

Episode 6: Resisting Reconciliation with Nayanika Mookherjee

Interviewer – Lucie McNeil

Interviewer:

We all love stories, stories about ourselves, about how we live and what the future might hold. We know that's why lots of people, myself included, just love being part of book festivals, to explore the story behind that individual's unbelievable way of thinking up a book, right there, up close, to try to understand a different way of looking of being from a different seat. This is what anthropologists do too, listening, learning, and holding a multiverse of other people's stories so that we can question, often, entrenched perspectives and think again, because we're still very new here on the planet. Anthropologists, help us understand where our present day conditioning comes from to loosen its grip a little bit.

Interviewer:

So we took a tea break or two over summer in Durham University, one of the largest anthropology departments in the UK, with six of their researchers. Researchers who are on vastly different journeys to understand many different groups and individuals' ways of being. Their stories can help us think about how we live now and next.

Nayanika Mookherjee:

So yeah, so it's more about thinking about non forgiveness, non reconciling as another form of resistance and as a position of politics rather than equating it to violence or revenge. It would be nice to do work, which is less heavy, but maybe I'm drawn to it. Frozenness of a reconciliation is important to regain one's agency in the phase of reconciliation, which really takes away all our agency.

Interviewer:

Nayanika Mookherjee's work explores how survivors of post-conflict violence can find internal agency from non reconciliation over the normative narratives of forgiveness. We caught up with Nayanika over video, at home, just back from a trip to India.

Nayanika Mookherjee:

I'm a political anthropologist, but I'm also a feminist anthropologist, and that is quite vital and important in all of the work I had done. And that kind of goes back to kind of growing up... I was a feminist when I was eight, let's say, growing up in a single parent home in India with three women; my sister, my mother, and myself. And so, that was a kind of very formative thing in any of the things I had done. And what got me into anthropology has a link to that. I mean, when you say, "What do you do as a kid?" I read a lot because we didn't have the funds to go on holidays. So in summer holidays, I would read a lot. And one of the most formative books for me became, as a 12 year old, reading Anne Frank, a kind of standard Anne Frank book for every 12 year old.

Nayanika Mookherjee:

So being feminist came very naturally as part of the life trajectory, itself. But also, I was always interested in the humanities, even though I had marks very good for a science student. Marks which would make me all the kind of science subject thing, but I chose to do humanities and social science and were in very good institutions with subsidized fees, often fees being paid by various people for both of us, both our sisters. But I knew we had to take various exams because exams would allow you to have free education.

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Nayanika Mookherjee:

So I did a political science undergraduate degree in Kolkata, in one of the best colleges, Presidency College, which is very well known. In a class of 11, fantastic class. For three years, we were a class of 11. But then I found politics quite dry and I decided to move to sociology and I went off, did again, the entrance examination to go and do my master's in Delhi, in Jawaharlal Nehru University. And within that... And one of the interesting things, this links up to anthropology very precisely. It was a sociology department, but in terms of the history of anthropology in South Asia, the more interesting anthropology, which is critical of its colonial baggage, happens in the sociology departments, right, because there is a lot of problematic baggages still there in many of the South Asian anthropology departments, which wants to focus on tribes or indigenous communities as an anthropological object.

Nayanika Mookherjee:

So studying the sociology department, we were also studying anthropology, and at the same time... So a lot of work... How I came to anthropology, a lot of amazing teachers, professors, and that led to a scholarship to do my PhD in UK, and I came to London. And that was in SOAS, School of Oriental and African Studies, which was also sociology and anthropology department. And what I do now, what I teach, what I research, actually brings all these issues together; my politics degree, my sociology, my anthropology and kind of political anthropology as a framework, within which, I feel most comfortable. And actually I feel comfortable calling myself an anthropologist, in spite of its continual colonial baggage. But at the same time, it's a really dynamic, interesting discipline, which I think, is addressing the very problems of the world we are facing today and of the past and the current. And there seems to be less discussions about this compared to other social science disciplines.

Nayanika Mookherjee:

So even though anthropology is a problematic discipline, I still feel okay to call myself an anthropologist, being a South Asian, being Indian, itself. So yeah. So that's what... long-winded story, but it kind of links up as you might see, links up to why and how I came to do anthropology and continue to do anthropology and enjoy or like calling myself a political anthropologist, and a feminist.

Interviewer:

I really appreciate that explanation because I think a lot of people don't really understand that strain around anthropology. So the normative prevalence in our global society rather appeals, often, for a state of reconciliation and forgiveness. Yet you look at the position of irreconciliation, especially for endemic impunities. And forgiveness, I should say, or non forgiveness seems a huge subject to look into. I mean, the very essence of it is looking at other behaviors. So how do you get your arms around it? How did you start? Give us an example of one group you looked at or you worked with, and how you do that ethnographically. Just give us a project so that we can get a real sort of bead on how you got going.

