

REFUGEE, MIGRATION, DIASPORA

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Lecture20

Lecture 20: Understanding Gendered Borderlands and Amar Mitra's Wild Goose Country

Thank you. Good morning and welcome back to the lecture series on Refugees, Migration, and Diaspora. So, today we will be talking about gendered borderlands and further examining the concept of borderlands through the lens of literary works. So, how literature has dealt with the concept of borderlands vis-à-vis South Asia, right, the South Asian politics and geopolitics. So, regarding the idea of borderlands, critic and scholar Gloria Anzaldúa suggests, I quote Anzaldúa here, '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.' Unquote. Unquote. So, the borderline itself has a certain heterotopic quality, qualities of heterotopia. It is a life in itself where certain normative values, certain normative, you know, concepts of lifestyle or what is considered normal in mainstream society are kind of experimented with.

These values are sometimes suspended, sometimes subverted, and so it is a very vague and undetermined place where different possibilities unfold. With the seminal work titled *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, Anzaldúa introduced the feminist conceptual scene and offered new ways of exploring relationships of power and domination, resistance and agency among women and men hitherto cast as the marginalized other—how their activities can question, defy, and resist their marginalized positions through their placement, their positioning, and their agential role in the vague borderland place. This is something that interests Anzaldúa's work, *La Frontera: The New Mestiza*.

So, Anzaldúa acknowledges the pain and anguish of otherness and seeks to reclaim its latent power by exploring how disempowered subjects from the fringes are labeled as other, and how they express their alternative identities and being through resistance in the borderland space and place. She coins the term *mestiza consciousness* or *mestizaje*, originally a feminist theory and methodology that examines the experiences of women of color and the Chicana people. She uses the term *mestiza consciousness* and *mestizaje* to reflect the border subjects' expressions, their discursive understandings of self and agency that incorporate spiritual transformations and psychic processes of exclusion and identification of feeling in-between cultures. So, the borderland people are constantly negotiating their identity because they belong to a liminal culture, a liminal language and place where they are shaped through multiple influences coming from different directions, especially referring to two abutting nation-states.

So, these people can connect their identity, trace their roots, and trace their affiliations to abutting nation-states. Usually, this is the case of borderland culture. All too often, borderlands is used as a catch-all that signifies, among other things, an uncharted territory or subjects whose identities are outside the mainstream. So, borderland, as I said, has its own habitat, its own culture, its own ways of survival and existence. And it is outside mainstream politics and the mainstream way of living.

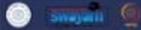
Right. Borderland is a heterotopia in itself where different possibilities unfold, where different states of one's being—or becoming rather—change, are made, are brought into existence. So, scholars Denise A. Segura and Patricia Zavella suggest that borderlands should be analyzed critically for the examination of complex relationships between structures and regionally or historically situated agency, right. Borderlands should be studied vis-à-vis the analysis of complex relationships between structures and regionally or historically situated agency.

An agency, an identity that is shaped through the history of the border, through the dynamics of a particular region. That is something all these determinants enable us to understand—a populace, a people that we call the borderland population. Understanding the intersections of historically specific regional dynamics, institutional configurations, and cultural expressions All these factors generate important theoretical and empirical work on gender and borderlands.

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- **Denise A. Segura and Patricia Zavella (2008)** suggests that borderlands should be analyzed critically for the analyses of complex relationships between structures and regionally or historically situated agency. Understanding the intersections of historically specific regional dynamics, institutional configurations, and cultural expressions would generate important theoretical and empirical work on gender and borderlands
- Different approaches of **Cultural studies** as a discipline emphasize the construction of hybridized border identities negotiated in response to forces from above and below, and therefore never fixed or bounded



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So, different approaches of cultural studies as a discipline emphasize the construction of hybridized border identities that are negotiated in response to forces from above and from below. And therefore, such borderline identities are never fixed or bounded. We have to understand that borderline identities, the border identities, are usually not fixed. They cannot be watertight. They are constantly in a state of flux and are shaped.

