



Feminist reflections on justice from the global South

Nivedita Menon

Justice requires us to question what has been normalized over time. Justice requires us to step outside of codes.

Justice as order?

Often what appears to be 'just' is the normalizing of a previous history of violence. The passing on disadvantage from generation to generation, just as for a handful of others, it's the passing of wealth and privilege from generation to generation. Not to recognize these histories of violence underlying normality is to legitimize a history of violence.

Historian Pankaj Jha puts it this way – justice requires us to think like a historian. You don't stop at the now. The now has a history. But history is not just what happened in the past—history is what **is** happening; history is about the present. It's not because people want to remember what happened in the past that the past becomes important. The talk about the past is actually about wanting to talk about the present in a certain way, and talk about the future in a certain way. That is why we have so many different versions of what happened in the past. So when I say "history of violence", I am talking about the here and now, not something that is over and done with. The idea of something being "just" comes from a previous history of violence—one that continues—and at the end of it, because order prevails, it looks normal, natural even.

The French philosopher, Romain Rolland said, 'If order is injustice, then disorder is the beginning of justice.' We need to think about 'social order' more critically.

In this context let me tell you a story about the Nicaraguan sign language. I learnt only recently that sign language is not simply signing the existing alphabet; sign language is a language in itself. This tells you how so many aspects of life are invisible to the privileged. Nicaragua is a country where a military dictatorship was overthrown by a revolution in 1979. When that revolution took place, there was a huge push towards revolutionizing education. One of the things they decided to do was to start proper sign language teaching. It had been a very isolated society, so the deaf people there already had developed their own language—unlike any other existing sign language in the world—called the Nicaraguan Sign Language. After the revolution they started



building schools for deaf children to formally educate them. What was interesting was that every year as new students came in, they would pick up the sign language that their senior students were using and then break the rules. They would introduce new words and new ways of thinking and forming sentences which would then improve the language. The next batch would break the rules again and so on, making Nicaraguan sign language complex and supple. Nicaraguan sign language (NSL) is understood globally to be [“absolutely unique, in that it is the only language ever to have been created without any other linguistic influences and recorded from its inception.”](#) What I learnt from this amazing story about the birth and growth of a relatively new language, is that rule breaking (that is, “disorder”) - can be the foundation of new knowledge that reflects the hitherto invisible.

And the reflection of the invisible after all, is the path to justice.

Two views on learning - Ranciere and Freire

The other story I want to tell is by a famous French philosopher named Jacques Rancière, who wrote a book called *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*. In this book, Ranciere tells the story of an actual teacher Joseph Jacotot who was sent to teach French to people in a Flemish speaking area. They knew no French and he knew no Flemish. The teacher had a bi-lingual translation of the Greek epic, *Iliad* which had French on one page and Flemish on the other. The teacher gave the children the text and told them to figure out the French words by comparing it with the Flemish section. And all the students learnt French by “having their intelligence revealed to themselves” as Ranciere put it.

Reading this story—as someone from a formerly colonized country whose languages were thoroughly marginalized—I questioned why Ranciere, a liberal, enlightened philosopher was not asking a simple question: Why was the teacher in a position where the Flemish children had to learn French but he didn’t have to learn Flemish? It was because of the way in which the French nation-state was created. All the nation-states from the eighteenth century onwards have been created by marginalizing languages other than the dominant one and assimilating or destroying local cultures. French was the language of the French nation-state and so Flemish—a minority language—had to be pushed aside in favour of French. Why was Ranciere not even



thinking about that? Because, as a Frenchman, he saw this as progress. However, irrespective of the specific language, it is the idea of ‘one nation, one language,’ or rather “one nation, one anything” that leads to injustice. What the teacher was doing was one kind of education—it was preparing Flemish children to live in a French-dominant world which had already taken shape around them. This is why many historians have said that the process of creating a modern nation state is similar to colonialism.

Another way of thinking about teaching as opposed to Ranciere, is the Brazilian scholar activist Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Paulo Freire thought of pedagogy as follows - the teacher teaches the students five things and students teach the teacher five things. I draw from this pedagogic method, the idea of the “outside.” If something is normal inside, when the outside breaks in, you suddenly think, “Oh! So, this is not fixed and natural? This is not okay?” What I am calling the outside could be a teacher or a friend or a movement or a book. There is always an outside that stops power formations from being consolidated. Whether it is capitalism, patriarchy, supremacism based on a religious or racial or class identity, there is always an outside that breaks in. This is what Paulo Freire meant, the students are the “outside” of the teacher’s knowledge and the teachers are the “outside” of the students' knowledge. When the outside bursts in, it destabilizes you. It makes you ask ‘Oh, was I wrong all along?’ and sometimes, it would be time to say ‘Yes, I was wrong, but the new world that is revealed, is wonderful’.

