Interview – Inderpal Grewal

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Inderpal Grewal is Professor Emerita of Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies, American Studies, and Anthropology at Yale University. She is one of the founders of the field of transnational feminist studies, and known for her prolific work on transnational feminism, cultural theory, feminist theory, and her extensive research of post-colonialism, South Asian cultural studies, mobility and modernity, nongovernmental organizations, human rights, and law and citizenship. Grewal has served on the Editorial and Advisory Boards of core journals in the field of feminist cultural studies, including *Women's Studies Quarterly* and Jouvert: Journal of Postcolonial Studies and Meridians: feminisms, race, transnationalism. She is the author of *Home and Harem: Nation, Gender, Empire and the Cultures of Travel* and *Transnational America: Feminisms, Diasporas, Neoliberalisms*. Her recent publications include "Theories of Discrimination: Transnational Feminism," in Handbook of Discrimination and Affirmative Action, (edited by Ashiwini Deshpande) and "GBV and Postcolonial India: Transnational Media, Hindutva, and Muslim Racializations", in *The Cunning of Gender* (edited by Lila Abu-Lughod, Nadera Kevorkian and Rema Hammani.

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

In Gender Studies, some of the most exciting debates are happening in Trans Studies, even though a great deal of this work concerns the US. A second area would be work on politics, policy and power, particularly understanding how politics of gender and sexuality impact the state as well as so much of social life (political parties and their gender/sexuality policies, for example). Relations between humans and non-humans and the sustainability of the planet is a very important and complex debate: for instance, there are feminists on both sides of the debate on how much population size matter in questions of sustainability. In the US context, the impact of Black feminism and analysis of the gendered aspects of racial capitalism have been crucial. In the context of India, there are debates about neoliberalism and capitalism in the making of ongoing gendered inequalities, with greater focus on caste, but with more regional emphasis than before (so for instance, distinguishing how gender operates in different regions). Also ongoing is the work on sexuality, as well as sexual violence.

Finally, and also of huge importance, is how security and securitization often seem to come before welfare and development, not just in India, but also in so many other spaces; this research includes how security is itself a gendered construct to be understood in the context of the rise of neoliberalism globally. And such a project is also transnational, not just in the use of security technologies around the world, but also in how questions of gender and sexuality, the "protection" of the family etc. are mobilized in connected ways around the world to enable the acceptance of these technologies and surveillance systems.

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

I began my career trying to understand the cultures of British imperialism, especially focusing on how travel was central to empire—many of us argued that instead of the common belief that travel broadens the mind, we found the travel entrenched cultural beliefs that supported imperial projects. Over time I became interested in how diasporas were often where nationalisms were generated and where becoming a diasporic subject – or citizen – meant accepting and deploying ideas of nationalism, for example, being "American." I researched how ideas of what it meant to be *American* were circulating globally and those ideas were part of how people related to the US (perhaps

wanting to migrate, seek asylum, become trading parter or investor or viewing the US as the imperial hegemon), even as they also saw themselves as citizens of other nations and drew on other nationalisms as part of their identities. In that project, I tried to understand American imperialism as making global –or transnational—subjects, even if people were not living diasporic lives in the US. That interest in American empire led me to the next project on the specific sort of nationalism that is produced in America, which is generally called "American exceptionalism." I was interested in how different groups of people also saw themselves as "exceptional" by participating in two forms of power that are visible in the US in the new century: of being humanitarians (seeing themselves as generous white or multicultural samaritans) and participating in surveillance (creating family and kinship relations by surveillance –for example using phones to monitor the movements of their family or friends). You can see that my interests were very much trying to understand how subjects became part of imperial cultures, how cultural ideas supporting imperial ventures often became powerful and influential (i.e., hegemonic). This area of research has been very important to postcolonial studies and cultural studies.

