

# The Coloniality of Gender and the Politics of Difference

Written by Aleksandra Kusnierkiewicz

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# The Coloniality of Gender and the Politics of Difference

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Identity serves as a point of departure; the individuality and collectiveness of being shape the unique points of view represented by individuals. This allows for the production of diverse epistemologies and hence a deeper representation of the world. The axis of power stemming from the history of colonial domination and currently arranging relations between states, peoples and beings is continuously trying to erase the variety of epistemological perspectives. At the same time, it works to uphold the colonial concept of 'difference' defined in terms of levels of development.[1] The approach of decolonial feminism, with its emancipatory goals, offers tools to move beyond the colonial difference and the oppression of the selves. This essay asks: what interventions does decolonial feminism bring into our understanding of global affairs? I will argue that, for multiple reasons, it deeply enriches and broadens the analysis of world interactions by offering tools for the liberation from distorted colonial thinking. Decolonial feminism provides insights into hegemonic power relations and global violence and reveals the post-colonial hierarchical distinctions. Additionally, it considers the importance of geography as a part of larger hegemonic histories. Moreover, it critiques and corrects the inequalities embedded in academia and sees knowledge production as a political act. Finally, it offers strategies to decolonize gender as a "lived transformation of the social"[2] and embraces the complexity of beings opposing the coloniality of gender. All these developments propose an enriched understanding of global affairs where the ethical, the political and the epistemological are linked together; this, in effect, enables a departure from the universalization of the category of 'women'.

## Postcolonialism vs Decolonialism

In order to assess the implications of applying decolonial feminism to global analysis, it is important to understand its complexity and goals, as well as situate it within the broader debate between postcolonialism and decolonialism. Both approaches stem from the understanding that despite the formal end of colonial rule and the emergence of postcolonial nation-states, the forms of knowledge through which the world is described and comprehended are entrenched in Euro-American positivist claims perceiving knowledge production as the proclamation of universal truths.[3] Modernity appears as an important concept reaffirming Europe as the "center" of the World and rationalizing "emancipation" as inevitable and justifiable.[4] As Edward Said proclaims, the periphery is an idea in itself, and this idea's history, tradition of thought and imagery are necessary for the realization of the Western identity.[5] With these assumptions at its core, Maori intellectual Linda Tuhiwai Smith defines decolonization as "a long-term process involving the bureaucratic, linguistic and psychological divesting of colonial power." [6] In this view, decolonial feminism strives to overcome the gender/class/race/sexuality oppression which is perceived to originate from the colonial legacy and continues to be entrenched in the capitalist world system of power.[7]

Madina Tlostanova highlights the qualitative difference between decolonialism and postcolonialism. She sees the latter as too heavily relying on Western postmodernist concepts, rarely rejecting the power matrix established in modernity.[8] Decolonialism, she claims, questions the universalising nature of postcolonialism and instead of merely critiquing, it goes beyond and deconstructs. It constantly opens up to new locales and epistemologies and fundamentally reassess what knowledge production means.[9] However, as both theories are conceptually radical, dedicated to the goal of epistemic decolonization and striving to dismantle the concept of modernity, I decided to rely on research representing both approaches in this essay.

## Hegemonic Power Relations and Global Violence

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The key concept introduced by decolonial feminism is the coloniality of power or the colonial matrix of power. With the commencement of the colonial project in the sixteenth century, which brought with it the genocide of the indigenous peoples and the organization of the African slave trade, a new global order was established. The structure was based on establishing superiority through the concept of race and controlling productivity through the exploitation of labour and the introduction of capitalism. Thus, the coloniality of power manifests itself through the emergence of race, the control of labour, the domination of subjectivity (the introduction of gender) and the control of knowledge production.[10] Maria Lugones additionally highlights the importance of the human – non-human distinction. The colonization of the Americas and the Caribbean imposed a hierarchical distinction on the colonized subjects in order to advance the interests of Western invaders. The distinction included the difference between men and women. In the colonial narrative, only the civilized (advanced by modernity) are human. In contrast, identity of the colonized was deemed animalistic and thus “non-gendered, promiscuous, grotesquely sexual, and sinful”.[11] The colonized subjects became the mythical ‘Others’. The system in which the strong Self produces the rules of the game for the weak Other is called a ‘neoliberal imperium’ by Anna Agathangelou and Heather Turcotte.[12] Revealing the layers of subjugation is an important epistemic development of decolonialism/ decolonial feminism. It allows a broader understanding of global affairs by exposing and illuminating the ruling system of gender oppression. With such an understanding of the consequences of the colonial legacy, violence against women and other subjugated groups can be analysed from a global perspective.

