

Decolonising white feminism: A response to Anjum Rahman

NISHHZA THIRUSELVAM

Abstract

In response to Anjum Rahman's question, 'How do we go about decolonising feminism?' I reflect on mainstream feminism's preoccupation with celebrating women, especially white women, within the existing hierarchical structures of New Zealand's settler colonial government. I ask if mainstream feminist discourse in Aotearoa/ New Zealand is truly empowering for young women of colour, given that celebrating the figureheads of our settler colonial government only upholds colonial capitalism, which systematically sidelines these women's interests. I argue that such structures are antithetical to feminist liberation when success within colonial, capitalist and patriarchal power structures furthers the oppression and degradation of marginalised women of colour.

Keywords:

Decolonial feminist, capitalism, mainstream pākehā feminism, mana wahine

For a while, I have identified my politics as decolonial feminist. In a recent conversation with a friend, I mentioned that I was writing a response to Anjum Rahman's interview with my former lecturer Kirsten Locke, where Anjum's question, 'How do you go about decolonising feminism?', struck my interest. My friend and I discussed the notion of decolonisation as reorienting itself against colonialism. Decolonial feminism still frames colonialism at the centre of such a declaration of politics, and engaging in a continuous response to colonialism is frankly draining. My friend and I talked about feminist politics taking on different names and meanings outside the understanding of English language speakers. For instance, I recently read about *mana wahine* in an article by Jennifer Donnelly, which appeared in a 2014 issue of *Kate*, the University of Auckland annual feminist magazine. Donnelly's article, 'Inadvertent colonisation? The relationship between *mana wahine* and pākehā feminism', articulates *mana wahine* as a concept that describes the 'interface between being a woman and being Māori' (Donnelly, 2014, p. 18). The article asks if pākehā can support *mana wahine* in a way that does not unconsciously colonise and patronise the movement (Donnelly, 2014, p. 18). Is it possible to dissociate feminism from coloniality? Thinking this through, I am unsure, especially given the existing frameworks of mainstream feminist discourse in Aotearoa/New Zealand.

I am a first-year high school English teacher at a West Auckland all-girls school. There, I don't teach a single pākehā student. My classroom is a wonderful mix of brown girls – Pasifika, Māori, and migrant/refugee kids from Asia, Africa and the Middle East. The kindness I see my students show to me and each other is humbling and moving – behaviour that one would describe as feminist. It is certainly behaviour that I aspire to, when my feminism is informed by how I experience life as a migrant. Leaving our home countries, communities and wider families makes social isolation a feminist issue. Intimate partner violence is facilitated through the isolation of migrant/refugee women from our networks of support. The violence that migrant/refugee women experience is especially severe in relationships with pākehā men, whose power is distributed through systems of the colonial capitalist patriarchy, and

whose empowerment is further found through *their* existing social and family support networks. With precarious visa statuses, migrant/refugee communities' entire lives are within the control of our colonial immigration system, and the legal system itself is not a system that safeguards the human rights of these communities' members.

Family violence for migrant/refugee communities is a complex issue. Men of colour are simultaneously hypersexualised and emasculated when measured against the colonial, capitalist and patriarchal construction of an idealised masculinity – namely, middle-class, heterosexual, white masculinity. The mana wahine movement also recognises this at play within the Aotearoa/New Zealand context, where Donnelly says that, 'due to an imposition of gendered and patriarchal laws during colonisation, Māori society itself became patriarchal. It was in the interests of Māori men to comply with a gendering process that granted them gender superiority and status when the social environment had eroded their own' (2014, p. 18). The violence enacted by men of colour is inseparable from the trauma they experience under the colonial capitalist patriarchy. I want to be clear that I do not wish to excuse the violence enacted within our communities as a result of this emasculation. Rather, I strongly feel that family and intimate partner violence remain insufficiently addressed by feminism, with feminists failing to identify this is an issue rooted in white supremacist capitalist patriarchy.

