

# **Kurdish migrant women and the re-conceptions of race within forms of feminism**

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## **Abstract:**

The main aim of this paper is to discuss research into the very unique set of migration circumstances of Iraqi Kurdish women migrants to the UK, and illuminate how categories and concepts of race have been applied and projected onto certain women by some postcolonial and Black feminist writers because they have assigned whiteness as a homogenised concept that excludes whiteness outside of a Western context.

Data from the research sees many of the Kurdish women shifting between racial and social spaces that impact their experiences (Brodkin, 2002). These shifts challenge concepts and models of power held within the work of some feminist writers—specifically those who can be interpreted as fixing and positioning women in particular racial subjectivities.

What has been significant in terms of race and forms of feminism is the Kurdish women's racial identification as white, and certain gender-related struggles with which that they also identify. Whilst most of the women generally did not wholly identify directly with all struggles and concepts held within the work of some white Western feminist writers, fundamental groundings, such as notions of women's rights and equality, found conceptualised within them did hold much appeal to, and a strong sense of identification for, the women. This strong appeal to and identification with sat in contrast to much less appealing concepts of only oppressive relationships that exist between women that ground other forms of feminism, such as some postcolonial and Black feminist writers (Anzaldúa, 1987; Minh-ha, 1988; Mohanty, 1991; hooks, 1984; Lorde, 1984).

It further suggests that it is possible for women's bodies to move through actual, social, and racial spaces, and to do so as an empowering experience of self-determination and not always as victims of oppressive governing dominant defining powers (Appadurai, 1999; Brodkin, 2002; Ong, 2003). The Kurdish women's movements, through actual, social, and racial spaces, illustrate how forms of transnational feminism are unfixed forms of feminism that are ever-changing, and being reorganised, recontextualised, and reconstituted.

## **Introduction**

This paper derives from an ethnographic research project about the re-settlement experiences of Iraqi Kurdish Muslim women in the UK. Drawing on a strand of data collect it explores how the Kurdish women show they shift between and push the boundaries and limitations of racial categories that have been set within the work of certain feminist writers. The evidence for this is illustrated by the fact that the women situate themselves explicitly as white and Westernised, and in so doing embark on a process of spanning multiple and contradictory racial spaces that see them reclaim a 'dialectic of identity' (Benhabib, 2004, p. 209).

## **Feminism and Racial Discourses**

There have been moves recently, in feminist theories concerning diversities that address a structured world whereby women's positions within it are built around race.

In terms of feminist work, Frankenberg (1993) has been significant in addressing issues surrounding whiteness. Frankenberg (1993) exposes the privilege of whiteness and the process of de-constructing whiteness in her work. This is useful in illuminating the otherwise concealed social, political, and cultural positions that white people occupy, and has

demonstrated that whiteness has been—and is—invisible; and yet it is the marker against which all other racial categories are measured.

Writers such as Frankenberg (1993, pp. 238, 293) and Ahmed (2004, p. 59) have suggested that turning to whiteness is essential for exposing its privilege, and thereby for highlighting the differences that exist between women. But Ahmed (2004), in particular, calls for there to be another turn—a ‘double turn’ as she puts it—away from whiteness in order to de-centralise it and deconstruct the racial hierarchical model in which it currently exists. For Ahmed (2004, p. 42), whiteness must be viewed within a ‘rainbow of colours’ that lie alongside each other, rather than whiteness being a disconnected privileged space. I suggest that whiteness is more complex than Ahmed’s ‘rainbow of colour’ (Ahmed, 2004, p. 42) proposes, and that to fix women both racially and socially in such a way negates migration experiences that may provide for shifts between simultaneous occupations of racial spaces.

Work done on the study of whiteness, even critical whiteness studies, raises questions of the audience to which such work address itself. And does that intended audience change, dependent on time and place, despite the work assuming polarised Black, ‘of colour’ and white identities that are fixed in time and place? If so, how have—and how do—the experiences of migrants challenge such fixation in time and place? In the field of migration this is especially relevant, considering the importance relocations may play in people’s construction and reconstruction of identities for themselves and for others around them (Foucault in Rabinow, 1997, pp. 177–178, 300).

