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Positionality and the dialectic of race and gender in British higher education: The issue with (mis) representation

Amani Al-Serhan [a,*], Joy Ogbemudia [b]

[a] Center for Women's Studies, University of Jordan, Amman 11942, Jordan
[b] Leadership, Governance & People Management, Leeds Business School, Leeds Beckett University, Leeds LS1 3HB, UK

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ABSTRACT

Disappointed by countless academic resources and personal accounts that tend to situate women of colour as the racialised other, this article aims to critique Western representation of Black and Minority Ethnic (BAME) women and query the production of knowledge in British Higher Education (BHE). Engaging in self-conscious introspective narrative where our personal experiences are linked to the social, we situate this paper in duoethnographic research by linking our personal experiences to the broader social context of "Whiteness" found within British Higher Education. Using our lived experiences as an entry point, we analyse personal challenges of negotiating "Whiteness" within British Higher Education. Drawing from the notion of gender and cultural essentialism, we discuss how Western discourse typically presents Arab and other women of colour as culturally oppressed and lacking a sense of agency. We call attention to the need to embrace decolonial feminism (Lugones, 2010), where the coloniality of gender is addressed and intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) is appreciated as an analytical tool for the experiences of women.

1. Introduction

Questions of identity and positionality are often augmented when geographical detachment from home and nation is experienced. It is mostly when people are pushed outside their comfort zones, away from social support, that the fragility of identity is discovered; irrespective of race and colour, identities become fragmented. Disappointed by countless academic resources and personal accounts that tend to situate women of colour as the racialised other, we feel a strong need to reclaim our identities and highlight our capacity to produce knowledge.

As young scholars pursuing our doctorates in a leading British institution, situated in the northeastern part of England, within a predominantly white community we suddenly became aware of the powerful implications of labelling, and the multiple layers of identities that are attached to us as women of colour. In the U.K, our paths crossed: an Arab Muslim Jordanian feminist, and a Black Nigerian British feminist. As researchers, undertaking the same doctoral programme in women's studies, we were very much taken aback by how our human capital is taken for granted; we were only seen as immigrants and potential threats to British jobs. Moreover, the institution of learning is never experienced as a level playing field because there is a constant pressure to prove oneself as we are endlessly constructed as "the other".

Using our personal experiences in a UK higher institution as a springboard, we shed light on the myopic and essentialist representation of women of colour in Western discourse within British Higher Education. In the voice of an Arab feminist academic, we examine the way White scholars represent Arab Muslim women only as victims of oppression, homogenizing their experiences and presenting them as victims of religion and a backward culture. In the same vain, in the voice of an African feminist academic, we explore the repressive representations of Black women as subjects of suffering and deprivation. We analyse our positions in British Higher Education, how we are represented in academic discourse and in a joint voice, we call for the decolonisation of Western curriculum and the embrace of decolonial feminism in exploring new ways of constructing knowledge.

2. Methodology

Engaging in self-conscious introspective narrative where our personal experiences are linked to the social, we employ duoethnography as a methodological tool for this paper. Duoethnography is an innovative qualitative research methodology through which two (or more)

* Corresponding author.
E-mail addresses: alserhan.amani@ju.edu.jo (A. Al-Serhan), J.O.Ogbemudia@leedsbeckett.ac.uk (J. Ogbemudia).

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researchers can draw from their lived experiences to interrogate existing understanding of a social phenomenon (Norris et al., 2012; Sawyer & Norris, 2013). Since the aim of this paper is to critique Western representation of BAME women and query the production of knowledge in British Higher Education, employing duoethnography situates our experiences as sites of research and helps us to explore the "cultural understanding and interpretation of others through the self and multiple layers of consciousness" (Pung et al., 2020:543).

Our choice of this methodology is birthed from our informal telephone conversations over a period of two years, where we constantly recounted our experiences as research students in the same university in the UK. We built friendship during our doctoral studies in the UK, and found solace in supporting each other. In order to sustain our relationship after the completion of our studies, we took to social media and continued with regular monthly zoom calls that would last from 60 to 120 min.

It was beautiful to always connect though we are borders apart (one in Jordan and the other in the UK). Reminiscing about our immediate past always left us with mixed feelings and a desire to reflectively analyse our experiences in the context of a broader discussion. We realised that (unconsciously), our long conversations served as a platform to retrospectively make sense of our lived experiences as researchers in a British university. When we finally decided to do an academic piece that accommodates our lived experiences as a site of knowledge, duoethnography as a subtype of autoethnography served as a mediating device to provide the frame we use to situate meaning (Pung et al., 2020; Sawyer & Norris, 2013).

