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11. Difference is not all that counts (1999)

Purna Sen

I have written this piece as a result of increasing frustration and concern at the way in which claims to ‘difference’ are used to silence women, and to seek support from well-meaning outsiders for women’s oppression. Difference can be turned into a tool for separation, isolation and censorship. Here I will argue for the *recognition* of difference, but against the *privileging* of difference. To do this I will draw on my own experience and work, particularly among Asian women in the UK and in the Indian subcontinent.

Feminism in the Indian subcontinent

The trafficking of girls across countries in the Indian sub-continent is rife, with many young girls disappearing from their homes and ending up in areas of prostitution. Sometimes they are intercepted by government officials or they may try to escape the control of their traffickers. In these situations, the girls are either put into government shelters (which are often incredibly unpleasant) or appear in court and are re-claimed by their traffickers, posing as relatives. The girls may go along with this misrepresentation, out of fear of their abusers. Sanlaap is an organisation based in Calcutta which works on this issue and which has successfully lobbied for recognition in the courts. They have also visited the government residential homes in which ‘rescued’ girls are placed and in which they too often languish. They have now managed to obtain recognition as legitimate carers for these girls, so that they are given custody. They can then house the girls, try to locate their families and provide some education or training too.

In Pakistan, Shirkat Gah has long worked for the promotion of the rights of women, handling cases of domestic violence, rape, forced marriage and other forms of discrimination. During the 1990s there has been an increase in the number of so-called ‘honour’ killings of women—where women are considered to dishonour or shame their families and are killed (usually by a male family member) to ‘cleanse’ the dishonour or shame. Suspicion of adultery or of consorting with a male can be enough to precipitate a killing. The women at Shirkat Gah work with these cases and seek to bring the men and their families to account — a difficult

task in a country where public cultural norms increasingly favour misogynist actions.

One woman long associated with this organisation is Asma Jahangir, a lawyer who with her sister Hina Jilani handles cases of women who have been abused by their families. In April 1999 Samia Sarwar, a client who was in the process of divorcing her violent husband, was killed in their office by a gunman, allegedly hired by her mother (a gynaecologist), uncle and father (president of the local Chamber of Commerce). Hina narrowly escaped a bullet. She and Asma have since been harassed and threatened by the family concerned and their supporters, who declared the murder in keeping with tribal laws and declared a fatwa on Asma Jahangir.

The courage and strength of women working for women's rights in such a context is remarkable. Not only do they face not only the difficulties of dealing with cases of violence and abuse, the consequences of their work include explicit threats to their own lives. Despite these dangers these feminists continue to speak with clear and loud voices against cultural practices which harm women.

Migration

It might be thought that the experience of migration and of living in hostile environments radicalises those who live through this process, but this is not necessarily so. I do not think that the immigration experience and that of racism has actually radicalised very many women — because they are caught inside a need to uphold traditional cultural practices as motifs of their identity and community allegiance. Why should women adhere to these practices? It seems to me that if women live in a hostile environment and have to deal with racism, and if the key 'leaders' who do not undermine women's own cultural identity are men who share that identity, but also promote conservative traditions, then women are more easily tempted (or coerced) into upholding the traditional and orthodox models of their own identity and history.

As a result, there are minority ethnic women who subscribe to notions of cultural identity and tradition more orthodox than those experienced by many women in their countries of origin. Those who leave often define their identity through culture and traditional practices shaped by their experiences in the home country before they left. They do this without being involved in the ways in which culture moves on, changes and transforms in response to and in connection with the other changes in society — economic, political and social. For example, in some Indian immigrant groups in the UK there is a strong ideological and practical commitment to older, stricter forms of arranged marriage than are now practised in certain communities in the subcontinent.

I think that there may be a number of different ways of explaining this: a) cultural practices have moved on but those who left have not — occasional visits are not adequate to participate in the dynamic of change, nor perhaps even to recognise it; b) cultural practices have moved on but those who left do not wish to move on — strong adherence to old practices is a central part of their identity, their self-respect in a hostile and still racist western society; c) those who left the subcontinent are from more conservative groups than those who are involved in radical social and political agitation at home. But whatever the explanation in individual cases, it is important to recognise that there are varied tendencies and histories within a culture. Claims to cultural (or other) difference should not be used to silence critical voices, and definitions of culture and tradition should not be treated as absolute or sacrosanct.

