

REFUGEE, MIGRATION, DIASPORA

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Lecture 21

Lecture 21: Identity Politics in South Asia and Ismat Chughtai's "Roots"- I


Thank you. Good morning and welcome back to the lecture series on refugees, migration, and diaspora. So, today we will talk about identity politics in South Asia. Before we talk about identity politics, we have to understand what we mean by identity. So, identity refers to a fluid, contextual, relational, and multidimensional phenomenon.

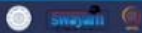
It refers to the social terrain, the historical context, political exigencies, particular interests and aspirations, all of which propel a group to construct or deconstruct a specific identity at a given point in time. Subsequently, group leaders tend to define and demarcate the boundaries of these specific identities with reference to and in contradistinction or in contrast to their opponents and rivals in the existing political space. The demographic outlook of South Asia has helped reinforce identity politics in each country in the region.

So, each country or each nation defines itself through this identity politics. It could refer to certain community's values, certain social groups' values, certain outlooks, national policies which are very consciously carved out in juxtaposition with the abutting or adjacent nation. So, there is a very conscious distinction in identity that is maintained such that the rivalrous relationship, the oppositional relationship among the abutting nations becomes very permanent; they are made to seem very natural and timeless. And this timelessness and this normalcy of their rivalrous or oppositional nature could very well be contested because there could be a lot in continuum, a lot in commonality among the adjacent nations. But identity politics of each nation within the South Asian geopolitical landscape mandates the leaders, the group leaders, to define the

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2


The culture defines the policies in such a way that the values of one nation are in contrast with the other, and they are made to seem as timeless rivals. So, when individuals identify themselves racially, ethnically, or religiously as connected with a particular group—when they have this kind of group affiliation—they often develop hostilities toward other groups automatically and imbibe a sense of superiority over them. So, that is also a way of owning one's own identity by very consciously disowning every other possibility or every other identity. In this regard, Adrian Holliday defines grand narratives. Grand narratives are those that we inherit and that we are brought up with.

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2

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<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When individuals identify themselves racially, ethnically, or religiously connected with a particular group, they often develop hostilities toward other groups and a sense of superiority over them • Adrian Holliday - 'Grand narratives' are those that we inherit and are brought up with – the big stories that are designed to define our heritages and to legitimate the social groups we are part of. They are part of the 'cultural resources' attached to 'particular social and political structures' grammar of culture' (<i>Understanding Intercultural Communication</i> 2013) • Grand narratives are also the basis for Holliday's 'global position and politics,' through which one inherits the stories of nation and race that positions one in relation to the cultural Other. They are ideological in that they contribute to how we structure our thoughts about the world; and promote the ideologies of race, gender and culture. 	

These are the big stories, the meta-stories or grand stories, designed to define our heritages and to legitimize the social groups we are part of. They are part of the cultural resources attached to particular social and political structures. They form the repository of the culture in which an individual grows up. They form the grammar of a culture. So, this grammar is never very neutral in nature.

It is value-laden. It basically juxtaposes different identities or different groups and then adds value to one group as opposed to the other. So, one looks superior over the other. So, grand narratives are also the basis for what Holliday would call global position and politics. Global position and politics are shaped through these meta-stories of different social groups.

And these stories do not have a lot of natural elements in them. A lot of them, a lot of these stories, So a large part of these stories is made up of unverified or baseless myths. And through these grand narratives, one inherits the stories of nations and race that position one social group in relation to its cultural other. So they are ideological in the sense that they contribute to how we structure our thoughts about the world,


and how we promote the ideologies of race, gender, and culture. There are a lot of stereotypes that fill in these myths, which comprise the grand narratives. So, grand narratives in today's world, with the postmodern turn, have lost a lot of their credibility. In place of grand narratives, what we have are the personal narratives, which are, you know, part of our everyday experiences.




So, we are fed certain grand narratives about our own cultures, but very often we draw on our everyday experiences too. And these experiences are not very overarching in nature, not very generalized, but they are very layered, very complicated experiences. And they

have plural meanings, plural significances. So, personal trajectories constantly mediate and filter how we respond to the structures within which we are brought up. The structures meaning the grand narratives, the repository of certain myths within which we grew up.

