
FEMINISM AND NATIONALISM

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Abstract: We are constantly reminded that the globe is becoming smaller and more integrated. Everywhere closer links are being forged between economies and societies, and everywhere formerly independent states and nations are being merged by complex web of interstate organizations and regulations into what has been termed, euphemistically, an 'international community'. Yet, paradoxically, in this highly globalised world, there is also a clear trend towards affirmation of the local, of particularist identities (Einhorn 1996: 1). Ethnic pasts are being updated and old cultures fragmented and recast (Smith, 1995: 1). Indeed, the current wave of nationalism testifies to the enduring nature of national idea and to the way in which it responds to, in Mary Kaldor's words, a deep-felt human need (Kaldor 2004: 161). After all, since the 19th century, nationalism has been one of the defining features of modernity (Cockburn 1998: 12), and of the nation-state. Feminists have long argued that the nation, national identity, and nationalism are gendered. As Nira Yuval-Davis and V. Spike Peterson have pointed out, women in nationalist discourse and practice play such diverse roles as biological and social reproducers, as cultural forms, as signifiers, and as embodied agents (Yuval-Davis 1996, 1997; Peterson 1999). Thus it is a well-known fact that the nation is often symbolized as a woman; conversely, women often serve as symbolic markers of a group's cultural identity embodying the repositories of its traditions, reproducers of its authenticity as well as of its workforce and soldiers. Nations may be 'imagined communities' (Anderson 1983). But struggles over national territory and ethnically based identification of us' versus 'them' have real consequences for women because they occupy a specific location within the national project (Einhorn 1996: 2).

Introduction: In this essay, I will argue that nationalism and feminism can never be made compatible. To support my argument that nationalists cannot be feminists, I will make several points based on two examples: Israel and Serbia. First, I will show that there is always a contested relationship between nationalism and feminism. While the former stabilizes hierarchical gender relations of power, the latter seeks to do away with them. Second, I will stress that women's participation in nation-building processes – even if it can from a short-term perspective provide emancipatory and liberatory potentials – fails, to challenge hierarchical power relationships and, thus ultimately, reinforces traditional notions of femininity. What accounts for this is that women are always 'second' actors in nationalist movements; they may play a role in anti-colonial struggles, but they are always pushed back to the domestic/private sphere after self-determination/independence is achieved. This is not to downplay the political role of women as actors without agency (Cockburn 1998; Shadmi 2000), for they often resist nationalism (even in limited numbers). Women in Black in Israel and Women in Black in Serbia are ample proof of this. However, there is a need to be conscious of the fact that not all forms of women's activism is feminist. Women defining themselves as mothers, for instance, may be constructing a single identity of a 'mother', biologically, by not questioning the ideology of a patriarchal family, or they may be constructing it socially as a primary caretaker (Cockburn 1998: 43).

Challenging the notion that feminism should be seen as a singular term, I agree with Chantal's definition of feminist politics as the pursuit of feminist goals within the context of a wider articulation of demands. For that reason, feminist politics should not be seen as a separate form of politics designated to pursue the interests of women as *women*. Feminists aim at transforming all the discourses, practices and social relations where the category of 'woman' is constructed in subordination. True, in its most general understanding, feminism is the struggle for the equality of women. But this should not be understood as a fight for realizing the quality of a definable empirical group within a common essence of identity. On the contrary, it is a struggle against the multiple forms of the constructed, subordinated 'woman' (Chantal 1992: 382). One such form is nationalism, a gendered ideology whose practice rests on the subordination of women and on the constant construction/reconstruction of notions of femininity and masculinity. By subjecting women to nationalist goals, they can only play a role as long as they reinforce male-designed politics (this also applies to non-hegemonic/ subaltern nationalisms, even if in a less restricted form). Nationalism draws on socially constructed ideas of masculinity and femininity to shape female and male participation in nation-building embodied in the imagination of self-professed nationalists (Banerjee 2003: 167). Thus as an ideology, nationalism relies on exclusion of groups and individuals who do not fit the characteristics of the 'self-imagined community'. In extreme cases, the

exclusionary potential of nationalism can lead to ethnic cleansing (Yuval-Davis 1997: 11) and other genocidal practices. In general, national projects are multiplex, even if one version is more hegemonic than others at different historical moments (*ibid.*: 21). As Cynthia Enloe contends, if one casts an eye toward nationalism without feminist understanding of its inner working or its consequences, one can simply revise patriarchy to enable it to thrive in new forms fit for a contemporary 'New World Order' (Enloe 1993: 251).

It needs no elaboration that the enlistment of women in nationalist projects has a long history (Griffin & Braidotti 2002: 239). Women's issues do not only offer nationalist movements a vital social platform for the collective mobilization of multiple community groups. Female emancipation – a powerful political symbol describing at once a separation from the past, the aspirations of an activist present, and the utopia of an imagined national future – supplies a mechanism of self-description and self-projection of incalculably more than pragmatic value in the self-fashioning of nations and nationalisms (Heng 1997: 31). Indeed, 'Third World' feminists were, in many countries, an integral part of anti-colonial nationalist struggles for independence (Bardan 1995; Jawardena 1986; Mohanty 1991). For these women, nationalism was an emancipatory movement for autonomy, sovereignty, and universal citizenship. Yet, when the nationalistic goal of independence had been achieved, women usually found themselves excluded from the public sphere and power (Yuval-Davis & Werbner 1999: 1). Tamy Jacoby points out that while national liberation has played a crucial role in the development of Middle Eastern feminism, it has also been a problematic site from which to negotiate women's rights and equal status in the post-revolutionary period (Jacoby 1999: 51).