Although the content of our numerous telephone conversations is not fully presented for analysis, we always talked about times when we felt our opinions were discounted, when an excellent presentation is explained as "show off" and a poor presentation is associated with our mental retardation. These formed the basis for employing our lived experiences as a springboard and subject of entrance into broader issues of racism, discrimination and misrepresentation in British Higher Education. Exploring our identities as Arab and African women respectively, we leveraged on our sameness and differences as BAME women in the UK.

3. Positionality within BHE

3.1. Black or British?

I have very many memories of my time as a postgraduate student in the UK, having done my masters and PhD in two different prestigious universities in England. As an immigrant, I could not help but take note of the challenging experiences of struggling to authenticate my place in a British university. My first challenge as a postgraduate student in the UK was introducing myself. My identity was one issue I struggled with. I never knew how difficult it could be to introduce oneself until I was suddenly faced with the hybridity of my identity as both Nigerian and British. To introduce myself as Nigerian is to be categorised as an international student and to say I am British is to give room to the detesting question, "Where are you really from?" As Ariane (2010) puts it, "It may not be racist, but it's a question I'm tired of hearing". Answering such a question adequately is often problematic; it places me in a sensitive position of disrupting the supposedly near linear position that is traditionally expected between self and others. More sensitive is my case because of the binary classification of the Black and Minority Ethnic (BAME) students in most Western institutions, where they are categorised as either international students who migrated for further studies, or children of migrants who were born in the destination country. I did not belong to either of these groups. A further probing question from a classmate gave hints to a third category into which I was also conveniently wrongly classified:

Classmate: you say you're British; so are your parents British?

Me: No (wondering why the probing question).

Classmate: Oh, I once had a friend who was an asylum seeker…

Me: (Not sure, if I was more shocked than irritated but concluded that someone needed some educating). I'm not an asylum seeker. I migrated with my family to the UK under the "Highly Skilled Migrant Programme" (HSMP), which allows you to settle in the UK, gives you access to an Indefinite Leave to Remain (ILR), after which you can become a citizen…

Obviously, people are ignorant of the different categories of immigrants. I do not in any way wish to rationalise the different ways people migrate from their home countries; after all, the precarity of their experiences leaves them all in the same playing field. What gets at me however, is the notion that immigrants are all forced or pushed out of their country, without thinking of choice as a currency of negotiation. I sometimes feel like screaming, "I am one of the "best and the brightest" invited by Theresa May (Portes, 2018; Waldron & Sanwar, 2015), and recently by Priti Patel (Taylor, 2020) in their dire need for talent and skilled workers. Having these conversations is not only tiring, but constantly leaves me with a sense of "otherness", a feeling of "trying too hard to belong". I once introduced myself as British during a seminar and was welcomed with some silent giggles until the lecturer with a wry smile asked where I was originally from and she announced, "Ok, you're Nigerian, so can you now please introduce yourself". It was surprising the aspect of my identity she chose to emphasise and the aspect she ignored. I am not particularly interested in being identified as British, but the challenge is the limited vocabulary to define race and nationality by diasporic population in the UK.

This makes me question how identity affects the way we are seen and related to. Sometimes, having a dual nationality makes you neither here nor there; an insider and at the same time an outsider. As a student, I was seen as an insider because I pay home fees but as an outsider because of my skin, accent and home country certificates. To the international students, I was a privileged British woman, enjoying all the "privileges" of being British but to my British colleagues, I was not quite part of; probably seen as a threat "to the biological purity and cultural superiority of European" whiteness (Marotta, 2008). It became clear to me that holding a British passport and living in Britain may tick the right box of legal documentation, but never does it legitimize the identity of Britishness.

The challenges of negotiating this hybrid personality was further heightened when as a graduate assistant I had to take up teaching positions in different departments. I had to travel with my British passport from one department to the other to verify my British status as it was always convenient to think of me as an international student, (the only reason for that I suppose, was my last name). My surname immediately sets the alarm bell ringing, this must be an international student; she is not allowed to take up paid work for more than 20 h per week. Now, let me pause and discuss the level of surveillance over international students by an institution that should passionately seek to protect them.

It is an open secret that revenue generation is one of the key motivations behind the recruitment of international students; as Prof. Susan Bassnett concluded, international students are being used as *cash cows* by British universities (Kingkade, 2012). What actually upsets me is the "policing" of international students and the level of surveillance over them. Attendance forms are signed as proof that undergrads turn up for lectures, while work attendance sheets are filled to control the number of hours worked—these, to me, all sound like an attempt to destroy the hen that lays the golden fleece. These unfair discriminatory measures create a very restrictive environment within which international students must carry out their studies. The only institution that could and should fight for the rights of international students is used to enforce restrictive measures. So, since my surname has no iota of Britishness in it, I am immediately categorised as an international student and for any paid work I undertake as a graduate assistant, I had to produce my passport to verify my British claim (details that could easily be verified

from the school data system).