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- Grand narratives may have lost their credibility in the postmodern turn. Rather, personal narratives are those that we form ourselves through everyday experiences.
- 'Personal trajectories' mediate and filter how we respond to the structures within which we are brought up. In this process, grand narratives and their ideologies and discourses are a part of the wider environment that we interact with; and splinters of grand narratives are irrevocably present in our personal narrative.
- Personal narratives can be volatile, help us make a shifting sense, engage with the question of identity, and enable reaching out to others beyond essentialist cultural threads. The overall picture of personal narratives is of complex, multifaceted and shifting realities.






4

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3

Our personal trajectories constantly filter the grand narratives, and they respond to the grand narratives. We grow up to understand that not everything we learn from our own social groups is true and verified. We grow up to understand that not everything we learn about our own social groups, about the myths, you know, is verified fact. So, in this process of understanding life through everyday experiences, grand narratives and their ideologies and discourses are understood as part of the wider environment we interact with.


And we see that even though we want to experience the world through our own reality, certain splinters of grand narratives are irrevocably present in our personal narratives. So, as opposed to the grand narrative, which is a very smooth, overarching, generalized,


myth-like, you know, repository, personal narratives—or our personal experiences, day-to-day experiences—are usually volatile. They are shifting, and they engage with questions of identity, enabling us to reach out to others beyond essentialist cultural threads. So, we also tend to understand the cultural other or other social groups outside of the essentialist, value-laden cultural threads we have learned from the grand narrative, the metanarrative repository.

So, we understand people without certain value judgments, basically. The overall picture of personal narratives is that of complex, multifaceted, and shifting realities without value-laden understandings. Described by Georg Simmel as invisible anthropological constellations, the concept of borders simultaneously connects and separates, divides and welcomes passage, and they entail—they involve—sites of friction and conflict. But at the same time, they are also seen as, you know, borders of hope and new possibilities.

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So, borders constitute a central human activity and create dynamic sites both socially and symbolically where mutual exchanges among heterogeneous entities can occur. And therefore, in the border, the otherness, the difference, and thereby these identity positions are constantly being negotiated. They are constantly being revisited and problematized. There cannot be any permanent identity positions. Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor has extensively written about identity politics.

Taylor points out that modern identity is inherently political because it demands recognition. The idea that modern politics is based on the principle of universal recognition comes from Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel. So, philosopher Hegel talks about this principle of universal recognition that modern politics entails. Increasingly, however, it seems that universal recognition based on a shared individual humanity may not be enough, especially in the case of defining groups and subgroups that have been


historically discriminated against, that have historically faced discrimination and marginalization in the past.



So, any sort of universal concept of recognition may not be enough to bring forward their grievances, their state of marginality. Hence, modern identity politics revolves around demands for recognition of group identities. So, we are talking about the specificity of each group's reality, that is, public affirmations of the equal dignity of all. Marginalized groups, the groups that have been formerly treated as marginal entities. It could be the Quebecois people or the African-Americans, or it could be women as a category or indigenous people or even homosexuals and transgender individuals.

All categories of people—it could be a geographical group, it could be a group in terms of sexual orientation, it could be a racially discriminated group. Any such people who have formally faced marginalization are they are claimants to equal dignity. So, the term 'identity politics,' also used in philosophical literature, predominantly talks about the struggles for recognition and social justice by groups of citizens within Western capitalist democracies. It could include indigenous rights movements worldwide.

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6

It could include demands for regional self-determination, to mention only a few. Critic Charles Taylor argues that modern identity is characterized by an emphasis—by a focus on one's inner voice and one's capacity for authenticity. In other words, the ability to find a way of existence that is somehow true and authentic to one's own self. So, regarding identity and associated identity politics, the marginalized groups—Sonia Kruks points out, I quote her here at length. What makes identity politics a significant departure from earlier pre-identitarian forms of the politics of recognition is its demand for recognition on the very grounds on which recognition has previously been denied.

It is queer women, queer Blacks, queer lesbians—these groups demand recognition. So, the recognition should also be in a very specific sense. It cannot be a universal sense of recognition. It should be on the same grounds on which recognition has been previously denied. It could be—if it is in the case of a woman, it should be with respect to her gender.

Same for lesbians in terms of their sexual orientation, for Black people in terms of their race and color, right? So, To continue with the quote, the demand is not for exclusion within the fold of universal humankind on the basis of shared human attributes, nor is it for respect in spite of one's differences. Rather, what is demanded is respect for oneself as different. So this recognition of one's specific reality, one's specific orientation, and specific existence.