Justice as equality

The idea of justice as impartial sounds very fair but is not fair at all.

Justice has to be based on the idea of recognizing differences and recognizing need. This has been long debated in academic circles but it also rears its head whenever there is a debate on affirmative action like caste-based reservations in my country India or reserved seats on buses for women. The crux of the matter is the same—should society recognize differences? Should justice be based on the idea of difference or not?

Differences are of two kinds: hierarchy-based difference, which is obviously unfair and unjust. For example, South Africa had a difference-based system—apartheid, which



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differentiated between races—but that system was also deeply hierarchical and unjust, giving only some people rights while denying rights to many. Difference is not inherently hierarchical but social structures do produce hierarchy.

Race, caste, class and gender differences are simultaneously hierarchical. Take gender. In the world in which we live, the gender we are assigned at birth determines our entire life and how we live it. This arises from the functioning of patriarchy, heteronormativity, the presentation of the world as containing only two sexes.

But we now live in a world which has radically changed since the 20th century. We know there are more than two genders, we almost take it for granted now. When I grew up, I had to embrace that world and learn. Why? Because of a very powerful queer movement. We came to know these things because there was push-back from society. And in order to live an ethical life, you cannot say “Everything I know is correct.” Rather, we have to say “Everything I know, may have to change”—and it is changing every day.

Judith Butler is a philosopher who has long argued that gender is constructed through multiple discourses including medicine and sciences like biology. Butler says there is a powerful frame, ‘the heterosexual matrix’ that makes the world appear as if there are only two sexes and that each sex is attracted only to the ‘opposite’ sex. Butler’s questioning of this frame is dangerous to the social order that exists, which is patriarchal, heterosexist and unjust. And now there is a strong state backed pushback in the USA against teaching or talking about gender in this way.

The problem is not difference but that difference is inserted into social circumstances that produce hierarchy. Take a physical disability like blindness. Why is blindness a disability? Because the world is built for sighted people. Sayings like ‘In the land of the blind, the one-eyed man is king’ are entirely wrong. The aphorism merely makes sense because this world is built for the sighted and therefore it becomes difficult and problematic for the unsighted.

Let me tell you a small story. One of my friends works in a research institute where one of his colleagues is blind. He dropped in to visit that colleague around 4 pm on a winter evening. By 5:30 pm it was already so dark that my friend couldn’t see in his colleague’s room. So, he said to the blind friend, ‘Don’t you want to switch on the light?’



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The friend laughed and said 'If you really need it, you can switch it on!' It was the sighted person who was left disabled by darkness, the blind person was fine. Suppose you lived in a world which was structured for the blind, there would be no concessions for darkness and we sighted ones would be the ones who would be stumbling into things and the disability would be of those who can see. Physical differences are disabilities only because society assumes a certain norm and builds around that norm.

So, my point is that justice has to be based on the idea of equitable treatment. Justice is not about sameness; justice is about recognizing differences. This is an old debate in mainstream political theory. Feminists and Critical Race Theorists have produced a strong critique of the idea of justice as sameness.

When you think about justice in terms of difference then it enables you to think about social justice and affirmative action along the many axes of inequality that exist in the world. This is from where ideas of redistribution are born.

Justice as freedom

Is there a difference between freedom and liberty? Most Western philosophers do not make a distinction between the two, except for Hannah Arendt, to whom we will return. Others see liberty and freedom as synonyms.

Western, liberal political theory has conventionally given liberty the highest value among liberal values, placing it above equality, above justice. Individual freedom began to be prized once the peasantry was thoroughly dispossessed from the land over the 16th to 18th centuries in Europe, once society was produced as consisting of a few property owners on the one hand, and a vast mass of rightless, propertyless people on the other. Only after these transformations did individual liberty become a value espoused by Western philosophy. In *Capital*, Marx ironically uses the word "free" for these peasants who have been violently uprooted from the land and left with nothing but their labour power – they have nothing, they have been freed of everything they possessed.

The most well known formulation is that of Isaiah Berlin, who distinguished between negative liberty and positive liberty. Negative liberty is the absence of coercion, constraints, by any external body (including the state), on the individual.



