Empowered Voices in Research: The Road to the Forum on Ethics of Research

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Power to those that sweep the streets, with more knowledge than PhDs

(Lowkey, 'Letter to the 1%')

Research: For the Greater Good? The Paradox

The PhD process as a program for an academic in training, or research in academia, is burdened by the question; what good is it and what is the 'impact' of this research. The idea of a greater good is a consistent and constant indictor of the 'value' of the research a PhD student or academic undertakes. Concerns that it should speak to a 'broader audience', to policy makers, lawyers and even more importantly to 'those with whom one is in conversation with' i.e. established academics in the field. Even if greater good or the purpose of academic training is recognised through the engagement of scholarship beyond its bubble, the concept of research itself or what the researcher does are not questioned on a fundamental level. It is possible, for example, to explain how something has 'value' and yet another to question who decides this 'value'? Do the communities, people and groups for whom the 'value' is determined want to be researched at all?

PhDs and in fact academic journal articles are written by and for academics. Academia is a career and like any career; it is embedded in ideas of stepping up a career ladder. Showing 'value'. 'impact', and 'public engagement' are just as much of a tick-box system and the crux of academic training at the graduate level.

Decolonising Research Collective: A Breathing Space — the Beginning?

The decolonising research collective of the postgraduate research students started from a specific set of questions that arose from a conversation with a colleague in the University of Kent Law school around the research methodology in the PhD program. The idea of a collective was to establish a space for research students to share our experiences and reflection on our respective projects. Specifically, thinking about how we have struggled to frame our project in a way which is anchored in relation to decolonisation itself. This included focused readings on scholars from non-European and non-white knowledge which would take the form of poetry, literature, video clips or material collated by activist groups based in the global south. We recognised that the space was meant to have conversations that were both substantive in nature i.e. what sources we use to present knowledge from the global south as well as have more material, institutional change in PhD training and research environment (Naqvi et al. 2019).

Our approach was not to only frame this as a 'reading group' where we just discuss readings. Dr. Priya Hope made clear certain ground rules about what decolonisation meant in form of the space in which we have the conversations as well. The first meeting led to the drafting of an ethos document outlining the aims and guiding principles of the space. Without quite intending to, we ended up creating a space which was not removed from our personal/political racialised experiences. This recognition of course is an inherent one among people who have gendered/racialised experience within the academic community. It is precisely why research students and staff of colour remain marginalised to the 'white male' academic standard as the only standard of excellence. As Jason Arday (2017) writes in his report for the University and College Union on 'Exploring black and minority ethnic doctoral students' perceptions of an academic career', most doctoral students indicated that they felt that 'equal access to the academy did not exist for individual from ethnic minority background'. If our collective's space were to be explicitly 'decolonial', it automatically needed to protect and buffer us against the same micro-aggressions, appropriations, misrepresentations and emotional labour that we face within the academia. Being conscious of how the space we occupy, the people in those spaces, can easily push us

to the margins of the conversations by de-centering our voices, we created guiding principles of the Decolonise Research Collective.

There were four main principles we wanted to abide by from the outset. First, that representation was key, which meant that voices mattered. Most importantly, we wanted to make that voices of researcher students of colour was centred in the room, given that the space was not openly exclusive to just PhD.

The second principle was to decolonise the way we write and communicate our ideas. We wanted to develop our own way of writing beyond expert vocabulary and jargon in the process of 'writing' and 'feedback' sessions. This was in spirit of the broader idea that we were within a system which was far removed from the material spaces where knowledge is experienced. So we needed to recognise that language becomes a marker of 'expertise' to demarcate between the academic who knows and the 'subject of research who does not. Even as researcher students of colour, who felt that our own professional space marginalised us, our recognition to accept our 'academic privileged' position was a conscious way to accept our own responsibility as researchers. To specifically not reiterate ideas of 'expertise' we thought were rooted in colonialist 'research'.

Linked to language and decolonising writing, but also in communicating our ideas, we aimed to keep the verbal, written engagement as accessible as we could out of respect to the ethic of decolonisation. This ethic, in terms of communication, relates to the position we occupy as 'academics' in this university located in the North, talking about base realities that we do not (might not have ever) experienced. It was our effort to develop our way of writing/communication so that at some level we communicate with the practice of speak 'with' and not speak 'to' the subjects/concerns of our studies.

