

February 2023

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Recommended Citation

Tsouroufli, Maria (2023) "Migrant Academic/Sister Outsider: Feminist Solidarity Unsettled and Intersectional Politics Interrogated," *Journal of International Women's Studies*: Vol. 25: Iss. 1, Article 2. Available at: <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol25/iss1/2>

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Migrant Academic/Sister Outsider: Feminist Solidarity Unsettled and Intersectional Politics Interrogated

By Maria Tsouroufli¹

Abstract

Feminist sisterhood has been heavily criticized by Black feminists and others as installing a false sense of equality among women and being overly ambitious in disrupting the models and boundaries of the neo-liberal university. This paper draws on the autobiographical account of a White-other, female European migrant academic in the United Kingdom to consider how intersectional disadvantage and privilege shapes feminist sisterhood with profound implications for academic identities, careers, and belonging in the internationalized university and the wider socio-political British context. I draw on my professional trajectory to demonstrate how othering and violence in the form of verbal abuse, microaggressions, misrecognitions, and xenophobic and racist performances of professional authority and superiority operate as dividing mechanisms among feminists within the context of institutional inequalities, color and class prejudice, and global hierarchies of North/South and East/West. I argue that the conditionality of Whiteness, coupled with the gendering, racialization, ethnicization and citizenship rights of European minorities within the pre/post Brexit context affect female migrant academics' sense of legitimacy, belonging, and solidarity. Moreover, unraveling hegemonic feminist subjectivities and the boundaries that are erected against female migrants can expose the racialized aggression and lack of feminist solidarity in neo-liberal British academia.

Keywords: Solidarity, Intersectionality, Migrants, Feminist sisterhood, Autobiography, Racism and Xenophobia, Higher Education, United Kingdom

Introduction

Globalization has led to a substantial increase in international mobility in many occupational fields, including the academic field. Highly skilled migrants are an important source of labor force growth in the knowledge-based economies of many parts of the world (Shirmohammadi, 2019). Yet, management has not paid sufficient attention to the discrimination experienced by highly skilled migrants and the implications for identities, organizations, and the economy (Zikic, 2016). Moreover, social inequalities have almost exclusively been treated as the terrain of low-skilled migration (Triandafylliadou & Isaakyan, 2015).

Feminist sisterhood has often been romanticized, despite criticisms from Black, transnational, and 'third world' feminists (Collins, 2000; Hernandez-Wolfe & Acevedo, 2020; Hundle et al., 2019) who have drawn attention to unequal relations among women and wider entrenched inequalities and hierarchies within higher education spaces. This paper is concerned with the interface between feminist solidarity, intersectional politics, academic migration, and internationalization of the market-driven university system of the United

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Kingdom. I explore the complexities of intersectional identity through a reflexive account of my academic career in the UK, while explicitly drawing from personal experiences of marginalization within White patriarchy, of gendered racism, and of religious discrimination in an attempt to unravel configurations of sisterhood among women. I treat strands of diversity as fluid constructs, contingent on various organizational and socio-political parameters, and interwoven in versatile ways across spatial and temporal contexts (Tatli & Ozbilgin, 2012a). To draw on Audre Lorde (1984), I identify as one of many “sisters-outsiders,” and I occupy a space of otherness as a migrant academic who is perceived as a foreigner or stranger (*xenos*) in British higher education and society.

In the field of Human Resources Management (HRM) and organizational literature, there is an increasing interest in intersectional inequalities and privileges in the careers of migrant academics (Sang et al, 2013; Shinozaki, 2017). The idealization of internationalization of higher education and academic mobility and its assumed gender neutrality has recently received criticism by feminist academics (Henderson, 2019; Morley et al., 2018). However, higher education and its policy literature remain largely oblivious to the intersectionality of highly skilled migration and gender in academic careers and identities, and how these might be influenced by migration policy and migration discourses; organizational, local, and global hierarchies; transnational relationships; and solidarity in the workplace.

Intersectional Disadvantages and Privileges of Academic Migration

Research with Indian and South-Asian migrant academics (Fernando & Cohen, 2016) has shown that they have an advantage in research-heavy universities in the UK due to symbolic capital accumulated through international connections and networks. Their ability to pursue challenging careers is supported by an extensive network of transnational family relationships and resources. In their research with female migrant professors in British academia, Sang et al. (2013) have shown “the surprising rather than summative nature of intersections between gender and ethnicity and as such lend support to the argument that disadvantages across multiple categories of difference do not necessarily translate into multiple jeopardy at the level of careers” (p. 158).