Studies of whiteness have tended to assume the victimisation of Black women and women ‘of colour’. In such studies, whiteness is positioned as privileged, and occupants of the opposing space (i.e., Black or ‘of colour’) necessarily position such spaces as automatically underprivileged. I suggest that not all Black women and women ‘of colour’ necessarily see themselves as underprivileged in all situations, at all times, and in all places. I suggest that privilege and underprivilege could, indeed, be part of shifting patterns in women’s lives, especially when considering experiences of migration.

The focus on installing a separation between whiteness and non-whiteness has had a tendency to victimise all assigned to non-whiteness and provide privilege exclusively for all assigned to whiteness. Furthermore, it fails to ask which women identify themselves as ‘white’, or ‘not quite white’, as ‘not Black’, as ‘Black’, or as ‘of colour’, and at what times and in what places they do that. It assigns colour and race to women in a restrictive and static way that may yet prove to be inappropriate and unwelcome by some women—particularly by migrant women who move locations and may more easily occupy different (even multiple)

racial identities.

In contrast, Ang-Lygate (1997) has proposed that ‘the space is there to examine complexities and contradictions without losing sight of feminist ideas of sisterhood, social justice and freedom from oppression’ (Ang-Lygate, 1997, p. 181). The women’s collective proposed by Ang-Lygate (1997, p. 181) grows out of an argument surrounding (what has become in feminisms) a false separation between white and non-white women whom, it has been assumed, occupy very particularly different racial and, therefore, social spaces; this is in place of an awareness that women who have been assumed to occupy non-white racial spaces may possibly self-define, and therefore occupy, what has been assumed to be exclusively white social and racial spaces. I suggest that women’s shifts between racial and social spaces have been much more of a possibility than has so far been proposed within feminist arguments. I believe it is possible for forms of feminism to be transformed through the recognition of how and why women identify particular social and racial commonalities with each other, whilst also why and how they simultaneously, and sometimes contradictorily, cite social and racial un-commonalities with each other.

More recent feminist migration studies have been useful in exploring the spaces between what has become the installation within feminisms of a non-white/white racial divide. Brodtkin (2002) has investigated how law, policy, work, and popular culture pigeonhole migrants as ‘other’, as ‘of colour’, and as ‘outside the “norm”’. Crucially, however, she shows how some ‘others’ have become socially acceptable over different times and in different places; how some migrants who had been cast as ‘unacceptables’ and ‘undesirables’ by dominant powers and discourses can become, over different times and places, ‘acceptable’; and how it has been possible for them to move between ‘unacceptable’ and ‘acceptable’ social and racial spaces.

Feminist writers who speak only of differences and diversity between women tend to fix women into particular racial categories and social spaces without acknowledging that movement and self-determination are possible within and between those categories and spaces. However, exploration into the experiences of more recent migrations have shown that such racial categories and social spaces are more negotiable and related to more complex interlocking subjectivities than Black and postcolonial feminist writers have suggested so far (Appadurai, 1999, p. 32).

The majority of the Kurdish women interviewed frequently referred to a strong belief in notions of women’s rights and equality. Within feminism, that referent marker of equality has been exposed by Black, postcolonial, and Muslim feminist writers as being the white

Western women (Mohanty, 1991, p. 52).

Some feminist theorists, such as Lorde (1984), hooks (1982, 1984, 1989), Anzaldúa (1987), Minh-ha (1988), Mohanty (1991), Spivak in Landry and Maclean (1996), and Ahmed (1998) have focused heavily on the differences and diversities that exist between women, suggesting that liberal equality discourse (Engles, 1973, p. 72) needs to be dismantled. It is, however, presumptuous to assume that all women who have been categorised by such feminist theorists as ‘different’ from the referent marker want to see such a deconstruction and dismantling. Imposing ‘difference’ on certain women reinforces the referent marker’s exclusive and privileged position, and also serves to somewhat homogenise that referent marker space as white and Western, and assumes the right to govern women and shape them as ‘different’.

The Kurdish women’s experiences of racial positioning and identity forces the referent marker space to be opened up, disrupting its oppressive power flow, and the way that power has been focused upon. The way in which the majority of the Kurdish women have done this is through a process of assertion and strategies of self-definition. The following section seeks to demonstrate more explicitly how this is achieved.

