

A Muslim Student's Letter

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My Dear Professors:

I write to you today from the traditional, ancestral, unceded lands of the Musqueam people. You have taught me to reflect on this land acknowledgement. I am now aware of the coloniality (Quijano 1999) within my own education, the erasure of histories, the omission of narratives, and the dismissal of experiences. It has humbled me, as I now understand that I profit from a settler community. I am an insignificant and unwilling cog in colonial machinery—machinery that I do not know how to halt on my own.

I write to you today out of choice, out of an eagerness to learn, and out of hope that I will find ways of making my anger intelligible. Allow me to display the identity symbols I wear. I am a racialized Muslim mother. My citizenship is not from a North American or European country. I am Pakistani, and while I have lived, studied, and worked in the global North for over fifteen years, I remain Pakistani. This is important for you to remember because you are oblivious to the criminality my citizenship awards me. I am a security threat until proven otherwise. I had assumed that the privilege of a Harvard undergraduate education would grant me the right to not be treated like a security threat, but it does not.

When applying to undertake graduate education in Canada, I had to go through a medical exam for my study permit to prove that I did not carry “third-world” diseases to your country. I sat like cattle in forty-degree heat, in an outdoor compound of the International Organisation of Migration with my one-year-old daughter, waiting to go through our medical exams. It was Ramadan and I was fasting but

the heat did not deter me from proving that I am physically worthy of entering your territory. People were waiting outside in the heat, were yelled at and were asked to provide multiple urine samples and x-rays, in order to prove their fitness. That was humiliation at its best. If I had any doubt in my mind of being human enough, the visa process guaranteed to break that illusion.

I was asked to submit police certificates or intelligence agency clearance from all countries that I had lived in since the age of eighteen. This is a practice usually reserved for those applying for permanent residency within Canada. However, as I said earlier, my citizenship alone merits criminality unless proven otherwise. When the Immigration Refugees Citizenship Canada (IRCC) denied my study permit the first time (due to a clerical error), I applied again because my eagerness to learn outweighed my unwillingness to bear humiliation. I applied again to prove my worth. I have applied for visas to visit, work, or study more than thirty-two times in approximately twenty countries. My loss of dignity when obtaining a Canadian study permit, however, was most distinct. University administrations seek international students through disingenuous advertising in the hopes of improving finances. What kind of inclusivity can an educational institute promise international students?

I have worked for corporations that were willing to provide resources for me to obtain the proper work permit, thus minimising any humiliation on my part. I have not seen the same from universities. Please do not tell me you understand the bureaucracy of the visa system because you had to apply for that one Chinese or Indian visa to conduct research overseas. You do not acknowledge the privilege of your citizenship.

Now that I am here in Canada, allow me to do the work I came to do. Please do not tell me to stand in solidarity with those affected by the US travel ban (initially proposed in February 2017 and upheld by the US Supreme Court in June 2018) by not going

to academic conferences in the US. My mobility to travel has come at a huge cost. The travel ban by the Trump administration was the best thing that has happened to me in that regard. It shows why it is difficult for people who do not have the right passport to attend workshops and conferences in North America and Western Europe. The problem has always existed; you seem to be outraged only now.

Please do not just “acknowledge” your privilege, truly recognize it. Embed that recognition in all your actions as a teacher. When you choose the syllabus, do not gravitate only towards white men for theory; understand that “modernity” and “enlightenment” are not concepts to aspire to but reasons nations were colonized around the world. If students do not connect to the work of those theorists, it is because their lived experiences are not accounted for. That “research,” as Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) said, “will always sound like a dirty word to many”; not just to those indigenous to Turtle Island, or to what we know as New Zealand or Australia, but to many marginalized communities who were “empirically” deemed to be less human. Orientalism (Said 1978) and eurocentrism are alive and thriving in the syllabi I come across today. I do not need white guilt. I need white conscientiousness or, as Friere (1983) said, “critical conscientiousness.”

You have students who have burned every bridge to get to your classroom. They truly have nowhere to go because they have risked finances, family, and more to learn from you. Recognize that when you schedule classes outside working hours you make it harder for single parents as they have to make tough decisions. Should they go to the class, even though it is outside regular hours, and pay tuition fees, daycare fees, and additional childcare fees? Should they sacrifice seeing their child for the whole day? Or should they just not go to the class? Sometimes the latter is not even an option because the class is mandatory. Do you really know how much you disadvantage students who must choose among tuition, groceries, and childcare costs to attend your class?

When I hear about the struggles of my indigenous colleagues, I wonder why do we not better support each other. There is a false sense of “post” coloniality among those from or living in ex-European colonies around the world. The fact that many nations have an “Independence Day” does not mean that decolonization has occurred. Coloniality in this context is reduced to the presence of colonial administrators (Grosfoguel 2007). Just as Bonilla-Silva (2010) makes a case for racism without racists, the ex-colonies need to introspect and address coloniality without the colonial bodies. In the context of higher education, the views of Thomas Macaulay, Head of the Committee of Public Instruction for the Indian Subcontinent in 1835, are still valid today:

It is impossible for us, with our limited means, to attempt to educate the body of the people. We must at present do our best to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern; a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect. To that class we may leave it to refine the vernacular dialects of the country, to enrich those dialects with terms of science borrowed from the Western nomenclature, and to render them by degrees fit vehicles for conveying knowledge to the great mass of the population.

