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Contestations over Hijrat and postcoloniality: Forming a theoretical framework
for the doctoral journey

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Contestations over Hijrat and postcoloniality: Forming a theoretical framework for the doctoral journey

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Abstract

My PhD study explored the experiences of a cohort of Iranian doctoral candidates in New Zealand. This paper presents my response to the unexpected challenge I faced as I collected data and formed my theoretical framework. I found that Western interpretations of non-Western international students largely ignored social-cultural specificities. I navigated this challenge by drawing from the postcolonial concepts of ambivalence, uncertainty and cultural hybridity to make sense of the way Iranian doctoral candidates' experiences in a Western university were analysed and understood. First, I conceptualised the knowledge journey of the research participants as a Hijrat – an Islamic and Persian cultural metaphor that refers to the experience of departure from one's homeland. Second, I drew from postcolonial theory to manage the West/non-West binary. This paper offers non-Western doctoral candidates and their Western supervisors an example of how cultural congruence can be understood when completing a PhD study in the West. In a general sense, it is important to acknowledge and critically explore the impacts of past socio-political experiences and practices (e.g., colonisation) and historical knowledge traditions (e.g., Islamic) on present thinking and practices.

Key words

Postcoloniality; Hijrat; theoretical framework; international doctoral studies; cultural hybridity

Introduction

International students negotiate a myriad of complexities when completing doctoral studies, such as language and “governmental, financial and/or cultural expectations” (Denholm & Denholm, 2012, p. 165). My doctoral project argued that the path to completion of a PhD for Iranian international students is challenging and has yet to be examined in a manner that would benefit those affected by the experience – present and future Iranian doctoral candidates, academic staff and New Zealand tertiary institutions.

Interviews with four Iranian doctoral applicants in Iran and six Iranian doctoral candidates in New Zealand found that the participants, regardless of their disciplines, had a clear academic focus to engage



with doctoral studies in New Zealand. I was able to capture the complexities within a) participants' educational experiences in Iran, reflections on the meaning of doctoral studies in relation to their life experiences, and why they sought to enrol in a doctoral programme in New Zealand; and b) how these students attempted to navigate their respective doctoral journeys while addressing their social and academic realities in New Zealand. However, the implications arising from the non-West/West binary they experienced, both within and outside Iran, contributed to a few unexpected challenges for me to make sense of their experiences as Iranians in New Zealand.

Although an Iran-West binary is well established within the socio-political sphere and rhetoric globally, my challenge was to avoid reifying this binary because it was neither helpful to understand intercultural academic experiences nor did it serve any positive function in the realm of professional experiences. To navigate the theoretical complexities I faced, I drew from the Islamic cultural concept of Hijrat, which I used along with postcolonial theory to form a theoretical framework. However, forming such a theoretical framework became increasingly onerous, relatively contentious and a daunting experience.

My unexpected challenge: Literature on international students

The literature on doctoral education tends to examine international students' experiences as if they share similar academic, social and cultural knowledge (Singh, 2018; Singh et al., 2016). My challenges with the literature on international students were multifaceted because this literature tends to 1) interpret experiences through Western paradigms; 2) fail to include diverse historical, political and social realities of non-Western doctoral candidates; and 3) ignore their specific knowledge assumptions and the complexities of their engagement with doctoral studies in the West.

This gap in the literature served as a catalyst for me to develop a theoretical framework that focused on the socio-cultural, academic and political contexts specific to the cohort of Iranian doctoral students in my research study. In order to focus on these specificities, I grappled with connecting Hijrat and postcoloniality as a theoretical framework to analyse the participants' narratives. While Hijrat was initially understood as an under-theorised Islamic concept, applying postcolonial theory was also challenging because it was nested in the coloniser-colonised binary.

My challenge of defining Hijrat

The act of Hijrat, as interpreted in my doctoral research, is informed by an epistemological tradition that emerges from the far-reaching travels of Persian and Muslim intellectuals and scholars (Afshar, 2012; Dabashi, 2020; Ghazinoory et al., 2013; Nagamia, 2003; Söylemez, 2005). The term *Hijrat* (also spelt *Hijra*, *Hijrah*, and *Hegira*) is an Arabic word. The concept of *Hijr* refers to being positioned "far from". Hijrat conceptualises the departure from one's homeland to a host country (Chapparban, 2019).