This raises the important question of whether women really have equal opportunities for agency within nationalist movements (*ibid.*: 51). Contradictions within gendered nationalism are bound up in the dynamic symbol and practical assertions of national identity. The symbolic female role in discursive constructions of nationalism does not necessarily coincide with the practice of women's politics (*ibid.*: 513). Thus colonial or neo-colonial rule has often been reproduced through patterns which reinforce the domination of the local men over their women (for example, the continuation of customary law and clan leadership). These patterns are articulated through efforts to postpone consideration of women's concerns until after the revolution (*ibid.*: 515). No variety of feminism in the 'Third World', then, has been secure from the intervention of the state or from the power of those who are able to control the

discourse of nationalism with unchallenged authority. Rights historically granted to women by patriarchal authority to accomplish nationalist goals and agendas do not necessarily constitute acts of feminism, even if such practices may initially enhance their social status (Heng 1997: 31). During the independence struggle in India, women stepped out into a public world for the nationalist cause. But after helping defeat colonialism, they were marginalised and forced to reoccupy their traditional roles as mothers, wives and sisters (Rao 1999: 317). Even if Gandhi's Satyagraha and Swadeshi movement allowed women to participate in the public sphere, they could not organize and transform the religious and social roots of their oppression (*ibid.*: 321).

State and nationalist militarism produces – and is produced – by gendered identities and divisions of violence manifested both internally and externally. Whereas men are socialized to be aggressive and competitive protectors of the nation, and even lifetakers, women are socialized to be passive, and supportive of those in need of protection, and life-givers (Peterson 1999: 7). Yet, even if women shape and are shaped by nationalist ideology some also resist nationalism. The methods used by Women in Black in Israel in their resistance against militaristic nationalism and the Israeli occupation of Palestine (women's body, the black colour and the constant presence in time and space) were distinctly feminist (Shadmi 2000: 25). As Erella Shadmi points out, the context of a political struggle within which these means of resistance amplified their power. Thus women's bodies were not used for traditional women's purposes, such as temptation or advancement of women's interests (day-care centres and equal opportunities, for example). Instead, they served the purpose of pursuing a general and all-encompassing social goals. These goals were articulated and argued in body-speak, and there was a room for new, female messages and strategies. Women in Black did not capitalize on the traditional roles of women as mothers and wives to advance their position; they established their status and position in town squares through their mere presence as *citizens* with equal rights. They confiscated from the public sphere (traditionally a male reserve), a space of their own for their alternative message which depended no longer on their sex roles. Womanhood was presented in a new political and ideological context, transforming the woman from an object, contingent on men's perception and conventions to a *subject* with her own right and distinctive position (*ibid.*: 25–26). Still, despite being able to carve out a potentially subversive space, Women in Black were a small collective of individual women and unable to push their agenda in a wider socio-political context.

They did not pose a real threat to the established order and were marginalized. But in the case of the Israeli Women's Network and the Women's Peace Network, there was not even the need for silencing. In contrast to Women in Black, these organizations adopted a distinctly male/nationalist political discourse. As Shadmi argues, such a culture did not allow women's free expression unless they conformed to male norms. Furthermore, it connected and associated gender with nationalism, imperialism/colonialism, religion and tradition (*ibid.*: 26).

In Serbia, the re-emergence of nationalist ideology as a dominant political force in the wake of Tito's death reinforced the notion of seeing mothers as symbols of the nation and of emphasizing women's responsibility for the biological and cultural reproduction of the nation. The result was a marked change in the concept of patriotic womanhood – a women's task was no longer to build socialism through work but to regenerate the nation through her roles as a mother (Bracewell 1996: 26). As Bracewell argues, in the militarized setting of Serbia during and after the wars in the former Yugoslavia, what became women's responsibility was not only to produce babies but future fighters (*ibid.*: 29). Stasa Zajovic of Women in Black in Serbia divides the development of Serbian nationalist propaganda into two phases (although they were constantly intertwined). The first began as early as the middle of the nineteen-eighties. It involved the preparation of various exclusionary projects aimed at the suppression of the 'white plague' (for example, the non-Serbian population, in particular the ethnic Albanians). The second one was of propaganda about child-bearing for patriotic reasons, that is, for the

enhancement of national security (Zajovic 1995). The abuse of woman and their bodies in the 'pure' nation-building processes resulted in two interdependent forms of violence against women: highly restricted identity 'demands' (no abortion) for women insiders, and extreme violence (rape) against women outsiders (Papic 2002: 129).

I have made the case here that nationalism and feminism are not only in constant tension with each other but they can never be reconciled because nationalist movements/m ideologies or state nationalism instrumentalise women. Nationalism augmented by militarism goes hand in hand with the suppression of women (Shadmi 2000: 26). As long as women struggle and protest through traditional means – as the Israeli Women's Network and the Women's Peace Network (Herzog 1997) – women's politics is considered acceptable. Yet, those women who defy patriarchy and successfully undermine the existing order by alternative means (Women in Black) are, beyond limited support and appreciation, downplayed (*ibid.*: 28). The only constant is that women are being used to serve arbitrary national interests, which are repeatedly redefined according to changing male priorities. The role of women in contemporary Serbian state nationalism is, thus, primarily symbolic; women are rarely actors or autonomous citizens (Bracewell 1996: 32). And despite well-documented evidence of Palestinian women's centrality in the Intifada in terms of co-operative production, military struggle and grassroots leadership, nationalist narratives have always tended to differentiate masculinity and femininity on the basis of traditionally constructed roles (Jacoby 1999: 513-514).

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