Being an Indonesia feminist in the North[1]: An autoethnography[2]

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Abstract

This essay adopts a collaborative autoethnography to unpack our experiences as Indonesian researchers and feminists during our study in a country in the Global North, the UK. In spite of the fact that Global North feminisms have expanded our understanding of gender issues, we cannot help but sometimes feeling marginalised and invisible within these theories because, very often, they merely discuss the experiences of women in the North and homogenise the experience of women in the South. Drawing on postcolonial theories, this essay explores our negotiation of identities as we attempt to decolonise such experiences.

Keywords: Higher Education; pedagogy; Global North, Global South, Autoethnography; Indonesia

Introduction

I am an alien, I am a legal alien
I am an Englishman in New York

We remember hearing this song one day during an Indonesian society gathering in a small city in the United Kingdom (UK). The song resonates in so many ways with our experiences in the UK, except we are neither English, nor men, nor are we in New York. If the singer Sting, who is English, shares the sense of being different to people in America, then perhaps it is not surprising that we, as Indonesian women, sometimes feel like an alien in the UK.

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This essay draws upon our experiences as Indonesians undertaking gender research in a UK higher education institution. The three of us, to some extent, feel a degree of being different, being alienated or, in Julia Kristeva (1991) words, a sense of being a foreigner. We developed this feeling since we were in the UK. We often feel like we are caught between two different, binary worlds, the Global South as the home and the Global North as the foreign land, as we will sketch out in this article. We come from Indonesia, a country situated in Southeast Asia and with the fourth largest population in the world after China, India and the United States, Indonesia is the third largest democracy in the world and is also known as the most populous Muslim country. There are more than three hundred ethnic groups, each possessing their own culture and have different languages. Consequently, the gender constructions of these groups also vary. Some ethnic groups adopt a matrilineal line, while others are very much patriarchal in nature (Blackburn 2004). Other ethnic groups, such as the *Dayak* and *Balinese,* even recognise transgender as another gender category (Blackwood 2005).-

Indonesia also has a very long history of colonisation. It was colonised by the Dutch for more than 350 years and, just like any other colonised country, the legacy of colonisation did not end when the occupation ended. According to Childs and Williams (1997), one key element of the post-colonial condition is also the way that colonial discourse affects the mentality of the colonised people in the long term. In the production of knowledge, a colonial element is obvious when universities in Indonesia are mostly relying to the Western theories of knowledge (Adriany 2015).

The three of us come from different histories of engagement with Northern academia. Vina was a PhD student in education doing research on gender in early childhood education in 2009. She is now working as a lecturer in Indonesia. Desy took a Master degree in Conflict Resolution and Peace Studies in 2012 and now continues her PhD, researching gender discourse within the implementation of Sharia Law in Aceh, Indonesia. Nur is a lecturer now based in Indonesia who took a Master degree in Media and Cultural Studies in the UK in 2012. She did an online ethnographical research about Muslim feminism on the internet. The three of us took modules on gender studies and also use feminist theories in our research.

All of us are Muslims. Vina and Nur wear the veil and Desy does not. When the two of us started to wear the veil, the relationship between Islam and the State under the New Order administration (1965-1998) was not harmonious (Smith-Hefner

2007) and, as a result, we experienced some degree of discrimination as the result of our decision to wear a veil. For instance, we faced different types of threats in our physical education classes, from having our veil pulled, to being threatened not to be given our high school certificates if we continued to wear veil. However, things started to change in Indonesia after 1998 with the downfall of the New Order regime under President Soeharto, followed by the rise of radical Muslims and the formalisation of Islam through sharia regulation in many provinces in Indonesia (Buehler 2016; Sirozi 2005). In Aceh, for example, veiling was never enforced to women until the implementation of sharia law in 2002, which began to regulate women's dress code and obligate them to wear the veil (Siapno 2013). During her PhD fieldwork in Aceh Desy, who is not wearing a veil often feels constrained by the dominant discourse of the veil during her fieldwork.

During our encounter with feminism in the UK, we have had eye-opening experiences. However, the hegemony of Western feminism is so pervasive that sometimes we feel there is little room for our voices, as persons from a Global South country. Even in Indonesia, the domination of Global North feminism, including the tendency to reduce women's experiences into one single experience, is very powerful. The ideas that women in the South are helpless and Muslim women are all oppressed, continue to be disseminated.

