We-Relation: Narratives of Emergence, Education and Resistance

Momina A. Khan  
*Independent Scholar*, mak234@usask.ca

Irteqa A. Khan  
*York University*, irteqak@yorku.ca

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Abstract
The educational landscape and curriculum are shifting tremendously as educators attempt to grapple with systemic and global issues, growing divisions, humanitarian crises, institutional and political violence, racial and religious injustices, and righteous and dangerous resistance which are surfacing during these intense times brought forth by the COVID-19 pandemic. Presently, educators face many frustrations and disappointments whereby working to create needed change becomes inevitable. In this position paper Momina and Irteqa as mother and daughter, Canadian Muslim women of South Asian ethnic decent, writers, poets, and critical scholars, share the truth of our knowing as an alternative way of knowing and initiating dialogue. By breaking the silence on oppressive systems and ideologies and reimagining and renegotiating curriculum, pedagogy, histories, and epistemologies from racialized perspectives we can transcend our collective suffering.

Keywords
women of colour, marginalization, alternative knowing, renegotiating curriculum, inclusivity
Bodies in Context

We begin with a brief description of who we are and how our positionalities as racialized Canadians shape our identity, lived experience, and research. Momina and Irteqa are Canadian Muslim women of South Asian decent who immigrated to Canada in the year 2000. As mother and daughter, writers, critical scholars, and poets, much of our work as women of color has emerged from our lived experiences and encounters with educational institutions and curriculum. Our personal lived experiences are situated in the tension-filled spaces of curriculum, pedagogy, and epistemology in which possibilities of counter narratives, renegotiation, and the sharing of difficult knowledges have been assimilated by the hegemonization of Eurocentric knowledge systems (Douglas, Purton, Bascuñán, 2021).

A silent epiphany

A face, a race, a color,  
a culture, a language, a religion  
an existence emerges  
then borders crossed  
now living in between  
mystified by plurality, multiplicity, diversity  
each moment held in conflicting spaces  
to get lost or to be found forever  
neither compartmentalized nor split into halves  
shifting from a static state to fluid consciousness  
endeavoring to throw certainty to the wind  
attempting to disturb the convenient truths  
merging boundaries, a new way of seeing things  
willful discourse and a quest for objectivity  
peeling off my layered self  
making meaning of my nested experiences  
mindfulness of being different  
dismantling ethnocentrism piece by piece  
unity, cohesion, and solidarity streamline  
reborn not from a tormented soul or a utopian dream  
freedom emanates from the soul’s periphery  
a hybrid identity  
born from a silent epiphany

(Khan, 2018, p.15-16)

Introduction

The educational landscape and curriculum are shifting tremendously as educators attempt to grapple with systemic and global issues, growing divisions, humanitarian crises, institutional and political violence, racial and religious injustices, and various forms of resistance which are
surfacing during these intense times brought forth by the COVID-19 pandemic. Presently, educators face many frustrations and disappointments whereby working to create needed change becomes inevitable. We share the truth of our knowing and our poetry as an alternative way of knowing and initiating dialogue for reimagining creative contributions, histories, pedagogy, and epistemologies from racialized perspectives in the hope of transcending our collective suffering. It is by sifting through the self(ves) in search of an authentic inner voice that women come to the basic insights of constructivist thought whereby all knowledge is constructed, and the knower is an intimate part of the known (Belenky et al., 1986).

A narrative inquirer enters this matrix of knowing in the midst of life stories to understand the particular characteristics of the human experience. Narrative inquiry is stories lived and told and a way of understanding human experience layered in complexity, patterns, narrative threads, tensions, situations, and interactions. (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000). As narrative inquirers, we acknowledge that who we are and what we know is because of our diverse life experiences, roles, and positionalities. We have come to know that we are citizens of a country where white privilege, white supremacy, hegemony, and Eurocentric knowledge shape the core of institutional culture, epistemology, pedagogy, curricula, and power relations. Although scholars, educators, and teachers have resisted injustice through breaking the silence on oppressive systems and ideologies, the resulting work (i.e., critical perspectives on class, race, gender, ecocriticism, postcolonial studies, disability studies and epistemological, pedagogical, and ontological diversity still have not fully given equal rights and voice to the voiceless (Corrigan, 2011) despite them voicing their pain and victimization loudly at this time.

