

Season 2, Episode 9: Neocolonial/Postcolonial with Vanessa Tsehaye

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**Vanessa Tsehaye (VT)** A lot of very left-leaning people who are against US imperialism are therefore pro any country that the US has a tendency or has any time condemned. I have a friend who was running for Congress in New York last year or this year while time really flies. And because of my friendship with him, which is quite apparent on social media, they start attacking both of us a lot consistently and saying that we were like “regime change activists” and funded by the US government, funded by the State Department, funded by the CIA. At first, I was trying to decide if they were like working with candidates that have some kind of problems with my friend? But I realised very quickly that they were just a part of - and this when I had my eyes opened up to this side of the world as well – so people who really see the world in black and white and really see that. First of all, I think what's really interesting in their approach is that they don't center the Eritrean people at all.

**Suhaiymah Manzoor-Khan (SMK)** Salaams, peace and blessings, you're listening to Breaking Binaries season two with me, your host, Suhaiymah Manzoor-Khan, known online as “thebrownhijabi”. As a society, we're obsessed with explaining our world through the use of straightforward opposing categories. So. good or bad, moderate or radical, pretty or ugly, victim or villain, the list goes on. All these sets of binaries, though, tend to be quite superficial, and they hide the real complexities, the politics and the nuances of how we've been encouraged to think. Following from the conversations of season one every episode, this series, I'll be sitting down with a different friend to break down, break apart and interrogate a different binary and see how doing so helps us think more critically about ourselves and our world and therefore how we transform it.

In this episode I had the pleasure of breaking down the binary of Neocolonial and Postcolonial with Vanessa Tsehaye. Vanessa is an Eritrean human rights activist who was born and raised in Sweden. She founded the organisation One Day Seyoum when she was in high school to continue the work of her uncle Seyoum Tsehaye, a journalist who has been imprisoned without a trial in Eritrea since 2001. One Day Seyoum is today one of the largest youth organisations fighting against human rights abuses committed against the Eritrean people, both still in the country and after they flee. She holds a law degree from SOAS, University of London and currently serves as Amnesty International's campaigner for the Horn of Africa.

It was a really fantastic conversation as Vanessa is obviously so informed on what's going on in Eritrea and across the world. She opened up so many new lines of enquiry for a rich, and to be honest, challenging, conversation – as somebody who lives in the global north how do we interact with this binary of postcolonial and neocolonial and how does that binary impact the ways that we glorify or condemn different nations across the world? I hope you enjoy this episode. Do let us know how you find it online.

So today, I'm joined by Vanessa Tsehaye in the fake studio that we have online. How you doing?

**VT** I'm good. How are you?

**SMK** I'm good. Thank you for putting up with all the technical difficulties we've had today. I'm really glad to have you here. This is season two of breaking binaries. And we've been talking about doing an episode for quite some time because of the work that you do. I think before we introduce the binary it might just be useful for you to tell us a bit about the work that you do, your advocacy and campaign work in Eritrea. Maybe that will inform a bit about where you're coming from in this conversation.

**VT** So I have been running an organisation called One Day Seyoum for the past, at this point, seven years, that in essence, advocates for the freedom of Eritrean people. So Eritrea, for those who don't know, is a country in the Horn of Africa that's been under the rule of the same person since 1991, pretty much as soon as their independence from Ethiopia. And there's no constitution that's been implemented since this entire period. And so people are kind of ruled by this arbitrary set of rules set by the government that has

no logic or no kind of legal standing. So people are forced into indefinite national service without adequate pay and under terrible conditions, people go to prison without a trial simply for expressing their opinions or practicing their own religion or just maybe thinking about opposing the government and then they get imprisoned for that just that. So that's the kind of conditions that the people of Eritrea are living under. And my engagement for this came from my uncle being a journalist who was imprisoned in 2001, which was pretty much when Eritrea transitioned from this country that people thought was going to become a democracy after independence. And that was really what set this into permanency, was the fact that they shut down the free press, imprisoned the most prominent journalists and politicians, and then shut down the parliament, cancelled the elections and pretty much became a dictatorship one day. So that's where my engagement started and that's where my kind of passion is rooted. And that's where my work began.

**SMK** That's really helpful because I think what you even just said there about this transition that occurred into this kind of movement from what was supposed to be a democracy to very kind of highly obviously explicit, like a dictatorship or authoritarian state, situates this binary really well.

So today, what we decided we would try to break apart is the binary of post-colonial and neocolonial. And I think those words can sound quite like big and the bit jargony. So maybe to begin with, you can tell us a bit about, you know, what are these concepts allude to? What were people talking about when they're talking about either of these things? And then I think we'll after that, we'll bring it to the context in Eritrea, if that's all right.

**VT** Absolutely. So I think in an academic kind of context, there's a lot that can be said about both these terms and there's a lot of literature, a lot of important people who say a lot of things. But I think in the context of this conversation and I think where it matters the most to me and why I'm so passionate about this false binary is just in the everyday usage of these terms. So post-colonial for me means moving past the colonial rule of like "west controls the global south", or we've both in an economical sense, but also in general, like geopolitics, power, that we're past, the fact that the West is the dominant factor and they control us. We are now our own subjects. We control ourselves.

**SMK** so, literally post – colonial.

**VT** Yeah, pretty much. And I guess neo-colonialist is a continuation of those structures. But what people usually refer to speak about neo colonialism is very much economics. And so the continuation of the same kind of countries controlling Africa and other continents of countries, lands or politics or even a lot of times like language. And the way we speak about, I guess our countries and our leaders can be considered neo colonial as well. So I think it's it is, when you put it like that, it is quite clearly a binary like - either you've moved on from colonial times or you're continuing them. And a lot of times what happens with neocolonial is that they call it like they have African or I guess non-white leaders, but a continuation of the same policies. I guess that's how we can define it.

