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#### Forum piece

# Who's Afraid of Education? An Ethnodrama in Four Acts

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#### **Abstract**

Who's Afraid of Education? is an ethnodrama in four acts based on data collected at two university colleges in Denmark. The main characters, Myriam and Mahmood, embody the collective voices of seven student teachers, all of whom were in the final year of their teacher education program at the time of the study. The ethnodrama centers on the characters' experiences, deliberately prioritizing their perspectives over the researcher's interpretations. The reader is invited to form their own interpretations and to critically reflect on the tension between the characters' cultural identities and the expectations of a predominantly monocultural educational system. By encouraging a deeper level of engagement with the research findings, the ethnodrama breaks away from conventional academic writing formats, making the research more accessible to a wider audience.

Keywords: teacher education, ethnographic drama, creative writing, critical multiculturalism, Denmark

### **Foreword**

Ethnodrama (ethnographic drama) is a distinctive form of creative writing that merges data presentation and analysis, creating a simultaneous expression of both or neither. The significant strengths of the ethnodrama genre are its ability to democratize the research and to shift power from the researcher to the reader and study participants (Blackledge & Creese, 2022; Sallis, 2007). It challenges conventional academic writing norms by avoiding the separation of data from analysis, and by amplifying the voices of study



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participants rather than privileging the researcher's interpretation (Petersen, 2013; Sallis, 2007). This genre also invites the reader not just to receive information but to actively engage with it, placing them in a cocreative role, thereby rendering the conventional analysis and discussion sections irrelevant (Petersen, 2013; ZIN & Gannon, 2022). Therefore, ethnodrama offers a visceral sense of being present in the experiences being portrayed, highlighting unspoken and embodied knowledge while critically interrogating power structures and the coloniality of conventional research practices (Blackledge & Creese, 2022; Sallis, 2007).

Who's Afraid of Education? is an ethnodrama in four acts based on data collected at two university colleges in Denmark during the spring of 2022. The foundation of the ethnodrama is built upon seven interviews with student teachers, all of whom were in the final (fourth) year of their teacher education program. Although the participants were born and raised in Denmark, their families were of diverse cultural backgrounds, with parents and/or grandparents having migrated to Denmark, for various reasons. During the individual interviews, the participants reflected on their educational journeys through the Danish teacher education system. Although they generally expressed satisfaction with the education they received, they also shared numerous instances of discrimination and unfair treatment that they had encountered during their on-site training and in other contexts. These experiences were subsequently analyzed and transformed into the ethnodrama, offering an artistic portrayal of their lived realities.

The study employs critical multiculturalism as its primary theoretical framework. Critical multiculturalism goes beyond advocating for equal access to education for all – it also actively challenges the hegemonic power structures that marginalize minority groups and perpetuate systemic inequities (May & Sleeter, 2010; Vavrus, 2010). Furthermore, the framework underscores the empowerment of minority groups and the amplification of their voices, with the aim of transforming the educational system and dismantling structural discrimination (Gorski & Parekh, 2020; Vavrus, 2010). Viewed through this lens, education becomes a tool not only for inclusion but also for genuine social change.

From an ethical perspective, Who's Afraid of Education? balances fidelity to collected data with the creative demands of ethnodramatic writing. A reflexive approach was employed in the development of the ethnodrama, involving ongoing negotiations between authenticity, anonymity, and artistic expression (Sallis, 2007). The process included multiple readings of the interview transcripts alongside a thematic analysis, initially conducted to identify recurring patterns of discrimination and unfair treatment experienced by the participating student teachers. These patterns encompassed instances of overt bias and prejudice during on-site training in compulsory schools, as well as in other settings such as their workplaces. For example, participants described facing microaggressions and encountering barriers to professional development opportunities based on their appearance or religious beliefs. They also reported

that their cultural backgrounds were often perceived as obstacles rather than resources in various educational contexts. These themes formed the foundation of the ethnodrama, shaping the portrayal of tensions and emotional dynamics within the script.