Although the UK market economy of higher education offers employment opportunities for migrant academics, further research is required to investigate how both ethnic capital and ethnic deficit (Tsouroufli, 2020) might operate within the micro, meso, and macro level and how multiple categories of difference might translate into privileges and/or disadvantages (Tatli & Ozbilgin, 2012a). An emic approach to intersectionality (Tatli & Ozbilgin, 2012b) can illuminate various configurations of migrant academic identity and solidarity projects. It can also highlight the contextuality and conditionality of Whiteness, which has received limited attention, specifically in relation to the experiences of migrant academics from various EU (and other) countries who are often subsumed into the category of White or ‘White-other’ in higher education in the UK.

Freedom of movement, economic and socio-political transformations in various European states, and an expanding and commercialized higher education sector have resulted in increased migration of academics from Central and Southern European countries to the UK, Germany, and Scandinavia. Despite the glorification and glamourization of academic mobility and the internationalization of higher education, we know very little about the experiences of migrant academics, their solidarity and belonging projects, and the intersections of their identities with gender, feminist, and other identities.

Bhopal (2018) refers to “different shades of Whiteness” (p. 46) to discuss the persisting marginalities of certain White-other groups in the allegedly post-racial British society. The non-hegemonic and peripheral position of certain White groups in educational,

work, and societal contexts is indicative of the conditionality of Whiteness and its relationality to normative notions of citizenship, nationality, and Englishness in Britain and other geo-political contexts. Sang & Calvard's (2019) research with migrant academics in Australia and New Zealand demonstrated the reproduction of considerable privilege for Anglo-White, male, senior academics. Although the persistent intersectional privilege of hegemonic masculinity and Whiteness in the careers of migrant academics has received attention, there is little work concerning the intersections of Whiteness and hegemonic femininity (Paechter, 2018), or concerning the exclusion of less legitimate non-English/White-other, professional subjectivities and femininities. In addition to the social identities of gender and ethnicity, this paper also draws attention to the political identities of female academics as feminists. Through an intersectionality lens, this work attempts to raise understanding about the heterogeneity of women's experience in relation to solidarity networks and feminist sisterhood in academic careers. The careers of feminist academics remain an under-researched topic, and this paper aims to address this gap (Sang, 2018). Although, there is potential for feminism to act as a collective source for support for early-career academics (Macoun & Miller, 2014), navigating and thriving within the academy is indeed a gendered and racialized process. Moreover, if feminism is to act as resistance against marginalization and exclusion of women in higher education, then we (feminists) ought to examine ourselves at both the center and the margins of the dominant culture, question our own practices, and become more attuned to the complexities of intercultural connections (Asher, 2003). We must examine our sense of self in relation to others within the competitive, internationalized, and commercialized environment of higher education. We must interrogate academic femininities/masculinities and various gendered, racialized, and class privileges and disadvantages and their spatial and temporal dimensions. These strategies are paramount in critiquing and resisting the false universalism of "woman" and romanticized notions of feminist solidarity and sisterhood (Clegg, 2008).

Homophily and Academic Networks

I now turn to homophily—the well-known preference for similarity in social relations—in an attempt to critically explore networking, connecting, and researching with the dominant Western paradigms of internationalized higher education in the UK. Homophily or the "homophily principle," means that interactions usually occur between actors with similar resources and lifestyles (Behtoui & Neergaar, 2010). White homophily has been found to disadvantage ethnic minority staff (Seebruck & Savage, 2014). For staff with less legitimate forms of capital (e.g. ethnic) in higher education, it might be difficult to bypass White and other types of homophily and to break into gendered and racialized academic networks. Even when achieved, membership within networks might be peripheral and offer little benefit for career progression (Barns et al., 2017, Tsouroufli et al., 2011, Tsouroufli, 2012). Moreover, the emotional labor to manage "bodies out of place" and "to minimize the signs of their difference" (Ahmed 2012, p.41) is draining for staff with less legitimate identities, although this emotional labor is useful in relating to and becoming accepted by the dominant culture (Tsouroufli, 2015). Through this relational process, staff connect with others, reify their academic identities, and develop a sense of belonging (Archer, 2008).