**SMK** And so in that binary, then I guess the opposition is also to do with not only, the type of governance, but as you said, this alludes to the kind of economy or the structure of the country. And I think even just thinking about a lot of independence movements across different colonies of Europe, there was always - from at least that I know about - there's always this kind of idea that once the coloniser is gone, you know, we will have true autonomy, self-determination - these things that are really important. But actually, even just hearing what you're saying, usually, very quickly, and very often, we know that things like military dictatorships, for example, in Pakistan, if we think about that context or and of course, like North Africa and the Middle East, like there's a real tendency for it to seem that the only way for control to be able to be maintained - and this is kind of its justification - is through dictatorship. So I'm interested in how quickly those transitions happen. And also, I think one question I have here is the difference between an internal dictatorship, being seen as "well, that's still better than a colonial occupation." Right? And I wonder if that's sort of at the heart of what you're talking about here. Maybe you can tell us about how Eritrea is discussed within this binary. Like where does it crop up and how are these conversations hard?

**VT** Absolutely. So in the Eritrean context, I find it quite fascinating because I mostly follow this debate in the Eritrean context. And that's what really made me, again, very passionate about it. Because Eritrea became independent in 1991 after fighting for independence from Ethiopia for 30 years. And just to give a tiny bit of Eritrean history, Eritrea was colonised by Italy and eventually Italy lost it as a colony due to the Second World War. After that, it was a British protectorate and they had to decide what to do with Eritrea and due to, I guess, neocolonial or I guess at that point colonial structures they wanted to award Ethiopia for their support in the Second World War. So the US, the United Kingdom and the UN which was newly formed, decided to award Eritrea to Ethiopia.

And what happened then was that Eritrea was supposed to be a part of the federation. So like semi-autonomous, but this was violated from day one. And that was why they stopped and fought for independence for 30 years. And in those 30 years, Ethiopia was supported first by the US and then when they moved sides in the Cold War because they changed leaders and they became a communist country. They received support from the Soviet Union. And in that entire period, Eritrea received support from pretty much no one just by the diaspora. So it was a very small group of people, I mean, relatively compared to Ethiopia. Small groups of people fighting, supported by themselves. The people who migrated - one third of the population fled the country, and a lot of them supported the people fighting back home so that the Eritrean struggle from day one was always very lonely. It was fought by us, supported by us, ignored by the rest of the world. So it was a very much like "us against the world" mentality.

And when then Eritrea gained independence, a huge part of the sentiment was like "we did it against all odds alone". And what continued then was that the regime started saying that we are self-reliant, we don't need anyone else. This is our country. This is our land. We fought and we fought for it. We're not going to let anyone buy it. So there's been other like land disputes with Ethiopia since then that has played a really big part in politics. We might get into that a bit later in part of the discussion. And what happened very early on was, again, this is like the first 10 years was that people started being sent to this military service camp where they started working. And what has happened since then is that we have a massive National Service population where almost the entire population is working for the government indefinitely without adequate pay, under horrific conditions.

**SMK** So for those of us who don't know what national service necessarily means. Is that just anything?

**VT** So that's a good question. So what Eritrea has is a system where young people's people in their final year of high school all have to do mandatory military "sawa" service. It's what they call it. So it's your final year of high school 18 months is spent in this military service far away from your house. Is it I mean, depending on where you live, of course. But if it's a remote area that's compulsory. And if you want to do anything in Eritrea, if you want to have the right to move freely, you have to have proof that you've completed Sawa. So like you have no right to do anything, you pretty much have to hide unless you've done it and you go to prison. So that's why a lot of people flee the country as well in terms of life before they have to decide. But most people do it. But because you're so young when you have to do it, it's too early for most people to flee. But a lot of young people, a lot of children do flee. And then when you've completed Sawa, you have the option to go to - so basically, sorry, this is mixing a lot of things - but the university in Eritrea, they had one university, Asmara University, was shut down. So what they implemented instead or what they kind of started instead was technical colleges across the country that were a completely different kind of quality of education. Most of the professors in the country had fled the country at that point because of the suppression and all of that. So a lot of the people who were working in the in the colleges and in the high schools across the country were national service conscripts. So the quality of education is really bad, the ability to access these kind of educational places it's really difficult as well, because you have to score really high. And when you do score that high in your test at the end of your high school education, they tell you what to study. So you don't have the choice to study what you want to study. Place are limited. You know, the kind of education that are provided is very limited as well.

So with this being said, after you finish Sawa, you have the option to do that, which is extremely difficult, or you become a national service conscript. So pretty much everyone under the age of sixty-five or something

of that is a national service conscript, unless you go on like your own business, which is very uncommon as well.

**SMK** So you will be working for the government?

**VT** So any kind of job. So that's a very complicated answer to first question is, is that once you enter national service, you never leave like it's described as indefinite national service because it truly is indefinite. You enter and you're - I don't think I've ever heard of anyone being left out of national service, but obviously it has happened once in a while. But it's something that you enter to probably never leave. Your salary is extremely low. You can be a national service conscript and work as a professor at the university or at the technical colleges or as a mine worker or as a construction worker or as someone between the streets. You can be placed in any kind of service because the government decides where you go. So a lot of people are far away from their families and they decide what to do. Which is completely separate to what you want to do in life, which is mostly the case. And this is the Eritrean working force. This is these are the people that sustain the idea of self-reliance. So the reason why Eritrea is able to function the way that they do is because everyone's working pretty much for free indefinitely under the standards and the conditions set by the regime.