Although the events depicted in the ethnodrama are grounded in the themes derived from the analysis of the interviews, the script also incorporates elements of 'creata'—a space for artistic reconstruction and expression, which is used to enhance certain aspects of the narrative to achieve a deeper dramatic or emotional resonance (Petersen, 2013). The author's reflexivity and positioning emerged through a continual process of critically examining early drafts of the ethnodrama to identify how personal beliefs and experiences might influence the interpretation of the data. The author's positioning as both researcher and creative writer required careful negotiation between preserving the integrity of participants' narratives and incorporating artistic reconstructions to enhance emotional resonance. This reflexive approach served as a safeguard, ensuring that aesthetic choices—particularly those associated with 'creata'—did not overshadow the experiences shared by the participants.

To protect the anonymity of the participants, the main characters, Myriam and Mahmood, represent the collective voices of the seven student teachers who participated in the research project. By combining their experiences and attributing them to two characters, the ethnodrama creates a unified narrative that amplifies the impact of their stories. The supporting characters, Leonora, Solveig and Astrid, are artistically constructed from the descriptions of the situations experienced by the participating student teachers, again representing shared voices rather than directly mirroring actual individuals. This creative synthesis allows for a more powerful and cohesive dramatic representation of the real events.

## WHO'S AFRAID OF EDUCATION?

## THE CHARACTERS (in the order of appearance)

**Myriam:** 25, student teacher, specializes in teaching Danish, English and mathematics. She was born and raised in Denmark and comes from a Middle Eastern family that values education and cultural heritage. Myriam believes in the power of education to bridge cultural divides. She is reflective, often considering how her own identity shapes her teaching methods and interactions with children.

**Mahmood:** 27, student teacher and friend of Myriam, specializes in teaching English, history and religion. He was born and raised in Denmark and comes from a Middle Eastern family. Mahmood is analytical, empathetic and deeply reflective. He has a strong sense of justice and is passionate about his teaching in a way that challenges children to think critically about the world around them.

Benediktsson 4

Leonora: 40, schoolteacher, self-identifies as progressive and open-minded, despite being defensive when

her perspectives are challenged.

Solveig: 52, principal of the school where Myriam and Mahmood are placed for on-site training, known for

her calm and composed demeanor.

Astrid: 36, chair of the parent's council at Solveig's school, energetic and passionate, though her

enthusiasm can sometimes be overbearing.

**ACT I EXCITEMENT** 

**The scene:** The canteen on the campus of a university college in Denmark

The time: Lunch break

(The canteen is nearly full, with students sitting in small groups or pairs, chatting as they eat lunch. Myriam

and Mahmood are seated at a table near the center of the canteen.)

Myriam: Are you excited about our final on-site training?

Mahmood: Very! I am looking forward to teaching religion. Remember, I told you about it before?

Myriam: Ah, right!

Mahmood: Last time I mostly focused on teaching English and history. This time will be a bit different, I

guess.

Myriam: I bet! Religion is a tricky subject to teach. You really must pay attention to what materials you use

and how you present the subject. Do you know anything about the school we are placed at?

Mahmood: I don't know much. But I have heard that it is very homogeneous, mostly ethnic Danes are

there.

**Myriam:** Hmm... it can be challenging, right?

Mahmood: I had a conversation with that lady from the office who arranges the training. I don't remember

her name ... Anyway, she said that we should not worry. So, I am feeling optimistic. What about you,

Myriam? How are you doing?

Myriam: I am doing well, but very busy, as always (laughs). You know, I have a part-time job at that fashion

shop, which is generally fun, but some days can be crazy, especially when the sale is on. These days when I

return home, I don't have any energy. To be honest, it has been quite challenging to balance work and studies. And now we are starting the on-site training! I am excited but I am going to need your help with

some of the assignments! (laughs)

Mahmood: Sure! I am always happy to help you!

Myriam: To be honest, I am feeling a bit stressed about the training.

Mahmood: Why?