What changed over time was that my sense that postcolonial research was often entrenching national boundaries rather than showing how boundaries are constructed or porous or contentious, and that such research (often created by diasporic scholars) left out the history of migration or mobility that often enabled that scholarship. In sum, over time I found postcolonial research needed to address the questions of diasporas, geopolitics, and the constructedness of not just the nation, but also territoriality—all the issues that we now understand as transnational issues. Now I research the issue of mobility, of people, ideas, goods, and militaries, but with attention to gendered inequalities that are produced through mobility. What remained in my work is the postcolonial focus on studying nationalism, though I would argue that that nationalism must be understood as a transnational project.

One of the main justifications behind America's presence in Afghanistan was to 'protect' women. How can a gendered understanding of contemporary imperialism explain the treatment of a woman's body as the site of masculinist competition?

So much of imperialism and nationalism is made powerful by using women's bodies- and bodies of LGBTQ people (in places such as Uganda or the US) in order to generate fear or desire. There is a huge body of research on this topic, from the questions of sexual assault and the military, to the example you give of the Bush administration justifying the bombing of Afghanistan in order to "save" Afghan women. It is axiomatic that war does not ever "protect," it always and consistently destroys lives (though it invigorates some economic ventures –such as the defense industries, or war profiteering). And so much nationalism is simply about controlling women in the name of protection; nationalisms do not say, for instance, that all rape must be prevented, but they just say that only rapes by the Other must be criminalized. In the case of the US in Afghanistan, after many years and many billions spent, it ended up making deals with the Taliban and now has left so many Afghan women in a dire situation. The US is now dragging its feet in giving asylum to many women who helped the US in Afghanistan and who are now suffering under the new regime.

In what way can love transgress the boundaries of the nation-state and produce a transnational resistance to its forms of control?

I would say that what love shows is how so many boundaries, of the state, caste, religion, region, sexuality and gender are obstacles to people's everyday lives and to their wellbeing. The violence used to maintain those boundaries are visible most through opposition to love – and how nationalisms often include such violent policing. But contradictorily, love can also support fascism, because the leader exhorts the people to love him (its generally a him, though not always). Thus, love is a double-edged sword too. Spaces of encounter (for instance, diasporas) can be places where different groups of people come into contact in new ways and generate new relationships – often in political solidarity, but sometimes supporting nationalisms from afar. However, so many transnational alliances, coalitions, and solidarities, can also produce a variety of forms of resistance. For instance, though there are a few groups in the Sikh diaspora in North America advocating for Khalistan, there are also groups that are more concerned with addressing human rights violations that took place in the 1980's and 1990's because there has been so little justice for those victims of state violence.

You have explained the scope of your theory of transnational feminism as extending beyond borders, identities and definitions. What would you say its limits are?

Like most theories, transnational feminism emerged as a corrective to feminisms that were nationalist, nation-bound or imperialist. Transnationalism in general shows how boundaries (of many kinds, but mostly the nation) are constructed, porous and contentious, as I've said above. There is so much that transnational feminist research can do if it is applied to our thinking of so many entities and events. It helps us understand international political movements and how and why they spread across borders and boundaries. Recently, I have become interested in how social movement activists use transnational media for very specific and local ends; I am interested in whether, for instance, the agitation by Indian women wrestlers against sexual assault within Indian wrestling, which has been covered internationally, benefits by this transnational attention.

Transnational feminisms limits are that it is not concerned with internal migration or what we might see as internal issues so that it has not been taken up by scholars living in India for instance, but more by scholars working on India who live outside it. So, for instance, Dalit scholars working on Dalit diasporas find the concepts useful, but not so much those who have to struggle within the country. It is so necessary, however, to understand how concepts such as race and caste are connected, or why Dalit Panthers came about, the influence of Maoist ideas on political movements (the history of the Indian government blocking Dalit activists' struggle to see caste in terms of racial justice is one important aspect that IR researchers could take up). However, transnational feminist analysis was a way to challenge the hegemonic national framework that is so taken for granted. But we always remember that the nation-state is also a product of European imperialism and is always struggling to remain independent and intact, even as its borders are in jeopardy (this is not just visible in South Asia but also in parts of Africa).

