

Getting by with my *Yaars*

Analyzing Decoloniality and the University through *Yaariyan*, *Gupshup* and *Baithak*

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This position paper engages with the possible intersection of decoloniality and the gender studies classroom. This paper is a reflection on the experience of an international, queer, South Asian student in the Netherlands, thinking through the theme of decolonizing at the University and in Gender Studies classrooms. This paper illustrates a personal stance on the questions of: What steps do I take, as a student, to engage with gender studies and the larger space of the university through the lens of decoloniality, and in what way is (de)coloniality made (in)visible or (re)produced?

DECOLONIALITY, THE UNIVERSITY AND THE COVID-19 CLASSROOM

As a student of Gender Studies in the Global North, I often find myself surrounded with the demand for feminist scholarship to provide practical answers, as short and sweet as possible, for the world's material and intellectual entanglements. The limiting issues yet hopeful possibilities that discourses informed by transdisciplinary, historical and situated entanglements often come to the fore in Gender Studies classrooms. Classrooms where young and eager, yet exhausted students find themselves in moral and personal panic within their own discipline(s) at the University. They find themselves in the interesting position of simultaneously critically interrogating centuries' old epistemic violences by hegemonic academic endeavor as well as engaging in conscious, accountable yet hopeful worldmaking.

I observe a relational dynamic within the task of decolonizing at the university. Classroom situations that engage with decoloniality as a practice and as a task cannot treat it as a singular act or event. Colonial and white violence—often overlapping endeavors—can, and do, continue to exist and persist even when the colonizer/settler has 'left'; leaving in their wake departmental procedural practices where young, decolonial feminists often find themselves having to explain to their peers that diversity of presence does not repair the white violences embedded in them.

As a South Asian international student in the Netherlands during the COVID-19 pandemic, I find myself disillusioned by the representation discourse enthusiastically adopted by university offices and admissions procedures. Where the optics of diversity politics, care, empathy, and the rhetoric that insists there exists a desire to change are all marketing strategies that act as cloaking tools to promptly dispel speculations of its pitfalls. I'm being marketed the possibility that the University can be decolonized by my mere presence, a reality that does not unfold. There exists a prevalent belief that an increasing exposure to diverse groups will automatically produce more tolerant environments. Although there are merits to being surrounded by different stories, backgrounds, and worldviews, mere presence is not the end-all. There is no decolonization in individual exceptionalism and neoliberal understandings of diversity when students often occupy the position of customers; ironically, those that are never 'right' just happen to be those who are neither wealthy nor White. Increasing the presence of international students has not changed the nature of the epistemic history that informs syllabi or teaching methods, nor have they removed the hoops of English language certifications, embassy idling and the separation from airport lines. It's been written about, theorized about, blasted about on social media—yet the need to directly lineate oppression to personal experience to appease to the sensationalist appetite of our white peers has not gone away. Non-white scholars are then limited into particular lines of research, for example a Pakistani scholar only ever studying Pakistan because that is what funding bodies think is the 'right' thing to do - not in terms of having the opportunity to do so, but in the sense of cordoning off what *they* think *should* be researched by certain bodies and identities in the first place. There is little room beyond certain Gender Studies classrooms to step outside of the limits defined by and through sensationalization of experience mediated through identity politics.

Feminist and queer scholars have given us the tools to realize that the colonial pasts of the university do not have to be a heritage, but these pasts are persistent in the way they show up even when we try hard to forget or dissociate from them. In order to think through this question of my own engagement with decoloniality, I refer to the works of queer, global south, and South Asian scholars, through which I reflect on the kind of responsible and intimate relationalities I associate with decoloniality as praxis. I think of Naveen Minai and Sara Shroff's theorization of *yaariyan* (friendship), *gupshup* (a mode of speaking), and *baithak* (a mode of space) as responsible knowledges that are located in relational rather than transactional methods, where critical relationality must be activated and not be seen as automatic (Minai and Shroff 2019). *Yaariyan*, *gupshup* and *baithak*—taken from Urdu—as activated methodologies, are premised on transnational feminist tenets of co-production, sharing, reflection, and accountability that enable queer feminist scholars of color 'located in/between academic institutions/networks in the global north and global south to produce and circulate knowledges' (Minai and Shroff 2019, 32).