**SMK** Well, it sounds like also after you've kind of been through almost like this propaganda experience as well, it's kind of very much working for the state and then not being the only way you can live. I'm wondering, hearing you say all of that, I mean, there are certain words and labels that come to mind about what you might name this kind of state. But what how does Eritrea present itself, like what form of government or state would it call itself to be? Do they say that their post-colonial state is that part of the problem, that they're kind of posturing as a democratic socialist? How do they present themselves?

**VT** I've have a lot of conversation about this this week because I don't feel heard about clubhouse, it's just like audio app of people just discussing stuff. And there was a lot of discussions between people who are like trying to understand Eritrea. And I just urge everyone to listen to what the Eritrean regime says about themselves and what they do, judge them by their words and their actions. The Eritrean regime very rarely describe themselves as anything. They very rarely try to make the case for themselves in terms of like "we are socialist". That's something that other people put on them. And that's a part of the problem that I'm having with at this time.

However, what they do say is "self-reliance", that's something that they love. It's one of their favourite words, "self-reliance", and also "defending themselves from the enemy", which is a different discussion as well in terms of that long discussion that I was mentioning earlier with the bordering country, Ethiopia. So another aspect I just wanted to add in terms in addition to the free labour that they're getting from the people, is also the fact that Eritrea is not self-reliant. Eritrea receives a lot of aid. Eritrea has a lot of deals with foreign governments, you know, with Saudi Arabia, with Australia, with Canada, with China. So even beyond the obvious fact that they're using the people, the people's labour for free, their exploiting their own people to have this idea of self-reliance, they're also lying about it. So it's both, I think from both angles. It's really not put together. It's it's hilarious that people are.

**SMK** That's really interesting. So would you say pulling that back into this binary post-colonial and neocolonial. It sounds to me that the Eritrean state is presenting itself very much as post-colonial. You know, that narrative of self-reliance. I think that's everything that, you know, everybody has been dreaming for right? You've been occupied. You've had all these different wars going on and finally, you are running the show yourself. And so I'm wondering, you know, it's very obvious, I guess, from what you've just said, that actually self-reliance hasn't been self-reliance for both those kind of angles. But also, I guess there's another element here as well, which is that that language justifies this regime itself. And so is that maybe one of the ways we can begin to break down this binary for you? Is there a central sort of assumption that that we can begin to, you know, untangle this notion of neo colonial versus post-colonial.

**VT** The main problem, I think, when we talk about this finding is not about the issues of like, you know, who's being oppressed. It's about who is oppressing. And I think that's one of the biggest issue in this binary, is that people talk about, you know, colonial oppression versus non-colonial oppression, but then people are very little focussing on like, OK, people are still oppressed, though. So maybe we have other issues, maybe the West can oppress, but also other people can oppress and these people can continue their oppression in different ways and different methods. But nevertheless, the people are still suffering in different ways.

And I think it's you know, we also have this, again, the idea that people really value the fact that everything is our land now, so that's people say that at least we have our land back. But what about people's experiences? Because at the end of the day, like if you're looking at theories, you're looking at all these different comparative analysis of colonial times - sometimes you have to look at people's experiences because that's the only thing that matters. That's why we fought for the land, was because colonisers refused to respect our economy and respect our people's rights. Eritreans were suffering in a way that they didn't have to if they were living under their own rule. And that's why they fought for independence, not because they thought that we were better on one side of the country or not.

So, yeah, I find that interesting in terms of, you know, that's one of the biggest problems, just focusing on who was doing the oppression. And then the answer is like, OK, that's fine. It's OK, it's a black person. It's an African person doing it? Then we don't care. And I think that really that part, even in Eritrea, Ethiopia and independence wars people didn't really care to the same extent because that was an African government that was oppressing another African government and that didn't have the same ring to it as like the South African government oppressing black people in South Africa or the independence force in other African countries against their white masters.

**SMK** You mean like from an international context, right? In terms of attention given?

**VT** Yeah, absolutely. Yeah.

**SMK** I think to be honest, like before I knew you in the work that you did, like Eritrea is not really anywhere. I feel that it's not on the radar for people to think about or to kind of question. And I think it is really interesting that you're raising this idea of nuancing the notion that like colonial equals bad and then post-colonial or anti colonial regimes that grew out of that equals good, because I think it's just really it's very obvious, but very important what you've raised about, OK, but what about the people? And so this raises really the question, I guess, of autonomy. So this hasn't really led to self autonomy, to self-determination. And it reminds me of some of the conversations around Kashmir and the way that, you know, lots of people obviously oppose the Indian occupation of Kashmir. There's been this blackout for years and so much violence that we do and don't see. But sometimes I see this rhetoric from Pakistanis, particularly, I would say in diaspora, but also not in diaspora, who kind of say that, you know, we you know, we want to liberate Kashmir by having it as part of the Pakistani nation state. And I think this is a really problematic narrative because at the same time as talking about liberation they immediately say, oh, but you will become part of our nation state, that we will decide for you what is best for the people of Kashmir. And I think the reason I raise that is because it's this question of autonomy that I feel like is at the heart of what you're talking about. And I wonder, you know, what are the conversations that are had? You know, what is it? Is there a conversation about what Eritrean people want to see? And, you know, is it as simple as ending oppression by any means necessary? What does that look like and what's the work that you're doing?

**VT** Well, yeah, that's a very good question, because we have another thing of like as I said, during the war of Independence, one third of the population fled the country or left the country. And a lot of those born in the diaspora are the children of those people. So like I was born in Sweden and we have a massive diaspora because one third of the population is a big part of population everyone has kids, or most of them do. And then what's happened since then? This is how I would like to divide up the Eritrean population. And I think it really matters in terms of discussing our politics, because we have those who left during that period

between the sixties and the, I guess, late 80s, early 90s, and then the people who are born from them, so people like myself and then people who are fleeing after the dictatorship in Eritrea started.

