University at Buffalo School of Law

Digital Commons @ University at Buffalo School of Law

10-12-2020

Nadine Shaanta Murshid, Unprecedented Times

Nadine Shaanta Murshid
University at Buffalo

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.law.buffalo.edu/baldy_center_blog

Blog 5

Nadine Shaanta Murshid, Unprecedented Times

Photo caption: A homeless woman cooking on the street during government-imposed lockdown as a preventive measure against the COVID-19 coronavirus in Dhaka, Bangladesh, on April 10, 2020. (Baldy Center/Shutterstock)

Blog Author: Nadine Shaanta Murshid, Associate Professor and Interim Associate Dean for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, the University at Buffalo School of Social Work. This blog is Professor Murshid's personal reflection on Unprecedented Times.

Introduction: In my work, I focus on violence which is explicitly and implicitly embedded in patriarchy, racism, and capitalism. I hold institutions accountable as I analyze policies and procedures that produce the social problems that we see around us. Here are four thoughts I'd like to share.

Unprecedented Times

Blog Author: [Nadine Shaanta Murshid](#) is an Associate Professor and Interim Associate Dean for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion at the University at Buffalo School of Social Work. This blog is Professor Murshid's personal reflection on Unprecedented Times.

Keywords: Activism, Advocacy, Community, Criminal Justice, Diversity, Equality, Equity, Discrimination, Colonialism, Neocolonialism, Racism, Patriarchy, Capitalism, Oppression, Interlocking System, Police Brutality, Inequality, Mass Incarceration, Covid-19

In my work, I focus on violence which is explicitly and implicitly embedded in patriarchy, racism, and capitalism. I hold institutions accountable as I analyze policies and procedures that produce the social problems that we see around us. Here are **four thoughts** I'd like to share.

1.

There was a children's song that we learned when we were, well, children. It went, *O ma go ma, Onno kichur golpo bolo. ek je chilo raja rani onek holo.* It's a song with a cheery tune, much like a nursery rhyme. But if you paid attention to the words, they'd haunt you. Here is a translation:

O ma go ma
Bangla song written by Salil Chowdhury; translated into English by Nadine Shaanta Murshid.

> *O mother, please tell me another story*
>
> *[I've had] Enough of 'Once upon a time, there was a King and a Queen'*
>
>
> *Why don't you tell me?*
>
> *That the maid's son in that other neighborhood*
>
> *Died, feverish and hungry.*
>
>
> *There are rows of big houses and cars around us.*
>
> *Tell me why,*
>
> *There are, still,*
>
> *So many people who sleep on sidewalks.*
>
>
> *Tell me why,*
>
> *Anjana was kicked out from school for not being able to pay tuition.*

Every time I ask

You say,

You'll know when you grow up.

Why don't you tell me?

Why do so many people beg on the streets?

Why don't you tell me?

Why my two elder brothers sit idle at home, unemployed

[Which makes no sense]

Because they were good students?

When do we start developing political consciousness and relatedly, critical consciousness? When it is introduced to you, perhaps, even in the form of popular culture.

This song from the perspective of a child, asking about the violence of poverty cut deep when I was a child. I could automatically *see* the children who begged on the streets; see the public walls painted with the words: Bangladesh Bekar Party (Bekar means unemployed); see the inequality between domestic workers and those who employed them; see how under President Ershad's autocratic regime no one had voice; how dissent was met with violence and extra-judicial killings. I remember my sporadic school attendance in 1990 at the height of the social movement to topple the dictatorship of Ershad. The movement consisted primarily of Dhaka University students along with civil society, academics, activists. Indeed, university students have always been at the forefront of bringing change in Bangladesh. This was true during the Language Movement in 1952 (when Bengalis in East Pakistan had to fight for their right to speak in Bangla), Bangladesh's Liberation War in 1971, and it was true in 1990 when (electoral) democracy came to Bangladesh.

2.

Now more than ever it is clear that "interlocking systems," to use Patricia Collin Hills instructive term – colonialism, neocolonialism, racism, patriarchy, and capitalism -- come together to create oppression. Under global capitalism, all countries are connected, not least by the global supply chain (and the Internet, with some exceptions), which means, there is a possibility for the workers of the world to unite against the exploitation they experience. The question is, why don't they? And more importantly, who is stopping them – and how?

3.

When I first started teaching in 2014, I had students who would say that we live in post-racial America. That racism no longer exists. Then Black Lives Matter happened in 2016, completely changing that narrative. I no longer hear about post racial anything. Not among aspiring social workers in my classroom, at any rate.

In 2020 Black Lives Matter opened peoples' eyes to how racism is structurally produced. That movement, again, allowed for a shift in conversation not only about how racism manifests in our individual lives but also about how whiteness itself is a system of oppression. There are plenty of examples: Police brutality against Black and Brown bodies. Mass incarceration of Black people with support from the school to prison pipeline. The disparity in health outcomes between Black and other groups. The disproportionately high Covid-19 death rate among Black, Brown, Indigenous, and other people of color.

Black and Brown scholars (Angela Davis, Audre Lorde, bell hooks, Eduardo Bonilla-Silva to name a few) have repeatedly called our attention to these issues for decades now but have been dismissed, treated as social pariahs, jailed, and silenced in one way or another at various points in time before being recognized for their contribution to our knowledge. My hope is: as we pave our way out of white supremacy, we will use their work to guide us.

These are not coincidences, but social engineering. BLM v. 2 is holding us all accountable. As they should.

4.

These are unprecedented times, we are told.

I agree.

Not (only) because we are in the middle of a deadly pandemic. But because we are finally waking up to the idea that we have (implicitly) consented to the creation of the oppressive systems of this world, participated in them, and we are complicit in the violence that we see around us.

We have the *power* to dismantle these systems that produce violence. It is *because* we, the people, have power that racism, classism, ableism, sexism, heterosexism (and other forms of oppression) are used to create fissures between groups that may otherwise be connected, make solidarity impossible between various forms of "us" and "them."

We can no longer allow that to happen.

If political consciousness begins at a young age, then, these unprecedented times presents us with numerous conscious-awakening moments. Like children learning "*O ma go,*" we cannot just repeat the words of the songs; we must allow the words to haunt us in ways that turns our awakening to authentic actions for change.