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Academic *Tamasha* and its Limits under the Shadow of Authoritarianism*

Statutory Warning: This article's academic ambitions were occasionally disrupted by voices that were too unruly to be packaged within neat method bottles that are tied together by respectable citations from powers that be. In order to discipline these unruly voices, they are written in a different font.

Being an academic in the humanities can occasionally give one the sense of being less of a mercenary in the current world order. Having a tenured position in a space that is relatively higher in the academic food chain¹ or having hopes for such a position is conducive to achieving this slightly self-righteous view about oneself. In my journeys through the corridors of academia in India (as a tenured Assistant Professor), United Kingdom (as a PhD student) and Germany (as a post-doctoral researcher) there have been moments when I was guilty of feeling such self-righteousness.

However, since “the canon of thought in all the disciplines of the Social Sciences and Humanities in the *Westernized university*...is based on the knowledge produced by a few men in five countries in the Western Europe,”² it is difficult to sustain such a sense if you are an academic from a different context. After reading reams and reams of critical theory that elaborates the possibilities for challenging

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1 Jokes that circulate around about the presence of a food chain in the university system within which the Dean has the ability to give “policy to God,” the Associate Professor can occasionally be addressed by God whereas the instructor has to pray a lot (Bronner 2012, 88) can be used to understand the power structures within this system. If we take into account the broader functioning of global academia in the humanities and social sciences, this food chain will be far more elaborate. For example, it is possible for white academics from the Global North to form all-white research groups with funding of a couple of millions to study precarious communities within authoritarian contexts in the Global South. Within the Global South itself, there are considerable inequalities in terms of access to research funding and the cultural and social capital that can lead to ‘significant academic contributions’ in terms of monographs or journal articles. Within such food chains, those in the lower orders fuel the success of those above them. The so-called ‘research subjects’ who serve as the material for study for academics within various levels of the hierarchy of the food chain can be situated at the bottom of this chain.

2 Grosfoguel 2013, 74.

existing hegemonies – mostly written by dead or alive white people – one could wonder, like Hamid Dabashi (2013), whether non-Europeans can think.

At the same time, even when one positions oneself as a researcher from the Global South,³ it is not easy to throw stones at the system when one works within the glass houses of academia. The power structures that confer the stature of knowledge⁴ to academic productions are not monolithic. For example, in India, the westernised university is also a site of upper caste privilege. Similarly, class functions as another important factor in determining the hierarchies of academia in many parts of the world. Apart from such obvious inequalities, one also needs to take into account the “epistemic racism/sexism that is foundational to the knowledge structures of the westernised university,”⁵ while ascertaining the privileges it confers to people from certain backgrounds. As scholars like Grosfoguel (2013) point out, the emergence of this form of university is tied to the silencing of other voices through the genocides and epistemicides of the long 16th century against native Americans and indigenous people of Asia, Jews and Muslims during the conquest of Al Andalus, Africans who were transported as slaves and European women who were burnt alive as witches.

So, anybody who operates as an academic within the framework of the westernised university is functioning within terrains which can pose far more dilemmas than the bureaucratic processes of ethical clearances acknowledge. As an academic from India, I have always found it difficult to negotiate these terrains. In order to move up within the academic food chain, one needs to wade through the sharp edges of peer reviews and appraisals where the rules of the game are already set. There is a need to cite theorists with good brand value and respectable citation indexes. While Europeans have the privilege of not reading theory that comes from other lifeworlds and perspectives,⁶ researchers from the Global South cannot afford a similar ignorance of the haloed white men of academia. I am sure that there must be ways of negotiating these terrains through path-breaking modes and tactics of resistance. A range of feminist, queer, indigenous and black scholars have shown the possibilities for such resistance.

But, not everyone who operates within unequal and unjust structures will have the capacity or frame of mind to go in for radical confrontations. As an early

³ According to the rules of academia that insist on precise definitions of not very easily definable terms, I would like to state that I use the term ‘Global South’ with an awareness of the contentions around the use of the term. Molosi-France and Makoni 2020.

⁴ Foucault 1980.

⁵ Grosfoguel 2013, 73.

⁶ Dabashi 2015.

career researcher who has a pretty low position in the academic food chain, I am certainly not good with such confrontations. My feeble efforts to point out the whiteness of academic structures often slide into heated arguments about problems of essentialist claims around ethnicity.

I have many white friends. white, black, yellow, brown...all are constructions. BUT CAN WE HAVE LESS OF MONOCHROME AND PENISES IN PLACES OF POWER?