So like these people who are fleeing after dictatorships, are a completely different set of Eritreans than from what I am. Because I have never lived in Eritrea. I've no first hand experience of anything from the government. My entire understanding of the country, my relationship with the country is from a distance. It's from second-hand experiences, whereas people who have fled, have experienced first-hand. So that also takes us back to the fact what is the regime's support system? And this is where this binary for me became evident, is that a lot of people born in the diaspora with complicated relationships with their home country, are often living in a racist or oppressive societies in the West – they started having a worse understanding, which is quite understandable, of their country. So like people born in the UK, people in the US, from Sweden, across Europe and through that understanding, really easily fed into the self-reliance argument given by their Eritrean regime and through that became a new support system for the regime.

So a lot of people who left in the war of independence never lived in Eritrea after independence. And a lot of them still value and love their president because he's the one who led the fight for independence for us. And even though, you know, he was the leader amongst many other leaders, amongst many other fighters, but he's the one who is personified as like the father of Eritrea. And because of that, a lot of them support him for emotional reasons.

Then you have the other set of people like myself who then have completely bought into this argument that Eritrea is a self-reliant country and because of, again, our experiences here, we then see the kind of damage that our governments do, both domestically, to people like us and to other people like us in other countries, in our home countries. And that's the first time that I started seeing this, how this argument was used by people who support the government in the West.

And back to your question is that people who are from Eritrea, I've never met someone who said, "oh, self-reliance is great. You know, we hate the West so much. It was so worth being in indefinite national service because our hatred for the west was so strong." So the people of Eritrea, I've again, like there's obviously people, some people who support the government who fled Eritrea. And that's for me, a complete different conversation because you can still experience the trauma without understanding the root of the trauma - like some people thought it was self-defense reasons against Ethiopian or other reasons. But majority of the people are tired of Eritrea's governance. They're tired of the regime of the dictator and by this false self-reliance kind of argument.

**SMK** So, yeah, that makes a lot of sense. And I'm interested actually in what you said about the almost the "cult of personality" as well and how I guess, it plays somewhat into upholding that binary. And, you know, this is something I think we see across a lot of post-colonial nations, where leaders kind of become revered, even really problematic leaders like Saddam Hussein becomes like - we can't have a ridiculous conversation about the fact that, you know, he was upholding all this violence, massacring Kurds and Shias, but the reason we have a nuanced conversation is because it's like either he was against the US or he was, you know, this bulwark against colonialism or he wasn't. And I think those nuances become easily hidden behind cult of personality. And it sounds like something that is true here now.

**VT** Absolutely. And I think obviously, again, just going back to the fact that people should be at the core of all discussions on governance methods, it's the fact that people then can start talking about greater ideas such as no, but he has such a great leader. But then if you always bring the caveat of like, so what about the people that obviously those kind of things become less relevant?

I think just again, to emphasise the fact that I think the binary is false because not because it's like what is good, what is bad in that sense. I just think that we just have to always look at how the people are doing. And I think in any neocolonial setting, the people are doing bad. Like I want to emphasise I'm not saying that neocolonial and postcolonial are both good and bad. I definitely think that obviously neocolonial structures are terrible. Colonialism was terrible. Like, I don't know if that goes without saying, but if anyone

listening, if anyone listening - I'm just saying, the only thing that we should be looking at is the quality of life for the people and obviously the people were not, have no control their lives. They were subject of foreign regimes. And then what I'm trying to say is that just because something's post-colonial doesn't mean that that structure completely changed.

**SMK** Hearing you talk, you're talking about like Eritrean people should be the center of conversations about Eritrea. And that sounds really reasonable to me. Like I'm really buying into that right now but I notice that you get attacked a lot by people in the Eritrean diaspora, I think in the US as well. And I'm wondering what is that about, you know, these are people on the left? Why are they kind of what's at the heart of the kind of conversation, the what are you being accused of?

**VT** Well, that's a really good question, because I think it really ties into what this whole false binary is about and why it's really like ruining the discourse on Eritrea right now. I think, first of all, it's not mainly the Eritrean diaspora. And that's where my kind of anger became the worst, is that a lot of people in the US who are considered to be like very left leaning people who are against US imperialism are therefore pro any country that the US has a tendency or has any time has condemned.

So I like I have a friend who was running for Congress in New York last year or this year. Time really flies. And because of my friendship with him, which is quite apparent on social media, they start attacking both of us a lot consistently and saying that we were like regime change activists and funded by the US government, funded by the State Department, funded by the CIA. And at first I was trying to understand if they were like, working with candidates that have some kind of problems with my friend but I realised very quickly that they were just a part - and this is when my eyes opened up to the side of the world as well - of people who really see the world in black and white and really see that.

First of all, I think what's really interesting by their approach is that they don't center the Eritrean people in the conversation at all. It's just about the US at the centre of the conversations and their opinions. And whatever the US does, they'll be on the other side of it. And the realities of the people really don't matter. And that's where the binary was like the most evident. Yeah. So it's just about like, "oh, the US doesn't like Khaddafi. That means he was a great leader", or "the US and like Saddam Hussein. Then we think he's doing amazing work in Iraq". And that's the literal approach of their kind of understanding of the situation. And yes, there are also people in the Eritrean diaspora who completely believe this who also attack me for this. But what I found the most interesting is the non Eritreans who were doing this.

We have this policy forum last week that I was really late in Europe so I did not attend it, but they invited this guy who has been continuously harassing me on social media to this really high profile leftist think tank to speak about Eritrea - and in a room and this is what my friends who were there described - it was really scary because the way he spoke about Eritrea was as this postcolonial, anti-West, US-defying kind of country and people were buying into it. And what's important there, again, is that people like to copy paste. That's where the problem comes in between having a binary is that you have one set of rules and then just like anything else is the opposite.