**Myriam:** Do you remember Fatima from our English language group?

**Mahmood:** Yes, of course. How is she doing?

Myriam: She wasn't happy with her on-site placement last time. She felt completely out of place. The children were calling her names, and the school staff barely intervened. They just let it slide as if it wasn't

serious.

Mahmood: Was it because she wears the hijab?

Myriam: I think so ... She's even considering taking it off for her next placement, just to avoid the harassment. It's breaking her down, and she's feeling like she must choose between her faith and her future as a teacher.

Mahmood: That's heartbreaking. I can't believe this is still happening. It's just a piece of fabric – a symbol

of her personal beliefs. Why does it bother so many people?

Myriam: Exactly and we are living in such a globalized world, so you would expect people to be more open.

But the reality is often different. And the real problem isn't the hijab – it's the ignorance surrounding it.

Instead of seeing her for the talented, dedicated person she is, people reduce her to what she wears.

Mahmood: Sad!

Myriam: I tried to encourage her and said that she shouldn't have to strip away parts of herself just to be accepted. She must be strong and carry on. But you know these are just words. We really don't know

whether they really help.

Mahmood: You are such a good friend!

Myriam: Thank you! (looks at her watch) Oh! Now, let's eat! We don't have much time! I have a class soon

and then I need to run to work!

#### **ACT II CONFUSION**

**The scene:** The fashion shop where Myriam works part time.

**The time:** Later the same day.

(Relaxing music plays in the background as Myriam is busy rearranging bags on a shelf in the accessories section of the shop. Only a few customers are in the store, browsing.)

**Leonora:** (walks into the shop and goes directly to the accessories section, looking at the bags)

Myriam: (notices Leonora, smiles and walks up to her). Good evening! Do you need any help?

Leonora: Hi! Yes. I see that you have a sale on. Are all the bags included in the sale?

Myriam: Not all of them but many are. Is there any particular type you are looking for?

**Leonora:** I am a teacher, so I need a bag I could use on a daily basis.

Myriam: Sure. Look at this one. I think this is a good bag for a teacher! It looks nice, has several sections where you can keep your computer, books and other things. And it is light! And it is in the sale – 40% off.

Leonora: This one looks good. Do many teachers shop here? Sounds like you know a lot about what a teacher needs.

Myriam: Well, I am studying to become a teacher myself!

**Leonora:** Really?! Wow!

Myriam: May I ask? What subjects do you teach?

Leonora: Currently I teach Danish, English and history, but I have taught different subjects throughout the years. What are your specializations in the college?

Myriam: Danish, English and mathematics.

**Leonora:** Wow. Great choices! Oh, by the way, where do you come from?

**Myriam:** (*smiling*) I am from Aarhus.

**Leonora:** (*smiling*) No, I mean where do you really come from?

Myriam: (softly but not smiling anymore) I am not sure what you mean, but my whole family is from

Aarhus.

Leonora: (still smiling) No worries. I am very open-minded and love different cultures. You know it is so cool that Denmark is becoming more multicultural!

Myriam: (still softly) Ah, I see what you mean. Well, my family has a Middle Eastern background.

Leonora: Exactly! I should have guessed! You have gorgeous eyes. I visited Dubai last year and was so surprised that those people are actually nice!

(pause)

Myriam: (confused) Ehm ... Right. Good to hear! (tries to smile)

Leonora: Oh, no! Please don't get me wrong! I like Middle Eastern people. I have a pupil in my class. He is from Iraq or something. And his brothers are educated, and they are overall an integrated family.

**Myriam:** Oh, that is nice to hear! Education is important for everyone.

Leonora: Right! After all that family had all the potential to become criminals, but thanks to education they are completely different people.

(pause)

Myriam: (confused) Ehm ... Well ... (pause) This is the bag I recommend. We have other options as well on that shelf. Do you need any more help?

Leonora: Oh, gosh! I am afraid you've misunderstood me completely. I am very open! And very happy to see people like you become teachers. You are really a pattern-breaker.