Due to my inability to look for ways of radically interrogating the power structures of academia within which I was also operating with the privileges of a middle-class background, I needed a different approach to tackle the dilemmas around my own role within the so called ‘production of knowledge’ at the westernised university. This led me to explore the possibility of approaching the field of academic production as a *tamasha*.⁷ In South Asia, the word *tamasha* has several meanings, ranging from joke to entertainment and commotion. Perceiving an activity or incident as a *tamasha* brings that activity or incident to the realm of the non-serious, in which the participants or onlookers act with a sense of ridiculousness about their own role.⁸ While some events are designed to be a *tamasha*, it is also possible to turn almost anything into a *tamasha*. For example, it is not uncommon to refer to an election or a government initiative as a *tamasha*.⁹ Such references signal that these activities and endeavours have entered the plane of the ridiculous.

It is possible to use *tamasha* as a conceptual framework to respond to seemingly invisible power structures.¹⁰ For example, in colonial India, local populations responded to the staging of spectacles of science by the colonial government which were intended to awe them by treating them as *tamasha*.¹¹ The representatives of the colonial government were dismayed by this approach. The effort to narrate the superiority of the colonial power through spectacles that showed the command of these powers over science did not have the intended outcome because the local population chose the frame of *tamasha* to respond to them. So, if the frame of *tamasha*, which draws from its multiple meanings in the South Asian context, including joke, commotion, and entertainment, can be useful to negotiate everyday life within the sharp edges of diverse power structures, how can one employ it to function within the field of academia?

⁷ Nizaruddin 2017.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Siddiqui 2021.

¹⁰ Nizaruddin 2017.

¹¹ Prakash 1999.

Participating in Academic *Tamasha*

Before exploring specific ways of using *tamasha* to negotiate the tricky terrains of academia, it might be useful to outline some of the rocky edges of its terrains. On the surface, it might appear that academics across the world have equal chances of rising up within the food chain of academia through ‘rigour’, ‘hard work’, ‘talent’ and ‘pathbreaking ideas’. However, this assumption is only as true as the statement that any actor in the world can become a star in Hollywood or Bollywood. The process of making academic stars with enviable citation indexes is a complex one which requires all kinds of capital, ranging from academic, social and cultural capital to economic capital.¹² As Moran points out, elite institutions have the capital required for such construction and maintenance of academic stardom. This kind of construction of academic stars also depletes already scarce resources that are available to the non-stars, early career researchers as well as those in precarious non-tenured positions. The situation becomes more complex for academics who work and live in the Global South. The star-making networks that do the alchemy of producing ‘eminent philosophers’ who apparently disrupt “ideological structures”¹³ generally wine and dine in the Global North.

Of course, there are star academics who are located in the Global South as well, though they are considerably fewer. And you can argue that, as an early career researcher, one should pursue the muse of knowledge instead of being resentful towards star academics. But, within the existing food chain of academia, the gold standard of citation index ensures that early career researchers cannot ignore the fact that more established and well known researchers get the resources, time and publishing contracts that are needed for what gets counted as ‘quality research.’ It is the age-old problem; you need capital in the first place to build more capital – be it academic, social or cultural capital.

So, as a lowly early career researcher who resented needing to cite X, Y and Z, who have already said whatever has to be said about anything in her discipline, I began to use the frame of *tamasha* to operate within the field of academia. This framework was immensely useful in several circumstances including the following: (a) while attending conferences where speakers talked about how humour began in Greece; (b) when feeling the secret desire to burn the library down while browsing through the books on documentary theory (my field of study), which hardly ever mentioned India though the country was home to an institution that was at one time considered to be the largest documentary produ-

¹² Moran 1998.

¹³ Zabala 2012.

cer in the world;¹⁴ or (c) while feeling the need to chase down the peer reviewer who wrote that my work was too South-Asia-centric to be of any relevance to discussions about digital media.