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Positive liberty is the possibility of taking control of one's life and realize one's fundamental purposes. This is often attributed to collectivities, rather than the individual. But it can be argued that the pursuit of liberty understood as self-realization or as self-determination (whether of the individual or of the collectivity) can require state intervention of a kind not usually permitted by liberals. This is why Berlin and other liberals are suspicious of the positive concept of liberty because it carries, in their opinion, the danger of authoritarianism.

But for most thinkers of the global South, whether African thinkers like Julius Nyerere, Kwame Nkrumah or Fanon, or in India, Gandhi and BR Ambedkar, the value was never expressed as liberty but as freedom, defined in the context of anti imperialism, and it was always conceived of as a community value. Freedom was never just freedom *from* colonial rule but the freedom *to* build a new, just society.

For Nyerere, the concept of *ujamaa* which can be translated as “familyhood”, was tied to communitarian values that would build a new socialist Tanzania. For Nkrumah it was African Socialism, built on an understanding of the communitarian basis of most African precolonial societies and the absence of a tradition of private property. From this, he justified the existence of an indigenous African path to socialism, one that seemingly offered a third way between Western capitalism and Soviet communism.

For Frantz Fanon freedom is social freedom, the freedom of the individual located in state and society. This involves consciousness of freedom, self-expression and obedience to one's own self. This means the people themselves should make decisions which affect them. This is something which no one can do for them. Decisions should be made not by the leaders but by the people, *all* the people. That is freedom.

For this type of freedom to be realized it is important that the nation-state not only be free from external control (from imperialism) but also that political and social arrangements should be such as to enable people to express and maintain their freedom. The human community must not only be a free state but also a free society.

For Gandhi, freedom is *swaraj*, self rule - that is, freedom from an external ruler but also control over oneself, discipline, a set of ethical principles that bind one as individual and community.



And finally, Ambedkar saw freedom as inextricably linked to a social revolution, freedom meant the annihilation of caste, and liberation from the oppressive caste order altogether, nothing short of a social revolution. So for Ambedkar, political revolution alone would not bring about freedom, a social revolution was required.

The one Western philosopher who did make a distinction between liberty and freedom was Hannah Arendt. Arendt understood liberty in the sense of negative liberty alone – freedom from oppression. This liberty is narrow, it can be enjoyed by the individual in private, even under a monarch or feudal hierarchy, she said. But freedom is broader “participation in public affairs, admission to the public realm”.

What Arendt is doing here, the philosopher Hannah Pitkin argues, is understanding freedom as countering the idea of historical inevitability – freedom is the human capacity for action, creativity, spontaneity, initiative, against helplessly watching history enact itself.

For feminism that goes beyond a narrow liberal interpretation, freedom cannot be only about individuals but is inevitably linked to community – single, individual women cannot be free, patriarchy has to end for any one woman to be truly free.

Can justice only be postnational?

Here I want to point to the limitations of what Sanjib Baruah calls the ‘homelandist’ imagination, even among counter-nationalist movements. Baruah makes an argument for an ‘alternative institutional imagination’ than this homelandist one. This alternative imagination would disentangle identity from a territorially and ethnically rooted collectivity. He urges that the ethnic homelands of the region (he is writing in the context of the Northeast of India but I think the argument has broader validity) be dismantled by giving citizenship rights to the large numbers of ‘illegal’ immigrants, and more importantly, that the North-East develop its relationship with its eastern neighbours across international borders. Currently such an alternative imagination it is certainly not the dominant vision visible on the horizon, either of the Indian state or of the insurgent movements. And the suggestion to look over national borders would be seen as sedition.

But we need to keep asking these questions. What or who is the illegal migrant after all? The migrant represents the phenomenon of movement of populations that has



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been widespread and common over the globe for several hundreds of years. This movement has been both voluntary (seafaring traders, pastoral nomads, invading armies that end up settling the lands they conquer) and forced (slave trade, indentured labour to run plantations). Once the nation-state system was put firmly in place however, such movements themselves came under scrutiny from the new 'homelands.' From this point onwards, (approximately the early 20th century), migration began to be closely linked to the issue of the security of nation-states. Ranabir Samaddar points out that what is called 'migration' is actually a continuation of natural human flows through the centuries, suddenly rendered illegal by new national borders. What now require to be called new rights, he says, such as the right to move across national borders for trade, work, or for grazing of animals for example, are not new privileges, but simply the re-legitimation of old practices.