My first challenge was that Hijrat was an under-theorised concept within mainstream Western literature. Initially, I did not feel as if the concept would be considered robust enough within Western framed academia to be used as a theoretical framework in relation to a doctoral thesis. The second challenge was that the religious connotation of Hijrat made it difficult – and somewhat awkward for me to apply and theorise in my thesis; a non-religious research context of the doctoral journey. In religious texts, many Muslims will use Hijrat when referring to Prophet Mohammad's act of migrating from Mecca to Medina in 622 AD (Alladin, 1979; Chapparban, 2019; Khan, 2011). This act, which is the starting point of the Islamic Lunar/Solar calendar, is symbolic of the Prophet taking the divine direction upon leaving Mecca due to having been threatened with assassination. Hijr or Hijrat can also refer to death, in the sense of transitioning from the physical to a metaphysical world. Hijrat, as a process, offered my doctoral thesis a useful cultural frame for exploring the research participants' knowledge journey as they transitioned from Iran (a non-Western context) to New Zealand (a Western context).

I conceptualised the process of journeying as signifying a fluid and constant motion (Clifford, 1997, 2010). As such, I was able to analyse the participants' Hijrat as an experience that included their socio-cultural realities, schooling and tertiary experiences. Their realities and experiences were impacted 1) by the ways in which Iran and its Western political adversaries have been epistemologically positioned in relation to one another, and 2) in the socio-political history of Iran (Bobby, 2012; Bozorgmehr, 2013; de Bellaigue, 2008; Golkar, 2012, 2018; Kazemzadeh, 2001; Keddie, 2003; Vahabzadeh, 2017).

My challenge of locating postcolonial theory

Drawing from postcolonial theory turned out to be yet another unexpected and unsettling endeavour. Firstly, I initially did not feel entitled to draw from a postcolonial theoretical lens because Iran has never been officially colonised. Secondly, anything to do with "colonisation" was already questionable, debatable and contested because of the ongoing challenges within the existing political and epistemological rhetoric in New Zealand (Prichard, 2005; Satherley & Sibley, 2018). However, the coloniser-colonised binary troubled me as much as the Iran-West or West/non-West binaries because I found the coloniser-colonised binary excluded the relevance of my research participants' experiences within the New Zealand context.

To navigate these challenges, I had to critically explore the history of the interactions between Europeans and Iranians within the political, economic, racial and intercultural educational contexts such as the Hijrat. I justified the relevance of my project to colonisation and postcolonial theory by elaborating on the fraught relationship between Iran and its major Western political adversaries (Borjian, 2013; Matin-Asgari, 2018; Mirsepassi, 2000, 2017; Mirsepassi & Faraji, 2018). This fraught relationship is mainly the result of what is considered to be the colonial endeavours of Western political adversaries in the Middle East. Young (2016) reports that, after 1919, Iran's delegation demanded independence, and Iran became "a British protectorate instead" (p. 117).

Although Iran has never been officially colonised, "it was reduced to the status of a semi-colony" due to political and economic exploitation (Ghaderi, 2018, p. 456). Between 1501 and 1925, European countries such as the UK, Portugal, France, the Netherlands and the Russian Empire/Soviet Union involved Persia in a series of wars and geopolitical confrontations (Dabashi, 2015, 2020; Keddie, 1971; Matthee, 2002, 2012). Since World War 2, Iranians have been positioned at the heart of the political and ideological clashes between Iran and its Western political adversaries (Zibakalam, 2016, 2019). The outcomes of these positionings and clashes include the formation of an anti-colonial discourse, subsequent resistance and a sensitivity of many Iranians to the West (Mirsepassi, 2017; Pesaran, 2008). Being sensitised to Western colonial and hegemonic attitudes that are the product of European empires is, therefore, central to postcoloniality (Bhabha, 1994; Gandhi, 2019; Loomba, 2015; Said, 1978, 1994; Spivak, 1988, 2010; Spring, 2008). That is why postcolonial theory became appropriate for locating my theoretical framework in order to make sense of my participants' experiences as Iranian doctoral candidates in New Zealand.

