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UNVEILING PREJUDICE: RELIGIOUS DISCRIMINATION IN PRIVATE SCHOOLS OF DISTRICT TANK, PAKISTAN

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ABSTRACT

This research paper analyzes the discrimination against students from minority communities in the private schools of district Tank Pakistan, particularly focusing on religious and sectarian biases exhibited by the teachers. Especially religious teachers consider the students of other religions and sects as 'other'. It points out the problem of teachers being the source of discrimination in the classrooms. The way teachers behave and treat the students of other religion and sect gives rise to a double standard in the classrooms. It highlights the suppression and oppression of students belonging to other religion and sect at the hands of teachers. The way teachers mentally and physically torture students by daily demanding non-Muslim students to recite verses of Quran. Additionally, teachers smash the very idea of equality in the classrooms by mocking and bullying Shia students. This paper is an attempt to analyze the role of teachers as discriminators in the classroom. This study investigates that how teachers' discrimination causes physical and psychological suffering for students.

***Key words**: Discrimination, Suppression, Oppression, Othering.*

INTRODUCTION

Religion has been a fundamental aspect of Pakistan's identity, a land which was founded in the name of religion, where Muslims could freely practice their faith. However non-Muslims were also guaranteed religious freedom. Muhammad Ali Jinnah, in his speech to the people of Pakistan on 11 August 1947 highlighted the freedom of religion:

"You are free, you are free to go to your temples, you are free to go to your mosques or any other place of worship in this state of Pakistan. You may belong to any religion or caste or creed — that has nothing to do with the business of the state…."

However, late in the 20th century, a wave of extremism hit Pakistan. Mr. Zia-ul-Haq aimed to Islamize Pakistan, which shattered the dream of its founder and all those who wanted a state where people could practice their faith freely. The Islamization by Mr. Zia-ul-Haq turned Pakistan into a fascist state by propagating the Deobandi school of thought across Pakistan. This school of thought considers even Shia Muslims infidels, apart from Hindus and Christians. The state sponsored this school of thought and used it for its benefit during Russian invasion of Afghanistan by creating *mujahedeen*.

Apart from three other provinces of Pakistan, Deobandis and Wahabis are dominant in Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa. Mostly people here are Pashtoon, whose lives revolve around Deobandi Islam. They are the followers of orthodox Islam, who consider all the followers of other sects' non-believers.

District Tank is located at the far end, in the southwest of Pakistan. Mostly tribal people from South-Waziristan live here. Mehsud and Wazir are the dominant tribes, apart from other Pashtoon tribes like Bettani, Marwat and Gandapur. However, the

local Saraiki community became a minority after the partition of India. Mostly Saraiki people were Shia and they migrated to Punjab because of sectarian issues. Moreover, a Christian community is also settled in district Tank. They have their own colony and live in a compound of almost 100-150 houses. They run white missionary hospital named 'Mission Hospital'. Doctors from all over the world come to serve there in the "Mission Hospital". So, district Tank consists of mixed community but majority belongs to Deobandi Islam. They dominate every sector of the city; Schools, colleges and markets.

Moreover, children from different communities come to study in different schools. However, those students who belong to Shia Islam, as well as those who are the followers of Christianity face discrimination at the hands of teachers. They are treated as 'bad other' by the teachers. The very institutions that eliminate the concept of discrimination become the source of discrimination for Shia and Christian students.

Methodology

This research was carried out with 14-17 years old children from class 7 to 10, comprising a total of 10 students, five girls and five boys. Six out of ten were Shia and they were from the village Gara Baloch. However, the rest of four were Christians, who lived in the Christian colony. I chose youngsters as a study population because they were generally more exposed to serious type of othering and violence (Estevez et al., 2008). All students spoke Urdu fluently. Interviews, the preferred form of data collection, were conducted in Urdu and then translated into English. All interviews were conducted in confidential manner with careful consideration given to the security and privacy of the students. However, due to security issues and the sensitive nature of the research, interviews were conducted secretly and at different places to ensure the safety of the students. Similarly, permission was obtained from the students' parents and assent was sought from students themselves. Mostly students were from different schools, however, the students of Zam public school district Tank were in majority. Through these interviews, the researcher was able to talk about the perceptions of otherness faced by students. All interviews were recorded and translated into English and were analyzed according to theories of Othering.