This is exemplified by Amalia Sa’ar who skillfully adopts the concept of the colonial axis of power in order to analyze the effects of liberalism on members of marginalized groups. In her analysis of gender oppression, she incorporates the complex intersections of other persecuting mechanisms, including class, ethnicity and coloniality.[13] By analyzing the experience of Israeli Palestinians, she argues that in order for marginalized subjects to benefit from the current liberal system, they need to adapt to its modes of behaving and thinking. The dominating masculine outlooks such as certain attitudes, rationales, values or behaviors, even when seemingly gender neutral, have an implicit gendered character. Maleness and whiteness emerge as matters of “historical consciousness” related to regimes of power, not simply to sex or skin color.[14] Her research suggests that in order to understand the positionality of marginalized groups globally, it is important to analyze the extent to which they manage to adapt to the expectations of the colonial, hegemonic system of power.

Another interesting example is given by Melanie Richter-Montpetit in her analysis of the violence enacted on the Abu Ghraib prisoners. Instead of seeing the event as a singular case of war violence resulting from the power imbalance, she instead argues that the abuse emerged as a result of a pre-constructed racialized, gendered and heterosexed world order, firmly rooted in colonial legacies and desires.[15] Richter-Montpetit’s research serves as an example of the enriched analysis that can be achieved through the application of the concept of the coloniality of gender. Only with an understanding of the dominant larger social order are we able to challenge hegemony and liberate the subjugated from oppression.

However, decolonial feminism reminds us that the mere acknowledgment of the oppression is not sufficient to fundamentally reverse the system. In fact, there remains a risk that international gender equality norms enforce the omnipresent system of coloniality. As Hisako Motoyama argues, the framework of the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda (enshrined in the UN Security Council 1325 Resolution), instead of bringing the voices of women into the realms of security, reflects the liberal order of power. Through the WPS, liberal democracies are given an opportunity to exercise their privileged position within the global security system through the imposition of moral authority over the rest, with no benefit to the civil societies in need of delinking from the colonial past.[16] Decolonial feminism forces us to analyze global development projects with suspicion and sensitivity towards the larger axis of power relations.

## **The Cruciality of Geography**

The analysis of geography from a decolonial feminist perspective is essential for a deeper understanding of global affairs. This is for a variety of reasons. First, the discussed global system of power relies on mainstream constructions of geography which localise the sites of violence and rationalise those who are the victims and the perpetrators. The schools of international relations naturalize such imperial logic. In essence, decolonial feminism

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forces us to question the connection between violence and specific geographical locations. The dominant discourse on violence links the oppression of women with the backwardness of places like 'Africa', 'Asia', 'Latin America' or 'Eastern Europe'. In such a narrative, the 'US' and 'Western Europe' emerge as territories of rights, where liberation is perceived to stem from the achievements of modern progress.[17] This narrative produces a category of women from the Global South who are universally oppressed and submissive, and women from the Global North who are universally liberated and independent.[18] This simplistic geopolitical segregation represents a set of imperial strategies crucial for the realization of the Western myth. This has a series of complications for marginalized individuals. For example, the analysis of the global asylum system reveals that the perception of certain localities as 'backwards' deeply contributes to a stereotypical and cruel treatment of queer refugees migrating to the West. Their migration is used to justify the narrative of the West as ideologically and politically progressive, obscuring the continuing subjugation of queer individuals living within Western territories.[19] Therefore, understanding the colonial axis of power reveals the underlying universalizing assumptions pervading the narratives of different geographical locations. Decolonial feminism questions the unequal nature of a global system where rights are granted based on the regulation of national citizenship.

