

Window Lickers, Autists and White Privilege

Tasneem Project

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I am a 40-something European, middle class, graduate professional convert to Islam, a parent of a child with autism, and a UK citizen. I am also a student of the social sciences, and it is in this capacity that I am writing this piece, a postcolonial analysis of the concept of 'white privilege'. This concept was central to a recent blog on Sunni Sister, and whilst I agree with some of the points put forward in the same piece, I intend to contest the concept itself as ultimately flawed.

To begin with, social labels such as 'white' and 'black' have their origins in the knowledge systems crucial to subjugating the peoples conquered by Empire. To employ the term risks reproducing the assumptions inherent to these knowledge systems, whereby each group is defined as 'other' according to essential differences. In contemporary social sciences, the term 'ethnicity' is more often preferred.

Ethnicity takes into account local complexities and cultures. For example, rather than describing Muslims in my home town of Huddersfield as 'South Asian', I would prefer to describe them as belonging to the Mirpuri Pakistani diaspora. This takes into account the cultural specificities of the region from which most local Muslims originate, as well as their transnational and hybrid status.

In the past, civil rights campaigners employed a strategic essentialism to define themselves as 'black'. The aim of such strategic labelling was to unite disparate groups in a common cause, which included building pride in a common identity against an Imperialist, racist hegemony. In the UK, many Muslims now similarly employ their faith strategically, in the face of a rising tide of Islamophobia.

But strategic essentialism is not a two way signpost. In using the term 'white privilege', White Anglo-Saxon Protestants (WASPs), Italians and even Arabs are essentialised as a single group, without their consent. Moreover, this essentialism is founded on the assumption that such identities are the cause of 'privilege', rather than class, gender or the desire to participate in hegemonic power structures.

The term 'privilege' is equally open to criticism. The assumption here is that 'white' people have access to 'the good life', and 'black' people do not. The sociologist Zygmunt Bauman describes this understanding of social justice as bogus. It implies a scramble to be 'like the folks on the hill', which is nothing short of a fight to participate in an Empire currently reeking havoc on planet Earth and its peoples.

The global North, numerically in the minority, currently produces the largest proportion of greenhouse gas emissions, as well as consuming a grossly disproportionate fraction of global resources. It sells most of the guns, which along with its trade policies are responsible for most of the world's poverty. Today, around 50 000 adults and children will die from hunger and preventable diseases. In the global North, as many if not more will die from obesity.

Yet the way in which the term 'white privilege' is currently employed places the concept at the very heart of a greedy, violent, amoral empire. Like so much imperial discourse, it does not locate itself in any specific place, nor does it limit its scope, but presents itself as universally true. Racism, while it might have imperialism at its heart, manifests itself in vastly different ways around the world.

I have little personal experience of racism, and never as a 'white' person other than online name calling, which off itself has little impact on my life. Indeed, I would argue 'black-on-white racism' is a myth of representation in Britain. In the UK, the mainstream media can still headline on an 'Asian' gang roaming the streets beating up 'white people', whilst the routine violence of Nazi racist thugs is rarely reported in the same sensational way, if at all.

People like me can join the rat race when we want. Few non-disabled ethnically European people like myself are likely to face discrimination in jobs, education or in the provision of public services. People of non-European ethnic origin, by contrast, are protected by some of the toughest anti-discrimination laws in Europe, and rightly so. The law recognises these groups are less likely to be in positions of power – and that is the key issue.

My personal experience of prejudice is as a parent of a child with autism. This might seem an odd comparison to make, racism and autism, but bare with me on this one. Rather than reinforcing prejudice as inevitable by locating it in an essential identity, I want you to reconsider how you understand prejudice – whatever your own experiences. Changing how people think, and then changing the world, is – I would suggest – the key to conquering racism.

People with autism face prejudice every day. Despite huge advances in provision in recent years, people who are not viable economic units within this consumer capitalist society continue to be marginalised. Educational and social services are legally required to provide for children and adults with autism, but with funds limited by 'priorities' (such as the occupation of Iraq, etc.), the majority of people with autism still do not have their special needs met.

Unemployment amongst adults with autism stands at 90%, and adults diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome (who experience no delay in language development, and have a 'normal' IQ) fair little better. The provision of alternative occupational services remains patchy and poor. We treat other 'useless' groups, such as the elderly, with little more compassion. Most people with Alzheimer's who cannot be taken care of by relatives live in care homes managed by nurses, but staffed largely by the underclass.

In regard to people with autism, this state of affairs is now being challenged more vigorously, not thanks to the increasingly over-professionalized charities, but by people with autism themselves. This is what is significant to my concerns about 'White privilege', which turns its back on ethnic minority experiences of discrimination, and instead points its accusing finger towards 'white' people to explain the world. The result can only be more hatred.

I desire a society which puts the mercy of the Prophet Muhammad (aws) at its heart, the man who said humans were given victory to protect the weak and vulnerable. I do not believe such a society can come about by simply rushing to join the ranks of the selfish and powerful, or by blaming them for being their victims. Muslims must seek to transform the societies in which we

live so that compassion is at the heart of all government thinking, social policy and individual human actions.

This is not to deny justice, which is also a key Muslim concept. People who commit acts of overt racism must be held culpable. However, the racism inherent in society – the ‘institutional’ racism, the ‘polite’ racism – requires a different approach. I see little point in blaming the polite, middle class folks who flee from my local park whenever I bring my boisterous, noisy 13 year old autistic son there. I could be easily standing in their shoes. We live in the same neighbourhood.

Their prejudice is rooted in history, ignorance, and the arrogance accrued to them by their class status. It is better to challenge this ignorance, and confront bad attitudes with knowledge and experience. For many people, children like my son are ‘other’, and faced with ‘difference’, the human response is to be afraid. Knowing my son is only one step – many ‘professionals’ who work with children with autism are no less bigoted.

Teaching these folks to understanding why they respond as they do requires teaching them about the forgotten history of people with learning disabilities. It means acknowledging learning disabled people are grossly misrepresented in the media as objects of pity, and are routinely the butt of jokes on comedy shows. It means overturning the idea that its already to call someone a ‘cretin’ as a friendly insult. It means teaching them that ‘normal’ people and people with autism can actually do things together that are useful and fun. Sound familiar?

I do realise your gut instinct may be to see comparing an ‘autist’ to a black person in terms of social processes as offensive. That’s nothing knew to me. When the UK passed the Disability Discrimination Act, physically disabled campaigners agreed to marginalise the learning disabled. Whilst acknowledging the historical basis for their own discrimination, they didn’t want to be compared to ‘window lickers’.

In short, white privilege is a bad idea. It assumes an identity that doesn’t exist, and proffers a simplistic explanation for the causes of racism and social injustice. It fails to locate prejudice in history, and equates social justice with having a piece of the pie. It excludes other groups who are victims of discrimination, instead of making common cause with the most vulnerable amongst them – some of whom, of course, may be white.

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