Black women academics in higher education: In search of inclusive equal voice and justice

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Abstract
This article reflects on the narratives of black women academics in higher education. These narratives range from an interrogation of societal expectations of what it means to be a woman, and more so, a black woman and society’s designation of the place of a woman. Some of these experiences include: the struggle to negotiate entry into the higher education space; the challenges that confront women from within and without the higher education system; as well as how otherness is perceived even within a seemingly homogeneous group – black women academics. These narratives and stories, though unique in themselves, are sources for further reflection. The article offers one line of reflection as it proposes questions of inclusion and exclusion, redress and equity, and equalisation of voices as lenses that could be used for analysis.

Keywords: higher education, black women academics, experiences, emancipation, equalisation of voice

UNDERSTANDING EXCLUSION AND MARGINALISATION

Freedom is inherent in (the) ability to make a beginning, which itself is inherent in the fact that every human being, simply by being born into a world that was there before him and will be there after him, is himself a new beginning (Arendt 2005, 113).

Arendt (1998, 2005) sees ‘action as beginning’ and that this beginning is made possible by the freedom to act. The freedom to act becomes the actualisation of the human condition of beginning. Arendt (1998, 178) further positions that:

It is in the nature of beginning that something new is started which cannot be expected from whatever may have happened before. This character of startling unexpectedness is inherent in all beginnings and in all origins. The new always happens against the overwhelming odds of statistical laws and their probability, which for all practical, everyday purposes amounts to certainty; the new therefore always appears in the guise of a miracle. The fact that man is capable of action means that the unexpected can be expected from him, that he is able to perform what is infinitely improbable. And this again is possible only because each man is unique, so that with each birth something uniquely new comes into the world.
This rather lengthy quote from Arendt’s (1998, 2005) ideas speaks to the narratives in this special edition on multiple fronts. First, for each of the academics sharing their experiences in higher education, a life in higher education became actualised through different routes. These routes could be considered as an end in themselves although this is not the case. Of the experiences narrated, none of them started off with a clear vision of the end. This speaks to the fact that most of these academics opening up to reflection are first-generation academics in their families. This is the unexpected in life according to Arendt. Second, in reading through each of the narratives, the reader also gets a sense that although the act of becoming an academic, for each one of these individuals, has been accompanied by prolonged periods of endurance and hard work, none of them could argue that becoming an academic was pre-determined. A reflection on an individual’s journey through the terrains of academic life has the very marks of ‘startling unexpectedness’ both in terms of the process of becoming an academic as well as achieving it. I am not proposing that the unexpected is alien to human life. Arendt (1998) strongly argues that the unexpected is essentially a part of the human condition, although the specifics of the unexpected always lie hidden in human potential. Third, if the unexpected lies hidden in human potential, it is only the free activation of this potential that leads to actualisation. In the narratives that have been provided in this special issue, the process of becoming an academic, for each of the black women academics, is much connected with the choices that each individual was required to make at particular moments and in particular circumstances of their lives. Outside these conditions of human life, the narratives would not make much meaning.

At this point, an antagonist would argue that such conditions, as the ones I have alluded to above, could have been deterministic; that becoming an academic was already written in the fabric of their being, as a matter of destiny. I would find this counter-argument problematic because as much as the thinking can be associated with a form of dialectical materialism, that position and counter-argument essentially remove the possibility of the workings of the free human spirit. It diminishes freedom as a conditioning element in human action. It is within conditions that accommodate human freedom that Arendt’s (1998, 178) argument that, ‘if a person is capable of action, (this) means that the unexpected can be expected from him, that s/he is able to perform what is infinitely improbable’, becomes meaningful. In other words, the fact that human action is envisaged to take place and operate within conditions of freedom for it to fulfil its own condition of ‘being human’ creates in a person the capability to act in ways that are unimaginable.

In addition to the above analysis, it is also clear that most of the personal journeys or narratives being reflected on in the special issue exhibit strong experiences of exclusion and segregation. In other words, the individual journeys towards becoming a black woman academic in the South African higher education sector come with their own share of having been undermined on the way, simply because of being a woman more so a black woman in an environment where white males have been dominant for years. Studies that have documented the dismal picture of women’s
representativity in the South African higher education sector include Higgs (2007), Moja (2007), Mlama (2007), CHE (2013), HERS-SA (2008), and many others.

