The Unspoken Struggles of an International Student

The idea of studying in the United States had been my dream, especially because of the way western culture has been looked upon in India. But little did anyone tell me about what was awaiting for me in the other part of the globe. I initially thought that as I worked harder than others, got good grades, networked, I would shine, and life would magically become brighter. But, it was not that long until I realised that the real struggle wasn't the classroom - it was everyday moments where I was constantly reminded of being an alien.

Conversing was the biggest challenge. I studied English as my first language until high school, but after coming to the U.S., I lost my confidence in it. Having to repeat myself every time I spoke, I began to hesitate, second-guessing my words. There were instances where I would rehearse my restaurant orders before saying them aloud to ensure the waiter understood them on the first try, avoiding the need to repeat myself. As a result, I started speaking as little as possible. This constant self-correction reminded me of Marjorie Agosín's experience in Always from Somewhere Else: Reflections on Exile, where she, too, felt silenced in a new country, struggling with language as both a necessity and an obstacle to belonging (Agosín, 1995).

Desperate to force myself into conversations, to practice the style of American speech, and to master the ability of small talk, I took a student job at Starbucks in my first semester of college. Over time, I started learning the tricks of trade. I grasped how Americans would greet strangers with ease, how to strike a casual chatter about the weather or football to fill the silence. It was exhausting sometimes, but I wanted to be more than an International student who was trying to get by. I wanted to be someone who could be a part of the surroundings, even if I may sound a little different. Just as Agosín describes how language became both a bridge and a barrier for her, my ability to adapt didn't erase the feeling of foreignness—it just made it easier to hide (Agosín, 1995).

When I visit India, the first few days are very comforting because of the home-cooked food, the absence of language barriers, and warmth of the family. Even amidst comfort there is some discomfort - my parents avoid sharing their problems with me so that my vacation in India is as smooth as possible, my younger sister no longer fights for that last slice of pizza. This VIP treatment made me feel like an outsider. I am no longer part of the insider jokes that my friends laugh about. From looking at me as their brother, my friends started viewing me as a rich kid pursuing an expensive degree. Just as Agosín describes in her memoir, displacement is not just about leaving a place—it is the slow realization that home has changed, and no matter how much I long for it, returning will never feel the same (Agosín, 1995).

In America, the online job-postings and career fairs shattered my belief that hard work is directly proportional to greater opportunities. Nine out of ten listings seemed to come with a disclaimer - "We do not sponsor work visas". I ignored it the first time I saw it, but it had come to an extent where I checked if the role sponsors work visas before even checking the description of the role or company. I watched classmates with less experience and weaker resumes secure opportunities with ease, while I woke up to rejection emails that had nothing to do with my skills

and everything to do with the inconvenience of my visa status. Just as Agosín recalls how Latin American writers in exile struggled to find an audience, their talents often overlooked due to circumstances beyond their control, I, too, found that despite all my hard work, my future in the U.S. is uncertain—not because I lack skills, but because I am not the "right" kind of candidate (Agosín, 1995).

In hopes of expanding my network and seeking better professional opportunities, I decided to rush for a professional fraternity. I was aware that I would have to put in double the effort to strike conversations with the brothers in order to become a member of the fraternity. I attended all the five rush events, when only three were required to attend. I actively participated in the professional development workshop. I nearly spoke to every brother, and by day five most of them even recognized me by name. As I was conversing with different people, I could feel the vacuum. Some felt natural, but in most of them, the disinterest was evident from their polite nods as they waited for someone more familiar to talk to. My fears turned into reality when I received an email from the rush head. The words were polite, encouraging—“It was a competitive process.” “We hope you stay connected.” But all I read was: You’re not what we’re looking for. Agosín describes how, despite being part of the intellectual community in the U.S., she and other exiled writers remained a small, isolated minority, always on the margins of belonging (Agosín, 1995). I felt the same way—no matter how much effort I put in, some doors weren’t meant for me to walk through. I replayed the rush process in my head, doubting myself if I had said anything wrong, if I sounded very desperate. I saw the people who got in, most of them white, but more importantly, all of them were born and raised in America having comfort in the space that I had struggled to manufacture. For them, rush events were about finding if the environment in their fraternity suited their preferences. For me, it had been about proving that I could belong in one.

I have spent the past three years of my life learning to exist in a world that is very different from the one I come from. I have learnt to switch between accents so that I don’t have to repeat myself to Americans, and the Indian’s don’t see me differently. I have mastered the ability to shrink myself so that I don’t stand out too much in the negative light, but present enough not to be disregarded or forgotten.

Despite all the hardships, I keep going. One day, I hope to create breakthroughs in Computer Science so significant that I no longer have to fit in, and my identity in this country doesn’t just come from the visa status. The chase to be respected, rather than trying hard to be accepted is what fuels me to navigate through the obstacles thrown as an international student in the United States.

Reference:

Agosín, M. (1995). Always from somewhere else: Reflections on exile. NACLA Report on the Americas, 28(6).