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# Towards a decolonial feminist intervention: ethics and perspectives of Françoise Vergès

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## ABSTRACT

In this conversation with Françoise Vergès, a French political scientist, historian, film producer, independent curator, activist, and public educator, Vergès talks about postcolonial studies and decolonial feminism. While the focus has been on Vergès' book *A Decolonial Feminism*, other aspects such as civilizational feminism, a feminist critical decolonial pedagogy, and ethical nuances have been discussed.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

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Women; decolonial feminism; Global South; civilizational feminism pedagogy

**Goutam Karmakar (GK):** After reading your argument that 'A feminist cannot claim to possess the theory and the method' (Vergès et al., 2021, p. 19), I would like to know why you use 'A' before 'decolonial feminism', rather than 'the' or just 'decolonial feminism' in your book title.

**Françoise Vergès (FV):** 'A' decolonial feminism because it is a proposition rather than a definitive definition. If I had written either 'The' or 'Decolonial feminism', I would have suggested that I was offering *the* theory of decolonial feminism. Among other feminist texts on decolonial feminism, I was offering an approach. I did not discuss the recognized authors of decolonial theory (Mignolo, Aquino, Grosfoguel, and Lugones); others have done it very well, and I did not write the book especially with an academic crowd in mind. They are very good academic books and articles on decolonial theory, I did not have to write another one.

I started with a very concrete question: who cleans the world? I thought, and I still think, that it is an essential question. Was not addressing the issue of cleaning within the so-called domestic space, which is very important and has been explored by the literature on social reproduction. My starting point was that without the *daily* work of black and brown women in the cleaning industry, no society would function. Every site of social interaction – schools, universities, hospitals, banks, post offices, airports, day-care centres, sports facilities, hotels, malls, etc.—needs to be cleaned every day for a society to function. And this is everywhere. And in this industry, black and brown women are the majority of workers *worldwide*. The work is underpaid, invisible, a site of systemic racial and sexual violence, and absolutely necessary. I looked at the strikes that these women had organized in this industry and said that they embodied the decolonial feminism I defend, which is radically antiracist, anti-imperialist, and anti-capitalist, hence anti-patriarchal. So, my goal was not so much to inscribe myself within a theoretical conversation, criticizing this author or that one, but to suggest that the work of cleaning could be analysed as a site that brought together, gender, race, class, environmental justice, public health, the struggle against sexual violence, and also, though I did not discuss

it in the book, that question: how would we organize post-racist, post-patriarchal, and post-capitalist cleaning?

**GK:** I completely agree that your book contributes to the critical works of feminists in the Global South and their Northern advocates on gender, feminism, women's struggles, and the critique of 'civilizational feminism'. In this context, how would you like to define civilizational feminism and your ways of decolonizing it?

**FV:** Civilizational feminism borrows from the colonial vocabulary of the civilizing mission or white man's burden. The civilizing mission was the colonial rhetoric that informed colonial policies: It was racist. European powers had a *duty*: to civilize non-European peoples. European art, philosophy, laws, social mores, and technology were superior, they had a *natural* disposition for human rights and progress. That duty had to be enforced upon colonized peoples, even by force, because it was 'for their good'. My argument is that, in the late 1990s-early 2000s, white, bourgeois western feminists turned to that rhetoric and were able to make women's rights the criteria to judge if a country was civilized enough. It was a smart move because being against women's rights was automatically associated with backwardness, uncivilized. It became the duty of white, bourgeois western feminists to educate non-white women, and teach them what their rights are (rights defined within their tradition). It represented a counteroffensive against feminisms in the Global South, black and indigenous feminisms. It was a way to re-establish their hegemony, weakened by the struggles of black, indigenous feminisms and feminisms in the Global South. States, international organizations, private foundations, and businesses soon adopted their approach to women's rights. It justified military interventions (US in Afghanistan), the adoption of Islamophobic laws (in France, the law against the veil or against 'separatism'), or the individualization of feminism, a soft feminism for glossy magazines. Everybody could be a feminist, even women on the far right. Feminism was about the individual, something about attitude and class disappeared.

Civilizational feminism is a tool of neoliberalism and imperialism. It does not seek liberation, abolition, or revolution. Decolonizing civilizational feminism will mean dismantling it. A colonial, imperialist ideology cannot be decolonized. Decolonization means radical change.