They happen, they evolve through responding to certain determinants, certain forces that come both from above—meaning the mainstream, the mainland politics—and as well as from below—meaning how the localized reality, the localized border culture, responds to the mainland or mainstream politics. So, what the mainland or the mainstream politics, the nation-state, have to give to the borderland people and further how the borderland people respond to such forces. All these factors come together in determining the fate, the future of the borderland culture.

In this respect, scholar and critic Chela Sandoval extends the notion of mestiza consciousness, thereby suggesting—I quote Sandoval at length here—this borderlands feminism calls up a syncretic form of consciousness made up of transversions and crossings. Its recognition makes possible another kind of critical apparatus and political operation in which mestiza feminism comes to function as a working chiasmus or a mobile crossing between races, genders, sexes, cultures, languages, and nations. So, we

understand that when we are talking about borderland feminism or borderland culture or even the case of mobile crossing, we are ultimately talking about a multi-layered identity, an identity that is very nuanced, that lies at the crossroads of different races, genders, sexes, cultures, nations, and languages. So, it is a very layered kind of identity that is being churned out through these multiple crossroads, right? A very complex identity that emerges through these intersections, through these crossroads, and such an identity is essentially hybrid in nature.

In the social sciences, borderlands research is growing in range and complexity. It explores women's agency in economic, political, or sociocultural activities that de-territorialize or span international boundaries. In this regard, critic Lynn Stephen undertakes ethnographic research, which weaves individual narratives and participant observation in terms of the migrants of Mexico and the United States. So, Stephen's work mainly focuses on the migrants of Mexico and the United States. It uses the methodology of studying individual narratives as well as participant observation.

Stephen incorporates a gender analysis of women's agency within patriarchal heteronormative discourses and migration with indigenous migrants' participation in the social field and the meshworks. She illuminates how structural forces as well as surveillance by state agencies and citizen groups limit the subjects' trans-border organizing activities. Despite such barriers, the migrants develop a sense of community over time. So, this is something very common we see—that the borderland culture has trans-border activity going on. Trans-border activities are very commonplace and part and parcel of the borderland culture, where life, sustenance, and basic survival are dependent on trans-border commercial activities, for example.

import and export, selling and buying. And so we see that the borderland culture is more incumbent on, more dependent on its immediate neighbors more than it depends on the citizen groups from the so-called same nation state. So the borderland people are more connected to They can identify more with the trans-border culture than they can with the citizen groups from the same nation state. Regarding the gendered borderlands, scholar Dennis Segura and Patricia Zavella suggests that a feminist borderlands project interrogates the multiple meanings of borders and borderlands.

There can be four key dimensions of borderlands, structural, discursive, interactional and agentic, any one of which can be a site of feminist analysis. Structural dimensions of a feminist borderlands project critic and analyze the effects of globalizing economies,

neoliberal state practices and the growing regional interdependence. Apart from populations that are joining migrant streams, geopolitical borders between the United States and Mexico, for example, or between Mexico and Guatemala, these borderland sites are you know, contain subjects that are in flight and that face, that experience extreme exploitative relationships and multiple dangers. So apart from a section of people that have identified themselves as part of the migrant streams, apart from that,

you know, the borderland culture contains certain subjects that are in a state of flight that are not even registered properly as migrants and they are subjected to exploitative relationships. They are being exploited in very many ways because of their jeopardized positions, especially vis-a-vis their homeland, their home state and so on. they are in the face of, they are facing, they are constantly facing multiple dangers. Discursive elements of Borderlands projects offer analysis of ideologies and practices related to racializations, femininities, masculinities and sexualities in order to point out the changeable, the mutable nature of intersecting power relations, right. So,

In the borderland culture, like I said, it is very difficult to fix one's identity, fix the possibilities of one's becoming. There are several, you know, ramifications going on. And so we have femininities, masculinities. They are constantly mutating in nature and there is a constant metamorphosis in terms of their identity, how the identity unfolds, right? and the changeable nature of their identities, you know, can be understood as a part of the intersecting power relations.