Also, in the publish or perish world of academia, to pass through the needle eye of peer review processes, one has to cite at least some of the venerable white men. So in the spirit of *tamasha* I used to cite a few while trying to smuggle in a few others who did not belong to the list of usual suspects who needed to be cited in my field of research. Being an artistic researcher also helped because the less dogmatic research structures around this mode of research allowed me to ridicule the need to cite Rancière in a work about film and anti-nuclear resistance in Tamil Nadu, even though I had to cite the grand old man (or someone similar) to make my work appear ‘scholarly’ enough.¹⁵ However, approaching anything, including the field of academia as a *tamasha*, comes with its limitations. Situating oneself as a participant in a *tamasha* may not bring any radical changes to the existing power structures. But, approaching academia as a *tamasha* allowed me to operate within a system which produced erudite analyses of strategies of resistance and subversion without paying much attention to the structures of exploitation and hierarchy through which such analyses gains the stature of scholarly contribution. I was also an active participant within such structures; I insisted on ‘rigour’ whenever I was in a gatekeeping position, without taking into account the severe inequalities that allowed those with a range of privileged positions – including class, racial or caste backgrounds – to set the so-called standards around ‘rigour’. But, like many participants in any *tamasha*, I was functioning within the structures of academia with an amount of self-derision.¹⁶ However, this mode of functioning definitely has its limits. Personally, I encountered the limits of framing my role as a participant in a *tamasha* while trying to function as an academic in India under the authoritarian rule of Modi, the current Prime Minister of the right wing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government, which subscribes to the Hindutva ideology of Hindu majoritarianism.¹⁷

¹⁴ Battaglia 2014.

¹⁵ Nizaruddin 2017.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ The peer reviewer of this chapter – who was kind, a rarity among (anonymous) peer reviewers – suggested that I should expand the arguments made here by drawing from the authoritarian experiences in other parts of South Asia, such as Pakistan. Since I have no lived experience of these contexts, I have limited myself here to the context of authoritarianism in India that I have had the misfortune to experience.

Authoritarianism and the Limits of Participating in the Academic *Tamasha*

Even while acknowledging the structural inequalities that are part of the present mode of functioning of the academia, one cannot discount the importance of academic understanding in acquiring informed insights about various phenomena or social processes. Academic freedom is crucial for gaining such insights. While there is a need for a clearer definition of academic freedom, it is possible to argue that the current rise of authoritarianism in many parts of the world has undermined this freedom in several contexts.¹⁸ In the case of India, several universities became key targets of attack by actors with ties to the regime in power; many of these universities also became sites of resistance against such attacks. The university where I used to teach, Jamia Millia Islamia in New Delhi, became one of the epicentres of protests against the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) introduced by the Modi government. This legislation, which can be used to discriminate against Muslims, met with stiff opposition in several parts of the country. In the case of Jamia Millia Islamia, responses to protest included a police attack on students¹⁹ as well as an incident in which a right-wing gun man fired at and injured a student in full police presence.²⁰

For me personally, these incidents showed the limits of the framework of *tamasha*. While making an academic response to the incidents unfurling around me through an article,²¹ I could no longer look at my work as a participation in a *tamasha*. It is difficult to use the framework of *tamasha* when your students are being tear-gassed, beaten up or detained, when your library is being destroyed,²² when you are worried about the draconian antiterrorism law that is floating through the campus looking for its next victim,²³ when right-wing goons kill with impunity as parts of your city burn in what gets termed ‘Hindu-Muslim riots.’²⁴ At the same time, the turmoil around me in a country which is now considered ‘partly free’²⁵ was not the only factor that made me realise the limits of the frame-

¹⁸ Bhatti and Sundar 2020.

¹⁹ Nitika 2020.

²⁰ Sundaram 2020.

²¹ Nizaruddin 2020.

²² Shankar 2020.

²³ *Scroll* Staff 2020.

²⁴ Ellis-Petersen 2020.

²⁵ Freedom House 2021.

work of *tamasha*.²⁶ The already skewed landscape of academic knowledge production in many disciplines, where research produced by academics from a few countries dominates²⁷ because of the concentration of resources and networks, could worsen with the deepening of authoritarianism in places like India. Arghavan et al. have written about how “[m]arginalized people of color from the Global South serve white academics as interesting objects of study to form a research group”²⁸; pointing out that funds from such projects generally provide employment to white scholars. Within these structures, certain populations become ‘objects’ of study without much of a role in deciding the nature, parameters and processes of such studies.