Othering involves a process by which a dominant group defines and constructs a minority group as fundamentally different and inferior. It involves the use of language, social practices, and power structures to marginalize the 'other.' However, Davies & McInnes (2012, p.135) describe othering a "specific way of excluding certain students who are different due to their gender, ethnicity, caste, ability, class, sexual orientation and/or religion". According to Borrero et al. (2012); Robinson & Saada, (2017); Saltmarsh & Davis, (2012); Tripathi, (2016), Othering is a very critical problem in the schools of multicultural societies. However, it is still one of the unique forms of violence for many of the students, especially for minority students, despite having a huge investment in the school sector for safe and sound learning (Maphalala & Mabunda, 2014; Olsen et al., 2014). In schools, because of their caste, color, physical ability, class and sex, students are at more risk of othering (Borrero et al., 2012; Khanal, 2017; Kumsairo, 2000; Maphalala & Mabunda, 2014; Takeuchi, 2009). It is the cultural capital of students that determines how they are treated (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). Similarly, according to Baak (2019), it is very crucial to address othering to make educational institutions safe for study.

Literature Review

The purpose of this chapter is to review and organize literature related to the specific topic of othering in the schools. This has been discussed by the various researchers. It has been discussed from the prospective of different communities, highlighting the issue of othering in different parts of the world.

Dhungana (2022) explains the experiences of othering and violence in Nepal's schools. His study unveils that the academically low performers and culturally undervalued students are more likely to be labelled as Bhuskul, the 'other'. This category is used to rationalize discrimination and use violence against the 'other'. Similarly, schools are unable to foster values of peace and nonviolence but on the contrary, they continue reinforcing structural violence and perpetuating direct violence. He concludes that Nepal has been making efforts to sustain peace after a long period of systemic violence. However, schools are not contributing to sustaining peace. If the

government truly wants to build a peaceful society, then the ongoing situation of Othering and violence needs to be addressed.

Dupper, Forrest-Bank, & Lowry-Carusillo (2015) point out very troubling issues faced by minority students in secondary schools in the United States. Their study focuses on understanding the experience of minority religious youths in public schools in the U.S., where most students belong to one dominant religion. Their group includes 50 students in grades 6 to 12. They are 11 Jewish, 11 Muslim, 18 Catholic, and 10 Universalist Unitarian students. The researchers conducted analysis using grounded theory methodology and a method of constant comparative analysis to identify four major themes: minority status, precursors, teacher and adult roles, and perception of peer intent. Some of the incidents described by the students were classified as hate crime or bullying while other were representative of microaggression. Their most important finding of the study was that some students reported teachers as perpetrators in several incidents. Their study suggests the need for the implementation of strategies to increase religious tolerance in diverse public schools.

Arorian (2011) highlights the problem of discrimination against Muslim Americans adolescent. He says that although there is a lot of evidence showing discrimination against Muslim Americans in general, there is not much specific information about Muslim American adolescents. However, a few specific studies suggest that Muslim American adolescents encounter much discrimination from teachers, school administrators, and classmates. His descriptive qualitive study provides a detail account of the discrimination Muslims American Adolescent. The study involved 14 Muslim American adolescents' experience with discrimination. The finding revealed that schools are the common places where discrimination against Muslims occurs. Additionally, Muslims girls face harassments by strangers in public places. His study also explores that how Muslim youth cope with discrimination.

Analysis

Othering is a social construct (Harber, 2004; Kumsairo, 2000; Tripathi, 2016) and it makes isolated students an easy target of victimization in schools through the process of social isolation (Rinehart & Espelage, 2016). Similarly, through the process of categorization, discrimination and exclusion students experience othering (Borrero et al., 2012; Kumashiro, 2000; Saada, 2017; Takeuchi, 2009), which in turn paves the way for violence (Staub, 2003). Therefore, it is very important to expose the underlying causes that shape pattern and disparities in education, through creating knowledge (Milner, 2012). Thus, in hierarchical societies that are divided along the intersections like religion, caste, language, gender, geographical location, ethnicity and other identities, it is very important in identifying the othering process (Khanal, 2017).