3.2. Empowered or debilitated?

As a Jordanian woman who travelled to the UK on a Tier 4 student visa, I was not looking or hoping for a long-term settlement. Quite the contrary, I was eager to complete my studies and go back home and start my academic career. As I was on a fully funded scholarship from the University of Jordan, I had under its bylaws to return upon completion of my studies and serve for a minimum of eight years at the university. Although this contract appears restricting, I was relieved to know that I had a job waiting for me once I finished my program. I was very excited to embark on my academic journey and to learn all about feminism and gender equality. As a PhD student with two young toddlers, faced with different obstacles and challenges, I resolved to remain focused. I was excited; as I was aware of how privileged I was to have been granted this opportunity of a lifetime to study in a renowned Western institution. This excitement was soon replaced with feelings of despair and anguish. I have vivid recollection of an incident that occurred in my first year. During one of the seminars, we had a discussion about Amina Filali, a young Moroccan woman who committed suicide because she was forced to marry her rapist, which at the time, was a condition for the rapist to receive a reduced sentence under the Moroccan law. This discussion was emotional for all of us but to my surprise, the stare I received made me self-conscious and the statement that followed caught me unaware: "I absolutely *detest* those cultures". This was said with a strong gaze at me. For a moment, I felt I was an embodiment of the culture; I felt out of place and immediately saw myself looked upon as "the other", defined by a culture I do not represent. Words could not express the intensity of my feelings as I paused in disbelief. I had not anticipated that such comments would be made in an academic setting where stereotypes are meant to be deconstructed and knowledge critically evaluated.

During another discussion in class on the different waves of feminism, I mentioned that Jordanian women are more interested in having access to political rights and higher levels of economic participation than in sexuality. I was however interrupted with a question about honour killings in Jordan. I was asked "How can you underestimate sexuality as a significant factor behind Arab and Muslim women's oppression? Doesn't sexuality form the foundations of women's oppression". I soon became cognisant of my positionality as an Arab feminist in relation to Western ones. I found myself constantly defending my identity, culture and religion from the condescending colonial "gaze" that saw us as "backward, retarded and uncivilized". It was not a position I was comfortable with, rather it was one that was imposed on me for the duration of my time in England. A conversation also ensued between a professor and I. Upon hearing about my academic discipline, he excitedly announced:

> Professor: Good! I think you would greatly need that back home. The other day I saw a couple who seemed to be from Saudi Arabia where the wife was left to push the stroller while carrying many shopping bags and her husband was unbothered by her struggle to multitask.
> Me: (Not knowing why and how this was relevant to our discussion) But Jordan differs greatly from Saudi Arabia.
> Professor: But they both share the same culture and religion. I feel sorry for the poor woman.
> Me: But there are many variations within Arab and Islamic culture and it is unfair to view them all as monolithic.
> (The professor then frowned signaling that he was not interested in hearing my defense. I quickly picked up his message and remained silent.)
> Professor: As a doctoral candidate you must have a lot to do. You could go home now. I will finish the invigilation alone.
> Me: I indeed have a lot to accomplish. Thank you. (and I left home)
>
> While I cannot mention all of the incidents I stumbled upon, they are all similar in fashion. Encounters that clearly made me feel frustrated, irritated and at many times vulnerable.

4. Whiteness in BHE

A young lady, Anuoluwa, wearing a broad smile walked up to me after an interesting seminar. She introduced herself and added, "I just wanted to let you know how proud and happy I am to have you as my lecturer". Seeing my confusion at her compliment, she quickly continued, "I mean, its first time I'm having an African female lecturer. I was sad when I came to uni and found out there were not many faces like mine to look up to; not in class and not even in our textbooks […]" All I could offer back was a faint smile; I could feel her pain and identify with her relief. I am aware that not only is there a dearth of Black (female) bodies in British educational institutions, the curriculum and pedagogy in these institutions also play fundamental roles in reproducing White privilege and promoting stereotypes against Black and Minority Ethnic population (Sian, 2017).

