

From Decolonising the Self to Coming to Voice

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Of the myriad calls for decolonising—the university, the museum, the curriculum, the mind, and so on—few have given attention to decolonising the self.¹ In my/our process of decolonising the self, poetry² has been pivotal in giving name to the nameless, which is dreamed but not yet realised (Lorde 2007, 73). As a black woman/woman of colour, following the pen strokes of Audre Lorde (2007) and Gloria Anzaldúa (1987), who put flesh back into words, poetry is a necessity in decolonising and reconstituting the self. In what follows, I hope to walk with the reader on this path of realising my colonised self, decolonising it through the emergence of the plural self, and the eventual reconstituting of self as a coming to voice (Lorde 2007, 79–86).

For those of us seeking higher education as former colonised beings, we enter the academy as both the researcher and the researched. There is a pressure to present ourselves either as a traditional representative of an entire region or ethnicity, or as an assimilated “modern” researcher, with the dichotomy never being questioned. Yet this fragmenting of the self points directly to the limitation of the individual subjective “I”. In *The Universal Machine*, Fred Moten (2018, ix) challenges us to contemplate the exhaustion of phenomenology due to its clinginess and servitude to the individual, an inherent assumption within phenomenology that “renders no-thingness unavailable and unavowable” (2018, ix). What Moten alludes to here is the absence of space within phenomenology for us to claim our humanity. In other words, a self that seeks individuality through subjective representation remains colonised and any

¹ This project is inspired by Ngũgĩ wa Thiongo’s iconic project of “decolonising the mind” (Ngũgĩ 1986).

² The poetry referred to here is the “revelatory distillation of experience, not the sterile word play that, too often, the white fathers distorted the word poetry to mean—in order to cover a desperate wish for imagination without insight” (Lorde 2007, 73).

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“decolonising” aims are cancelled out by the individual’s obedience to modernity/coloniality (cf. Quijano 2007).

Decolonising the self, then, requires grappling with what is left after we strip away the years, accolades and achievements bestowed upon us by indoctrinated formal schooling and learning how to speak from and beyond the colonial wound as an act of collective healing and what it means to live-think-be and do decolonial feminist work. It asks us to reimagine ourselves in relation, invoking within us the connection to ourselves, our ancestors, the land, our bodies and others, so that the knowledge that is inherent and deep within us may be cultivated. It asks, when we peel away the layers of scar tissue necrotised at the colonial wound through “epistemological deep listening” and heal all that has been erased, denied, shamed, negated and exiled, what emerges?

IqhawekaziRani

I am not a daughter of this soil
It is my adopted home
A home that cradles my orphaned soul

You say, I am not African
I am African
I am African in my heartbeat
I am African in my compassion
I am African in my generosity
I am African in my determination

It is the only reality I know

You say, I am not Indian
I am Indian
I am Indian in my breath
I am Indian in my kindness
I am Indian in my courageousness
I am Indian in my resilience

It is the only existence I know

I am a daughter of two Mothers
I cried for *Umama waseNdiya*,³ as I was held by *Am'mā āppirikkā*⁴
Do not ask me to choose!

Both have raised me
one breast feeding my fire
one breast feeding my spirit

³ *Umama WaseNdiya*—Mother India in isiZulu.

⁴ *Am'mā āppirikkā*—Mama Africa in Tamil.

My feet move to the rhythm of your drums
one foot following the tabla
one foot following the *isigubhu*

It hurts *Am'mā āppirikkā*
It hurts *Umama waseNdiya*

My tears fall at your feet
You catch me as they fall

My child, your heart beats with the rhythm of *Am'mā āppirikkā*
My child, your breath moves with the harmony of *Umama waseNdiya*

My child, your body is Indian
My child, your being is African
Moving in perfect synchronicity

Rise *Qhawekazi*⁵
Rise *Rani*⁶

Rise, so you can raise others

In my/our process of decolonising the self, echoing Fred Moten's (2018) dictum, *I consent not to be a single being*. In foregrounding the privilege inherent in the choice of positioning ourselves as black women or women of colour, I/we acknowledge the "scales in the intensity of colonial wounds" (Mignolo and Walsh 2018, 125). As a third-generation South African woman of Indian ancestry, whose caste oppression was dropped to the depths of the *kala pani* (black waters), only to be picked up as hoes and machetes in the sugar plantations of British Natal, followed by white domination, brutality and dehumanisation known as apartheid, I/we consent not to be a single being. As the first generation to attend university, first in KwaZulu-Natal and currently at a northern-European institution, and the first woman from a lineage largely erased to be in the privileged position of being able to write ourselves into history, I/we consent not to be a single being, because our fates are inextricably tied. My dear black women and women of colour mothers, sisters and daughters, don't you see, to not be in solidarity is to "sit on the same throne we have been forced to kneel before ... [to] meet the crooked standards of excellence of the [*baas*, master, *sahib*, *memsahib*] conquistadores and slave holders ... still in the grip of imperial thinking ... [which] always sacrifices someone to imperial dreams" (Morales Levins 1998, 39).

⁵ *Qhawekazi* in isiZulu refers to a queen and heroine who fights for her being and her people.

⁶ *Rani*—Queen in Tamil.

Voice

Who are we when we are not spoken for
spoken of
spoken over
when we are not given a voice
not given a platform to amplify our voice
not given the volume control of our voice

Who are we when we find ourselves hypervisibilized
invisibilized
represented
erased

What sounds have been muted in the depths of our colonial wound
A cacophony of visceral screams
filling our mouths
swallowed
stuck in our throats
swallowed
wrenching our guts
carried
womb to womb
grandmother to mother
mother to daughter

Our scream
is the sound of birth
of life itself
of thunder rolling
of wind howling
of waves crashing
of night turning into day
of sun rising
of clouds moving
of flowers blooming
of leaves falling
of day turning to night
of stars shining
of moon waxing and waning
This is the sound of our voice.

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Biography

Zuleika Bibi Sheik is a poet, writer, yogi, activist, teacher and PhD candidate at the International Institute of Social Studies (ISS), Erasmus University Rotterdam. As a third-generation South African woman of Indian descent, through the British colonial system of indentured labour, and the first generation to attend university, she has, through her work, questioned the legitimacy and claim of the university as the sole producer of knowledge. Her poetry, short stories and academic writing are positioned in the liminal space where decolonial thought meets Black/Dalit/Chicana feminisms. In her PhD research she refuses the “masters’ tools”, which have been complicit in her/our own dehumanisation, opting to collectively cultivate epistemic non-violent methods with other women of colour in the Netherlands instead. Through her work she attempts to transcend identity politics by focusing on onto-epistemological justice and collective resistance and liberation.