And what people say again is like, "oh, but you are a part of the bourgeoisie, which means that you are not looking after the interests of the working class people of Eritrea" because that works in so many other countries, that's probably the case in so many countries that there's a bourgeoisie or upper middle, upper middle class that is speaking out on behalf of the people in the country pretending that their struggles are not relevant just to maintain their economic status quo or socially status in the country. But that doesn't work in Eritrea because first of all, I'm not in Eritrea. I'm not saying I'm an Eritrean experiencing these issues. And every single person in Eritrea, pretty much everyone, is living on the same wage, under the same government. Even class systems - I mean, it's like that whole set of logic doesn't exist, but they're just copy pasting it to apply to any country that the US doesn't like.

So for me, that's one of the issues that I realised in the beginning that they're first of all, just copy pasting to fit their ideology, to fit their theory that they've been reading in books in their offices New York and

they're really not looking at the lived experience of the people because like you can - the US should not be a guidance of their morals, because that just puts them you know, makes whatever they're saying is bad and then that's good or bad. They're saying that, but they're refusing to look at the experience of the people, which makes them no better than anyone else.

**SMK** Yeah, I think that's such an important thing to highlight because we see this I think, you know, what does it mean for conversations about liberation and justice if we aren't able to have nuanced conversations? And I think that's such a crucial part of anything is to root it in what you talking about: material conditions.

If you're materially day to day being paid really low wage to do something that you don't want to do if you're censored, if you can't resist or air your grievances, if you don't have recourse to justice. I mean, as you say, that's really where the conversation should start, not who is doing it. I think the question of who's doing it becomes important in terms of how you tackle it. But as you say, it's being used - it's being weaponized, I guess, to actually maintain a silence on Eritrea.

You know, I think there's been similar debates over the last decade around Syria. And, you know, you do have this big group of leftists in the West, in the UK and other places who are really pro-Assad purely because of, you know, the idea of like imperialism and anti-imperialism. To the extent, at the expense of Syrian people and people who experience violence of the state. So I think on that note, something I wanted to ask you about is, did you think there's something there's some investment or some erasure that deliberately exists amongst the international community when it comes to Eritrea? And how might we understand that?

**VT** Yeah, I think that's a really good question. Again, all your questions are amazing - but I think also just continuing off the last answer I was giving. They're saying that the US loves the opposition movement. They hate their current government. That, again, is not very true either, the US government's priority is stability in the region. So when Eritrea and Ethiopia became friends after a long time of the land dispute, like the US was at the forefront of supporting that initiative.

Yeah, well, the world and the international community as a whole has never been a massive fans of removing the dictatorship from Eritrea. That's never been a priority. It's nothing, though that they're against, this is not something which I guess is not a controversial issue in that sense. It's nothing that anyone is like very like super against it's existing as a dictatorship. They don't mind it continuing and they don't also mind people opposing it. So it's obviously Eritrean groups have had support by the US government in different ways, like capacity building and stuff like that. But there's never been like it's not it is not Libya. It is not Syria. So it's just a country that no one really cares about.

**SMK** So when we think about Neo-Colonialism, I guess the other thing that comes to play is like the relationship to other states. And you mentioned earlier that actually Eritrea is not self-reliant. And so I'm wondering what those relationships with other nations, what that looks like.

**VT** Yeah, I think actually one of the things that I wish that these people who are attacking us, if they were actually to listen, is the fact that the EU has been funding Eritrea for a very long time, like the EU has been sending massive aid packages to try for as long as I can remember, at least. And what's interesting about those aid packages is that they're rooted in in a desperation to combat migration from Eritrea. There's a lot of Eritrean's fleeing because of the dictatorship. And what the regime says is that these people are economic migrants who are fleeing because Eritrea is a poor country, and the EU thinks the way that you solve poverty is by giving aid packages, which is at the root of - It's like, no, you don't don't solve these problems with giving false money that sustains dictatorships. That continues a pattern. You look at the root causes. And the root cause of migration is not necessarily that people are poor because of international economic systems, which might also be the case in the future in terms of like when you have the right kind of governance. But right now, the problem is the fact that people are not allowed to work getting adequate



compensation. The conditions are terrible. People are literally getting imprisoned without trial, people have no future. They have no presence because their presence belongs to the government.

That's the root causes of people fleeing. And by giving the government money, you're allowing them to continue actually - by giving the government money without any kind of standards to what they should be using that money for. That's where you are enabling the dictatorship to continue. And you are saying without saying on paper that "please do whatever you want with this money. Just make sure people are not leaving the country."

**SMK** So interesting.

**VT** because, I mean, that is literally the West controlling what's going on in Eritrea for their own interest. And that for me is Neo-Colonialism, that for me is a continuation of Western kind of dominance in the region to decide to control what goes on there in their own interest. Because if they want to do it in the interest of the African people, they would offer up safe routes to Europe. If that was the case, they would have allowed Eritreans to have kind of like access to justice in different ways and help them get safety and whatever when they come here. But instead they not only fund the Eritrean regime to make sure they don't leave the country, but they also fund Libyan militias and they fund the Coast Guards and they implement new coast guards in Europe to make it as difficult as possible for these people to reach safety in Europe.

So it's very clear intentions behind their work. And this is not being highlighted because it doesn't fit into the narrative. It's like what? A so-called socialist country, which was a socialist movement back in the independence movement but I don't know why there still calling it that. But that's how they are labelled. And they're also taking money from not only the EU, but also taking money from Australia, from China, from the EU, from Saudi Arabia, from Canadian companies. That doesn't work out. Let's just ignore the rest of those folks on the first part, because that fits our narrative that fits our ideology and that fits our theories.