In these instances, the locally constructed meanings and practices around femininity, for example, become surveilled and contested as subjects seek their own subjectivities. So, there cannot be one meaning of femininity that applies to all or that becomes timeless. Some of these concepts are constantly being surveilled, they are being contested, they are being revisited, they are being challenged and they are being deconstructed and they are being reconstructed. This is how subjectivities are constantly, you know,

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- **Discursive elements of borderlands** projects offer analyses of ideologies and practices related to racializations, femininities, masculinities, and sexualities, in order to point out the changeable nature of intersecting power relations
- In these instances, the locally constructed meanings and practices around femininity, for example, become surveilled and contested, as subjects seek their own subjectivities
- **Interactional dimensions of borderlands** projects analyze the ways that exclusionary boundaries are actively produced based on race, class, gender, and sexuality



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changes, they are constantly in a state of flux. Interaction and dimensions of Borderlands projects analyze the ways that exclusionary boundaries are actively produced based on race, class, gender and sexuality. In these borderlands, subjects may feel like outsiders to certain exclusive social arenas or they contest expectations about appropriate displays of inclusion, right? So, borders are therefore volatile and fluid in nature and they thwart, they frustrate any kind of normative meanings and normative activities and understandings, right? So what the mainstream society in a nation state consider as inclusionary behavior or inclusionary inclusive policies may not amply include the borderland people.

They may not feel that such policies exist. You know, implemented by the nation-state, they are able to facilitate inclusion amply and in an appropriate manner. So, these borderline cultures are constantly questioning and problematizing the policies of inclusion that any nation has to offer. They are pushing, in a way, these policies because they Such policies are not considered cohesive enough.

They do not hold all the people together, and borderland people, more often than not, feel left out—they feel excluded through such perpetually inclusive policies. So, borderlands are usually volatile in nature. Feminist borderland projects include research that focuses on the subject's constructions of identities and expressions of agency, which negotiate structural, discursive, and interactional borders or geopolitical boundaries. In these examples, in these instances, the borderland subjects often take extraordinary creative measures to assert their own sense of self.

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- In these borderlands, subjects may feel like outsiders to exclusive social arenas or contest expectations about appropriate displays of inclusion. Borders are therefore volatile and fluid in nature that thwart normative meanings and understandings
- **Feminist borderlands projects** include research that focuses on the subjects' constructions of identities and expressions of agency that negotiate **structural, discursive, and interactional** borders or geopolitical boundaries. In these instances, borderland subjects often take extraordinary creative measures to assert their own sense of selves



So, borderland projects also disentangle the complexities of intersecting discursive power relations, which are attentive and respond to the socio-historical and regional processes that create and transform social inequalities, right? They are constantly attentive to the different socio-historical and regional dynamics that challenge and transform the existing social inequalities. Interrogating how discourses of race, class, gender, and sexuality can be reified ideologically but undermined in practice provides insight into the discursive configurations of borderlands. So, basically, to put this very plainly—in pen and paper, theoretically speaking—there could be a number of policies that a nation-state boasts, which talk about racial, class-wise, gender, and sexual equality of people, but in terms of practice, certain people are left out; they are made to stay at the fringes.

They become fringe elements, marginal elements. And so, the borderland politics comprises interrogating how there can be a gap, how there can be a lacuna between the reified ideology and the practice in place. Feminist Borderlands projects analyze social interactions within hierarchically organized settings that are framed by regional ideologies and normative behaviors, which can either reinforce or challenge inequalities. So, based on this understanding of a very volatile, fluid, and almost heterotopic borderland culture, we will now look at Amar Mitra's story, originally written in Bengali, titled Wild Goose Country. So, Amar Mitra's short story Wild Goose Country is set on the hilly border of West Dinajpur and is historically set in the year 1996.