In this paper, I aim 1) to contribute to scholarship de-romanticizing feminist sisterhood through autobiographical research, and 2) to raise awareness about othering and exclusion of female migrant scholars in Britain through an intersectional approach to equality and difference. The two main narratives presented in this paper concern being othered and out of place while attempting to carve space for oneself, and knowing one's place amidst violence and racist deployments of White feminism. These autobiographical narrative threads illuminate the various marginalities I experienced while attempting to connect with other

feminists and develop networks. In the following section, I discuss my epistemological and methodological approach.

Researcher's Positionality, Transnational Feminist Epistemology, and Autobiographical Resistance

My thinking in this paper is influenced by the work of women of color feminists (Lorde, 2012), postcolonial feminists (Dhawan, 2012; 2016), 'third-world' feminists (Mohanty, 2003) and transnational feminists. Transnational feminism as a paradigm "aims to decenter Western epistemologies, shaking the foundation of the sometimes taken-for-granted framework of Western—and specifically UK, US or European-focused—feminist research in the English language" (Hundle et al., 2019, p. 3).

A critical focus on Western feminist epistemologies and Anglophonic and Eurocentric perspectives on gender means also to challenge the construct of 'Europe' and its assumed homogeneity as a geopolitical location. I aim to identify its historical, socio-economic, political and epistemological processes that have mobilized racist, colonialist, nationalist, and neo-liberal paradigms beyond Europe as well as within. A critical focus on European paradigms of thought should be mindful of how the Renaissance and later the Enlightenment—with their allegedly emancipatory projects of rationality, secularism, humanism, and equality—were operationalized in the modernization of newer states in the Mediterranean and the Balkans, states that were controlled by Western European empires, including Great Britain, France, and Germany. Such forms of intra-European colonization can be traced centuries back but are always present and reconfigured in light of various socio-political transformations, including the dismantling of communist countries in East and Central Europe, the European Union with its free market and free movement until Brexit, and the COVID-19 pandemic. Economic and intellectual forms of intra-European imperialism and neo-colonialism have reconfigured gendered and racialized relations of domination, exploitation, and subordination, generated new forms of racism (neo-racisms) and sparked constructions of the other (e.g. Mediterranean, Central or Eastern European) as a honorary or second-class European subject/citizen (Brah, 1996). The production of the European 'other' is contingent on the social imaginary of Europe as exclusively Western and inherently superior and progressive (Stein & Andreotti, 2017).

Epistemic Violence and Disobediences

Neo-colonialism and neo-liberalism present the migrant/mobile/transnational subject with endless possibilities and challenges for self-improvement and reconstitution. However, identity transgressions and transformations are always performed through subjection to "epistemic violence," that is, violence produced discursively through imperial politics of knowledge production (Dhawan, 2012) "that write out histories and mute voices" (Hussein & Hussain, 2019, p. 262).

Following Walter Mignolo (2013), Nazia Hussein and Saba Hussain (2019), I engage in epistemic disobedience in this reflexive paper by using "border thinking." Hussain & Hussain (2019) define it as:

The necessary condition for thinking decolonially. Borders in this case are conceptualised not just as geographical borders of nation states, they also signify the borders of modern/colonial world, epistemic and ontological orders that the gendered and racialised populations of ex-colonies (and indeed new colonies) inhabit. We claim that dwelling, thinking and writing from these borders create conditions of epistemic disobedience to coloniality/modernity discourses of the West (p. 261).

What might this mean for me as a female migrant European ‘Other’ subject? As a feminist academic from the Global South trained in the North, I find the scarcity of feminist and sociological knowledge-production from the Global South, and particularly Southern Europe, limiting for my own research and problematic for the peripheral position I occupy as a scholar in the North (Connell, 2015; Hussein, 2019). As a diasporic scholar I engage in disciplinary reflexivity (Canetto, 2019) informed by my positions as European ‘Other,’ White-other, trans-disciplinary, and a migrant, feminist, academic outsider in relation to many White and non-White feminist and women’s studies groups operating in the UK.

In this paper, I also share my experience of finding space (Kwakye & Ogunbiyi, 2019) in higher education institutions and intellectual communities where belonging has always been a struggle for people like me with non-hegemonic identities. This experience motivated me to seek various sisterhood configurations as a way to bring together people with marginalized bodies and experiences to create possibilities for cooperation and emotional bonds (Davies, 2014) and as a subversive act of challenging patriarchal and other forms of dominance and oppression (Zaytoun & Ezekiel, 2016).

