

“Where there’s a will there’s not always a way”: A Conversation on the Illusions of meritocracy with Amirah Ayinde, Fadilah Salawu and Assya Hamdani (8/12/21)

ASSYA: Hiya! My name is Assya Hamdani, I am a teaching assistant working within the Department of French in TCD. I am also a member of Different Leaders, a group of young people that aims at implementing equal opportunities for all. This is why we are hoping to officialise an IDEO – International Day for Equal Opportunity- on December 5th. So, I’m delighted to introduce you to Ireland’s first International Day for Equal Opportunity. This podcast on meritocracy and inclusivity is one of many initiatives that are currently taking place in more than twenty countries. The title we’ve chosen for this conversation is the following: “Where there’s a will there’s not always a way: a Conversation on the illusions of Meritocracy”. I am mostly interested in listening to Irish students’ experiences and take on the subject so let’s welcome our two special guests: Fadilah and Amirah. Hi!

AMIRAH: Hi everyone!

FADILAH: Hello!

ASSYA: So, could you please introduce yourself?

AMIRAH: So my name is Amirah Ayinde, I’m a third year general nursing student and I’m a student partner for Trinity- INC as well.

ASSYA: (and...)

FADILAH: Oh sorry! I’m Fadilah I’m a third-year law student at Trinity. I’m also part of the Trinity Inclusive Curriculum project and also part of the Muslim student association in Trinity.

AMIRAH: So am I as well, I forgot to mention.

ASSYA: So, your contribution to the conversation is all the more important as you are both working with the Trinity-INC project. My first question is the following: how do you interpret the title we've chosen for this conversation, especially the phrase "where there's a will there's not always a way"?

AMIRAH: I'll go first. So, when it comes to meritocracy, I think the first thing that comes to mind for me is a university society – cause we're talking about higher education – a university society where your ability to kind of like progress and do well is solely based on merit and merit can be based on your IQ, or the amount of effort that you put in. So, I feel like this is true to an extent but there are also like other contributing factors that can influence whether a person can succeed in higher education. So, there are things just like your gender, your skin colour, your religion, your social standing even having certain characteristics such as leadership or civic mindedness... these types of things can influence whether you're able to succeed in higher education. So, when it comes to the phrase "Where there's a will there's always a way", these factors I just mentioned kind of highlight the fact that everyone is not on the same ground going into university, so that we don't have everyone being the same. We have people from different backgrounds, people from different social economic and stances as well so if we take that into consideration then everyone is not the same so everyone will not have equal opportunities going into higher education.

ASSYA: Thank you so much Amirah. Fadilah would you like to give us your own interpretation of the title?

FADILAH: Yeah, I think what Amirah said about a level-playing field - I think that it's definitely true. I think you can see it throughout the process of moving through university to whether it's like getting in or progressing through your years into your degree or even when you're graduating... Like I can remember myself in the exams that we take in Ireland, The Leaving Certificate exams, even just the different circumstances people found themselves in at the time when they are preparing for exams, like you know, we think of the obvious things such as like, you know, socioeconomic class and background and such, but even just like the day-

to-day things that affect people. Like, for example, I knew someone who had a family member passed away shortly before she sat her exams. And then if she's coming out and looking at her grades as a reflection of her ability when she was clearly going through a very difficult process at the time – that's quite an unfair way to look at it. And then even getting into university I think the online learning and the pandemic in the past year really showed us about how, you know, circumstances more than anything can really affect how people are able to perform. Of course, the pandemic affected many people in different ways, of course, not everyone had facilities to learn online comfortably, some people had different responsibilities as carers or in their communities and very different personal lives that do have a big role to play in the academic realm. I think that we don't appreciate that and assume that everyone can come to college every single day and go home and be able to do their best with no navigating factors. I think that it is a bit unfair in terms of how we see things.

ASSYA: hm That's really interesting. Would you say that knowing these factors motivated you to join the TRINITY-INC?

AMIRAH: I'd say to an extent, because it directly affects me like, I'm black, I'm Muslim and I'm a female so obviously because these factors relate to me I'd be interested in joining Trinity-INC but for me I was probably drawn towards joining it not because I knew it would directly influence me but because it makes me hopeful for the future that it would influence other students.