Another limitation is that with transnational feminism research focus centered on nations and nationalisms, other sorts of geographical concepts – oceanic networks or transregional or regional research – is not within its framework. However, I see transnational feminist research as essential to research projects, both historically, and for the contemporary world centered on nation-states as products of European imperialism, and for understanding geopolitics.

How has the emerging field of critical caste studies contributed to existing discourses on intersectional feminism?

So much good work and debates on this issue are now coming out. There are many researchers arguing for using the concept for caste; there is a new anthology on Intersectionalism just published by Routledge. It's become a powerful way to think about caste in a new way, though I think feminist researchers in India do have a history of paying attention to caste and gender together, even if they did not call it "intersectional." However, there is also interest in how caste is transnational – be it because of Dalit migration and remittances, or how historically various groups were selected for indenture by the British, or how Partition, for instance, entrenched caste inequalities.

How do intersections of caste, race, region and language unsettle the universality of first-world feminism?

I think rather than thinking about universality, I find the notion of "pluriversality" more interesting. This idea comes from scholars of Latin America (Arturo Escobar, Marisol De La Cadena) This concept suggest that diverse groups of people have their own notions of what is universal, that what we exist is in a radical relationality between all beings. Escobar and De La Cadena center indigenous cosmologies as leaders in this type of thinking. What this means that we need to research alternatives to prevailing notions of what humans seek, and alternatives to the whole set of ideas from European and American colonial projects and Developmentalist modernization programs which are leading to global climate disasters. So, I think also feminism needs to engage with a pluriversal politics – one in which a belief in a radical relationality between humans and non-humans can be foregrounded so that we think of all inhabitants (not just human) of the planet and which engages with the world outside of capitalist modernity. How to make such a feminism is the most important task before us.

In Saving the Security State, you argue that "neoliberalism militarizes everyday life while producing the "exceptional citizens"". Who are these "exceptional citizens"? Do they always conform to the stipulations of the security state, or do you note instances of dissent from this?

This book was focused on the US empire. I have been interested in how empires create cultures that support the imperial project, and so my concept of "saving the security state" was a way to ask how different groups of people who see themselves as Americans (and Indian Americans are certainly part of that group) act in ways that uphold US power. I argued that some believe that humanitarianism is an American trait, even as so many researchers believe that so many humanitarian projects do not succeed even in their stated goals, and that such projects are a way to leave unquestioned American capitalism and imperialism. A second way in which many groups uphold the empire is by not questioning the massive surveillance apparatus that upholds the racism, policing, and militarism that pervades everyday life. So "exceptional citizens" are subjects of the US empire and its belief in being an "exceptional" nation. I think however, that every nation believes it is exceptional in some way or other and that it is different from other nations – or citizens of other nations. This project of exceptionalism prevents transnational solidarities and collaborations and is central to nationalisms.

In what manner do sites of resistance to patriarchal oppression transform to sites of emancipation? What is the relationship between the two?

Oppression and emancipation are both such massive projects, even if they are so radically different. We also have to think pluriversally and transnationally about the power of transgression, unsettling, upheavals, strikes, gheraos, shutdowns, bandhs – all of which seem more the way that social change also takes place in particular times and places. Historical shifts, changes all are continually taking place, if we are able to look in the right places and if those can be harnessed to progressive rather than regressive or revanchist projects. Struggle against sexual violence can take place in so many different ways in the ways I mention above. But embracing the cause of the so-called violation is so important, and both feminist and LGBTQ research have shown us that just as much as we condemn the violence, we also value that which is struggling to change oppressive conditions. Those struggles happen all the time and continually, in small and large ways, in streets and offices and houses and neighborhoods and parks. Those cannot be stopped.

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

Don't be hampered in your thinking and theorizing and acting by social or disciplinary norms – but understand historically how those norms came about. Those norms belong to the past, and so often they come from a different time and from different contexts that are helpful to understand. Overall, doing careful research remains such a huge contribution so that it is important to combine that critical eye for disciplinary boundaries with research methods that make sense to the communities you serve.