. Ethnicity has been described as the politicisation of culture. Under its banner, people seek to defend and promote their own culture in opposition to others. Maybe the aim is to get more attention from the state, maybe to bring it down or take it over, maybe to work from within to undermine, subvert and question it.

But no conclusions can be drawn a priori about the way power is held within the ethnically defined group. Ethnicity demarcates a domain where power may be relatively diffused or relatively concentrated; where it may be the preserve of men or held jointly with

women. By the same token, no a priori conclusions can be drawn as to how women re-negotiate or alter ethnic identity at marriage. Thus since internal social relations envisaged by ethnicity are so nebulous, there is ample space for them to be re-created and re-negotiated, and also to be "hijacked", so as to suit contemporary needs and specific political purposes.

Arguably, ethnicity's most salient feature from a political perspective is destiny: the search to link images of a distant past with the future, and by so doing, construct a culturally-informed vantage point from which to report on and respond to the contemporary situation.

Since ethnicity provides no clear or uncontested guidelines as to future action, a multiplicity of outcomes become possible, depending on who holds power and with what intentions. As we have seen, some ethnic configurations and ideologies are very closely allied with racism and nationalism; others draw on liberation theology and images of emancipation. The invocation of a more dignified and glorious past under current circumstances provoking pain and revolt helps explain why ethnicity has emerged in the contemporary world. It can take the form of a mass reaction by people who have felt impoverished and brutalised by the pressures of modernisation and who have felt muted and pushed around by authoritarian states, especially when these are built on systems of legalised violence and racism as in Eastern Europe or South Africa.

Intersections of gender and ethnicity

Gender identities and relations always inform cultural practice and social inequality and are therefore necessary to take into account in all circumstances. Yet one can argue that there are more fundamental connections. Surprisingly, the social science literature linking gender with ethnicity and racism in Third World societies is still quite sparse; though recent useful works include Jayawardena, 1986; Liddle and Joshi, 1986; Yuval-Davis and Anthias, 1989; and Mohanty, Russo and Torres, 1991.

Although the intersections of gender and ethnicity have rarely been explicitly handled, nevertheless various assumptions have become common currency. According to some, women play a particularly important role when it comes to the cultural reproduction of ethnicity; not only are they the chief bearers and symbols of a group's ethnic identity, as the principal socialisers of children, they are also the main architects and arbiters of cultural meanings.

According to others, however, women are as marginal in the ethnic domain as they are in all other situations of social and cultural life where meanings are being constructed. In response, women may act in opposition to men to oppose the more patriarchically informed readings of ethnicity in situations of social change.

Important determinants of women's experience and potential for greater autonomy and authority lie in the customs and practices surrounding marriage, parenting and inheritance. It may widely be the case that as stated by a Tswana proverb, "women have no tribe" (Vail, 1989:15). The relative well-being and social power of women will be strongly affected by whether marriages are contracted endogenously or exogenously; by the status and position granted women in their "new" clans; and by the daughter-in-law's position where patrilocality is the norm. Groups set differing values on women's mothering role, on the extent to which women are in charge of the socialisation of their offspring and on whether children belong more to their father (or the group) than to their mother. Finally, there are wide variations in women's rights over property and in the relative freedom women have to enjoy or dispose of it. Where women are considered as having "no tribe", then they are unlikely to exercise authority over the group's resources. But women's status may be much higher where there is gender segregation and parallel female and male systems of resource use and transmission.

While acknowledging the variation in the way women experience ethnicity, one can point to three specific intersections of gender with ethnicity.

The issue of reproduction. Ethnicity's underlying idiom of kin and family ties and its ideological mingling of heritage and inheritance mean that issues surrounding reproduction are central. Women are bearers not just of children in the abstract, but of children who are members of a particular ethnic group, race or class. It is through women that boundaries are kept in place: demarcating cohesion on the inside and differentiation on the outside. It will matter greatly who women marry and whose children they bear. This carries important implications for the way women's reproductive capacities are perceived and controlled and for the ideologies and practices that endure to distinguish "own" women from "other" women.

Ethnic identities and cultural differentiation. Gender stereotyping is often closely interwoven with ethnic identity and used to indicate what is note-worthy about a social group. Signalling difference gives ample scope for ethnic and gender chauvinism. "Our women and/or men are circumcised, yours are uncircumcised and therefore less worthy/brave etc."; or "our women wear the veil, yours are shameless"; or "our women are healthy/clean, yours are diseased/dirty." It is not so much the registering of cultural difference per se that is at issue, more the tendency for cultural claims to become embedded with claims of ethnic superiority and incompatibility. Ethnic mobilisation, confrontation and violence then result. But so too may popular reactions be unleashed which question and reject the straitjackets imposed by ethnic or gender stereotyping.