This article is informed by both postcolonial and decolonial theories following Bhambra's (2014) approach in which she makes no distinction between postcolonial and decolonial theories. Despite of differences in their geographical origin, postcolonialism and decoloniality share at least two things. One, they both 'challenge to the insularity of historical narratives and historiographical traditions emanating from Europe' (Bhambra 2014, p. 115). Second, they are both working 'within the broader politics of knowledge production and both emerge out of political developments contesting the colonial world order established by European empires' (Bhambra 2014, p. 119). Therefore, we are adopting both perspectives, because they allow us to decentre the hegemonic of Global North feminism.

Postcolonialism has been extremely important for us because it has pointed out problems associated with Western feminism. Feminist postcolonialist like Mohanty (2006), Narayan (1997, 1998) and Spivak (2000) have all provided critiques of the epistemological foundation of Western feminism for its desire to speak about and speak for non-Western women. Thus, the representation of non-Western women

is always understood from a Western point of view. This then perpetuates the binary position between Western women and non-Western women whereby non-Western women are always seen as subordinate and as, having no agency at all, therefore needing saving from both Western men and women (Spivak, 2000). Mohanty (2006) also claims that feminists in/from the Global North have homogenised the experience of women in the Global South, who continue to be treated as a singular and monolithic group.

In this essay, we will unpack the negotiation of our identities as Global South feminists during our study in a country of the Global North, the UK. Our writing is informed by an autoethnographical approach which uses our personal lives as primary data (Pirmasari 2016, p.129). Autoethnography allows our voices to be heard and affords an opportunity for us, the researchers, to be visible (Méndez 2013). We believe this paper is an act of decolonial pedagogy. A decolonial pedagogy is not only as an act that recognises differences, but as an act that allows resistance to be heard (Davis 2010; Lissovoy 2010). It allows a confrontation of the domination of Eurocentrism from various geographical positions (Davis 2010). Thus, decolonial pedagogy is about the making of a new geopolitics of knowledge (Bhambra 2014).

On using autoethnography

According to Reed-Danahay (1997), autoethnography is an intersection of three genres: native anthropology, ethnic autobiography and autobiography. It blurs the line between researcher and participant. She becomes the object of her own research because the research unpacks her own experiences (Chang 2008).

In this paper, we adopt a collaborative autoethnography that involves more than one researcher. Each researcher's experiences are used as data that can be analysed by other researchers (Chang 2008). Together, the three of us engaged in a reflective process of unpacking our experiences during our study in a Northern country, that is the UK, from 2009 to 2017. Vina and Nur had already finished their study when we conducted this research, while Desy had returned back to the UK for her PhD. Each of us wrote our experiences in a diary for a month, and we then exchanged these diaries. The process was very difficult as we needed to go back to our past. People sometimes are suspicious about the extent to which a story of a past is reflective of the past itself (Méndez 2013). However, one needs to understand autoethnography as a method that recognises the blurred boundaries between 'fact'

and 'fiction' and between 'true' and 'imagined' (Richardson 2000, p. 926) and, perhaps, acknowledges the thin line between 'past' and 'present', particularly the fact that one of us is still in the UK, doing a PhD. After writing up a diary for one month, each of us analysed the diary of another person. We coded all the writing in the diaries. After codes were developed, we discussed themes that emerged from the codes and analysed them.

There have been many debates about autoethnography, whether it can be categorised as a scientific method or not, because it has been perceived as lacking objectivity since it focuses on the researcher's self-narrative. Here, we need to understand autoethnography is a form of critique of a modern notion of science (Spry 2001). It questions and problematises the scientific notion of truth in which the researcher should be detached from their data. By doing this, Reed-Danahay (1997) believes that it brings the voice of the insider, which is considered to be more original than that of the outsider. It also affords opportunities for the first person voice to be heard, without being misinterpreted by others.

Findings and discussion

The sense of being voiceless

Reading and comparing our diaries, it became clear that prior to coming to the UK, the three of us shared a sense of excitement. The North had always been associated as a 'dream land' for us. Our thirst and curiosity about feminism brought us to the North, the place we associated with the primary place where knowledge about feminism began. It situated the Global North as an idealised and legitimate place to obtain knowledge.