My Multiple Identities and Resistances

As a migrant academic working across borders and beyond nation states throughout my professional and personal trajectories and encounters with difference (disciplinary, gender, ethnic, national, etc.), I have multiple cultural identities and perspectives (Horne & Arora, 2013), which have enriched my understanding of gender, differences in women’s oppression, and various forms of women’s agency and particularities. My stories in this paper recognize global power differentials, contest savior mentality, build on corrective projects of Global South femininities (Sensoy & Marshall, 2010), and demonstrate transnational solidarity that does not tokenize, patronize, or infantilize but instead inspires and facilitates multiple ways of being (Lorde, 1984). My narratives tell of resistance to the objectification of foreign bodies in British academia and of the processes of becoming through exclusions and inclusions in various sisterhood configurations.

My feminist identity is not a label acquired simply through affiliation to feminist groups or publications in feminist journals, but was shaped by engagements with social justice and a feminist philosophy that is critical of theory and praxis that reproduces gender inequality and other inequalities. However, in the Greek context, and certainly other Global South contexts where I have worked, I feel that my feminist commitments would not be encapsulated accurately or fairly with the label feminist. Such a categorization would be as alienating and redundant in my country of origin as the notion of Whiteness discussed below.

As a first generation, highly skilled migrant whose cultural heritage differs from that of the dominant group in Britain, I could also identify as an ethnic minority (Sepulveda et al., 2013). However, I am aware that I am rarely seen or named BAME in Britain, because of my skin color. I find such reduction of oppression and ethnicity to color very problematic (Spivak, 1990) and blind to complex and polymorphous ethno-racializations of European minorities in British academia and society (Anthias, 2021). The color obsession I have encountered in the UK does not in any shape or form resonate with my Orthodox Christian upbringing and experience of Hellenic psycho-social, spiritual, and academic education and work in Greece up until early 1990s. The identity of White and White-other remains as alienating as it was when I first moved to the UK. Moreover, I feel it underplays prevalent identities in my life such as a migrant, Greek woman and non-mother (but with caring responsibilities) and masks the various exclusions that I have experienced in the academy and Britain. However, I am aware of the many advantages I have enjoyed as a European migrant until recently, including access to health care and freedom of movement, all of which have

come under threat since the pro-Brexit discourse emerged. My precarious position and associated anxieties have led me to decide to apply for British citizenship which was granted to me in 2018. However, my citizenship rights and certain entitlements associated with them have not saved me from the policing of my belonging, nor have canceled my outsider subjecthood within the British context in which I have worked and lived for almost 30 years.

Although I am known to the Western world as Greek, my naming as such in this paper is not unproblematic and uncritical. Discursive and symbolic violence has operated for centuries—even before the founding of the independent Greek state in 1832—disrupting Rum (Romios) identities, distorting historical and national continuity within the East Roman Empire (known as Byzantium in the West), misrecognizing the Hellenic nation, and then subjecting it to cultural, intellectual, socio-economic, and political rape for the purposes of modern Europeanization (Glikantzi-Arhweiler, 2009). Such projects of ‘civilization’ and ‘emancipation’ of European ‘other’ identities have shaped my dis-identification with what is known as the West and my feminist sisterhood alliances within the global world.

In what follows I discuss my solidarity projects through a reflexive journey of relational personhood/womanhood in response to the matrix of domination in British academia in an attempt to highlight the impossibility and fallacy of universal sisterhood.

Othered and ‘Out of Place’

Narratives can “open valuable windows into the emotional and the symbolic lives of organization” (Gabriel, 1998, p. 135). The first thread of my narrative focuses on discourses of othering embodied in xenophobic and racist practices of exclusion and marginalization. A focus on othering brings to the fore “the dualistic processes by which the normative and the deviant, centres and margins, core and periphery and the powerful and the powerless are identified and differentiated” (Ozbilgin & Woodward, 2004). The narrative is imbued with emotions of anger, disappointment, alienation, and estrangement resulting from othering. I discuss my networking practices and projects of connectedness since I started working in British academia. I feel both marginal and privileged because of the possibilities of “reflexive narrativization of identities” (Brown, 2006, p. 737) enabled through publication in an academic journal.

Migrants as Space Invaders

“What are you doing here?”

