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Stories from Home for the Classroom: Teaching Decolonial Feminist Theori(es)

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How do we attend to the delicate task of teaching and conceptualizing decolonial and transnational feminisms within institutions with colonial histories? How do we "decolonise" women, gender, and sexuality studies? How can we teach/learn gender and sexuality in or of the "Middle East"/ "West Asia"? What/whose knowledges are shared? What is or should be front staged in our classrooms and what should be kept silent or back staged?

These questions and sensations have been central to the development of my pedagogical practice; they inform the location from which I enter "our" classroom – a classroom that is constructed and framed to help me and my co-travelers/students find hope (or forcefully practice radical hope), in the present moment of utter defeat.

In our collaborative journey within the landscapes of feminist thought and literature, my student co-travelers and I collectively grapple with and reflect deeply on teaching and learning with/on gender, race, class, and sexuality. We focus on the interrelated and interlayered realms of feminist, queer, postcolonial, and anti-racist knowledge production; while doing so we practice an attunement to the longer histories of settler/colonialism and imperialism as well as our own entanglements with institutions, structures, and systems that still uphold their presents. This practice asks "us" – the students and I – to think about the structures of power and violence, put our lived experiences in conversation with theories, and take account of feelings, emotions, affects, and bodies as spaces and archives of knowledge production.

In order to set the ground work for such an attunement, we start our journey with an informal workshop in which we hold each other while exploring concepts such as unlearning and un/mastery. Inspired by Julietta Singh (2018), Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999), Arvin Maile, Eve Tuck, and Angie Morrill (2013), Audre Lorde (1984), Sara Ahmed (2017), Richa Nagar (2019), and many more, we talk about what it means to unlearn, what it means to question mastery, what it means to know and be an expert on/of something. I emphasize that unlearning is as important as learning during our course journeys while making sure that the classroom remains a space for collective care. In that I take inspiration from Sara Ahmed who reminds us that

> in queer, feminist, and antiracist work, self-care is about the creation of community, fragile communities… assembled out of the experiences of being shattered. We reassemble ourselves through the ordinary, everyday, and often painstaking work of looking after ourselves; looking after each other (2017, p. 240)

We look after and for each other. Our unlearning journey is not a top down, professor-led and student-followed process. It is a shared and reciprocal journey. It is a practice in/of vulnerability, a "radical vulnerability" (Nagar 2019) – a radical openness to the possibility of relearning from one another without having a set destination in mind. Richa Nagar tells us that

> a relationality imbedded in radical vulnerability strives to internalize that our self is intensely co-constituted and entangled with the other. Whatever we learn, whatever we come to be, becomes

> deeply contingent on what each one of us is prepared to give to the collective journey that seeks to unite the I and we with the you and they (2019, p. 31).

If radical vulnerability is practiced in a lecture hall, what would it look like? I thought a lot about this question while I was preparing my lectures for a first-year course on Feminist Thought and Literature, a survey course that is created as a gateway for Gender Studies majors and bears a lot of pressure in persuading students to remain in the program, so that the precarious program of gender studies survives (thanks, neoliberal university)! While I still grapple with this question – and by no means have I found the answer to it, I have come to the decision to be open and honest about my own unlearning journey because the practice of "radical vulnerability" craves reciprocity. It demands co-travelling. Therefore, I cannot expect my students to enter this course with openness if I am not willing to show the same openness in my own learning journey.

So, I/we share.

The week on postcolonial feminism starts with a story of my favourite decolonial feminist:

Soghra Bagheri: my maternal grandmother

Now this usually raises eyebrows, especially when a picture of my grandmother, a tiny woman in her *gol goli chador* holding her grandchildren, pops up on the screen.

Why is it that she's my favourite decolonial feminist? What has she done to be considered one? Then comes the most pertinent question: who is a decolonial feminist anyway?

So, I tell them about *Soghra*.