(pause)

Myriam: (still confused) Right ... Well ... (pause) As I said, I am happy to help if you need any advice on our range of bags. (smiles)

Leonora: (looks around, frantically) Yes. I am going to take a look. Thank you and good luck with your studies!

Myriam: Thank you.

(Myriam disappears into the personnel room.)

#### **ACT III FEAR**

The scene: Solveig's office

The time: Morning, several days later

(Solveig sits at her desk in the quiet of her office, drinking her coffee. The sound of children playing filters in through the open window. Suddenly, someone knocks on the door.)

Solveig: Come in please!

**Astrid:** Good morning, Solveig! Am I disturbing you?

**Solveig:** (*smiling*) No, not at all. Please come in!

**Astrid:** Thank you!

**Solveig:** Sit down! How can I help you?

Astrid: (smiling) Thank you! I just wanted to discuss one thing. I have heard that two student teachers have been placed at our school for training.

Solveig: (smiling) That's right. They are lovely students. I showed them around the other day. They seemed to be motivated and passionate about teaching.

Astrid: (loudly) Very nice!

(pause)

Astrid: (whispers) But I have one concern. Oh, I don't even know how to say this, but ...

**Solveig:** Is something wrong?

**Astrid:** One of these students is going to teach religion, right?

**Solveig:** Yes, that's correct.

Astrid: I don't have any prejudices, but ... I am a bit concerned because ... well, you know, he's one of them.

Solveig: One of whom?

Astrid: A Muslim. I had a conversation with some of the other parents in our group chat, and they have concerns too.

Solveig: I see. I understand where the concern might be coming from, but I want to reassure you that he's a

highly educated, responsible young man. I'm confident he'll do an excellent job with the subject, regardless

of his background.

Astrid: I know... But we are afraid. What if he overemphasizes certain aspects of religion? I mean, sure, he

seems nice and all, but we don't really know him, do we? We don't know what's going on inside his head or

what his real intentions are. And, you know, I've seen documentaries ... sometimes religion can be used to

radicalize young minds. That's what scares us.

Solveig: (seriously) Astrid, I repeat – I understand your concerns. But it's important to remember that a

person's faith does not define their teaching. What we should focus on is his professional qualifications, not

his faith. And he is constantly under supervision, and he will be following our teaching plans.

Astrid: I hope you are right. And again, this is not prejudice, but with everything you hear these days, it's

hard not to be anxious. We just want to make sure our children are safe and learning the right things.

Solveig: Yes, I understand. But we must also be careful not to allow fear to turn into prejudice. This young

man has worked hard to be here, just like everyone else.

Astrid: (hesitantly) Right ... but ...

**Solveig:** (interrupts) Is there anything else I can do for you, Astrid?

**Astrid:** (*still hesitantly*) No that was it. Have a nice day!

Solveig: Thanks. You too!

Astrid: Thank you!

(Astrid leaves the office. Solveig takes the phone and calls her secretary.)

Solveig: (on the phone) Hi. Could you please find Mahmood, one of the student teachers, and ask him to

come to my office for a quick chat? Thank you.

(Solveig works in the office. Several minutes later, somebody knocks on the door.)

Solveig: Come in please!

Mahmood: Good morning, Solveig! Did you ask me to come?

**Solveig:** Yes! Thank you! Please sit down.

(pause)

**Solveig:** How are you doing?

Mahmood: Pretty well, thank you.

**Solveig:** How is the communication with your supervisor? It's Anne, right?

**Mahmood:** Yes. Everything is going well, and the communication is smooth. Is there something specific you'd like to discuss?

**Solveig:** (hesitantly) Well, yes ... It's a bit of a sensitive issue. It relates to one of the subjects you'll be teaching – religion. Have you started teaching that yet?

**Mahmood:** No. I'm scheduled to start tomorrow.

**Solveig:** Good. The thing is that some parents have raised concerns about what you might include in your lessons ... they're worried that some topics might not be ... how should I put it ... appropriate.

**Mahmood:** (surprised) Appropriate? What do you mean by that?

**Solveig:** Sorry, that wasn't the best choice of words. Let me be put it differently.

Mahmood: Please, go ahead.