I have intentionally chosen to start my narration from this painful question because it signifies my construction as illegitimate and a space invader (Puwar, 2004) in the British academy and as a body out of place within predominantly White feminist groups (Ahmed, 2012). The question was asked by a White-English feminist academic after I greeted her and introduced myself at her book launch in London many years ago. It was the first thing I was asked, as soon as I arrived at the venue and it made me feel very unwanted. At the time, I was working as a research fellow and was attempting to meet experts in the field and join relevant interest groups. I had signed up for the event and traveled from Cardiff to attend. During the reception, I attempted to start a conversation with various people but there was a general climate of unfriendliness and coldness, which made me realize the event was not for people like me; I left 10 minutes after the presentation of the book. Since then I have attended several events, conferences, meetings, job interviews; communicated with editors and editorial boards; and attempted to engage with various societies and networks, where I felt the existence of racist White English solidarity (DiAngelo & Sensoy, 2014). The absence of space for feminist outsiders and foreigners was not only evident but screaming the refusal of

the other, even during silences. Othering and racism were performed through various boundary-setting and discriminatory practices including invisibility or hyper-visibility of the other, microaggressions sometimes disguised as British humor, xenophobic verbal attacks, and dehumanizing silences.

Boundary Practices and Xenophobic Attacks

“If she doesn’t like it here, she can go back to Greece!”

The statement above was part of the feedback I received for a paper submitted to the special issue “Being a Feminist Academic” in 2012. In the first submission of my reflexive paper “Feminist Academic Interrupted,” I had used the narrative/metaphor of slavery in relation to the female figures/captives in the marbles of Parthenon. I eventually removed this reference following the reviewers’ objection, claiming that slavery did not accurately represent my experience because I could simply walk away from oppression and marginalization. Although I felt that such a position implied a narrow view of agency embedded in European modernity (Wadhwa, 2020), I agreed to rename and re-write the slavery narrative. I was upset and shocked that the review process for feminist scholarship had become a platform for performing racism and xenophobia. This was one of the many times where I had to engage in emotional labor in order to navigate the racialized space of higher education, and to protect myself from further violence by being described as over-emotional and denied the very existence of my othered experience (Hoschchild, 1983; Evans & Moore, 2015). My resistance did not manifest as a formal complaint to the editor of the special issue, but my silence at that particular moment did not indicate defeat or passivity. Through sharing the anonymized feedback in safe spaces, as an example of othering discourses and xenophobic practice, I have found more allies and opportunities to speak out against intersectional injustices.

Sometimes the othering practices of White feminists entailed distance and dis-identification from feminists others whose identities did not seem to align with Western hegemonic conceptualizations and constructions of female agency, independence, and freedom. For example, various assumptions about religion and stereotypical perceptions of women of faith have perhaps led some White feminist scholars to distance themselves from me. I have heard this statement from a White-English feminist female academic: “I do not have anything in common with religious people and I do not want to socialize with them. Does this mean I am racist? I do not think so.”

My identity as non-mother has never created any tensions within my transnational feminist alliances, and many of the feminists I work with have children and care for both children and elderly parents. However, non-motherhood and my international, cosmopolitan identity have been treated as differences that somehow disadvantage White feminist academics within British academia. There have been occasions when I was penalized for these identities. I remember vividly my disgust after a verbal exchange with a feminist academic and line manager who requested my presence in evening promotional events because I was the only member of staff without children.

The various xenophobic discourses and othering practices I have encountered in the 25 years of my academic career in the UK not only served to reassure collective identity when the self-image of Britain was perceived as being under threat or in crisis. These xenophobic practices also operated as forms of a struggle, a fight to push out migrant academics from higher education and British society (Wimmel, 1997), particularly after the recession and Brexit provided platforms for the normalization of racism and intense racialization of European identities. Various forms of violence against foreigners and migrant

academics might be associated with fear and anxiety (Jackson, 2013; Leathwood & Hey, 2009; Skeggs, 1997) about the penetration and potential control of pedagogical spaces and workplaces by highly skilled foreigners. I have heard statements made in staff meetings such as “This institution did not have so many foreigners” (by a White-English feminist female academic) and “We have been invaded by the Greeks” (by a male academic, laughing). These statements indicate panic and a sense of nostalgia for the lost world of British higher education, where women and foreigners had no place. Within such an unfriendly and unwelcoming context, my Whiteness or “different shade of Whiteness” (Bhopal, 2018) did not seem to carry much symbolic capital and was not experienced as an advantage. My foreign/migrant/Global South identity emerged as in conflict with the shared discourses that White hegemonic feminist communities drew on to show White solidarity (Tsouroufli et al., 2011). In the next section, I turn attention to the intersections of gender, class, and Whiteness to unravel the operation of power, hegemonic relations, and violence among feminists in British higher education.