Soghra, my grandmother (maman), was born in 1930 to a nomadic tribe in North Western Iran. She was the youngest of 6 siblings and the only daughter. Her mother, Zahra, was the khan *of her tribe. People referred to her as* Khanim Agha[1] *Maman used to say, laughing at the apparent contradictory transfusion of such a title. Maman would explain her mother's daily routine with such pride: Khanim Agha would get up in the morning, braid her thick long brown hair and wrap it in a red scarf, put on her* tuman[2] *and* shalta,[3] *and walk out of her tent. Maman would brag about how everyone in her tribe respected Zahra and her words, and how she had the ultimate power in negotiating or resolving any water or land related conflicts.*

Despite hearing this story repeatedly, I explain to my students, *up until nine or ten years ago, I saw my grandmother as one of the most oppressed people; a victim of child marriage as she married at age thirteen, gave birth to her first child at age fourteen, and had her six kids by age twenty-five. I saw her as an illiterate woman who didn't have much of an opportunity to study. She had taught herself how to read, so that she*

[1] Sir Lady or Sir Madam is the literal translation.
[2] A colourful loose pants.
[3] A colourful dress.

would be able to read the Quran. I saw her as a woman without agency, the power to make informed decisions about her own life, because my conceptions about women's empowerment and emancipation were formed through reading western liberal feminism. I read many books on feminism by various known scholars and they were helpful in giving me perspectives on patriarchy and women's oppression, but they did one thing in the process: they made me think that patriarchy is only experienced in one way. They made me think that context does not matter and the only valid story is the one told by white cis women. They made me think that there is a universal way to emancipate and empower women and gendered minorities – that is, the liberal feminist way. Although these books educated me immensely they also made me ignorant in some ways. The stories that my grandmother told me about herself and her mother entered one ear and exited speedily from the other. Stories told in the books held weight and value; Soghra and Zahra's stories did not. Alas, I did not know how to listen.

If I listened I would have known that for maman oppression and patriarchy worked differently. Maman never said she was not oppressed, but oppression for her took a different form. She did not think she was oppressed because she was married at age thirteen, but she thought she was oppressed because immediately after World War I, to reduce the influence of Soviet Union in Northwest Iran, with the order of Britain, Iran's Monarch Reza Shah violently forced most of the nomadic tribes to settle down and give up the rights to their lands and their hunting weapons.[4] *So, my grandmother's tribe was forced to dismantle. Many of her people moved to different villages and cities and many, including her mother Zahra, lost their lives in the process as they could not bear the inertness of a static life. Soghra was left alone. Whereas previously she had the support of her whole family, her whole tribe, she was forced to raise her children by herself, without any familial connections. For Soghra, then, oppression was the result of an imperial top down settlement, rather than not having the right to vote for example. Her tribe did not care to be part of a nation-state or subjects to a monarchy anyway.*

If I listened I would have known how strong she was as she pulled herself and her family together through many sacrifices and also took care of the children of many people from her tribe who had not survived the settled life. So, in addition to her six kids, she also raised three other kids and took care of many others over the years. She turned a room in her house into a shelter for women who needed a place to stay. Her self-taught reading was not just for religious means; it also gave her access to build a community with other women who attended religious ceremonies in the mosque.

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Teaching is why I have entered academia and it is the reason I'd like to remain in it despite the continued siege on the liberal arts – with its neoliberal, cost-benefit approach to higher education – where students are

[4] The policy of dismantling major tribes in Iran during the Pahlavi era is called *takhte ghapoo*. The role of the nomadic tribes in revolting against shah and resisting the foreign influence on National resources, specifically Britain's major interest in oil and gas, worried the Shah and Britain. This policy forced many nomadic tribes to give up their nomadic life and settle in nearby villages. Please see عزیز کیاوند (1368) and
مهدیقلی هدایت (1361).

