

Unveiling Fascism Within the Classroom: A Struggle for Recognition and Change

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In a world where marginalized groups often find themselves relegated to the periphery, this essay contends that personal narratives disrupt the normative discourse and shed light on the oppressive undercurrents that persist within educational settings. It asserts the necessity of integrating these narratives into the academic dialogue to challenge and interrogate fascist remnants, thus promoting a more inclusive, equitable, and diverse educational landscape.

Keywords: personal narrative, marginalized groups, fascism

The Struggle for Recognition

Growing up in a nation marked by "third world" categorization within the standards of whiteness, I knew that education is power; a potent tool for liberation from the grip of fascist systems seeking to manipulate human existence. Paradoxically, my journey led me into academia, a realm that, despite its pursuit of knowledge, perpetuates fascist remnants through the lenses of white nationalism, racial purity, and suppression of civil liberties.

Hello! I'm a Muslim, Hijabi, Arab, Middle Eastern, Female, doctoral candidate within the United States, I navigate the educational landscape as both student and teacher, confronting the subtle cultivation of fascism within the classroom. In my upbringing, education embodied empowerment, a means to defy oppressive structures. Little did I anticipate that my pursuit of education would lead me to an environment nurturing the facets of fascism.

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The “disposable” status of minorities in Western society is inescapable, perpetuating marginalization and discrimination even within academia. A profound irony unfolds as the academy, a supposed bastion of enlightenment, becomes an agent of exclusion and bigotry. The very constructs that are supposed to uphold knowledge and fairness seem to be tainted by an undercurrent of prejudice and systemic bias. This systemic discrimination extends its grip even to my pursuit of education within the United States.

In this milieu, the struggle for recognition becomes all-encompassing. As a Muslim, Hijabi, Arab, Middle Eastern, Female, I strive to assert my identity and existence within a space that often seeks to diminish them. The process of education, which should be a liberating force, becomes an intricate web of hurdles and challenges. The pursuit of knowledge, far from being a straightforward path, becomes a journey marked by the need to navigate through the labyrinth of prejudices and preconceived notions.

Amidst this struggle, I am reminded of Abdi's (2014) insightful work on narrative, where she astutely observes that diverse perspectives are often embraced only when it's convenient, typically in a non-threatening manner. Furthermore, she highlights that those oppressive narratives, once recognized, aren't usually formed spontaneously; instead, they are frequently shaped by systemic forces and interconnected barriers deliberately designed to perpetuate them. Abdi's analysis emphasizes the importance of crafting one's identity within their cultural context as a means to enable individuals to establish their place in the world. These identities can serve as a reassuring resource for stabilizing both individual and collective subjectivities. Therefore, it is important to include narratives from marginalized groups to trouble the hegemonic narratives that organize higher education.

This struggle for recognition echoes not only in my personal journey but also in the experiences of countless peers who, like me, find themselves marginalized and relegated to the periphery. The classroom, which should ideally be a space for the exchange of ideas and the celebration of diversity, often transforms into a battleground where the norms of the majority dictate the discourse, while alternative narratives are suppressed.

“I'm proud of you Dolphins who live among sharks”.

“Thank you for the sharp messages writ in your scars. The bite marks you wear as you demand back your birthright”.

(Gumbs, 2021, P.76)

Language as a Tool of Control

Because of who I am, I have diligently pursued the fulfillment of the demanding "credential requirements" to attain the status of a doctoral student. These prerequisites encompass achieving commendable scores on standardized international English proficiency tests. Successfully gaining admission into a Ph.D. program, I found myself confronted with an unexpected twist: the demand to undergo a "locally" administered assessment. This assessment purportedly determined my qualification to study and instruct in English within the institution.

In the face of this scenario, a question lingers: Does this cycle of scrutiny ever cease? As fate would have it, I managed to navigate this challenge and passed the test. However, my triumph is entwined with the narratives of other equally accomplished students who face the consequences of not meeting this arbitrary threshold. Irony drips from the situation, as these students are compelled to embark on English courses while simultaneously fulfilling their roles as diligent doctoral candidates — engaging in classroom discussions and crafting research papers, all in English.

