# Student Feature – Theory in Action: Postcolonialism and Women of Colour

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SHEILA NAIR, SEP 9 2019

**This is adapted from *International Relations Theory* (2017). Get your free copy of the textbook here.**

As with all theories of IR, there are internal debates among postcolonial scholars and in this case also a significant overlap with feminism – especially 'third wave' feminism that became prominent in the 1990s. bell hooks (2000) observed that the so-called 'second wave' of feminism of the mid- to late twentieth century had emerged from women in a position of privilege and did not represent African American women such as herself who remain on the margins of society, politics and the economy. She called for an alternative, critical and distinctive feminist activism and politics. For example, does a black woman from a poor neighbourhood on Chicago's south side experience sexism in the same way as a white woman from its wealthier suburbs? Women who share the same ethnic identity might experience sexism in different ways because of their class. The same might be true for women of colour and white women from the same social class. Women of colour and white women in the United States experience 'heteropatriarchy' – a societal order marked by white male heterosexual domination – differently even if they come from the same social class. An illustration of how this works may be found in the video of Beyonce's 'Lemonade' which not only draws on how sexism is filtered through this patriarchal order but also explores how race, gender, class and sexuality are intimately intertwined in the history of black women.

The fact that some black women may be more privileged in relation to class may not take away from their experience of racism. For this reason (and others), feminist postcolonial scholars (see Chowdhry and Nair 2002) call for more attention to the intersections of race and/or ethnicity, nationality, class *and* gender. By doing so they address the ways that different aspects of one's identity, such as race, gender, class, sexuality and so forth, intersect to create multiple and distinct forms of oppression so that no one aspect can be privileged over another in understanding oppression. Instead, various identities must all be understood as intersecting in producing one's experience of oppression. This idea of 'intersectionality' is central to third-wave feminist approaches.

Postcolonial feminists share a desire to go beyond simply analysing the impacts of patriarchy, gender inequality and sexual exploitation. Instead, they highlight the need to fight not only patriarchy (broadly understood as the power of men over women) but also the classism and racism that privileges white women over women of colour. They question the idea of universal solidarity in women's movements, arguing that the struggle against patriarchy as well as social inequality must be situated in relation to racial, ethnic and sexual privilege.For example, while Western feminism has often portrayed the veil as a symbol of oppression of women, many Algerian women adopted the veil, standing alongside men, when protesting French rule. To them, it was a symbol of opposition to white, colonial patriarchy. In many other parts of the colonised world, women stood shoulder to shoulder with men in nationalist movements to overthrow colonial rule, showing that women in different cultural, social and political contexts experience oppression in very different ways. Postcolonial feminists are committed to an intersectional approach that uncovers the deeper implications of how and why systemic violence evident in war, conflict, terror, poverty, social inequality and so forth has taken root. Understanding power thus requires paying attention to these intersections and how they are embedded in the issue at hand.

Postcolonial feminism asserts that women of colour are triply oppressed due to their (1) race/ethnicity, (2) class status and (3) gender. An example can be found in the employment conditions of the many women in the Global South who work in factories producing textiles, semi-conductors, and sporting and consumer goods for export to the West. In one such factory in Thailand, the Kader Toy Factory, a fire in 1993 killed 220 female factory workers and seriously injured over 500 more. The doors to the building were locked at the time of the fire. The tragedy revealed the exploitation and deplorable working conditions of these women, who were employed by local contractors of American companies to make toys and stuffed animals for sale in Western markets. Despite decades of such abuses, there was little attention given to the conditions in these factories, or to the tragedy of the fire, in the mainstream Western media. One opinion piece captured the shocking disregard for these women's lives,

These executives know that their profits come from the toil of the young and the wretched in the Far East; they can live with that – live well, in fact. But they do not want to talk about dead women and girls stacked in the factory yard like so much rubbish, their bodies eventually to be carted away like any other industrial debris (Herbert 1994).

In another tragedy, the Rana Plaza – a garment factory in Dhaka, Bangladesh collapsed, killing 1,135 garment workers, mostly women. It threw a spotlight on the workings of the global garment industry. Popular Western clothing lines profit from low wages, exploitation and sweatshop conditions by producing their clothes in countries with lax building codes and regulations and non- existent (or inadequate) labour standards. The clothing lines do not then hold the factories to account for working conditions or safety. Postcolonial scholars argue that the deeply exploitative conditions and the disregard for the safety of these workers show that lesser value is ascribed to brown bodies compared to white ones.

While there was much more coverage of this industrial accident in the Western media and the brands whose clothing was being made at the Rana Plaza did suffer some momentary bad publicity, there has been little sustained effort to right the wrongs in the operations of multinational firms. The quest for the highest possible profit margins forces developing countries into a 'race to the bottom' in which they compete to have the cheapest labour and production costs in order to attract investment from multinational corporations. The results are low wages, exploitation and low safety standards. Postcolonial scholarship explains the failure to change these conditions by exposing how race, class and gender come together to obscure the plight of these workers, meaning that the factory overseers, like the owners of the Rana Plaza and Kader operations, are not held accountable until tragedy strikes. Even when they are held accountable, the punishment does not extend to the Western corporations further up the chain who sub-contract the task of exploiting workers – and ultimately killing some of them in these cases. It is almost impossible to imagine that a tragedy of a similar scale in a Western state would prompt so little action against those responsible or allow the conditions that caused it to continue virtually unchecked.

Postcolonialism interrogates a world order dominated by major state actors and their domineering interests and ways of looking at the world. It challenges notions that have taken hold about the way states act or behave and what motivates them. It forces us to ask tough questions about how and why a hierarchical international order has emerged and it further challenges mainstream IR's core assumptions about concepts such as power and how it operates. Postcolonialism forces us to reckon with the everyday injustices and oppressions that can reveal themselves in the starkest terms through a particular moment of crisis. Whether it has to do with the threat of nuclear weapons or the deaths of workers in factories churning out goods for Western markets, postcolonialism asks us to analyse these issues from the perspectives of those who lack power. While postcolonialism shares some common ground with other critical theories in this regard, it also offers a distinctive approach. It brings together a deep concern with histories of colonialism and imperialism, how these are carried through to the present – and how inequalities and oppressions embedded in race, class and gender relations on a global scale matter for our understanding of international relations. By paying close attention to how these aspects of the global play out in specific contexts, postcolonialism gives us an important and alternative conceptual lens that provides us with a

different set of theoretical tools to unpack the complexities of this world.

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### About the author:

**Sheila Nair** is Professor of Politics and International Affairs at Northern Arizona University, USA.