The story is about the reality of borders that are reflected by the barbed wire fence defining the border between India and Bangladesh. So, it studies the borderland politics, the borderland culture that exists between India and Bangladesh in the year 1996 through the hilly border of West Dinajpur. Author Amar Mitra has utilized the figure of a lone

goose. So, this goose, the figure of this lone goose, becomes a repetitive symbol, almost a leitmotif throughout the story. The lone goose that is separated from its flock,

Unable to control the vertigo of fate, in order to express the futility of national borders. The author is using the symbol of this lone goose, which is unable to control the vertigo of fate, as a way of showing and expressing the futility of national borders as political divisions and the human impact of such borders. In this study of borderlands, Michiel Baud and Willem van Schendel used the term 'border' to refer to the political differences that resulted from state-building. And the scholars emphasize how, all across the world, boundaries became key elements in the new, increasingly global system of states. So, the nation-states are essentially built through authorizing

a nation, even as we see in the case of, so a nation, as Benedict Anderson also points out, is an imaginary community. There may not be a lot in common among the people living in the same or residing in the same nation within the same national border, but they are bound together as a part of an imagined community, right? This is in contradistinction with the borderland culture where people are actually very similar in the borderland place where two nation states are abutting, two nation states are adjacent to each other. We see that the barbed wire is very permanent as a symbol of separation.

However, the culture, the habits, the lifestyles of people on both sides of the border are like a mirror image. They are so similar that they render the devising or the definition of that border as a kind of farce, as almost a something that fails humanity in a way, a barbed wire that fails humanity in a way. So, the border between countries is a sharp line and impassable barrier from the perspective of national centers of authority, whereas, one sees that this impassable barrier, the so-called sharp line and impassable barrier is almost undone.

It is almost neutralized as a part of the ground reality. The borderlands are vast sceneries of exchanges between exchanges at the human level between individuals on both sides of the border. The borderland in the hilly area has a life of its own. It is a microcosm which is almost dissociated from their respective nation state's dynamics and politics.

The people from across the border, they can identify with each other. They trade, they do small trading, exchanging, buying and selling, where one can see an unsuspected unity of split populations through the culture of a marketplace. There is a market every day, a bazaar that is set, you know, periodically where the humanity operates, does not distinguish between, you know, people from that side and people from this side, that the

humanity merges together and they come together in terms of necessity. What is not available on this side of the border is bought and what is not available on the other side of the border is sold, right?

So, the borderland culture is, is also a part of basic sustenance, basic survival. It is a kind of preservation for the borderlands people. In the pedestrian reality of their lives, there was no sign of the border. There was just a sea of people who had swallowed up all the marks which demarcated one country from another.

So these are the lines from Wild Goose Country. People who own a house on one side of the border come to mow the grass on the other side. In exchange of doing that work, of course, the person is getting some money. Similarly, sugary delights or sweets, you know, they are sold. People just come to sell some homemade sweets

On this side of the border, and of course, there are smuggling activities going on. All these things are an unequivocal reality of the borderland culture. So these intricate networks of borderland transactions spark political squabbles, which result in the decision to create a barbed wire barrier—a permanent, impassable line or a wall that keeps, you know, trespassers or so-called infiltrators at bay. Now, coming to the story by Amar Mitra, 'Wild Goose Country,' we see that the character, rather the protagonist, Mazrul—Mazrul's visions of birds, which serve as a leitmotif throughout the story. And his vision of the wild goose, the lone wild goose flying high above in the sky, symbolizes his longing for a lost motherland on the other side of the barbed wire.

In the story, those who see undefined frontiers assume the white things flying in the sky as wild geese. Whereas, those who see the border as a concrete reality assume that those same white things are warplanes. So, depending—it is almost like an optical illusion happening here. Depending on which side of the ideology you belong to, you interpret the white things flying in the sky as wild geese or warplanes. People who consider the frontiers as undefined, people who consider the frontiers as fluid, who don't believe in the barbed wires, see the small white things flying in the sky as wild geese.