Ethnicity and deterritorialisation. One of the legacies of nationalism has been the harassment and displacement of population groups considered not to fit with nationalist visions of sovereignty. As a consequence, many have been stuck in the no-man's land of refugee camps. Political refugees are joined by a wide spectrum of economic refugees, migrants who cross borders in search of new livelihoods. In both cases, women's histories and experiences of mobility are usually very different from men's. Furthermore, the presence of women as refugees or migrants often changes the attitudes and policies of the host country: for example, the myth that "guest workers" are young men, not permanently resident is contradicted when women also migrate and can constitute an immigrant population. At the same time, both refugees and migrants are pressed into a reconstruction of their understandings of ethnicity and gender in order to maintain social cohesion and adjust to the new situation of exile.

Gender and social difference

The creation of an ideology with respect to the naturalness of social difference was as relevant to gender as it was to "race". An intellectual process taking place in Europe attempted to justify the subordination of women leading to the emergence of pseudo scientific theories in the late 19th century. These sought to "prove" the biological basis for persistent social inequalities and so transfer the burden of responsibility from the dominating white man to the "weak woman" just as it was shifted in other contexts to the "lazy native".

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Feminist and other minority discourses in Europe had pointed out from the 18th century onwards that definitions of citizenship were deeply discriminatory. Despite pronouncements of equality, liberty and democracy and the establishment of individual citizens' rights, in practice equality before the law was illusory. Underlying contradictory ideologies of gender, class, race and at times, religion, disturbed the way both the law and the state functioned and perpetuated differences in civil rights.

Gender identities were re-constructed in Europe especially during the 18th and 19th centuries when increasing emphasis was put on biology. Women could not to be treated as citizens on a par with men on account of their natural weaknesses according to thinkers like Rousseau. Early feminists, like Wollstoncraft (whose "A Vindication of the Rights of Woman" appeared in 1792, the same year as the second part of Tom Paine's "Rights of Man"), took issue stressing the straight-jacket imposed on young girls by virtue of their socialisation in the middle classes. But still this was seen to lead to intellectual stifling, over-blown sensibility and a dangerous sexuality that needed constant restraint. Women's natural place was in the home as helpers and dependents of men. The answer to women's oppression suggested by early European feminists was that women had to suppress their sexuality and femininity if they were to leave the domestic realm and enter the world of men. These ideas were to linger on affecting the re-emerging feminisms in both Europe and the Third World.

Biologist conceptions of "race" and womanhood were part of the intellectual baggage that the men going out from Europe to the colonies took with them; these were conceptions on which ideas of what was moral and good were based.

Biologist arguments about women's need for restraint and the protection of men was connected with the image of women as the natural mothers of the nation. Thus the growth of nationalism has had particular implications for women's relations with the state. In a European context, patriotism made it the explicit duty of women to reproduce healthy sons for the nation. Governments considered they were justified to intervene in what had previously been considered private matters: procreation and reproduction. Achieving a nation's objectives might at times demand a higher birth-rate and low child mortality but at other times, be better accomplished with a lower birth rate but where healthier, more socially useful future citizens were reproduced.

Healthy mothers producing healthy off-spring were a fundamental national resource. But where nationalism was increasingly preoccupied with race and heritage, in effect healthy off-spring implied legitimate children of known and ethnically or racially acceptable parents who as citizens qualified for the state's munificence. The idea of qualification underlay the discriminatory legislation with respect to citizenship whereby the rights of women continued to be distinguished from those of men.

In the context of the Third World, the struggle for Independence and emerging nationalism often carried a strong emancipatory potential for women. Popular liberation struggles in Asia and Africa were accompanied by demands that women would achieve greater equality with men. But in the aftermath of colonialism and in the contemporary period of development assistance women continued to be perceived and represented primarily in their role as mothers. This has led to a mixture of responses. The mothers of fighting sons is an image glorified in some strongly nationalist states facing (or provoking) outside aggression such as Sandinista Nicaragua, or Iraq or Iran. But rarely have women's needs even as reproducers of the nation been met with strong commitments on the part of governments to safeguard the health of the whole population. A far higher proportion of national budgets have been allocated to military hardware than to health or to ways of improving the conditions of life of the mass of the population.

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