Hey, race is a fiction. NEANDERTHAL, MAYBE THAT IS ANOTHER RACE? “YES, YES. but like most fictions, it sticks to the skin and makes one pay with pain in many currencies”

At the same time, though phenomena like “Yale University’s all-white department of black studies,” which Paul Beatty (2015) draws up in his brilliant novel *The Sellout*, are not unusual within the very unequal terrains of academia, race or nationality are not the only positions of advantage in these terrains. As mentioned before, the very nature of academia, which privileges those with academic capital – often linked with economic, social, or cultural capital – excludes many marginalised groups who are often topics for examination for scholars from more privileged backgrounds. I have also benefitted from my privileges as a middle-class person whose parents were college teachers and have paid many bills with the money I earned from the categorisation of tears and resistance of precarious communities on the edge. However, an understanding of my own culpability within the power structures of academia did not prevent me from being extremely resentful when the tables were turned. Academics who are located in the Global South are often important entry points for what can be categorised as researcher tourists who arrive from the Global North. These researcher tourists, with access to funding that is very difficult to raise in authoritarian contexts for critical research, arrive with an intention to sieve out ‘resistance’ from extremely complex and violent lived realities. In a short time span they try to mine for ‘resistance;’ with the hope of turning such ‘resistance’ into the gold of highly citable

²⁶ While India as a country was classified as partly free recently, people in several parts that are administered by the Indian state, such as Kashmir, have been living under severe repression for decades. Kazi 2009.

²⁷ Wolhuter 2017.

²⁸ Arghavan, Hirschfelder and Motyl 2019, 187.

published academic outputs.²⁹ Many colleagues from the Global South often complain about their encounters with such mining efforts and my own brushes with similar efforts have significantly increased the average level of grudge that I hold against the world.³⁰ Under the present authoritarian context in India, I was unable to situate such encounters as a part of the academic *tamasha* in which I continue to be a participant.

The manner in which misery in one part of the world fuels the career growth of researchers in another part is certainly not a new phenomenon, and the existing inequalities within the field of academia are largely responsible for the creation and sustenance of such positions. It is convenient to imagine that academic research is born of the toils of the lone genius who single-mindedly pursues fieldwork and toils in archives or libraries to produce ‘new knowledge.’ In reality, the process of production of such knowledge requires research grants and time off from teaching responsibilities as well as personal circumstances that provide the time and energy to brave the various gatekeeping mechanisms of academia. The manner in which this process produces more male geniuses and creates roadblocks for women has been studied.³¹ Apart from women, this process has the ability to sieve out a range of varying degrees of marginal positions. Academics who are located in the Global South generally have considerably less access to resources and networks that are essential to rising up within the food chain of academia by playing the citation index game with precision. However, even within the Global South, there are severe disparities between academics who work in more established universities and those who work in colleges with scant resources. In India, I used to belong to that privileged group of academics who have a tenured position as well as a certain degree of mobility to access resources and networks that are essential to stay relevant within the citation game. My position within a central university in Delhi was far different from that of many other colleagues. Some of them teach thirty contact hours a week as the only teacher in departments in remote border towns, while others work in private universities where their classes are recorded and watched by the management.

²⁹ These time spans can often be linked with academic calendars. For example, in the context of Bosnia, Damir Arsenijevic (in a personal conversation with me in 2022) mentions about how anthropologists are in bloom in June.

³⁰ On the other hand, it is also possible to look at most efforts at research – including my own – as efforts at mining for the elusive academic ‘excellence’ that is measured through citation indexes.

³¹ Steinþórsdóttir et al. 2020.

Who has the privilege to write?

But, being able to write itself is a privilege.

and, those who write and are cited, they earned it through centuries or even thousands of years of 'hard work'

Amidst so many layers of inequality that are part of the academic terrain, in India, the targeting of university spaces, academic communities and individual academics³² under the present regime creates yet another factor that deepens existing divisions. In India, the existing meagre funding for humanities research comes mainly from state funding. In circumstances where the majoritarian Hindu-tva ideology that informs the group of organisations under the fold of Sangh Parivar including BJP – the current ruling party – poses a serious threat to academic freedom, securing grants from government agencies to study the implications of majoritarianism is almost impossible. The way in which funding cuts threaten the existence of centres for women's studies as well as studies on social exclusion³³ shows the difficulty of producing academic work under the current circumstances. Bhatti and Sunder (2020) have demonstrated how the agenda of cultural transformation of Sangh Parivar groups such as RSS (*Rashtriya Swayam Sevak Sangh*)³⁴ make certain university spaces their specific targets.

But, there is still hope. With the jails being more open than the doors of research funds, someone might come up with prison notebooks that can rival Gramsci's.

While physical attacks and imprisonment that targets students and academics are easier to perceive, there is also within the country a simultaneous stifling of the research landscape that seriously affects the ability of scholars, especially early career researchers and students, to produce work that can rise up within the global academic food chain. As mentioned before, this can further increase the existing inequalities within global academia. Personally, these circumstances made me realise that this shrinking of the research landscape around me can also curtail my ability to approach my work as an academic as a *tamasha*. When the

³² Bhatti and Sunder 2020.