reduced to numbers, accounts, and dollar signs, and where junior and non-tenured faculty struggle to prove worthy of their precarious employments. It is in these moments of exhaustion and despair that decolonial feminist pedagogy becomes not just a teaching tool but a practice of survival for all those deemed worthless and replaceable by neoliberal institutions. A feminist pedagogical practice is not simply about sharing ideas/topics, but it is a site through which we can crucially examine the power dynamics and coloniality of knowledge and knowledge production, investigate the material and colonial hierarchies of the classroom and the university, and build collective communities of care – a space for survival. "The feminist classroom," bell hooks reminds us,

> is and should be a place where there is a sense of struggle, where there is visible acknowledgment of the union of theory and practice, where we work together as teachers and students to overcome the estrangement and alienation that have become so much the norm in the contemporary university (1988, p. 51).

By encouraging respectful but honest, critical yet open conversations, our co-traveling journeys have been spaces of feminist pedagogy and (un)learning; our conversations, though hard and uncomfortable, have also been hopeful, felt, and embodied.

I share the fragment of my favourite feminist's life to hold myself in the circle of unlearning, listening, re/learning.

What a complicated subject listening is: on the one hand it demands silence; a wordless moment that is often presumed empty, void, nothing; and on the other hand, it rejects silence as it solicitates a response; moments filled with words, so that we know one has listened. It is with such contradiction that listening is often dismissed as an engaged response in the classroom. Perhaps it is not listening that we are troubled by but rather the silence that accompanies it. We often perceive silence as nothingness. However, silence can be a location in which engagement is ultimate; it can be a location in which sitting in discomfort and un/learning takes place.[5]

The story about my grandmother and her mother sparks conversation in the class, stories of grandmothers, mothers, and aunties from Jamaica, Ghana, Pakistan, Puerto Rico, and so on are shared. All of a sudden, the feminist theories come to life, they take the shape of people around us or in our past. They are not just figures or characters in our books and lecture slides; they are people whose lives, with all their complexities, resemble many forms of resistance we talk about. Women, whose lives are often reduced to victims and victims only, become our feminist decolonial archives.

But, as their instructor, the one with the outmost responsibility in the classroom, I am cognizant of the complexities of these women's lives. Often time the narratives of heroes, of decolonial feminist heroes, are portrayed in such a light that it is impossible to see the fractures, fragments, and complexities. Such

[5] I write and engage with silence in my other works (Dibavar 2022). See also Akanksha Mehta (2019).

"imaginary wholeness," life with no fracture, takes away from "fragmentary reality."[6] It shatters hope as it seems unattainable. The change, the revolution, and the resistance seem unattainable, if we do not let the fractures, shortcomings, and "failures" shine.

We share these stories, the familiar and familial stories, to learn to journey along them; along women whose lives are entangled with both decolonial, leftist, or anti-imperial resistance but also conformity to and re-installment of heteronormative patriarchy. How can we be attentive to this very complex co-existence?

Unlearning journeys are not straightforward, sometimes they take us into uncomfortable locations. They force us to face our own limitations and mistakes. But, it is only in the face of such "failures" that we are reminded of the impossibility of upholding the neoliberal narrative of "progressive productivity," where we are expected to consistently "better ourselves." "Failures" in such narratives stem from falling behind or outside of "order, logic, and sequence" (Halberstam 2011). Whereas, errors and mistakes that are considered "failure" in neoliberal institutions are all moments in which we un/learn; it is a location of teaching. It is through these moments of "failure" that we learn how to build a collective community of care; a learning community that cares.

[6] The artwork of Nisrine Boukhari called Imaginary Wholeness/Fragmented Reality inspired this sentence. Nisrine is a mixed media and installation artist from Syria. She works with psychogeography to navigate the relationship between the inner self and outer spaces, creating sensorial and participatory installations that engage the body as well as the mind. Her work Imaginary Wholeness/Fragmented Reality is a sculptural installation in Folkets Park in Amalmo, Sweden. Please see the link for more of Nisrine's work: http://nisrineboukhari.com/

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