**SMK** That's so powerful because I think actually that really for me, that's like the heart of why I've never heard about Eritrea, because really I can see now that there's a- I think you kind of reframed as well or kind of reminded us neocolonialism is not purely direct economic investment in a country or, you know, direct, you know, like the CIA running your government. It can also be, as you said, this really insidious, investment in maintaining the conditions, of repression, of whatever violence exists in that state for the benefit of locking out people who would seek asylum in your countries from accessing the resources that actually rightfully belong to the rest of the world that you looted. I think that's pretty vital as people who are situated in Europe to think about because I guess what it poses the question to me is like, OK, so if we were to talk about Eritrea, if we were to criticise the Eritrean state, if we were to say, "what do Eritrean people need?" you know, how can we hold anybody to account for what, you know, people like your uncle experience, then I think suddenly we would be threatening not only the Eritrean state, but would be threatening the entire border-Europe, that fortress of kind of violence. And I think that's really interesting connection.

And it also suggests to me that the people on the left that you're talking about in the US, particularly people who are not Eritrean, for them to be kind of condemning these conversations, I think also speaks a lot to not only what you say about them being divorced from praxis and grassroots, but also about their investments in the status quo. And I think that's something that we you know, those kinds of nuances and those connections are completely erased by this binary. Actually, another thing I want to ask you was I see you talking quite a lot about the Eritrea and Ethiopia peace agreement. Would you mind telling us a bit about that and maybe why it's important for us to cover in this conversation?

**VT** So after Eritrea gained independence in the first 10 years, things were, for the first six years, things were looking quite good with their neighbouring country. So they were both independent movements in both Eritrea and Ethiopia so when Eritrea gained independence, that other movement in Ethiopia gained power.

So they were both new governments at the time and they were friends. They were happy. They were considered like brothers at war or whatever.

And then in 1998 there was a border dispute that led to two years of really bloody war. And after the war ended, Ethiopia refused to withdraw its troops from land that had been awarded them by the UN appointed commission. So everyone kind of knew that it was Eritrea's land in this dispute in terms of land, but because of Ethiopia's standing internationally, this led to Eritrea's kind of being frozen out from the international community.

So the Eritrean regime actually use the border dispute with Ethiopia as a justification for their rule, even military service was justified by this, not necessarily national service and the whole self-reliance idea that was a bit separate, like the whole idea of self-reliance was not because of the border dispute by violations of political rights and the idea of shutting down the free press, the violating the Constitution, the cancellation of elections, the failure to open up the parliament again after the war. All these things were attributed to the fact that Eritrea was, quote unquote, at war at any time they could be invaded. And therefore, they have to have an active army. They have to have they couldn't allow for opposition within the country. They have to be united and against their combatant, against the foreign enemy.

So it was always like the justification for the status quo in Eritrea. However, as many advocates could see, like it was completely disproportionate. So I always talk about the fact that the US obviously had 9/11 but the response was disproportionate, even though there was an emergency that happened to them. But the way they responded with disproportionate and wasn't in line with international human rights law because there are actually laws that says how much you can respond. You obviously you can defend yourself. There's definitely limits to how much and what you do. And that's what the Eritrean regime has done too without legal footing. So they have never declared a state of emergency. They've never tried to justify anything that they've done to their actual domestic or international laws. And I always say that's because there's no way they could have done that. Like, there's just no way they could have found any laws, domestic or otherwise that would have justified their level of violence that they've imposed on their people as a result of this, quote, unquote, war.

Because it wasn't, what happened after the 2000s was that it was a no war, no peace situation. So it was like the border was militarised. But there wasn't an active conflict, which made it very difficult to justify these things. But a lot of people still obviously got into it. And I think an interesting point here is that the circumstances of the Eritrean people since 1998 throughout the war and afterwards remained the same till the state turned twenty. So getting in to 2021 and in 2018, the leadership in Ethiopia changed. So the people that Eritrea, the Eritrean regime have been fighting with were removed from power. So obviously when the new people came to power, they ended up becoming really good friends, and especially because people came to power in Ethiopia, also had an enemy in the former leaders. So that just became them having a common enemy and they declared peace. Everyone across the world was saying, well, it's incredible there's finally peace in Eritrea because of the conflict they've been experiencing such trauma and violence and not saying that disproportionate measures were just using that as an excuse.

This was in 2018 and going back to the fact that we can only judge a government by what they do and what they say, they never said they're going to change anything and they never changed something. And the fact that governments, institutions, organisations across the world were like "this is incredible. We're finally moving towards peace in Eritrea. That's great. It's going to be great for the people." And because of their friendship with Ethiopia, this isolation that they had experienced before, sanctions, for example, that were actually imposed not because of the human rights situations, but because they were allegedly funding al-Shabaab, magically disappeared. Eritrea magically became this country that was considered a "transitional country". And moving past the conflict.

And this is purely because of their friendship and their close relationship with Ethiopia. So it also kind of goes to play that again, pointing out the fact that the situation, the domestic situation there e hasn't changed in the slightest. And they have no intentions. They've never said it's going to change either - but

the that that was completely disregarded just goes again to the part that I guess on that part of things, the more neocolonial side of the world doesn't even doesn't care about the lived experience of Eritreans. If they did, they wouldn't do all the things to support the Eritrean government and change their approach to their government as well.

So even the fact of the a lot of leftist people in the US, white leftist men, actually, on Twitter are speaking about these issues, and they don't even first of all, they don't look into details, they don't look at how the relationship has changed in the past years, they don't look at the level of support, the position that the US government has given, and they don't look at the difference between post and pre peace deal. So for me, that's another aspect of how the lived experience of Eritrean people in most cases are never considered.