Women in India continue the radical and challenging traditions of the anti-colonial struggles, struggles which were inextricably linked to the promotion of women's rights. A quick look at most of the constitutions put in place when ex-colonies won national independence shows that they committed to gender equality and female suffrage relatively promptly. This did not come about by accident: it came about because women fought long and hard to put these issues on the agenda and to push the nationalist leaders — usually men — to make some progress. Fighting battles for national identity and integrity perhaps helped to set favourable terms in the discourse (if not in a lot of practice) for the promotion of other aims which were consistent with such principles. Improving women's social and political position was one such aim.

I do not mean to suggest that all is well for women in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh or Sri Lanka — far from it — nor that feminist struggles and nationalist projects were one and the same. I do suggest, however, that alongside the traditions claimed by diasporic women — traditions of cultural compliance under regimes of male dominance — there are courageous, exciting and inspiring traditions of women's activism, women's struggles and women's solidarity. Unfortunately, amongst migrant communities the selection of which traditions to promote or adhere to does not commonly encompass these other histories of strong, vocal women's activism. It concerns me that women and girls, first and subsequent generations, lose that aspect of their history and are disconnected from feminist activism and ways of thinking.

This shows itself in the foreclosure that operates for some migrant women (or the succeeding generations) against challenging male oppression within their own communities. It is also supported by (some) feminists from other cultures who, unaware of other traditions, accept and even perpetuate (sometimes under the

rubric of respect) conservative constructions of tradition which oppress women. Feminists in the ex-colonies do not share the reluctance of their migrant sisters to name and challenge the patriarchal practices of their communities.

Difference

There is another aspect of the traditionalism of migrant communities which is of concern: the focus on *difference* and the way in which it can sometimes become an overriding preoccupation. The need to recognise difference is clear — without it there is pressure to conform to a dominant culture, and a denial of prejudice and discrimination. But what does concern me is where difference becomes an absolute organising principle, a fundamental tenet of separateness.

The separatist refrain is along the lines of ‘How can you work on my needs when my culture / traditions / religion / experience / language are so different from yours?’ Of course, at face value this may have some merit — surely it is those who have particular experiences who are best placed to define their needs — and is an argument which many of us have proposed in relation to women naming their own experiences. However, the dynamics and relationships in which we work are more complex than this formulation permits. I think women in various locations are absolutely central in naming their experiences and needs, and in contributing to the understanding of their situations. But how do others hear these voices? We have to hear them through an organising framework that includes the principles of justice and equality.

When a woman says that her husband has every right to chastise her physically for her wrongdoings, or when a woman says that her husband makes her have sex as and when he chooses but it is not rape, a feminist response will likely *engage critically* with such views. Likewise, it is important to engage critically with cultural expressions of the oppression of women. It is only after hearing these that it is possible to move to working together to address needs — something which I do believe is possible across cultural boundaries. In the case of Sirkat Gah discussed above, for instance, it is not necessary to respect cultural difference by saying that so-called ‘honour’ killings are a cultural expression or practice (which they may well be). Sirkat Gah is operating within a cultural context and *contesting* its norms: feminists from beyond that context must support their struggle.

Highlighting difference can foreclose discussion, and limit the possibilities for joint action. If I cannot know the particular experiences of, say, Sikh or Muslim women because I am not one, then it can be argued that I can neither have meaningful discussions about their needs, nor can I understand their situations, nor can I sensibly

participate in their struggles. So, on the one hand the privileging of difference can result in closure of communication, while on the other it can silence those beyond the boundary of belonging, in terms of culture, race, ethnicity or religion. The results of the difference principle becoming primary is that it can censure, silence, and support separatism — none of which have a place in struggles for justice and feminist principles.

Another tendency I find troubling is the way in which the language of difference has been taken up by those who are not sympathetic, and used against the very groups which proclaim the centrality of difference. In recent cases of which I am aware, it has not been exceptional for police officers to decline to support women suffering domestic violence because, they claim, of the importance of cultural difference. I know of such instances involving Asian women and women from the Horn of Africa; I know also that others who stray from the 'normative referent' — in their sexuality, appearance, disability etc. — are also liable to have their needs downgraded or dismissed in the name of difference. Such dismissals may be thinly disguised forms of prejudice.