Mahmood Mamdani makes a startling claim contrary to nationalist wisdom, that cultural communities rooted in a common past do not necessarily have a common future. Political communities rather, are to be defined not by a common *past* but by the resolve to forge a common *future* 'under a single political roof'. He believes therefore, that citizens' rights should be attached to place of labour, wherever they choose to work, not to the accident of place of birth.

In short, we need to escape the homelandist imaginations that restrict our ethical horizons.

Any radical transformative politics today must be postnational. In the way it has been developed by a group of South Asian scholars including myself, the post of postnationalism is to be understood not in the sense of *after*, but in the sense of *having passed through*, the nation. In this idea of the postnational, the insistence on an uncompromising critique of the nation is the very obverse of the argument for postnationalism "from above" made from two opposed positions – one, in which the sovereignty of the nation is sought to be bypassed in the interests of global capital, and the other, a Habermasian celebration of global universalism. Rather, the kind of postnationalism I refer to is better described as being "from below". Its politics can be represented by any idea that is counter-hegemonic, whether that hegemony refers to development, sexuality, caste/community or any other. But equally importantly, it must be seen as having two dimensions – one, "over" the nation, across national borders,



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and two, “under” the nation, resisting inclusion into the “larger” national identity, insisting on space/time trajectories that do not mesh with progressivist dominant narratives of nation and history.

The first dimension is easier in a sense, to recognize as a subversive strategy, for it begins with the assumption of existing nations, which it then interrogates. This can include cross-border solidarities of feminist, anti-nuclear and peace movements. In the recent (2025) conflict between India and Pakistan, amidst a very charged atmosphere, a joint statement calling for peace was issued by over a thousand feminists from both countries.

The other dimension of postnational politics - “under” the nation – is less obvious as a strategy, because it does not assume the prior existence of the nation. More significantly, its subversive edge may lie in the exact opposite of what animates the politics of “over” the nation – that is, the strategy of exit and movement across borders. The interrogation of the nation from under may involve rather, the refusal to move, as for example, in the struggles against big dams or mining operations that involve massive relocation of populations. It can include the struggles of different groups for control over their natural resources being opened up to capitalist exploitation.

This dimension may also involve claiming histories that run parallel to, that do not intersect with, that of the nation. People think of themselves being from a locality, not necessarily an abstract nation state. For example, in Gujarat after the 2002 massacre of Muslims, I met Zubeida in a relief camp. She had owned a small bangle business, destroyed by the rioters. In the shade of the neem tree protecting the dargah, the shrine in the grounds of which stood the relief camp, she chatted to me about Delhi, where she has relatives. But she turned out not to be from Gujarat originally. She asked me, "Bindra van gayi ho?" Have you been to Vrindavan, but she pronounced it in a local way, not the Sanskritized way the way I am saying it. Vrindavan is in another state of India, and is associated with the god Krishna's childhood, and is a very sacred spot of pilgrimage. No, I reply. She asked, "Tirath karne nahin gayi?" (You have never been there on pilgrimage?)

“Hum wahin se hain. Wahi hamara vatan hai.” (We are from there. That is our land.)



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Hamara “vatan”. Vatan means one’s homeland. But she didn’t think of the nation-state as home. Nor of any Muslim pilgrimage site. For this Muslim woman, Zubeida, her vatan was Bindraban, Vrindavan, the land of Krishna. She did not identify with any nation. She identified, like most ordinary people do, with a locality and its local culture.

The postnational involves the recognition and valuing of these multiple histories and identities.

Justice is anti capitalist

Capitalism is unjust. Violence is involved in establishing it, in enclosing commons, dispossessing people of their habitats. And it involves violence towards the environment.

Let us consider the idea of Degrowth – an idea that formally emerged in Southern Europe in 2008, but with roots going back to the 1970s. Degrowth is a call for downscaling of production and consumption that increases human well-being and enhances ecological conditions and equity on the planet. In other words, economic activity must not exceed the carrying capacity of the planet and it should promote human well-being, not the avaricious pursuit of wealth. Obviously, this would have a specific meaning in the context of the global North, quite different from how it would play out in the global South – but we do need to remember that there are extremely poor people in the North and extremely wealthy people in the South. The importance of the idea of Degrowth is that it delegitimizes the idea of natural and endless growth subscribed to in the South not only by elites, but even by the Left. The idea of Degrowth is thus radically anti-systemic. Degrowth feminists have issued a statement calling for a recognition of care-work as work, and “an end to the subalternisation of reproduction in service to the realm of production.” The social organisation of labour and care-work needs to be democratically rebuilt. The realm of public welfare “that has been so depleted by decades of neoliberalism, austerity, structural adjustment, and the privatisation of education and healthcare” needs to be reconstructed. Above all, our economies that are in the grips of “the growth paradigm founded in heteropatriarchal capitalist principles” must be led towards emancipation.

