

Interview - Swati Parashar

Written by E-International Relations

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Swati Parashar is Associate Professor in Peace and Development at the School of Global Studies, Gothenburg University, Sweden. She is also a Research Associate at the Centre for International Studies and Diplomacy (CISD) at SOAS and a Visiting Faculty at the Malaviya Centre for Peace Research, Banaras Hindu University, India. She has previously been a Visiting Fellow at the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS), Delhi and worked in academic institutions in Singapore, Australia and Ireland. She is the author of *Women and Militant Wars: The Politics of Injury*, co-editor (with Ann Tickner and Jacqui True) of *Revisiting Gendered States: Feminist Imaginings of the State in International Relations* and co-editor (with Jane Parpart) of *Rethinking Silence, Voice and Agency in Contested Gendered Terrains*. She is an associate editor of *Critical Studies on Security* and serves on the advisory boards of *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, *Critical Terrorism Studies* and *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*. With Marysia Zawleski, Cristina Masters and Shine Choi she is the co-editor of the Book Series, *Creative Interventions in Global Politics*.

Where do you see the most exciting debates and/or research happening in your field?

To be honest, I am not working within any one field in IR. I have always had this urge to break free from 'fields' and disciplinary boundaries. I did work in mainstream Politics and IR departments for a while but conversations outside the narrow disciplinary confines, especially in the last few years and since my move to Global Studies in Sweden, have inspired and sustained my intellectual curiosity. The two approaches I draw from are feminism and postcolonialism and both cannot be contained within the frames of IR. They are rich and eclectic fields of enquiry which have always tried to embrace the diversity and unpredictability of global political and social life. I have my quarrels with them (how gender is deployed in feminism, the 'mainstreaming' of feminism, how postcolonial scholarship can create hierarchies of knowledge and categories of subalterns) but I would say the most exciting debates are taking place within these two approaches and at their intersections too.

In terms of particular themes, I would say 'violence' is being explored in new and interesting ways. This is also important in these times, when violence is both normalized and exceptionalised and does not have predictable characteristics. The performance, content, legitimacy, texture, historical continuities, location, transformative potential, ethical and moral dilemmas, body counts, injuries, coloniality, discursive absences and silences of and around violence need to be scrutinised further. IR theories and methods are less equipped to do it on their own. Interdisciplinary enquiries are the way forward.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

I started my career in the policy world and was grateful for the opportunities academia provided to write and research about things that mattered. But that might be changing now. The pace of changes has left us all breathless. We are struggling very hard to make sense of all this; we are not always very well equipped I have to say. I feel increasingly more suspicious because not only are we watching a certain kind of anti-intellectualism which is dangerous, but also conversations are now limited to those who are in agreement with each other (echo-chambers). States and governments are coming down hard on civic dissent, but academic freedom is also being stifled (sometimes by academics themselves). The world has changed in the last decade in the sense that ideological divides are deep,

Interview - Swati Parashar

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and conversations with 'difference' have become difficult, nay, impossible. The ease with which you could engage people on the 'other' side has disappeared. Sometimes I feel quite pessimistic about this uneasy collision and coexistence of all our different and multiple worlds.

In my early career stage, I was inspired by Christine Sylvester, who taught me to charter into the unknown, to challenge normative wisdom in any 'field' (including feminist IR) and to never settle for 'belongingness' in an academic way. I still carry that spirit of homelessness, I hope. I am currently involved in a project on Political violence, memory and transitional justice in relation to hunger deaths or famines. It is great to be able to ask questions about the exclusions and inclusions of violence in particular, when and what bodies may be outside or inside it, and how it is significantly gendered. Why it is important to talk about violence is always related to where the violence occurs, what counts as violence and who gets to speak about violence. How can we reframe and reclaim the knowledge about violence in the pursuit of truth and justice for those who need healing, reparations and redemption? I don't think I had imagined working on famines as violence, after years of work on war, terrorism and armed conflict!