The narratives by women on women’s experiences show that exclusion of a female child, a female learner and a female student usually takes different forms. It is articulated at different levels and the reasons people cite for the exclusion do not fit one jacket. The experiences of black female academics narrated in the special issue are those of black females of African origin. In this regard, a form of exclusion had to be excised as a way of achieving a particular form of inclusion (Young 2000) that could make sense of the given experiences under consideration. According to the South African legislative framework, the population category of ‘black people’ includes blacks of African origin as well as Indians and coloureds. Despite limiting the contributions to this category, no assumption is being made here that this group is homogenous, despite the similarities of the histories across the group.

Young (2000, 23–25) discusses inclusion as a social norm, a way of dealing with each other or a mindset. It involves the capacity to invite others to participate in doing something or being a part of something that is public. Inclusion advocates that everyone ought to be included in public affairs especially in the processes of public engagement as well as in formulating the very rules that guide those practices. Inclusive processes are marked by people’s disposition to be accountable to others and make deliberation open to the public, making the processes accessible to others for them to count as normatively legitimate (Young 2000, 13). This model promotes the idea that everyone has the right to be included and treated as important in the dialogues and decision-making processes from which their voices and interests were previously excluded. Young’s (2000) notion of inclusion can be understood to mean that after the ushering in of democracy in South Africa and in most of the southern African countries, inclusion, as an element of democracy, should have been easily practised. On the contrary, the experiences expressed in the narratives point to the fact that in a number of cases, inclusion is not an easily accessible value between human beings; that exclusion becomes normalised. Specifically, hurdles continue to be placed either directly or indirectly such that the full inclusion of black female academics in higher education is as challenging as attaining the academic degree itself.

On the other hand, exclusion can be both internal and external, that is, there can be external exclusion and internal exclusion (Young 2000, 52–53). External exclusion occurs when some members of a democratic community are kept out of that community and its debates or decision-making processes. Society’s expectation that a woman’s place is in the home (or the kitchen) and not in the corporate or academic world is tantamount to keeping women out of the academic space and confining this space to male members of society only. In Nkambule’s contribution to the special issue, the main challenge for her was that entering universities meant that her parents had to part with the little money they had, which was not even enough to cover university expenses such as books, food and toiletries for a year. To her, scenarios like these are the ones that prevent black African students from working-
class and rural areas from applying to university in numbers. The family financial status in this case excludes such people from participating in higher education. In other cases, aspiring and potential black female academics do not realise their dreams of becoming academics because they are sandwiched in spaces where they have to make ‘either – or’ choices between career and family. Such ‘false dilemmas’ act as agents of external exclusion.

Internal exclusion takes place when people are formally represented in social institutions, such as higher education institutions (HEIs), but experience exclusion when conditions within the institutions make it impossible for them to participate meaningfully in the processes. This may happen because the specific forms of action and life are such that they require a specific cultural capital, such as: styles of expression; the use of language that is difficult to understand; and the dismissal of the participation of some people as people who will never make it. What is special in this understanding is that the conditions for exclusion are being exercised by the very people who may have the responsibility to ensure that other members of the academic community fully participate in the meaningful activities of the institution. Young (2000) states that while mechanisms are accelerated to include all stakeholders, (such as black women academics), new forms of exclusion come into play. For example, these could be revised expectations in terms of academic achievement and performance. Similarly, the shifting of the goalposts for promotion are tantamount to internal exclusion, in so far as such changes may be used to keep some people at the bottom of the system.

**EXPERIENCES OF BLACK WOMEN ACADEMICS IN HIGHER EDUCATION: MATTERS OF SOCIAL JUSTICE OR NOT?**

In this sub-section, I present and argue that the experiences of black women academics in higher education are not matters of the heart as some may want to insinuate. In the arguments that follow, I aim to show that these narratives and the experiences from which they arise are essentially matters of social justice. In order for readers to appreciate this line of thought, I propose that the connection between education and emancipation be examined. In the discussion below, I use current thinking from Means (2011), who has re-examined the connection between education and emancipation from Rancière and Freire’s positions. Means (2011, 29) argues:

> The essence of education is found not in the rationalization of curriculum or in the pedagogical act of transmission from teacher to student. Rather, education is a question. It represents an indeterminate process of attention and exploration: the becoming of each individual’s capacity as a creative and equal subject in common with others. Education, in short, necessarily concerns the intersection of intellectual emancipation and democracy or what might be thought of as the ‘art of citizenship’.