We cannot deny that there has been some movement in the right direction in Higher Education, for example, according to Runnymede Trust (2010), there was an increase of BAME students across British universities from 13 % in 1994/95 to 23 % in 2008/09 and the number of BAME students enrolled for undergraduate studies in 2019/20 academic year was 27.4 % (HESA, 2021) however, the number of their representation in Russel Group universities still remains relatively low (Osei-West, 2021; Sian, 2017). Also, despite the crawling increase in the number of students, there is still a shocking under representation of Black professors and an almost insignificant number of Black female professors in British universities (Gabriel, 2013). Out of 19,000 professors recorded in the 2016/17 academic year, more than 14,000 are White men and only 25 are Black women (Adams, 2018). The existing statistics suggest that the equity gap in HE remains endemic and to navigate such racialised, gendered and classed space of whiteness can be nerve-wracking for Black women. A number of academic scholars have expounded on the burden Black women incur to inhabit white spaces. According to Hill Collins (1986), for Black women to arrive at, and enter such privileged white spaces is to risk being seen as "the outsider within", to Mirza (2018) it is to be a trespasser and to Puwar (2004) it is to be seen as a "space invader"—to be out of place. Puwar puts it more succinctly:

> While all can, in theory, enter, it is certain types of bodies that are tacitly designated as being the 'natural' occupants of specific positions. Some bodies are deemed as having the right to belong, while others are marked out as trespassers, who are, in accordance with how both spaces and bodies are imagined (politically, historically and conceptually), circumscribed as being 'out of place' (2004, 8).

What then can be done? Perhaps the challenges have been dressed and ad-dressed for far too long with no solution proffered and instead, like a whitewashed sepulchre, we pretend that all is well—the fight against racism is conquered! Urged by Western institutions to embrace post-racial[1] discourse, we are to ignore how the "new patterns of insidious racism and deep inequalities are evolving in the 'affective' learning landscapes, or 'eduspaces' of our seemingly cosmopolitan but inherently white elitist universities" (Ardey and Mirza, 2018, 169). As BAME (female) academics within the space of a white Western institution, we argue that the institutionalised practice of racism as we know it may have evolved—becoming covert and implicit instead of overt and explicit, however, to hold on to post-racial ideologies is to promote "colour-blindness". It is much too early to tick racism off our agenda and

[1] Post-racialism is "the false but common belief – that systematic racism has been defeated in Western societies" (Seikkula, 2019:95)

ring the bell of triumph before the war is over! To attain the position of triumph, we need to move toward the decolonization of not just the curriculum, but the entire British educational system, in order to incorporate and validate the experiences of other knowledge producers and to embrace other ways of knowing (ibid).

"What Exactly Does Diversity Do?" Sarah Ahmed (2012) poses this question to diversity and equality practitioners working in universities. Konrad et al. (2006) also argue for the need to unpack the term because of its multiple overlapping and conflicting meanings. Is the presence of Black women within HE just a token? An added number to justify the "doing" of diversity? According to Ahmed (2009), "When our appointments [...] are taken up as signs of organisational commitment to equality and diversity, we are in trouble." We become mere figures in tick-box exercises and utilised as marketing devices, then progress becomes a mirage.

I had an experience when I first got a teaching position as a Graduate Assistant (GA); I was excited when I got the job, it was my dream come true. Finally, I was going to be teaching in a British University. My first day in class however sapped the adrenaline that was surging within me, leaving me with mixed feelings. On this fateful day, I met a senior lecturer in the lift and excitedly announced that I got a teaching job as a GA to facilitate seminars. I expected her to share in my joy, but the following conversation ensued.

> (I will call her Grace)
> Grace- Oh; sounds interesting. You mean you got the job?
> Joy- Yes, yes. I did and I'm really looking forward to my first session.
> Grace – You will be fine, won't you? … (she had a wryly smile on her face) the only issue is that any seminar tutor found incompetent would be withdrawn. (This she said and hurried away).

I suddenly felt glued to my track and my confidence seemed to freeze. I encouraged myself to hurry along and not be late for my first class. I got in early to class and waited patiently for my students to arrive. The first student to arrive opened the door, saw me in front, apologised and quickly shut the door. I was shocked. His reaction was clear; he did not expect to see me stand in front of the class. It will probably be acceptable to have me sit (as part of the class) but not standing in front as a tutor. That was against the norm. I immediately felt like a body out of space. At this time, the little confidence in me was far gone. My excitement of finally landing a teaching job dissipated into thin air. My all night preparation for the seminar suddenly felt insufficient. I did not fit into the student's expectation of a tutor, therefore, the door was shut. I stood there, thinking more about the shut door than the student. The shut door was to me an image of dispassionate restraint, of demarcation and of limitation.

5. Arab Muslim women: the essentialised other (in the voice of an Arab feminist academic)

Being educated in the West provides a purview of the ways White scholars write about Arab women in the Middle East region. Volumes of resources generated in the West have one major issue in common: affirming women's oppression, in both the Humanities and Social Sciences. As a woman with heritage ties to this region, I am stricken by the dynamics of power that play out in these texts which are difficult to ignore. There were many moments where reading such texts was a daunting task, irritating my decolonial feminist mindset. As an academic, being expected to cite and make use of the extensive resources and texts written about Arab women by White women who most likely have never been to the region or have the faintest idea about the reality of living in the Arab world is akin to replicating the colonizer's mindset, in my opinion.