Who are WE?

we are humans yet ferocious beings
we are loving yet number one back stabbers
we are lineages yet worst enemies
we are benevolent yet finest malevolent characters
we are civilized yet unkind and cruel
we are kind lovers yet biggest haters
we are open-minded yet mightiest bigots
we are alive yet dead souls

Failing to Die before Death

we have big mouths and small ears
we have large heads and narrow minds
we have seeing eyes and blind vision
we have long arms and short reach
we have long legs and small leaps
we have exceptional minds and dominant ideologies
we have significant words and unfiltered emotions
we have fantastic voices and rotten expressions
We have pulsating hearts and ceased empathy
We have brilliant minds and canned compassion
Aching and still Faking

We are spotlights who left themselves in the dark screaming for escape. We are creators who failed to chisel art, justice and peace to facilitate raw, honest and humble emotions to see beauty that exists in every drop, speck and sentient and non sentient beings. We are conscious beings who failed to raise our mindfulness to provoke a cathartic emotional release for repair, renewal and relief. We are humans who forgot to exist in a ‘we- relation’ where “our willingness to become undone in relation to others constitutes our chance of becoming human” (Butler, 2005, p. 136) . We are freedom fans yet failed to develop deep consciousness necessary for living a moral life. We are wanderers who failed to take a wide-awake walk in the desert of heat to search for shade, shelter, and assembly. We are spiritual beings who failed to free our thriving souls for liberation from our caged bodies while being alive.

Blistering and Blooming

As human beings our survival and renewal hinges on audacious acceptance that our inadequate attempts magnify our failures and each repeated failure causes death to our lineage, history, knowledge, existence, collectivism, and humanity. Existence without wakefulness, conscious endeavor, contemplation, and creative action halts the movement of our physical, social, psychological, emotional, intellectual and spiritual flight. Existence without deep respect for the dignity of human beings and human rights fail to affect real action and change. And finally, existence without manifestation and unification of knowledge, art, peace, power, and justice, activates irreversible body, mind, heart and soul cessation. Our promise, passion, hope, efforts and cravings for compassion, reciprocity, and grace, must never die if we desire to fully live prior to the final death.

Our Story: We have all been marinated in Colonialism and Eurocentrism

Momina: As a racialized mother, I am a part of a colonial system in which my voice is censored and silenced, and my body recycles colonial attitudes, approaches, pedagogies and practices instead of resisting them and asking unsettling questions. We have all been marinated in colonialism and Eurocentrism which reflect inaccurate and incomplete depictions of Canada’s relationship with Indigenous peoples (Battiste, 2005; Douglas, Purton, & Bascuñán, 2021). We are too afraid to confront exclusionary criteria and challenge dehumanizing policies and practices. My children were taught history/social studies through a Eurocentric lens and only knew the stories told to them at school, while at home we revised those same stories together so that their understanding of patriotism, belongingness, and nationhood were not jeopardized. It was too risky of an action to expose my Brown children who were growing up on White land among White people studying a White curriculum to the critical realities of oppression and discrimination. Despite immigrating from a former British colony like Pakistan and being a colonial subject myself, it was a very difficult ordeal to imagine revealing such hard stuff to my children so early. The truth of my knowing was masked by the deep and dark imprints of imperialism, ongoing colonialism, and the resulting hopes and fantasies of immigration, considering Canada a savior state for immigrants from impoverished countries (Khan and Pushor, 2022, in press).
Momina: When Irteqa grew up and became a university student, we began having critical conversations at home about the pervasiveness of mass media and global atrocities as it had become unavoidable by that time. One day she brought up some thoughts and questions she had regarding her experiences with curriculum in elementary and high school, and in so doing, opened a Pandora’s Box. I felt a strange sense of guilt and numbness in that moment, that I had unconsciously perpetuated that very oppression, so much so that my children became a part of it as oppressors and the oppressed because I was not unapologetically doing what I should have been— questioning and resisting. Schools are sociopolitical terrains therefore students must be brought into the fold of an understanding of the linkages between historical violence and current events so that they have the power to negotiate social justice and change in all forms. How often do educators in schools acknowledge the ways in which curriculum is failing to create safe negotiable spaces for silenced and suppressed histories?

