Interview – Swati Parashar

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Swati Parashar is Professor in Peace and Development at the School of Global Studies, Gothenburg University, Sweden. She is a member of the Swedish Development Research Network. Her research interests include feminism, postcolonialism, security, conflict and development in South Asia and East Africa. She is the author of*Women and Militant Wars: The Politics of Injury* and has published several journal articles, policy papers and popular media pieces. She is the co-editor of the *Routledge Handbook of Feminist Peace Research* with Tarja Väyrynen, Élise Féron and Catia Cecilia Confortini; *Gender, Silence and Agency in Contested Terrains* with Jane Parpart; and *Revisiting Gendered States: Feminist Imaginings of the State in International Relations* , with J. Ann Tickner and Jacqui True. She is a co-editor in chief of the International Feminist Journal of Politics and serves on the advisory boards of Millennium, Security Dialogue, Third World Quarterly, Polity, Critical Studies on Security and Critical Terrorism Studies. She co-edits two book series — Creative Interventions In Global Politics with Rowman and Littlefield, and Gender, Sexuality and Global Politics with Bristol University Press.

Since your last interview with E-International Relations in early 2020, have you seen a change in the debates and research happening in your field? Has your own perspective changed over the last three years?

The world has changed a lot in the last three years – the Covid pandemic taught us so much. With all the developments we have made in medical technology and public health, we could not prevent the deaths and we saw the vulnerability of the Global North, in particular. The social ruptures, politically incompetent regimes, xenophobic nationalisms and the collective and personal grief has left us reeling, and we are still struggling in many ways. The impact of this global catastrophe is all around us. And then, we have seen wars in Sudan and Ukraine, more militarization of civilian spaces and rise of multiple kinds of violence (including the 'slow' violence of hunger and famine) more generally.

International Relations, as an academic discipline, has tried to respond to the new challenges, and its limits have also been exposed. It was particularly useful to serve as the program chair of the International Studies Association for the Montreal Convention in 2023 to get a sense of the shifts in thinking and research. There is a lot more emphasis on interdisciplinarity among critical approaches and an understanding of global inequalities of hierarchies including in how we create knowledge.

The coloniality of power, and power of coloniality debates are occurring in many spaces. There is an understanding that coloniality is an important lens through which we can understand a lot of world politics today – who gets pandemic care, which kinds of livelihood are lost, which lives are grieveable and how accountability is imagined. There is also a lot more scrutiny of postcoloniality/decoloniality and what these approaches are doing to themselves, their canon building and cannibalizing impacts. In terms of feminism, a lot more emphasis is on masculinities, sexual and gender-based violence, gendered dynamics of social movements and policy engagement and impact especially through the Women, Peace and Security Agenda and the manifestations of the global gender/feminism backlash.

My own research and perspectives on violence have moved towards understanding 'slow violence' of starvation deaths and famines, and sexual violence along the war and peace continuum (we have exceptionalized war time sexual violence without paying attention to the continuum). I have been consistently researching, with other

colleagues, on the ethics of doing field research and the silences of research brokers/facilitators in conflict zones in collaborative research projects. I have always been interested in cultural and religious encounters and exchanges and am working on the biography of the Belgian Jesuit, Father Camille Bulcke who lived in postcolonial India and became an exponent of Hindi and Ramcharitmanas. I have recently been writing about European women who travelled to India for spiritual pursuits and became anti-colonial activists. I must also say that most of my work now and in the future will be collaborative and I am very pleased about that. I am learning a lot through collaborations and really believe that shared intellectual labour is the best way to practice feminism and do academic work in these times.

Have postcolonial voices in International Relations become mainstreamed?

Depends on what you see as 'mainstream'. The postcolonial condition is an important analytical framework for global politics and events. We cannot escape the discussions on coloniality and its impact, and what the various types of colonial encounters have produced and continue to produce. I am less concerned about whether it is, or should be mainstreamed because the centre and the margins are not stable categories. If you look at IR debates these days, academic events and even hiring patterns, you would imagine that critical approaches in IR are the 'mainstream'. I certainly think postcolonialism, feminism and other critical approaches have a lot more analytical value today than before, but there is a 'mainstreaming' of certain kind of postcolonial voices, debates within postcolonial studies itself, a kind of canon building that bothers me a lot more. Maria Eriksson-Baaz and I have written about this – that we need to stop taking Eurocentrism as the only departure point, restore agency to the Global South, recognize changes in the global landscape and be wary of too much navel gazing within postcolonial studies. We have to work harder to save critical/postcolonial IR from mimicking the 'mainstream' we have critiqued, keep paying attention to what counts as 'knowledge' and whose knowledge counts, as our core commitment to epistemic freedom and change. We think that the unsettling and the implosion of IR is imminent, given it has limited explanatory potential and is unable to think of solutions to global problems with its existing conceptual tools and theories. This might do the discipline some good in terms of challenging canons, demanding greater accountability and drawing from different disciplines, approaches and knowledge systems. We will just have to wait and watch.