The feminist Degrowth response is one within an efflorescence of thinking around this core feminist idea of the value and marginalisation of care-work.



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Any attempt to deal with the ecological crisis only in centralised ways at the level of nation-states is bound to fail. Equally important are the secession into decentralised but interconnected local ways of life, a replenishing of the commons, and absolute rejection of the idea of growth. Such a retreat might require state facilitation, at least for a start. That would not be a passive apolitical act but rather a deeply political blowback against the continuing violence of corporate capital and the state systems that sustain it.

Let me refer to “rewilding” here, which is a specific ecological strategy, but I want to use the term also as a metaphor for a conscious political retreat from “civilisation”, which is usually counterposed to “wildness”. Rewilding can be of many kinds, which I won’t go into, but for example, Pradip Krishen is someone who practises rewilding in India, “a form of small-scale ecological restoration”, as he puts it. Contesting the idea of “compensatory afforestation”, he says:

“An old forest is a whole lot more than the sum of its trees. How do you recreate a community of plants, fungi, microbes, insects and animals that are all part of a living jungle ecosystem? How many decades might it take? And how do you call into being a soil teeming with micro-organisms and mycorrhiza that inhabit the humus that has taken 30,000 years to build up?”

Rewilding initiatives are happening in various parts of India, some initiated by middle-class people with an ecological vision, the cultural capital to embody it, and the capacity to attract funding, but these facts do not necessarily delegitimise what they are achieving. Most such initiatives do involve local communities in the process, people who do not otherwise find a voice or the space to act.

Alongside these, though, we must take on board living Adivasi and global indigenous people’s practices that preserve the biodiversity threatened, and often destroyed, by predatory capital in partnership with the state.

Linked to this is the idea of Food Sovereignty - a radical alternative to “food security”, which refers only to the availability of food. Food sovereignty, on the other hand, as defined by the Nyeleni Declaration of 2007, is “the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems. It puts the



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aspirations and needs of those who produce, distribute and consume food at the heart of food systems and policies rather than the demands of markets and corporations.” Food sovereignty, land sovereignty, rewilding and Degrowth together create a tapestry of linked practices that could escape, even triumph over, capitalism’s dreary concrete, like the pipal tree which secures its roots in high-rise building walls, threatening to split them open as it pushes them deeper; or like the weeds that spring up in the cracks of grey pavements.

Feminist, Ambedkarite, Postnational and Degrowth oriented perspectives in the 21st C recognize uniformity as anti-democratic, the local as a legitimate space of assertion, and imply a move to participatory forms of democracy – with all the uncertainties that these shifts imply, for this uncertainty is more ethical than the rigid certainties of the Nation State.

A just future is based, not on the eradication of multiple identities, not on “uniformity”, but on the proliferation of identities. To return to Picasso’s question in conclusion, I see that question, “rather small, isn’t she?” as the entry of “the outside” into a settled world, destabilising its codes of meaning, common sense, and order. I’m inspired here by the idea of “border thinking” first used by Gloria Anzaldúa and subsequently developed by decolonial thinkers, most prominently Walter D. Mignolo. As Mignolo puts it, “border thinking implies dwelling in the border, not crossing borders.” Decolonial border thinking, says Mignolo, involves “epistemic disobedience” towards normative, Eurocentric frameworks of knowledge. I would use the idea of the outside to indicate multiple and shifting borders even inside decolonial thinking.

Justice then is not about one big revolution. It is a daily nibbling away at social norms and suddenly, the whole landscape has changed before you know it.

In this space that we inhabit, in the future, I imagine a vibrant democracy, internally contested, locally rooted, recognizing heterogeneity, taking collective responsibility for ecological restoration and transformation, anti-capitalist and degrowth oriented, committed to social justice and gender justice, and always seeing democracy as a horizon, never to be reached, never to act as a closure, but keeping open the possibility of the emergence in unspecified futures, of new identities, new needs, new notions of justice.