On the other hand, people who see borders, who believe in borders, who believe in the formation of nation-states through otherizing humanity, otherizing a section of people as part of another civilization and another culture, they see the same white things as warplanes. So, quoting from the story again: 'On tremulous wings, these flew across from the east towards the northwest.' So the two friends, Subir and Mazrul, are seeing the same thing through different angles of a self-same prism. So there is a prism located between

their visions, and they see the self-same thing through different angles, through different perspectives, which point to how they perceive a geopolitical space—the dynamics of a geopolitical space.

'Wild-Goose Country'

- These intricate network borderland transactions spark political squabbles, resulting in the decision to create a barbed-wire barrier to keep trespassers or "infiltrators" at bay.
- **Mazrul's visions of birds** serve as a **leitmotif** throughout the story, **symbolising his longing for a lost motherland.**
- In the story, those who see undefined frontiers assume the white things flying in the sky as wild geese; those who see borders, assume that they are warplanes.
- *"On tremulous wings, these flew across from the east towards the north-west".*



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Whether they see it as part of a continuity or an irreconcilable gap, whether they have accepted the barbed wire or they still do not accept it, they question such a gap, such a wall between West Bengal and Bangladesh. Mazrul, with his hypertrophied sense of the past, is left trailing in disenchantment, just like the flock of wild geese that have flown away to oblivion, leaving that one straggling goose behind. So, Mazrul represents that lone straggling goose that is flying behind the flock, right? Mazrul is in a state of nowhere-ness,

between, you know, his current, you know, nation-state and what he considers as his homeland. Mazrul represents the lone goose that had apparently wandered away from its group and was now wobbling across the sky. So, he refuses to cross the border, which has already eliminated the option of a return home. So, the paradox that Mazrul faces is that once he migrates to the other side or to Bangladesh as an Indian citizen, he would return only to be identified as a fugitive or an outsider. He cannot reclaim his Indianness or his Indian belonging once he has migrated to the other side of the border.

'Wild-Goose Country'

- He refuses to cross the border, which has already eliminated the option of a return home. He could migrate to the other side as an Indian citizen and return to be identified as a fugitive or outsider. In the end, he sees that Partition is a break in one's destiny, depicted by barbed wires ripping through one's flesh.

Mazrul's, Aloka's, and Subir's families have been permanently divided by the Partition.

- Despite the fact that two of Mazrul's uncles fled with their families in 1953, when Mazrul meets **Amal Bhattacharya**, who has stayed in Bangladesh, he is struck by memories of his family and cousin, his beautiful aunt whose whereabouts are constantly marked by an absence.



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And yet, he has family on the other side, and he yearns, he longs to meet them as well. In the end, he sees that partition is a break. It is like a crack or a fracture in one's identity, depicted through this barbed wire that rips, that literally rips through one's flesh. All these different characters that we see in the story—Mazrul, Aloka, Subir, and their families—they have been permanently divided by the great divide, by the partition. Despite the fact that two of Mazrul's uncles fled with their families back in 1953 when Mazrul meets Amal Bhattacharya.

Amal Bhattacharya, who is just like Mazrul. He is a minority living in Bangladesh, just like Mazrul is on the wrong side—the so-called wrong side of the border. He is a Muslim who has stayed back on the Indian side of Bengal. Amal Bhattacharya is a Hindu Bengali who has stayed in Bangladesh as a Hindu minority,

'Wild-Goose Country'

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And once Mazrul meets Amal, he is struck by memories of his family and cousin, especially his beautiful aunt, whose whereabouts are constantly marked by absence. So this aunt is once again mentioned several times throughout this story. An aunt who is

very beautiful, but no one knows where she went, whose whereabouts are unknown. One could surmise—the reader could conclude in a way—that this aunt is, so the reader could deduce in a way that this reference to the beautiful aunt is a symbol of undivided India or undivided Bengal.

It's beautiful. It's the concept of, you know, togetherness, a unified intercommunal harmony, intercommunal brotherhood. But this aunt, whom everyone loved, cannot be found anywhere. No one knows where she went. Whenever she is mentioned in the story, her mention is constantly marked by absence somewhere.