Our final principle was respecting the space, as a collective on decolonising research our intention is to respect the aims of the space which means being aware of and actively engaging with reading, writing, researching from a positionality of the south. There needs to be active distancing from representations, methods, knowledge structures that are Eurocentric in nature or form. Thus, our selections for the collective's sessions were by scholars from the global south, knowledge that was not 'scholarly' or 'academic' in nature but spoke about stories of violence by oppressive systems as well those that resisted those stories. We wanted to also explore poetry, literature, documentaries on indigenous resistance, activist literature against oppressive systems.

Is Research Colonial? the Journey to the Ethics Forum

The decolonising research collective was more than just a reading group for us — we wanted to think more deeply, within the confines of our precarious position as PhDs and hourly-paid lecturers, about our praxis within that space. Our plan was to set up a workshop on having a conversation around our experiences of doing research and our challenges in doing it in a way where it ultimately raises broader problems of its 'colonial' nature and 'power' in creating knowledge about material realities of communities and people within the academic university.

As we were organising for this, it was quite clear to me that planning an informal discussion session as a PhD. Student with no publication, and therefore no particular academic profile was itself a hindrance. I put down a list of academics I believed could be good for a panel. Unfortunately, of the five academics I had contacted, except for two replies who could not commit to the day, the rest did not even reply. I ended up relying on Dr. Suhraiya Jivraj and Professor Toni Williams in giving suggestions and specifically referring to them in my email to the academics that did eventually become part of the session — which ended up being an 'informal discussion forum'.

The shift from a panel to an informal discussion forum came out of a conversation with Dr. Karen Salt. She reiterated that we need to start thinking about the space beyond just a place where experts talk about something. Rather, she suggested a sharing of experiences from which we can reflect and learn and carry forward into something 'actionable', even if at the most individual level for people attending the session. This particular idea is what led to the informal discussion forum being a place where five researchers shared their experiences and reflections of what 'ethics' of research meant for them.

Decolonising Knowledge — Reflections on the Journey

In the course of the discussion forum, the one thing that stood out most was the importance of lived knowledge. The idea of lived knowledge and its absence in academia is what spoke to me in understanding that research is colonial in nature. The colonial university utilises research to 'label', 'intellectualise' and treat the 'human' as the 'subject' to be studied (Smith 2013). This framing, as Linda Tuhiwai Smith (Ibid.) points out in her brilliant book *Decolonizing Methodologies*, is colonial at its heart

and can be seen how historically research is deployed in this particular way by colonial anthropologists, geographers, thinkers to justify the colonial enterprise itself. Therefore, research in the university is colonial in nature because knowledge, or what we consider and recognise as legitimate knowledge, is colonial in nature. Decolonising research — as an endeavour itself is not just about reading authors from the global south (even though that centring of 'othered' voices is important part of it), it needs to be inextricably linked to how we experience our 'academic spaces'. Knowledge cannot be compartmentalised into legitimate and a somehow lesser form of knowledge. Decolonising research needs to tackle the challenge of decolonising knowledge. This means continuing to reflect not just our own lived experiences within the academia, but also those outside of it, beyond the reading list. Ultimately presenting the provocation of what is considered a 'legitimate' source of knowledge and who produces this knowledge to claim 'expertise'.

This provocation would strike at the heart of deconstructing the identity that we all as researchers maintain and create, of a 'researcher/ academic'. Thus, at its most fundamental level we must deconstruct what it means to be an 'academic/researcher' — and therefore re-purpose our approach to creating a space for anti-colonial resistance against the colonial university. In the sections that follow on, I consider what is required in carving out a space for this resistance and how through this resistance we can redefine and re-construct the 'colonial self-entitled researcher'. What is required is thinking about how this 'self-entitled researcher' is constructed in a specific academic ecosystem. Thus, understanding the construction of the 'self-entitled colonial researcher' through a sociologically grounded way helps us in thinking about resistance through these modes of sociological ecosystem of the academia.