Interviewee-1

Zahra is a Shia student in the 10th grade. She says that "teachers suppress our religious beliefs" and that, for them, we are "unwanted things". Teachers think that Shia people are not like normal people and question why they don't have tails or horns. Reflecting on her experience, she says, "I usually face weird looks from my teachers". Similarly, she does not feel comfortable in the class room because they want her to change her religion. She mentions that teaching is very sacred profession, but here, teachers cannot suppress their hatred towards the students of other religion. One day, she was having a discussion with Islamic studies teacher about Quranic verse Tatheer. She asked her teacher that this is not the correct interpretation of that verse and for the next three days, her teacher asked her to give a presentation. Furthermore, her teacher asked, "Do you people take care of your hygiene? Do you beat your chest during Muharram? Do you go with anyone without Nikah/ marriage?". Zahra says that the Islamic studies teacher hardly gives reply to any of her question. Once, when her seatmate was beating her chest, her chemistry teacher suddenly pointed out and said, "Why are you beating your chest like Shias. Zahra says that she was not supposed to say this in classroom.

Interviewee-2

Hajra is a 9th-grade student and the topper in her class. While discussing her general experience at school, she says that "At first everything goes well but when they know about our religion then they behave differently". She recalls an incident with the

Urdu teacher: Once, she was performing ablution, and her Urdu teacher was watching her. Before that the teacher did not know about her religion, but after observing that ablution, her behavior changed. Hajra does not feel comfortable in the classroom because when teachers discuss Shia or Christian topics, everyone looks at her with strange eyes.

One day, her Islamic studies teacher commented that Shia people are unable to weep naturally during Muharram and that they use chilies in their eyes and mix that water in *Niaz*/dedications which they use for ablution of their dead bodies. Hajra speaks about her faith and her closeness to Imam Ali, the first caliph and imam of Shia Muslims. She usually quotes different sayings of Imam Ali on Teachers' Day, but her Physics teacher feels awkward and questions why she only narrates quotes from Imam Ali and not from other companions of Prophet Muhammad. Once, she reported the discriminatory behavior to her Christian teacher, who herself had been a victim of discrimination, but unfortunately, no action was taken.

She further says that teachers comment in the class room, "Why do you people do *matam?* Why do you follow Ahly-bait and not Ashab? Why not four daughters of prophet, only one?" She feels alone in her Islamic studies class because there is no one to support her, or to tell the teacher, "You have crossed the line". She becomes motionless when she hears comments from teachers telling other students that "You can eat with anyone but not with Shias because Shias are infidels".

Interviewee-3

Raheel is the student of 9th grade. He is a Christian and lives with his family in the Christian colony. While discussing his experience with teachers, he says that teachers force him to sit in the back seats and usually fully ignore his presence in the class. Time and again they ask why he does not believe in God, recite *qalma* (declaration of faith), and make statements like *"*Muslims will go to heaven and non-Muslims to hell". He further mentions that he is not given a chance to participate in sports because of his religious identity. During sports days, he was issued a sport card but was not allowed to participate in the match with Star International School. Once, he took test for joining English academy classes, he was failed by his teacher. He believes that the failure was due to prejudice against Christians. During winter, the whole school offers prayer at 1 p.m., and they invite him to join them in prayer. Raheel feels that this is none of their business to offer him prayer with them.

For Raheel, the most shocking experience was when an Islamic studies teacher asked him to accept Islam secretly, promising not to tell anybody. In addition to this, he faces discriminatory remarks from his classmates. His classmates usually do not share their notes with him because they believe it would become impious by touching Raheel. Raheel believes that these attitudes are a result of the teachers' instructions.

Interviewee-4

Salma is an 8th grade student. She is the only Shia student in her class. She is not valued by the teachers as compared to other students of the class. Both students and teachers irritate her. She is very active in her studies and performs very well in her academic tests, but her teacher does not communicate with her directly. Instead, the teacher asks her seatmate to tell her to sit down. The whole class does not greet her due to the teacher's behavior. She feels utter loneliness when she is not encouraged to participate in class activities. Once, she wanted to participate in a chemistry presentation about periodic table. She asked her teacher but the teacher responded, "We don't need you". Salma does not want to report the discriminatory behavior of teachers to others because she fears facing further discrimination in future.