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Using Means’ (2011) ideas on Rancière, this reflection agrees that although education is loosely considered as the transmission of knowledge from teacher to student, such an understanding downplays the actual meaning and function of education. Other recent scholars, such as Marples (2010), look at education by analysing the purposes that it serves. In this regard, Marples considers education as a good in itself, and the goal of human pursuits. Quoting Bailey’s (1984) Knowledge and Understanding, Marples (2010, 37) argues that ‘education is characterized by its capacity to liberate a person from the here and now, by involving pupils in what is fundamental and general and intrinsically worthwhile in order to promote the development of the rational mind’. Other additional purposes of education include education for work and education for well-being (Marples 2010, 39–45). But if I were to subject these purposes to further scrutiny, it would become evident that what is called education for work and happiness does not find meaningful existence in the event that the critical mind and its development are removed from the equation. Although not all work is mentally intensive, a person requires a level of mental operationalisation to coordinate the activities of the physical body. A person’s capacity to find work and succeed in his/her operations requires the development of a critical mind as a pre-requisite. Similarly, it can be argued that an ignorant person may be capable of pursuing forms of well-being through the actualisation of self-satisfaction and happiness, but I doubt this line of argumentation would pass beyond the characterisation of these as simple sensations and not necessarily forms of happiness and fulfilling pleasure adequate for the human condition. Hence, at the centre of education and everything that is called educational is the development of a critical mind, which may also be referred to as the enlightenment of the mind (Divala and Mathebula 2013; Gutmann 1987).

Means’ (2011, 29) representation of education as ‘an indeterminate process of attention and exploration’, that leads to ‘the becoming of each individual’s capacity as a creative and equal subject in common with others’, only makes sufficient sense if (and only if) education is primarily considered as the development of the human mind both in knowledge and understanding. Similarly, the author proceeds to argue that education ‘necessarily concerns the intersection of intellectual emancipation and democracy or what might be thought of as the “art of citizenship”’ (Means 2011, 29). It is at this point that education and all its activities and processes, legitimately classified as such, become emancipatory because they are concerned with ‘freeing the mind’.

Galloway’s (2012) recent work, among others, speaks to what these narratives are doing both to the individuals narrating them and to the practices of higher education in relation to how black women academics negotiate the apparent unfriendly environment of higher education. In Galloway’s work, Freirean and Rancièrean perspectives are used to understand the emancipatory character of education. First, Galloway (2012, 166) notes that ‘Freire described oppression as the societal enactment of “banking education” and developed an emancipatory “problem posing” education in the form of conscientization projects linked to the possibility of social transformation’. In this regard, what individuals choose to do are permanent educational engagements.
with the physical world driven by the ‘limit of situations they perceive around them’ (Galloway 2012, 167). In the Freirean thinking being articulated here, I can argue that the experiences and reflections made in the narratives clearly indicate how each black female academic engaged her own physical and social world in order to attain a form of emancipation. Such an emancipatory activity could not have been initiated, nor could emancipation have been achieved if each one of them was naïve and oblivious to the challenges involving academic work and excellence, bearing in mind the family backgrounds, social and economic baggage as well cultural context in which each of them was working.

Using Rancière’s thinking, Galloway (2012, 163 and 169) believes that people need to attend to their own will and thereby achieve equality. This cannot be the case if people rely on the intellect of others, accepting others’ opinions and neglecting to form their own. In such cases, they fail to attend to their own will and equality is no longer enacted. Similar profound views are expressed by Mill (1861) in his influential work, Considerations on Representative Government, when he discusses the merit of participation in a public forum. Galloway (2012, 163) then highlights Rancière’s description that in fact ‘oppression is a form of pedagogization of the social order’. In other words, oppression is a process that seeks to make people believe that what the social order offers is good and should not be changed. In this collection, what readers see is that the experiences of black women academics show that both internal and external circumstances have been used by others either to pedagogise or to argue and reinforce the idea that the higher education sector is not the place for a woman, less so a black woman! These views intend to preach about and promote the prevailing social order as a blueprint of society, yet they are actually oppressive.

The narratives in the special issue go to the very heart of challenging what people have loosely labelled an equal and transformed system of higher education as if having a constitutionally transformed system of education means equality has been realised. These narratives, read from the points of view of Rancière, Freire and other scholars seeking to understand the interplay between education and justice, are also an attempt to start thinking, formulating and implementing fair conditions for calling a system of education a justice education system. If meaningful education is only that which liberates the person and the mind of a person, a just education system cannot live below this standard. In other words, a just education system is also one that creates opportunities for the development of the potential of human beings. Elaborate debates on the development of human capabilities as central to any social justice education cause can be accessed from other key proponents such as Nussbaum (1997), Satz (2007), Sen (2009) and others. Rancière (1991, 71) sums up the connection between education, transformation and equality in the following manner:

We can thus dream of a society of the emancipated that would be a society of artists. Such a society would repudiate the division between those who know, and those who don’t. It would only know minds in action: people
who do, who speak about what they are doing, and who thus transform all their works into ways of demonstrating the humanity that is in them as in everyone.