And my favourite example is always Libya and Gaddafi and how a lot of people across the world support Gaddafi because of the fact that he was a new post-colonial anticolonial leader. But the lived experience of Libyans and also Africans living in Libya, refugees, for them Gadhafi was the first person to implement the deal with Italy to make it as difficult as possible for refugees to leave, to leave Libya, to get to Europe. He was also the first person to set the grounds for what's happening now in the hell-hole that is the situation in Libya, but also the lived experience of mercenaries who are brought from West Africa to do the dirty job of the regime. And in Libya at the time, their lived experiences and the lived experience of indigenous people in Libya, the different views of other Libyans, that has been completely neglected because of the sole fact that Gadhafi was an anticolonial post-colonial figure.

So it's like two things can be true at the same time. And that's, I guess, the summary of why this binary is false and destructive and allows for abusive regimes to continue doing what they're doing on both side of things.

**SMK** Yeah, that's amazing, I think. Thank you so much for putting it like that. I think even as you're saying, it's very obvious, but I think it really demands that interrogation and breaking apart. And especially because, you know, I think more than anything, it reveals the just the disingenuity of people that can't think like that. And as as you say more than anything, that they're not centering people and the experiences of, you know, everyday life. So, you know, the third part of this podcast, generally, the question that I'm trying to raise is, you know, if this binary is very much constructed in the way that clearly you've proven that it is: post-colonial and neocolonial, not really being separate or even opposites. But, you know, the question I usually ask is, why then does it exist? And I suppose in this case, it might be very obvious, but maybe I can just give you a chance to answer that more directly. What do you think that this binary really obscures?

And in the case of Eritrea particularly, you might even want to do what you think we could be doing as an international community, what you would like to see, whether that's people in the Eritrean diaspora, but also people not within it, how can we show solidarity? How can we support this movement that I think is being obscured?

**VT** I think like most binaries that exist to allow people to kind of do what they want to do with a really good justification. So by having good or bad or evil or I guess evil and good and all of those binaries, it allows people to say "this evil so we can do this to help them" or "this is good. So this means we have to take out the evil to help them". And I think in this case, it allows leaders, first of all, to do pretty much a lot of different things to their people by having either sides of the spectrum in their favour.

So I guess if it's a neocolonial state, then they will continue to have the support of the international institutions that are saying, "oh, but they're doing development" - without democracy though, but that's fine because they're doing development. "And that's what we want to see." And on the other side of the spectrum, we have "oh but we're doing all these things. It's great for the people. But like, you know, we cannot implement human rights right now because of we are a new state or we are a socialist state and we have to focus on economic, and social rights and stuff like that right now. So therefore, we're going to do this. Freedom comes later. That's a European concept anyway. This idea of justice. I don't know where that came from. European colonialism, apparently." So that's I mean, they both kind of feed into it.

Also, when people are saying, when Eritreans are saying "Eritrea is not ready for democracy", Eritreans have had different forms of governance, democratic government, they just weren't labelled democracy because that was a specific term that came up from a place of the world where they have the ability to write that out and make that public knowledge. But we've had, we have sets of standards of dignity, of human dignity, of justice, of democracy. They just haven't been written out in that way. So both play I think both sides of the binary allows governments to do whatever they want to do with support of different segments of society and of the world.

And in the Eritrean context, I think in a lot of other contexts, it allows them, again, to say that we're just resisting the West and we're trying to do our best considering the society, the world that we live in. And they put in all those extra things that have nothing to do with it, that has nothing to do with the fight against neo-colonialism. In fact, what they're doing is actually being part of it. And I think it also kind of just to continue on that it's just like what is colonial? Is it just European countries? But is it also in the Eritrean context, for example, Eritrea has an incredible relationships with Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and China, for example. So are they not considered colonial because they don't have a colonial past in Africa, or is that something that we value? Because half, I guess, China's still considered communist. So what is this false binary that is allowing people to do what they want to do just because they don't?

**SMK** Yeah, I think that's a really, really important question, though. Like where where we assume colonialism to come from. So then if I can ask you, you know, the final question I usually ask people is like, well, how would you prefer to think about the struggle? How can we find out more about the work you're doing and how can we really amplify the voices of the Eritrean people? I think you've made the case really well. So this is really the actionable point, right? What can we be doing?

**VT** I think well, as you said, a lot of people don't know about Eritrea and I think that's for different reasons. It's not just because they have interest in silencing it. I think way before the EU was invested in people fleeing, people don't care about Eritrea. There's no reason for them to unless they care about the people suffering. There's no major resource or whatever there so like, it's not a country that people know about.

So our role as civil society, as people fighting for the people, as kind of - access to justice and democracy in the country is to just continue to make Eritrea a priority for the world, and every time it's mentioned, together with other world events, the Eritrean context is always, always ignored. And that's something that's a big issue because, again, people don't know about countries. Why would customers who were reading the media want to read about the Eritrean perspective if they don't even know the country exists or have no interest in knowing how?

So I think a large part of it is just trying to learn as much as we can about Eritrea and then try to join any kind of Eritrean campaigns running. So what our organisation does and our main objective is to inform as many people as possible about what's going on in Eritrea and then translate that kind of access to information into actual actionable acts. So people actually are just learning about what's going on in the country and then also deciding to do something about it. And we want to make it as easy as possible for people to do that.

So I guess as a major plug for our organisation, I would definitely urge all of you listening to follow our page just because we do put out a lot of information, but we also put out a lot of campaigns that we're continuously running with strategic targets and really trying to get as many people as possible behind different kinds of calls that we're making to different institutions. So it could be calling on the Eritrean regime specifically, or we can be calling on the US government to do something specifically, or you can be calling on the EU to change their migration policy specifically. So it's just us trying to find out more strategic ways we can campaign and getting as many people behind us as possible.