Re-Existing Through Practice: Writing 'With' Not 'About'

Decolonising research cannot be just an intellectual endeavour. The very idea of only decolonising within the frames of intellectual 'discussion' is a failure of imagination. In the practice of decolonisation there must be the synergy of action and thought in understanding that knowledge is both thought and praxis not simply a separation of the 'mind' from the 'body'. The 'mind' here is with reference to the knowing researcher and the 'body' as the object of study i.e. the communities. This binarisation of 'thought' of the knowing researcher out to 'study' and

explain the 'object' is at the heart of colonialism. Within the research environment of the University, there is an implicit framing of 'subject' of the research and the 'observer' researcher as the 'outsider' (Smith 2013). At a fundamental level it represents a certain relation that is the basis of how the idea of researching is defined and justified — as a scientific exercise of the observer as an objective individual collecting 'data' on the subject, analysing it to produce knowledge *about/on* the 'subject' of the research. This binarisation continues to be reflected in the way we do and understand research at the University. Decolonising knowledge itself requires a questioning of the main premise of University education as being colonial in nature. It has to then also engage with and take form of a new re-existence within the colonial university. This re-existence is, as Dr. Karen Salt reminded us[1] — and as Remi Joseph-Salisbury (2018) observes, in how we speak 'truth' to power. Speaking 'truth to power' here refers not just in grand gestures, but more importantly also in everyday praxis.

Perhaps in order to understand this practice of decolonising knowledge we can turn to Franz Fanon (2008) and Allama Iqbal (Sevea 2012). Fanon and Iqbal called on 'native elites' to listen, value, reflect and learn from their own communities who they must work with and not speak for or separate from in their endeavour against colonialism. In the context of British colonial rule Iqbal spoke of a consciousness of Muslim mind and spirit which grew *with* the struggles of the 'common' man, the peasant, beyond caste/tribe differences. His critique of Muslim public intellectuals at the time was that they grew apart from the struggles of those less privileged in order to respond the construction of the 'Muslim' man created by the white gaze of British colonialism at the time (Iqbal 1940). This construction of Muslim man as the savage, illiterate became a internalised struggle where the Muslim intellectual became fixated to prove they are not 'savage'. For Iqbal, this only reiterated the gaze of the 'west' and his entire epistemological basis for a Muslim consciousness was a re-existence of Muslim 'self' or 'khudi' (in urdu; Ibid.) on its own terms as a struggle against colonialism. This struggle required the Muslim intellectual to work with, learn from and apply their mind to the everyday struggle against imperialism that labourers, workers, those less privileged were constantly engaged in colonial India. The internalised gaze of whiteness in the black man is what Fanon (2008) then referred to when he spoke of the 'native intellectual'. The native intellectual internalised 'whiteness' to such an extent as to loath their own community,

trying only to speak to the inferiority that whiteness has constructed of their world. For Fanon just like Iqbal, the struggle for decolonisation was also a re-existence or consciousness beyond the 'white gaze'.

We could understand the academy both as a microcosm of a colonial structure and part of the way in which power operates to perpetuate racism, sexism and knowledge hierarchies similar to colonial structures. If I had not known a mentor who was willing to navigate those corridors of power through their own networks of scholar activists, I would not have been able to pull the workshop together — or be introduced to be people who were thinking along similar lines. The invisible college works both ways but the neoliberal academy only values those that perpetuate its colonial structure — and it is the PhDs, early career researchers who are caught within this systemic 'isolation' and/or 'alienation'. Unless they are either pressured to 'assimilate' to, as Fanon put it 'be white or be nothing' (Ibid.). The nothingness here is the condition and danger of precarity for PhD's that is exacerbated by isolationism. The operational mode of 'being white' is to be subsumed as the 'neo-liberal' academic who thrives and succeeds in the academic networks of 'intellectual elites'.