On violence, my thinking has been greatly influenced by postcolonial scholar Ashis Nandy and anthropologist Veena Das. I had the wonderful opportunity to be a Visiting Fellow at the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies in Delhi during 2016. There were some great inspiring conversations with Prof. Nandy at the Centre. It is impossible to understand South Asian/Indian psyche and socio-political behaviour without reading Nandy. He has such incredible insights about people and a deep understanding of politics, religion and culture in public life. L.H.M. Ling and Susan Sontag are other inspiring figures in my life. Conversations with Lily (Ling) enabled me to feel less guilty about wanting to study the impact of religion and spirituality in global politics. I am currently working on a biographical manuscript on a Belgian Jesuit who lived and preached in India. Within my peer group, I have had great conversations with Camilla Orjuela, with whom I share the famine project, and with Bina D'Costa who has always enabled intellectual and personal spaces to disagree with and challenge each other. It is truly refreshing to have a warm friendship with someone you can disagree with. Conversations with feminist friends, colleagues, students who have challenged me have been invaluable. But most of all, I owe a huge debt of gratitude to those who challenge me, who question my work, find faults with it, are largely unconvinced and who find the time to critically engage.

What is the importance of International Women's Day and what does it represent to you?

IWD started with work rights demands for women; this is not just a celebratory day to mark women's 'successes', especially those 'women' who are implicated in the neoliberal hierarchical systems and exploitative political economies that women across the world are challenging. Universities, for example, have also started the tradition of seeking out 'successful' women and parading them as role models as part of IWD celebrations. We need to ask ourselves: who we would like to hear and celebrate on such occasions?

It is a day to remember that our struggles are far from over, and that we may need new vocabularies of resistance and solidarities. We also need to recognise that the concerns raised by third wave feminism have not been fully resolved. Intersectionality is still poorly understood, articulated and practised. We have to do more to reclaim IWD to further genuine feminist agendas.

In a recent book chapter, you discuss the potentials of and obstacles to transnational feminist solidarity. What are the biggest barriers to such solidarity?

There are three main barriers to transnational feminist solidarity: First, the selective recognition of struggles, voices and discursive locations has become a hindrance in promoting transnational solidarity. Feminists can be co-opted by different ideological sides and can be embedded and invested in unproductive identity politics. Second, the fear and anxiety generated by 'difference', which has increasingly become non-negotiable. Forging solidarities does not mean that there can't be productive differences. Third, the continuous search for 'authenticity' in our understanding of the Global South is also a hindrance. We are still grappling with questions such as who gets to represent and whom, who gets to speak and for whom, who is left out, what voices are privileged, what is erased, whose voice matters etc.

What can we learn from global movements such as #MeToo about negotiating and re-imagining feminist

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transnational solidarities?

I have said that #MeToo is not an unambiguous space of women's activism and feminist solidarities. There are fissures in the movement, there are anxieties and frustrations. It is neither exceptional nor the most effective in some contexts (it is restricted to the online domain and we know a lot of women still do not have access to these spaces). However, we cannot deny its transnational impact despite its many failings. I think the most important lesson has been that we need to utilise such opportunities better, to make such movements truly intersectional and inclusive. What also emerged was the differences among inter-generational feminists that played out very poorly in the public space especially in the Indian context. An empathetic dialogue between the differing sides would have helped undo some of the damage. Transnational solidarities exist and are protected and nurtured painstakingly by feminists; poor handling of global movements like #MeToo can affect such solidarities in a negative way and exacerbate differences. We need to be prepared to deal with differences, keeping the larger picture in mind.

Your research draws on and combines feminism and postcolonialism. What does this approach bring to the study of international relations and particularly violence and development?

IR has grown exponentially as a discipline even as international relations have become complex in an unpredictable world. By growth of the discipline, I mean that there are today more departments of International Relations, more jobs in the field, more recognition of different 'critical' approaches, methods and theories, more visibility in terms of academic events and conferences and of course so much funding from grant bodies and research councils. A decade ago, when I applied for my first job in Ireland, it was one of few jobs in feminist international relations. Today you see so many new jobs created for those specialising in gender politics, feminist IR and security studies. It all looks good from the outside, a secure discipline, attracting the best minds. And yet, the inside story is that the discipline can thrive and survive only when disciplinary boundaries are broken, only when transgressions occur. In this interconnected and complex world, no one puzzle in IR can be explained by IR theories alone. You cannot understand war and violence, for example, unless you read multiple and often conflicting approaches that different disciplines have to offer.