She recalls an insulting incident that is etched in her memory. She was doing something in class, and her classmate reported her to miss Aneela. Miss Aneela began abusing Shia, saying "leave her, these Shia are just like this; do not talk to her". Similarly, her chemistry teacher, Miss Ulfat Shaheen, who is a *hafiz e Quran,* instructs her students not to talk with Salma. Moreover, Miss Ulfat Shaheen, openly states that Shia people do not recite the Holy Quran and that they smell bed.

Interviewee-5

Reena Maseeh is a 10th grade student. She says that both teachers and students discuss her religion in the classroom. Teachers tease students who remain silent and are not as clever. Teachers openly say in the classroom that one should not shake hand with, eat

with or sit with non-Muslims (Christians). The Islamic studies frequently points Reena out in classroom. The teacher repeatedly asks Reena Maseeh to recite the Holy Quran in classroom, even though she knows Reena is Christian. Additionally, the Islamic studies teacher openly says in the classroom, "Inka *koi deen eman nhe hai*", which means Christians have no religion or faith. Moreover, teachers do not forbid students from teasing Reena Maseeh.

Interviewee-6

Maryam is a 7th grade student and a Saraiki speaker. She has had very negative experience with her teachers due to her religious identity. She was so scared of her teacher, Miss Shaheen, that her presence at school petrified her. Maryam wanted to run away from school whenever she saw her. Similarly, her Islamic studies teacher forced her to rewrite test repeatedly. One day, when Maryam was absent, Miss Shaheen entered the class, mentioned her name without saying anything and asked her to stand up and speak test answers loudly. Maryam is sure that the Miss Shaheen's mentioning her name when she was absent was due to her religious bias, as she often treated her unfairly because of religious identity. On another day, during a test about how *namaz* prevents from evil deeds. Maryam gave the same answers as her class fellow. At the end of the test the teacher said Maryam's answers were wrong. She never reported this to anybody because she felt unsafe at school.

Interviewee-7

Abiseh is a Christian boy studying in the 9th grade. He is also the victim of severe oppression from his teachers. He says that being a black student is not a fault in the school, but being both black and Christian makes him a target. Everyone refers to him 'Black Christian', and teachers do not say anything to the students. Even his math's teacher calls him '*Choroa*' which means a lower-class black boy. His math's teacher often says in class that Christians smell very bad. One day, when someone farted in the classroom, his math's teachers said it must be Abiseh. Similarly, his Islamic studies teacher daily comes to classroom to distribute tickets for hell and heaven. Abiseh says he always receives a ticket to hell because of his different religious identity. Another day, his Islamic studies teacher, Dawood, criticized Christians severely, stating that they are a source of worries for Muslims worldwide. He openly said in the classroom that Christians killed innocent Muslims in Afghanistan. Abiseh feels that in this war of words, he always faces defeat while his Muslim teacher wins. Moreover, Abiseh says that he does not receive friendly behavior from his teachers. Every teacher wants to make each student *mufti* in the class and Abiseh to a good Muslim.

Interviewee-8

Abbas is an active 10th grade student, who recites the national anthem at the assembly. He says that although he is very active and obedient student, his religious identity hinders him from reaching the teachers' hearts. The moment they know about his religious background, their attitude changes like a Chameleon. Abbas' Educational journey has included both good and bad teachers. Many teachers have openly spoken against his religious identity. Qari Imran was one of them; he openly said in the classroom that Shias are Infidels and attempted to turn every student against Shia student in the school. Abbas once reported Qari Imran's behavior to another teacher, but afterward Qari Imran intensified the enmity against Shia in school.

Additionally, teachers make derogatory comments about his religion during the Muharram or while reading the elegies of Mir Anees in Urdu class. These comments usually claim that Shia people have eulogized the incident of Karbala excessively and that God, being merciful, will forgive Yazeed. Abbas' teacher Mir Badshah supported him in every circumstance despite knowing his religious identity. He was the only one who supported every weak student. But there were also some teachers who closed their eyes when he needed them. Once, when students teased him, he complained to his teachers but they did not address his complaints. After few days those boys spat on his bike from the bus and started chanting "hey Shia, hey Shia" in the bazar. Abbas' cycle collided with a motorbike. Abbas feels that teachers could have prevented this incident if they had taken strict action when he first complained about these boys.