These lessons ring true still when I reflect on Dr. Salt's brilliant keynote in the Decolonise UoK conference, March 2019.[2] Dr. Salt spoke of our need to think about what does it mean to live in a truly ethical, decolonial way as 'academics'. How do we treat the sweeper in our corridor, how is it we treat our juniors. How do mentors, seniors support their precarious and early career staff without expecting some kind of 'career' return. Does our 'theory' reflect in our everyday 'praxis' or rather — should we even have the binary between theory and praxis. Instead we should think about the scholar activist as a person who, like Fanon and Iqbals' vision of the intellectual, constantly reflects, learn with and from the community around them. Hence, these everyday encounters of us 'existing' in the academia are all interwoven into the way we talk about 'decoloniality'. Since if we are truly to create a space within what is otherwise historically a colonial endeavour and now increasingly part of a 'neo-liberal' system, we need to start acting in a way that reflects the 'intellectual' conversations that speak to those values. Otherwise, those 'values' spoken in an intellectual way simply become conversations being had outside the experience of our material realities. Perhaps, that is the modus operandi of the colonial university; to have 'elites' who call themselves experts of knowledge themselves perpetuate hierarchies,

elitism, faux objectivity in the name of 'research'. 'Research' that is devoid of 'body', 'experience', 'practice' and everyday resistance.

To decolonise research through practising it is an active mode of resistance — remembering you are not alone and to create, thrive, re-exist in networks of resistance. PhD students and early career researchers are where that space is most effective as you can mould, shape, and subsume the student, precarious researcher into whatever form 'white' academia wants it to take to maintain its status quo. At the same time, it is also the same place where the scholar activist could be supported to become an intellectual who embodies anti-racist, anti-sexist and decolonial praxis in not just re-forming themselves as a 'scholar activist' but also as a teacher. In order to resist that 'colonisation' of the PhD students mind, what is then important is support networks of scholar activists who embody, understand and are actively creating work that is conscious of decolonisation work as more than just intellectual academic exercise. The role of mentors and senior academics who are scholar activists is crucial to the success and support of decolonising research spaces and efforts.

Reframing the Vocabulary of the 'Conversation' — Beyond the White 'Gaze'

Another equally important reflection in relation to decolonising knowledge as both practice and theory is pushing the decolonisation vocabulary beyond whiteness. Reframing the vocabulary has psycho-logical, intellectual and emotional effects on 'BAME' PhD students. Taking my own positionality as an example, I want to demonstrate in this section about my reflections how 'theory' is deeply intertwined with everyday experience. More importantly, how the false binary between the two effects BAME PhD students even more so as they are asked to intellectualise what is essentially their everyday material experience. In my case, my faith, both in practice and as a way of thinking through intellectual thought, is something I never saw being put forward as actual philosophy. If my project isn't specifically on something to do with 'Islamic legal thought', I didn't find the space where Islamic thought, practice, experience could ever be a way of thinking through other issues surrounding us. We could think about social inequality, critical thinking, or even international law through European frames and philosophies — but somehow thinking about anything outside, it becomes a 'speciality' of

its own, something restricted to a place, person (Morsi 2018). We are asked to become academics and engaged with 'critical thought' but that critical thought as a way of viewing the world and law is limited to Europe's 'white' gaze on the world (Dabashi 2015).

The white gaze is apparently the only gaze through which we can understand the whole world — but no other gaze can be used to learn something about the rest of the world. That is perhaps why I could never have conversations about my faith, my everyday practice without having the fear of either being judged for 'believing' and also being a 'critical researcher'. That is exactly why the 'mosque' became a space where I could live this 'other world', the part of me that wants to feel accepted for my faith as well.

Being a Muslim PhD student felt often like a place of living in-between two worlds even though my experience was embodied, everyday — not something that could be split neatly into these two different 'epistemes' or ways of living my reality. Members of our collective, through conversations with the Law School's postgraduate research staff team, managed to get some decolonial philosophy (Mignolo 2009) as part of study group reading. This still perhaps is not enough as it comes from the limited, yet important, aspect that we need more diverse/decolonised opinions. However, they are still referred to as about something called 'decolonisation' simply as a 'metaphor' (Tuck et al. 2012) or a 'good' thing to do without the appreciation that this 'theory' is often how we reflect on our everyday experiences and the spaces we occupy. More importantly perhaps, that we can learn so much through the reflection of our everyday experiences as people of colour about these decolonial theories by brilliant scholars of colour.