Is the understanding of national selfhood and identity construction the key to de-colonising research and academia?

Only partly, there are wider differences at play. I don't think national selfhood and identity were ever off the radar in academic disciplines including IR. Global cosmopolitanisms, transnationalisms and the liberal international order did not take the focus away from nationalisms and identity, which have been particularly important in the Global South. Of course, the pandemic revealed that nationalisms are alive and kicking in the Global North. When resources are scarce and to be shared, when the threat is from an invisible 'enemy' and when there is pressure on the economic and social security systems in place, national selfhood comes to the rescue: it gets all insular and xenophobic, as I personally witnessed living in Sweden. In general, one sees linguistic, political and cultural nationalisms on the rise in Europe in the last few years. So, there is that aspect – national selfhood and identity construction are ongoing projects redefined by colonial encounters of the past and present.

Decolonising research and academia certainly require us to pay attention to identity and national selfhood to get a sense of how people, communities, nations and institutions construct themselves and what is visibilised and invisibilised in knowledge creation. However, these are wider goals to achieve that require us to understand global and institutional inequalities, and the politics of knowledge creation and dissemination. One project that I have been part of is the ethics of field research in conflict affected societies and the silencing of research brokers/fixers/facilitators, funded by the Swedish Research Council. While issues of identity and postcolonial 'self-hood' are important, our research reveals that inequalities around race, class, gender, availability and distribution of funding, institutional differences, locational insecurities, researcher positionalities all play an important role in invisibilising the intellectual labour of research brokers from the Global South.

In what ways did co-editing the "Handbook of Feminist Peace Research" allow you to push the boundaries of feminist research?

I am very proud of this project we undertook with Routledge and we managed to curate excellent chapters based on diversity of location, positionality, theoretical approaches and empirics, beyond the tokenism that is usually the case. It came during the pandemic so it also gave us several uplifting moments as we collaborated, co-wrote and deliberated on the chapters. It was a work of tremendous emotional as well as intellectual labour, of friendships and of understanding feminist differences and building solidarities.

Tarja, Catia, Elise and I started with the premise that feminist peace research is many different things from our different perspectives but there are certain instances when it is not: add women and stir, discussing women's issues in little feminist ghettos or exclusive gatherings, ignoring high politics and peace talks, feminist utopias of peace or talking only in terms of binaries. We were aware that feminism makes a lot of people uncomfortable and its vocabularies are not inclusive. This posed challenges for us to make our handbook appealing to wider audiences. We paid attention to various methodologies and genealogies and multiple forms of violence, including slow violence of famines. We went beyond formal institutional and societal interventions to talking about informal methods including yoga. We also talked about bodies, sexuality and health.

We pushed the boundaries mainly by emphasizing that it was about critical feminist peace research that included discussions of issues beyond the category of women, and including men and sexual minorities. The chapters all point out that feminist peace is possible only through emphasis on accountability and justice and by paying attention to colonial encounters that continue to shape conflict and peacebuilding. Feminist peace is also about building networks and alliances with other social movements: environment, religious, social reform movements etc. Peace is a process, and not a destination and feminist peace is all about long term societal transformation, resisting structures of patriarchy, and yet offering persistent and constructive critique of societies.

Can feminist policy and research become an obstacle to itself through creating a canon?

