Negotiated voices: Reflections on educational experiences and identity by two transnational migrant women

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, as two transnational migrant women of colour we explore both privilege and disempowerment as afforded us by our education, laden with postcolonial influences and reinscribed patriarchal limits. We also examine our sense of vulnerability and 'voicelessness' as migrants in defining our positionalities and gendered identities within a transnational space. Within the conjunctures in our stories we analyse the impacts of post-colonialism, education, gender, patriarchy, identity discourses and transnationality. Using evocative auto-ethnography through 'intimate landscapes' of self-confession we focus on intergenerational female relationships, in particular with our mothers. Through socio-cultural, postcolonial and transnational feminist lenses we sub-stantiate our arguments on the denial of 'voice,' irrespective of educational achievements. Our stories contribute to discourses surrounding the ambiguities around contested and intersecting notions of education, gender, social and cultural differences and identities within the spaces of postcolonial histories and transnationalism.

Introduction

In this paper, as two migrant women, we use an autoethnographic approach to reflect upon our individual educational experiences, shedding light on the denial of 'voice' and positioning ourselves within a transnational space in Australia. We explore the complex relations between educational experiences in our countries of birth imbued with postcolonial influences relating to social class, access and equity to education, our migration experiences and "education as a mobility providing tool" (Moldenhawer, 2005, p. 52). We argue that our edu-cation has been marked by our postcolonial heritages, intergenerational conflicts and patriarchal discourses. Although we agree that education has brought empowerment, privilege and entitlement, we contend that we simultaneously experience feelings of disempowerment. Our stories discuss education's ability to open up avenues for exploring the multi-plicity of transnational experiences, relations and hybrid identities.

The postcolonial lens helps describe the effects of social mobility on people from former colonies and analyse the consequences of power, domination, economic privilege, political resistance and the emergence of postcolonial voices (Fox, 2004; Hickling-Hudson, Matthews, & Woods, 2004; Spivak, 1990). As postcolonial migrant women, we at-tempt "to reclaim the meaning of education, reinstating it as a radical site of resistance and refutation" (Mirza, 2006, p. 137). In spite of re-siding in a transnational space, we still perceive ourselves as speaking

from disempowered positions as we feel our discourses are deemed peripheral to the host culture. Rubenfeld and Chua (2014) highlight these co-existing feelings of privilege and powerlessness as often ex-perienced by educated ethnic migrants to Western nations. We there-fore query the authority, authenticity and positionality within our transnational voices using the opportunity afforded us by education. In doing so, we find ourselves grappling with these intrinsic questions:

- Our education is implicitly rooted within postcolonial influences and shaped by social class, patriarchy, access and equity enhancing our sense of privilege and entitlement. So why do we still consider that our education denies us a voice?
- As transnational women, how do we reconcile our transnational selves with the tensions and conflicts we perceive in negotiating our hybrid identities?

The above questions frame a reflexive analysis engaging us with a set of theories to help elucidate our analysis. We scaffold our analysis using frameworks from postcolonial and transnational feminism, along with cultural and gender studies. This provides a broad lens encom-passing the different socio-cultural perspectives shaping the sub-jectivities and positionalities vis à vis education which informs our past and current positioning.

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Our transnational migrant voices as women of colour

As transnational migrant women we use our voices and positions from the centre (Hooks, 1990; Mirza & Joseph, 2010) in deploying the language of Whiteness. But originating from spaces which rendered us voiceless, we fear the possibility of remaining unheard and vulnerable within the host country. Intergenerationally we have never been entrusted with the transmission of feminine freedoms (Giannessi, 2004). An inherent sense of disempowerment drives us to tell our stories, situating our thinking and positionalities while seeking a sense of agency. We argue that our stories encode a clear message, namely, that there are other ways to define the binaries within our marginalised voices to be heard. In doing so, we heed Spivak (1988) and as postcolonial feminist scholars "plot a history" (p. 297) donning a transnational lens.

The conjunctures that inform and shape our narratives are driven by "historical, social, political, economic and ideological contradictions" (Hall & Massey, 2010, p. 57) located within discourses on post-colonialism, patriarchy, global mobility and transnationalism. Dimitriadis and McCarthy (2001) suggest "the work of the postcolonial imagination subverts extant power relations, questions authority and destabilises received traditions of identity"(p. 10). Therefore, post-colonial writing attempts to shift the dominant ways in which the relations between Western and non-Western people and their worlds are viewed (Young, 2003). Bhambra (2007) asserts that postcolonial approaches work to challenge dominant narratives while allocating a voice to the hitherto voiceless within history and society, whereby the experiences of non-European 'others' have been rendered invisible in analytical frameworks of sociology. We consider our transnational voices as crucial in understanding postcolonial experiences and the politics of the transnational migrant women (Spivak, 1988; Young, 2003). Our narratives highlight the fact that the personal is indeed political (Hanisch, 2009), but instead of collective solutions, we merely seek to 'voice' the truth behind our negotiated identities.