Nayanika Mookherjee:

So before I give you an example, one of the things in some ways, while we are thinking, talking about futures and talking about emergencies or as Veena Das, who's a very well-respected anthropologist, talks about as critical events, one of our big primary books. So many of our research interlocutors would be experiencing conflicts. I work on, primarily, post-conflict context in terms of the kind of politics I look at, anthropologically, they would be... and how they experience these conflicts, wars, but also, after the post-conflict setting, how people are addressing injustices or seeking redress about these conflicts. So in

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some ways, my idea of futures is linked to the kind of futures envisage by those seeking redress or struggling to seek justice for historic and political wrongdoings.

Nayanika Mookherjee:

And so, one of the things that the... Peace and reconciliation is a normative form. It's a template given out from the UN, 2004, United Nations. But my work has been, primarily, on looking at the public memories of wartime sexual violence during the Bangladesh war of 1971. And what I found, among many of my interlocutors, which included survivors of wartime sexual violence, who were coming forward and talking about it, about the experience of various sets of reasons, as well as survivors who had seen their fathers being killed in front of their eyes, and this was obviously perpetrated by the West Pakistani army and their local collaborators during the Bangladesh war.

Nayanika Mookherjee:

So many of my friends and research interlocutors would say, "The day Pakistan builds a memorial in Islamabad, that day, I might think," they don't even say, "I will," "I might think of forgiving people." So forgiveness is not a template because it's... And that is what made me think, primarily, about how many post-conflict contexts propose reconciliation as a framework to kind of move on. It needs a happy future. But at the same time, reconciliation allows, in a way, it's a positive and a normative way forward. And this is what I am exploring, last year, in 2022, the book that was published called *On Irreconciliation*, an edited volume, which I edited with other colleagues.

Nayanika Mookherjee:

I want to explore this kind of unaddressed issue because it's a difficult uncomfortable issue. But many of us working in post-conflict context, are coming across it, where survivors are saying, "I will only forgive if justice has been served." So it's a less examined lens of analysis, through which, ideas of futures are configured by survivors of genocidal and institutional injustices. So yeah. So it's more about thinking about non forgiveness, non reconciling as another form of resistance and as a position of politics, rather than equating it to violence or revenge. So this is the important and interest... important distinction, that needs to be made about the framework of a irreconciliation we are talking about.

Interviewer:

Absolutely. I mean, it is upending, what people think is common sense and questioning, what gets taken for granted around terms like forgiveness and reconciliation. I think you were just about to tell me about some of the particular projects in post-conflict areas that you've worked in.

Nayanika Mookherjee:

So for example, most of my work has been among survivors of wartime sexual violence in Bangladesh. And these constituted a range of women, who would be landless women, to middle class women who are sculptors or those who are sex workers. So, specifically, focusing on, I would remember, accounts of Moina, one of the landless women who has come forward to give her testimony against the war criminals. But what becomes an important criticism, drawing from the survivors, is to also look at the testimonial process. If the testimonial process of recording their testimonies become another form of transgression, then it is... So there've been various instances where, the survivors accounts have been recorded without their consent, they have been videoed, so there has been a massive transgression on the part of, also the human rights community and the feminist community.

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Nayanika Mookherjee:

And so, they would say; the survivors, Moina, in this instance, would say, "Itihāsa ki śudhu'i itihāsēra pātāya? Karmē ki kichu nē'i?" in Bengali, which means, "Is history only in the pages of history? Is there nothing in action?" And this account, it's precisely, their form.. There's Moina's form of a irreconciliation about aligning with the nation's story when she or a family hasn't received those specific form of reparations that they were asking, whether it's a son's job or a child not being able to go to school. So there are everyday life events which might make things happier for them, without those kind of reparative processes being served. They are in a state of irreconciliations. Irreconciliation then becomes, a process of a frozen moment.

Nayanika Mookherjee:

Another example I want to give, which is one of my recent work, I'm working with various adoptees, adult adoptees who were adopted from Bangladesh to Western Europe and North America. I'm also working with many of the adoptees from within UK, which has been recently in the news, who were removed from their the mother and baby homes between 1947 and 1970s. And many of those adoptees, actually, refer to the concept of a irreconciliation as something powerful. Because like the survivors, they have also given testimony in the human rights committee, in parliament but the UK government has turned around to say that they are not apologizing, in spite of the Scottish government and the Welsh government having apologized.