FADILAH: Yeah, for sure. I would say you know, everyone has their own personal experiences but I would say maybe just interacting with other people and understanding some of their experiences actually motivated me to think deeper and to consider more closely what affects different people learning experience. I was a class representative for my course for law students so within that role I actually learned a lot not just about like getting feedback from professors and say we want less classes but genuinely how different people are affected by the decisions made in academia or how they respond to them differently. And also as part of the Muslim student association like seeing in particular how people from certain religious minority background may be affected by institutions and structures in university that – again it is this kind of competitive structure that means that we're less likely to consider how it

affects people directly, you know on a one-on-one basis so you know, a lot of things just don't really work for everyone and I think that the work with Trinity-INC really helped understand that better.

ASSYA: That's very insightful. Would you say that you experienced a lack of what you're trying to work on or implement within the Trinity Inclusive Curriculum project? If that makes any sense?

AMIRAH: Well from my perspective, I kind of speak a little bit about it in the podcast that I did for Trinity INC but for example, I'm a nursing student and we always learn about different illnesses and how they present but we never really discuss or learn about how they represent in people of color specifically. So that can mean that oh we're being trained by the lecturers in Trinity and then going out onto our health care services and if someone is to come to us with something we haven't learn about the presentation we may not be able to treat them adequately so something like that is probably something that resonates with me.

ASSYA: Yes! That makes me think hm I forgot the name or the nationality of the student and artist in question but... this week...have you read about..?

AMIRAH: Yeah, I think I was trying to read your mind before you even said anything, but it was this... I think he's an aspiring medical student and he's a medical illustrator and this was the first time any of us, most people online had ever seen a depiction of a foetus in a woman's womb growing and it was a black woman and a black foetus... It was just mind blowing seeing something like that. We are so – I don't even know how to describe it – it's just so normalised that white is the way. It never even crossed my mind that oh that's a possibility, to see a black person, a black woman with a black baby in her. It was just so amazing to see and that's the kind of things that I would love to see more within our curriculum. I'd like to see black people being used within our textbooks. I'd like us to learn more about the presentation of illnesses on black people or people of colour as well. So, these are just the small changes that we could make that would make the biggest difference.

ASSYA: Well, thank you Amirah. I really think that your observation could help some trinity students to reconsider what they consider to be “normal” especially when it comes to the curriculum and that’s so interesting from both a teaching and student perspective. So, what do you think Fadilah?

FADILAH: I’d say... I mean getting into a law degree in itself is a very competitive field and people tend to be very serious you know about becoming lawyers one day. I was actually asked - when I told someone before I got into university that I had plans to become a lawyer - I was questioned “Oh do you have any lawyers in your family? And I was like um no and they were like: “It’s going to be a bit difficult for you then won’t it?” And I was like, well, ok maybe and then getting in I did definitely realise that a lot of people did come from families that had a legal tradition or a history of lawyers and such. And... you know we were all taught you know, professors did lectures that did intend to give us all the same knowledge but then even just the expectation – the assumption of knowledge rather – that would come like “Oh if your father happens to work in courts he would know this” or “You would know this from being your father’s child”. Or “You’re probably familiar with this process” which I think could be exclusive to a lot of people who of course don’t come from those backgrounds... And then, a couple of other memories I’d think are when I was class rep before any measures had been taken against COVID-19. A person in my course reached out to me because she had – someone in her family was immunocompromised – so like if she were expected to come into college every day and to work with these close interactions when she wasn’t able to perform as best as she could... Again this idea of merit would lead us to think that, we’re looking at her grades (as grades are the only definition of success) we’re looking at these grades and say “Ok you clearly didn’t do well” and that must have been your fault. But no, there were loads of other circumstances and personal issues that come into play and that really do affect the academic experience. It’s just something that I really came to appreciate more because – especially at that stage when no real measures had been taken. So, it is at that level a very personal concern and it’s hard when there’s no institution that recognise individual needs. Yeah, actually I’m going to stop talking because I could draw on all day.