Texts such as *The Caged Virgin* by Ayan Hirsi Ali (2006) and *The House of Obedience* by Julliette Minces (1982) that have wide readership in the West were predicated upon the notion of gender and cultural essentialism. The danger lies in homogenizing the category of Muslim women and presenting it as ahistorical and unchanging. As Uma Narayan argues, "essentialist notions of culture often rely on a picture that presents cultures not only as 'givens' but as 'unchanging givens'" (Narayan, 1998: 94). These texts claim to offer in Mohanty's terms images of "average third world women' who 'lead an essentially truncated life based on her feminine gender and her being 'third world', tradition bound, domestic, family oriented, victimized" (Mohanty, 1991: 56). This image Mohanty suggests is 'in contrast to the (implicit) self-representation of Western women as educated, as modern, as having control over their own bodies and sexualities, and the freedom to make their own decisions' (Mohanty, 1991: 56). This dichotomy between East/West, first world/third world has always been problematic. It is disappointing that numerous Western resources on Arab and Muslim women tend to position themselves as binary opposites. As Narayan purposes, "historically informed and antiessentialist feminist vision requires that we learn to see cultures as less rigid and more suffused by change than they are often depicted" (Narayan, 1998: 94). It is with Narayan's statement that I desire to join the voices of other women of the Arab World in taking to task the continuation of appropriating our stories and lived experiences for our own scholarly use.

Reading such texts brings one question to mind: What would it be like to have women of the Arab World write about the lives and issues pertaining to White women residing in the West? How would such texts be perceived? And, why are we in most cases posited on the receiving end of knowledge production? When will those roles be reversed? When will we have an equivalent level of agency as those enjoyed by White scholars? Frustrated by countless accounts and representations that have a tendency to victimize Arab women, a deep urge exists to reverse this abuse of power. Chela Sandoval argues that,

> Insofar as academic disciplines generate division in this way, they continually reproduce an apartheid of theoretical domains. These divisions further demonstrate the articulation of knowledge with power inasmuch as what is being reenacted on a conceptual level are colonial geographic, sexual, gender, and economic power relations. Such divisions encourage what Cornel West describes as the appropriation of "the cultural capital of intellectuals of colour" and women, insofar as their contributions are folded into some "appropriate" category and there go submerged and underutilized (2013:70).

Women from our region need to produce and consume knowledge of their own. Inspired by Chandra Mohanty's groundbreaking article "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses", I echo her main arguments. I no longer need to consume knowledge that is infiltrated to me through the prism of difference, through the process of othering and selective documentation steeped in hierarchy and racial privilege. Not only am I critical of Western discourses that capitalize on notions of binary opposites, I am equally critical of sympathetic and apologetic discourses that purport to display the West as the passionate and most caring "other".

In the words of Maria Lugones, "feminism does not just provide an account of the oppression of women. It goes beyond oppression by providing materials that enable women to understand their situation without succumbing to it" (2010: 747). Therefore, as a feminist academic, I feel that it is of great necessity that I, along with many scholars and academics of the region formulate our own school of thought that speaks to our own experiences, lives, struggles and challenges; a school of thought that takes our social, cultural, and religious identities into perspective. Rather than having to appropriate Western knowledge and to forcefully mold it to our audience, time has come to invest in the process of writing our own histories, realities and struggles. Perhaps most important of all, time has come to actively engage in the process of theorizing: Arab feminist theorizing for our own consumption, and ours only.

Being very cautious to avoid the process of gender essentialism, as Uma Narayan argues, one must not fall in the trap of essentialising one's

own culture by capitalizing on the notion of difference between Western and non-Western cultures (Narayan, 1998: 87). One strategy to resist cultural essentialism according to Narayan is "the cultivation of a critical stance that 'restores history and politics' to prevailing ahistorical pictures of 'culture'" (Narayan, 1998: 92). This critical stance provides women of colour with useful tools and critical methodologies that will enable them to embark on the joyful journey of drafting their own stories that are devoid of colonial narratives of the "other". Moreover, it allows academics from non-Western cultures who have been saturated with outsider, revisionist, and colonial accounts about their societies to reclaim their own knowledge and to release it from the strong grip of Western hegemonic discourses of the "other".

While using the works of postcolonial feminists to support my arguments, I am however uncomfortable with the label "postcolonialism": the label implies that we have surpassed colonialism in its traditional military form. Given the ongoing Western intervention in the region and the destabilizing of many Arab nations, I find the label postcolonial in a sense quite ironic. Can we not regard the current meddling of Western superpowers in the affairs of countries in the region as modern day colonialism? Are we in any sense post-colonial? Particularly in the Arab world where countries like Syria, Iraq and Palestine have suffered from political and military involvement by White super powers in the names of democracy and human rights?