Our curriculum, language preference, university rankings, bureaucracy, legal codes, ideals of knowledge, standards of beauty—all of these uphold coloniality and ensure continued epistemicide (Santos 2013). We, as scholars, are to blame for that. Am I, as Macaulay stated in 1835, still “Indian in blood and color but English in taste, in opinions, in morals and in intellect”? Especially in intellect? As universities throughout Canada commit themselves to the goals of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, how do you as teachers commit to decolonizing knowledge? How do you partake in the practice of “epistemic disobedience” that breaks the

illusion of neutral education (Mignolo 2009)?

I never know which resistance to support. Maybe Black Lives Matter because I can relate to the violence of the police state and because I want to challenge the racism towards black Muslims within diverse Muslim communities? Or can I relate most to the struggles of undocumented workers and immigrants whose worth is measured by how much they contribute to the economy? Or maybe I should support the women’s march? But then again, I do not like white celebrities speaking for my experiences when they continuously perpetuate the harmful stereotypes they seem so outraged by. Or maybe I should support those working against anti-Muslim racism? You might know this as Islamophobia but I do not like that word. The violence against Muslim bodies happens because they are deemed criminal—not human. It is not caused by fear. It is caused by hate. This accompanies a conviction of superiority amongst those who are not Muslim. While Muslims are not a race, it is the systemic nature of racism that I think is applicable (Müller-Uri and Opratko 2016). What is race, if not an ever-arbitrary and shifting concept in our imaginations?

To my professors who teach Islam (theologically, socially, anthropologically, and legally), I do not feel part of the *ummah* but I do feel that you carry the conflicting burden of trying to be a critical voice in the discourse of Islam while spending most of your energies addressing the harmful stereotypes. You are far fewer on campus than I would have hoped. Sometimes, you are on campuses in parts of North America or Western Europe where I am too afraid to study. I am afraid because I feel my daughter will be bullied at school or will have to explain a religion before she even understands what religion is. That she will have to pay for crimes she does not yet comprehend. How do I learn from you, my professors of Islam? How do we engage Muslim communities in an introspective, critical struggle to address the systems of oppression within us? How do we decolonise our own consciousness? Is the concept of an *ummah* an unrealisable dream? Will the *ajmi* and

ar'bi ever have the same rights? Why is there a stronger outcry for what is happening to American-Muslims but relative silence over Rohingya-Muslims or Uyghurs-Muslims or South-Asian working-class Muslims in Arab gulf states? And please let the women speak. I do not need validation from Muslim men to make my argument worthwhile. Oh yes, and if you stick me at the back of a room or in a corner and have *khutbahs* that only speak from your perspective or from the illusion of a Muslim *ummah*, I am not likely to show up for Friday prayers. Why do we talk about our experiences in Western Europe and North America but not about *riya* or *taqlid* or the hatred within our own communities? Trust me, I do not wish to undermine those experiences, but I also have no wish to undermine the experience of religious minorities in Muslim-majority countries. We should be just as outraged about that.

To those who hear me at academic conferences, please ask me questions or offer critique about my work. But do not ask me about Afghanistan because you consulted for the US State Department. Do not assume that I study radicalisation because I study *madaris*. Look at methodological and peer-review failures in the academic research on *madaris*, failures which equate all *madaris* to militant training camps without ever providing evidence for this generalisation. Do not sympathise with me afterwards because you think this all started because Donald Trump was elected President and Prime Minister Trudeau is the epitome of Canadian exceptionalism. Do not avoid eye contact as if you are afraid of offending me by looking at me. Please do not ask me how bad it is at airports, to relive stories of discrimination as you sympathise with phrases of “Oh no!” and “Oh dear!” and then run off to your next session. My misery is not for your intellectual entertainment.

People sometimes walk up to me and ask where I teach. When I say I am a master's student, the response is: “You're not even PhD?” I guess the value of my work is measured by my job title or my program and not by the merit of my work. Inside

universities, graduate students exchange looks when we hear professors refer to us as “cheap labour.” You know we can hear you, right? How is this different from the corporate cultures you deplore? One of my fellow students commented, “It's like they have two ears, one to listen to us and others for their esteemed colleagues.” All of this gives me some appreciation for the transparency of alt-right discourse. Its hate and superiority are out in the open. I can adjust my expectations of an author after reading their alt-right discourse, whereas in academia I walk away disoriented and disenchanting.

I would like to conduct my research but instead of pursuing my interests, I work to satisfy curiosity and address misconceptions about Islam and Muslims. When will the emotional and intellectual labour of anti-oppressive work shift to those who are privileged by the systemic discrimination in our societies? I have received feedback on papers by professors who are unable to differentiate between Islam and Islamism or Islamic and Islamist. You are surprised that there are 1.8 billion Muslims in the world who embody all markers of diversity and struggle with multiple systems of oppression. You ask me, kindly, if I speak to my daughter in Arabic. I used to be confused but now I understand: because I am Muslim, I must speak Arabic. I do not. Indonesia, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Nigeria's Muslim populations contribute most to the 1.8 billion. Please reflect on that.

Professors, you, more so than the alt-right you are so eager to bash, are crippling me. You make me so physically and emotionally drained after class that I feel my head is filled with lead. I expect you to recognise, analyse, dissect, critique, deconstruct, and cite what you are doing wrong. Yet you do not.

I am here, present in body, mind, and soul. Ready to learn and contribute. Do you want to teach me?

Sincerely,

Rabia Mir

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