



## Article

# Feminist Futures as Unthought Futures

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## Abstract

*The article reflects on the tension between neoliberal visions of the future in the Gulf states and the possibility of creating feminist, human-centered approaches through teaching. Drawing on personal reflections on developing a course on Futures Studies, the article explores the role of feminist pedagogies in facilitating critical student engagement for creating more equitable and diverse visions of the future. The article claims that feminist futures are not just about gender equality but further encompass a larger project of decolonizing the future.*

## Keywords

Neoliberalism, Feminist Pedagogy, Futures Studies, Gulf States, Decolonization.

## Introduction

In June 2020, I found myself sitting alone in a dark room in the Museum of Modern Art in Doha, Qatar. I had just successfully submitted my PhD in gender studies a few months ago and had made the difficult choice to move back to my hometown of Doha, Qatar. The decision to move back was difficult because the Gulf region is notorious for its dominant structures of gendered oppression, and unchallenged style of familial and state-patriarchy. Describing yourself as a feminist here, is often met with scrunched, horrified faces or looks of disdain. Many believe that feminism is about ‘hating men’ (Brownmiller, 1970) whereas others see it as a polarizing or divisive discourse, stemming from a foreign (Western) cultural or social context, which has historically overlooked or misrepresented the struggles of women of color in the Global South.

In Ivana Milojević’s (2024) monograph, *The Hesitant Feminist's Guide to the Future*, she defines feminism as “a social movement, ideology, theory, philosophy, worldview, and a way of life. It is also about women collectively finding their own voice based on their lived experiences. Furthermore, it is about articulating a different set of values and priorities from those inherited from the patriarchal world view” (p. 46). I grew into my feminism as a reaction to the structural, cultural and epistemological violence I witnessed in my own lived context. The Arab gulf region had experienced more than one hundred years of British colonialism, an experience that was underpinned by extensive natural resource extraction and in/direct forms of violence towards the colonized ‘other’. Unlike other postcolonial contexts elsewhere, colonialism did not end because of sustained anti-colonial struggles. Rather, colonialism was replaced by a patriarchal and monarchical form of government that retains strong ties with its former colonial power to this day. In the present context, patriarchy is sustained through the development of rentier economies and by instilling a system of male guardianship over women that helps maintain coercive forms of political and social control over the population. In similar fashion to the way in which colonized people were viewed as ‘others’, women, non-binary individuals, as well as articulations of feminism and female empowerment are ‘othered’ by positioning them as inferior subjects, divergent discourses or as something outside the ‘norm’ (Milojević 2024, p. 35)

Back in the Museum, I walked aimlessly between objects until I arrived at a video installation titled *The Future*

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was *Desert* by Qatari-American futurist artist and writer Sophia Al-Maria (2016). I waited until the video looped back to the start and sat myself down on a hard bench in front of it. Al-Maria's video puts the viewer in a lucid, dream-like state, as barren desert landscapes are juxtaposed against images of fossils, cars, and iconoclastic idols. A robotic female voice narrates in the background orating, "Let's begin at the end, where the keys to the deep future, are kept in your deep past" (Al-Maria, 2016, time 00.32-00.38). In this speculative narrative, Al-Maria explores how natural resource extraction, colonialism, and contemporary neoliberalism all lead to environmental collapse and temporal dissonance, which creates an inevitably bleak and dystopian interpretation of a (not so) distant future.

Al-Maria's videos is a stark contrast to narratives of the future commissioned for the Gulf states and produced by international consultancy companies such as PwC. National Visions of the future for states like Qatar, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia starting from 2030 to 2071 envision a positive outlook for a neoliberal future that is underpinned by principles of economic liberalization, diversification from oil dependency, and growing technological advancement (PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2023). One just had to look at the large-scale land use, habitat destruction and increasing energy demand that went into the creation of mega-events like 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar, the Dubai Expo 2020, and the creation of globalized economic cities like NEOM in Saudi Arabia to see how Gulf states have attempted to self-actualize themselves. Milojević (2024) argues that there is a profound link between the "marginalization of women and the exploitation of the environment, both products of patriarchal devaluation" (p. 73). In the Gulf states' National Visions, women and nature are both regarded as resources for economic and reproductive gain, rather than as entities with intrinsic value. These frameworks for the future prioritize rapid economic growth and infrastructural development over gender equity and environmental stewardship, calling into question whether such visions were the best versions of the future people and ecologies in the region could ask for.