Postcoloniality is positioned as a political condition that has economic, social and psychological implications for the lives of the Iranian academic diaspora in the West. While Iranian PhD candidates, who intend to study in the West, have already begun to experience the political condition of postcoloniality during their time in Iran, this political condition continues during their postgraduate studies in their chosen tertiary institution in the West. This postcolonial condition created an experience of "ambivalence and uncertainty" for my participants in relation to the socio-political structures and the people associated with these structures during their socio-academic experiences in both Iran and New Zealand.

Ambivalence, uncertainty, cultural hybridity

To further navigate my challenges with theory, I interrogated the literature on postcolonial theory and learned about the struggles and contestations over it as a theory and term. As a result, I found that *ambivalence*, *uncertainty* and *cultural hybridity* to be safe and appropriate postcolonial concepts to make sense of the participants' Hijrat. What follows is an exposition of how I defined these concepts to thematise my participants' narratives.

An outcome of a postcolonial condition was the sense of uncertainty for my participants in relation to their own culture and knowledge, and those of their socio-academic host-context. This uncertainty occurs within a space that is widely known as the third space where dual cultures and knowledges are mediated and negotiated (Bhabha, 1990, 1994; Easthope, 1998). From a postcolonial theoretical perspective, ambivalence and uncertainty during Hijrat included complexities that were experienced as a result of the mismatches that my participants saw between the meanings and conceptualisations available to them in a space within which two sources of knowledge were sometimes contradictory. It was evident that my participants were positioned to navigate both their prior learnings in Iran and the knowledge that is made available to them in New Zealand.

The third space of hybridity and the uncertainties within it are also thought of as involving postcolonial ambivalence (Barongo-Muweke, 2016). Postcolonial ambivalence is "historically shaped and maintained within complex, simultaneously opposing, and contradictory means of representation and orientation to meaning" (Barongo-Muweke, 2016, p. 56). The postcolonial concept of cultural hybridity creates a space that merges the coloniser/colonised binary and in so doing forges an identity that draws from elements of knowledge in the spectrum that exists within that binary. Loomba (2015) asserts that

[c]olonial 'hybridity' in this particular sense, is a strategy premised on cultural purity, and aimed at stabilising the *status quo*. In practice, it did not necessarily work in that way: anticolonial movements and individuals often drew upon Western ideas and vocabularies to challenge colonial rule and hybridised what they borrowed by juxtaposing it with indigenous ideas, reading it through their own interpretative lens, and even using it to assert cultural alterity or insist on an unbridgeable difference between coloniser and colonised. (pp. 171–172)

Loomba (2015) also draws on Bhabha (1994) to challenge this binary, stating that "neither coloniser nor colonised is independent of the other" (p. 176). However, he also challenges Bhabha, asserting that

Bhabha generalises and universalises the colonial encounter. Thus, ironically, the split, ambivalent, hybrid colonial subject projected in his work is in fact curiously universal and homogeneous – that is to say he could exist anywhere in the colonial world. Hybridity seems to be a characteristic of his inner life (and I use the male pronoun purposely) but not of his positioning. He is internally split and agonistic, but undifferentiated by gender, class or location. (Loomba, 2015, p. 176)

In my PhD study, cultural hybridity was enacted through Hijrat from the Islamic Iran to the colonial context of New Zealand. On the one hand, the positive impact of the knowledges that have come from Europe was one of the reasons why Iranian students initiate their Hijrat. On the other hand, my participants – and myself – had to navigate the realities of studying and living in a colonial-framed Western country.

Conclusion: Implications of the unexpected challenges

This paper provides an example of how I navigated the unexpected challenges that arose as I developed a theoretical framework for locating the socio-cultural and academic specificities of a cohort of Iranian doctoral candidates in New Zealand. Hijrat and postcoloniality are two theoretical concepts that ensured that my research participants' cultural, socio-political and historical contexts were respected and understood. Similar conditions may also underpin the complexities that doctoral candidates from other non-Western backgrounds in New Zealand may experience. Therefore, this paper offers doctoral candidates from contexts known to be non-Western, and their supervisors with Western backgrounds, an example of how cultural congruence can be understood when completing a PhD study in Western-framed academic institutions. More specifically, PhD supervisors and their supervisees should be cautious to not conceptualise such dichotomies as West and non-West because stereotyping people can essentialise perceptions of certain qualities in them.

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