Moreover, the division of geopolitics affects the way in which social phenomena in 'the South' are addressed. The conceptual responses are shaped by colonial power relations. This is particularly strong in relation to Africa, which, as Maria Eriksoon Baaz and Judith Verweijen argue, was constructed as located at the end of revolutionary progress and hence represents the least developed 'Other'.[20] By using decolonial lenses, they show that the way in which the concepts of securitization and militarization are applied to the continent reproduce the narratives of 'backwardness'.[21] This point is further supported by Rita Abrahamsen who in her well-proclaimed piece reveals the limitations of studying and analysing Africa from a colonial perspective. She argues for the need to see Africa as a place in the world and of the world.[22] This is an important epistemic and normative observation. The a priori understandings of certain geographical localities, shaped by the colonial legacies, affect our attitudes and scholarly approaches. Decolonial feminism urges us to question universalist assumptions in order to truly experience and understand specific locations.

Nevertheless, Redi Koobak and Raili Marling point to the limitations surrounding the internalized progress narratives of decolonial feminism. They argue that a near absence of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) in feminist theorising is caused by a continuing organisation around geographic localities understood in terms of progress and backwardness. The depiction of CEE's cultural difference as a mere 'lag' behind Western Europe reproduces the narrative of Western superiority.[23] Koobak and Marling's analysis reminds us of the emancipatory goal of decolonial feminism, where the 'difference' is not only recognized, but also embraced and theorised, in order to learn from plurality of embedded knowledges. Hence, decolonial feminism helps liberate epistemologies from the limiting imperial barriers of geopolitics.

## Decolonization of Knowledge and the Production of Decolonized Knowledge

So far, this essay has discussed the workings of the global system of power and its implications for marginalized groups and localities. Another fundamental task of decolonial feminism is linked to its emancipatory nature and concerns the decolonization of scholarship and institutions of knowledge production, especially in the case of global feminism(s). In order to understand global affairs to a greater extent, decolonial feminism advocates for a) decolonizing existing epistemes and b) embracing subjugated ways of studying and knowing the world, especially indigenous knowledges and practices.

Critical feminists like Peace Medie and Alice Kang argue that approaches to studying women in the Global South adopted by Western feminists are permeated by colonial and neoliberal assumptions, reinforcing global inequalities. The attribution of gender inequality to factors such as ethnicity or caste is challenged by decolonial feminists who strive for a more comprehensive analysis including historical and contemporary power relations.[24] Therefore, the goal of decolonizing the academy arises as a normative objective and is defined as "identifying, critiquing and correcting the inequalities embedded in scholarship and at the foundation of knowledge production." [25]

Anne Sisson analysed International Relations from a decolonial feminist perspective and pointed to its fundamentally

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colonial nature. She argues that the founding assumptions of the discipline, such as sovereignty, liberal democracy and nation-state, stemming from the Westphalian project, obscure and legitimize imperialism and racism which, in significant cases, resulted in massacres and genocide. The coloniality of the discipline is linked to its constant erasure of peoples and perspectives coming from the Global South.[26] What decolonial feminism reveals, then, are the costs of neglecting the colonial axis of power. They include a poorer understanding of global affairs, the imposition of an unequal global order and the continuous subjugation of marginalized groups.

This point is further argued by Medie and Kang. They analysed the representation of scholars in the Global south in gender and politics journals and confirmed Sisson's point on the erasure of South-based scholars: less than 5% of articles published between 2006 – 2017 in international feminist political journals were produced in Southern institutions.[27] Revealing the inequalities in knowledge production is a first step to challenging its pervasiveness. Through their decolonial practice, Medie and Kang made a point on the importance of diversifying the sources of knowledge. A varied academy is more likely to ask a broader array of questions and come up with innovative methods in deepening our understanding of global developments.

Furthermore, decolonial feminism advocates for broadening our analysis of the international by "shifting the geography of reason", meaning opening reason beyond Eurocentric modernist understandings of knowledge, as well as producing epistemes beyond and outside of the strict frameworks of the academia. This includes paying attention to questions arising in spaces of struggle for liberation from domination, as well as embracing what is often considered epistemologically irrelevant.[28] Such a decolonial approach stems from a particular understanding of the positionality of the researcher. Identity is deemed "an inevitable point of departure" which shapes our research interests, observations and responses.[29] The acknowledgment of a standpoint is a fundamental development of decolonial feminism. It suggests that there is no such thing as a universal point of view; the hegemonic points of views are expressions of a particular identity and are upheld for the imposition of a particular global order.[30] Applying a decolonial lens to research could contribute to a process of knowledge production motivated by ethical goals of liberation. In this sense, knowledge production becomes a political act.