ASSYA: No, on the contrary your understanding of the notion of merit and how it can be both biased and compromised by certain circumstances is exactly what I had in mind and this is

what we're talking about when we talk about the illusions of meritocracy cause it's an ideal but we are not all given the same opportunities and we don't have the same circumstances even once you have access to higher education. Your story about wanting to be a lawyer is reminiscent of so many stories I've heard. I heard so many teachers telling students that they should reconsider the job of their dream because of their background or because they didn't have any role model. And that can be pretty hard especially if you're in a prestigious school because you can still feel that you do not deserve to be here or that you're an imposter. Does that ring a bell?

AMIRAH: I've definitely had moments when I felt like that, but I feel that recently I've been becoming more confident in thinking that yes I actually deserve to be where I am like I put in the work, I put in the effort, I'm no worse or better than anyone else in my position. I feel like right now, currently, I have confidence in myself that I know that I have the ability to succeed but obviously there's time when you don't always feel as confident but I feel like what I try to just do – try to motivate myself and look toward the future and like look towards my goals.

ASSYA: How about you Fadilah?

FADILAH: Yeah, I think I'm very familiar. Imposter syndrome and I are quite close friends, I think. But I definitely am kind of working through it and recognising my own abilities. I think it also comes from the lack of role models in a sense because when a person from whatever minority background or whatever social standing does achieve something there is kind of always this connotation that they're the exception to the rule. And this idea of them being an exception makes it something extraordinary or something like that we're not quite used to. And because of that perhaps it is an unpopular opinion, but it is kind of assumed that because they're an exception, others from the same background aren't capable of reaching the same height. And I find quite often from movements for diversity, that sometimes effort can be well intended but misplaced because sometimes I honestly feel that there is little faith in the people that they're trying to represent so there's like this idea that "perhaps you can't achieve this on your own so, because of the colour of your skin we're going to give you a leg up", and at times my imposter syndrome has come from that. I'm questioning, did I get this because I deserve this or did I get this because I fit a certain minority quota? So, I think it's absolutely

important to diversify and make efforts to represent everyone but I think it definitely needs to be done in a way that doesn't like belittle people or make them feel like they wouldn't have any chance whatsoever if it weren't for the help they're receiving which I think can honestly be can sometimes do worse harm to a student's or anyone's self-esteem. If they're thinking that way or are being presented with those options.

ASSYA: Thank you so much Fadilah. Actually, you're kind of anticipating my next question cause I was thinking about asking you if you have ever felt the burden of being a minority model not only in higher education but more generally? Amirah?

AMIRAH: I wouldn't say necessarily directly from my lectures but because of the nature of my course I am mostly (...) half of my course is in university and half of it is in the hospital, I'd say maybe from patients that I would kind of get that because...I don't know there's this stereotype that if you're Muslim and a hijabi that you're a doctor I don't know. Every time I meet a patient they're like "Oh doctor" I'm like "No" and then "Medical student?" ...No! And I'm just like "Oh sorry that's not me I'm a nursing student". I don't know it's like some feeling of disappointment that looms over me afterwards. It's just like... there's nothing bad in being a nursing student you know? So I'd say that's mostly where I experienced that kind of feeling. I'm trying to think...in lectures, I'd say the only type of feeling I'd had in the past was I think we were in a sociology lecture and we were just discussing minorities and specifically black people and we kind of leaned towards black people in America and then it started going towards crime rates and then you know if you're putting two and people were just making those assumptions that majority of black people quote on quote are criminals or something like that. So I'd say that in that lecture some of the students put that idea outwards cause we were discussing it in the lecture hall. I was disappointed by the fact that that idea was never just shut down it was just this let's move on kind of thing so I feel that us black people would appreciate if those types of ideas were debunked. I know it's a classroom and there may not be time for things like that but in that moment me and other black students were feeling kind of upset and angry that these stereotypes were being placed on people even if they weren't here in Ireland, but it was just Black people in general you know?