Most of my students do not associate themselves with the language of feminism. Many roll their eyes at the mention of feminism on the syllabus, and my inkling is that they have located within feminism an entwinement with (or perhaps an inseparability from) coloniality. This inseparability dwells within mainstream feminist discourse in Aotearoa/New Zealand, which continues to see the pākehā woman heading our colonial government as a great example of our feminism. Mainstream feminist discourse in Aotearoa/New Zealand continues to praise Greta Thunberg, and rightly so. We ought to be grateful for her bold expressions of anger towards a generation whose greed has caused the destruction of our planet, which we will leave for my students' generation, and their descendants, to inherit. Does our mainstream feminist discourse likewise recognise the indigenous women in the Pacific who have been fighting for decades to save their ancestral lands from drowning in our rising sea levels? Does mainstream feminism in Aotearoa/New Zealand consider it an urgent feminist issue that, in the Pacific, sea levels continue to engulf our neighbouring island nations, even as I write this? Not that I can see. Erasure of the work of people of colour from socio-political narratives is a historically colonial exercise. When my students do not engage with a feminism that surreptitiously erases them and their contexts to an extent that is uninspiring at best and disempowering at worst, I see this as a critical effort towards self-preservation.

Likewise, as a migrant, my feminist politics are inseparable from community care, acts of service and reciprocity. I see my students as so firmly grounded in these values and I feel privileged to build relationships with these girls in such an empowering setting of brown womanhood. Yet I do not have a feminist vocabulary to express the depth of this experience in English. As my year-10 student aptly put it, 'English is the language of business'. It is the language of the colonial capitalist patriarchy, and the colonial capitalist patriarchy relies on disconnecting us from each other through ideas which isolate and overvalue the individual – ideas which tell us that economic success and social empowerment are guaranteed through hard work. The buy-in to the colonial capitalist patriarchy also occurs due to a lack of transparency around the fact that individual success relies on an exploitation and abuse of those in our community in overt and covert ways. A career woman's success within the colonial capitalist patriarchy's idealised nuclear family relies on exploiting the labour of her domestic helpers, who are underpaid to a degrading extent, and are almost certainly women of colour. These

women of colour, who are the mothers and aunties of many of my students, are exploited within the framework of a feminism which celebrates women who occupy positions of power within the existing hierarchy of the colonial capitalist patriarchy.

To me, colonial language of success seems to serve as a euphemism for gaining and furthering our power and control over those around us through a precise utilisation of our existing privilege. Often, it seems that the idea of a person having a lot of potential – an idea referred to frequently within a school setting – refers to the privilege that they have available to them, and their willingness to utilise it. The colonial capitalist patriarchy undermines the importance of community care. Care is now a paradox, distorted into an inherently exploitative transaction, whereby the carer relies on their own exploitation for their own survival. Meanwhile, through this parasitic transaction, those who are cared for gain feminist empowerment, as well as social and economic success. If mainstream feminism's ideas of feminist victories rely on women exploiting women, then it does not concern itself with solidarity between pākehā women and women of colour; rather, it requires our subservience. Acts of service are counterproductive under colonial capitalism's idea of success, where instead, the notion of always putting yourself first is promoted as sensible and responsible. Reciprocity, which can be loosely defined as a mutual exchange of privileges, isn't a suitable principal for living under colonial capitalism either, when the operation of colonial capitalism enables and relies on the privileged being able to exploit the under-privileged. Teaching feminism in a high-school English class requires this to be thoroughly acknowledged and critiqued.

I suppose that today, when I call my worldview feminist, I am paying homage to where I find myself in terms of my grounding in Asian, migrant, queer, Indigenous and Black feminist thought. I gain so much energy and inspiration from these sophisticated works, which identify complex enactments of the colonial capitalist patriarchy. I have engaged with this form of feminism so much that western feminism has become jarring to me in its expressions of white supremacy and its enactments of colonial domination.

NISHHZA THIRUSELVAM is a Malaysian-born Tamil with ancestry tracing back to Jaffna, Sri Lanka and Tanjavour, in India's southernmost state of Tamil Nadu. She is the proud daughter of migrant parents. As a first-year teacher, she feels privileged to experience a kind of love for her students that she has never felt before.

References

- Donnelly, J. (2014, July). Inadvertent colonisation? The relationship between mana wahine and pākehā feminism. *Kate*, p. 18. <http://www.ausa.org.nz/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Kate-Magazine-2014.pdf>.