So is the unified concept of motherland absent throughout the narrative. The concept of unified motherland is replaced, it is kind of displaced by the symbol of the barbed wire. So, we see that Mazrul is desperate for news about them, about his family and makes frantic inquiries to Amal who is a mutual acquaintance. Amal knows his family back in Bangladesh and so Mazrul is asking about their location, their news in order to fulfill his desire to travel across time, he sets off on a journey.

So we see towards the end of the story that Mazrul grasps the barbed wire that wounds his skin, that tears off his skin, leaving red spots as a proof of his failed attempt to infiltrate the past. The past that one leaves behind, the homeland that one leaves behind, cannot be really revisited again. And so Mazrul cannot transcend, he cannot overcome the reality of partition. In the end, he cannot cross the barbed wire.

'Wild-Goose Country'

- He is desperate for news about them and makes frantic inquiries to Amal, a mutual acquaintance, regarding their location. In order to fulfill his desire to travel across time, he set off on a journey.
- Mazrul grasps the barbed wire that wounds his skin, leaving red spots as proof of his **failed attempt to infiltrate the past and transcend reality of Partition.**
- As Aloka, Subir, and Amal struggle to free him from the wire, they realise that despite the flair of nostalgia, **reconstructing a long-forgotten house is impossible.**
- These folks have been trapped and their identities have been altered by the boundary.



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So he cannot really transcend or kind of cross over the reality of partition. The reality of partition succumbs him and he has to give in. So, as Aloka, Subir and Amal, all of them struggled to free Mazroor from the barbed wire, they realize that despite the flare of nostalgia that is present in his heart, reconstructing a long forgotten house, reconstructing

a long forgotten homeland is impossible. All these folks have been trapped in a loop of time, in a time loop and their identities have been altered by the boundary.

So their mental scape contains that idea, that notion of a homeland. But the boundary line has actually altered their contemporary reality. Right now, they are physically present in a reality that is very different from their mental scape—the nostalgic memory they foster, that they cherish in their hearts. So, artworks on the partition of India bring into sharp focus the ambiguity of the notions of border and boundary, as well as nation and homeland. These narratives poignantly portray the dilemmas of people, their multifaceted identities and realities, who see only fuzzy frontiers—for these people who have migrated from

another land, they see the frontier as only a fuzzy reality, not as a full reality, and they have memories of these emotional homelands. However, these homelands have been irrevocably separated through a borderline that has been drawn and through the existence of two different nations. As two separate nations—or rather, three separate nations—are born out of one, the emotional homelands cannot be revisited again. In reality, these borders prevent them from going back.

So, in the case of the traders we see in Amar Mitra's story, *Wild Goose Country*, they are involved in selling and buying on the border, both legally and illegally. And that posits the border as a porous identity. For example, there is a shortage of something as essential as Vicks on one side, so it needs to be procured from the other side. So, that does not really amount to smuggling.

It becomes a mini-narrative in itself. One side does not have fish or Vicks or something as essential as, you know, it could be part of one's staple diet or it could be some grains that one side is selling to the other, which does not really amount to smuggling but to preservation and sustenance. So, while the border on land can be fenced off with barbed wire, many critics have sarcastically questioned how the borderline can run through water and how the borderline that runs through water is to be enforced. How can one understand this? Where a river ends in India and continues in Pakistan or Bangladesh.



This kind of question actually renders the border as a farcical, you know, imposition. It's a farce that has been imposed on India, the different nation-states through the policies of the different nation-states, which has an impact on the immediate humanity living in the borderlands, which has an impact on their microcosmic society that has a thriving transnational culture at the borderlands. So these impositions, these impositions at the national levels, have a direct impact on the borderland culture, the microcosmic realities, the microcosmic culture of the borderland people, who enjoy transnational interaction and exchange on a day-to-day basis, at a mundane level of existence.



I would like to stop my lecture here today. Let us discuss further in our next lecture. Thank you.