**Solveig:** Because you come from a Muslim background, a few parents are concerned that you might focus too much on Islam, or even promote it to the children. Do you see where I'm getting at?

**Mahmood:** Ah, I see. So, basically, they're uncomfortable with a Muslim teacher teaching religion class.

**Solveig:** I know it sounds prejudiced – and I want you to know that I do not share their concerns. I've assured them that you are a professional and will follow the curriculum. But they've expressed fears that you might try to radicalize the chil...

**Mahmood:** (*interrupts*) Radicalize? Did they actually use that word? That's not just a concern – that's an accusation. Why would they think that?

**Solveig:** (*sighs*) I know. It's an extreme reaction. They don't know you, Mahmood. They're acting out of fear. They just want to protect their kids.

Mahmood: (calmly) I see. But instead of fearing a Muslim teacher, maybe they should be more concerned

about passing their prejudices on to their children. I hope I'm not being too blunt.

Solveig: No, not at all. I completely understand where you're coming from. And I agree, it's unfair. But I

wanted to have this conversation with you, so you are aware of this situation.

Mahmood: I appreciate that. Thank you.

Solveig: I'll also talk to your supervisor, Anne, and let her know about the situation. Would that be alright

with you?

Mahmood: Yes, that's fine. But what about my religion class tomorrow? Will I still be able to go ahead as

planned?

Solveig: Absolutely. You'll follow the schedule as planned. I'll deal with the parents' concerns, so you can

focus on teaching.

Mahmood: Thank you. May I go now?

**Solveig:** Yes. Take care and have a nice day!

Mahmood: Thank you! You too.

(Mahmood leaves the office. Solveig takes the phone and calls her secretary.)

Solveig: (on the phone) Hi. Could you please call Astrid, chair of the parent's council, and ask her to come to

my office tomorrow or later this week, when she has time.

**ACT IV COMMITMENT** 

The scene: Myriam's favorite coffee shop

The time: Evening, three weeks later

(Relaxing music fills the air as the coffee shop, comfortably half-full, hums with quiet conversations. People

sit in pairs, sipping coffee and engaging in light chatter. Myriam and Mahmood are seated near the center,

enjoying their coffee and sharing a piece of cake.)

Myriam: I am so happy the on-site training is over!

Mahmood: Me too. It was quite challenging this time. I felt I was under surveillance all the time.

Myriam: Ah, right, because of the religion class and the parents ... I still cannot believe that nonsense that

nordiccie.org

NJCIE 2025, Vol. 9(2)

they came up with. What were they thinking? That you were going to run a Quranic school?

**Mahmood:** I think that is exactly what they imagined.

Myriam: Ugh, I am so sorry you had to experience all this.

**Mahmood:** You know, although it was challenging, and I felt saddened by the kind of welcome I received, I pushed through and completed my classes. And I am so glad I did that – not just for myself, but for the children and even their parents.

Myriam: So, everything went well?

**Mahmood:** I think the classes went very well. The children learned a great deal about Islam, not through the media they're often exposed to, but through real, lived experiences.

**Myriam:** Exactly. It's disturbing how their main source of information about Islam – and Muslim people in general – is the media, which, to put it mildly, is anything but neutral. The narrative is always framed to create fear or suspicion, rarely understanding. The headlines don't tell stories of community, history or the diversity within Muslim cultures. They focus on extremism, violence and difference. And when that's all they're exposed to, it's no wonder the children, and their parents, end up with all these prejudices.

**Mahmood:** I am so glad I got this opportunity to undo some of that damage.

**Myriam:** Those parents should have realized how fortunate they were to have their children learning from such a dedicated teacher as you, Mahmood. Education is meant to open minds, not close them with fear. They should have been thankful for the opportunity, not afraid of it.

**Mahmood:** Thank you, Myriam! Through this experience, I've learned that we can't let these barriers stop us. We must be strong and resilient, and push through. Denmark is multicultural, but that multiculturalism is still not truly reflected in the teaching profession. And that's a real problem. I think there's a lack of teachers from diverse cultural backgrounds, and it impacts the whole system.