These systemic obstructions illuminate the presence of embedded fascism within academia. Irrespective of meeting stringent entry requisites, my stature as an English-proficient doctoral candidate was tested through localized evaluations. This imposition, a shared experience among numerous deserving peers, prompts us to scrutinize the very essence of academic fairness. The enforcement of linguistic benchmarks under the pretext of evaluation mirrors the very essence of fascism's dominion over channels of expression and communication.

In this environment, the language that serves as a medium for knowledge transfer becomes an instrument of control, echoing the facets of fascism that manipulate and regulate the narrative. The imposition of linguistic assessments within academia parallels the control mechanisms characteristic of fascism, subverting the autonomy of academic expression. Just as oppressive regimes dictate the acceptable discourse, these localized language assessments reiterate the hierarchical power dynamic and imposition of conformity that is emblematic of fascist practices.

Identity and Cultural Erasure

At the core of the system's pervasive intolerance lies a disregard that extends far beyond linguistic confines, infiltrating the very fabric of cultural and religious

identities. It is an assumption, unspoken yet palpable—one that disregards the multilayered dimensions of an international educator—distinct culture, language, religious rituals, and dietary considerations. The mere resonance of prayer times seems a trivial expectation, and school retreats continue to remain oblivious to religious dietary restrictions. This disquieting insensitivity, however, is not confined to extracurricular spaces—it infiltrates the very heart of the educational experience: the classroom. Here, the narrative of cultural erasure takes shape, meticulously crafted in the theater of daily discourse. This is not a haphazard occurrence but a calculated cultural performance emanating from the scaffolds of the prevailing hegemonic power structure. This unsettling portrayal underscores a deeper truth, one that speaks to the intricate web of cultural relations that sustains this form of intolerance. I find myself asking the same question as Ghabra (2015): “What is the fate of women of color in the midst of a hegemonic world in which oppression will continue to sustain itself? (p. 1).”

In a seemingly innocuous exchange with my peers, I voiced my "hopes" for a slight adjustment to my teaching schedule, rooted in my religious beliefs. To my surprise, the response I received was laced with Islamophobia—a response implying that accommodating my needs would be deemed "unfair" to those not of my faith. This raises an important question: What emboldens my peers to make such Islamophobic remarks unless they hold a trust in the system's support for their sentiments? This blatant display of cultural bias, I contend, is a product of intersecting hegemonic cultural relations. It raises a pivotal query: Would these same biases be directed towards Muslim men or U.S.-born Muslim women?

Within the contours of an imaginary world where every individual's worth is embraced and respected, I, as the only Muslim in a given space, would be recognized as an integral part of the system. Regrettably, the so-called "real world" starkly contrasts this utopian vision. Fascist systems persistently negate my very existence, either through rigid regulations or the burgeoning authoritarianism upheld by those in positions of power. This perpetual testing of my limits thrusts me into situations where I must repeatedly defend my right to belong—to assert that I am deserving of my place. My struggle, like that of many others, is compounded by the realization that any support we receive from the system is rooted in its generosity, not in a recognition of our inherent rights.

On what should have been an ordinary day of intellectual discourse, I entered the classroom ready to contribute—bringing with me my complete identity, experiences, and reflections. However, instead of being met with appreciation, I encountered discrimination. My professor, and a guest scholar (both white),

allowed the projection of offensive images that targeted my Muslim identity, all without any prior warning. These images, featuring topless white women perpetuating racism against Islam and Hijabi women, lingered on the classroom screen, transforming the learning space into one tainted by toxicity and discomfort. It became apparent that the offense extended beyond me, impacting many of my peers who also felt the sting. A pivotal divergence emerged: My peers found the fortitude to voice their concerns, while I was left grappling with an unexpected, unjust truncation of my voice. This shared phenomenon, however, transcends individual plight to birth a collective terrain—a political space where muted voices harmonize in the resonance of marginalization. It is within this realm that the tendrils of silencing extend, transcending specific demographics to coalesce into an amalgamation of shared disenfranchisement.