### **Neoliberalism as an Anti-Feminist Future**

Neoliberal futures are always anti-feminist. The projection and promotion of neoliberal futures, particularly in postcolonial contexts like the Arab Gulf states, prioritizing market logic, privatization and individualism, all come at a significant human and ecological cost precisely because neoliberalism shifts the focus away from 'human-centered futures'. Jennifer Gidley (2017) believes that human-centered futures challenge the traditional top-down, one-size-fits-all approach to shaping the future. Instead, it promotes collaborative and inclusive approaches that aim to create a future that truly benefits and respects the people who inhabit it. In contrast, state capitalism and pursuing neoliberalism in the future often lacks visionary insight as it denies the structural power differentials that underpin it while simultaneously producing new hegemonies.

So, what might a vision for an equitable future and a more egalitarian society look like? How can we push our future visions to be more imaginative? Milojević (2023) uses the Change Progression Scenarios adapted and expanded from the Futures Triangle (Inayatullah, 2008) to contextualize how social change occurs in three key ways: where "the first dimension is the image of the future which pulls an individual, organization or society forward. The second dimension is the pushes of the present – quantitative drivers and trends that are changing the future. And finally, there are weights – the barriers to change and the imagined preferred future." (p. 34).

In some ways, *The Future was Desert* video installation helped describe the weight of the past in understanding how historical legacies and entrenched power structures can influence our present and limit our future possibilities. It calls on the viewer to challenge and transform the 'power-over' structures of domination in place so that the Future does not become a desert. The prophetic dimension of the video helps us conceive of the future as an active object of desire. It propels us to be active in the present, to engage with the practice of hope in creating a more sustainable future. In Braidotti's (2009) words, "hope is a way of dreaming up possible futures: an anticipatory virtue that permeates our lives and activates them. It is a powerful motivating force grounded not only in social and political utopias but also in the political imaginary, unconscious desires, affects and creativity" (p. 8).

Hope is what lead me to leave *The Museum* that day with a newfound commitment towards creating more sustainable and inclusive interpretations of the future, situated in feminist methods and methodologies, through the practice of teaching. Milojević (2024) believes that "feminist futurists acknowledge the possibility that the future has already been colonized by patriarchal imaginings. Two parallel projects need to happen if and when this is deemed to be the case. First is the project of critiquing and decolonizing. And second, the project of envisioning

different, post-patriarchal futures” (p.75). Teaching futures studies, as a present-based practice, is my way to understand the pushes of the present, by providing students with the tools to critique technological developments, gender inequality, economic policies and social changes happening around us to understand how we can influence and decolonize future scenarios.

### Teaching Futures and Theorizing Practice

In Spring 2021, I decided to launch a new upper-level undergraduate seminar class titled ‘Gulf Futures’ that was interdisciplinary in nature as a lecturer at Georgetown University in Qatar first in 2021, and then at Northwestern University in Qatar from 2023 until present. It engages with the concept of ‘Gulf Futurism’ that was first theorized by Sophia Al-Maria and Fatima Al Qadiri to examine how the future in the Arab Gulf has been imagined in relation to global modernity and the postcolonial states’ rapid social and urban transformation. The course is designed to critically examine prevailing narratives about the Gulf’s future, often shaped by consultancy firms and policymakers, and which marginalize bottom-up imaginings of the future coming from everyday people. Instead of accepting fixed, state-sanctioned narratives of the future, the course encourages students to think of alternative scenarios of the future, paying close attention to and reflecting on the experiences of overlooked and marginalized communities in the process. Teaching Futures Studies in Qatar, using feminist approaches, helps students to think about how Gulf cities serve as futuristic prototypes and the role that transience, belonging, citizenship, and urban development play in shaping the region’s future. The course’s pedagogical approach utilizes Futures Studies methods like role-play, speculative futures design, and gaming simulations to push students to think expansively and more creatively about their preferred visions for the future.