Knowing Your Place: Violence and the Mobilization of White Mainstream Feminism for Racism

The second thread of my narrative is imbued with emotions of pain, interruption, and disruption of my multiple subjectivities. It focuses on enactments of White superiority and invalidation of the White-other/migrant/foreigner, entwined with the production of hegemonic femininities and the claiming of territories by White working-class and middle-class feminists. Such projects of power, although cunningly concealed behind the veneer of political correctness, are always underpinned by various forms, shapes, and shades of violence against feminist outsiders, including verbal abuse, bullying, and misrecognition (Paechter, 2018)

In my experience, the more subtle forms of violence at play in higher education were underpinned by perceptions of foreign/migrant academics as ‘thick’ or inferior, associated with notions of illegitimate embodied habitus. Being a non-native speaker of English educated in the Global South and being perceived as a victim of non-English patriarchy have often been used to inform and sustain a deficit construction of my foreign/migrant academic identities and a rationale for infantilization, paternalism, and exclusion. Although such notions of the other are instrumental in reproducing inequalities and hierarchies, they are based on perceived disadvantages rather than actual disadvantages in the increasingly racialized higher education context, which constitutes non-English subjects as second-class and naturalizes feelings of not fitting in. Foreign/migrant embodied habitus, encompassing a wide range of skills, knowledge and ingrained subjectivities, including knowledge of foreign languages, cosmopolitan identities, global citizenship, high educational capital and transnational networks, is often misrecognized or canceled so that projects of violence and rescue narratives can be normalized (Spivak, 1990).

Throughout my academic career misrecognitions and invalidations of migrant/foreign capital and embodied habitus were evident in many pedagogical and intellectual spaces, including doctoral supervision of migrant and ethnic minority students/academics, editorial work, staff meetings, conferences, and even socializing with colleagues. They presented as systematic and intentional attempts to belittle contributions of migrants, present achievements of migrants as undesirable by White feminists (and non-feminists), disregard expertise and knowledge, and demonstrate disproportionate expectations of excellence. One such attempt was through the feedback I received a few years back on my paper “Gendered and classed performances of good mother and academic professional” published in the *European Journal of Women's Studies* in 2018. Despite having referenced relevant work in the first submission, it was assumed by reviewers that I was confused and unable to convey meaning correctly in

English. The reviewer feedback noted: “Emic approach to intersectionality..... Do you actually mean epistemic?” My response was “Although both emic and epistemic originate from Greek, they are different words and concepts. Emic means... Relevant work by distinguished academics is referenced on page ... Epistemic means...”

Despite my successes in research-income generation, I recall occasions in staff meetings where White-English feminists would completely disregard my advice and request input from male senior colleagues with considerably less or even no experience in research funding. There were also occasions where White-English feminist academics of a senior grade would engage in violent behavior such as shouting at me in staff meetings or showing passive/aggressive behavior. Demonstrations of power and performances of violence were also evident with migrant and ethnic-minority doctoral students who on many occasions were reduced to non-persons, patronized repeatedly and ‘politely’ humiliated, even when the quality of their work was well above average and better than the work of their British peers. Some of these students have mentioned to me that they built resilience and tenacity because of my presence and role in the supervisory meetings and the wider academic community. Others withdrew from doctoral programmes feeling broken, and mentally and academically destroyed.

Can Sisterhood Be Global?

My recollection of encounters with White working-class feminists certainly does not resonate with the feminist slogan “Sisterhood Is Global” but rather consolidates classed and racialized processes of differentiation that construe the foreign/migrant feminist as subordinate. Raised in a different national context, I am still shocked by the class system in Britain and the pathology that White working-class identities are seen to suffer from (Skeggs, 1997b). Condescension, verbal abuse, and distancing, as well as a general lack of cultural humility and respect for foreign/migrant/xenoi/White-others have, in my experience, been common practices of White-English working-class feminists performing White femininities through racism (Brah, 1996). Denouncing working-class origins, acting middle-class, dis-identifying from migrant academics, and forming alliances with White men and White middle-class feminists are all forms of othering inextricably connected with the gendered, classed, and racialized constitution of the imperial, superior, White-English academic subject in the neo-colonial context of British higher education (Dhawan, 2012). Such projects of self-transformation and transcendence of working-class legacies are essential in gaining respectability (Skeggs, 1997b; Tsouroufli, 2018).