I would definitely say that that's a really helpful way that people can get involved, but something that's a

bit separate from that. And I also want to do the plug is that, as I said since Eritrea became independent, you know, countless people have fled the country. We don't know the exact numbers yet because of the census. And these numbers are not going to be counted in an accurate way. But there's been tons and tons of people fled the country. And in that journey of flights, both in the country, their circumstances were terrible. A lot of people imprisoned under these horrific conditions. And since then, because of the journey to safety in European or American countries are so difficult. They experienced years and years and years of trauma. And once they come here, here being Europe or the U.S. or Canada, they're met with very little support. So we've started something called the [Eritrean Refugee Centre](#) that tries to help Eritreans who are fleeing both in their journey here, but also when they arrive here. So focus on all aspects of their life. It could be emergency situations or it could be someone being detained on their way, like in Libya or Israel, or wherever they might be.

Or it can be just helping people write CVs or apply to universities or find the kind of their dream job in 10 years and help help them make that happen, knowing what to do or how to get there. So it's just like a volunteer, pretty much a volunteer network connecting Eritreans to one-to-one free services. And we just need anyone who speaks English pretty much, we have translators on board. So if you are willing if you want to do some more, like one to one help and actually direct impact, I guess that's something that we really need volunteers for. And I think that's not just important for their individual lives, because obviously individually that matters a lot. But to remember that the future of Eritrea, is its people and when everyone's fleeing and they're not getting adequate support, we're risking the future of our people and our country by not doing that properly. So I really urge everyone to get involved in any ways that I just mentioned.

**SMK** That's amazing. I'll put the links to both of those in the description of the podcast. And I think also, you know, it's really inspiring hearing all those different things you mentioned as ways to kind of support or raise awareness and consciousness about what people are experiencing. And I think also just one other. You know, the work that you've done, I think in of itself has raised consciousness here. And I know it's raised my consciousness about this issue, but I think also it's important because not only what you were saying about kind of making Eritrea a priority for the global community, but I think also in doing that, you kind of draw attention to the way that so many international forms of exploitation and oppression are connected.

So, you know, this isn't solely about like what type of state is good or bad; it isn't solely about like refugees and asylum seekers; it isn't solely about imperialism; it's all these things. And I think that Eritrea seems to provide to me, like just from thinking about this conversation, a really good example of like how we can't eradicate one form of injustice without eradicating all of them. And I assume that there's no way, you know, even if we would somehow topple the Eritrean dictatorship, you're right that there's going to be so many, I'm sure we don't know the numbers of refugees and asylum seekers who are still making their way to Europe, I'm sure, detained in British detention centres or, you know, in all sorts of other centres across the continent.

So the struggle for Eritreans, I suppose, becomes everybody's struggle because this is a struggle about any type of injustice that we see in the modern world. So I really appreciate you for kind of centering that here. And it's helped me to definitely just think about, you know, the connections that I haven't been making when it comes to Eritrea.

**VT** Yes, I completely agree with that, and I think that also kind of goes back to why this binary is false, because we can still question the systems of people who are considering themselves to be post-colonial and are attacking me for being neo-colonial, are questioning; like the idea of the international economic system, the idea of how a lot of these loans are structured and all these things that I know that Eritrea probably have struggles with and will have struggles with once we get rid of this dictatorship so that that doesn't take away from anything, it's to say that it's not just that it's not just that and in this situation it isn't the problem because they're obviously not taking the laws and still oppressing the people.

But that doesn't mean that the laws are good in themselves. So like a big problem is that a lot of countries will then have like the complete opposite government being in front of them, like, oh, "we love the IMF, we love the World Bank". But that's not necessarily the right decision either. So that's why, again, this is false, because it just looks like at this versus that. Instead of like, let's mix, let's make this and figure that out. Let's move this edit this out. So I guess that's what, again, bringing in the fact that that is the problem itself in the same way as like the international migration system is a huge problem. And immigration laws are very limited and the same way with aid packages, all those things have problems. So by centering the people you can really see the flaws of all those systems. And that's I think where we should start not being behind or for one kind of system

**SMK** That's so powerful. And I think that really moves us away from absolutist thinking, which is really at the heart of this entire podcast series. And I think, you know, something that I find to always be something that I find myself saying, I guess is "wow it turns out, you know, two things can be true at the same time." I think that's the heart of this, right, is that, post-colonial states and neo-colonial states can both be good and bad and problematic and are not necessarily opposites. And I think you made that case pretty clearly. Yeah. Thank you so much, Vanessa. This has been really, really powerful. I feel like I've learnt loads and I hope that people who are listening feel like there's a lot that they can also take on.

And, you know, hopefully that this really contributes to the more nuanced thinking that this podcast is all about and contributes to, you know, asking more questions, I guess, about everything when we're presented with a narrative, whether it's about Eritrea, or whether it's about anywhere, really asking, you know, whether that's true, who it's true for, and what else may also be true alongside it.

**VT** Absolutely. Thank you.

**SMK** Thank you for listening to this episode of Breaking Binaries. I hope you, like me, can take something from our guest this week. Look out for episodes fortnightly and if you enjoy, please share. The music you've been hearing is made by an old high school friend, that came through, so shoutout to Violence Jack at @getviolencejack online. Thanks to all my guests for chatting to me every week and helping us to think a little more critically, and I hope, humbly, about our world.

I do believe that part of the way we transform the world is by transforming the ways we think about it. Thank you for listening. I've been your host, Suhaiymah Manzoor-Khan, bye!