We took different gender studies modules, which varied from theories of feminism to how to conduct feminist research. However in most classes we attended we somehow experienced a sense of disappointment as we felt that Global North feminisms generalised Asian women. Desy, for example, writes in her journal how she had travelled from a feeling of excitement to disappointment when she realised the course she was taking did not take into account the experiences of Indonesian women, especially when discussing Asian and Muslim women, despite the fact that Indonesia has the fourth largest population in the world and is the largest Muslim country. She questioned, 'Where is my history in the curriculum?' as written in her diary. Desy's sense of disappointment also resulted from the fact that Indonesia is not

represented in the classroom discussion, despite its long history of feminist movements.

Similarly, the course that Vina and Desy took on postcolonial feminism did inform them about women in the Global South, but the discussion was very often limited to women in India or China. The generalisation of women in the South made us ask ourselves 'who are we, actually?' The concept of homogenising Asian women (Mohanty 2003) denies the fact that women do not live under the same experiences. When we are talking about Asia, it is, then, not the same as talking about Pakistan, or India, or Indonesia, since the women in each of these countries do not share the same issues (Minh-ha 1989). Soon we realised that the discussion about the North in the classroom was not differentiated either, as it was centred around what happened in English speaking countries such as the US and the UK. The sense of loss was also the result of the issues discussed in class, which Nur felt were very much European-centred. She writes in her journal how, during a discussion of anorexia, she felt completely lost because it is not a major problem in Indonesia. Nur also illuminate her sense of confusion when the class discussed about 'chav mums', a new abusive word to point the-white-poor-working-class in Britain (Tyler 2008), which was not familiar to her as an Indonesian.

As we found in our findings, this sense of disappointment also leads to a feeling of being invisible, not only during the class discussions, but also when we searched for literatures for our research. While the literatures on gender in Indonesia themselves are still very scarce, the feeling of invisible was also perpetuated because the library is not equipped with books on Indonesia. Similar to the discussion in the class, most books and resources about Asian studies are dominated by discussions about China and India. For two of us, Vina and Desy, the scarcity of literature on Indonesia affected our research.

Desy writes about how the fact that most of the experiences of women in the South are written through the eyes of scholars in the North, makes her feel like she does not know herself, that she needs other people to write the history of her own people. This was shared by Vina and Nur. It is apparent that production of knowledge is centred in countries in the Global North. As Connell (2014, p. 218) argues, 'There is, then, a structural imbalance in the production of knowledge. Researchers in the South routinely study the work of researchers in the North, but the reverse is not true.'

Feeling of otherness

All of us share some degree of otherness. Our sense of otherness not only results from Western discourses on feminism, but also from how some people back home in Indonesia understand feminism. The fact that we are Muslim and Indonesian sometimes makes us feel as though we cannot be fully considered feminists, either here in the North or in Indonesia. In her diary, Vina writes about her experience of attending a conference in Europe, where some people talked about the rise of radical Muslims in Europe, with the veil seen as a signifier of radical Muslims. At the same time, she also feels resented by many people in her country who think she has become liberalised as the result of her Western education. Nur writes how, by being a feminist in Indonesia, many of her colleagues there assume that she is against marriage. Desy also writes about her sense of being 'strange to herself', because many Indonesians think that she is not a Muslim and, therefore, she is not entitled to speak about Islam, while, at the same time, people in the UK do not even know where Indonesia is.

To borrow Kristeva (1991, p. 10) words, we feel like a foreigner caught between two different worlds, we are 'always elsewhere, the foreigners belong no-where.' We are caught between two worlds, 'radical' versus 'liberal', 'South versus North', and none of them seem to accept us fully. Vina and Nur, who wear a veil are often seen as conservative in the West, but back home we are seen as liberal due to our ideas about feminism. Meanwhile Desy who does not use the veil and is researching gender discourse and its relation to the implementation of sharia law, is often seen as liberal within Indonesian society, but also a conservative in the West as she tried to emphasise that Islam does not oppress women. We feel at home, yet a stranger within the discourse of Global North.