Yaariyan denotes and connotes informal, intimate connections and friendships that can be platonic, romantic, temporal, and between/across genders (Minai and Shroff 2019, 32). Differing from the idea of (often white) feminist sisterhood or peerhood however, *yaariyan* implies a non-respectability and non-normativity, necessitating a rethinking of the frames of care and interaction within which the former may exist. A *yaar* (friend, member of the *yaariyan*) comes to *yaariyan* acknowledging and critically engaging with the histories, vulnerabilities and emotions they bring to it, but within the University, the *yaariyan* ‘do each other’s work, we cite each other to give thanks and acknowledge indebtedness of our labor. We write together in shareable documents, revising and rewriting each other’s sentences’ (Minai and Shroff 2019, 36). I find a reworking of care in WhatsApp messages and Microsoft Teams meetings where we sit together through the screen and try to hold each other’s grief and confusion as the conditions of the pandemic deprive us of the possibility of physical solidarity. *Yaariyan* however demands an accountable way of being with each other that other modes of togetherness and presence does not.

Gupshup (casual conversation or informal exchange of feelings) and *baithak* (seat or act of sitting) are harder to visualize as decolonial praxis when the classroom and the University are virtual due to a pandemic where physical proximity is not an option. However, it is precisely in spaces where traditional and normative ways of collectivity are disrupted that the potential of *gupshup* and *baithak* as decolonial tools is demonstrated. *Gupshup* speaks to an engagement with multiple and half languages (Minai and Shroff 2019, 38), where being understood through memes, WhatsApp stickers, Microsoft Teams emojis, texts, and comments on shared documents allows listening through a spectrum of articulations. It is where Dutch-speaking peers hastily translate government changes in corona measures in real-time for non-Dutch speakers. It is the collective eye-roll we know is happening behind the screen when a white peer makes a comment that sounds racist to non-white ears. It is the virtual affirmation, the speaking ‘sideways to what is canon’ (Minai and Shroff 2019, 38), by talking amongst ourselves when what is available to us does not make sense. By checking out of the theory in classrooms in order to not be caught up in the pace of what is expected, but rather what can be done by fatigued bodies at the time, *gupshup* enables a non-normative seeing and listening.

Baithak in popular Urdu understanding refers to a collective sitting or seating arrangement on the floor. Minai and Shroff’s *baithak* however, acknowledges that not all rooms allow all bodies to sit on the floor, dictated by age, class, gender, sexuality, nationality and social rank (Minai and Shroff 2019, 39). When I think of *baithak* as a decolonial tool, I think of its call to spaces that exist between physical and digital borders and boundaries, where the rules that govern spaces are further influenced by *baithak*’s feature of invitation—there is a critical choice involved when

inviting someone to share space physically or virtually. The University is not yet a *baithak*, but its hallways, Microsoft Teams breakout rooms, WhatsApp groups and joint documents can be. By students evading the questions that inquire into the reasons behind turning off cameras during class time, by crocheting under the table, by leaving the meeting early or staying even after all other participants have left, there exists decolonial possibility as the pace and expectations of the virtual COVID-19 classroom are disrupted.

Seeing the possibilities of *yaariyan*, *gupshup* and *baithak* on the edges of—and sometimes spilling over into—the gender studies classroom, there exists an acknowledgement of being uncomfortable, by being asked ‘How are you doing?’ and expressing that discomfort. We decolonize the university at the expense of our persons—our identities, our mental well-beings, our ways of being together—deeming the University a cause important enough or unavoidable as a means of our survival. The conditions under which we wish to shape our current and future feminist formations is something visited and revisited in the gender studies classroom, and in my case, revealing the need and potential of *yaariyan*, *gupshup* and *baithak* for imagining decolonial futures within the University.

REFERENCES

- Minai, Naveen, and Sara Shroff. 2019. ‘Yariyaan, Baithak, Gupshup: Queer Feminist Formations in the Global South.’ *Kohl: A Journal for Body and Gender Research* 5 (1): 31–44.