**GK:** What do you mean by 'a feminist critical decolonial pedagogy'?

**FV:** What I could say is that a feminist critical decolonial pedagogy would rest on collective practice, on listening, on working together, and also learning from those who have practice and knowledge about the stars, the oceans, cultivating the earth, bodies and minds, about helping to give birth, to mourn, to celebrate. What I mean is that we all have knowledge, but we also have different knowledge. Sure, I can learn about repairing a car, plumbing, ways of growing different plants, and helping a woman give birth, but I may be better at cooking, sewing, and driving. I want to learn about the stars, building a bridge, or 10<sup>th</sup> century travels in the Indian Ocean from someone who has studied these topics. It is about putting our different knowledge and talents together. Having a talent does not mean, in my eyes, being superior; it is the recognition of differences. I love when we put our differences together to create something. This is what I propose in *L'Atelier*, a workshop I have been convening since 2015 with artists and activists of colour: we put our differences in common to imagine a public performance.

Also, learning takes time. I remember trying to learn to weave: it does not come like that, you need time, you also may realize that you are particularly good at something you are learning which I realized for weaving.

**GK:** Influenced by postcolonial and Latin American feminisms, decolonial feminism is a significant feminist intervention that modifies decolonization as a political proposition (Ballestrin, 2022, p. 116). So, I would like to know your perspectives on the interconnectedness between postcolonial and decolonial feminism.

**FV:** There is a lot of debate about the merits of 'postcolonial' and 'decolonial', their commodification, their pertinence to explain a vast diversity of situations, and the danger of making them rigid notions. And I agree with these remarks. I think it is important to always clarify and situate what we are talking about. And to listen to what the women engaged in struggles are saying, how they formulate their desires, aspirations, and desires. It is not always useful or necessary to put an adjective on their struggles. It is often about dignity, abolition, and equality, and they show incredible courage and determination. That should be enough.

What I can say is that I situate myself within the long tradition of south-south anticolonial struggles and their networks of solidarity. The decolonial feminism I defend is deeply indebted to anti-slavery and anti-colonial struggles. It is an 'anticolonial decolonial' feminism, if you want. We are not done with colonization and its violence (see Palestine!)

**GK:** How would you like to link decolonial feminism with indigenous women and their knowledge systems?

**FV:** Decolonial feminism must never claim precedence over other feminist struggles that target racism, patriarchy, dispossession, and capitalism. No decolonization without de-patriarcalization, indigenous feminists say, and they are right! And again, the decolonial feminism I defend must remain humble. Struggle for liberation is also about the unexpected, the unforeseen, and there are moments when these words – decolonial feminism, postcolonial feminism, etc.—are not that useful.

**GK:** How do you perceive ethics in relation to decolonial feminism?

**FV:** If decolonial feminism has an ethics, it is to understand and embrace differences, to accept that struggle is long, often difficult, but also full of joy. It is about non-linear time and interconnections among human and nonhuman lives.

**GK:** Do you agree that the principles and integrity of decolonial feminism should be built on a more radicalized understanding of what Lugones (2010) refers to as 'learning from other resisters'?

**FV:** All radical movements have sought to learn from others and build transnational solidarity. In Algeria, Vietnam, Chile, and South Africa, to name a few, revolutionary movements always connected with other movements, creating their own images and sounds to counter imperialist propaganda and inviting artists, activists, and filmmakers. Whether Bandung 1955 or women's transnational movements against imperialism, there has always been a desire to learn from other movements. Ideas and practices circulate.

## Notes on the interviewee

Françoise Vergès is an activist and public educator. She holds a PhD in Political Science from the University of California, Berkeley, and is the author of many books including *A Decolonial Feminism* and *Wombs of Women*.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Notes on contributor

*Goutam Karmakar* is an NRF Postdoctoral Fellow at the University of the Western Cape, in South Africa. He is one of the editors of the Routledge book series on South Asian literature. His areas of research are South Asian literature and culture, Women and Gender Studies, Postcolonial studies, and Ecological studies. His forthcoming and recently published edited volumes are *Nation and Narration: Hindi Cinema and the Making and Remaking of National Consciousness* (Routledge, forthcoming), *The Poetry of Jibanananda Das: Aesthetics, Poetics, and Narratives* (Routledge, forthcoming), *Narratives of Trauma in South Asian Literature* (Routledge, forthcoming), *The City Speaks: Urban Spaces in Indian Literature* (Routledge, 2022), and *Religion in South Asian Anglophone Literature: Traversing Resistance, Margins and Extremism* (Routledge, 2021). He has also published articles in over a dozen academic journals. He can be reached at [goutamkrmk@gmail.com](mailto:goutamkrmk@gmail.com)

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