Nayanika Mookherjee:

And so, this is something that was put forward by Harriet Tarman and Joanna Cherry from MSP from Scotland. But the UK government, they have said sorry for society of that time, but they are not apologizing though the church, the baby homes, everything that operated, which ensured forced removal of these children from the young women because just because they were not married, they were all run under the laws dictated by the state. So this is, again, the term irreconciliation, I find, is being taken up among the transnational adoptees of Bangladesh. They, themselves, read my work and they, themselves, kind of think this term is also... has resonance for them.

Interviewer:

Are you challenged a lot by, either, those in your profession or outside of your profession for being a proponent of this state? How are you challenged with putting forth this idea of irreconciliation as resistance or as a healthy state?

Nayanika Mookherjee:

One of the questions that I have been asked is, "What would a society be where there is no forgiveness? What is the imagination of a society where there is no forgiveness?" And so, this is where the distinction needs to be made. It's precisely, irreconciliation is trying to kind of put forward a feeling, an uncomfortable feeling, which is often not addressed, because it is uncomfortable, right. It's not about... This is not, so a lot of reconciliation is often about putting things under the carpet.

Nayanika Mookherjee:

So just two days ago, the USPG, the United Society's Gospel for the Propagation in faraway lands, which was part of Church of England and central to the processes of enslavement history in UK, has just apologized, two days ago and this is... The chaplain from Durham University has sent me the report. But

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one of the main things they're saying in their response is, they propose reconciliation as a way of moving forward. Now, this becomes problematic, precisely, that reconciliation should be in the terms of people who have suffered rather than... So often, you would find reconciliation comes from the framework of perpetrators. Reconciliation becomes a way of... Reconciliation for whom? And reconciliation for what? Are the big questions to ask.

Nayanika Mookherjee:

So it's not about non forgiveness, it's about a pushing for the form of justice that has been promised but is not being delivered.

Interviewer:

I love that because that is foreground into what is, usually, left in the background, right. I mean you, you're bringing what is usually left out into the foreground and especially as an ethnographer. I mean, you're thinking the people you're studying as opposed to figuring out how the people you're studying, think. So you are framing beyond their perspective

Nayanika Mookherjee:

Or bringing... or forefronting their perspective rather than forefronting the templates we are given from governments and authorities and organizations, right. So it's precisely saying, "Reconciliation, who does it work for?" Because it's not working for people who it's meant to be serving.

Interviewer:

Yes. Tell us about the book that you've worked on.

Nayanika Mookherjee:

So this is a edited volume and it was, precisely, to bring together the idea of a irreconciliation together. It was very difficult to think about it theoretically, because there's nothing much written on it, within anthropology, and also in other... There's some work in philosophy and I draw on Hannah Arendt's work, so who, writing in her book, *Denktagebuch* or the thought diaries, talks about one of her main premises, was very helpful to us, she writes that, "Acts which cannot be forgiven are beyond punishment and hence cannot be reconciled to." And she questions, the very conditions of the world, which enable such acts to be carried out. So she's not just... she's saying, "There's no forgiveness because this is beyond forgiveness and hence there is no reconciliation," and she's questioned, "How could these acts even be allowed to be carried out?" Forget reconciliation, forget forgiveness.

Nayanika Mookherjee:

So she's questioning the very way in which culpability and by standard, if you can think of these terms, allow things to happen. And then we say, "Oh, that was terrible, let's reconcile," right. So she's precisely calling out the conditions of complicity, which allows things to happen. And you can see this framework being relevant, whether for post genocidal conflicts or institutional transgressions. There have been colleagues who've picked up these concepts in terms of Me Too or Black Lives Matters or debates around the statues or even climate justice. I've had colleagues working on kind of climate change and how they're dealing with organization's authorities and various kind of different resistive kind of mode, which allows a certain kind of language, in which, the feeling can be expressed as a irreconciliation.

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Nayanika Mookherjee:

And within the book, what... So one of the other big ethnographies also, the only ethnography that I draw a lot of inspiration along with current, is Vincent Crapanzano's work on the Harkis. And the Harkis, were a group from Northern Algeria, who fought with the French in the Second World War, and then they return back and they are attacked because they're seen to be collaborators of the French. And then they are taken in back in France but they are kept interned, in camps and they are... France never apologizes to what happens to them. And the intergenerational effect from the parents, have gone into complete silence. Their children are looking at doing the campaigning. And so, that was one framework of the Harkis that Crapanzano writes about, that brings it closer to this idea of a irreconciliation.

Nayanika Mookherjee:

But within the volume, as well, I've got fantastic colleagues who are comparing different ethnographic settings, from that of the Canadian Truth and Reconciliation Commission on the residential schooling by Ronald Niezen, who shows how people; First Nation adults, who were in those residential housing are made to give testimonies but there is no kind of... nothing brought out against the perpetrators, so you are allowed... So similar to, in fact, the South African TRC, everyone had a way of venting or expressing what happened, but there was no kind of... nothing happened to anyone; any of those who have perpetrated. So not in terms of even saying... This is not about violence or vengeance, so this is the kind of clear framework, where there needs to be a certain kind of reckoning of the way, in which, people feel or justice hasn't been served.