The positionality of a researcher lies at the core of indigenous practices. Smith advances the argument of the importance of representing various epistemic approaches by arguing that benefiting larger communities, social transformation and a greater understanding of the world should lie at the core of knowledge production.[31] Yet, she argues, research seldom benefits indigenous communities as it never reaches the indigenous populations. On the contrary, it often forces them to give up their cultures and sacrifice their decision-making for the greater project of 'progress' and modernity.[32] Decolonial feminism asks us to question knowledge production as entrenched within the global system of power. Only through embracing diverse localities and epistemes can marginalized communities be benefited through research.

## The Liberation of the Self

Finally, the application of decolonial feminism suggests that real liberation does not only occur at the level of global politics or knowledge production, but also at the level of individual being, feeling and knowing. Despite the end of colonialism, the coloniality of gender continues to oppress individuals through the intersections of gender, class and race as central aspects of the system of power.[33] The colonized inhabit a fractured world constructed through the imposition of difference and find themselves in conflict between their identity and their lived experience. Decolonization requires us to move beyond understanding individuals as "oppressed" and to acknowledge the beauty of resistance as a way of the protection of the Self. Decolonizing gender is a practical task which Lugones calls "a lived transformation of the social." [34]

The liberation of the individual is hence a necessary mission of decolonial feminism. International relations are played out on the globalised stage, but their effects fully emerge within the local context. Likewise, the abstract project of the coloniality of gender reveals the structures of oppression, but it is communities who suffer and lose their identity in order to survive under the existing regime. The emancipatory goal of decolonial feminism is achieved not only when the international arrangement of power is shifted, but fundamentally when the self is liberated. Seeing the personal as international [35] shifts our focus and allows us to fully grasp the interconnectedness between individual stories of

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resistance and altering global affairs. For Carolette Norwood, the process of liberation entails “falling in love with a self I did not know, a self that was prohibited, a self that was shunned for no apparent reason, a self that was (and is) beautiful as is.”[36]

## Conclusion

In this essay I argued that decolonial feminism shifts and deepens our understanding of global affairs for a variety of reasons. Firstly, it works to reveal the coloniality of power based on the sex/race/class/sexuality divisions, which underlines multiple international and local interactions through its enshrinement in the capitalist global system. Moreover, it asks us to question the seemingly natural link between localities and violence. Because of that, we are able to challenge the universalised cultural assumptions initially formed to uphold the inequality of geopolitics. Furthermore, decolonial feminism uncovers the underlying limiting assumptions of mainstream epistemes and asks for the liberation of knowledge production through the rejection of coloniality. Simultaneously, it welcomes multiple ways of knowing and studying the world and evokes the need to embrace indigenous, local research. Finally, at the heart of decolonial feminism lies the task of the liberation of the self from the limitations imposed by the global power structures. Only then can its emancipatory goal be fulfilled.

The analysed arguments suggest that decolonial feminism fundamentally broadens our understanding of global affairs. The decolonial approach is essentially an open-ended intellectual modality, continuously enriched by more local knowledges. A genuine interest in difference and a dedication to liberation make decolonialism a critically important intellectual endeavour.

However, it is necessary that decolonial feminism moves beyond criticism and analysis of the coloniality of power and shifts towards the affirmation of something outside of the dominant system of values and norms. The fulfilment of its task of modifying both people's consciousness *and* power structures requires a constant modification of the applied tactics. The future of the discipline and its ethical, emancipatory goals remain fluid. Just as our understanding of international affairs is continuously broadened and enriched by learning from new localities, we also may need to learn to embrace the uncertainty of plurality.

## Notes

[1] Walter D. Mignolo, *Local histories/global designs: Coloniality, subaltern knowledges and border thinking*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, (2000): 9.

[2] Maria Lugones, “Toward a Decolonial Feminism”, *Hypatia* v. 25, n. 4, (2010): 746.

[3] Sarah A. Radcliffe, “Decolonising geographical knowledges”, *Transactions*, Royal Geographical Society (2017): 229.