Our sense of otherness also results from our language barriers. English is the third language for us. Each of us, in addition to speaking Indonesian, speaks an indigenous language at home. In our diaries, we write that the language used in the class prevents us from saying what we want to say and, at the same time, also limits our understanding. However, our limitation in using the language may not be due to the linguistic aspect only. Vina, for example, writes in the diary about how she was struggling to understand Butler's book *Gender trouble* (1990), yet she finds it a lot easier to read another of Butler's books, *Precarious life: The power of mourning and violence* (2004). Perhaps the reason that she could understand the second book better is that book discusses the experiences of being Muslim. Being Muslim herself, there

is a sense of proximity that results from the similarity of religious identity between the individuals discussed in the text and herself. Similar situations happened in the class. When the lecturers tried to make us speak by asking about the relevance of the discussion we had with the situations we had in our countries, we were more confident to join the discussion as we were certain that we had knowledge about this.

Proximity of identities

Despite our sense of being different and voiceless, we found in the proximity of identities, a hybrid space where we can negotiate our beings as Indonesian feminists who study in the North. Proximity is the term we develop to illuminate the feeling of relatedness, the feeling of nearness, a sense of association that results from similar though not identical experiences of 'otherness'.

Being a Muslim in the North, we often feel marginalised and discriminated against, perhaps not physically, but through discourses circulated in the media. These feelings assist us in developing empathy and solidarity with the LGBT community in general. The feeling of being different, the sense of being discriminated, creates a sense of proximity between the experiences of LGBTs and ours. Vina writes how she met a transwoman at a conference in the Europe, and together they formed a friendship because they both felt different to the other conference participants.

The proximity of identities can also be created through sameness in perceiving women's issues. Desy, for example, writes how discussing rape enabled her to reach a mutual understanding and develop solidarity with her classmates. The fact rape is normalised made everyone felt connected and realised the pervasiveness of rape culture all over the globe. Feminism is, after all, about creating a space for solidarity for those who are oppressed, marginalised and abused. Clearly, the feeling of sharing some degree of similarities in our experiences helps us to create a hybrid space, 'a third grey space', a space where local meets global, North interacts with South (Bhabha 1994), a place where we are able to negotiate our identities as Southern feminists in the North and, most importantly, a space where solidarity can be developed.

Conclusion

This paper has unpacked our experiences of being Global South feminists in a country in the Global North, the UK. It illuminates some of the struggles we are facing, from

the sense of being invisible to feeling lost. The findings from our collective autoethnography also show how we are engaged in the act of decolonising by co-creating a hybrid space that results from our proximity in identities with other marginalised groups.

The findings, therefore, suggest that feminism needs to move forward to what Connell (2014, p. 227) calls 'a world-centred, rather than metropole-centred approach.' In order for feminists to do that, they need to start acknowledging the diverse experiences of women and men in the Global South. Now seems a perfect moment to do that. The recent Women's March in cities around the world in January 2017 illuminated the importance of taking into account one's intersectionality. Women from different groups like Muslims, LGBT, Black, Indigenous, White American, Latino, all gathered in the demonstration to support each other and challenge the state's oppression. From the far-right wing in America and Europe to the rise of radical religious groups in Indonesia and other Asian countries, feminism has never been more relevant to address those issues, and our experiences advise that this can only be achieved by creating a space where solidarity and understanding can be created. To achieve such things, feminism will need more representation and visibility of women and men from different backgrounds.

This paper is not written out of an anti-North, anti-Western, or anti-European sentiment. The three of us acknowledge that it was our engagement with theories in the North, both postcolonialism and decoloniality that allowed us to understand the importance of recognising different voices of women. While our paper focuses on our experiences as Indonesians studying in the North, it is not our aim to generalise our experiences to other students from the South. In fact, what we would like to highlight is the importance of not generalising and homogenising students' experiences on whatever basis. Therefore, lecturers need to be reflexive and attempt to include various students' experiences and cultural backgrounds. This could be seen as ways to develop solidarity and different perspectives that could enhance the curriculum itself. The lecturers also need to recognise proximities in students' experiences so that each student can feel connected. Pedagogical practices in a feminist classroom should provide spaces and opportunities for each of the students in the classroom to reflect on their experiences and having other students listen to their stories. By doing that, the making of a new geopolitics of knowledge can be begun.

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