While doing so, we find ourselves resisting the notion of being situated in a postcolonial trajectory to chart stories from past to present (Gilbert & Tompkins, 1996). Instead, we engage in the process of quilting our stories to "illuminate other ways of knowing" (Mirza, 2009, p. 138) about gendered and racialised discourses with "powerful meaning for women across cultures and time" (Mirza & Joseph, 2010, p. 2). There are numerous unheard stories of women of colour from different ethnic or religious origins (Mirza, 1997) and these are important in making such voices heard and in countering "the silent consuming whiteness of normative legitimated knowledge and theory" (Mirza & Joseph, 2010, p. 2). Mirza's (2006) work along with others (Keddie, 2011; Passerini, Lyon, Capussotti, & Laliotou, 2010; Popova, 2016; Subreenduth & Jeong-eun, 2010) highlights the wider structural forces that depress the aspirations of women of colour.

Problematizing a rationale around theoretical discourses

Sifting through our stories, it was difficult to structure a narrowly specific theoretical framework to inform both narratives with their varying perspectives and positionalities. Given the depth of our narratives and the fact that the material itself has the power to pull us into a quagmire of theoretical frameworks, our biggest challenge has been to scaffold a cogent discussion based on certain interlinked theories. This also involved being mindful of the postcolonial notion that categorisation of South Asian women is problematic in itself (Puwar & Raghuram, 2003).

Given the commonalities and differences in the structure of our narratives, we draw upon Mirza's notion of polyvocality to strengthen our "bi-vocal presence" (Mirza & Joseph, 2010, p. 3). The politics of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991; Patil, 2013; Yuval-Davis, 2006) enables female scholars of colour to hold on to their strategic multiplicity yet gives them an opportunity to celebrate 'differences' (polyvocality) within a "conscious construction of sameness" (Mirza & Joseph, 2010,

p. 3). Meanwhile Lather (2008, 2013) claims that voice, authenticity and empathy can be grounds for research and this informs our methodology around evocative autoethnography. We have however kept in mind the risks of romancing ourselves as speaking subjects and indulging in selective appropriation (Atkinson & Silverman, 1997; Hargreaves, 1996)

Research methodology - evocative autoethnography

We craft our inquiry using an evocative auto-ethnographic stance (Bochner & Ellis, 2016), basing our narratives on self-confessions drawn from 'intimate landscapes of intergenerational silences' and challenging the cultural cults of supportive motherhood. Critical autoethnographers invest in 'the politics of positionality' (Madison, 2012) and 'evocative auto ethnography' as a methodology emphasises how to connect, intellectually and emotionally to the lives of readers through the challenging process of representing lived experiences (Bochner & Ellis, 2016). Our stories examine the cartographies around "the personal and its relationship to culture" (Ellis, 2004, p. 37) as we use our socio-historical, postcolonial and gendered cultural experiences to unpack discourses from our individual experiences and shared standpoints.

We as researchers take a unique stand in using 'intimate self-confessions' within evocative autoethnographic accounts of our lived experiences and those of our families. In doing so we run the risk of creating misunderstandings and compromising certain relationships. Yet, we do so to enhance our understanding of experiences through systematic sociological introspections and emotional recall (Ellis, 1997, 1999). While there are "ethical and methodological questions to consider" (Lee, 2006, p. 22) in using this methodology, we believe it is imperative to authenticate our voices.

(Author's 1) narrative

> "There's really no such thing as the 'voiceless.' There are only the deliberately silenced, or the preferably unheard."
>
> Arundhati Roy (2004)

A gendered identity matrix often evokes dimensions of transnational feminism (Mohanty, 2003), gender inequality, particular subjectivities, politics of inclusion and the multiple forms of 'intersectionality' for third world women of colour (Carastathis, 2014; Crenshaw, 1991, 2016; Fernandes, 2013; McCall, 2005; Patil, 2013; Yuval-Davis, 2006). Intersectionality as contended by Crenshaw (2016) "is not primarily about having multiple identities; it is more about how structures make certain identities the consequences of the vehicle for vulnerability." My ethnographic account refers to 'lived' experiences from education and migration focusing on the vulnerability in defining positionalities and identities through both a sense of privilege and disempowerment as a woman of colour. These perceptions are framed by and along the lines of postcolonial and diasporic influences, gender, patriarchal hegemony, an intergenerational shift in access to education and my ambivalences in negotiating a transnational identity. Although I now live and work in Australia, I stress on a denial of 'voice' in discussing inherent subjectivities encompassing my multiple gendered roles with "ongoing emotional struggles" (Elliott & Lemert, 2006, p. 72) in particular with my mother. With the mutual entanglements of these dimensions, I discuss how moving towards negotiating a 'fluid social identity' (Bradatan, Popan, & Melton, 2010) in a transnational space is transgressive, disquieting and often with dissonance in being 'voiceless' (Giannessi, 2004).

Upbringing and intergenerational access to education - a transnational journey

I was born and raised in Mauritius, a former British and French colony with postcolonial legacies of Eurocentric education systems. As a