FADILAH: Yeah, I'd say in secondary school I was very fortunate, I had quite supportive teachers, but I think since getting older and making at certain stages, making decisions to practice my faith or to become more visibly Muslim with the hijab for example, I think that there's again just generalisations and assumptions and I feel less pressured. Honestly in my field, I feel that less was expected of me. So I think people would be surprised when I would have opinions or when I would be able to articulate myself in a certain way. Sometimes I would even get complimented on my English, I've been speaking it my whole life, it's my first language. So, like stuff like that I feel less that there's high expectations of me I feel that honestly day after day I'm surprising people or breaking their expectations which can at time be positive but also quite exhausting. It's not breaking news that a hijabi can articulate herself or defend her position. We can move on, it's okay.

ASSYA: Yeah, apparently it always comes as a surprise in Western countries for some people when Muslim women especially when they wear a hijab are as articulate educated and opinionated for some reason because of a fabric on their head. It's as if you had to prove that you belong somewhere...it could be In the workplace or even in the educational field or in a classroom. So, that reminds me of Amirah's podcast that is available on the Trinity-INC website, Student Partner Programme, I think. Amirah, you mentioned the fact that you experienced instances of otherism, could you elaborate on that?

AMIRAH: It was mostly about feeling excluded and I was kind of trying to make reference to it in an everyday- setting. So, I feel that for a lot of us Black Muslim, what we experience on a daily basis is some type of harshness that is felt towards us compared to other people. So, I don't know if you speak to some people let's say you're asking a question like the tone someone uses can be harsher than it would be to a person that fits social norms let's say a white male. So like, the certain harshness that we feel, it can also be exclusion from social circles as well. I know I kind of spoke to you Assya about that even in a university lifestyle, something like making friends can be difficult for a lot of black Muslims or Muslims per say because things like drinking are kind of the culture in Ireland but someone who is Muslim may not want to engage in those like activities so it leads to them kind of being left out and leads to not having friends...that's when the Muslim society comes into play and a lot of students appreciate it cause they meet people who are like them who are open to meet people from

other backgrounds cause we have Muslims from around the whole world. I feel that the Muslim society brings everyone together. I feel like mostly, it would be exclusion and making us feel that we're different from other people. Yes, we are different, we have different backgrounds, but you don't need to treat us like that as well.

ASSYA: I also had another question. We talked about so many things surrounding meritocracy and inclusivity in higher education, but would you say that as a minority member of the Trinity community you sometimes feel the responsibility to educate students or even teachers of teaching them about issues that you've been aware of from a very young age?

AMIRAH: Yeah, I feel that most people like myself who are black and Muslim are part-time educators because every single time you meet someone who doesn't look like you or is different from you feel that you have to educate them. I don't know if it's because people don't care or because it doesn't directly affect them. It doesn't come to their mind it's just something that they haven't been educated on but yeah, most people like myself feel like they always have the responsibility of educating other people and that can be very tiring cause at the end of the day I don't want that to be my job. An ideal world would be a situation where everybody knows that already or are more open to knowing that and being educated by that so that the curriculum can obviously be better. It's kind of a sticky situation cause you want to educate people but it's kind of draining having to educate everyone you know? I feel that people like myself or people from diverse background tend to stay with people who are like them because they know they won't have to assume the role of being an educator or to have to be looked at as different. They feel that they get to feel more comfortable in those kinds of circles where there are people like them.

ASSYA: How about you Fadilah? Do you feel that same exhaustion, do you feel that you sometimes have to take on the role of an educator even if it's not, if you're just a student?

FADILAH: Yeah, for sure. I think in particular, being a law student at times it can feel like an elite kind of club perhaps you know; people make a lot of jokes about law students having big egos but besides that there is genuinely an assumption that there is a tradition and a pattern and rules that you have to fit it in order to succeed as a lawyer. For example, when speaking

with senior colleagues and peers, being told stuff like “Oh there’s a networking evening and if you want to get an internship at a certain firm all you have to do is put on some nice lipstick and drink wine and talk to some associates” and it’s like, well that doesn’t necessarily work for everyone like some people may have values that – I myself, personally- would have values where I wouldn’t feel like I should use female sex appeal to get a certain position or I wouldn’t be going socialising and drinking wine as part of my religion so these things these assumptions that this is how it’s done or at least “this is the easy way” because this isn’t a formal application process but like these things do affect the experience. What about the people who aren’t able to participate in these kinds of ways or aren’t able to make it in those tight circles? It is subconsciously sending the message that okay, maybe you’re here maybe you made it, but you might not make it any further because there is no space for you.