To simply talk of decolonisation in theoretical or intellectual ways as if it is only an ethereal philosophy anyone can tap into while reflecting about their work is to remove the ethical question we are confronted with when talking of decolonisation. This ethical question is not one which rests on 'who' can do decolonial theory, but rather 'how' can one do decolonial theory ethically. The burden of the 'how' lies on those whose relation to knowledge centred at the university and in society i.e. the white academic or even those that have an imperial relation to the marginalised within their communities i.e. upper caste brown academics. This question of the 'how' is even more important than the why we must do it because of the material, structural and political reality of colonialisation and its neo-imperial forms existing in the world today and more

importantly, in the form of the colonial university. These realities are more often than not a product of years, generations of colonial trauma, survival, re-existence and finding our voice through the orientalising, colonising, fetishising gaze of European white scholarship. When we talk about decolonising research, we must talk about who gets to speak about it in 'what' way, how must those that benefit from the structure or are historically centred talk about it, and who embodies it and has lived through these realities in different ways.

This question is for me a question of ethics of 'research' itself. It is a conversational, dialogical mediation between positionalities of power. For a decolonial research, we need to engage in this mediation, which then needs to be set through principles. Our broader project around Kaleidoscope Network and hub includes such principles[3] we must engage in, in order to even practise decoloniality. The same should and in fact in different form has been said of research and knowledge production. Beyond whiteness as an overarching imperial form, the idea of ethics in research has also been explored on the topic of 'caste'. Caste as a form of colonial relation in the Indian subcontinent has existed in the subcontinent long before British Colonisation where socio-economic hierarchy of 'human' (i.e. an upper caste Brahmin) less human (lower caste), and non-human (untouchable or Dalit) is based on spirituality and blood lineage (Ambedkar 1948). It is not only present within Hindu faith, but also reproduced in other faith practices within the subcontinent including Islamic, Christian, Sikh context (see, for example, Ahmad 1978 and Puri 2003). Conversation around research of caste as an over-arching reality of brown communities both in India, Pakistan and the west have ended up producing conversations around the ethics of speaking about these experiences i.e. who gets to speak about these experiences and how. Most notably in the context of caste research through a co-authored dialogic book 'The Cracked Mirror' by Dalit academic Gopal Guru and non-Dalit Professor Sundar Surrakai (2018). Surrakai and Guru speak of the ethics of writing about caste oppression and experience especially when Brahmin/upper caste researchers write as not only outsiders but as those historically, structurally and politically privileged. For Guru and Surrakai, in order to understand the 'whole' experience, both the power holders (i.e. the non Dalit Brahmin) deconstruction of his/her power and the Dalit experience are important. Both aspects can give a full knowledge in dialogue with each other. However, at the centre of this dialogue for Guru and Surrakai, regardless of their positionalities,

the ethical goal of research on caste has to be the dismantling of caste supremacy as imagined by Dalit leader and scholar B.R. Ambedkar (2014). The research thus has to be led by, framed in its objective by those colonised. In a similar vein, whiteness in a way in which it can be deconstructed needs the active participation of the white scholar. However, the overarching goals need to be set as dismantling 'whiteness' and the 'white gaze' — not to reinforce, or invisibilise it. It is particularly this goal of deconstructing and dismantling the dominant/colonising frame as the objective of decolonisation. Dia da Costa and Alexandere Da Costa (2019) and Shaista Patel (2016) attempt to answer this question of 'how' one does decolonial research through a conceptual framing of 'multiple colonialisms' in society i.e. whiteness, Brahminism (casteism), anti-blackness and anti-indigeneity. For Da Costa and Da Costa (2019) and Patel (2016), we must find ways in which to create decolonial solidarities beyond identities but with the ethical imperative of dismantling any/all colonial power frames. This then requires those of us who occupy those positions in relation to 'colonised' to deconstruct our positionalities critically to that end i.e. white scholars deconstructing whiteness, non-black scholars of colour deconstructing anti-blackness and upper caste scholars of colour critically reflecting/critiquing caste supremacy.