Interviewee-09

Simon is a Christian boy studying in the 9th grade. He says that he is treated like an alien in the classroom. Teachers mentally torment those students who belong to other sects or religion. He constantly observes weird behavior of teachers. Similarly, teachers' attitude depends on the religion of a student. "If you are a Muslim, they will treat you gently, but if you are a Christian, then you will be treated like an unwanted orphan in the classroom". He feels like an unwanted child among forty students. His other teachers often comment about his religious identity, which he does not like. Although they do not go to extremes, he still, feels like an unnecessary child to them. However, his Islamic studies teacher, Mr. Tahir, exceeds these limits. Simon says that in Islamic studies class teacher, Mr. Tahir seems to want "to eat him alive". His life is a constant struggle between the rude behavior of teachers and students. Islamic studies teacher teaches other Muslim students how to deal with non-Muslims, and the Muslim students apply this theory by refusing to sit with Simon in the classroom.

Simon recounts one incident that highlights the brutal behavior of his Islamic studies teacher towards his religious identity. Once, as he was going to class room, a peon asked him to bring a cup of water to teacher Tahir. When he brought the cup of water to Mr. Tahir, he refused to drink from it, saying that water had become unholy because it had been touched by an infidel.

Interviewee-10

Hanan is a student in the 8th class. He is the also a victim of discrimination in his school. He says that old, more experienced teachers generally behave well in the classroom. However, those who live in rural areas away from civilization are often the source of discrimination in schools. As a Shia student, he faces bias from his own teachers. For Hanan the Islamic studies class is the primary source of discrimination. The Islamic studies teacher is always on a mission to say derogatory things to Shia students rather than teaching the Holy Quran.

One day, the *Qari* sir asked Hanan to tell the class about the tragedy of Karbala. When he recounted the whole incident of Karbala, the Qari sir said that Shias killed Imam Hussain, the grandson of prophet Muhammad, and now they weep over their sin. Similarly, during the holy month of Ramazan, another teacher asked Hanan, "Do you people really observe fast or pretend for public?" Additionally, Hanan said that the harsh statement he got from his teacher when he was laughing and teacher asked him that 'he will perform the act of *Sham-e-Ghareeban* with Hanan'. Hanan says this is just another way of bullying Shia. Teacher mocked his sacred religious ritual with sexuality.

So, in the light of theory of Othering, these interviews reflect the biased nature of teachers in the classrooms. Teachers' behavior with Shia and Christian students, raises a question about their role as implementors of equality in the classroom. Teachers reveal their 'shadow' by showing cruelty toward Shia and Christian students instead of loving and caring. Similarly, their presence in the classroom terrifies the minority students, who view discriminatory teachers as cannibals ready to devore them.

Moreover, teachers commit a heinous act by filling the innocent minds of other students with hatred for Shia and Christian students. This creates a situation of alienation for Shia and Christian students. As a result, Shia and Christian students become socially alienated in the classroom. Additionally, the regular teasing environment results in a loss of self-confident for Shia and Christian students and make them weak and meek.

Furthermore, teachers' double standard undermines the academic success and participation in games of Shia and Christan students. Teachers build a wall of hurdle on the road to success, binding the hands of Shia and Christian students with the ropes of hatred and discrimination.

Conclusion

The overall discussion reveals the discriminatory attitude of teachers towards Shia and Christian students in schools. The very institutions that should eradicate discrimination instead become source of it for Shia and Christian students. Teachers suppress and oppress Shia and Christian students, creating a web of religious distinction that mentally torture them. They are the supreme authorities in the class rooms and students are marionette in their hands. They can change the overall position and shift of a student with other students. The movement of hands filled with hatred and distinction creates very serious problems for Shia and Christian students in the class

room. They create a wide gap between students of different religious backgrounds, which does not prevent students from becoming religious extremists.

- In Pakistan, particularly in district Tank, the suffering of Shia and Christian students can be minimized if teachers break the shackles of religious extremism. Teachers should receive training on religious tolerance. They should behave friendly to every student. They should not make students religious extremists in the class room rather they make students good human beings. They should teach them how to live a life rather than making their life burdensome. They should remain neutral in the class room and should maintain the decorum of class room by treating every student equally. They should not discuss religion in the class room. They should know that humanity comes first than the religion.

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