Feminism just doesn't tell you what and where the problem is, it also tells you how to fix it. This makes it appealing both within critical research and scholarship and for policy and yes, it creates canons and supports neo liberal, colonial agendas. Along with other colleagues, I have also written about it especially in the case of UNSCR 1325 and the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) Agenda, Feminist Foreign Policy and Feminist Foreign Aid. While funding opportunities have widened for feminist projects, there has been a neo liberal shift within feminism, where some areas have become hypervisible to attract funding, high profile appointments, training opportunities, paid consultancies and transfer of knowledge. WPS attracts a lot of funds, has endorsed a canon where the same people are visible in panels and discussions and receive funding for conducting projects. Most of these projects are top down, liberally deploy the language of 'expertise' and transfer of knowledge from Global North to South, insisting that the WPS agenda is global and universal and could save and protect women everywhere. Bina D'Costa and I have argued that from the outset the agenda has been developed in a problematic/normative/predominantly white and privileged space. In many parts of the world, it is perceived as hegemonic and influenced by top-level, elite security and gender experts who use the language of 'best practices' from the Global North. Similar canons exist around other issues. There are linguistic variances around feminist issues that are no longer even recognized as important; in many parts of the world feminism can be a western imposed and alienating terminology. Feminist IR, Feminist Security Studies, Feminist Military Studies, Feminist Foreign Policy are all part of the problem. They serve a useful purpose but also contribute to canon building, so we definitely need to ask whither real diversity, whither our commitment to decolonize knowledge systems within feminism. I recall an encounter few years ago with an Indian student at a panel at ISA who was working on the politics around marital rape in India. She hadn't cited a single Indian feminist and all her citations were from the western white canon of feminist IR scholars who had never worked on India. When I asked her why, her response was a poignant eye opener about what these canons are doing to younger scholars. She said, 'I want to belong to the feminist IR community and in India no one does *Feminist IR'*. There are numerous such examples of young scholars submitting to feminist journals and being advised to cite the usual suspects. It isn't enough that they are citing scholars relevant to them (from the Global South), who we really need to read and engage with. This politics of citation is part of the canon building too. Even from the Global South there are erasures of many good and relevant works and the same people are visibilised through citations.

In the article "Rethinking masculinities, militarisation, and unequal development" that you co-authored,

you advocate for the recognition of intersectionality, and its role in perpetuating segregation and inequality. What steps does feminist scholarship need to take in order to move in this direction?

That was a short editorial in the *International Feminist Journal of Politics* so we did not have a lot of space to expand. Intersectionality is being used across a number of disciplines, so there is bound to be conceptual confusion and different definitions. I do not want to get into details, but my thoughts are always about what these kinds of concepts such as intersectionality, decoloniality, etc, do not mean. As feminists we need to engage with the limits of the concept and critique its inappropriate uses. For example, intersectionality is sometimes used interchangeably with identity which is a problem. Everyone is intersectional so it is not a community identity. It is always good to specify what kind of intersectionality one is referring to. Manifestations of power and privilege always lead to hierarchies and inequalities and intersectionality helps us understand how the system of power and privilege work in a complex web of intersecting 'being' and 'belonging'. Intersectionality is not the sum total of different marginalisations and inequalities, but how they influence each other and produce specific experiences and subjectivities. Intersectionality is not a contest of who is most oppressed but an important feminist concept to recognize that multiple group memberships at the same time, produce specific and unique experiences in which some are more disadvantaged than others. I think we are not using it as much as we should or in the appropriate spirit.

Looking ahead, what would you like to see happen in the future within Feminist and Postcolonial IR?

Feminist IR needs to recognise the differences that exist within feminism – the differences of vocabulary and networks, study and build transnational alliances with other interest groups, expand its research agenda, be wary of neoliberal and statist appropriations and reclaim its critical agenda.

Postcolonial IR needs to engage in less navel gazing, pay more attention to knowledge inequalities, epistemic silences and changes in the global landscape which demonstrate the agency of the Global South. There needs to be an understanding that epoch making events did not start or take place only in the West and we need different global perspectives to be centered in unpacking world politics. As Sabelo Ndlovu Gatsheni says, provincializing Europe is not enough, we need to also deprovincialize Africa (bring Africa and African perspectives into the centre of knowledge). We can extend this to any under represented parts of the world.

Most importantly, these two approaches need to speak to each other and treat gender and race as important intersectional categories. Consider the coloniality of gender (see e.g., Maria Lugones) and the gender of coloniality (see eg. Ashis Nandy). Few years ago, I had edited a special issue in Postcolonial Studies on how postcolonialism and feminism need to interact more and become greater allies within the critical space.

What is the advice you could give to those trying to de-colonise the curriculum?

These days the trend is to use 'decolonise' pretty much like we use 'intersectionality' in feminism: totally uncritically. Everything is being decolonized. What does it even mean, or rather, what does it not mean? We need to see decolonizing the curriculum by paying attention to our own location and privileges as educators and researchers, our institutional policies and practices, our diverse classrooms and students we encounter and our commitment to our subjects. Some points to perhaps re-emphasize:

- Pay attention to and question the validity of claims that concepts and knowledge systems are universal, value free, or neutral.
- Ask whether our course contents are reflective of the changes in the world, or are they too Eurocentric.
- Ask whether concepts and theories reflect the diversity of interpretations from across the world.
- Pat attention to diversity even in the Global South, so as to not only amplify hegemonic voices.
- Question the hierarchical model of knowledge creation- theory from the Global North, applied to the case study from the Global South.
- Study the history of inequalities and oppressions in relation to the subject/research areas.
- Pay attention to the experiences and backgrounds of the students in the classroom and create an inclusive space for respectful and empathetic dialogue.