### **Research Data Results**

This strand of research data relates to the ways in which dominant powers and discourses have been operating in shaping and governing the racial identities of the Kurdish women in particular ways. It explores the complexities of how the women accept and understand such shaping and governance, replicating the same governance they experience themselves over other women. I suggest that this governance may provide something of an uncomfortable challenge to some Black and postcolonial feminist writers, such as hooks (1989, pp. 35–36, 42–43), Lorde (1984, p. 116), Minh-ha (1988, p. 73), Mohanty (1991, pp. 51–80), Spivak (1985, pp. 120–130; 1996, p. 292) and Ahmed (2000, p. 85)—who have assumed often that processes of ‘othering’ are largely undertaken by women from presumed privileged and white Western social spaces. It also explores how the women seek to subvert, challenge, and resist this in strategies of self-determination, thereby opening up the possibility of breaking out of points of assigned governance, and of occupying multiple conflicting racial and social spaces at the same time.

An example of how the women felt they were defined as refugees and asylum-seekers, and how they desired to escape such governance as being a part of a particularly undesirable group, came when interviewee twenty three confided that she wanted to move to

live in another area of town. She explained it was important for her to move in order to re-determine herself:

*Participant:* I want to go to a different area. I want to go to [an area of town]. Yeah, it's quiet and all the people are English. Here there are too many people, and they are refugees, and it's busy. Busy everything. Yeah, it's nice [an area of town]. Yeah, nice and quiet.

*Researcher:* When you say 'English', what do you mean?

*Participant:* White. Yeah, I like this.

Moving into white neighbourhoods was a strategy for escaping the discourses governing certain racially-constituted areas of town as 'undesirable' (Brodkin, 2002). The women's view of themselves as racially 'acceptable', and being closer to whiteness than 'otherness', was put succinctly by interviewee twenty two, who said of meeting British people:

When I meet people I say I am from Iraq. They say, 'What! Why are you not Black?' I tell them we are not Black, the Kurdish people. No, because Kurdish people from the north, they are not Black. But some Arab people, you can find some people, in Arab people, yes.

In a process of 'othering' and self-making (Foucault in Rabinow, 1997, pp. 177–178, 300), the women defined the 'other' as Black and Arab, and themselves as not Black—and often as white. There was a sense of them defining themselves racially as not-Black, and not-Arab, and there was surprise when dominant discourses defined the women in ways conflicting with this self-making. One participant illustrates what surprise and anxiety came when she experienced British people defining her as Pakistani:

Somebody just said, 'You bloody Pakistani,' although I am not from Pakistan. I think he must have been drunk and that he saw me differently.

Evidence shows that the women themselves made use of such discourses in order to produce and define themselves against those they define and produce as 'other'; yet, at the same time they were confronted and contradicted by the fact that dominant powers and discourses made use of the same strategies in 'othering' them.

Data collected outside of the interview situation illustrates also this well. I was asked

how British people see Kurds. I was told that, before coming to the UK, the Kurds thought of themselves as white. But since coming to the UK, they were confronted with the fact that they are often seen as Black. Participant ten said, ‘We thought we were white until we came here. Then we realised we are Black to you.’

The vast majority of the Kurdish women have represent a group of women who may well be defined by Black and postcolonial feminist writers as non-Western, but who feel comfortable with the concepts of liberal equality and rights discourse, and with processes of ‘othering’ that have been advocated by the work of some white Western feminists, which they employ towards other women. Therefore, there are elements of some forms of white Western feminism with which the vast majority of participants felt an affinity, a sense of some kind of sisterhood through shared struggles for equality and rights (Mojab, 2001, p. 10).

Much of what the Kurdish women expressed does not ignore the differences between women and the privileges that autochthonous British women enjoy. The women who spoke of shared struggles for equality and rights did not dismiss the concepts in some forms of white Western feminism as wholly irrelevant to them, but neither did they align themselves wholly with them. The study participants only align themselves in a very limited way (if at all) with concepts held within some Black and postcolonial forms of feminism. The women, more generally, distanced themselves from postcolonial and Black experiences, associating closely with a more socially acceptable experience of whiteness.

This reveals the extent to which certain women set their own social contexts, resisting both white Western feminist concepts (MacKinnon, 1991, p. 15; Daly, 1973, p. 178; 1978, p. 11) that have automatically sought to exclude them through processes of homogenisation, and Black and postcolonial feminist concepts (Lorde, 1984, pp. 46–47; Anzaldúa, 1987, pp. 85–86; Mohanty, 1991, pp. 59, 61) that have sought to include them automatically within their racial concepts. However, the Kurdish women set new boundaries and introduce limitless movement between racial categories, working to open up different possibilities of being not previously considered by feminist writers.