**Myriam:** Oh, absolutely! It was the same when I was at school. I remember every teacher I had – they were all fifty-plus, Danish men – Morten, Svend – always the same. There was no room for voices like mine, or anyone from a different background. It sent a message, loud and clear: there was only one way to be a teacher, and that didn't include us.

**Mahmood:** That's right! We need culturally diverse teachers – like Fatima, Ajay, Svetlana, Kai-liang and so many more. When children see teachers with diverse backgrounds and experiences, it's transformative. It

13

gives them a sense of belonging, a sense of representation that they rarely get elsewhere. It helps all children to imagine themselves in roles they might otherwise feel excluded from.

**Myriam:** One hundred per cent! It's about more than just teaching subjects – it's about who is allowed to be seen as a role model. When children only see a narrow representation of who can be a teacher, it limits their understanding of what's possible for them. We need to break that cycle!

(Their conversation gradually fades into the background as they continue to chat, sipping coffee and enjoying their cake.)

∽ THE END ∽

## Author's postscript

The ethnodrama *Who's Afraid of Education?* offered a window into the lived experiences of seven student teachers, whose stories were artistically woven together and represented through the collective voices of the two main characters, Myriam and Mahmood. The purpose of the ethnodrama was to engage the reader by inviting them to critically reflect on the power dynamics and systemic inequities that are still embedded in educational spaces. By using creative writing as a medium, the ethnodrama uncovered nuanced insights that might remain hidden in conventional ethnographic presentations, particularly those tied to unspoken experiences and embodied knowledge (Blackledge & Creese, 2022).

The scenes in *Who's Afraid of Education?* were constructed to portray the dynamics and conflicts between the characters, aiming to give the reader a sense of how it felt to be there. Although based on the audio recordings of the interviews, the dialogues were artistically reconstructed rather than being a literal transcription, thereby going beyond the constraints of conventional academic reports and creating a sense of authenticity through careful attention to aesthetic and dramatic elements (Blackledge & Creese, 2022). The process of crafting an ethnodrama was described by Blackledge and Creese as 'crystallization', wherein the ethnodramatist sifts through multiple truths within a setting to construct scenes that capture key themes.

From a critical multiculturalist perspective, *Who's Afraid of Education?* demonstrated how Myriam and Mahmood navigated the tension between their cultural identities and the expectations of a predominantly monocultural educational system. This tension manifested in their struggles to defend their professional qualifications against the discriminatory narratives that still exist inside and outside of educational institutions. As critical multiculturalism insists that mere recognition of injustice is insufficient and instead

demands action toward systemic change (Gorski & Parekh, 2020; Vavrus, 2010), the question remains as to whether the ethnodrama can truly disrupt the power dynamics it seeks to expose.

Although *Who's Afraid of Education?* brings to light the marginalization experienced by Myriam and Mahmood, it may also risk reinforcing the very structures it criticizes if the reader fails to move beyond passive empathy to active engagement in dismantling structural discrimination. In conventional academic writing, the researcher 'argues' or 'defends' a point, often presenting a singular, more digestible interpretation of the data. In contrast, by being both data and analysis (or neither), the ethnodrama genre allows the reader to generate their own insights and interpretations, fostering a deeper engagement with the research findings (Petersen, 2013; ZIN & Gannon, 2022). Therefore, the ethnodrama's impact ultimately depends on whether it mobilizes its audience to challenge and transform the power dynamics within educational spaces, and in society more broadly.

In summary, the ethnodrama genre challenges traditional notions of research representation, opening space for more inclusive and participatory forms of inquiry. The strength of ethnodrama lies in its ability to capture the complexity of lived experiences, amplifying voices that might otherwise be marginalized and inviting the reader to critically engage with the social realities portrayed. Through this blend of data and creativity, ethnodrama pushes the boundaries of both academic research and creative writing, offering new possibilities for understanding and transforming the world around us.

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