Coleman and Jungnickel (2024) make the claim that “feminist methods are rigorously theorized, and the work on feminist research has therefore refused any straightforward distinctions between theory and practice; indeed, work on feminist research might be understood to compose and sit within a space whereby theory is practiced, and practice is theorized” (p. 3). In one of the earlier classes, students were asked to come up with one scenario based on Milojević’s (2020) reading, “Futures Fallacies: What They Are and What We Can Do About Them,” through role-playing, putting theory into practice. Students were expected to act out each fallacy in small groups, followed by a brainstorming session on possible solutions or strategies that could mitigate the effects of each type of fallacy. The goal was to improve accuracy in futures thinking and find ways to handle situations when predictions go awry. At the end of the session, students realized that the future, whether we like it or not, is always unpredictable but the best-equipped individuals are those who know how to prepare for uncertainty in the future.

In another class, we examined the “Three Tomorrows of Postnormal Times” by Sardar & Sweeney (2016) to understand how “the future is largely colonized, and certain trends are deeply embedded” (p. 5) in our extended present and familiar futures. Students in smaller groups began to reflect on how certain state decisions in the Gulf region that led to the creation of ‘smart cities’ in Lusail and Musheirb in Doha, or NEOM in Saudi Arabia, were an extension of a variety of trends and phenomena embedded in the Extended present. State policies to create such ventures in already-populated spaces almost always hinged on the forcible displacement of local populations, increased natural resource extraction to make way for new technologically driven ‘smart’ spaces devoid of cultural significance or memories. Walking down the streets of these smart cities with my students left us with a feeling that these spaces were eerily familiar precisely because they were “mediated by images and imaginings of the future(s)—from data driven projections to science fiction” (p. 6).

For the course, students were asked to submit a written assignment that was based on a prompt asking them to use the futures triangle in a way where they could identify their worldview positions (radical change, marginal change, or no change) (Milojević, 2023, p. 127) towards a specified scenario in an unthought future, such as a radical socio-economic transformation, a change in governance model, or environmental/geopolitical upheaval that could affect a Gulf state of their choice. Students were asked to tackle the factors that could lead to this scenario in the future and provide recommendations to various stakeholders on preparing for these potential futures. Using the tools they learned from this assignment, students were asked to create a vision or aspiration for their preferred future for their final projects. Many assignments described the ‘pull of the future’ (Inayatullah, 2008) as a vision of a more equitable and inclusive future, through gender, legal and educational reforms, or by creating carbon-neutral and

sustainable environments that shifted away from oil dependency. Rarely, if ever, did I encounter a case of plagiarism or unauthorized use of AI-generated text in any submitted assignment, which was rare phenomenon when compared to plagiarism rates in writing submissions from my other classes. Perhaps students felt a heightened sense of agency and ownership over their creative output, precisely because futures studies require students to engage with speculative thinking by situating their own cultural, social, and political perspectives in their unique interpretations of the future.

### Concluding Remarks

At the time of writing this piece, I am teaching my futures class for the third cycle. I still start each teaching term with an abundant feeling of hope. One metaphor that I have taken from Future Studies that has not only shaped my teaching trajectory but also my everyday reality is Sardar's (2005) idea of the future as a garden, as "a purview to cultivate, a space to shape an appropriate and healthy environment, a place to cherish" (p. 15). I try to give space for the garden to take shape in my classroom by showing through theory and practice how, in bell hooks' (2014) words, "Patriarchy has no gender" (New School, 2014, para. 2). Rather, patriarchy underpins capitalism, disproportionate extraction, and state-endorsed forms of neoliberalism that give shape to (colonized) familiar futures. I encourage my students to critically examine the power structures that formulate these futures and consider more equitable and just ways of organizing society. Teaching, in a way, allows for "traditional 'feminine values (such as caring, nurturing, nonviolence, support and empathy with others) [to] be re-valued, re-considered as critically important for the creation of such better world" (Milojević, 2024, p. 81) Just like a garden requires continuous care, love, alteration, and cooperation, so too do our collective futures.

Perhaps a feminist future is my idea of an unthought-out future. A future that transcends understanding feminism as being just about women and their rights. A future that "advocates for equity and justice across all divides, thereby enriching our collective human experience" (Milojević, 2024, p. 63). The future we hope to shape and cultivate as feminists must move beyond the familiar in a way where marginalized voices lead the way in decolonizing not just our geographies, state decisions, economic policies, and educational systems but also our very imaginations.

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