This discussion on ethics is also central to the claim that Fanon and Iqbal make in their critique of the native elite who is effectively the person of colour internalising and operating within the logics of 'whiteness'. Simply stating that only scholars of colour 'can' do decolonial scholarship is to sweep Fanon and Iqbal's critique of internalised 'whiteness' under the rug. It easily turn to 'performativity' as measure of progress as Sara Ahmed (2004) points out. This 'performativity' is exactly what the neo-liberal university, and 'native elites' utilise to their own ends. Thus in re-making the academic researcher as a anti-colonial researcher, one must be wary of internalisations of whiteness as well as invibilisation of any/other forms of colonial frames the researchers actively avoid. This is especially in the case of researchers of colour, as Dalit and non-Dalit scholars/activists in India point out, who do not talk about caste structure as a colonial frame (Krishnaswamy 2005; Jangam 2015; Figueira 2008). This invisiblisation however is also reinforced and finds refuge in the colonial ecosystem of the neoliberal 'native 'elite'. Seemingly critical perspectives like postcolonial theory/subaltern studies build on an intellectual capital and become ways in which scholar networks find their epistemological grounds in order to succeed in the profession. In

this endeavour of the neoliberal academic, performativity operates on another register — that of critical performativity. This includes seemingly anti-colonial frames which do not have principled ethics of their own positionality and theories are deployed simply for intellectual capital and personal gain. Here again this binarisation of praxis and theory produces the effect of emboldening the neoliberal 'native elite'. Under the guise of critical 'theory', neoliberal academics of colour ignore colonial frames they themselves are complicit in and hence their praxis does not become a way to question their theoretical integrity.

The discussion of 'how' as mediating set of principles, guidelines, 'ethics' thus are not just discursive considerations, they must be part of spaces and conditions under which these discussions happen. More importantly, they are ethical questions translated into principles/mediating inter-dialogical frames, an anti-colonial scholar network needs to have so as to not reproduce 'native elitism'. Principles, guidelines or ethical frames can have the ability to guide us, as ways to reclaim our experiences, as conversations of self-reflection, self-growth and as collective and individual healing.

On 'Not Being Alone' and the Next Phase: Future Collaborations and Communal Engagement

Drawing on my experiences of being connected with Dr. Salt through Dr. Jivraj, I was convinced that we need to counter the 'neo-liberal network' of academia which reinforces 'whiteness' with our own 'principled' ecosystems of support. Through the project, I became more conscious of seeking out other PhDs/staff who were having similar discussions. Not long after our project, the University of Sheffield and University of Sheffield Hallam publicised their informal forums on decolonising research and decolonising methodologies.

If anything, in all of the three instances i.e. white PhD students, discussion with an international Indian scholar activist and at Sheffield University workshop, it became clear to me the importance the mediating principles is these contexts. The idea of grounding principles through which we all can engage with decoloniality are incredibly important to a constructive possibility of a decolonising research. In my experiences in these three instances these were either absent/or partially present. Which in one case lead to uncomfortable, troubling and self-effacing

experiences I have faced in other scenarios of 'whiteness' reinforcing itself as the only authority in the room.

Rethinking Ground Rules? — The Need for a Manifesto for Decolonial Research Ethics

Looking forward, what is paramount in taking the initiative of decolonising research and especially the research collective at University of Kent forward, is to drive home the form, spaces, and dynamics in which conversations around decolonising research are being held. This requires developing, honing and putting into place core principles of the spaces in which we produce knowledge. Dr Salt for example refers to a guiding principles document of the common cause research collective[4] she works with who do research projects with communities. While we think about a more structured, strategic approach to resist within the academic ecosystem, at the most foundational level, we must start with ourselves. Reflecting, re-examining the everyday spaces and dynamics of academic 'work' and build collaborative networks where we can push these subversive ways of resisting in order to further our aim of creating an anti-colonial ecosystem within the colonial university.

Notes

1 Salt K., 'Keynote Speech', Decolonising the Curriculam Project Conference 2019. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KYglXKq7yJ4&list=PLbAKl g2H-Hdu-v5ZPBMF6hta3PNe-aSob&index=8.

2 Ibid.

3 https://research.kent.ac.uk/sergj/kaleidoscope-network-decolonising-the-university/.

4 https://www.commoncauseresearch.com/, *Common Cause* (2018). Common Cause: Building Research Collaborations between Universities and Black and Minority Ethnic Communities. Bristol University and AHRC Connected Communities Programme.

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