To mobilize power, dominate relationships, maintain friendships in exclusive groups, and reify celebratory and hegemonic White-English femininities (Paechter, 2018), popularity and legitimacy can only be sustained by embracing White middle-class dispositions and values. White mainstream feminism is paramount in these projects, as it seems to have become a vehicle for career progression in the neo-liberal University and sometimes a platform for racism against feminist others (Delphi, 2015). Such dividing mechanisms have provoked alienation and resistance, performed as conscious and intentional dis-identification from groups and practices that produce and reproduce relations of domination, perpetuate the coloniality of gender (Mignolo, 2007). and sustain a type of myopic elitist feminism and colonizing solidarity (Emejulu, 2018).

In what follows, I share some concluding notes about difference, differentiation, boundaries, identification, belonging, equality, and solidarity relating to the agonistic (Anthias, 2021) lives of migrants and possibly other minorities within the changing higher education landscape.

Some Concluding Thoughts: Feminist Solidarity and Intersectional Politics Unsettled

In this autobiographical paper, I have unraveled the complexity and multiplicity of my exclusions and othering in British academia, performed through the racialization, ethnicization, and gendering of personal and collective differences inscribed on my migrant body. These differences have been used within feminist groups and other spaces in higher education to police and politicize my belonging and construe me as an undesirable subject—or less desirable than White-English and other White (American, Canadian, French) feminists. My ‘othered’ subjectivities were made through the relationality of differences of gender, class, ethnicity, nationality, culture, language, religion, and translocational positionality, which took specific meanings and relevance within and across spatio-temporal contexts, social relations, and feminist agendas. My otherness in the predominantly White-English feminist groups and higher education was not simply the result of chromatic racism but rather the outcome of various forms of exclusionary gendered and racialized processes and discourses aiming to keep out White and non-White, European and non-European migrant women denoting danger, deviance, deficit, and sometimes even disgust (Anthias, 2021).

Such feelings or anxieties and associated hegemonic performances have been normalized and exacerbated through emotive discourses of preserving and defending the very essence of British way of life and identity, dominant in the media and British politics in at least the last 10 years leading up to Brexit. Powerful discourses of grandness (“we can be great again”), a growth in nativism and populism, the wider context of politics of catastrophe in Europe (Emejulu, 2018), and Brexit have created new outsiders, sparked new racisms, new borders, new imperialism, and nostalgia for an ethnically homogenous state (Anthias, 2021). Attention and further research should expose the ambivalent positions and violent encounters of migrants within the new Europe and the new global world emerging post-pandemic with perhaps new colonizers and colonized subjects. Such work requires moving away from the seductive and muted discourses of diversity and the institutional polishing of decolonizing the curriculum and “equality badges” (Ahmed, 2012). It requires engaging with the heterogeneity and contingency of difference inscribed in migrant bodies/collectives/discourses, which are shaped through processes of othering and subordination from outside and within physical and symbolic borders. It also requires moving away from romanticized and colonizing sisterhood (Emejulu, 2018) and elitist feminism, and exposing care-less feminist praxis and violence that generates abject ‘others’ and struggles for legitimization and belonging of migrants. Reflexive, autobiographical work can certainly operate not only as a cathartic force but also a tool for disrupting normative Whiteness (Arday, 2019) and other hegemonic practices even in spaces and collectives that claim commitment to feminist solidarity and eradicating gender inequalities. Autobiographical work, embedded within a feminist and intersectionality framework, has the potential to unravel the entanglements of power within the invalidations of migrant experiences and knowledge and to provide a powerful critique of the non-performativity of feminist solidarity in neo-liberal British academia.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Drs. Ourania Filippakou, Giuliana Ferri, Saba Hussain, and Nazia Hussein for their constructive feedback on this paper. Without them and other feminist sisters (Balbir, Gunjan, Geeta) and my inspirational doctoral students (Sulaiman, Najwa, Kellie, Shafeena and Min), I would have not been able to find the courage to write this paper.

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