Nayanika Mookherjee:

So whether that, there is Noa Vaismann's work on the Argentinian disappeared. There's Vindhya Buthpitiya's work on the disappeared in Sri Lanka. Kamari Clarke is looking at similar issues in Colombia. Jacco Vissur is looking at the effects of the Bangladesh war crimes tribunal in UK. So I've got 10, overall, authors in it. And there's a fantastic piece by Lisette Josephides, in the beginning, where she compares Jacques Derrida account of forgiveness with that of Paul Ricoeur's account, where she brings in also similar ideas within communities in Papua New Guinea and Northern Ireland.

Interviewer:

Amazing. I'm just thinking, as you list out all of those areas, a couple of things, what impact does this all have on you, personally? Does it affect you as a researcher when you listen to all these stories? How do you hold it for yourself as a professional and personally? And then, separately, that leads me into sort of the final question, which is, for our book festival goes, what pragmatic hope can we have for the future against a backdrop like this?

Nayanika Mookherjee:

I never talk about the effects on me because, then, it seems too much on me, that kind of... The only thing I often tell people is, "My hair is completely white now." People think I've done some kind of coloring to it. Apparently there's a thing called platinum, I didn't know. And people think I've done that, but actually, I started going gray from my early twenties, and that could be, possibly, things within my family or feeling work stress, but I sometimes think of my hair as an effect of the work I do, maybe. And often, it would be nice to do work which is less heavy, but maybe I'm drawn to it. And these three projects have been interconnected with the work, with the survivors of sexual violence or looking at war crimes, tribunals, which is linked to irreconciliation and the work with adult adoptees. They're all kind of

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interlinked. A. And maybe once I finish them, which might take another 10 years, I might work on something lighter, who knows.

Nayanika Mookherjee:

But in terms of festival goes, in terms of the idea of hope. Hope in various ways within anthropology has been thought of as, "A futuristic positive process" or for others, other theorists would say, "Hope is all about the present because the future is not about never arriving, it's a future never to come." Rather than hope, I would talk about indeterminate futures. Futures as... Particularly in the case of a irreconciliation, indeterminate future has become relevant when there is no closure, which can obscure ideas of the future as the lack of justice emerges in the present, constantly. So it's an idea of time which is beyond the past, present, or future. And in that way, time is frozen rather than future being about time oriented about tomorrow, about a distant time, where things might be better, where the future is rosy. Rather than thinking of the future as rosy or good versus future as scary or bad.

Nayanika Mookherjee:

I think we need to, the idea of I reconciliation challenges these kind of assumptions, of rosy or happy versus scary. And I would rather think of the future as a processual one and in some ways, where the idea of justice is being worked out or worked through or striven for. And so, in that way, the idea of a indeterminate future or a time when it's frozen is important for that striving for justice. And within that, it doesn't mean one will never get closure, but, it is also having one's own agency to decide when I'm going to head off to that future, right, because, for me to decide, when I will decide to forgive, when I will have the closure, rather than someone telling me by, authorities, to reconcile and move on.

Nayanika Mookherjee:

So this is where I think the frozenness of a irreconciliation is important to regain one's agency in the phase of reconciliation, which really takes away all our agency.

Interviewer:

Absolutely. Because then after the frozenness, the only constant, ideally, is change. I mean, that's all we can, in some respects, expect from the future: the constant is change. But you need to have that moment. I think that's what you're saying, where the frozenness can melt a bit, where the justice comes in as well.

Nayanika Mookherjee:

Or even if justice doesn't come in, for me, to then decide, when I will move on. So that's correct-

Interviewer:

So it's internal; the agency is internal, it's not just waiting for an external permission. Yeah.

Nayanika Mookherjee:

Because reconciliation and peace frameworks are all about a certain kind of control from an external authority, to tell you, "You should be feeling this, you should be doing this, you should be moving on and you should be happy," right. So it's precisely taking that control and deciding for oneself when that agency is with you and when that can... what allows one to go forward, whether it's to a happy place, whether it's to a sad place, whether it's to a melancholic place, that's my decision, right.

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Nayanika Mookherjee:

And this is where one of the other aspects is, there's work from colleagues in Bosnia who also talk about silence as a irreconciliation. The very fact of, "I will not speak because justice has not been served," is also really important. So rather than talking about voice as agency and silence as lack, we need to kind of always go beyond those binaries.