[4] Madina Tlostanova, “Decolonial Feminism and the Decolonial Turn” in *Gender Epistemologies and Eurasian Borderlands*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan US (2010): 19.

[5] Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, London: Penguin Group, (2003): 5.

[6] Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing methodologies*, Zed Books, London, (2010): 33.

[7] Maria Lugones, “Toward a Decolonial Feminism”, *Hypatia* v. 25, n. 4, (2010): 746.

[8] Madina Tlostanova, “Decolonial Feminism and the Decolonial Turn” in *Gender Epistemologies and Eurasian Borderlands*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan US (2010): 24.

[9] *Ibid.* 25.

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[10] Ibid. 20.

[11] Maria Lugones, "Toward a Decolonial Feminism", *Hypatia* v. 25, n. 4, (2010): 743.

[12] Anna M. Agathangelou and Heather M. Turcotte, *Transforming world politics: from empire to multiple worlds*, London: Routledge, (2009): 15.

[13] Amalia Sa'ar, "Postcolonial Feminism, The Politics of Identification, and the Liberal Bargain", *GENDER & SOCIETY*, v. 19, n. 5, (2005): pp. 683.

[14] Ibid. 688 – 689.

[15] Melanie Richter – Montpetit, "Empire, Desire and Violence: A Queer Transnational Feminist Reading of the Prisoner 'Abuse' in Abu Ghraib and the Question of 'Gender Equality'", *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, v. 9, n. 1, (2007): 38 – 59.

[16] Hisako Motoyama, "Formulating Japan's UNSCR 1325 national action plan and forgetting the "comfort women". *International Feminist Journal Politics*, v. 20 n. 1, (2018): 50.

[17] Anna M. Agathangelou and Heather M. Turcotte, "Postcolonial Theories and Challenges to "FirstWorldism", *Gender Matters in Global Politics: A Feminist Introduction to International Relations*. (ed.) Laura J. Shepherd. Routledge. London (2010): 37.

[18] Ibid. 42.

[19] Rachel A. Lewis, "Gay? Prove it. The politics of queer anti-deportation strategies", *Sexualities*, v. 17, n. 8, (2014): 958 – 975.

[20] Maria Eriksoon Baaz and Judith Verweijen, "Confronting the Colonial: The (re)Production of African Exceptionalism in critical security and military studies", *Security Dialogue*, v. 49, n. 1-2, (2018): 58.

[21] Ibid. 58 – 59.

[22] Rita Abrahamsen, "Africa and International Relations: Assembling Africa, Studying the world", *African Affairs*, n. 116/462, (2016): 125 – 139.

[23] Redi Koobak and Raili Marling, "The decolonial challenge: Framing post-socialist Central and Eastern Europe within transnational feminist studies", *European Journal of Women's Studies*, v. 21, n. 4 (2014): 332.

[24] Peace Medie and Alice J. Kang, "Power, Knowledge and the politics of gender in the global South", *European Journal of Politics*, v. 1, n. 1-2, (2018): 37.

[25] Ibid. 40.

[26] Anne Runyan Sisson, "Decolonizing knowledges in feminist world politics", *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, v. 20 n. 1 (2018): 3.

[27] Peace Medie and Alice J. Kang, "Power, Knowledge and the politics of gender in the global South", *European Journal of Politics*, v. 1, n. 1-2, (2018): 43.

[28] Nelson Maldonado – Torres, "Thinking through the Decolonial Turn: Post-continental Interventions in Theory, Philosophy, and Critique—An Introduction", *TRANSMODERNITY: Journal of Peripheral Cultural Production of the Luso-Hispanic World*, v. 1, n. 2, (2011): 9.

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[29] Ibid.

[30] Ibid. 10.

[31] Linda Tuhiwai Smith, "Getting the Story Right, Telling the Story Well: Indigenous Activism, Indigenous Research" in *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, Zed Books (2012): 217 – 226.

[32] Ibid. 226.

[33] Maria Lugones, "Toward a Decolonial Feminism", *Hypatia* v. 25, n. 4, (2010): 746.

[34] Ibid.

[35] Cynthia Enloe, *Bananas, Beaches and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics*, London: Pandora, (1989): 196.

[36] Anne Sisson Runyan, "Decolonizing knowledges in feminist world politics", *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, v. 20 n. 1 (2018): 7.

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