³³ Sharma 2017; Bhuyan 2019.

³⁴ RSS, which is the main organisation within the Sangh Parivar group, has links with fascist and Nazi ideologies (Leidig 2020). As mentioned earlier, the ruling BJP is a part of the Sangh Parivar network. For an account of how RSS functions as a deep state within the rule of Modi see Chatterji et al. 2019.

already limited scope of functioning as an early career researcher located in the Global South is further threatened by the spectre of authoritarianism, the space of manoeuvre that is required to take on the position of one who participates in a *tamasha* disappears; at least that was my experience. Here again, not all academics face the same scale of limitations. I was able to get a postdoctoral fellowship from a German foundation for more than two years, which allowed me to pursue my research interests at a department at a German university and a research centre in India; both places provided me with very supportive and inspiring environments. However, such privileges are accessible only to very few researchers in India. I continue to wonder about how many of the students and academics that I have encountered, who resist the rising tide of authoritarianism and majoritarian violence in the country at great personal costs, will be part of the writing of academic discourses about such resistances. It is highly likely that profitable academic output about such resistance will be authored by researcher tourists from the Global North with access to more resources and capital.³⁵

The Way Forward

So, while the framework of *tamasha* might be useful at certain junctures to navigate the unequal structures of global academia, the limits of this framework can be easily stretched in several circumstances including under authoritarian contexts. There is a need to address the roots of such structural inequalities with the same precision with which academics do hairsplitting around various theories and approaches within their disciplines. Maybe instead of keynote speeches in conferences by fat cat theorists who seem to know the last word on everything that needs to be said (and they often do not live in the contexts that they speak about), there is a need to listen to students who are located in the terrains that they speak from.³⁶ Of course, such gestures will only be symbolic and they will not change the fundamental structural problems within academia.

³⁵ Here it is not my intention to locate every researcher from the Global North as a researcher tourist who works within what can be characterised as an extractive paradigm. There are several examples of solidarities and collaboration across borders. *The Wire* Staff 2019.

³⁶ Within academic penchant for hairsplitting, this could be seen as a romanticization of people who are located within certain contexts. Such romanticization is not the intention here because that can limit the mobility of scholars who are located outside the usual lifeworlds from which academia generally draws its 'experts.'

Addressing such fundamental problems is all the more important when faced with the spectre of authoritarianism because the global and interconnected nature of academia can work against the efforts of authoritarian regimes to violently curtail possible expressions around specific issues and topics. For example, the project of BJP and the larger Sangh Parivar group of organisations, which includes efforts to rewrite the history of India to suit their ideas of a glorious Hindu majoritarian past,³⁷ will continue to be difficult at a global scale because it will be impossible to gain consensus from historians across the world for this project.

There are several examples of academics in various disciplines who build solidarities across borders to navigate difficult working conditions.³⁸ However, the compulsions of the neoliberal university make such solidarities difficult. As Gudavarthy (2019) points out in the context of secularism and ethnic conflict in India, it is difficult to carve out solidarities when you are competing with each other in the neoliberal order. For example, while scholars located within authoritarian contexts might be struggling with the limitations posed by the environment around them, other scholars who are positioned in what could be seen as greener pastures of academia in the Global North are struggling with precarity in jobs and limited contracts. The neoliberal university structure and the food chain hierarchies within academia places both sets of scholars in competition with each other for very scarce resources.

While the question of solidarity is always a tricky one, given the power imbalances inherent within frameworks of solidarity,³⁹ there is scope for academics across the world to work together to deal with many issues including the threat from authoritarianism. However, any genuine solidarity will require a serious rethinking of academic structures that give preferences to those who come from various kinds of privileged backgrounds. While there is enough talk (and generally little action as in the case of climate change) about the need to disinvest in academia from heterosexual white male geniuses, whiteness or one's gender are not the only layers of privilege within the academia. Class and caste differences, as well as hierarchies within specific societies, have serious implications in deciding who emerges as a 'serious' academic within the food chain. Unless there are genuine efforts to address these structural inequalities and precarity within academia at a global scale, the only option for many academics will be to operate as participants in a *tamasha* within the existing power structures. And the spectre of

³⁷ Sarkar 2019.

³⁸ Schneider and Chaudhuri 2021.

³⁹ Sözen 2021.

the rising trend of authoritarianism in many parts of the world can unsettle even such limited frameworks like that of the *tamasha*.

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