A Perfect Pause

wandering into wonder
no longer seeking answers
because answers are an untruth
can truth be ultimate?
where mouths leak opinions
every eye is prophetic
and every voice is an argument
existence trapped in tiny bodies
stuck in between hollow spaces
head and heart, body, and soul
an entreaty to an enchanted forest
listen to the journey you are in
to be unafraid in a deep place
to be brave in a bold space
in a skirmish between
your beauty and your beast
knowledge aching to reach the truth
while truth claws and carves to bare itself
creation and recreation dance performatively
relationally, reciprocally, interdependently
can truth and humans exist together?
mind and mouth, head and heart, body and soul
this passionate struggle, redeeming
wisdom in unseen, unknowing, unlearning
putting pieces together, the body sacrosanct
are we together with ourselves?
within our own self(ves)
do we see what we do?
do we do what we say?
do we touch what we know?
do we know how we act?
Irteqa: historically, “alternative” approaches to research and teaching, such as Indigenous knowledges and ways of knowing, have been devalued because they deviate from dominant capitalist, neocolonial, and Eurocentric modes of study and analysis. This erasure continues to pervade both the educational landscape and curriculum today through the privileging of narrow Western epistemological traditions that attempt to whitewash the deeply Indigenous character of Indigenous teaching paradigms and pedagogies. Dominant paradigms form the core of Eurocentric institutions and serve to stifle epistemological diversity by constraining the parameters of what constitutes curriculum, how it is designed, disseminated, and taught. In the case of the historical relationship between the Canadian state and Indigenous peoples, one example of this applies to what the Indigenous scholar Taiaiake Alfred indicates is the violence of the “cooperative venture” myth. What this means is that Canadians grow up being taught that the history of their country is a story of the “cooperative venture” between people who came from elsewhere to make a “better life” and those who were already here, and that the Canadian state has always acted with peaceful “good intentions” toward Indigenous populations by trying to fix the “Indian problem.” (Alfred, 2010, p. ix) This includes racialized settlers who are unwittingly folded into and become purveyors of an ethos that insists their new country is a “friendly neighbour” to its BIPOC communities while actively concealing the truth—the Canadian state was built upon a brutal legacy of dispossession, occupation, assimilation, and genocide. Thus, oppressive systems and ideologies are recreated across time, space, and curriculum in order to reinforce colonial norms, histories, and epistemologies.

Noble “navigators” and “explorers”

Irteqa: As a child, I vividly remember some of the class activities and lessons I was taught during social studies (which was my favorite subject) when I was a grade five student. Indeed, we not only covered units on the discovery of the “New World,” the history of the Hudson’s Bay Company, and the “founding” of Canada, but also on the legacies left behind by European “explorers” like Christopher Columbus, Samuel de Champlain, Jacques Cartier, Henry Hudson, John Cabot, and Ferdinand Magellan among others. Through each lesson on how these men bravely set sail to “map” mysterious North American terrains and bodies of water, trade with and bring “technological advancements” to local populations who upon first contact—“happily” greeted them, share their Christian faith and European culture, and establish permanent “settlements” for communal growth and prosperity, I felt impressed with the extensive history of the country I had become a citizen of. However, to my detriment, this sterile and incomplete retelling of the “exploration” of Canada paved my approach towards Canadian history as a young student instead of the fact that these were not noble “navigators” or “explorers” who had founded Canada and aided in its growth, but merciless “colonizers and imperialists” who arrived on its shores to exploit and erase Indigenous peoples and their Lands. I only realized fully as I got older that the very structure of Canadian society, historical and contemporary, from its branches down to its deepest roots, was embedded in the “fundamental denial” of the human dignity and rights of Indigenous peoples. (Smith, 1991, P. 452)