What is crucial about the identity of identity politics appears to be the experience of an individual subject—the unique experience of a subject, especially their experience within social structures that generate injustice and the possibility of a shared, more authentic, or self-determined alternative to such injustice as a way of ensuring survival and self-preservation. So, identity politics rests on the connection between a certain social occurrence and the particular subject position to which it is attributed, and hence on a unifying claim about the meaning of politically laden experiences to diverse individuals, right? So, this could be simplified. So, this could be elaborated with the example of racism or ethnic cleansing that a certain people undergo or experience. You know, undergoing a certain incident, occurrence, or treatment that is enacted—that is enforced on a particular subject position that people have to face by virtue of belonging to a certain geopolitical space and by virtue of being



who they are in terms of their skin color, their race, and ethnicity. If people undergo a certain experience because of who they are, it could be the experience of racism, gendered marginality, or sexual violence. It could be ethnic cleansing. All these social occurrences shape the meaning of politically laden experiences. And they, in turn, consolidate identity politics.

Right. It is something that is unique to certain people. Racism is something unique that African-Americans have faced, which shaped their history, actually. Right. Similarly, ethnic cleansing is something that the Rohingyas are facing right now.

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9

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9

The field of gender studies and body politics, particularly in relation to migrant women and their expressions through artworks, is a dynamic and complex area of study in current times. The body as a site of political negotiation often transgresses the boundaries of dominant discourses and creates its alternative spaces of order and disorder. Regarding the conceptualization of body politics, scholar Ailbhe Kenny suggests that, I quote Kenny here, bodies are political. The term body politic has medieval origins where states, towns, guilds, churches, and families were considered in such terms as bodies.

So, in Kenny's sense, drawing on Kenny's definition, body therefore refers to social institutions, social orders, the political Body politic refers to certain dogmas that rule institutions. So the dogmas that underlie certain social orders. The political and social body has been historically understood in a manner similar to the physical human body, which is either considered healthy or corrupt and therefore in need of intervention, often through purging and disciplining. So, in contemporary context, the body politic can refer to a nation regarded as a corporate entity, a state, or collective unit of people.

Such a body politic directly intervenes in the experiences of those who are subjected to racial persecution, sexual harassment and abuse, gender-based violence, reproductive restrictions and disability discrimination to name but a few. So, body politic refers to certain dictates, certain dictates that are implemented by a body, a corporate entity and which directly interferes with, directly intervenes into the lives of people in the form of racial persecution, gender violence, you know, sexual harassment and so forth. Depending on the position of a subject, whether a subject is a disabled person or a woman or a transgender, the body politic would accordingly render a specific treatment to the individual.

So, when working with marginalized groups and subjects, what becomes especially pertinent in any examination is how the research practices might reflect, confirm or else question the existing body politic, how the research brings to the fore the power structures and the political histories that our bodies signify. So, in terms of suffering, when we come to talk about partition literature, We see that partition literature has given us the knowledge of the horrors that the people from its contemporary time experienced during the event and the kind of horror that the people were made to know, that the people were made to face during the partition. When the impact of the partition was initially studied using geographical and political metrics,

Later on, towards the close of the 20th century, we see literature emerging that also focus on the human cost of partition, the human impact of partition, the literature that reflect people's lives. The personal access and personal experiences are explored during the partition and there is a special focus on women's lives and their grisly, you know, gory experiences. The partition was a gendered calamity with men being celebrated as heroes in the stories, the men being celebrated as saviors, as national heroes, whereas the women being primarily depicted as victims. So, again, In that same thread, in that same note, we see Ismat Chughtai's story *Jaadein* or *Roots* showing the struggles of women and how the partition affected their lives directly.

We also understand the difference in the idea of nation for the two genders—how men and women differently understand the idea of nation and how it plays out for women. We see how the meaning of nation is understood differently by men and women and how it plays out differently in various contexts for them. The men and the women—how the understanding of home and hearth is very different for women as opposed to that of men. So, the short story '*Roots*' or '*Jaadein*' by Ismat Chughtai explores the theme of India's partition while reviving in its readers' minds a sense of hope through celebrating cultural

inseparability among different communities. And it shows a kind of commonality, a linkage and connection across not only different communities—Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs—but also across different political ideologies and positions that people hold.

So, the story begins with a description of the circumstances prevailing in post-partition India. The English had left India. And while leaving, they inflicted a deadly wound that would fester for generations to come. So, according to Chughtai, India was—and I quote—'operated upon by such clumsy hands and blunt knives that thousands of arteries were left open, rivers of blood flowed, and no one had the strength left to stitch the wounds.' We will continue our discussion on Chughtai's story 'Jaadein' in our next lecture.

Thank you.