I am content with the label decolonial feminism coined by scholar Marina Lugones. She calls "the analysis of racialized, capitalist, gender oppression 'the coloniality of gender,' and calls 'the possibility of overcoming the coloniality of gender 'decolonial feminism'" (2010: 747). Moreover, she declares that, "the coloniality of gender enables me to understand the oppressive imposition as complex interactions of economic, racializing, and gendering systems in which every person in the colonial encounter can be found as a live, historical, fully described being. It is as such that we want to understand the resister as being oppressed by colonizing construction of the fractured locus" (2010: 747). Whether explicit or implicit, in discussions on feminist discourse in the region, colonialism seems to frequently surface as a reference point, particularly by fundamentalists who view feminism all together as an alien concept to Arab Muslim societies. Thus, "The colonial difference creates the conditions for dialogic situations in which a fractured enunciation is enacted from the subaltern perspective as a response to the hegemonic discourse and perspective" (Mignolo, 2000: x). Moreover, "the transcending of the colonial difference can only be done from the perspective of subalternity, from decolonization, and, therefore from a new epistemological terrain where border thinking works" (Mignolo, 2000: 45). It is therefore very essential that non-Western scholars are critical of their positionality not only as one that is disparate from the West geographically, but also culturally, socially, politically and historically. This conscious understanding of one's positionality would allow non-Western scholars and in particular Arab feminists to seek new modes of knowledge that transcends particular notions of hierarchical Western discourse. The colonial difference could therefore serve the function of/or possess the effect of a mirror that enables the least powerful part of the equation moments of self-reflection and an opportunity to strike back and create a shift in the dynamics of power.

Concurring with Mignolo's argument "the colonial differences, around the planet, are the house where border epistemology dwells" (Mignolo, 2000: 37), the field of Women's Studies in the region is at a crucial point. As an academic, I find myself constantly thinking in the form of binaries. These dichotomies of opposition without a doubt inform my epistemological standing. Given the limited amount of academic resources on Women's Studies in the region, I am therefore always conscious of how I deploy Western knowledge to a non-Western audience. In the words of Lugones, "the decolonialist feminist's task begins by her seeing the colonial difference, emphatically resisting her epistemological habit of erasing it. Seeing it, she sees the world anew, and then she requires herself to drop her enchantment with 'woman,' the universal, and begins to learn about other resisters at the colonial difference" (2010: 753).

For Sandoval, "The differential mode of consciousness functions like the clutch of an automobile, the mechanism that permits the driver to select, engage, and disengage gears in a system for the transmissions of power" (2013: 57). Moreover, "The differential represents the variant; its presence emerges out of correlations, intensities, junctures, crises. Yet the differential depends on a form of agency that is self-consciously mobilized in order to enlist and secure influence; the differential is thus performative … When enacted in dialectical relation to one another and not as separated ideologies, each oppositional mode of consciousness, each ideology- praxis, is transformed into tactical weaponry for intervening in shifting currents of power" (ibid). The differential mode of consciousness thus, "depends on the practitioner's ability to read the current situation of power and self-consciously choosing and adopting the ideological stand best suited to push against its configurations, a survival skill well known to oppressed peoples" (Sandoval, 2013: 60).

A consensus exists among us as feminists of the Global South about the intentionality of Western discourse in appropriating our voices, experiences to be a means to their ends. I wish to declare that the content of essays like this be for our own consumption and not that of Western White "feminists" and academics who might use our work to further support essentialist claims about Arab and Muslim women. I want non-Western scholars to read this essay as one of many attempts to identify the lack of a unifying Arab feminist school of theoretical thought that spares us all the extra effort of adaptation, translation and careful appropriation. While fully acknowledging that the process of critiquing Western feminist discourse and its construction of the "other" is not new, what I hope to offer here is to voice my concerns, frustrations and most importantly, my own personal informed perspectives as an insider regarding the way feminist discourse operates in the region. I know that the ideas discussed in this essay might resonate with many feminists of colour across the world. I therefore think of this dialogue as a continuation of ongoing transnational discussions on the dilemma of feminist discourse in decolonial/postcolonial settings.

6. Black (African) women: written out of history *(*in the voice of an African feminist academic)

Black [African] women are written out of history and when mentioned at all, we are presented as possessors of an "innate capacity to cope with brutality and deprivation and perpetuating the myth that we are somehow better equipped than others for suffering" (Bryan et al., 2018: 2). Rejecting this repressive viewpoint, we (Black women scholars) are determined to tell our stories in our own voices, challenging the position of [hyper] visibility and invisibility. We query the Western hegemonic and Eurocentric ideologies (Mohanty, 1984) which colours how Black women are represented and how our works are perceived- "ignored or ruthlessly critiqued, deemed not scholarly enough or too polemical" (Hooks, 2000: xiv).