This land is not your land nor is it mine
Similarly, in grade five and six my teachers would designate a period of free time during the day that would be dedicated to singing songs and learning instruments together as a class. I remember fondly learning a plethora of songs, one of which was a Canadianized version of Woody Guthrie’s famous folk song “This Land is Your Land” recorded by The Travellers in the late 1950s. The simplicity of the lyrics, which included, “this land is your land, this land is my land…from Bonavista to Vancouver Island, from the Arctic Circle to the Great Lake waters…this land was made for you and me” as well as the nostalgic longing and patriotism imbued within them were evocative. Once again, I was consumed by feelings of gratitude and joy without knowing the full extent of what I was being taught— the song was dressed as an ode to overcoming struggles, expressing gratitude, and the romantic sublime yet concealed an obvious truth—this land is not your land nor is it mine, it is and will always remain the ancestral Land of the First Peoples, that is, Indigenous peoples in Canada. To normalize the idea that “this land was made for you and me” in an educational landscape, whether through song or syllabi, is to suppress the need to deliberately confront the moral and ethical contours of colonial power relations and structures and their occupation of epistemology and curriculum.

In the face of epistemicide, Western scholars and educators must recognize the holistic nature and ceremonial nuances of Indigenous research practices and paradigms. Intrusion and obliteration must be met with protest and resistance, creation and celebration, and the pervasiveness of dominant narratives with the proliferation of counter narratives. Similarly, humanizing education and creating transparent dialogical spaces that prioritize justice, truth-telling, and accountability to equitably exchange, engage, and interact are vital. As a racialized settler I grapple with my guilt and unknowing as much as I make a conscious effort to educate myself, align with critical and anti-racist epistemologies and ontologies, and reflect on my role as a scholar and activist in acknowledging, amplifying, and acting towards the struggle for diversity within research and teaching. Furthermore, I understand that words must be accompanied by “concrete action” at all levels, at their core, must be radically “transformative.” (Alfred, 2010, p. X).

As a racialized woman and Brown settler I am consumed by guilt and seized by pain and shock while carrying the burden of being an unconscious enabler of injustices as I live through my own oppression. The guilt is deep, and the pain is enough to teach me to explore the relationship between guilt, responsibility, and action (Khan and Pushor, 2022, in press). In addition to my Brown settler guilt, as a mother, I am enveloped in the guilt of not pushing back against the masked histories being taught to my children at school, and instead perpetuating them at home. My unawareness, fear, and silence as an immigrant and Brown settler were the result of White racial supremacy, western civilizational superiority, and structural and historical racial injustices embedded in Canadian government policies, institutional oppression, and discriminatory practices. In an era of apology, how many more apologies are due to whom and by whom? Are the apologies I am making to my children as a mother for reproducing harms mine alone? Are they only my children and not the children of Canada as well?

Conclusion

Every human life starts in relation, and it is through relations that a human individual emerges (Noddings, 2012, p. 773). Our commitment to justice, equity and the development of a just and
democratic society informs not only our relation to others, but to ourselves wherein our core of “being” human is shaped. In a world of intersectionality, diversity, tension, and apology, all of us have a serious obligation to reflect on how our oppressed and privileged identities and knowledges intersect with each other and take form. Without exposing and challenging pre-set discourses, context complexities, assimilative pedagogies and power relations, we cannot stop reproducing power, privilege, and exclusion within our own classrooms and communities. Decentering the Eurocentric perspective, knowledge and practices and recentering BIPOC ways of knowing, being and belonging can help us all renegotiate our relationships in order to create harmony within difference. By challenging misuses of power, manipulations of truths, processes of marginalization, oppressive ideologies, and marginalized positionings, curriculum makers, educators and teachers can construct supplementary discourses of resistance and establish alternative perspectives of knowing and being worthy of inclusion.

a meeting place

i meet with my best self
when i journey within my(self)
when i stop seeing the seen
when i stop hearing the heard
when i stop knowing the known
when i stop assuming, judging,
suggesting, correcting, fixing
when i dissolve my old body
when i open my tightly closed fist
when i lose my self in self
compassion begins to fill in
the gaps, fragments
silences, surprises
the world within self
is all- embracing, universal
dripping in tranquility
sewn eyes ears mind heart soul
healing from within
i transcend beyond self
i reach the garden
of humanity

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