## **Conclusion**

This research shows evidence that challenges some of the conceptions of race that currently exist within certain feminist arguments. With all the Kurdish women racially identifying as white, this meant they themselves did not identify with that main focus of those forms of feminism and that, at the same time, they were somewhat alienated and excluded from those feminist writers’ investigations.

The process of migration has been key to many of the Kurdish women's shift between, not only literal space and boundaries, but also racial spaces. And because of this unique shifting experience, they have been able also to migrate through, and position themselves across and within, the context of different forms of feminism according to their own self-determination; thereby, they have resisted being positioned in particular ways (for example, as non-white) and of being impacted by postcolonial legacies by particular feminist writers.

The majority of the Kurdish women's self-identification as white demonstrates a debunking of concepts of what it means to be racially white within certain feminist arguments, and of which feminist writers have assigned, and do assign, certain women as white and non-white. This reconceptualisation of whiteness challenges feminist writers to look at how they have produced some women in particular ways, and in so doing how that has alienated and excluded some women from them.

By saying that Western forms of feminism are exclusively white in nature, some postcolonial, Black, and Muslim feminist writers have reinforced that exclusivity and, in turn, have made essential both whiteness and Westernisation. They have intertwined whiteness with Westernisation and produced them as one fixed and inseparable concept that excludes certain women who may identify as white or as Western. I subscribe to the position that forms of white Western feminism have clumsily attempted to speak for all women, having advocated a woman experience, and that in so doing they have negated the diversities and differences between women that postcolonial and Black feminist writers have illuminated. However, in many ways, despite other failings, white Western feminist writers do not exclude the possibility of any women from identifying with or joining up with those concepts and theories, through their production of a singular monolithic woman experience. Neither is this true when taking parts of those concepts and theories and reimagining them and making them their own—of re-claiming, re-conceptualising, and reconstituting them in multiple and different ways, especially in relation to challenging recent postcolonial and Black feminist writers.

For most of the Kurdish women, a focus on the universal oppression of women (something that features largely in forms of white Western feminism) is a very attractive concept with which they relate and strongly identify. The following statement from interviewee five illustrates well how many of the Kurdish women identify more strongly with Western concepts of women's oppression than with concepts that relate more directly to racial difference:

I don't know why. I'm very sorry I say these things. Even my sisters, they say the same. I don't say we have been more English. I am not saying that we are being more Western, but I think these ideas are more for us [more for Kurdish women].

My sister, she is doing the research, and when she went to it. Well, it's been five years since she has been in Sweden. So when she went to Egypt [to do the research] she was very happy. 'Oh, at last I'm going to an Arab country!' You know, the same food, the same as our culture, these things. But when she came back, she said, 'I'm never going again; not even watching any Arabic channel on TV'. She said, 'I can't, you know?'

Of course, the women identifying themselves as racially white were not always straightforward. A number of the women spoke about how this self-identification was challenged when, whilst very limited, 'close encounters' (Ahmed, 2000, pp. 161–181) with the local autochthonous population did take place and resulted in experiences of negativity, of insults, and of racial abuse. Employing processes of mitigation that involved installing and maintaining distance encounters between themselves and particular groups of people proved to be empowering and positive experiences for many of the Kurdish women.

In summary, the majority of the Kurdish women were able, from their migration through literal space and borders, to experience movement through social and racial spaces, whether that was through processes of self-making or through production by external characters and agencies (Foucault in Rabinow, 1997, pp. 177–178, 300). Because of this physical migration and social movement, many of the Kurdish women were able to connect to what were, for them, different aspects of different concepts within different forms of feminism.

It suggests that it is possible for women's bodies to move through actual, social, and racial spaces, and to do so as an empowering experience of self-determination and not always as victims of oppressive governing dominant defining powers, as Gedalof (2003) and Mojab (2001, pp. 72, 75–77) have suggested. The Kurdish women's movements, through actual, social, and racial spaces, illustrate how forms of transnational feminism are unfixed forms of feminism that are ever-changing, and being reorganised, recontextualised, and reconstituted.



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