While the police or other individuals or agencies reject calls for support from 'different' women, men from these groups may also take separatist positions on difference. Many Asian women know only too well the intense pressure put upon them by men (but also women) not to speak out about difficult intra-community issues, such as domestic violence. Women should not wash their 'dirty linen' in public, nor subject men to harassment or intervention from a racist state. Where these dynamics are successful they impose once again the compulsion to silence, to uphold and acquiesce in the protection of men and male dominance.

Commonality

Women all over the world experience male violence. I have listened to women of different cultures, religions, countries, age groups, classes, social backgrounds... and over and over again they talk of the devastating impacts of the belittling, of the physical injuries, of the emotional destruction, of fearing for the safety of their children, of the shame and embarrassment of speaking to anyone about their experiences and of the fear that violence brings. Again and again women find ways of expressing their intolerance and disavowal of violence: they share the need for support, belief, safety (including shelter), real options, financial means and clear affirmation that their lives can be different.

All women have the right to live free from violence, the right to live without men and the right to protection by the state against violence inside and outside the home.

How these rights can be best delivered, enabled or facilitated must be considered in relation to the considerations which shape our various experiences, such as culture, language and race/ethnicity. However, the fundamental principle must be that all women have shared experiences, shared needs, rights in common and a sound basis from which to talk to each other and struggle together.

Contrary to what the principle of difference founded on ethnicity or race may tempt us to believe, not all black and ethnic minority women have the same view as to whether and how spaces should be created to resist gender inequality and oppression. Here, the points I made earlier about the divergent ways in which migrant women and those in the home country understand themselves, their cultures and religions are relevant. Constructing a monolithic category of 'third world woman' or even a single Asian stereotype is as problematic and unhelpful as are notions of white women as a single category, or of all women based only on the experience of white, heterosexual, able-bodied women.

There *are* significant differences between women, but they come into play most importantly not in terms of women's life experiences — listening to women from an ever-increasing number of countries and contexts underlines what we share, more strongly than what divides us — but in the ways in which women can and do respond to their experiences and contexts. I will highlight two critical aspects of difference here.

One is access: women have differential access to support and to services. In the UK language issues remain critical in this respect; race and ethnicity are still significant factors when contacting service providers (or when deciding not to do so); dis/ability marks a scandalous barrier to access; and there are many others including those structured by the state, such as immigration rules. The second is politics: much more fundamental than tradition, culture, race or religion is the allegiance women have to particular political projects — feminism is one, anti-racism another. Politics not only influences which projects will be significant but also how those projects are shaped — what justice looks like, what feminism can bring and how one should fight racism. These two issues are much more important in our work together than whether we celebrate Christmas or Eid, how we dress or the food we eat.

I wonder if it is possible to shift the separatist and divisive aspects of a focus on difference by using the concept of *diversity* instead? It seems to me that *difference* has become too loaded with tendencies towards closure, silencing and isolation to be useful in political strategies which emphasise working together. Diversity itself is not without problems — it has been used to neutralise the power of anti-

racist action and politics in the USA and now in the UK (witness the many local government authorities which have replaced their anti-racist teams and policies with those 'valuing diversity' — a de-politicised, unchallenging and anodyne term). Despite this I think that it holds more promise than difference because of the way in which difference has so successfully been used to divide us.

Commonality, diversity and women's politics

The more I hear women's voices from various locations — social, cultural, religious, etc. — the more I am certain that our commonality must provide the framework for our work together. This commonality is shaped by many things including our experiences of male oppression and power, of injustice, violence and discrimination and our struggles for other ways of living. So my first suggestion is that commonality provides the framework and it is within this that we have to recognise diversity.

Secondly, there is one issue which I think is of central importance if we are to work successfully across this diversity — a critical self-positioning. A pre-requisite for conversations across diversity is for women to engage critically with their own position, not only the positions of other women; women must name their own oppression. One of the problems associated with earlier claims to sisterhood was the implicit (and sometime explicit) claims to superiority from white/western women in relation to the rest of us. This cannot have a place in shared struggles.

A third way in which diversity can find a place in our work together is through supporting women's choices and giving credence to other expressions of resistance. This means, for example, that western women cannot instruct all subcontinental women to oppose all forms of arranged marriage, or claim that no feminist can ever wear a head-cover; Indian (and other) feminists should not always rush to write off white women wearing lipstick as not being real feminists.

We should not accept cultural definitions of tradition which are monolithic and which clearly oppress women. We must be able to recognise voices of resistance, which may take many forms, and support them. There are always voices of resistance from women, but they sometimes they struggle to be heard.