ASSYA: Yeah, thank you so much Fadilah. Unfortunately, I must say that I’ve experienced that myself not only as a student but as a teacher. My last question is the following: would you say that you’ve experienced self-censorship as a TCD student, maybe in an academic context and keep in mind what we’ve been talking about so far. (...) I guess I could rephrase that. Do you feel that sometimes you have to refrain yourself in order to feel included? Or to hide your real nature or some parts of your identity just to feel included in conversations?

AMIRAH: I feel like people like myself often hold back when it comes to their personal feelings towards topics and things like that. I would just wait till I’m in a position or in an environment that seem more open to hear my idea before I put them out there. Personally, I would never just do that in a lecture hall when we’re discussing something. I don’t usually put myself out there and try to openly debate probably because I’m just not comfortable to do so or because I know that, if I put myself out there in a room filled with other people who are different to me, I may not have someone who is on my side or back my point...that would just be me against a whole lot of different people so most of the time I just kind of avoid those situations which may not be the best thing if you’re aiming at changing but I just don’t want to put myself on the spot.

ASSYA: How about you Fadilah? Do you agree with Amirah? Do you share the same experience as her?

FADILAH: I think again, with the responsibility to educate, it does come from a place of exhaustion at times. You know that if you put a certain point forward or if you express a certain opinion you're going to have to spend more time defending that opinion instead of discussing it, or you're going to have to explain or educate. With my role with the Muslim association, we have instances of students who have faced islamophobia in teaching and I think it's quite common and people really think twice about using examples with Muslims and Islam when discussing certain topics without really realising how this could be perceived or stereotypes perpetuating or how students may feel on an individual level. Myself and other students are like... sometimes in that moment you're not sure how to react if it's a classroom setting, it's that power balance where the lecturer is speaking and you're listening and if you disrupt that you don't know what the consequences could be, you don't know if anyone would understand you or support you so there is that it is censorship in a way just because you're so unsure about where to stand or how it could work for you. I think it comes back to otherism...there's a majority opinion, what's popular and easy to say and there's things that people are comfortable with and then there's people who don't fit into that category and I think that's when the term political correctness comes up. Some people can be kind of resentful and be like...Oh, If a person from a minority background speaks, they're probably going to be accusing me or like, you know... pointing to things (...) or this or that and you don't want to fall into the stereotype of the angry black woman or the reactionary Muslim. These are really quick moments where you have to make the decision to speak or not to speak and there's so much going through your head in those moments.

ASSYA: That's perfect Fadilah, cause you actually summed up clearly all of the notions I wanted to discuss with you today. Fadilah, I know that you're a writer; would you say that what we've been discussing for almost an hour shaped you as a writer and inspire you in your work?

FADILAH: Absolutely, a hundred percent! Especially at times I mentioned before like being a minority or not really having other people to share certain experiences with. I found myself looking and relating with characters in literature and also, I began writing things. My first writing was a terrible angsty emotional teenage stuff. But you know, it just kind of explored

questions of belonging and identity and where a person's place in the world really is. Through writing they kind of fed each other and I think that every experience became fuel for a later piece and such. It Also allowed me to appreciate other writers exploring these themes and sometimes it also leads me to appreciate that our experience may not be the exact same, it's about that kind of human connection in literature (...) I think that you can find yourself in any story or understand those things on any level.

ASSYA: So, thank you so much Fadilah and Amirah for your contribution to this conversation for our first International Day for Equal Opportunity. For those of you who are interested in launching their own IDEO, just know that it is possible and if you need more information, you can contact me at HAMDANIA@TCD.IE. All the information will be available on social media, you can always have a look at jmec.com.