Black women's clamour for a legitimate presence is not to claim a privileged homogeneous position but rather a rejection of symbolic annihilation and the ghettoization of our experiences where we are victimized, trivialized and stereotyped (Tuchman, 2000; Valdivia, 2002). It is a call for our work to be reckoned with, taken seriously, appreciated and given a legitimate position in knowledge production (Hooks, 1989: 48). Although there is a positive shift in the right direction, the criticism against feminism as primarily representing the desires of White, middle-class Western women is still as true today as it was in the 1960s, when Friedan (1963, 2010) first published *The Feminine Mystique.* Friedan was primarily concerned with issues relevant to White women with class privilege and focused on their challenges as a representation of "global sisterhood" (Brah & Phoenix, 2004). Hooks however magnifies the failure of such feminist discourse to adequately examine the "interlocking webs of oppression" such as racism, classism, imperialism and other forms of subjugation in establishing a broader feminist movement (Biana, 2020). These interlocking webs of oppression are

conceptualised by Kimberle Crenshaw (1989) as intersectionality.

Crenshaw uses the term "intersectionality" to emphasise the complex and multidimensional components of Black women's experiences and how such experiences are theoretically erased or distorted in social discourse. She argues that there cannot be an adequate analysis of the manner in which Black women are subordinated without taking the intersection of race, class and gender into account. Phoenix and Pattynama (2006: 187) equally see intersectionality as a "handy catchall phrase that aims to make visible the multiple positioning that constitutes everyday life and the power relations that are central to it." This level of "multiple positioning" among other things, I suppose, is what Adichie (2009) calls for in her presentation on "*The Danger of a Single Story*". Adichie, an African (Nigerian) feminist, talked about her early exposure to Western literature, and how the all-White characters in those books made her oblivious of the possibility of the existence of people like herself in literature—the danger of a single story. More disturbing is not the absence of many Black bodies in the British classrooms but the calculated omission of their histories from academic discourse. As Bernal (2002: 106) puts it, "Although students of colour are holders and creators of knowledge, they often feel as if their histories, experiences, cultures, and languages are devalued, misinterpreted, or omitted within formal educational settings".

To re-claim legitimacy and in an attempt to dispel false perceptions, Black women are stepping in to deconstruct the long-standing racist and sexist ideologies prevalent in Western discourse (Gammage & Alameen-Shavers, 2019). Rejecting "feminism" as a term that adequately accounts for the experiences of African women, Hudson-Weems (1993, 2019) argues that Black feminism and/or African feminism were adopted for want of better frameworks to accurately reflect the realities and struggles of African women. Hudson-Weems sees feminism as a concept that denies the authenticity of the Africana woman and Black/African feminism as equally deficient in capturing the complexities of their experiences, hence her use of the term "Africana womanism". Building on Hudson-Weems Africana womanist theorization of Black womanhood, Dove (1998) emphasizes culture as a tool of analysis for understanding the nature of African women's experiences. Moreover, Patricia Hill Collins (2002) in her book, *Black Feminist thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment,* said that in her struggle to regain her voice, she places Black women's experiences and ideas at the center of analysis. These Afrocentric perspectives on the theorization of Black women is a move to challenge the marginality of African women and a need to re-write the distorted representation of Black womanhood.

This call is to 'see from other eyes'; to address the normative and myopic construction and consumption of knowledge (Acuff, 2018; Collins, 2016). The call has birthed recent protests, campaigns and decolonial student activism to address the narrow-mindedness of university courses. For example, the campaign led by students from University College London, "Why is My Curriculum White?" (Peters, 2015) and the "#Rhodes Must Fall" movement which began at the University of Cape Town and other campuses in South Africa, and then to Oxford University in the UK (Arday & Mirza, 2018; Chaudhuri, 2016). These protests have a singular agenda—to decolonise the Western curriculum. It is a call to examine our assumptions about knowledge production and interrogate the "fundamental reconsideration of who is teaching, what the subject matter is and how it's being taught" (Muldoon, 2019). It is about challenging the existing gendered and structural biases in the broader system and particularly to critique the Eurocentric curriculum. For Black women, it is refusing to be seen only through the eyes of men and White women, where we are presented only how we are permitted to appear (Mirza, 1997). It is reconciling the objectivity of our learning process and the subjectivity of our lived experiences (Collins, 2002). Addressing the "outsider-within" position to which we are relegated in mainstream academic discourse, where claim for full membership is Whiteness for feminist thoughts and maleness for Black discourse (ibid).