This is where I find feminism and postcolonialism particularly relevant. The study of violence and ordinary lives as well as everyday politics has made me reflect on the postcolonial nation-state and hierarchies of knowledge and on how dominance is produced, sustained and legitimized but also subverted. I am interested in pre-colonial and non-colonial traditions and modes of knowledge production. When people and societies live through different cultures and epochs and have different approaches to political and cultural survival, how do we open up creative possibilities in the study of postcolonial states and societies beyond the European enlightenment and modernity? There is so much that feminism and postcolonialism can make sense of, especially trajectories of development and the violence (always gendered) that it has unleashed, normalised, expected as the rightful trade off and also erased. Here I also want to suggest that it is important to pay attention to language. Eurocentrism (or being the American Social Science) means that IR has not actively pursued an interest in resources beyond English texts in original or translations. Postcolonialism discusses the limits of English language and opens up spaces for enquiries beyond.

Your chapter within the edited collection *Revisiting Gendered States* (with J. Ann Tickner and Jacqui True) looks at how the (postcolonial) state conscripts gendered emotions. What role does emotional gendered language play in the construction of statehood and citizenship?

A massive role, to answer in brief. The current debate in India over the controversial Citizenship (Amendment) Act, passed by the Indian Parliament in December 2019, is a relevant illustrative case. The Indian state has conscripted emotional, gendered language to create a constituency of supporters for this Act while protestors have also deployed gendered emotions in their resistance strategies. My point in that chapter was to demonstrate how postcolonial states experience and perform vulnerability and anxiety through an active display of emotions. You can call it performative, but it is important in building affective citizenship. The book has been received well and it is great to have contributed to the wider discussion on states and their invocation of gendered discourses and practices.

Feminist approaches have often focused on the importance of agency in challenging gendered practices

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and norms. In your edited volume on Rethinking Silence, Voice and Agency in Contested Gendered Terrains, you and Jane L. Parpart argue that agency should not be understood based on voice or speech alone. What do we miss if we focus solely on vocal challenges to patriarchal power?

It was such a terrific experience to work with Jane on this topic. She has inspired us all to rethink our relationship to silence with her article on *Choosing Silence: Rethinking Voice, Agency, and Women's Empowerment*. We took the debate further in the book as we asked our contributors (from various disciplines, by the way) to challenge the assumption that silence is always a sign of disempowerment. What if silence is empowering in a complex neoliberal and postcolonial world? The authors brought significant theoretical and empirical insights to this question. Resistance to patriarchy involves constant negotiations, building alliances, and strategizing, prioritising the small battles, while keeping the big picture in focus. Feminist 'tool-boxes' have all kinds of tools and we argue that silence is powerful in many contexts. In the chapter I co-authored with Anju Toppo, we talked about silent and performative ways in which tribal women in India convey their frustrations at how they have been erased from histories. Focusing on vocal challenges alone means we miss out the diversity and contexts of resistance against patriarchy; silence is not a passive survival strategy but can be an active form of resistance, a choice, a way forward. Silence can be pretty effective, especially as patriarchy assumes that speaking out is the only form of legitimate resistance. What about those that may not find 'speaking out' so convenient, safe or even strategic? There is also a spiritual, philosophical yearning for silence to connect with oneself and to dig deep into inner reserves of courage and strength. We have not exhausted the possibilities of exploring the power of silence.

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of International Relations, particularly women?

- Constantly remind yourselves why you are in the profession and how you can use your privilege to change the way we understand and interpret the world.
- Stop treating the 'Global South' as case studies to validate Eurocentric theories. Look for viable and robust theoretical alternatives beyond the Eurocentric world. That will be a long-lasting contribution.
- Publish less! The burgeoning publishing industry and pressures of neoliberal academia means we have all become publishing machines. It creates unrealistic expectations and quality always suffers. Original and good ideas take time to develop.
- Also publish more in collaboration, build alliances and networks. That's a particularly feminist thing to do and very useful to fight the academic malestream.
- Rage with and for a more compassionate and humane world! This is what we need the most at this critical juncture in world politics when we are confronting such a strong gender backlash.