The convergence of identity and cultural erasure continues to shape my academic journey—a journey that transcends my individual experience to reflect the broader struggles of marginalized communities striving for equality within the classroom. Amidst this turbulence, our resilience emerges as a beacon of hope. Through collective resistance, we strive to break the chains of fascism, dismantle systemic barriers, and create an educational environment that reverberates with diversity, critical thought, and justice.

Cultivating Change Through Resistance and Empowerment

Preserving my identity and growing to be a scholar in the academy, the educational realm presents a dual reality: one of both student and teacher. This duality casts a revealing light on a system that often turns a blind eye to its entrenched biases. The discomfort I, and others like me, experience serves as a vivid backdrop against which the inherent resistance within us takes center stage. Through our mere presence challenging the rigid mold the system strives to impose upon us, we find that resistance is not a solitary act but a collective force, one that is strengthened by connecting with others (Ghabra, 2015) who share our struggle and our determination to break free from these constraints. In this discomfort, we find our strength—a strength that resonates as a clarion call to the system, underscoring the dissonance between its purported mission of inclusivity and the palpable realities of its exclusionary mechanisms.

Resilient Pedagogical Pathways: Shaping the Future

Amidst the pervasive tendrils of systemic fascism, educators bear the mantle of transformation. In this era of change, pedagogical practices emerge as our collective retort. By embracing the tenets of critical race theory, cultivating critical thinking, and nurturing avenues for social justice engagement within the educational fabric, educators assume a transformative role. This pedagogical approach engenders a climate of awareness, empathy, and constructive dialogue. It establishes the bedrock upon which an empowered generation can rise—a generation primed to challenge the oppressive structures that have lingered for far too long.

Uniting in Collective Empowerment: The Path to Change

The journey toward dismantling fascism's foothold within academia is not one embarked upon alone. The imperative lies in a united front—a chorus of voices that refuse to be silenced. This collective endeavor begins with recognizing the shared struggles (Ghabra, 2015) that traverse diverse identities. It is within this recognition that the seeds of change take root. The convergence of intersecting oppressions, including the specter of xenophobia, serves as an aperture to mutual understanding. Through understanding, a tapestry of shared experiences is woven, nurturing a sense of collective empowerment. The desire for change kindles, fueled by the flames of solidarity—a solidarity that charts a course toward transformation, justice, and the reclamation of a genuinely inclusive educational landscape.

Concluding Thoughts

The exploration of fascism's insidious cultivation within the educational domain unravels a disconcerting truth—an environment ostensibly dedicated to enlightenment coexists with underlying biases and systemic prejudices. This paradox, however, harbors a prospect for profound change. Embracing roles as educators, learners, and conscientious thinkers, we are summoned to confront the encroaching tide of fascism, asserting our entitlement to acknowledgment, dignity, and an impartial education. By interweaving critical frameworks into the fabric of pedagogical practices, we possess the capacity to challenge oppressive paradigms and cultivate a cohort of minds primed to dismantle the very systems that once sought to stifle them. In embracing our identities and harnessing our inherent resilience,

we materialize as not just catalysts for change, but as living testaments to the immense potency of diversity within the educational milieu.

In this narrative, I stake my claim as a Muslim, Hijabi, Arab, Middle Eastern, Female, a confluence of identities that resonate within the diverse tapestry of academia. As a bilingual scholar, both a bearer and generator of knowledge, I remain unwaveringly anchored to the facets that constitute my unique being—my steadfast resistance against erasure.

This collective tale underscores a persistent truth—the call to action against fascism within academia. Armed with resilience, fortified by collective recognition, we are poised at the precipice of change, ready to carve out an educational landscape that transcends imposed barriers. Through solidarity and assertiveness, we stand as living monuments to the power of diversity in shaping an enlightened tomorrow.

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