7. Decolonial feminism and the relevance of inclusion (in a joint voice)

In our respective countries, pursuing a doctorate is associated with a higher notion of social and economic status particularly when the degree is granted from a leading Western institution. We therefore felt a great sense of empowerment in undertaking the decision to earn the degree from the U.K. However, such notions of empowerment and confidence were soon to be challenged upon enrollment and at the start of the academic journey. We came to terms with the contrast between our imagined perception of Western academia as the "epi-centre" of knowledge and the high level of chauvinism embedded in British higher institutions. Our experiences of prejudice weighed heavily on how we came to perceive ourselves; the power dynamics were soon visible: two young women and mothers from the Global South, with a non Western background, and from ethnic minorities in an institution from the Global North in a city in North Yorkshire with a homogeneous society of predominantly White British citizens. We soon realised the implications of our positionality. At times, we felt vulnerable, and at others challenged. These feelings were mainly triggered by the way class discussions tend to focus on a monolithic image of women from the Global South as victims of gender based violence, living in dire circumstances. Nonetheless, these representations have challenged us to think differently of our new acquired status. Despite feeling debilitated at first, particularly in the beginning of our academic journey, we did not lose sight of our new positionalities as producers of knowledge. We thus reject any discourse that reduces us to the "uncivilized", and unwanted other". Through this paper and as feminist scholars, we engage in the joyful process of evaluating academic discourse and endless moments of self-reflection.

Decolonization is a laudable item on the agenda of Arab and Black feminist scholars; it is however, a very complex concept and could mean different things in different contexts. It goes beyond a tokenistic representation of a BAME population that ignores the systemic inequalities and its effect. It is on this premise that we embrace decolonial feminism, to address the coloniality of gender and its relationship with the capitalist world system of power (Lugones, 2010). Although we are aware of Lugones' linguistic critique of intersectionality (Velez, 2019), we argue that there is a deep coalition between decolonial feminism and intersectionality. As captured by Velez (2019: 400):

> Both traditions introduce important questions—the "intersectionality" question and the "coloniality" question—that open up new lines of investigation into categories that have held a central place in feminist theorizing, especially the category "Woman." Intersectionality allows us to recognize and contend with the erasure of women of colour as multiplicitous selves by the categorial logics of oppression. Decolonial feminism takes up this insight and points us to what undergirds these categorial logics, interrogating their source and imposition. That is to say, through a decolonial feminist frame we see not only the erasure of Black and brown women at the intersection of categories like race and gender but, further, that the oppressive racialization, gendering, and sexualization of those bodies is a colonial imposition.

Relying therefore on the intersectional analysis of race, class and gender, and raising the motion to overcome the coloniality of gender, we join other feminist scholars to construct and embrace new ways of producing and consuming knowledge.

We offer a critique of Western discourse in an attempt to depart from oppositional, colonial, hierarchal and dichotomous discourse to focus directly on what binds us as feminists of colour from regions abused by Western powers. To borrow from Lugones,

> Thus, it is not an affair of the past; it is a matter of the geopolitics of knowledge. It is a matter of how we produce a feminism that takes the global designs for racialized female and male energy and, erasing

> the colonial difference, takes that energy to be used toward the destruction of the worlds of meaning of our own possibilities. Our possibilities lie in communality rather than subordination; they do not lie in parity with our superior in the hierarchy that constitutes the coloniality (2010: 752).

The main purpose of this paper lies in being critical of how the intersection of race and gender impacts on the construction of women of colour through hegemonic Western discourse and to identify alternative tools for knowledge production from within non-Western societies and cultures. Hence, we invite all marginalized feminists, be they Muslim, Arab, Latina, and/or Black, to search for common issues, debates, struggles and challenges in the field of Women's Studies in the hopes of exploring new ways of constructing knowledge.

In the critique of particular Western narratives on Arab, Muslim and Black women, the idea is to be more critical of what and how Western knowledge ought to be consumed in non-Western contexts. This is not to denigrate Western knowledge as useless or less valuable; rather it is an attempt to expose particular narratives that have a tendency to augment the gap between White women and women of colour. This could "undo the apartheid that divides theoretical domains, and redirect academic desire away from its tendencies toward intellectual colonialism" (Sandoval, 2013: 71). Moreover, it is an attempt to be more critical of Western texts that tend to victimize women of colour and present us as helpless. More importantly, it is an invitation to embark on self-discovery journeys and exploring the possibility of producing and consuming knowledge of our own. Following the main argument of Lugones (2010), it is also an attempt to counter recent implicit Western colonial narratives and replace them with ones that focus on collaboration among us in the Global South and establish a transnational connection between our Arab, Muslim and Black Feminist sisters where the flow of information would facilitate future cooperation and agendas to promote and work on a counter narrative. This narrative would be one that establishes possible linkages between women of colour from around the world based on their shared past of colonialism and their experiences of white power domination.

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