**CAN THE EQUALISATION OF VOICE LIVE UP TO THE CHALLENGES BLACK WOMEN ACADEMICS FACE IN THE SOUTH AFRICAN HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM?**

In one of the recent studies examining ‘the potential of an ethics of care for inclusion of women in African higher education discourses’, Shanyanana (2013) states that when it comes to issues concerning women’s active role in decision making in the management and administration of higher education, African universities appear to discard this expectation to promote the social interest of groups such as black women academics. Instead, the system exhibits low forms of access to knowledge production. Shanyanana (2013, 78–79) argues that from the very inception of higher education in Africa, the development of skills and knowledge was meant mainly for boys and men. This eventually led to the institutionalisation of a male-dominated social world and male-dominated institutions. Quoting Ajayi et al (1996), Shanyanana (2013) continues to argue that women were educated with low-level skills, while men were equipped with the requisite skills for societal involvement. As such, through the increased dominance of males and the persistence of hegemonic structures of the university, the higher education sector is likely to worsen rather than improve the access of women into some of its major foci such as research and knowledge production. As a consequence of this, marginalised groups such as black women, either as students or researchers, remain at the periphery of the system. This picture indicates that the voices of women (and in this special issue, the experience of black female academics in higher education) continue to remain unheard, and their multiple experiences as a scholar, a mother, an aunt, a wife, and so on, continue to be systematically ignored under the universalisation of what it means to be a person or an academic for that matter.

It is in view of the above background that the reader can make sense of Rancière’s proposal that a way out for higher education is for it to begin to ‘equalize the voices’ of its different actors, female and male academics, but more so to make sure that the voices of the marginalised are heard. The idea of equalising voice is dependent on such actions as increasing the modes of inclusion for black women academics through increased access, representation, participation, and so on. Such a position calls for a genuine development of human capabilities across sectors of the higher education system, which would engender substantive internal inclusion in which the voices of female black academics within the system are recognised and taken into account.

The exploration of women’s experiences and shared stories that the special edition has brought to the fore indicates that if no appropriate measures are put in place to enable previously excluded groups to participate meaningfully in the life
of HEIs, then the same intended transformation can carry hostages on its way, as Mohope intimates in her narrative. She relates this to cases where mixed emotions of loss, anxiety, fear and anticipation characterise the very process of transformation, to the extent that transformation becomes endangered because of the expectations that an integrating culture puts on those to be integrated. Similarly, in her narrative, Msimanga recalls that she found that the ‘communities of practice (CoPs) to which she belonged defined time variously and thus conceptualised the roles of a black career woman differently. Moreover, while communities held varying definitions of the space and time of a “black career woman” they failed to define the space and time of a “black career mother”. The shifting goalposts, in terms of how different higher education role-players are understood, have the potential to taint the objective of creating an equal society. In defence of this position, Shanyanana (2013) argues that the higher education framework, which claims to equalise voice within its own system, may actually fail to do so because of subtle ways of excluding society’s sub-groups, such as black women, or the poor, on account of these groups lacking appropriate forms of cultural capital, and so on. Chauraya (2012, 257) confirms these ideas by arguing that ‘higher education policies and programmes in Africa have remained gender neutral, gender blind or gender insensitive, thus failing to change the gendered structural status quo in the African context’. Although gender has traditionally been used to examine the differential treatment of people, Rancière propagates a shift that should focus on ‘equalization of voice’ as a basic framework. Addressing inclusion and equality in higher education on the basis of ‘equalization of voice’ has the potential to advance substantive equality where the meaningful recognition of equal voice would contribute to policy and knowledge, rather than simply being reduced to statistics and numbers.

**CONCLUDING COMMENT**

The article has reflected on some of the experiences of black women academics in the higher education system in South Africa. The analysis drawn from these reflections indicates that the different ways through which a black woman becomes an accepted member of the higher education system is marred by her experiences of exclusion and marginalisation from society in general as well as from the higher education system in particular. The article has also argued that at the heart of these experiences and narratives are troubling perceptions of what education is and how the process of education is essentially connected to transformation and equality. The article opts for the development of sufficient human capabilities as the threshold for building an inclusive and fair system of higher education practice. Lastly, it has also been argued that appropriate forms of justice are at the risk of being annihilated if HEIs do not systematically attempt to equalise voice, so that those marginalised by the prevailing systems and social practices can make a meaningful contribution to the development of society.
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REFERENCES

CHE see Council on Higher Education.